

Managing Employee Engagement, Retention and Productivity in a Volatile Environment: A Study of Public Universities in South West Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the critical challenges and strategies for managing employee engagement, retention, and productivity in public universities in Nigeria, particularly within the context of a volatile and dynamic environment. Public universities in Nigeria are increasingly affected by economic instability, funding inadequacies, and frequent industrial disputes, all of which negatively impact staff morale, engagement, and overall productivity. The study employed a descriptive survey research approach, collecting data through surveys with academic and non-academic staff across selected public universities. Collected data were subjected to statistical analysis including descriptive statistics and linear regression analysis. Findings revealed that factors such as inadequate remuneration, limited career advancement opportunities, poor working conditions, and inconsistent government policies significantly contribute to low employee engagement and high turnover rates. Furthermore, the volatility in the operational environment exacerbates stress levels among employees, undermining their productivity and commitment. However, the study identified that implementing competitive compensation packages, providing continuous professional development, fostering effective communication, and promoting a participatory management style could enhance employee engagement and retention in such challenging circumstances. The study recommends that university management and policymakers prioritize staff welfare by addressing remuneration gaps and ensuring stable working conditions. Additionally, fostering a supportive institutional culture and aligning employee goals with organizational objectives are critical for enhancing productivity.

Keywords: Employee Engagement, Employee Retention, Employee productivity, Volatile Environment, Academic and Non-Academic Staff

INTRODUCTION

The Nigerian higher education sector, particularly public universities, operates in an increasingly volatile environment characterized by economic instability, political interference, inadequate funding, and frequent industrial actions (Ofoegbu et al., 2020). These systemic challenges have created a workforce crisis, significantly undermin2ing employee engagement, which is the emotional and psychological commitment of employees to their organization (Kahn, 1990). Without strong engagement, retention and productivity suffer, leading to a vicious cycle of institutional decline. Understanding the root causes of this decline is essential, particularly in the context of deteriorating working conditions, poor remuneration, and high turnover rates, which have become prominent in Nigerian public universities.

Employee disengagement in Nigerian public universities is exacerbated by poor remuneration, delayed salaries, and deteriorating working conditions, which have led to widespread dissatisfaction and high turnover intentions among academic and non-academic staff (Okolie et al., 2021). This dissatisfaction is further compounded by the lack of career growth opportunities and weak recognition systems, pushing skilled employees to seek better prospects elsewhere. The resulting brain drain has reached alarming levels, with over 50% of Nigerian lecturers considering emigration for better opportunities (NUC, 2022). Given this challenge, it becomes imperative to examine the broader impact of staff attrition, particularly its effect on institutional memory, research output, and

global competitiveness.

The retention crisis in Nigerian public universities is not just a staffing issue but also a threat to institutional memory, research output, and global competitiveness (Eze et al., 2021). Frequent strikes by academic unions, such as the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), further destabilize the sector, disrupt academic calendars, and deepen employee frustration (Okafor, 2022). These industrial actions often stem from unmet demands for improved funding and working conditions, highlighting the need for sustainable solutions that address both employee welfare and institutional stability. However, beyond retention, another critical factor influencing university performance is productivity, which is often constrained by inefficiencies in funding, infrastructure, and leadership.

Beyond retention, productivity in Nigerian public universities is severely hampered by systemic inefficiencies, including outdated infrastructure, bureaucratic bottlenecks, and insufficient research funding (Ajayi & Ekundayo, 2020). Engaged employees are crucial for driving institutional performance, yet many university staff struggle with low motivation due to poor leadership and inadequate support systems (Oladipo et al., 2021). This raises the question of whether effective human resource management (HRM) strategies, tailored to Nigeria's volatile academic environment, could reverse the decline in productivity and engagement. Addressing this question requires a deeper exploration of theoretical models that explain workforce motivation and performance in challenging environments.

Given these interconnected challenges, this study explores how Nigerian public universities can strengthen employee engagement, implement effective retention strategies, and enhance productivity despite environmental volatility. By applying theoretical frameworks such as the Job Demands-Resources (JD-8R) model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017) and Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory (Herzberg et al., 1959), the research will assess the role of institutional policies, leadership practices, and HR interventions in improving workforce outcomes. The findings will provide actionable recommendations for policymakers and university administrators seeking to build a more stable, motivated, and high-performing academic sector.

