

Academic Staff Development and Staff Performance in Imo State University, Owerri, Nigeria (2018 – 2023)

Odoemene Robert Chinonyerem, *PhD*

Department of Public Administration, Imo State University, Owerri

E-mail: bobbyroby1@yahoo.com; Phone: 08167719488

Abstract

This study focused on academic staff development and staff performance in Imo State University, Owerri, Nigeria, 2018 – 2023. The problem of poor job performance among the academic staff of Imo State University has become a source of concern to the Institution, the state government, and the broader society. The broad objective of the study was to explain how staff development problems affect the performance of academic staff at Imo State University during the period under review. The hypotheses included, among others, that paucity of funds and a skills gap were possible challenges to staff development at Imo State University, Owerri. The theoretical framework adopted in this study was the organisation's education and training theory, propounded by Argyris & Schon in 1978. The theory is rooted in the assumption that education, training and development are associated with effective planning, problem-solving and experimentation. The sources of data were primary and secondary, which consisted of official records from the University, TETFund, journals and textbooks. The analytical tool was qualitative content analysis. The study found that measures adopted by Imo State University in its staff development programme had a positive effect on the work behaviour of most academic staff and therefore significantly improved their performance. The study, therefore, recommended the introduction of compulsory attendance to international conferences, symposia and workshops, since lecturers' performances are usually enhanced by such training. Also, Professors and senior lecturers should be encouraged to take sabbatical leave as a way of developing and improving their welfare, as this would motivate them to put in more effort in teaching, research and community development, which are the core mandates of the academic profession.

Keywords: Staff, development, training, performance, conference

Introduction

Staff development in Imo State University encompasses a broad range of activities designed to provide staff with the knowledge, skills and expertise that are directly related to their roles and can help them perform their responsibilities better (Njoku & Agbiriogu, 2021). The major areas of staff development programme in the University include training of human resources through in-service programme, sponsored seminars, workshops and symposium, which is a planned and systematic effort by which the University facilitates employees' learning of job-related competencies. These competences include knowledge, skills and other behaviours that are central to the successful performance of their job (Njoku & Agbiriogu, 2021). The goals of staff development are for an employee to master the skills, knowledge and behaviours emphasised in the training programme and to apply them to day-to-day functions on the job. Staff development

in the University holds the key to unlock growth and development of the University system (Fanibuyan, 2001).

Over the years, most academic staff of Imo State University, Owerri, have remained in the habit of performing the routine function of teaching mostly the same courses with the same course materials and course outlines designed many years ago, even when there is a review of the curriculum. This is done to avoid having to start reading a fresh topic and conducting new research that are onerous and time-consuming in the face of the many courses handled by a single academic and other academic activities that they are saddled with, such as script making, publication, and attendance at conferences, among others. Most lecturers try to find a way of retaining the same courses they teach for a long time without making necessary changes and new findings in the disciplines they belong to, leading, most of the time, to the passing of the same and obsolete knowledge to the students.

Statement of the Problem

As businesses strive to stay competitive and adaptive, so do institutions of higher learning, such as the University. Imo State University and others strive to achieve excellence in their mandate to deliver quality educational services to the student population. Achieving success involves keeping a contented, engaged team of academic staff at the forefront of these efforts, as employee satisfaction plays a significant role in overall institutional effectiveness and quality of the service.

However, there are several factors challenging staff development policies and programmes, and these challenges have posed grave implications for the job performance of staff in the university. Staff development anywhere needs competent instructors who can teach and coach trainees (Onah, 2015). However, in Imo State University, there is a limited number of these competent expert instructors/managers who would develop others on the job. Again, even though some academic staff are aware of the requirements for advancement in their career and the means to achieve it, there is an overemphasis on the next job instead of good performance on present tasks. That is to say that most academic staff do not give their best in their present positions while expecting to be promoted to the next higher rank (Koontz et al., 1988).

