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ASSESSING THE EFFECTS OF AUTOCRATIC DECISION-MAKING BY ACADEMIC UNIT MANAGERS ON WORK PERFORMANCE OF UGANDAN ACADEMIC STAFF

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the key issues and the effects of an autocratic decision-making approach by the unit managers on the work performance of the academic staff in three typical Ugandan public universities. The research was prompted by persistent complaints and reports from different key stakeholders regarding the deteriorating quality of teaching, research, and community engagement in public universities in Uganda. The objectives of this paper are to explain the issues, processes, and consequences of an autocratic approach to decision making by academic unit managers on the regular work performance of academic staff in the public universities; examine the role of academics' in promoting the competitiveness of universities for better ranking at national, regional, or global levels, and establish the incentives for different types of academics' work performance. A cross-section survey with mixed quantitative and qualitative methods in addition to the in-depth interviews and self-administered were used to collect data. The study findings revealed low work performance levels as a consequence of the practice of an autocratic decision making employed by the academic unit managers in Uganda. The study concluded that autocratic academic unit managers are instrumental in demoralising academic staff hence resulting in low-performance levels. Academics' work performance is vital for university competitiveness for high institutional ranking. This is because Universities have a critical role to play for the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) number four for national progress towards education for sustainable development in Uganda.

INTRODUCTION

The issue of autocratic decision-making approach on the work performance has captured the concerns of not only scientific researchers but also management researchers. However, the topic has

not gained significant attention in the educational management research field. The purpose of this paper was to empirically examine the effect of autocratic decision-making on the work performance of the academic staff in public universities in Uganda. This is because university

education plays a major role in creating expertise and acts as a centre of excellence for knowledge creation and developing human resources necessary for a country's development. As Chauhan (2008) put it, university education impinges on every area of a country's development and deserves necessary attention. It is important to note that work performance is a significant factor affecting organisational performance. In a university setting, academic staff work performance has a strategic role and is the main factor determining student performance and eventually, the university performance. Kingdon and Teal (2003) in their study observed that academic staffs are the innermost actors in the learning process that takes place in educational institutions. Therefore, the study of the effects of autocratic decision-making on work performance of Ugandan academic staff in higher educational institutions from different settings is very useful for not only enriching and refining theory but also for developing reasonable recommendations to increase the quality of higher educational institutions.

Autocratic decision making has become a controversial issue to find a fit between work performance of Ugandan academic staff and public universities' objectives. Such researches have been conducted in developed as well as developing countries but still very limited in Uganda. Moreover, the previous research shows a lack of consistent and conclusive evidence about the impact of participative decision making on teaching performance in higher education. The empirical evidence shows that research in this area is still equivocal. The purpose of this research was to ascertain empirical evidence and gain insights about the impact of participative decision making on lecturer performance in higher education in Uganda.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Even though work performance (WP) is generally used in the fields of education and business studies, its notion is still disappointingly amorphous. This is because different scholars in different fields give different definitions of the concept. Haigh (2008) observed, there are different academic tribes in universities speaking in different academic languages, although the variations in definition,

direction and emphasis tend to share common commonalities. The variation in definition and explanation of WP is that the concept has not yet reached its conceptual limits, and that is why there seems to be no universally accepted definition of the phenomenon. To that end, the explanation for the concept WP has been developed and revised several times in recent years.

According to Gordon, Kane, and Stalger (2006), work performance is the process of carrying out something or the execution of an action based on a specific instruction. Burnell (2011) postulated that work performance involves how well or poorly a person accomplishes a set task or job. Meanwhile, Camps and Luna-Arocas (2012) defined work performance as an evaluation of the results of a person's behaviour. For this study, WP of the Ugandan academic staff has been characterised by how well or poorly they handled their assigned tasks emerging from their cardinal roles in the university. This study specifically borrowed two of Camps and Luna-Arocas' (2012) eight-factor model of work performance, where work performance was looked at in terms of task-specific behaviours and supervisory attributes of the academic staff studied.

According to Heriyono (2009), improving lecturer work performance has become a strategic approach for alleviating educational problems so as to improve educational quality. Therefore, identifying the factors that affect academic staff work performance in universities has become a main concern following the low ranking of public universities in Uganda. Connecting the autocratic decision-making approach to academic staff work performance, educationalists, practitioners, and researchers from various disciplines of knowledge have studied factors affecting work performance. One of the prominent factors affecting work performance is autocratic decision-making (Drummond and Reitsch, 1995; Lipman, 1997; Clinton and Hunton, 2001). Decreasing the level of teacher participation in making decisions and narrowing their involvement in the overall decision-making process makes school policy and management less responsive to societal needs (Pashiardis, 1994).