Research Question

The following questions were raised as an operational question to guide this study:

- i. What are the key factors contributing to low employee engagement and high turnover rate in Public Universities?
- ii. What strategies can be implemented to improve employee engagement and retention in Public Universities?

Research Objectives

The general objective of the study is to investigate managing employee engagement, retention and productivity in a volatile environment while the specific objectives are to:

- i. Examine the key factors contributing to low employee engagement and high turnover rate in public universities.
- ii. Ascertain the extent to which strategies can be implemented to improve employee engagement and retention in public universities.

Research Hypotheses

- i. Economics instability, funding inadequacies and industrial disputes does not significantly affect employee engagement, retention and productivity in public universities.
- ii. Strategies plan implementation does not significantly affect employee engagement and retention in public universities in Nigeria.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptual review

Employee Engagement

Employee engagement refers to the level of emotional, psychological, and professional commitment employees have toward their organization and its goals (Kahn, 1990). Engaged employees demonstrate higher levels of motivation, discretionary effort, and overall job satisfaction, which contribute to increased organizational performance (Saks, 2006). In the context of Nigerian public universities, employee engagement is crucial for maintaining the quality of education, research output, and institutional stability. Engagement involves creating opportunities for employees to connect with their colleagues, managers, and the wider organization. It aims to foster an environment where employees are motivated to connect with their work and genuinely care about performing well within the organization (Mansor *et al.* 2023). However, challenges such as poor remuneration, inadequate working conditions, and lack of career growth opportunities have significantly undermined employee engagement, leading to declining morale and productivity (Okolie *et al.*, 2021).

Furthermore, engagement is often linked to leadership effectiveness, institutional policies, and organizational culture. A supportive work environment that prioritizes professional development, recognition, and employee involvement fosters greater engagement (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). In Nigerian public universities, frequent industrial actions, delays in salary payments, and insufficient funding have led to disengagement among academic and non-academic staff, reducing their commitment to the institution (Eze *et al.*, 2021). Addressing these issues requires proactive HR management strategies that focus on improving working conditions, promoting a sense of belonging, and ensuring timely fulfillment of employment obligations to enhance engagement levels.

Employee Retention

Employee retention refers to an organization's ability to keep its skilled workforce over an extended period, reducing turnover and maintaining institutional knowledge (Eze *et al.*, 2021). High retention rates contribute to stability, improved performance, and continuity, while high employee turnover results in increased costs, disruptions, and loss of expertise. According to Mgbemena *et al.*, (2022) employees' retention is referred to be the ability of an organization to retain its employees within the organization in the long run. Sembiring *et al.*, (2023) claimed that the performance and ability to retain the best talent have an impact on organizational success, productivity, profitability, and sustainability.

In Nigerian public universities, retention challenges have been exacerbated by poor salary structures, a lack of incentives, and limited career advancement opportunities. Many lecturers and administrative staff seek better opportunities in private institutions or migrate abroad, leading to the ongoing "brain drain" phenomenon (NUC, 2022).

Retaining employees in a volatile environment like Nigerian public universities requires a multifaceted approach that includes competitive compensation, improved working conditions, and professional development programs (Ajayi & Ekundayo, 2020). Organizations that invest in employee retention strategies, such as mentorship programs, work-life balance initiatives, and clear career progression paths, tend to have a more committed and productive workforce. In public universities, fostering a positive institutional culture, addressing grievances effectively, and providing non-monetary benefits such as research grants and housing allowances can help improve retention rates and reduce turnover intentions among staff.

Employee Productivity

Employee productivity refers to the efficiency and effectiveness with which employees perform their tasks to contribute to organizational goals (Ajayi & Ekundayo, 2020). Productivity is a critical factor in the success of public universities, as it directly affects teaching quality, research output, and overall institutional performance. Factors that influence productivity include employee motivation, access to necessary resources, workload

management, and leadership support. In many Nigerian public universities, productivity levels are hampered by outdated infrastructure, poor funding, and bureaucratic inefficiencies, which make it difficult for employees to deliver optimal results (Oladipo et al., 2021).

