

Ombudsman Mechanism And Conflict Resolution In Southwestern Nigerian University

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Abstract: Disputes are inevitable in educational institutions because it comprised of people of diverse characteristics and background. Therefore, this study examined the implementation mechanism of ombudsman and conflict resolution in the southwestern Nigerian university. The population for the study comprised all the staff and students from the six federal universities in southwestern Nigeria. A sample of 300 staff and 300 students were selected from the three selected universities using simple random and disproportional sampling techniques. Three instruments were adopted for the study: Academic Staff Complaints Satisfactory Questionnaire (ASCSQ), Non Academic Staff Complaints Satisfactory Questionnaire (NASCSQ) and Students Complaints Satisfaction Questionnaire (STCSQ). Descriptive statistics was used to answer the two research questions raised for the study. The results reveals that the way the sampled universities handle complaints could be said to be in orderly manner and that students have good perception about how the complaints is being handled. The study recommends that Nigerian universities should put in place an Ombudsman office that will handle disputes among students and staff independently and provide a preventive mechanism that will not allow the emergence of complaints from staff.

Keyword: *Ombudsman, Dispute, Complaint, Non-Partisan and Conflict Resolution*

Introduction

Disputes are inevitable in educational institutions because institutions comprises human beings. This is more apparent in the universities due to its structure that allows several units or groups to share functional boundaries in achieving set objectives. Universities comprises students, academic and non-academic staff who must work harmoniously for the development of an institutional structure. These university personnel share functional boundaries of exchange of knowledge within the system. However, universities in Nigeria are characterized with internal and external disputes that militate against effective service delivery. Internal dispute are disputes between academic and/ or non-academic staff and University management or between students and University management. On the other hand, external disputes involves academic or non-academic staff and/ or students and the government and/ or with the host community.

Historically, individuals, social and peer groups and communities have disputed over available resources in form of land, human and materials resources available in the society for human survival. Communities have even fought one another and bitterly sought the elimination and/or subjugation of rivals, in order to control these resources. At the same time, human societies and groups have found their own ways and means of resolving conflicts without

degeneration.

Among the conflict resolution methods available, according to Rajani (2009) was Ombudsman Institution which has been closely associated with democracy, democratic development, governance and public administration in contemporary world. It is viewed as an easy mechanism of conflict resolution available for common people against arbitrary use of power by superior officer and government functionaries. Hussaini (2010) submitted that with adoption of Ombudsman Institution, there is hope that the right and welfare of the subordinate or junior worker in any human establishment will be protected.

According to Longley (2023), an Ombudsman is a neutral and non-partisan or committee of experienced officers appointed by the constituted authority to impartially investigate complaints by individual citizen against administrative injustice by public officers. The committee deals with specific complaints from the public against administrative injustice and arbitrary use of power. The committee has power to investigate, report upon and make recommendations about individual cases handled. The committee is not a court or tribunal, and has no power to make orders or to reverse administrative action but empowers to seek solution to problems by a process of investigation and conciliation. Investopedia (2023) informed that an ombudsman's decision may or may not be legally binding. Even if not binding, the decision typically carries considerable weight.

In view of the aforementioned, universities therefore, cannot afford to disregard the feelings of their workers. It is therefore imperative for the universities to set up stable, effective and trustworthy non-partisan committees to serve as mediating organ in order to avoid total collapse of harmonious relationship among the various categories of workers and students in the universities.

Methods

The descriptive research design was adopted for this study with population of all the staff and students from the six federal universities in southwestern Nigeria (University of Lagos, Federal University, Abeokuta, University of Ibadan, Obafemi Awolowo University, Federal University of Technology, Akure and Federal University, Oye-Ekiti). The multi-stage sampling procedure was adopted for this study. Simple random technique was used to select three of the six universities in southwestern Nigeria while disproportional sampling technique was used to select 100 students and 100 staff from each of the selected universities across levels and cadres. The techniques are to give equal chance for the universities in southwestern Nigeria of been selected and allow equal representation or participants irrespective of the staff and students population in each of the selected universities. Three research instruments were adopted for this study. These are: Academic Staff Complaints Satisfactory Questionnaire (ASCSQ), None Academic Staff Complaints Satisfactory Questionnaire (NASC SQ), and Students Complaints Satisfactory Questionnaire (STCSQ). The ASCSQ, NASSQ and STCSQ were divided into two sections each. Section A is designed to collect data on personal information while Section B contains items on the indicators of the variables under study. For validity of the instruments, copies were sent to experts in personnel administration and conflict resolution for their review. The criticisms and corrections were used to improve on the final draft. To ensure that the instruments were reliable, test-retest of the instrument was carried out on 20 each of academic, non-academic and students of Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago-Iwoye which was not part of the

subject for this study. The reliability value of 0.87, 0.84 and 0.81 was obtained for ASCSQ, NASCSQ and STCSQ respectively. The researcher personally administered the instruments with three research assistants who were adequately trained by the researcher for the exercise. Simple percentage was used to answer the two research questions raised for the study

Result And Discussion

Research Question 1: What is the perception of academic staff/students about complaints handling in their institutions?

