

APPLICATION OF ACADEMIC KNOWLEDGE AND POTENTIALS FOR SUSTAINABLE STAFF WELFARE IMPROVEMENT IN NIGERIAN UNIVERSITIES

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Abstract

One of the fundamental issues faced by Nigerian universities staff over the years, which has not only led to inefficiency, low morale, poverty of staff and incessant strike actions by labour unions, is the inability of university managements to provide robust and sustainable staff welfare packages, in spite of the knowledge and potentials that abound in the universities locally and internationally. This paper aims at providing workable insights, through the application of academic knowledge and other university potentials, which have the capacity to produce diverse material and food needs of university workers in order to improve their welfare, morale and productivity with high degree of sustainability. The paper relied on secondary data and utilized resource-based theory, including a model developed by the researchers for discussing main themes of the paper. The paper found among others, that universities in developing countries with emphasis on Nigeria, do not only have abundant human and natural resources, but are also custodians and creators of knowledge which has the capabilities to build, fabricate and engage farm implements in the production of agriculturally based goods as well as manage their natural resources, first, for the wellbeing of their staff and the society at large. Universities are therefore strongly admonished to engage in agricultural production of food and other material needs of workers by engaging the faculties of agriculture/agricultural engineering and entrepreneurship development centres to achieve this goal.

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1. Introduction

Over the decades, staff welfare remains a major concern in Nigerian public universities. The perpetual lack of robust, satisfactory and sustainable staff welfare packages has often resulted to low morale, job dissatisfaction, and high rate of employee turnover, labour-management conflict, petty corruption, strike actions and premature deaths of university staff. In other words, to fulfill the basic needs and provide a good working environment, good pay and other benefits for employees' welfare and motivation is quite multifaceted and burdensome to organization managers (Al Mamun and Hasan, 2017). Aside the poor attitudes of university managements toward staff welfare, under-funding of tertiary institutions in Nigeria by the central government remains one of the major contributory factors (Uhunmwangho and Urhoghide, 2019). This, also, is largely as a result of Nigeria's over dependence on assured stream of income from the export of oil and gas products, which accounts for 98% of the country's total export earnings, and provides about 83% of the Federal government's annual revenue (National Geographic Society, 2016). Aside the need to improve university staff welfare packages, there is also a need to urgently diversify the economy and cushion it from the uncertainties of a virtual single export product regime, there is a growing global focus on entrepreneurship as an important means of job or employment creation, income earnings, self-reliance and national development (Audretsch, Keilbach & Lehmann, 2006; Malchow-Muller, Schjerning & Sorensen, 2011; Wennekers, van Stel, Thurik & Reynolds 2005). More of concern is the fact that:

"There is a pervasive myth that public universities in many countries are under the dictates of the federal government. This is due to the claim that government universities are public institutions that are closely linked to the government and, therefore, must accommodate national needs, demands and expectations. The subservient bondage is embedded in the fact that public universities are largely sponsored by the government; hence, university's goals and development agenda must concur with the government's agenda and priorities, as if the universities themselves lack the sense of direction in determining their vision, goals, priorities" and welfare (Hussin and Aziah, 2009, P.83).

Consequently, contemporary universities have to redefine themselves and adjust to the new dynamics or mega trends that are affecting the institutions (Patrascu, 2022).

Despite the fact that several studies have been carried out on this topic, little research has unveiled the peculiar knowledge and potentials (resources) within the university environments, especially in developing economies with production capacities for sustainable staff welfare and the impact it has on employee morale and productivity, which is the gap that this paper attempts to fill.

Although, the knowledge of application of science and technology is not a new concept, it has been drawing attention and research interest in order to solve the problems of underdevelopment, unemployment and underutilization of resources that continue to force Nigerians to live below poverty line and to remain in vicious circle of poverty. That makes it imperative for attention to shift from single source of livelihood to diversification of knowledge and potentials that abound in universities (Palka, Rikwentishe, Mani & Josiah, 2015; Baltai, Amuda & Baltai, 2023). Thus, this study is significant as it has the capacity not only to provide lasting solution to university staff welfare issues (mainly food production), but also the tendency for sustainable staff welfare measures through practical application of the knowledge of science, technology, theories and ideas that are unendingly taught in the class in conjunction with the enormous available potentials (resources) within the universities, without having direct impact on the organization workers, who continuously put in their best yet, perpetually dissatisfied due to very poor reward system on the part of management.