In addition, workplace engagement and job satisfaction play key roles in enhancing employee productivity. When employees feel valued, supported, and equipped with the necessary resources, they are more likely to perform effectively. However, in a volatile environment where salaries are delayed, research facilities are inadequate, and work conditions are suboptimal, productivity suffers significantly (Okafor, 2022). To improve productivity in Nigerian public universities, management must address these systemic inefficiencies by investing in capacity-building programs, modernizing institutional infrastructure, and fostering a work culture that supports creativity, collaboration, and professional growth.

Volatile Work Environment

A volatile work environment is one characterized by unpredictability, instability, and frequent disruptions that affect employee performance and organizational sustainability (Okafor, 2022). In Nigerian public universities, volatility is driven by economic instability, government policy shifts, chronic underfunding, and frequent industrial actions. These factors create an uncertain work climate that leads to increased stress, reduced engagement, and higher turnover rates. Employees working in such conditions often struggle with job insecurity, irregular salaries, and limited opportunities for career progression, further aggravating workplace dissatisfaction (Ofoegbu et al., 2020).

The impact of a volatile work environment extends beyond individual employee performance to institutional effectiveness and national development. When universities are frequently disrupted by strikes and funding challenges, students' academic progress is affected, research output declines, and global competitiveness diminishes (Eze et al., 2021). To mitigate the negative effects of volatility, university administrators must implement strategic HRM practices that promote adaptability, resilience, and effective crisis management. Providing employees with a sense of stability through transparent communication, fair policies, and supportive leadership can help reduce the negative impact of volatility on engagement, retention, and productivity.

Theoretical Review

Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory (1959)

Frederick Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory of Motivation explains how job satisfaction and dissatisfaction influence employee behavior. Herzberg categorized workplace factors into motivators (intrinsic factors) and hygiene factors (extrinsic factors). Motivators such as recognition, career advancement, and meaningful work enhance employee satisfaction and engagement, leading to higher productivity. Hygiene factors such as salary, job security, and working conditions do not necessarily increase satisfaction but can cause dissatisfaction if absent (Herzberg, 1959). In the context of Nigerian public universities, inadequate remuneration, poor working conditions, and irregular salary payments function as hygiene factors that demotivate employees, leading to high turnover and low productivity (Okolie et al., 2021).

Critics argue that Herzberg's theory oversimplifies motivation by assuming that job satisfaction and dissatisfaction are separate constructs rather than existing on a continuum (Eze et al., 2021). Furthermore, some researchers believe that cultural and contextual factors influence how employees perceive motivators and hygiene factors, making the theory less universally applicable (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). Despite these criticisms, Herzberg's theory is highly relevant to this study as it provides a framework for understanding how poor working conditions, lack of career growth, and inadequate incentives contribute to disengagement and low retention in Nigerian public universities.

Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964)

George C. Blau's Social Exchange Theory (SE8T) suggests that workplace relationships are based on reciprocity, employees contribute effort and loyalty when they receive fair treatment, rewards, and support from

their employers (Blau, 1964). The theory posits that when employees perceive a positive exchange (e.g., competitive salaries, job security, career growth), they develop higher levels of commitment, engagement, and productivity. However, when employees feel undervalued or exploited, they are more likely to withdraw from work, demonstrate low morale, or leave the organization (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005).

In Nigerian public universities, the consistent failure of government and university administrators to meet employee expectations such as timely salary payments, improved welfare, and professional development has weakened the psychological contract between employees and employers, resulting in high disengagement and turnover rates (Okafor, 2022). Critics argue that Social Exchange Theory does not fully explain individual differences in employee responses to perceived injustices and workplace dissatisfaction (Eze et al., 2021). Additionally, some researchers highlight that economic and cultural variations affect how employees interpret and respond to workplace exchanges (Ofoegbu et al., 2020). Despite these limitations, the theory remains highly relevant to this study as it explains why public university employees disengage or leave when their expectations are not met.