Sabbatical leave and conferences are development processes in the University system, but these are not regularly and sufficiently provided to academic staff of proven seriousness. Furthermore, there are so many operations in the University system that are not covered in the in-service training programmes and therefore do not qualify staff members for study leave with pay. The issue of Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFUND) sponsorship of seminars, workshops and PhD programmes for academic staff of Universities has been made too rigorous for an average academic and most times, it depends on 'connections and leg-work', the process having been infected with corruption. Most times, genuine applicants for loans are not considered due to corruption. More so, there is no standard mechanism or yardstick for measuring the behaviour of staff members before and after embarking on a development program to determine whether the worker's attitude to work has changed in terms of punctuality and regularity at work and devotion of the staff to duty. No one tries to compare this behaviour checklist with the behaviour before training and that of other colleagues of the worker in order to obtain reliable information.

Research Questions

1. What challenges of staff development bedevilled Imo State University, Owerri, from 2018 - 2023?
2. How has Imo State University dealt with staff development problems within the period under review?
3. In what ways have the implementation of the proxies of staff development, like training, sponsorship to conferences and sabbatical leave by the university, affected the performance of academic staff of the Institution within the period under review?

Objectives of the Study

The broad objective of the study is to explain how staff development problems have impacted the performance of academic staff of Imo State University, Owerri, while the specific objectives are:

1. To find out the challenges that bedevilled the staff development of Imo State University between 2018 and 2023.
2. To explain how Imo State University can deal with staff development problems within the period under review.
3. To explain how the implementation of the proxies of staff development (training, sponsorship to conferences and sabbatical leave) by the university affects the performance of academic staff of the Institution within the period under review.

Hypotheses

In line with the research questions and objectives, the research hypotheses are:

1. Paucity of funds is a challenge to staff development in Imo State University, Owerri, from 2018 to 2023.
2. Imo state university is likely to have applied adequate skill-gap analysis and improved funding to deal with staff development problem within the period under review
3. Improved training through sponsorship to conferences and sabbatical leave is likely to have helped the university to deal with problems of staff development in the Institution within the period under review.

Theoretical Framework of Analyses

The study is anchored on education and training theory developed by Argyris & Schon in 1978 (Bakah, 2011). The theory is rooted in the assumption that education and training are associated with effective planning, problem-solving, and experimentation (Olusanya et al., 2012). Similarly, education and training of academic and non-teaching staff have become more pronounced in the education literature and are associated with the implementation of planned change (Switbert, 2013). This is mainly attributed to the fact that changes in academic work and student populations challenge prevailing beliefs and practices and require the development of knowledge and skills (Knowles, 1977). Bakah (2011) asserts that the key to better education practices and desired educational outcomes is to have a superior academic staff workforce. It is necessary to continually engage academic staff in the process of learning to make it effective. Staff development in educational settings is described as those processes and activities designed to enhance the professional knowledge, skills and attitudes of academic and non-teaching staff, so that they might, in turn, improve the learning of students (Guskey, 2010).

The theory veritably applies to the study as it explains the process by which the staff of an institution are helped in a continuous and planned way, to acquire or sharpen capabilities required

to perform various functions associated with their present or expected future roles; develop their general capacities as individuals and discover and exploit their own inner potentials for their own and/or organizational development (Armstrong, 2016).

Conceptual Clarification

Concept of Staff

Staff are the mainstay of every organisation. This is because they contribute immensely towards the attainment of organisational goals and objectives; without them, an organisation may not achieve such lofty goals and objectives. Kodilinye (1972) in Onah (2013) shares the same view when he stated that staff are an indispensable resource in ensuring the realisation of an organisation's goals, and carrying out these functions is very important and necessary for the success of any organisation. University staff play a central role in the university's delivery of academic values to students and ultimately in the development of the nation. However, the preparation, training and upgrading of staff - both academic and administrative - are generally not paid particular attention. The teachers often fulfil their tasks without adequate pedagogical training; the researchers, even if qualified in their discipline, are often inadequately prepared for the management roles of their work; and the administrators also seldom get adequate training. This aspect becomes more critical as the universities are increasingly being exhorted to cooperate in the nation's development stride. This, according to Anyata (2015), is the reason universities in developing countries have started paying more attention to the training of their academic staff.