N=300

Description	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	STD
There is wide spread Manner of Handling complaints in your institution	151 50.3%	88 29.3%	61 20.3%	0 0.0%	3.30	.95
My Institution is aware of Public Complaints Commission Directive (PCCD) requirements	146 48.7%	85 28.3%	69 23.0%	0 0.0%	3.26	.95
My institution is aware of the benefit of proper handling of complaints	139 46.3%	101 33.7%	60 20.0%	0 0.0%	3.26	.97
This institution upholds general complaints to any extent	135 45.0%	101 33.7%	64 21.3%	0 0.0%	3.24	1.50
Members of this academic community including myself knows where complaints are to be lodged in this institution	116 38.7%	116 38.7%	68 22.7%	0 0.0%	3.16	1.01
The institution has enough facilities to redress complaints	146 48.7%	68 22.7%	75 25.0%	11 3.7%	3.16	1.00
There are complaints Management policies in this institution	110 36.7%	127 42.3%	63 21.0%	0 0.0%	3.16	.96
This institution is Complaint friendly	119 39.7%	105 35.0%	76 25.3%	0 0.0%	3.14	.85
Methodical Handling of Complaints is evident in the way this institution handles complaints	119 39.7%	97 32.3%	76 25.3%	8 2.7%	3.14	.92

Table 1 presents the results of the perception of academic staff about the complaint handling in their institution, the result reveals that 79.6% of the respondents agreed that there is wide spread of Manner of Handling complaints while 20.4% disagreed (mean=3.30, SD=0.92). Again, 77.0% of the respondents agreed that their institution is aware of PCCD requirements while 23.0% disagreed (mean=3.26, SD=0.95). More so, 80.0% of the academic respondent agreed that their institution is aware of Benefit of Proper handling of Complaints while 20.0% disagreed (mean=3.26, SD=0.79). Furthermore 78.7% of the respondents agreed that their institution upholding of complaints to any extent while 21.3% disagreed (mean=3.24, SD=1.50). Again, 71.4% of the respondents agreed that there is availability of appropriate remedy in the institution (mean=3.16, SD=1.00). Also 79.0% of the respondents agreed that there is complaints Management policies and procedure that are in place in their institution while 21.0% disagreed

(mean=3.16, SD=0.96). In addition, 74.7% agreed that their institution has Complaints friendly Culture of the institution while 25.3% disagreed (mean=3.14, SD=0.92).

Table 2: Perception of the Non-Academic Respondents about Complaints Handling in their Institutions

N=300	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	STD
There is wide spread Manner of Handling complaints in your institution	107 35.7%	104 34.7%	84 28.0%	5 1.7%	3.31	0.4
My Institution is aware of Public Complaints Commission Directive (PCCD) requirements	146 48.7%	93 31.0%	61 20.3%	0 0.0%	3.28	0.41
My institution is aware of the benefit of proper handling of complaints	147 48.0%	88 29.3%	62 20.7%	3 1.0%	3.26	0.23
This institution upholds general complaints to any extent	143 47.7%	91 30.3%	64 21.3%	2 0.7%	3.25	0.51
Members of this academic community including myself knows where complaints are to be lodged in this institution	141 47.0%	88 29.3%	69 23.0%	2 0.7%	3.23	0.56
The institution has enough facilities to redress complaints	135 45.0%	97 32.3%	66 22.0%	2 0.7	3.22	0.12
There are complaints Management policies in this institution	135 45.0%	88 29.3%	73 24.3%	4 1.3%	3.18	0.3
This institution is Complaint friendly	114 38%	108 36.0%	67 22.3%	11 33.7%	3.08	.35
Methodical Handling of Complaints is evident in the way this institution handles complaints	108 36.0%	109 36.3%	71 23.7%	12 4.0%	3.04	0.12

Table 2 shows the distribution of non-academic staff responses on their perception on the way the complaint is being handle in their institution. The results reveal that 70.4% of the respondents agreed that there is wide spread of Manner of Handling complaints in their institution while 29.6% disagreed (mean=3.31, SD=0.4). Again, 79.8% of the respondents agreed that there institution is aware of PCCD requirements while 20.2% disagreed (mean=3.28, SD=0.41). Also, 77.7% of the non-academic staff agreed that their institution is aware of Benefit of Proper handling of Complaints while 22.3% disagreed (mean=3.26, SD=0.23). More so, 78.0% of the non-teaching staff also agreed that their institution upholding of complaints to some extent while 22.0% disagreed (mean=3.25, SD=0.51). Furthermore, 84.0% of the respondents agreed that knowledge of Complaints lodgment center by everyone (mean=3.23, SD=0.12). 77.0% of the respondents agreed that there is availability of appropriate remedy in their institution while 33.0% disagreed (mean=3.22, SD=0.12). In the same vein, 87.3% of the respondents agreed that there is complains Management policies and procedure are in place in their institution while 12.7% disagreed (mean=3.18, SD=0.3).