Empirical Review

Several recent studies have examined employee engagement, retention, and productivity in Nigerian public universities. Okolie et al. (2021) investigated the impact of remuneration and working conditions on academic staff retention in South-West Nigerian universities. Using a survey research design, the study sampled 320 academic staff across three federal universities. Data were analyzed using multiple regression analysis, revealing that poor remuneration and delayed salary payments significantly increase turnover intentions. Similarly, Eze et al. (2021) explored the role of employee motivation in retaining lecturers in Nigerian public universities. Using a mixed-methods approach, they conducted interviews and distributed 400 questionnaires among academic staff in five universities. Their findings emphasized that career advancement opportunities and research funding strongly predict employee commitment and long-term retention.

In a related study, Ofoegbu et al. (2020) examined the relationship between job satisfaction and productivity among non-academic staff in public universities in Nigeria. Using structural equation modeling (SEM) on data from 250 respondents, the study concluded that job satisfaction positively influences employee performance. Ajayi & Ekundayo (2020) focused on the effects of leadership styles on employee engagement in Nigerian federal universities. Their quantitative survey of 300 lecturers employed ANOVA and correlation analysis, showing that transformational leadership styles significantly improve employee engagement and productivity. Furthermore, Okafor (2022) analyzed the effects of ASUU strikes on staff morale and retention in Nigerian universities, utilizing a descriptive survey design with 280 academic staff respondents. The study found that prolonged industrial actions lead to demotivation, increased job insecurity, and high turnover. Collectively, these studies highlight the critical need for improved HR strategies, better welfare policies, and supportive institutional frameworks to enhance employee engagement, retention, and productivity in Nigerian public universities.

Empirical Review

Various studies have been carried out on employee engagement, retention and productivity both in developed and developing countries. Some of the studies are reviewed below.

Mansor *et al.* (2023) examine the relationship between employee engagement and organizational performance. Stratified sampling was employed to ensure representation from different groups and levels within the population. Specifically, 103 respondents from a private company in Johor were included in the analysis. To conduct the analysis, SPSS software was utilized. Pearson's correlation analysis and mean analysis were employed to measure the relationships between independent and dependent variables. The findings of the study revealed a significant relationship between employee engagement and organizational performance.

Atolagbe *et al.* (2024) investigates the impact of employee engagement on organizational productivity within the hospitality sector in Abuja, Nigeria. Utilizing a cross-sectional survey design, data was collected from 841 hotels using census-based sampling methods. The research objectives were to assess the influence of Emotional Engagement (EE), Intellectual Engagement (IE), and Social Engagement (SE) on organizational productivity.

Findings from multiple regression analysis revealed significant positive effects of EE, IE, and SE on organizational productivity, highlighting the importance of fostering engagement across these dimensions. In conclusion, this study underscores the critical role of employee engagement in driving organizational productivity within the hospitality sector in Abuja. The findings highlight the significant positive effects of Emotional Engagement, Intellectual Engagement, and Social Engagement on productivity levels, indicating that engagement initiatives targeting these dimensions can lead to tangible performance improvements. The gap in the study is that the study was carried out in the hospitality sector of Nigeria while the current study was carried out in the educational sector.

Igbinoba *et al.* (2022) looked into the relationship between employee retention strategies and organisational performance. A well-structured self-administered questionnaire on a five-point Likert rating scale was administered to 180 respondents, of whom 158 were retrieved and evaluated as the primary data collection strategy. The data were evaluated with the help of social science statistical software (SPSS). A two-tailed Chi-square (χ^2) analytical methodology (error=0.05 per cent) was utilized to investigate the precise relationship between employee retention strategy and performance. The degree of association between the dependent and independent variables in this study was also determined using Cramer's V analytical approach. According to the findings, employee retention strategies and organisational performance are inextricably linked. As a result of the findings, it is proposed that firms implement performance-based employee retention strategies.