Also, this study is motivated by the fact that, the application and demonstration of academic knowledge and potentials by both teachers and learners will not only address the problem of food and material needs of staff but equally serves as skills acquisition forum for learners for employment creation, income earnings, self-reliance and national development by extension. Furthermore, the significance of this study is anchored on the fact that it has the capacity to promote partnership between the universities and private sector organizations like banks, telecommunication industries among others for mutual benefits. In a nutshell, universities have the capacities for improving their staff wellbeing (welfare) through exploiting the resources of nature within their environments.

2. Method and Main Arguments of the Paper

This is a qualitative study and it relied on secondary sources of data collection. The plights of Nigeria's universities staff, resulting from poor welfare packages and over reliance on the lean monthly statutory allocations from the federal government to pay salaries and other entitlements were highlighted. The paper argues that,

universities are not only custodians of knowledge but also creators of knowledge, therefore, University managements should not keep waiting and expecting allocation from the federal government. As funding inadequacies, executive and administrative incapacity, political interferences from the federal government have been advanced as weakening the viability and capability of universities as agents of transformation (Odoh, 2004, Ibietan, 2017). They should subscribe to brilliant ideas presented by academics and practically apply/engage both academic knowledge and available human and natural resources of the universities for agricultural production and other material needs of workers at subsidized rates, in order to enhance their wellbeing as well as boost their morale towards higher productivity. Thus, as creators of knowledge, universities can be self reliant without over relying on federal government. The utilization of resource-based theory (in organization research) as framework for textual analysis including a model developed by the researchers illuminated the discussion, conclusion and recommendations of the paper.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Academic Knowledge and Potentials in Context

Universities, by their potentials and endowments, are bodies which can determine their own vision, goals, objectives, strategies and timeline of development. They have experts and professionals that can be deployed for designing their own development plans, needs, demands and wellbeing (Lemmer, 2002). Unarguably, virtually all universities in developing economies have vast lands fallowing for decades without development especially in terms of agricultural production. This does not only account for no/low productivity, hunger and general hardship of university workers, but also creates room for non-engagement of the human capital resources. Against this backdrop, Enems, (2016) asserts "man was created a catalogue of materials of both living and non-living things intended to provide comfort for him. Therefore, man's ability to recognize this fact cannot be underestimated. Each of the catalogue of human problem and desire would require a unique approach to solving it..." Drawing from the history of livelihood and improvement of quality of life, the capacity to exploit the resources of nature is dependent on the extent to which people and institutions understand the laws of nature (science) and the extent to which they put that knowledge into practice by developing tools (technology) and on the manner in which work is organized for the production of food and material needs of man-the worker (Rodney,1976). Therefore,

programmes and innovations that would drive institutional prosperity should be embarked upon in the country, this would boost job creation, output growth, and eventually eliminate poverty in Nigerian universities and the country at large (Omilogun et al, 2023).

Furthermore, from the standpoint of the proactive approach, the whole world is exploring the concept of sustainable development as an approach that will permit continued improvements in the present quality of life at a lower intensity of resource use, leaving behind for future generations an undiminished or even enhanced stock of natural resources and other assets (World Bank, 1992 in Aregbeyen and Adeoye, 2012 P. 37). Against this backdrop, it is germane to unveil the knowledge and potentials within the context of universities and the urgent need, more than ever, to engage them for material and food production for the wellbeing of both university management, workers and the society at large.

3.2 Application of Knowledge and the need to improve staff welfare

Basically, welfare connotes well-being. It is concerned with somebody's state or condition with respect to whether he or she is healthy, safe, happy, or prospering (Encarta, 1999). "Indeed, the wellbeing of any people (staff) is life assuring and their pivot to progress and prosperity" (Ayuk, 2021 P.1). Unarguably, food is one of the key factors that enhance people's welfare and productivity. As Ogundari, (2017) in Ayuk, (2021 p. 1) rightly asserts that "Food is key to sustaining life, as it provides nutrients essential for the maintenance of good health, improvement of well-being, and labour productivity". From the foregoing, it is clear that "every worker works, not only to contribute his time, strength, skills, knowledge and experience towards the achievement of organizational goals, but also, mainly, for achievement of personal goals in terms of ability to meet first, basic needs: food, water, clothing, shelter, security and self-esteem (Edino, Echadu & Bisong, 2023). Thus, with the abundance of scientific knowledge and potentials in Nigerian universities and the entire globe, it is high time more than ever, to learn by doing rather than laying emphasis on theories and philosophical ideas yet, languishing in poverty and penury.

