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## Job Stress, Workload, Academic Freedom and Quality Research in Nigerian Universities

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# Academic Leadership Journal

## Introduction

One of the major obligations of higher education academic staff is to conduct research. It is used to assess the lecturer's scholarship and leads to promotion. It is therefore expected that academic staff who must progress as expected should conduct quality research. Unfortunately, research in higher education in Nigeria seemingly lacks the potentials to produce results that are sufficiently generalized for humanity's stock of knowledge. This study therefore examined some of the impediments to quality research in Nigerian universities. The variables studied were the institutional factors of job stress, workload, and academic autonomy. These indices were considered institutional because they flow from the government, private proprietors, and universities who garner them for the onerous challenges in teaching and research for the benefit of mankind and society.

Research is a scientific investigation to establish facts, principles, or generalizable knowledge. It is the ability to create new knowledge by seeking information and drawing conclusions (Inomiesa, 2003); it focuses on information, come up with invention and make knowledge and information useful (Hagston and Steen, 1995); it is an orderly, systematic and insightful search for dependable knowledge, providing a deeper understanding of a phenomenon. Thus, to research is to search again, to take another close and more careful look, to find out more, often because something may be problematic with what is already experienced or known (Duze, 1997). Research plays a very significant role in various aspects of development nationally and internationally, including also the academic and general development of the immediate community of the institution. The key notion in the various concepts of research is that it is directed towards solution of problems or searching for answers to questions that bug human beings, thus presupposing the existence of unsatisfactory and questionable state of affairs. The human society, especially the developing world, is replete with problems and experiences that call for further search and problem solving. To this end, the importance of research is invaluable. Higher institutions, particularly the universities, carry out research. Universities function to produce high level manpower, to involve in scholarly and analytical research, to find and proffer solutions to the problems of man in his society through research, and to engage in rendering services to the community apart from other incidental functions (Inomiesa, 2003; Atkinson, 2004; and Mohammed and Gbemu, 2007). It is therefore expected that the volumes of research findings from students and academics in Africa, and Nigeria (with her over 100 universities) would have lifted the nations from abject poverty to wealth and modernization. The question that piques the mind is the inability of the myriads of research carried out in developing nations, African nations particularly, to impact positively in elevating the living standards of its people. The answer could really bother on the quality of research carried out in these countries.

Quality, however, is a concept that lacks common definition that would be applicable in all fields, for any subject or for every phenomenon (Parri, 2006). The concept of quality in education is as old as education itself and has always been part of academic traditions especially in higher education. Due to the changes in the relationship between higher education and the society evidenced in enrolments, admissions, funding, methodologies, globalization, science and technology, human and physical resources, increase in knowledge, etc, emphasis on the need for quality in all aspects is more

pronounced.

Harvey and Green (1993) see quality as slippery and value-laden, as well as a philosophical concept while Scott (1994) notes that quality in higher education has no possible authoritative definition. As a concept, quality has been applied to various mechanisms of assessment such as in accreditation, examination, work life, research, etc. In higher education, quality research should influence the intellectual aptitudes of lecturers and students providing them with skills, knowledge, change-attitudes. It is greatly concerned about how research and higher education can play the important role of creation of growth and progress in developing nations.

Stress is the physiological and emotional reaction to psychological events. It can be described as an individual's continuous feeling of worry about life which prevents the individual from relaxing and enjoying a high level of well-being. Defining stress is a problem because it has many divergent uses in different disciplines. Job stress in tertiary institutions is something that all academic and administrative staff face. It arises when demands exceed abilities. Hansen (2009) says that infrequent doses of job stress pose little threat and may be effective in increasing motivation and productivity, but much or prolonged stress may lead to both professional and personal downward spin which can lead poor health and injury.

Workload simply refers to the amount of work assigned or expected to be done within a specific time or period. In higher institutions, however, the concept is not as simple as it appears to be because lecturers carry out a multitude of overlapping functions including teaching and research, supervision of students' research work, practicum, laboratory/workshop experiments, academic counseling, conduct of credible examinations, curriculum development, planning of academic programmes, among others. The organization of all these remains largely the responsibility of the individual lecturer for the smooth going of academic and administrative obligations.

Academic freedom means freedom to organize the university, freedom of inquiry and expression, the right to design and teach courses, conduct researches and declare findings, and other activities without fear of harassment or victimization, challenge established orthodoxies without any fear of contradiction, associate freely with people in the university community without being ear-marked for partisan relationship, in the pursuit of truth of which the university stands to project and defend. Scholars and researchers have noted that what the university needs in achieving teaching and research excellence is academic freedom (Inomiesa, 2003; Atkinson, 2004; Achibong and Bassey, 2006; Agih and Egumu, 2007; and Hoy and Miskel, 2008).