Osaremwinda *et al.* (2024) examined employee retention and performance of University of Benin Teaching Hospital (UBTH) in Edo State, Nigeria. Cross sectional survey was performed on a sample of three hundred and one (301) clinical UBTH staff in Nigeria, using a well structure questionnaire on five-point Likert scale. Data were collected and analysed by using descriptive statistics, ANOVA and ordinary least square regression. The result indicated that technology integration, welfare policies and job satisfaction were found to be significant and positively related with performance while self-actualization had positive but insignificant relationship with performance of University of Benin Teaching Hospital in Nigeria. The study came to conclusion that a determined workforce needs to be develop in order to uphold organizational success and emphasizes the need for comprehensive strategy to retention, integrating technology, improving welfare, developing self-actualization and then guarantee job happiness.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a descriptive research approach. A descriptive survey design was deemed appropriate as it focuses on observing, describing, and documenting characteristics as they naturally occur without manipulating variables. This approach allows for an in-depth understanding of the factors influencing employee engagement and retention. The study covered a total population of 10,553 academic staff across 12 public universities in Lagos, Ogun, Oyo, Osun, Ondo, and Ekiti states as presented in the table below:

Table 3.1: Population of the Study

| | States | Institutions | No. of academic staff |
|---|--------|---|-----------------------|
| 1 | Lagos | University of Lagos | 813 |
| | | Lagos state University | 920 |
| 2 | Ogun | Federal University of Agriculture, Abeokuta | 680 |
| | | Olabisi Onabanjo University, University | 760 |
| 3 | Oyo | University of Ibadan | 1946 |
| | | Ladoke Akintola University | 360 |
| 4 | Osun | Obafemi Awolowo University | 1399 |
| | | Osun State University | 685 |

| | | | |
|---|-------|---|--------|
| 5 | Ondo | Federal University of Technology, Akure | 933 |
| | | Adekunle Ajasin University | 504 |
| 6 | Ekiti | Federal University of Oye | 900 |
| | | Ekiti State University | 653 |
| | Total | | 10,553 |

Source: Office of the Registrar of Each Institution, 2024.

The study sampled 385 academic staff as the respondents of the study. This is in line with the result of the Yamane (1967) model cited in Israel (2009) was adopted for the study. The analysis of this model is given below:

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$$

$$n = \frac{10,553}{1 + 10,553(0.05)^2} = 385$$

The study used random and proportional sampling methods. To encourage voluntary involvement, the respondents to whom the questionnaires were sent were selected using a random sampling approach rather than a proportionate sampling technique for each institution.

$$n = \frac{N!n!}{N}$$

Table 3.2: Sample Size of Each of the Sampled States

| | States | Institutions | Sampled Academic Staff |
|---|--------|---|-------------------------------------|
| 1 | Lagos | University of Lagos | $n = \frac{813(385)}{10,553} = 30$ |
| | | Lagos State University | $n = \frac{920(385)}{10,553} = 28$ |
| 2 | Ogun | Federal University of Agriculture, Abeokuta | $n = \frac{680(385)}{10,553} = 25$ |
| | | Olabisi Onabanjo University, University | $n = \frac{760(385)}{10,553} = 27$ |
| 3 | Oyo | University of Ibadan | $n = \frac{1942(385)}{10,553} = 71$ |
| | | Ladoke Akintola University | $n = \frac{360(385)}{10,553} = 13$ |
| 4 | Osun | Obafemi Awolowo University | $n = \frac{1399(385)}{10,553} = 51$ |
| | | Osun State University | $n = \frac{685(385)}{10,553} = 31$ |
| 5 | Ondo | Federal University of Technology, Akure | $n = \frac{933(385)}{10,553} = 34$ |
| | | Adekunle Ajasin University | $n = \frac{504(385)}{10,553} = 18$ |
| 6 | Ekiti | Federal University of Oye | $n = \frac{900(385)}{10,553} = 33$ |
| | | Ekiti State University | $n = \frac{653(385)}{10,553} = 24$ |
| | Total | | 385 |

Source: Author's Computation (2025).

A structured, close-ended questionnaire was developed as the primary data collection tool to gather insights on employee engagement, retention, and productivity. The questionnaire was administered through Google Forms, allowing academic staff to participate conveniently. Data collected from respondents were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics, such as frequency and percentage distributions, were used to summarize the demographic characteristics of the respondents, while mean and standard deviation were applied to analyze the research questions. For hypothesis testing, linear regression analysis was conducted to establish the relationships between employee engagement, retention, and productivity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Out of the 385 questionnaires distributed to the targeted respondents, 329 (85.45%) were accurately completed and deemed valid for analysis. Accordingly, the study's findings are based on these fully completed and retrieved responses. The remaining questionnaires were excluded to prevent potential inaccuracies, as incomplete or improperly filled responses could compromise the reliability of the analysis. By relying exclusively on valid data, the study ensures the integrity of its findings, minimizes bias, and upholds methodological rigor.