3.3 Areas of University's Application of Knowledge and Potentials for Staff Welfare Improvement and other Benefits

Agricultural production:

This will be geared toward food (crop and animal) production. Here, the entire faculty of Agriculture with diverse departments and areas of specialization should be engaged, with financial supports from management and the government, to

apply or demonstrate their knowledge of science, technology and existing theories and ideas for physical production of food and material needs of the university community at affordable rates. This way, the university workers or community will become self-reliant in food production and distribution thereby enhancing the morale and productivity of workers. It is common knowledge that the most common food items consumed by Nigerians including workers include maize, cassava, guinea corn, rice, beans, tomatoes, pepper, etc while animal protein needed is gotten from fish, poultry, cattle, goat, sheep, rabbit, and grass cutter among others. Nigerian universities have vast lands that are fallowing for decades which can be utilized for such productive ventures.

3.4 Waste conversion to Produce Manure:

In the quest to boost food production, the need to convert waste to manure cannot be overemphasized. Other areas of knowledge application include the following: Mechanized farming, preservation and packaging of farm produce and others.

3.5 A Model for Discussing Main Themes of the Paper

The nexus between university knowledge/potentials, environment, workers' welfare and productivity

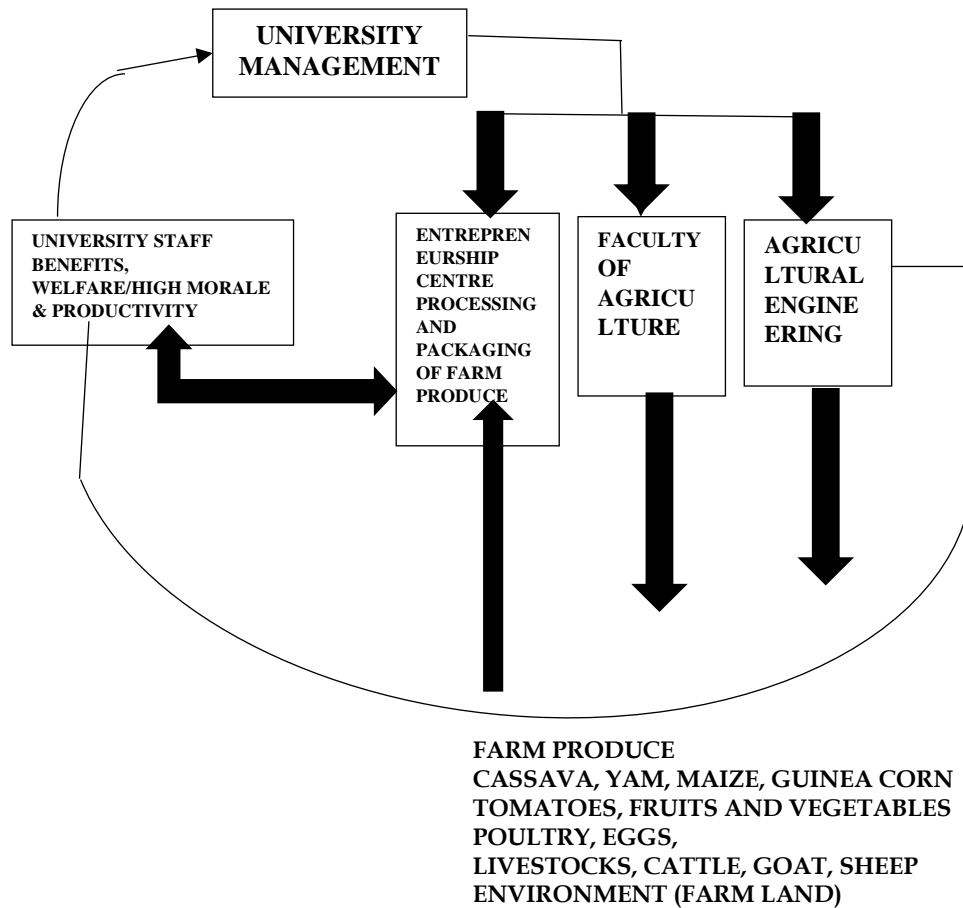


Figure 1. Farm Land

Source: Developed by the Authors, (2024).