From the results on Table 2 and 3, it could be observed that sampled respondents in the southwest universities agreed to a large extent. Hence inference could be made that the way the sample universities handle complaints could be said to be in orderly manner. This is in tandem with the position of Relph (2017) who observed that at internal committee level, conflict issues are well presented against when it is presented to committee set up by the supervisory agency. This might be because members of the committee are not strange to the aggrieved members, hence, reason for expressing their mind fearlessly.

Table 3: Perception of the Students about Complaints Handling in their Institutions

N=300

Description	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	STD
There is wide spread Manner of Handling complaints in your institution	334 55.7%	158 26.3%	108 18.0%	0 0.0%	3.38	0.56
My Institution is aware of Public Complaints Commission Directive requirements	298 49.7%	151 25.2%	151 25.2%	0 0.0%	3.25	0.4
My institution is aware of the benefit of proper handling of complaints	290 48.3%	158 26.3%	152 25.3%	0 0.0%	3.25	0.56
This institution upholds general complaints to any extent	290 48.3%	158 26.3%	152 25.3%	0 0.0%	3.23	0.21
Members of this academic community including myself knows where complaints are to be lodged in this institution	263	143	15	44	3.18	1.3
The institution has enough facilities to redress complaints	255 42.5%	237 39.5%	108 18.0%	0 0.0%	3.11	1.2
There are complaints Management policies in this institution	178 29.7%	279 46.5%	143 23.8%	0 0.0%	3.06	1.2
This institution is Complaint friendly	214 35.7%	236 39.3%	150 25.0%	0 0.0%	3.04	0.34
Methodical Handling of Complaints is evident in the way this institution handles complaints	254 42.3%	201 33.5%	145 24.2%	0 0.0%	3.01	0.21

Table 3 reveals the rating of the factors that determines the perception of students about complaints handling in Nigerian universities. The mean item scores showed that the students agreed that the entire nine factors pointed towards a poor perception of the students towards complaints handling in the Nigerian universities. Spread of manner of handling complaints was rated highest (Mean = 3.38, SD=0.56). This is followed by benefit of proper handling (Mean = 3.26, SD=0.4), lodgment center (MIS=3.25, SD=0.56); methodology (Mean = 3.23, SD=0.21); extent of upholding complaints (Mean = 3.18, SD=1.2); culture (Mean = 3.11, SD=1.3); awareness of complaints directives (Mean = 3.06); appropriate remedy (Mean = 3.04, SD=0.34); and lastly, availability of policies and procedure (Mean = 3.16, SD=0.21). Thus, it could be said that students have good perception about how the complaints is being handle. This is in line with the findings of Grobna (2008) who concluded that Ombudsman is unbiased and fair in handling complaint

brought before it. This might be because the members of Ombudsman are non-partisan. Their appointment is on merit, integrity and experience

Research Question 2: What is the perception of staff and students about the composition of the complaints handling unit of the University?

**Table 4: Perception of the Academic Staff about Dispute Handlers in their Institutions
N=300**

Description	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	STD
Adequacy of delegation of dispute resolution	151 50.3%	88 29.3%	61 20.3%	0 0.0%	3.30	0.02
Consideration of complainants in resolution process	133 44.3%	109 36.3%	58 19.3%	0 0.0%	3.25	0.34
Management Acceptance and utilization of handlers' resolution	113 37.3%	125 41.7%	62 20.7%	0 0.0%	3.17	0.56
Task orientation of complaints handlers	120 40.0%	107 35.7%	73 24.3%	0 0.0%	3.16	0.4
Human and Task orientation of complaints handler	146 48.7%	62 20.7%	71 23.7%	21 7.0%	3.11	0.61
Human orientation of complaints handlers	112 37.3%	107 35.6%	71 23.7%	10 3.3%	3.07	0.3

Table 4 reveals the rating of the factors that determines the perception of the academic staff about dispute handlers in their institutions. The mean item scores explained the perception of the academic staff towards complaints handlers in the Nigerian universities using the entire six factors. Adequate delegation was rated highest with 79.5% of the respondents agreed that there is adequacy of delegation of dispute resolution (Mean = 3.30, SD=0.02). This is followed by resolution process (Mean= 3.25, SD=0.34), acceptance and utilization (Mean = 3.17, SD=0.56); task orientation (Mean = 3.16, SD=0.4); human and task orientation (Mean = 3.11, SD=0.61); and lastly, human orientation (Mean = 3.07, SD=0.3). From the result, it could observe that academic staff in the sampled Universities perceived that universities management fairly handle the dispute whenever it erupted. This is in line with the ethical principles that establish the foundation of Ombuds work which include: independence, neutrality, impartiality and confidentiality as identified by Mastiro (2015). The confidence repose in the Ombudsman might equally be responsible for their fairness.