The term "academic staff" taken together refers to the scholarly persons employed in an institution of higher education. In this sense, the term, academic staff, becomes synonymous with the term "faculty" (Tumer & Harkin, 2013). The term 'faculty' is derived from the Latin word *Facultas*, which means ability, natural aptitude, and power or authority. When education got institutionalised, and teaching was professionalised, the teachers got grouped and categorised as faculty in general, and in groups of related subjects in particular (Knowles, 1977). However, one distinction can be drawn between the two terms "academic staff" and "faculty", which otherwise have been used interchangeably, both in the literature and in the present article. Whereas the term "faculty" is used both for the teaching staff of an institution and for the institution itself, the term "academic staff" is specifically used in the former sense.

Oftentimes, young academics are left to struggle on the job to acquire the rudimentary knowledge for the job. Their efforts, in most cases, do not yield much to the institutions in terms of their ability, capacity, effectiveness and efficiency in their performance and professionalism as academic staff (Knowles, 1977). These young academics, who are not necessarily young in age, are usually beginners in the field of academics, starting as Graduate Assistants and Assistant Lecturers, employed based on their possession of certain educational qualifications, but in most cases, are not given the needed orientations or induction. Bingilar & Etale (2014) observed that new employees are often uncertain about their roles and responsibilities; hence, job demands and employees' capabilities must be balanced through staff development. A new employee in this context is any academic staff member employed by the university permanently and who has never had an initial experience in lecturing. This class of employees usually comes in as Graduate Assistant, Assistant Lecturers and Lecturer II categories. Orientations and inductions are not necessarily provided for new entrants into the system before full responsibilities are assigned to such staff.

According to Awang (1981), the term academic staff encompasses the whole range of academics, from the position of lecturer to that of a professor, and it serves to distinguish teaching

staff from administrative staff, general staff and technical staff. Normally, academic staff are classified into seven main categories: a) Lecturer; b) Senior Lecturer or sometimes known as Associate Professor; c) Readers; d) Professor, which includes visiting professors; e) Fellows on inter university exchange programmes; f) Fellows who choose to spend their sabbatical in the university to conduct lectures, seminars or workshops for students; and g) Part-time lecturers who assist the scholarly centers in professional duties, especially teaching and research.

Concept of Development

In the context of this study, development is discussed in terms of manpower development. Manpower development is a process that enables organisations to ensure there is adequate human resource saddled with the responsibility to ensure the continuous growth of organisations and the ability to achieve the set goals or vision of such an organisation. It is a process that creates growth, progress, positive change or the addition of physical, economic, environmental and social well-being. According to Adebola Sobanjo, a foremost writer on manpower development in Nigeria, manpower development planning is the most strategic of all human resources management functions. It helps you discover the potential of your workforce and how to fan into flame and transform these potentials into usable skills needed for the growth of the organisation.

Development is defined by Ezeanyinka (n.d) as “movement along a trajectory leading to growth”. It is also used sometimes to describe a society retrospectively and the prospects of moving towards greater equality and social justice. Each of these connotations of development seems to be derived from a certain theory or an ideology. Thus, whenever one talks about social or national development, one seems to make a set of theoretical and ideological assumptions.

Apart from the problems of role ascription to education, education cannot, of its own, achieve the desired societal goals without additional structural supports. One of the major fallacies of the theories of education and development has been their over-determined nature. An underlying assumption is the belief that formal education can both manipulate and be manipulated to attain specified educational goals. Educational goals are only partially determined by educational factors such as teacher quality or curricula.

