Equal Employment Opportunity and Employees' Engagement of Senior Staff in Federal Universities in South-East Nigeria

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Abstract: this study focused on Equal Employment Opportunity and Employees' Engagement of Senior Staff in Federal Universities in South-East, Nigeria. Guided by two objectives, the study adopted the descriptive survey design as its methodological framework and covered a population of 23,126 senior staff of the five (5) Federal Universities in South-East, Nigeria. Data used in the study were generated from both primary and secondary sources and stratified random sampling technique was adopted in determining the 430 senior staff that were sampled. The research questions were analyzed using Spearman's rank correlation statistics while the hypotheses were tested with Theil-Sen regression technique. Sequel to the findings from the analysis of the data used, the study concludes that equal employment opportunity has significant effects on employees' engagement in federal government owned universities in South-East, Nigeria. The study recommended that it is imperative for federal universities in South-East, Nigeria to guarantee equality in the access to organizational benefits to all employees by offering equal opportunities for career advancement through career progression, mentorship programmes, training and development initiatives and that Federal Universities in South-East, Nigeria should foster an inclusive culture by adopting diversity management practices that recognizes, promotes and reward an inclusive workplace culture.
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keywords: *Cognitive Engagement, Diversity management, Equal Access, Emotional Engagement*
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Introduction

Globally, organizations strive to optimize their resource mix (tangible and intangible) in pursuit of their goals. One of the critical resources that organizations seek to strategically optimize is the human resource or the employee who is commonly acknowledged as the key resource that coordinates, integrates and drives other resources towards a predetermined goal. The human resource being an emotive creature tends towards their emotion; hence, they tend to respond to organizations according to how well or unequal they are treated. In Nigeria, especially in the public sector (government owned establishments), it is common to hear of agitation for regional and state representation in the recruitment process into government owned establishments; this reflects the pander to human emotions. It is important to understand that beyond the agitations, the Nigerian government and indeed governments across the globe recognizes this emotive nature of man; hence, their being intentional about ensuring equal employment opportunities in the workplaces through different policies and legal frameworks. While Nigeria may not have a specific comprehensive federal law addressing equal employment opportunity (EEO) at the moment, several subsisting legal and regulatory frameworks touched upon equal employment principles.

Human right activists and researchers (Elizabeth, Ann and Jane, 2019; Ugwu, 2021; Ali, 2013) are deepening the conversation on the need to eliminate the disparity among different categories of employees especially along the lines of social, economic, religious, disabilities, gender, ethnic and cultural considerations. This conversation is based on the argument that none of these disparities made any employee superior to the other, and that God has created each employee with its own unique capabilities. This has led to the formation of different non-governmental agencies that advocate for inclusivity and the addressing of different areas of perceived industrial right, inequalities or discriminations such as; Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID), Center for Reproductive Rights, Equality Now, Men Engage Alliance, Gender at Work, Gender Equality Resource Center (GERC), Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch etc. In many developed economies, this advocacy has gained traction and general acceptance with the government providing policy supports through legislations and other non-legislative actions that ensure the enactment of equal employment opportunity (EEO) laws. This has steadily advanced the principles of fairness and equal opportunity for all in the society in general and the workplace in particular. More specifically, Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) simply refers to the offer of employment, pay, training, performance appraisal, promotion, compensation and even holding of leadership role equally to all prospective and existing employees without discrimination of race, sex, colour, or disability (Sandra, 2024). The idea of equal employment opportunity is anchored on the prohibition of job-related discrimination based on a wide range of personal characteristics like race, age, gender, religion and certain health conditions. However, in developing economies like Nigeria, much has not been done to strategically drive policies to address this issue of global concern; yet, the concept of equal employment opportunity is not completely lost in both private and public work spaces. It is in recognition of this that the Federal Government of Nigeria (FRN) established the federal character principle in the filling of offices in public workplaces in order to engender inclusivity on regional lines and foster national harmony. However, the extent to which this has been implemented or its intents achieved is a subject of interest to political and social science researchers in Nigeria today and beyond. Hence, this study aims to examine the effects of

equal employment opportunities on employees' engagement of senior staff of federal universities in South East, Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

In many federal universities in Nigeria, it does appear that primordial sentiments that entrenches discrimination and widens the gulf of difference among the employees are still prevalent. This may have brought about the reduced access to organizational benefits for some employees thereby promoting inequality and lack of democracy in the workplace. Thus, when not checked may cause the unfortunate employees to fall into social withdrawal which will or may make them emotionally disengaged from the universities.