Additionally, Pashiardis (1994) described that teachers could take a greater role in the overall success of the school when they are committed to being active participants in the decision-making process. Marks and Karen (1997) found out that failure to involve teachers in school decision making hampers teachers' commitment, expertise, and effectiveness. Lipman (1997) asserts that dictatorial tendencies to teachers do not re-energise schools, unleash teachers, enhance initiative and creativity; neither do they get them to focus on the restructuring agenda. Yet, these are key components needed to restructure and reform universities in Uganda.

Dictatorial tendencies in decision making have been criticized for many reasons including the belief that it cannot enhance communication among teachers and administrators as well as the quality of educational decision making and quality of teachers' work-life (Smylie, 1996). It does not enhance the teacher's sense of responsibilities, shared culture, and teacher commitment (Lipman, 1997). In addition, Mualuko et al. (2009) investigated the extent to which teachers are involved in the decision making process in comparison to their desired extent of participation. They found that teachers desire greater involvement in decision making and therefore recommended that by involving lecturers in decision making, the quality of decisions and their morale in performing their duty will be higher. Accordingly, it is expected that autocratic approach in decision making has negative effect on academic staff work performance in teaching, research, publications, and community engagement activities. Based on the literature above, it was then hypothesized as follows:

H₁: The autocratic decision-making approach significantly affects academic staff work performance in public universities in Uganda.

A study by Kadri et al. (2009) found that gender and experience of lecturers affected academic staff work performance. Generally, in Uganda, public universities are considered as being much more high-status and more preferred by students than their private counterparts. Therefore, private universities are more susceptible in an increasingly competitive environment due to limited government financial and non-financial support

that is perceived as the most influential determinant for public universities. In 2008, Sinar Indonesia Baru reported that about 40 percent of private universities (1,080 universities) in Indonesia were going out of business due to the lack of financial support and potential market demand. This proposition was supported by research evidence revealed by Chien-ern et al. (2008) in Taiwan's higher education system that found university managers to be more eager than their public university counterparts to try new strategies for getting out of the predicament. Such conditions may affect academic staff work performance between public and private universities.

The work performance of academic staff is critical to the survival and the quality of any education system (Namuddu, 2010; Awan and Asghar, 2014). It is therefore indisputable that in educational settings, effective performance processes supported by a well-streamlined system, with purpose-driven employees (the academic staff) willing and determined to exert themselves to the maximum to surmount whatever challenges they encounter is paramount since organizational performance is dependent on employee performance (Emojong, 2004; Tibakanya, 2013; & Nsubuga, 2008). This implies that every university should have an interest in igniting employee work performance through different decision-making approaches in relation to motivation, retention, and development. Kitunga (2009) and Oshodi (1991), propound that the quality of academic staff is the most important determinant of academic performance and quality of education. This presupposes that lack of proper DMA without any reasonable doubt grossly impairs the work performance of the academic staff in any university regardless of the context. Consequently, the public universities in question more often than not are likely to suffer from chronic ineffectiveness and inefficiency in regards to work performance.

The study presumed that the academic staff's work performance in public universities could be evaluated when a proper DMA was adequately provided for through policy frameworks. The research was concerned with articulating the effects of autocratic DMA on the academic staff's work performance in the selected public universities in Uganda. The work performance of the academic staff is the dependent variable in the study, and it

was used to measure the contributions of academic staff through in-role-performance. De Waal (2011) and Tolentino (2013) acknowledge that work performance increases when workers believe they have the power to decide on how the task should be performed but not when they just dictate on them.

Scholars like Anwar, Yousuf, and Sarwar (2008) argue that the general absence of a culture of regular dialogue and joint forums in universities is manifested in rising cases of strikes and unrest. In their study on decision-making practices in universities of Pakistan, they found that university problems increase if there is a lack of mutual communication between the administration and university staff. It is even worse where the dean's post is politically elected by staff because of its power structure hence leaving such deans with indecipherable executive powers that put them in continuous conflict with the academic staff (Lakha, 2002).