Many of the functions of education with respect to development relate to higher education. Higher education is not merely at the apex of the education system; it is also the level which prepares personnel for all other levels of education and expertise for a variety of jobs that have to be done in the social, economic and cultural sectors. In addition to being at the frontier of knowledge, it plays a crucial role in the generation of new knowledge. Therefore, the radiation between higher education and development is a crucial one.

Staff Development

The concept of staff development needs to be properly understood. Having separately defined staff and development, it is apposite to juxtapose the two terms for the purpose of clarity. Staff development is a deliberate, purposeful, ongoing process of enhancing employees’ knowledge, skills and competencies to improve both individual performance and the effectiveness of the organisation. Staff development combines formal training (coaching, workshops, and seminars) with informal training (mentoring, job rotation) to foster career growth and increase productivity. Cambridge Dictionary of English Language defines it as “the improvement of the knowledge and skills of employees of an organisation by providing them with training”. The University of Michigan sees the concept as “growth in an individual’s knowledge, skills and personal effectiveness”.

Training is defined as a structured process of teaching specific skills, knowledge or behaviour in order to improve performance, competence or physical fitness. Training is essential for enhancing workers' productivity, safety and operational efficiency in any organisation. Training can be classified into technical (specialised job skills), soft skills (communication, teamwork) or physical (exercise/fitness). The stages in training include induction/orientation for new staff and periodic sessions to maintain the competency of the staff.

Concept of Performance

Performance of a staff member is defined as the employee's contribution and input towards the collective goals and objectives of the organisation. Mwita (2010) noted that the performance of the human resource will ultimately increase the performance of the organisation. Performance is a major multidimensional construct aimed at achieving results and has a strong link to the strategic goals of an organisation. Ideally, the more employees are developed, satisfied with their work and environmental conditions, the more they can help enhance their organisations' performance. In universities, academic staff performance is thus central to the effectiveness of the institutions, in the same way that it is to all people-centred organisations.

Performance is also defined in terms of the ability of a student to complete a task. The task completion results could be positive or negative. Academic performance in private Universities is undulating between first and third classes, rare in public universities. If the result is positive, it indicates that the student performs brilliantly or excellently, but on the other hand, if it is negative, it indicates woeful performance. Student performance is an outcome of a rigorous evaluation through examination or other assessment methods. Performance criteria start from day one on campus, and it extends and accumulate to the end of the student's study (Kumari, 2019).

Empirical Review of Literature

Kirungi (2024) conducted a study on staff training and development as a tool for organisational objectives in Mbarara City Council in Uganda. The research used a qualitative research approach in which staff of Mbarara City Council were interviewed using a semi-structured interview technique as the primary data collection method. The research also used secondary data collected through peer-reviewed articles, journals, and websites. From the findings, the majority of the staff interviewed believed that staff training increases the efficiency of organisations, effectiveness, and contributes to the overall performance of Human Resource Development of Mbarara City Council.

Ozurumba & Amasuomo (2015) examined staff development and the output of academic staff in the state Universities in South-South Nigeria. An ex-post-facto survey design was used to conduct the research in three state Universities in the area. Three research hypotheses were formulated to guide the study. Data were collected from a sample of 402 academic staff. This was done using a questionnaire entitled "Academic Staff Development and Academic Staff Output Questionnaire". One-way analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was used to analyse the data. The findings were that a significant relationship exists between staff development and the productivity of academic staff in terms of research, teaching and community service. Therefore, the study concluded that in-service training and attendance at conferences and workshops influence the output of academic staff. Accordingly, it was recommended that adequate funding towards staff development and policies that support staff development are imperative for improved performance.

Suelle & Saranya (2015) investigated the impact of training and development on organisational performance and employee productivity, addressing the multidimensional impact of structured training and development programmes on organisational performance and employee productivity across various sectors. The study adopted the Human Capital and Social Learning theories. The findings showed that effective training initiatives positively correlate with increased productivity, staff engagement, innovation, and leadership competence. The study recommended actionable insights for managers and policy makers seeking to optimise training investments.