Employees in federal universities in Nigeria are always drawn from different parts of the country; hence, there is always plurality of culture, language, religion and sexual orientations in Nigerian federal universities. It is therefore common to see some form of resentments especially when some employees believe that they are treated based on where they come from and not the quality of their services to the institution; this can lead to destructive work behaviours and counter-productivity against the goal of the institution. Poor diversity management practices can endanger employees' enthusiasm, hence, may hamper their willingness to invest time in their work or take their own development serious. This breeds wasteful organizational practices (negative work attitudes) which may affect the ability of the universities to achieve their core mandates of teaching, research and community service. However, as the effects of the above scenarios on the engagement of employees are rarely given rigorous academic attention through research, the researcher is motivated on that bases to study the nexus between equal employment opportunity and employees' engagement in Nigerian Federal universities in South-East, Nigeria with focus on the senior staff of the selected universities.

Objectives of the Study

The broad objective of this study examined the effects of equal employment opportunity on employees' engagement of senior staff (teaching and non-teaching) of federal universities in South-East, Nigeria. The specific objectives were to;
i.   investigate the effects of equal access to organizational benefits on emotional engagement of senior staff in federal universities in South-East, Nigeria;
ii.   determine the effects of diversity management practices on the cognitive engagement of senior staff in federal universities in South-East, Nigeria;

Research Questions

The following research questions served as guide to this study;
i.   How does having equal access to organizational benefit affect emotional engagement of senior staff in federal universities in South-East, Nigeria?
ii.   What effect does diversity management practices have on the cognitive engagement of Senior staff in federal universities in South-East, Nigeria?

Statement of Hypotheses

Hypotheses for this study were stated and tested in null forms, thus;

H0$_1$: Equal access to organizational benefits does not have significant influence on the emotional engagement of senior staff in federal universities in South-East, Nigeria

H0$_2$: Diversity management practices does not have significant effect on the cognitive engagement of senior staff in federal universities in South-East, Nigeria

Review of Literatures

The concept of equality has been a fundamental issue in law as well as in society. In every organization, equality is often a critical issue of concern that is often in the spotlight. From gender segregation to bias pay (Madhani, 2015), all kinds of unequal treatment have been the classic problems longing for a solution. According to Stainback and Devey (2013), equal opportunity in employment has been a worldwide issue since 1964. In the US for instance, before 1964, discrimination and segregation of employment were legal in the workplace. Only after the Civil Rights Act emerged in 1964, that this issue started to receive coordinated attention. It was that historical milestone that gave birth to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), charged with the responsibility of continuous monitoring of the enforcement of equal employment practice. Meanwhile, it is important to note that in the absence of fairness and justice principles, organizations are often faced with the tradeoff between emotion and economic performance (Samara & Arenas, 2017). Conversely, organizations that promote fairness in their workplace are likely to improve their economic performance along with the satisfaction and commitment from organizational members (Pimentel, Pires, & Almeida, 2020). Samara and Arenas (2017), posits that organizations can significantly benefit from promoting the practice of fairness and justice in the workplace, unfortunately, it is a common practice for organizations to indulge in unfair practices by offering different treatment to different employees.

It is important to note also, that the Nigerian government having signed up and ratified some of the global instruments has continued to explore ways to enhance EEO in the public sector. Organizations such as the Federal Character Commission (FCC) and other relevant bodies play a role in overseeing adherence to EEO principles and promoting a fair and inclusive work environment. Additionally, civil society organizations and advocacy groups contribute to the ongoing initiatives aimed at improving equal employment opportunities in Nigeria. In its definition, Bush and Middlewood (2013) defined equal employment opportunities as creating a workplace where women, ethnic minorities, and people with disabilities participate, progress and succeed in proportion to their availability in the labour market or in the workforce without consideration to their gender trait or other personality traits. In other words, it is an employment by a company that offers equal opportunities and fair treatment in the employment process to all people regardless of race, sex, religion, nationality, disability or political affiliation that is stated in the final part of the advertisements for new jobs as well as in the job description. It is a stipulation that all people should be treated similarly, unhampered by artificial barriers or prejudices or preferences, except when particular 'distinctions' can be explicitly justified (Raghavi & Gopinathan, 2013). In addition, it is clear that legislation regarding equal employment opportunities exists, but the question is whether it is regularly practiced in the everyday life. In other words: Assuming the law is effective, we expect to see it change prevailing employment

practices, given that employers wish to comply with the law to prevent sanctions, or merely are willing to adopt and apply newly enacted norms.

