

Conflict of Interest among Academic Staff of Universities in a Dwindling Economy

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19396587>

Abstract

The main purpose of this study was to investigate the academic staff of universities in Nigeria experience of conflict of interest in the face of a dwindling economy. Descriptive survey research design was adopted for the study. One research question guided the study. The study was carried out at the Enugu State University of Science and Technology (ESUT). The population for the study was 834 academic staff of the university. Taro Yamane formula was used to determine the sample size of 270 respondents, selected using simple random sampling technique. A self-developed structured questionnaire titled "Conflict of Interest Questionnaire (CIQ)" was used as the instrument for data collection. The instrument was validated by three experts, one expert in Measurement and Evaluation; and two experts in Educational Management, all from the Faculty of Education, Enugu State University of Science and Technology. The reliability of the instrument was determined using unstandardized Cronbach alpha with reliability coefficient of 'r' 0.74. Research instrument was administered and retrieved by the researchers. Mean and standard deviation was used to answer the research question. Mean scores of 2.50 and above were considered positive while those below 2.50 were considered negative. The null hypothesis was tested using z-test statistics at .05 level of significance. From the result of the findings of the study, it was concluded that the academic staff of universities in Nigeria have high level of conflict of interest at work. It was recommended that there is need for a review of conditions of service for academic staff of Nigerian universities.

Keywords: Conflict of interest, academic staff, dwindling economy, university, teaching ethics.

Introduction

The global economic downturn is significantly reshaping organizational behaviours. People continually make adjustments to maintain a healthy work-life balance. Currently, in Nigeria, the workforce purchasing power is reducing, while inflation is on the rise (Gbenizibe & Epem, 2025). This situation could make it difficult for many employees to meet their basic needs. Among this category of people are the academic staff of universities. The universities play a vital role in society, driving innovation, knowledge creation, and human capital development (Okolo, Wen, & Eze, 2023). However, recent developments cast doubt on capacity of the universities to achieve these expectations (IseOlorunkanmi, Rotimi, Adebola, Lawal, Henry, & Adebisi, 2021). They appear to be facing significant challenges in the present dwindling economy, characterized by reduced government funding and budget cuts, increased competition for limited resources, and pressure to generate revenue through alternative sources in the midst of a growing workload.

In this context, academic staff may face ethical dilemmas and conflicts of interest (COI) that may compromise their professional integrity and the quality of research and teaching. COI according to Muth (2017) refers to a situation in which a person or organization could compromise their judgment, decisions, and actions in the workplace in a biased way because of personal interests, financial or social factors, giving favor to family members, relatives, friends, and acquaintances. For the purpose of this study, COI is described as situations where personal interests (financial, professional, or personal relationships) conflict with professional responsibilities, potentially leading to biased decision-making or unethical behavior.

Ethics is the moral principles and rules of conduct that govern the actions of individuals within an institution (Unobunjo, 2022). In the context of schools, ethics encompasses a set of moral principles and values that guide the behavior of academic staff, who are expected to adhere to them. Unethical behavior, as defined by Adeyeye, Aina, and Ige (2015), refers to any action that deviates from what is considered morally right or proper. Academic staff's unethical behavior, therefore, involves violating professional ethics and conduct. The Teachers Registration Council of Nigeria Code of Conduct (2013) defines such behavior as a moral deviation from the virtues expected of teachers in the discharge of their responsibilities. Zhao (2019) notes that unethical behavior among academic staff refers to

behavioral tendencies that contradict professional ethics, particularly in student-teacher relationships during teaching. Examples of unethical behaviors exhibited by academic staff include extorting students, sexual abuse, examination malpractice, unlawful punishment, using vulgar language, disrespect, corruption, indecent dressing, and other moral deviations (Demirbilek, 2023; Yildirim, Albez, & Akan, 2020). Academic staff are expected to act in ways consistent with the tenets of the teaching profession, and any deviation from these expectations can impact the integrity of their job performance, irrespective of gender.

The debate about whether employee ethics vary by gender remains unresolved. Recent studies have yielded mixed results. Lasthuizen and Badar (2023) found that women tend to exhibit stronger ethical judgments in the workplace compared to men, a finding consistent with earlier research by Dhandra and Park (2018) and Glover, Minnette, Glynda, and George (2022). However, Shangxi (2023) argued that there is no significant difference in moral values between men and women. Further research is needed to clarify these conflicting findings, hence, the need for this study.

Ordinarily, COI doesn't just occur but as a result of the tensions related to the interactions between various economic forces unleashed by dwindling economy, leading to an increased interest in teaching ethics and in issues of conflicts of interest. Nzokurum (2021) reported that schools have become centres for unproductive attitudes such as absenteeism, lack of seriousness to duty, lateness for work, and refusal to participate in workshops, seminars, and lectures. This development may not be unconnected to efforts by academic staff to meet personal economic demands in order to make ends meet. Mukhtorkhon (2022) noted that COI in the field of education may occur in situations where teachers force students to acquire their own scientific works, received material benefits, and money, gifts, and services, as well as the release of confidential information. If such situations are not curtailed, there may be poor assessment of students' achievements, which can undermine the credibility and reputation of the institution (Mukhtorkhon, 2022). Fink (2020), in a study of COI in medicine, observed that it is important to raise awareness for COI acknowledgment to evaluate the influence on secondary interests. Olugasa, Abiri-Franklin, and Olanrewaju (2022) observed that COI affects the reputation of companies, thereby discouraging investment in the companies.