Research Design

The study adopted the descriptive survey research design involving a structured interview and questionnaire distribution, in which tables, graphs and simple statistical tools, such as percentages and measures of central tendency, are employed to aid the description of observed data. The data takes the form of a time series (trend) and a cross-sectional (longitudinal) form in its presentation. Descriptive survey questions are posed, which were derived directly from the research questions.

This design is very relevant to the study, in view of the nature of the investigation, which entails assessment of the feelings of the study subjects on the effects of staff development on academic performance.

Population of the Study

The population of this study comprised all the teaching staff of Imo State University, Owerri, whose estimated number is put at 1900, sourced from the bursary department of the university. These are the active staff performing different functions in the university. The question of estimation is allowable, having indicated the 5% acceptable margin of error. However, the researchers can't reach all the units of this population, thereby making sampling inevitable.

Sample and Sampling Technique

The sample size is 190 academic staff, representing 10.0% of the population, with whom structured interviews were randomly administered. The formula used in selecting the sample from the population was Slovin's formula. The formula is represented thus:

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + Ne^2}$$

Where N is the population

n is the sample size

e is the margin of allowable error.

Substituting the formula, $n = 1900 / 1 + 1900 * (0.05)^2$

$$n = \frac{1900}{1 + 1900(0.0025)} = \frac{1900}{1 + 8}$$

$$= \frac{1900}{9}$$

$$n = 211.$$

$211 / 1900 * 100 = 11.0\%$. The sample, therefore, consisted of 11.0% of the population, which is 211 staff members of the university.

The sample consisted of men and women drawn randomly from 12 departments of the university. The departments were purposively selected by the researchers on an equal basis. The representativeness of the sample was guaranteed by ensuring that an equal number of males and females were included in the sample, and more so, that all categories of lecturers, ranging from graduate assistants to professors, were included in the sample.

Method of Data Collection

The sources of data for this work include both primary and secondary sources. The primary sources include structured interviews. No questionnaire has been designed for this study. Rather, an interview schedule containing several structured questions guided respondents in the interviews. The secondary sources are made up of internal and external sources. While the internal sources consisted of official documents from the Imo state university administrative unit, the external sources consisted of the written works, journals, newspapers, magazines and periodicals of other organisations used in the work. Empirical data were presented in tables, which formed the basis for the analysis.

Method of Data Analysis

The data were mainly empirical data presented in tables derived from official documents to facilitate easy analysis and comprehension. Data collected through interviews were analysed in prose (word form) and logical interpretation, while those collected through document study were analysed through content analysis and logical interpretation. The contents of official documents consulted were analysed following some established criteria, and reference tables were used to present the figures in the data.

Analysis of Research Hypotheses

Hypothesis One: Staff development and poor funding in Imo State University

Staff Development and Management System (SDMS) is part of the Tertiary Education Reform Program (TERP). The primary aim is to incorporate in-service training into the program of tertiary education. It is important to note that staff development has been ongoing and is still in progress in the nation's tertiary education system. Atugonza (2007) points out that since 1995, TDMS has trained heads of departments, the university management committee and other stakeholders in proper management of schools.

There are many challenges to staff development, however. Among them, the following were worth mentioning: Inadequate funds, poor staff development policy formulation, negative attitudes of the staff, corruption and embezzlement of funds.

In a society undergoing rapid development, there is an ever-increasing need for training. The rate of development and the increasing demands with regard to knowledge require extensive flexibility in the workforce. Staff training and development everywhere requires lots of funds. Staff development is done through education, training, upgrading and holding continuous professional development courses (CPDCS) and Refresher Courses (RCs) and all these require a lot of money. This is affirmed by Ezewu (1983), who asserted that school education involves expenditure like fees, textbooks, uniforms and other equipment, so the families which can provide such requirements are more likely to prepare their children for school work. Much as Ezewu was referring to children, it even applies to any person intending to undergo any kind of formal education, staff training inclusive. For example, upgrading lecturers/non-teaching staff require college/university dues and other instructional requirements. A staff member with a poor family background and or low-income level will find it difficult, if not impossible, to upgrade.