Dimensions of Equal Employment Opportunity

Equal Access to Organizational Benefits: These are programs an employer uses to supplement the cash compensation that employees receive, to protect the employee and his or her family from financial risks. Benefits constitute an important part of the remuneration package. They are an addition to other forms of cash payment like wages and salaries that are intended to improve the quality of work life for employees and increase their cooperation and productivity (Amah, Daminabo-Weje, & Dosunmu, 2013). Employee benefits is defined as any form of compensation provided by the organization other than wages or salaries that are paid for in whole or in part by the employer. Employee benefits are essential for the development of corporate industrial relations. Examples include retirement plans, child care, elder care, hospitalization programmes, social security, vacation and paid holidays. The purpose of employee benefits is to increase the economic security of staff members, and in doing so, improve worker retention across the organization.

To have a competitive benefit package an organization need to carry out a survey to know what is available in other organizations, so that they use it as a basis and add or modify theirs to have an edge. The survey could be done through the use of interviews, questionnaires or information from consultants. The nature of an organization's work force affects its choice of benefits package. An organization with many single employees may not have the same benefit package with another whose employees are mostly married people. Single people will prefer more money while married people will want health care and disability leave, pension and life insurance. The benefits adopted by an organization need to be acceptable to its employees for it to be effective in achieving its desired goals. To achieve these individual employees could be interviewed or the union executive could be consulted before the introduction of new benefit package (Ekere & Amah, 2014).

Diversity Management Practices: Workforce diversity is one of the most important aspect in organizations. In contemporary organizations, people from diverse backgrounds are joining the work force of organizations, increasing the diversity of the workforce. Different viewpoints are used inside an organization to express diversity. Diversity in the workforce is characterized in both strict and general terms. According to Lee and Gilbert (2014), it can be narrowly defined as the extent of employee heterogeneity that is confined to specific demographic characteristics like age, gender, and ethnicity. Workforce diversity is more broadly defined as the recognition, comprehension, acceptance, value, and celebration of individual variations among employees, including those related to age, gender, ethnicity, physical and mental abilities, and spiritual traditions (Foma, 2014). Workforce diversity is being considered in organizations as a core strategic value in response to the pursuit of equity and fairness (Li *et al*., 2020). Regarding workforce diversity and how it affects an organization's success, there are conflicting theories. According to the positivist view of diversity, a diversified workforce creates synergy if such diversities are managed, as the knowledge, attitude, skills, experiences, and exposures of this diversified workforce come together and result in the success of the organization. Conversely, Wang (2022) proposed that because diversity affects people's affective states, it may make

interpersonal conflict more likely. The researchers further say that a diverse workforce may lead to goal discrepancies among staff members, which may further exacerbate feelings of defensiveness, anxiety, and uncertainty, as well as a decrease in appreciation, assertiveness, and enthusiasm.

Employee Engagement
Yadav (2020) expressed that many existing researchers defined employee engagement from the perspective of a multifaceted construct (cognitive, behaviours, and emotions) or a single-focus construct (individual willingness, dedication, and opposite of burnout). Donovan (2022) ascertained that regardless of engagement models used in the past 20 years of research, there is proof that antecedents of employee engagement can have an impact on individual, group, and organizational performance and influence business outcomes such as customer loyalty, job satisfaction, profitability, and productivity. Ongoing employee engagement is critical for business continuity and survival.
Highly engaged employees extend themselves on the job psychologically, cognitively, and emotionally, which then leads to increased contextual and task performance (Bhardwaj & Kalia, 2021). Employee engagement involves influencing the hands, hearts, and heads of followers towards a leader's vision and organizational goals. Using the JD-R theory, Garg, Murphy & Singh (2021) found that reverse mentoring at interpersonal levels and job crafting (also known as employee-driven resourcing) both play a significant role in influencing an employee's attitude to work and overall engagement. Employees that practiced job crafting improved their physiological and psychological attachments to work creating a feeling a meaningful work and better business performance (Dasgupta & Dey, 2021). Homann, Limbert, Matthews, Castaldi, and Sykes (2021) explored management practices that promote or hinder engagement on the basis that while manufacturing leaders understand that employee engagement enhances performance, many do not proactively create a trusting and enabling environment that drives increased engagement. They focused on safety, quality employee communication, and a trusting work environment which are drivers of employee engagement. Leadership behaviors significantly impact workers' health and safety behaviors, employee engagement and disengagement, and overall performance. Where there is distrust and directive styles of leadership, employees can lose the feeling of meaningfulness and psychological safety. Engaged employees are strategic competitive advantage in organizations and any form of disconnection in attitude to work or performance of duties can hurt business profitability and survival (Moyo, 2020).