Recent literature on COI in academics is remarkably invisible. Despite the fact that one could see studies on COI focusing on business management, sports, accounting, and auditing, researchers appear to have ignored this all-important ethical issue in education (Dragomir, 2017). There is a need for more research on the experience of COI among academic staff in universities, particularly in the context of a dwindling economy. This study aims to address this knowledge gap by offering an insight into academic staff's experiences on COI using evidence from Nigeria with a rapidly declining economy, increasing wage inequality, and modestly increasing teacher salaries. It is an issue that has broad relevance to the financial challenges facing academic staff globally.

Research Question

The study was guided by one research question.

1. How do academic staff of universities experience COI at work?

Research Hypothesis

This null hypothesis was tested at 0.05 level of significance as a guide to the study.

H₀₁: There is no significant difference between the mean ratings of male and female academic staff of universities on how they experience COI at work.

Methodology

A descriptive survey was adopted for this study. A descriptive survey design, according to Nworgu (2015), is a type of research design in which a group of people or items are studied by collecting and analyzing data from only a few people or items considered to be representative of the entire group, or wherein the entire population is used for the study. It is aimed at collecting data and describing them in a systematic way. In this study, a descriptive survey was considered appropriate because it established the opinions of the academic staff on the prevalence of COI in the university following the current economic downturn in the country.

The study was carried out in Enugu State, Nigeria. Enugu State is in the South Eastern Nigeria and plays host to a number of public and private universities, including the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Enugu State University of Science and Technology, Caritas University, Godfrey Okoye University,

Coal City University, among other tertiary institutions. The population for the study was 834 academic staff of the Enugu State University of Science and Technology. The sample size was 270. The sample size was obtained by applying Taro Yamane's formula (Yamane, 1967). A simple random sampling technique was used to select the sample.

A self-developed structured questionnaire titled "Conflict of Interest Questionnaire (CIQ)" was used as the instrument for data collection. The questionnaire has two parts: A and B. Part A contains information on personal data of the respondents, while Part B contains 10 items which focused on COI among academic staff of the university. The rating format was based on a four point scale of Very High Extent (VHE), High Extent (HE), Low Extent (LE), and Very Low Extent (VLE). This implies that the higher the aggregate scores in the rating scale, the more positive the response of the subjects, and the lower the score, the more negative the response of the subjects. The scale was weighed 4, 3, 2, and 1, respectively. The face validity of the research instrument was determined by giving initial copies of the instrument to three research experts. One of the experts was from the Department of Mathematics and Computer Education (Measurement and Evaluation option), while two were from the Department of Educational Management, all from the Faculty of Education Enugu State University of Science and Technology (ESUT). They were specifically requested to assess the adequacy of the items in getting the required information, the quality of its language, and the logicity of its arrangement. Their corrections and comments were used to modify the questionnaire before the final copy was produced.

The reliability of the instrument was determined using a trial test on 20 academic staff at the University of Nigeria Nsukka, which has similar characteristics to Enugu State University of Science and Technology. Unstandardized Cronbach alpha method was adopted to determine the internal consistency coefficient of the instrument, because the questions are polychotomous in nature, the instrument was in cluster, and it ensured the homogeneity of items on the cluster. The instrument yielded a reliability index coefficient of 'r' 0.74. The reliability index indicates that the instrument was reliable and suitable for the study.

The instrument was administered on the respondents by the researchers and two research assistants who were properly briefed on the study's purpose and explained the questionnaire items to ensure they understood and were able to provide clarifications on the items to the respondents when needed. The

research instrument was administered using a direct delivery and retrieval system. This approach helped to maintain control over the data collection process, ensuring that the correct respondents completed the instrument and provided immediate clarification on any items that participants may have found unclear. Two hundred and seventy (270) copies of questionnaire distributed and returned were used for the study. The research question was answered using Mean rating and standard deviation, while the hypothesis was tested at a 0.05 level of significance using the z-test statistic. The four-point scales were used with the following values assigned to the responses:

Very High Extent - 4 points

High Extent - 3 points

Low Extent - 2 points

Very Low Extent - 1 point

The decision rule was that any item with a mean rating of 2.50 and above was interpreted as “High Extent”, while a mean rating below 2.50 was interpreted as “Low Extent”. This is in line with the position of Nworgu (2015), who stated that with four-point scale, a mean rating with 2.50 or above should be positive, while those less than 2.50 should be regarded as negative. The z-test statistic was used to test the hypothesis. Consequently, when the calculated z-value is less than the critical z-value, the null hypothesis is not rejected but upheld; whereas when the calculated z-value is equal to or greater than the critical z-value, the null hypothesis is rejected.

Presentation of Results

Research question: How do academic staff of universities experience COI at work?