In related development, Koontz, O'Dornell & Weitrich (1982) seem to concur with Ezewu when they explained that the family into which a man is born exerts a profound influence on his career because his occupational life is conditioned by his education, and his education depends, to a considerable extent, on his family. Staff from poor family backgrounds or low economic status usually find it difficult to upgrade.

As regards IMSU, the funding of the university is bankrolled by the Imo State government as a state university. The university relies on government subventions along with internally generated revenue (IGR) to fund its operations. But more often than not, these funds are inadequate. For instance, based on historical and budget reports, the monthly subvention for Imo State University, Owerri, has fluctuated over the years, with a reported increase from ₦50 million to about ₦200 million monthly in 2019. Key details regarding the financial support for the university include: subvention to cover overhead and operating costs. The 2025 approved Budget shows allocation of annual budget expenses and administration for IMSU, with some line items listed at ₦134,500,000.00. (https://investinimo.com/imo_state_2025_approved_budget.pdf). But since 2020, the IGR of the Institution has been funnelled into the state Treasury Single Account (TSA), which is not easily retrievable at the request of the university. This accounting strategy adopted by the government, though, intended to ensure financial discipline, technically starved the Institution of needed funds for development. The issue of staff welfare in the university has, for long, not been taken into consideration by the state government. During the period of this study, staff salaries were being paid directly to the staff and not through the university bursary. The continued operation of TSA has prevented the university from attending to necessities, such as payment of electricity bills and other pressing needs of the Institution.

Hypothesis Two: Improvement in job performance through training, skill-gap analysis and improved funding

One major area of human resource management function of particular relevance to the effective use of Human Resources is training. One important way of enhancing high performance and output in workers is by updating their knowledge continually through exposure to the latest research in science and technology, arts and social sciences and science of administration, as well as in teaching. According to Nwita (2010), training human resources in organisations for improved output is essential since an improvement in the quality of human factor is as important as or even more important than investment in physical capital.

The more highly motivated a trainee, the more quickly and systematically a new skill or knowledge is acquired (Aremu, 2020). That is why workshop training should be related to money, job promotion, and recognition, etc., i.e., something which the trainee desires (Koontz et al., 1982). Training is immediately followed by positive reinforcement so that the learner can feel the response.

Over time, Imo State University has also embarked on training and capacity building for its staff so as to enhance the performance of its workers. Staff development schemes for the past three years have been mainly through the TETFUND educational support interventions. This privilege is open to all qualified and interested university academic staff. Studies have shown that a good number of the academic staff of the University have accessed TETFUND Academic Staff Training & Development intervention from 2016 to date. The privilege is, however, not open to academic staff in affiliate institutions at the moment. This is due to the recognition of the important role of in-service training, such as study leave, seminars and workshops in attainment of the Institution's goals. Attending workshops and seminars is vital to updating knowledge and improving skills, since formal education alone cannot adequately provide specific job skills for a position in the university system (Aremu, 2020). While few individuals may have the requisite skills, knowledge, abilities and competences needed to fit into specific academic and non-academic functions, some others require extensive training to acquire the necessary skills to be able to fit into some specific job functions and also make significant contributions to the Institution.

Implementation of Skill Gap Analysis

One of the first steps in staff development is to identify the current and future skill gaps in your workforce. This means that the existing competencies, knowledge and abilities of the workforce, as well as the emerging trends, demands and opportunities in the institution need to be assessed. Conducting a skill-gap analysis is very challenging, especially in middle-rated institutions as the Imo State University. This is because skill gap analysis requires a clear understanding of your organisational/institutional goals, a comprehensive data collection and analysis process and a collaborative approach that involves input from various stakeholders such as management, academic and non-academic staff, the community and students.