Emotional Engagement (EE): emotional engagement according to Chukwuma, Agbaeze, Nwakoby & Icha-Ituma (2019) is a motivational state that reflects how intensely and persistently employees emotionally invest themselves in their roles. It focuses on the employees" feelings, ideas and views about the job and enthusiasm and the pride towards the job. The opposite of emotional engagement is emotional absence or detachment from the job. The emotional engagement deals with how the employee feels about their role and if they possess a positive or negative attitude towards the organization and its leader(s). Emotionally engaged employees feel a sense of pride in their job and organization; hence, possesses a sense of ownership and therefore, likely to stay and deliver optimal performance. Employee emotional engagement is the extent to

which employees value, enjoy, and believe in their jobs, managers, teams, or organizations. Employee emotional engagement is more than being happy at work; in fact, happiness does not greatly impact engagement, rather, emotionally engagement is demonstrated by how personally connected and committed employees feel to their organization (Chukwuma, Agbaeze, Nwakoby & Icha-Ituma, 2019). It is measurable by an employee's eagerness and willingness to recommend their organization as a place to work and a place to conduct business.

Employees who are emotionally engaged feel proud of their work, the company, their colleagues, and are invested in the objectives and values of the company (Kaaviyapriya & Xavier, 2020). These employees display proactive initiative, express their voice, and demonstrate organizational citizenship behavior. Employees with an emotional connection to the company display behaviors beyond just a contractual relationship (Ali *et al*., 2019). Meaningful interpersonal relationships play a significant role in the level of emotional attachment (Firoz & Chaudhary, 2021) and loyalty employees feel to the job and the workplace (Liu & Liu, 2022). When company values are congruent with personal values, the emotional connection can make employees blend organizational goals with personal goals (Huang & Fei, 2020).

Cognitive engagement (CE): This develops when employees feel safe at work, assess their job roles as meaningful, and have available resources to complete assigned tasks and deliver business goals (Kahn, 1990). Employees who are cognitively engaged have a psychological connection with the work environment, the tasks to perform, and express a high level of enthusiasm and interest at work (Satata, 2021). Ogueyungbo *et al*. (2022) posits that cognitive engagement means a situation where employees show more commitment in what they do, generate new ideas, and exert themselves in challenging situations to accomplish both personal and business goals.it is the degree at which employees are mentally alert to their jobs roles with the goal of the organization in their mind. An employee is said to be cognitively engaged when he has an enduring, fulfilling and positive attitude that makes him focused and psychologically present in organizational job activities. Organizations with efficient and effective information distribution is likely to experience a high level of employee cognitive engagement.

Scharp *et al*. (2022) developed a process model that introduced the concept of playful work design into work environments to test autonomy, relatedness, and competence. Employees that design their work in a more playful manner experienced higher engagement, job satisfaction, and performed better on the job, mainly due to the autonomy and personalized approach to creativity. This established that employees could use playful work design to cope in challenging stressful conditions in and outside of work. Employees approach work in relation to the purpose and meaning they attach to it and when they feel in control, they can evoke positive emotions as a coping mechanism, becoming more resilient and optimistic even in difficult circumstances (Vermooten *et al*., 2021). The cognitive, emotional, and behavioral condition of employees towards work and the company's goals impact the level of engagement on the job (Satata, 2021).

Methodology

The study adopted the descriptive survey design as its methodological framework and covered a population of 23,126 senior staff (teaching and non-teaching staff) of the five (5) federal universities in south-east, Nigeria. Data used in this study were generated from both primary and secondary sources and stratified random sampling technique was used in determining the 430 senior staff that were sampled. The research instrument was subjected to validity test while Cronbach Alpha was used to test its reliability. The research questions were analyzed using Spearman's rank correlation statistics as against simple Pearson (r) correlation statistic because the basic normality assumption of the error term was not satisfied, so as to establish the relationship between the dependent and independent variables in the study. Hypotheses were tested with Theil-Sen regression technique. The acceptance or rejection of null hypothesis was based on whether the calculated p-value is less than the level of significance (0.05), otherwise the null hypothesis was accepted not be rejected.

Results

Test of Research Questions and Hypotheses

In this section, the Spearman rank correlation coefficient and the Theil regression techniques were employed to address research questions and hypotheses respectively since the normality assumption of the error term was not satisfied.

Research Question One

How does having equal access to organizational benefits (EAOB) affect the emotional engagement of employees (EEE) in federal universities in South-East, Nigeria?