It was observed in recent times that there is a growing tension among university academic staff about the amount of academic freedom enjoyed in carrying out their teaching and research activities, the increased workload due mainly to student population explosions, and the increased job stress due to insecurity of lives and property by the menace of secret cults, armed robbery, and kidnapping. Lecturers are not adequately and comfortably accommodated both in the office and the home. Power supply, which is an asset to economic, social, and academic activities, is a big problem. On daily basis, the university lecturer is under stress and coupled with the increased workload, has little or no time to conduct quality research. When he does, he bears the burden of costs alone while working in rickety laboratories, workshops, and obsolete libraries without proper networking.

However, it is not known the extent to which the three variables of academic freedom, job stress, and

workload influence the quality of research in Nigerian universities. Herein lies the problem of this study. Thus, the problem of this study was to investigate the influence of job stress, workload, and academic freedom on quality research in Nigerian Universities. To guide the investigation, three research questions were raised from which two null hypotheses were formulated.

## **Research Questions**

1. What are the indicators of quality research in Nigerian universities?
2. Is there any significant relationship between the independent variables of job stress, workload, and academic freedom and the criterion variable of quality research in Nigerian universities?
3. Is there any statistically composite influence of the three independent variables of job stress, workload, and academic freedom on the criterion variable of quality research in Nigerian universities?

## **Hypotheses**

Ho<sub>1</sub>: There is no significant relationship between the independent variables of job stress, workload, and academic freedom and the criterion variable of quality research in Nigerian universities.

Ho<sub>2</sub>: There is no statistically composite influence of the three independent variables of job stress, workload, and academic freedom on the criterion variable of quality research in Nigerian universities.

## **Method**

The study adopted the ex-post facto design of the descriptive survey since the information sought has already occurred and there was no manipulation of independent variables. The population was all academic staff of all Nigerian universities (public and private). This was an estimate of 17,000 at the time of study. A multi-stage random sample of 2,976 (17.51%) was selected putting into consideration the various faculties of the three categories of universities (federal, state, and private). Considering the large sample size, 50 percent of this was further selected through simple random sampling to bring the number to 1,488. Using a self-developed questionnaire found valid by a team of pilot jurors, and a computed reliability index of 0.81 established through the test-retest method, relevant data were gathered from the respondents.

The instrument, comprising twenty-six items, was set into three sections – A, B, and C. Section A sought demographic data on gender, age, highest qualification, name of university and faculty, years of experience, etc., Section B elicited information on quality research, while Section C elicited information on job stress, workload, and academic freedom. The instrument was administered with the help of research assistants. Retrieval was 97.98 percent with 1,458 copies returned and well-completed. This 1,458 was the final sample size used. Responses were collated and scored according to how they related to the only research question and the two null hypotheses formulated. The Research Question was answered using the simple percentage while the null hypotheses One and Two were tested using the the Pearson's Product Moment Correlation Coefficient and regression statistic respectively, and results presented in Tables 1-3.

**Research Question:** What are the indicators of quality research in Nigerian universities?

The relevant data collected to answer this research question were analyzed and the result presented in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Distribution of Responses and Corresponding Percentages on Indicators of Quality Research in Nigerian Universities (N = 1,458)

Sources of Impediment	Frequency	Percentage	Position
Funds	1,452	99.59	1 <sup>st</sup>
Job Stress	1,405	95.75	2 <sup>nd</sup>
Workload	1,336	91.67	4 <sup>th</sup>
Academic Freedom	1,251	85.80	8 <sup>th</sup>
'Publish or Perish' Syndrome	1,297	88.96	7 <sup>th</sup>
Networking	1,390	95.34	3 <sup>rd</sup>
Accessibility of Information	1,322	90.67	5 <sup>th</sup>
Availability of Material Resources	1,318	90.40	6 <sup>th</sup>

The result in Table 1 is vividly self-explanatory. It showed that funds constituted the greatest indicator to quality research with a whopping percentage of 99.59. This was followed by job stress (95.75%), Networking (95.34%), Workload (91.67%), Accessibility to information (90.67%), and Availability of material resources (90.40%). Academic Freedom was indicated as least (85.80%) followed by "Publish or Perish" syndrome (88.96%). The very high percentages recorded in all implied that these could pose serious problems to the conduct of quality research in Nigerian universities if not well planned and managed. The result therefore implied that the three independent variables of job stress, workload, and academic freedom examined in this study affect quality research to a large extent.