Imo State University faces a unique set of staff development challenges due to its dynamic nature and the constantly evolving needs of students. Lecturers have not been able to effectively integrate technology into their teaching practices and accommodate the diverse learning styles and needs of their students. Leadership of the university has not been able to provide professional development opportunities, create a mentorship programme and provide educators with the technology and training they need to integrate technology into their teaching practices.

Table 1: Types of Conferences and Number of Attendees, Academic Staff of IMSU 2018-2023

Year	Conference Type		Sponsorship		Category of Staff		Total
	International	Local	TET Fund	Self	Snr. Lect.	Prof	
2018							155
2019			11	127			138
2020	COVID 19	COVID 19	COVID 19	COVID 19	COVID 19	COVID	COVID
2021	13	142	15	140	132	23	155
2022	10	190	21	169	170	30	200
2023	15	125	-	140	113	27	140

Source: Culled from TETFund desk, 2026

Table 1 is used to illustrate the number of academic staff of the university who received one form of sponsorship from TETFund for either an international or a local conference within the period under review. From Table 1, a total of 155 academic staff of the Institution reportedly attended at least a conference in 2018 and of the number, 17 academic staff attended international conferences either in Nigeria or abroad, while 138 attended local conferences. The table also shows that 9 of the conference attendees received one form of TETFund sponsorship or the other, while the remaining 146 attendees self-sponsored their conference attendance. Again, 21 of the attendees in 2018 were in the Professorial rank, while 134 were within the ranks of Assistant Lecturer and Senior Lecturer.

Similarly, in 2023, the last year covered by this study, a total of 140 academic staff of the university reportedly attended one or more conferences and or workshops, and of the number, 15 attended international conferences while 125 attended local conferences. However, there was no TETFund sponsorship for any of the conference attendees, as the costs were borne by attendees. It was not actually ascertained why the institution was not captured in that year's TETFund conference sponsorship. Some believe there were some scores to settle between the institution and

the interventionist agency over previous allocations, which prevented it from being captured in that year.

2020 represented the period of the COVID-19 pandemic that grounded both academic and business activities across the globe. The entire world was locked down as a control measure against the ravaging effects of the pandemic. No Academic activities took place that year.

From the table, the rate of attendance at international conferences by the academic staff was highest in 2019 before COVID-19; the rate of attendance at local conferences by academic staff of the university was lowest in 2022. Conversely, the rate of attendance at local conferences by the academic staff was highest in 2021, with 190 academic staff attending one or more local conferences, while only 10 people attended international conferences.

Furthermore, in all the years covered by the study, more lectures in the other ranks between Assistant Lecturer and Senior Lecturer paid more attention to conference attendance than those in the rank of Professor. This shows that when academics reach the professorial cadre, they tend to reduce their rates of attendance at academic conferences and publication of academic journal papers.

It is worthy of note that a larger number of lecturers in the university sponsored themselves to conferences and workshops annually without getting refunded by the university. Although the Tertiary Education Trust Fund's sponsorship has been made available, the bottlenecks and delays in obtaining such funds, coupled with the penalties attached to any infractions and defaults, discourage prospective applicants for TETFUND sponsorships.

Table 2: Study leave granted to academic staff by category 2018 – 2023

Year	M.Sc	PhD	Post Doctoral	Total
2018	3	11	8	22
2019	5	7	3	15
2020	COVID 19	COVID 19	COVID 19	COVID 19
2021	8	8	5	21
2022	8	15	7	30
2023	3	11	9	23

Source: Compiled from Establishment Unit IMSU 2026

Table 2 represents the category and number of academic staff who embarked on a study leave within the period under review. In 2018, a total of 22 academic staff embarked on study leave. A breakdown of the 2018 data shows that 3 of the beneficiaries were enrolled on an M.Sc programme, 11 in PhD programmes, while 8 were enrolled in post-doctoral programmes. Academic staff, mainly professors, returned from sabbatical leave within the same period. If the figures are combined, it would be seen that 191 academic staff benefited from sponsored training programmes in foreign universities. In 2019, 5 M.Sc., 7 PhDs and 3 Post-doctoral candidates also travelled to for further studies. In 2020, no staff left the institution on account of the COVID-19 pandemic. The data for years 2021, 2022 and 2023 are presented in Table 2. This number, though seeming inadequate, can be said to be reasonable in view of the limited funds available to the institution to provide academic training sponsorships as well as the very rigorous processes in accessing the funds due to the stringent requirements attached to funding academic training programmes.