Table 1: mean scores of academic staff on extent of COI experience

S/n	Items	Male 147		Female 123		Overall 270		Decision
		X	SD	X	SD	X	SD	
1	Hire relatives to work for the institution	3.14	1.15	2.98	1.25	3.07	1.20	HE

2	Offer paid services for other institutions	2.90	1.02	2.71	1.08	2.81	1.05	HE
3	Accept payment for information about the institution	2.71	0.89	2.67	0.90	2.69	0.90	HE
4	Fail to investigate coworkers' wrongdoings because they are friends	3.03	1.06	3.02	1.19	3.03	1.12	HE
5	Have romantic relationships with students	2.65	0.90	2.66	1.03	2.65	0.96	HE
6	Accept gifts from students for marks	2.78	1.08	2.72	1.02	2.76	1.05	HE
7	Aid examination malpractice	2.88	1.09	2.71	1.17	2.80	1.13	HE
8	Extort students	2.90	1.06	2.98	1.08	2.94	1.07	HE
9	Force students to buy own textbooks	3.17	1.06	3.09	1.20	3.13	1.13	HE
10	Engage in other business activities	3.01	0.99	3.08	1.03	3.04	1.01	HE
	Cluster mean	2.92	1.03	2.86	1.10	2.89	1.06	HE

Table 1 above shows the mean scores of male and female academic staff on the extent to which they experience COI. The respondents' means ranged from 2.65 to 3.17, with a cluster mean of 2.92 and a standard deviation of 1.03 for male academic staff, while those of female academic staff ranged from 2.66 to 3.09, with a cluster mean of 2.86 and a standard deviation of 1.10. The respondents had an overall cluster mean of 2.89 and a standard deviation of 1.06. Both groups recorded similar responses in all the items. The overall cluster mean of 2.89 and standard deviation of 1.06 indicate that academic staff of universities experience COI to a high extent.

Research hypothesis: H₀₁: There is no significant difference between the mean ratings of male and female academic staff of universities on how they experience COI at work.

Table 2: z-test of significant difference in mean scores of male and female academic Staff on how they experience COI at work

Group	N	X	SD	Df	z-cal	z-crit	Decision
Male	147	2.92	1.03	268	0.46	1.96	Do not reject H ₀ but uphold it.
Female	123	2.86	1.10				

Table 2 shows the z-value for the difference in mean scores of male and female academic staff on the extent of COI they experience. The result showed that the calculated z-value (0.46) was less than the critical value (1.96). Hence, the null hypothesis was not rejected but upheld. Therefore, there is no significant difference between the mean ratings of male and female academic staff of universities on the extent to which they experience COI at work under the current dwindling economy in Nigeria.

Discussion of Findings

The findings suggest that academic staff in universities face a high level of conflict of interest in the current economic climate. This implies that the dwindling economy has created an environment where academic staff are more likely to encounter situations that challenge their professional ethics and values. The finding is consistent with Nzokurum's (2021) and Mukhtorkhon (2022), which highlight the prevalence of unproductive attitudes among academic staff, such as absenteeism, lack of seriousness, lateness, and refusal to participate in workshops. This suggests that the dwindling economy has contributed to a decline in academic professionalism and an increase in unethical behaviors.

A comparison of the mean ratings of male and female academic staff further revealed that there is no significant difference between the experiences of both genders. The lack of significant difference in the experiences of male and female academic staff suggests that conflict of interest is a universal challenge that affects both genders equally. This finding contradicts the reports of Lasthuizen and Badar (2023), Dhandra and Park (2018), and Glover, Minnette, Glynda, and George (2022), that men and women have different ethical perspectives and experiences. This finding explains why the quality of education in Nigerian universities appears to be declining. No doubt, engagement in such unethical behaviours by academic staff could be a survival strategy in an unsupportive work environment.

These findings have implications for university management and policymakers. They highlight the need for universities to develop and implement effective policies and programs that promote academic integrity, professionalism, and ethical conduct among academic staff. Additionally, universities must address the underlying factors contributing to conflicts of interest and unproductive attitudes, such as poor working conditions, inadequate compensation, and a lack of resources.

Conclusion

Under the current economic downturn, workers, including academic staff, are making adjustments to maintain work-life balance. However, some of the adjustments are resulting in unethical behaviors, contradicting the stipulated professional ethics. The study reveals that academic staff in universities experience conflict of interest to a high extent in the current dwindling economy. The findings suggest that both male and female academic staff are equally affected, and that the economic downturn has contributed to a decline in academic professionalism and a rise in unethical behaviors. Ultimately, the study emphasizes the importance of promoting a culture of integrity and professionalism in universities and ensuring that academic staff are equipped with the necessary skills and resources to navigate the challenges of the current economic climate. By doing so, universities can maintain their integrity and continue to play a vital role in shaping the minds of future generations.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

1. The university management should review the condition of service for academic staff to reflect the current economic realities.
2. Continuously review and update policies and programs to ensure they remain effective and relevant in maintaining academic integrity and professionalism.
3. Conduct regular monitoring and evaluation of academic staff performance to ensure compliance with ethical standards.

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