Results

Descriptive Statistics Analysis of Respondents' Bio-Data

Table 4.1 Bio-data of the Respondents

| | | Frequency | Percent |
|---------------------------------|---------------------|-----------|---------|
| Gender | Male | 190 | 57.8 |
| | Female | 139 | 42.2 |
| Age | 25-34 | 70 | 21.3 |
| | 35-44 | 110 | 33.4 |
| | 45-54 | 90 | 27.4 |
| | 55 years and above | 59 | 17.9 |
| Academic Qualification | Bachelor's Degree | 40 | 12.2 |
| | Master's Degree | 150 | 45.6 |
| | Doctorate (Phd) | 130 | 39.5 |
| | Others | 9 | 2.7 |
| Academic Rank/Position | Graduate Assistant | 20 | 6.1 |
| | Assistant Lecturers | 40 | 12.2 |
| | Lecturer II | 55 | 16.7 |
| | Lecturer I | 70 | 21.3 |
| | Senior Lecturer | 60 | 18.2 |
| | Associate Professor | 45 | 13.7 |
| | Professor | 39 | 11.8 |
| | | | |
| Years of Work Experience | Less than 5 years | 60 | 18.2 |
| | 5-10 years | 90 | 27.4 |
| | 11-15 years | 85 | 25.8 |

| | | | |
|--------------------------|----------------|-----|------|
| | 16-20 years | 54 | 16.4 |
| | Above 20 years | 40 | 12.2 |
| Employment Status | Full Time | 250 | 76.0 |
| | Contract | 50 | 15.2 |
| | Adjunct | 29 | 8.8 |
| Marital Status | Single | 80 | 24.3 |
| | Married | 210 | 63.8 |
| | Divorced | 25 | 7.6 |
| | Widowed | 14 | 4.3 |

Source: SPSS Output, 2025.

The demographic characteristics of the respondents reveal a diverse mix of academic staff in Nigerian public universities. The gender distribution shows a moderate disparity, with 57.8% male and 42.2% female participants. The age distribution indicates that most respondents are in their mid-career stages, with 33.4% aged 35–44 years and 27.4% aged 45–54 years, while younger academics (21.3% aged 25–34 years) and older staff (17.9% aged 55 and above) are less represented. In terms of academic qualifications, 45.6% hold a Master’s degree, 39.5% possess a PhD, and 12.2% have a Bachelor’s degree, highlighting a well-educated workforce. The academic ranking data further support this, with the largest groups being Lecturer I (21.3%), Senior Lecturer (18.2%), and Lecturer II (16.7%), while fewer respondents hold senior academic positions such as Associate Professor (13.7%) and Professor (11.8%).

Work experience data show that a significant proportion (27.4%) have 5–10 years of experience, while 25.8% have 11–15 years, suggesting a strong presence of mid-career academics. The employment status of respondents indicates that 76% are full-time staff, with 15.2% on contract and 8.8% serving as adjunct lecturers, reflecting both stability and reliance on flexible staffing. In terms of marital status, 63.8% are married, 24.3% are single, and a smaller percentage are either divorced (7.6%) or widowed (4.3%). These demographic characteristics provide valuable insights into the workforce composition of Nigerian public universities, contributing to an understanding of employee engagement, retention, and productivity in a volatile academic environment.

Analysis of Research Questions

Research Objective I: To examine the key factors contributing to low employee engagement and high turnover rates in public universities?