Hypothesis 3: Improved training through sabbatical leave and staff development**Table 3: Sabbatical leave attended by academic staff by category 2018 - 2023**

Year	Senior Lecturer	Associate Professor	Professor	Total
2018	Nil	4	7	11
2019	Nil	2	4	6
2020	COVID 19	COVID 19	COVID 19	COVID 19
2021	Nil	3	6	9
2022	2	3	4	9
2023	Nil	2	4	6

Source: Compiled from Establishment Unit IMSU 2026

Table 3 illustrates the number of academic staff of the university who embarked on sabbatical leave and returned during the period covered by this study. From the table, a total of 11 academic staff of the institution, comprising 4 Associate Professors and 7 Professors, embarked on sabbatical leave in 2018. In 2019, however, only 6 academics - 2 Associate Professors and 4 Professors left the university for other institutions on sabbatical. Similarly, the table shows that a total of 9 academic staff left in 2021 and 2022, while 6 left in 2023 for the same purpose. More staff in the Professorial cadre had the opportunity to enjoy a sabbatical within the period covered by the study, as only two senior lecturers benefited in the period under review. This number, though inadequate, can be said to be reasonable in view of the limited funds available to the institution for academic training sponsorships, as well as the very rigorous processes for accessing the funds.

Although the researcher did not probe into the length of time spent by the staff on the various sabbatical leaves, it is believed that many returned to the university after two years, and that means that they came back with new knowledge and ideas from the various institutions, within the country and abroad. Sabbatical leave provides academics with the opportunity to move out of their parent universities to others across the globe where they brainstorm and interact with other students and academics, thereby learning new techniques of teaching, learning, research and community development. The stock of knowledge gained from this exercise is usually brought back home to the parent university and used to bring positive changes to the home university.

Conclusion

University lecturers play crucial roles in improving learning in the university system. Their ability to effectively carry out their functions and roles is largely determined by the quality of staff development programmes made available to them, even after they have attained the highest academic degrees. Academic staff development in the university is measured by the difference between the outputs of staff before and after a development programme has been administered on the staff, often sponsored by the university either within or outside, through attendance at conferences, workshops and sabbaticals. This difference is determined by relating the effects of such outcome with the performance of staff with reference to the established university appraisal standards. Again, the students' learning outcomes would serve as a feedback mechanism and could also serve as a starting point for further initiation of the staff development programme, therefore, forming a cyclical process. Conferences, workshops, study and sabbatical leave, among others, are veritable means of developing skills of teaching, research and community development, which are the basic functions of university lecturers.

Recommendations

In line with the research findings and conclusion, the following recommendations are proffered by this study:

1. The university should enforce regular and compulsory training programmes by giving timely approval to staff wishing to attend international conferences, workshops, and symposia, since lecturers' performances are highly enhanced by such training programmes.
2. The government should mobilise adequate funds for the state-owned universities to enable them to attend to their staff development needs and, at the same time, remove the universities, especially Imo State University, from the TSA so that the university can manage its Internally Generated Revenues. By so doing, the universities would have funds to organise seminars and workshops which improve academic training.
3. The scope of study and sabbatical leave should be expanded by the university to cover many more academic staff, including lower-ranking lecturers and regularly too, because knowledge is not a preserve of any one category of staff, as every staff member deserves periodic change of environment, holiday and knowledge update.
4. Every self-sponsored conference and workshop should be reimbursed by the university once it is proven that the staff actually attended the conference or workshop with their own funds and presented a publishable paper. This will go a long way in motivating academics to participate in conferences.

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