**Hypothesis One ( $H_{o1}$ ):** There is no significant relationship between the independent variables of job stress, workload, and academic freedom and the criterion variable of quality research in Nigerian universities.

The relevant data collected to test this null hypothesis were analyzed and subjected to the Pearson's Product Moment Correlation Coefficient statistic. The result is presented in Table 2.

**Table 2:** Correlation Matrix of Independent Variables and Criterion Variable (\*p < 0.05)

Variables	Mean	Standard Deviation	1	2	3	4

1. Quality Research	15.13	5.12	1.00		
2. Job Stress	2.21	0.90	- 0.89*	1.00	
3. Workload	2.18	0.87	-0.87*	0.88*	1.00
4. Academic Freedom	1.97	0.89	0.67* 1.00	0.66*	0.68*

The correlation matrix in Table 2 showed the correlation coefficients between each pair of variables. Since the larger the value of  $r$ , the stronger the association between the two variables, it means that the pairs of variables with large correlation coefficients had strong association with each other. Thus, the result revealed a significant relationship between the three independent variables of job stress, workload, and academic freedom and the criterion variable of quality research. The negative values of  $r$  for job stress (- 0.88\*) and workload (- 0.86\*) implied that, as lecturers' job stress and workload increase, quality research decreases or reduces. The positive value of  $r$  in academic freedom (0.67\*) meant that quality research increases as academic freedom increases.

**Hypothesis Two ( $H_{o2}$ ):** There is no statistically composite influence of the three independent variables of job stress, workload, and academic freedom on the criterion variable of quality research in Nigerian universities.

The data collected to test this null hypothesis was analyzed and subjected to the regression statistic. The result is presented in Table 3.

**Table 3:** Regression Analysis of Independent Variables on Quality Research

Summary Table of Analysis of Variance

Variables	df	Sum of Squares	Mean Squares	F-value	Decision
Regression	3	3360.642	1120.214	262.47	Significant at $p < 0.05$
Residual	1454	6206.133	4.268		
Total	1457	9566.775	-		
R = 0.917					
$R^2 = 0.843$					
SE = 2.06					
$R^2$ (adj.) = 0.840					
Durbin Watson = 2.22					

The result in Table 3 showed that the calculated F value of 262.47 is greater than the critical F value therefore the null hypothesis was rejected. This implied that there was a significant composite influence of the three independent variables of job stress, workload, and academic freedom on the criterion variable of quality research. Also, the  $R^2 = 0.843$  indicated that the explanatory variables (job stress, workload, and academic freedom) captured about 84 percent variation in the endogenous variable (quality research). It also implied that job stress, workload, and academic freedom showed a significant relationship with quality research as had been established from the result in Table 2.

## Discussion

Seven indicators of quality research identified in this study in the order of highest percentage scored were, funds, job stress, networking, workload, accessibility to information, availability of material resources, 'publish or perish' syndrome, and academic freedom. Funds which recorded a score of 99.57 percent, was the most highly rated. Another indicator identified by university lecturers that influences quality research was job stress, indicated by a score of 95.75 percent. In higher institutions, job stressors manifest in various forms including lack of funds to cover personal and institutional financial demands; dealing with large classes as a result of explosions in students' population; dealing with students' discipline; teaching new courses; frequent changes in timetable and courses; pressures on meeting up with various forms of targets and deadlines in teaching, marking of too many students' scripts, practicum, preparation of senate results, screening of students' credentials, supervision of research projects, preparation of minutes of meetings, etc. Also, working all round the year and year after year without going on leave, deferring annual leave meant for rest until a lecturer was due for a sabbatical leave for periods between six and eight years of service, and long working hours increased workload.

Apart from demands on the job, job stressors can also be in the form of control, relationship, role, change, and support. Control includes lack of participation in decision-making, given responsibilities without the backup authority and resources to do the job, bureaucratic bottlenecks, and not being able to use one's discretion in making urgent decisions. Relationships include bullying from senior colleagues, 'god-fatherism', dealing with conflict situations, feeling that personal inputs are not valued, favouritism, nepotism, ethnicity, tribalism, statism, 'indigenism'. Lecturers working in States that are not their States of origin are marginalized as non-indigenes of the State and suffer all sorts of frustration and stress as a result of relationship stressors. It is totally absurd to find that appointments and positions held in Nigerian universities are tied to such relationship stressors as were mentioned. Yet Nigeria pretends to revere unity and to pursue it to the uttermost! Much more, universities which are supposed to be level playing grounds for all persons in the pursuit of truth have also failed in this regard.