The main objective of a university is to develop knowledge through teaching, research, and social service. However, at the individual level, academic staff who execute these are hindered by lack of participation in decision-making process (Sukirno & Siengthai, 2011), teaching and research efficiency (Sellers-Rubio, Mas-Ruiz, & Casado-Díaz, 2010; Ajayi, Awosusi, Arogundade, & Ekundayo, 2011) and emotional intelligence (Bashir, Jianqiao, Jun, Ghazanfar, & Khan, 2011).

METHODOLOGY

In this study, the researchers used pragmatist research paradigm where a mixed-methods research approach was adopted to provide a deeper understanding of the DMA as a predictor of WP that would otherwise not have been accessible by using one approach alone (Morse & Niehaus, 2009). This study chose to use the mixed-methods research approach because of its ability to overcome the disadvantages that are inherent when adopting a single research method. In this study, the sequential explanatory research design was used and beefed up by a cross-sectional survey because of the large number of respondents that were involved. A sequential explanatory research design is a two-phase study that starts with the quantitative data collection phase and then successively

followed by the qualitative phase to enhance the quantitative findings (Doyle, Brady & Byrne, 2009). The cross-sectional aspect of the design was intended to enable the researcher to collect data at one point in time in order to avoid returning to the field several times. This helped to reduce the time and costs that were used in the study.

Regarding the study population, it comprised of all the academic deans, heads of department and the academic staff (professors, associate professors, senior lecturers, lecturers, assistant lecturers, teaching assistants, and graduate fellows) of the selected public universities totalling to 1744 academic staff according to NCHE (2017). Since the total population was too large for the researcher to access and study all its members, the Yamane's (1967) method for determining sample size was used to arrive at 325 participants.

The survey was preferred as a method of data collection because as Yin (2009) put it; it enabled the researcher to closely examine the data within a specific context. This meant that the survey method was undoubtedly good for this study because the researcher was concerned about the DMA of academic unit managers and the WP of academic staff. To carry out the survey, the researcher used a self-administered questionnaire.

Interviewing was used as the second method for collecting data in this study. According to Cresswell (2014), an interview is a data collection method in which the researcher face-to-face or otherwise interacts with the respondent to get descriptions of the life world of the interviewee with respect to the interpretation of the meaning of the phenomena under investigation. To conduct the interview, an interview guide was developed and used as a tool for data collection. The contents of the interview guide were crafted and grounded in the quantitative results from the first phase of the study.

The document review was the third method where data was collected by reviewing existing documents (Cresswell, 2014). In order to get secondary data about the concepts investigated in this study, different documents were checked using the document review checklist as a tool to collect data. Among the checked/reviewed documents for this

particular study were: annual reports, human resources manual, work attendance records, among others. In congruence with Bowen (2009), the document checklist was used in this study to complement other tools like the questionnaire as a means of triangulation. In this study, the use of the document checklist helped the researcher to obtain thoughtful and critically analysed data as put forward by Mugenda and Mugenda (2003).

The call for a valid and reliable data collection instrument was very paramount because whereas the pragmatist epistemology calls for distance and independence between the researcher and the researched, the pragmatist ontology advocates for objectivity. This is why the validity and reliability of the instruments had to be ensured in this study. To establish the validity of the questionnaire that was used, the researcher broke down the variables of the study into three sections, namely: background, independent and dependent variables and ensured that they were in congruence with the conceptual framework to obtain the relevant questions for each section. To ascertain the reliability of the questionnaire in this study, the items to measure the constructs under investigation were informed by the relevant items adopted from already-made instruments from Jeya and Sahari (2011); Smeenk, Teelken, Eisinga, and Doorewaard (2009) and were generally considered to be reliable for that matter. Furthermore, to establish reliability due to contextual differences, the tool was subjected to a pre-test on a group of academic staff who did not participate in the main study.

Data Management and Analysis

The pragmatism methodology, as noted earlier, necessitates the use of the deductive form of logic where the hypotheses are tested in a cause-and-effect progression (Feilzer, 2010). Following this, the quantitative data upon completion of the survey were coded and transferred into the computer for analysis using SPSS version 23, software for data analysis. Data were cleaned and presented using applicable tables, diagrams, and descriptive statistics such as frequencies and means. This enabled the researcher to know the profile of respondents and the general trend of the responses. To establish the existence of any significant effect

of the democratic decision-making approaches (IV) on the work performance (DV), the academic staff scores on work performance were then correlated to each of the three dimensions of DMA approaches (IV) using a simple linear regression analysis provided by SPSS. A multi-linear regression analysis was run to determine the aggregate effect of decision-making approaches on the work performance of academic staff.