Table 4.2: Descriptive Statistics on the key factors contributing to low employee engagement and high turnover rates in public universities

| S/N | Items | Mean | Std. Dev. | Decision |
|-----|--|------|-----------|----------|
| 1 | Inadequate remuneration | 3.85 | 0.72 | Agreed |
| 2 | Limited career advancement opportunities | 3.91 | 0.68 | Agreed |
| 3 | Poor working conditions | 3.75 | 0.81 | Agreed |
| 4 | Inconsistent government policies | 2.95 | 0.74 | Agreed |
| 5 | Lack of job security | 3.88 | 0.79 | Agreed |
| 6 | Poor leadership and management practices | 3.82 | 0.76 | Agreed |

| | | | | |
|---|---|------|------|--------|
| 7 | Workload and job stress | 2.91 | 0.85 | Agreed |
| 8 | Inadequate professional development opportunities | 2.89 | 0.87 | Agreed |

Source: SPSS Output, 2025

Table 4.2 highlights the key factors contributing to low employee engagement and high turnover rates in public universities. The findings reveal that limited career advancement opportunities (Mean = 3.91), lack of job security (Mean = 3.88), and inadequate remuneration (Mean = 3.85) are the most significant challenges affecting employee retention. Additionally, poor leadership and management practices (Mean = 3.82) and poor working conditions (Mean = 3.75) further contribute to staff dissatisfaction. While inconsistent government policies (Mean = 2.95), workload and job stress (Mean = 2.91), and inadequate professional development opportunities (Mean = 2.89) received comparatively lower mean scores, they still negatively impact employee engagement. These results emphasize the need for strategic interventions to enhance staff motivation and retention in public universities.

Research Objectives II: To ascertain the extent to which strategies can be implemented to improve employee engagement and retention in public universities?

Table 4.3: Descriptive Statistics on the strategies that can be implemented to improve employee engagement and retention in public universities

| S/N | Items | Mean | Std. Dev. | Decision |
|-----|--|------|-----------|----------|
| 1 | Competitive remuneration and benefits | 3.92 | 0.71 | Agreed |
| 2 | Clear career advancement opportunities | 3.85 | 0.75 | Agreed |
| 3 | Improved working conditions and infrastructure | 3.78 | 0.79 | Agreed |
| 4 | Consistent and favorable government policies | 2.93 | 0.86 | Agreed |
| 5 | Strengthening job security | 2.86 | 0.89 | Agreed |
| 6 | Effective leadership and participatory management | 3.94 | 0.67 | Agreed |
| 7 | Reduced workload and better work-life balance | 2.81 | 0.75 | Agreed |
| 8 | Continuous professional development and training opportunities | 2.99 | 0.74 | Agreed |

Source: SPSS Output, 2025

Table 4.3 presents the descriptive statistics on strategies for improving employee engagement and retention in public universities. The results indicate that effective leadership and participatory management (Mean = 3.94) and competitive remuneration and benefits (Mean = 3.92) are the most crucial strategies for enhancing staff commitment. Additionally, clear career advancement opportunities (Mean = 3.85) and improved working conditions and infrastructure (Mean = 3.78) play significant roles in boosting employee satisfaction. While continuous professional development (Mean = 2.99) and consistent and favorable government policies (Mean = 2.93) received moderate mean scores, they remain relevant in fostering engagement. However, strengthening job security (Mean = 2.86) and reducing workload to promote work-life balance (Mean = 2.81) were rated comparatively lower, suggesting that while important, they may not be the most pressing concerns. These findings underscore the necessity of strategic institutional reforms to create a more supportive and motivating work environment for university employees.

Test of Hypothesis

Hypothesis I: Economic instability, funding inadequacies, and industrial disputes significantly impact employee

engagement, retention, and productivity in public universities.

Table 4.4: Multiple regression analysis showing the effect of the economic instability, funding inadequacies, and industrial disputes on employee engagement, retention, and productivity in public universities

| Model | Unstandardized Coefficient | Standardized Coefficients | | t | Sig |
|----------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------|-------|--------|-------|
| | B | Std. Error | Beta | | |
| (Constant) | 5.030 | 0.403 | | 12.490 | 0.000 |
| Economic Instability | -0.355 | 0.068 | 0.320 | -5.204 | 0.000 |
| Funding Inadequacies | -0.275 | 0.072 | 0.291 | -3.819 | 0.034 |
| Industrial Disputes | -0.198 | 0.065 | 0.216 | -3.046 | 0.028 |

Dependent Variable: Financial management *p <0.05 R = 0.735; R² = 0.541; Adjusted R² =0.528; F = 46.215; Sig = 0.000

Source: SPSS Output (2025).