**Table 5: Perception of the Non-Academic Staff about Dispute Handlers in their Institutions
N=300**

Description	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	Std
Human orientation of complaints handlers	144 48.0%	95 31.7%	61 20.3%	0 0.0%	3.28	1.00
Management Acceptance and utilization of handlers' resolution	132 44.0%	105 35.0%	63 21.0%	0 0.0%	3.17	.98
Consideration of complainants in resolution process	146 48.7%	67 22.3%	77 25.7%	10 3.3%	3.16	0.85
Adequacy of delegation of dispute resolution	119 39.7%	108 36.0%	64 21.3%	9 3.3%	3.12	1.00

Human and Task orientation of complaints handler	121 40.3%	98 32.7%	73 24.3%	8 2.7%	3.11	0.50
Task orientation of complaints handlers	108 36.6%	109 36.3%	71 23.7%	12 4.0%	3.04	0.17

Table 5 reveals the rating of the factors that determines the perception of the non-academic staff about dispute handlers in their institutions. The mean item scores explained the perception of the non-academic staff towards complaints handlers in the Nigerian universities using the entire six factors. Human orientation was rated highest (Mean = 3.28, SD=1.00). This is followed by acceptance and utilization (Mean = 3.17, SD=0.98); resolution process (Mean = 3.16, SD=0.85); adequate delegation (Mean = 3.12, SD=1.00); human and task orientation (Mean = 3.11, SD=1.00) and lastly, task orientation (Mean = 3.04, SD=0.17). The general, implication of the result from the Table 5 is that dispute handlers are objective in their ways of settling the dispute. This result is in line with Kolb (2015) who provided four sets of ethical principles establishes the foundation of ombuds work. The dispute handlers need to be objective to be able to say the truth and provide amicable suggestions to settle the dispute.

**Table 6: Perception of the Students about Dispute Handlers in their Institutions
N=300**

Description	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	STD
Adequacy of delegation of dispute resolution	305 50.8%	144 24.0%	151 25.2%	0 0.0%	3.26	0.23
Consideration of complainants in resolution process	248 41.3%	244 40.7%	108 18.0%	0 0.0%	3.23	0.46
Human and Task orientation of complaints handler	290 48.4%	158 26.3%	152 25.3%	0 0.0%	3.23	0.12
Management Acceptance and utilization of handlers' resolution	210 35.0%	281 46.8%	109 18.2%	0 0.0%	3.22	0.35
Human orientation of complaints handlers	240 40.0%	208 34.7%	152 25.3%	0 0.0%	3.15	0.65
Task orientation of complaints handlers	263 43.8%	143 23.8%	143 23.8%	51 8.5%	3.03	0.21

Table 6 reveals the rating of the factors that determines the perception of the students about dispute handlers in their institutions. The mean item scores explained the perception of the students towards complaints handlers in the Nigerian universities using the entire six indicators. Adequate delegation was rated highest (Mean = 3.26, SD=0.23). This is followed by resolution process (Mean = 3.23, SD=0.46), human orientation (Mean = 3.23, SD= 0.12); acceptance and utilization (Mean = 3.22, SD=0.65); human and task orientation (Mean = 3.15, SD=0.65); and lastly task orientation (Mean = 3.03, SD=0.21).

Conclusion

The study concluded that there is wide spread manner of handling complaints by universities and awareness of benefit of proper handling of complaints, knowledge of complaint lodgment

centre and availability of appropriate remedy are all factors responsible for the simplicity of resolutions of dispute in the universities. The current dispute resolution in Nigerian universities requires an establishment of an office (Ombudsman) for dispute resolution that is recognised and accepted by all stakeholders in the universities. This is because conflict potentials in the universities are varied. Hence, the need for all the groups within the system to recognize these potentials and deliberately make concerted efforts to curtail the negative consequences of conflicts. This curtailment could be achieved through meaningful interactions and effective communication; resourcefulness and resource management; and cooperation between the universities and the state. These measures would culminate in drastic reduction in negative conflict potentials and consequent high goal attainment potential.

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