Table 1: Spearman's Rank Correlation Summary for Emotional Engagement of Employees (EEE) and Equal Access to Organizational Benefit (EAOB)

Variables	N	$\sum$	$\overline{X}$	SD	R
EEE	382	5287	13.8403	3.8308	
					0.887
EAOB	382	5551	14.5314	3.9182	
Very High Relationship					

Source: Extracted from SPSS Output

Table 1 shows the result obtained from the analysis in respect to research question one. The result reveals that the Spearman rank correlation coefficient is 0.887, which is very high. This implies that the effect of equal access to organizational benefit on emotional engagement of employees in federal universities in South-East, Nigeria is to a very high extent.

Testing of Hypothesis One

H0$_1$: Equal access to organizational benefit does not have significant influence on the emotional engagement of employees in federal universities in South-East, Nigeria

Table 2: **ANOVA Summary for Theil-Sen Regression of EEE and EAOB**

Response: EEE	Df	Sum of Squares	Mean Squares	F-value	p-value
EAOB	1	5849.1	5849.1		
				1651.3	0.000
Residuals	380	1346.0	3.15		

Source: Extracted from R-Studio Output

The result in Table 4.6 shows that the mean squares of 5849.1 for equal access to organizational benefit and 3.15 for residuals, F-calculation value of 1651.3 and a p-value of 0.000 which is less than 0.05. This indicates a statistically significant result. Therefore, the null hypothesis which stated that equal access to organizational benefits does not have significant influence on the emotional engagement of employees in federal universities in South-East, Nigeria is rejected. Hence, the study concludes that equal access to organizational benefit has significant influence on the emotional engagement of employees in federal universities in South-East, Nigeria.

Research Question Two

What effects does diversity management practices (DMP) have on the cognitive engagement of employees (CEE) in federal universities in South-East, Nigeria?

Table 3: **Spearman's Rank Correlation Summary for Cognitive Engagement of Employees (CEE) and Equality in the Diversity Management Practices (DMP)**

Variables	N	$\sum$	$\overline{X}$	SD	R
CEE	382	6566	11.9529	2.9158	
					0.602
DMP	382	5777	15.1230	3.2929	
		Moderate Relationship			

Source: Extracted from SPSS Output

Table 3 shows the result obtained in respect of research question two. The result reveals that the Spearman rank correlation coefficient is 0.602, which is moderate. This implies that diversity management practices have a moderate effects on the cognitive engagement of employees in federal universities in South-East, Nigeria.

Testing of Hypothesis Two

H0₂: Diversity management practices does not have significant effect on the cognitive engagement of employees in federal universities in South-East, Nigeria.

Table 4. ANOVA Summary for Theil-Sen Regression of CEE and DMP

Response: CEE	Df	Sum of Squares	Mean Squares	F-value	p-value
DMP	1	459.02	459.02		
				58.592	0.000
Residuals	380	2977.0	7.83		

Source: Extracted from R-Studio Output (See Appendix)

The result in Table 4 shows that the mean squares of 459.02 for equal access to organizational support and 7.83 for residuals, F-calculation value of 58.592 and a p-value of 0.000 which is less than 0.05. This indicates statistically significant result. Therefore, the null hypothesis which stated that diversity management practices does not have significant effect on the cognitive engagement of employees in federal universities in South-East, Nigeria is rejected. Hence, the study concludes that diversity management practices has significant effect on the cognitive engagement of employees in federal universities in South-East, Nigeria.

Conclusion
In conclusion, Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) policies significantly enhance employee engagement by fostering a fair, inclusive, and respectful work environment. These employment policies lead to increased job satisfaction, enhanced trust and loyalty, higher morale, improved productivity, and better mental health among employees. By promoting diversity and reducing workplace conflicts, EEO creates a positive organizational culture where all employees feel valued and empowered. This, in turn, drives higher levels of commitment and motivation, ultimately benefiting both employees and the organization as a whole. This study therefore concludes that equal employment opportunity has significant effects on employees' engagement in federal government owned universities in South-East, Nigeria.

Recommendations
To maximize the benefits of Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) on employee engagement, organizations should consider the following recommendations;
i.   It is imperative for federal universities in South-East, Nigeria to guarantee equality in the access to organizational benefits to all employees by offering equal opportunities for career advancement through career progression, mentorship programmes, training and development initiatives. To achieve this, members of the management team must model behaviors that promotes fairness and accountability especially when distributing benefits in the universities;
ii.   Federal Universities in South-East, Nigeria should foster an inclusive culture by adopting diversity management practices that recognizes, promotes and reward an inclusive workplace culture. This they can achieve by encouraging open dialogue about diversity and inclusion and actively seeking input from diverse groups by committing to the principles of diversity, equality and inclusivity (DEI)

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