Role includes conflicting demands in job functions, lack of line management support in role performance, lack of promotion prospects, lack of career development opportunities, 'publish or perish' syndrome, poor pay prospects, etc. Change includes changing without consultation, impact of restructuring on job responsibilities and workload, insecurity in job due to frequent re-organization, over competitive institutional culture, and new styles of institutional management. Support includes lack of grants to conduct research, lack of equipment, materials, and facilities, lack of power supply, networking (computer, internet, etc), access to information, and obsolete libraries.

Results also revealed that workload was rated the 4<sup>th</sup> most important indicator to quality research, scoring 91.67 percent. Workload is an important factor in quality research since too little time left after the hours have been consumed in coping with the amount of work to be achieved in a given time or period leaves the lecturer incapable of exploring effectively researchable problem areas. Some of the causes of increase in workload include addition of new courses, general administrative functions in addition to teaching and researching, increase in students' enrollment, and gross under-staffing of the department.

Although academic freedom was rated least among the indicators to quality research, the score of 85.80 percent (Table 1) was high enough to assume a significant impact on quality research when universities are denied academic freedom. The results in Tables 2 and 3 also tally with this. Also, the study revealed that the trio of academic freedom, workload, and job stress associated significantly (Table 2) to influence quality research in a significant way (Table 3). Findings showed that when job stress and workload are reduced or kept at acceptable minimum, research output would definitely improve in quality, while the same is the case when universities enjoy considerable academic freedom. These align with the findings of Achibong and Bassey (2006), Debowski (2006), Atkinson (2004), and Inomiesa (2003). The issue of academic freedom is still 'baking in the oven' in Nigeria. Academic staff of Nigerian universities is still awaiting the finished product. By implication, because we cannot claim to have academic freedom in Nigerian universities today, so can we not claim to have quality research output. Adequate funding holds the key to success of all educational programmes and policies. Money is needed to pursue and fine-tune all human endeavours, research processes inclusive. Money will remove all forms of job stressors, keep workload at healthy levels and allow researchers do their jobs in enabling environments. Nigeria is notorious for gross inadequacy in the allocation of funds to education and control of funds (Akintayo, 2005; Oghenekowho, Adekola and Olufunmilayo, 2007; Mohammed and Gbenu, 2007). For instance, Akintayo (2005), citing the Human Development Report (2002), noted that the listing of Nigeria among the low human capital formation countries with an index of 0.462, lower than that of Togo (0.493) hinges on her expenditure on education. While public expenditure on education as percentages of Gross National Product (GNP) was only 1.70 percent in 1985-87, it further plunged downwards to a woeful percentage of 0.70 in 1995-97. These figures for Nigeria were the least in comparison with thirteen other African countries under the Low Human Development (LHD) cadre with respect to expenditure on Higher Education in particular. Recently (UNESCO, in NTAi News, June 2010), Nigeria was grouped among the 'e9' countries with the highest number of illiterates in the world, with Egypt being the only other African country. Again, this reflects her poor monetary investment in education, the highest being only 11.12 percent in 1999 as against UNESCO's minimum of 26 percent in budgetary allocation to education for developing countries (ASUU Bulletin, 2002). Because Nigeria fails to fund the education sector, especially the universities, as recommended, so will the education sector continue to suffer inadequacies of poor products and outcomes. It is indeed 'what you sow that you reap' in every aspect of human endeavour while the computer language says, 'garbage-in-garbage-out'!

## **Conclusion**

Based on the results, findings and the foregoing discourse, the study concluded that job stress, workload, and academic freedom, which are the independent variables investigated in this study, are important correlates of quality research (criterion variable) in Nigerian universities. Impacting singly or collectively, they influence the quality of research output to a great extent. If well planned, funded, and



managed, they would contribute effectively to quality research in Nigeria, thus raising the quality of life of Nigerian citizens.

## Recommendations

In view of the conclusion drawn in this study, we recommended that government and the universities should continue and endeavour to create the enabling environment for quality research to be conducted. This could be done by eliminating the job stressors and reducing the workload of lecturers through well planned and well managed policies and programmes in the universities as well as adequate funding of research, while academic freedom should be upheld as much as is practicable to enable academic staff have quality time and feel secured to conduct quality research.

The issue of funding education adequately has been over-flogged in Nigeria. Is it that the resources are not there or that we deliberately turn deaf ears, allowing mediocre educational outputs that are dragging the country back to the Stone Age? Nigeria has to change her attitude towards the 'poor-budgetary-allocation-of-funds syndrome' to the education sector, and also needs to introduce proper avenues for proper control of the funds disbursed. Let us for once in this country put things right by funding education the way it ought to be done, for education holds the key to sustainable national development and modernization.

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