The model above illustrates the significant relationship between and among key variables in the diagram and within the university community. At the top is the university management. The study presupposes that management should engage the faculties of agriculture and engineering in the production of food and other material needs of workers. It is designed that, while the faculty of agriculture with different departments and areas of specialization engages in the cultivation of land and rearing of livestock, the faculty or department of agricultural engineering on the other hand collaborates by fabricating relevant tools, equipment and machines that could facilitate the cultivation and production process. Buttressing, Enems (2016) remarked that agricultural engineering is the application of engineering principles to any process associated with producing agriculturally based goods and

management of natural resources. Enams stressed further that “the discipline (agricultural engineering) concerns itself with development of labour-saving, farm machines, farm buildings, irrigation and drainage systems and processes for preserving and converting agricultural products to useful feed, and fiber products.

Furthermore, agricultural engineering develops methods and designs equipment for land preparation, planting and harvesting. They find better ways to reduce crop loss from field damage, during handling, sorting, packing and processing. The entrepreneurship center is where the farm produce (crops and animals) are moved to, processed or converted and packaged for sales at subsidized rates. Buttressing, Wirzba, (2011) remarked that everything that lives eats, we (humans) are the ones privileged to garden, feast and be hospitable.”That is why an address of the food need, is an apt attention to the future of any forward looking people” (Ayuk, 2021, P.2).

It is strongly believed that, the application of this knowledge, with strong internal control measures in place will lead to massive production of food and material needs of the university workers, which has the capacity to enhance the welfare, morale and productivity of staff. It is a framework that guarantees food security- a motivation for workers.

4. Theoretical Underpinning

Given the motivation and the main thrust of this paper, resource-based theory is considered suitable as the theoretical framework for discussing this paper. Barney, (1991) in Lartey et al, (2020) is said to be the major proponent of resource-based theory. It contends that, “the possession of strategic resources provides an organization with golden opportunity to develop competitive advantage”. It emphasizes the importance of internal resources of an organization such as physical capital resources, human capital resources and organizational capital resources in achieving organizational sustainability and performance. This suggests that an organization that enjoys self-motivated capability is skilled at continually adjusting its range of capabilities to maintain speed with changes in its environment. On the whole, the theory provides a framework for understanding how organizations can leverage their unique resources and capabilities to achieve and maintain competitive advantage.

However, just as every other theory, resource-based theory has been criticized by some scholars (Armstrong & Shimizu, 2007; Nason & Wiklund, 2018; Crook,

Ketchen, Combs & Todd, 2008). Specifically, Kraaijenbrink, Spender & Groen (2010) argued that the possession of strategic resources is not enough until the resources are appropriately deployed. As valid as this criticism may seem, it suffices to posit that it does not outweigh the relevance and explanatory capacity of the theory as observed in the assertion by Barney (1991, in Lartey, et al, 2020) that the “importance of internal resources of an organization such as physical capital resources, human capital resources and organizational capital resources is critical in achieving organizational sustainability and performance. More importantly, the cogency in the above criticism is engulfed in the submission of this paper that a university as an organization through the innovation of the top management can leverage the aforementioned resources by practically engaging the faculties of agriculture/agricultural engineering in the fabrication and building of farm implements and technologies that have the capacities to enhance massive production of food and other related material needs of workers at subsidized rates. This has the capacity to motivate the university staff, enhance their morale as well as productivity, so long as the production process is sustained. It is argued that this will also reduce over dependence on central government financial allocation for payment of staff salaries and incentives.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, universities in developing countries, with emphasis on Nigeria, have abundant human and natural resources. They are not only custodians of theoretical knowledge but equally possess the human, natural, material as well as technical/practical knowledge (resources), which have the capabilities to build or fabricate farm implements and engage in the production of agriculturally based goods and manage their natural resources, first, for the benefit and wellbeing of their staff and the society at large. It is argued that this will improve staff welfare and productivity as well as project good image of the university as solution provider not only to staff welfare but also to food insecurity.

It is therefore recommended that given the knowledge and other potentials embedded in Nigerian universities, the universities should engage in agricultural production of food and other material needs of workers by engaging the faculties of agriculture/agricultural engineering and entrepreneurship development center to achieve this goal.

Strong internal control measures must be put in place by engaging people of high integrity with juicy packages to avoid thievery, leakages and financial loss.

Every criminal act or action capable of sabotaging the aims and objectives of the programme should be met with legal action and whatever damage done by an individual should be reinstated by the perpetrators.

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