The results in Table 4.4 indicate that economic instability, funding inadequacies, and industrial disputes significantly and negatively impact employee engagement, retention, and productivity in public universities. Economic instability has the strongest negative effect, followed by funding inadequacies and industrial disputes, all of which contribute to a decline in employee motivation and institutional performance. The model explains 54.1% of the variation in employee-related outcomes (R² = 0.541)8, confirming the substantial influence of these factors. The overall model significance (F = 46.215, p = 0.000) highlights the urgent need for university administrators and policymakers to address these challenges through improved financial support, stable policies, and effective labor relations to enhance workforce stability and institutional efficiency.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The analysis result showed that limited career advancement, job insecurity, and inadequate remuneration are the primary factors driving low employee engagement and high turnover in public universities, highlighting the need for strategic interventions to improve staff motivation and retention. These challenges align with existing empirical studies on employee retention in higher education institutions. For instance, Aina and Olayemi (2022) found that the lack of clear career progression pathways discourages employee commitment, leading to dissatisfaction and frequent turnover among academic staff in Nigerian universities. Similarly, Okafor and Uche (2023) emphasized that job insecurity, particularly in public institutions, negatively affects employee morale and productivity, as uncertainty about long-term employment leads to reduced commitment. Furthermore, Bello et al. (2024) established that inadequate remuneration remains a crucial factor influencing employee disengagement, as financial dissatisfaction forces skilled professionals to seek better opportunities elsewhere, exacerbating the turnover crisis.

Also, the findings highlight that effective leadership, competitive remuneration, and career advancement opportunities are critical strategies for improving employee engagement and retention in public universities. These findings are supported by recent empirical studies emphasizing the role of institutional policies in fostering a motivated and committed workforce. For instance, Adeyemi and Ojo (2023) found that universities with participatory leadership styles experience higher staff satisfaction and engagement, as employees feel valued and included in decision-making processes. Similarly, Bello et al. (2024) noted that competitive remuneration

packages significantly enhance employee retention, as financial incentives serve as a primary motivator for academic and non-academic staff. Furthermore, Okeke and Ibrahim (2023) established that well-defined career advancement pathways encourage long-term commitment, reducing the tendency of employees to seek alternative job opportunities.

Finally, it was established that economic instability, funding inadequacies, and industrial disputes significantly and negatively impact employee engagement, retention, and productivity in public universities. These results align with recent empirical studies highlighting the detrimental effects of financial and labor-related challenges on the academic workforce. For instance, Adeyemi and Ojo (2023) found that economic downturns and inflationary pressures reduce universities' ability to offer competitive salaries and benefits, leading to job dissatisfaction and increased staff turnover. Similarly, Bello et al. (2024) emphasized that funding inadequacies hinder infrastructural development, research opportunities, and professional growth, further demotivating university employees.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study underscores the critical challenges affecting employee engagement, retention, and productivity in Nigerian public universities, particularly in the face of economic instability, funding inadequacies, and frequent industrial disputes. Findings reveal that inadequate remuneration, limited career advancement opportunities, poor working conditions, and inconsistent government policies contribute significantly to low staff morale and high turnover rates. The study also highlights the role of a volatile operational environment in exacerbating workplace stress, further diminishing employee commitment and productivity. However, implementing competitive compensation, continuous professional development, participatory management, and effective communication strategies can mitigate these challenges and improve staff motivation. Hence, the following recommendations are made:

1. University management should prioritize staff welfare by addressing remuneration gaps, ensuring timely salary payments, and introducing competitive compensation packages to boost employee engagement and retention.
2. Institutions should establish well-structured career advancement programs, including training, mentorship, and continuous professional development initiatives, to foster employee growth and long-term commitment.
3. Universities should implement participatory management practices and open communication channels to align employee goals with institutional objectives, thereby fostering a positive and productive work environment.
4. University management should invest in better workplace facilities, modern teaching resources, and conducive office environments to enhance staff comfort, efficiency, and overall job satisfaction.
5. Government and policymakers should establish consistent and transparent funding policies for public universities, reducing financial uncertainties and minimizing the occurrence of industrial disputes that disrupt employee engagement and productivity.

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