In order to understand and validate the qualitative data for analysis, the researcher repeatedly listened to the recorded interviews and then transcribed the interviews. Inductively, the researcher analysed the data using the thematic content analysis technique. In line with Bowen (2009) and Glenn (2009), the inductive approach helped the researcher to understand the meaning in the data through the development of summary themes induced from the raw data. To ease the interpretation in this study, the major themes were presented alongside the results from quantitative analysis and documentary evidence following the study objectives. Some quotes from different participants were presented, and they represented some level of mixture in opinion and different voices.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

To establish if the autocratic decision-making approach predicted the academic staff's work performance, this study regressed work performance against the constructs of the autocratic decision-making approaches. The constructs of the autocratic decision-making approaches were namely; lack of consultation, lack of free expression, no free sharing, lack of collectivism, lack of teamwork, suppression of free talk, and closed-door policy

The results showed that four attributes of the autocratic decision-making approaches explained 46.6% of the variation in the work performance (adjusted $R^2 = 0.466$). This meant that 53.4% of the variation was accounted for by extraneous variables, that is, other approaches not considered in this study. The regression model was very significant ($F = 6.743$, $p = 0.000 < 0.5$). While all the 4 attributes of the autocratic decision-making approaches were positively correlated to the work performance, only 3 of them, namely, lack of free

expression ($\beta = -0.017, p = 0.608$), lack of teamwork ($\beta = -0.006, p = 0.799$), and lack of free sharing ($\beta = -0.033, p = 0.246$) were found to be negatively significant elements of autocratic decision-making approaches by the university academic unit managers.

Furthermore, the results made known that there was a PLCC, $r = 0.142^*$ between the autocratic decision-making approach used by the academic unit managers and the work performance of academic staff. The non-presence of a negative sign on the coefficient implied that the two variables were

positively linearly correlated. The observed Sig. p-value was 0.000 which was less than the popular Sig. (p) value of 0.05 which suggests a significant correlation at 95% confidence level between autocratic decision-making approach and work performance of the academic staff.

To establish if the autocratic decision-making approaches predicted the academic staff's work performance, this study regressed the work performance against the autocratic decision-making approaches. *Table 1* shows the respective betas and their corresponding Sig. (p) values.

Table 1: Regression Results of Autocratic decision-making approach on Work Performance

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
	B	Std. Error	Beta	T	Sig.
1 (Constant)	2.518	0.092		27.336	0.000
Autocratic Approach	-0.031	0.029	-0.065	-1.085	0.279

a. Dependent Variable: Work Performance

From the table above, the autocratic decision-making approach possessed a negative beta (-0.065). This suggested a negative correlation between the autocratic decision-making approach and work performance. Since the p-value, (0.000) was smaller than $\alpha = 0.05$ (i.e. $p < 0.05$), then at the 5% level of significance, we deduce that the computed or observed t statistic is insignificant or small enough ($t = -1.085$) in which case we reject the null hypothesis suggesting an insignificant effect. Hence, using the regression analysis, the null hypothesis, which stated that; there is no significant effect of autocratic decision-making approach relationship on the work performance of the academic staff in the public universities, was rejected. This is because an increase in the use of autocratic decision-making approach by the academic unit managers by one unit is associated with a corresponding decrease in academic staff work performance by -0.031.

CONCLUSION

The objective of the study was to establish the effect of an autocratic decision-making approach as

used by academic unit managers on the work performance of the academic staff in public universities in Uganda. To provide a holistic understanding of the phenomena, while at the same time providing for the generalization of the findings, a two-phase mixed-methods approach was used as advocated by Creswell and Clark (2011). This helped to obtain a broad and deep understanding of the phenomena under study. Additionally, to ascertain the effect of autocratic DMA on the work performance of the academic staff, it was necessary for the researcher first to establish whether academic unit managers used autocratic DMA at all. The results showed that the overall mean for all the seven items that measured the use of autocratic DMA was 3.03 close to code 3 on the Likert Scale used. Code 3 on the stated scale corresponds to the word “sometimes”. With these results, it was apparent that academic unit managers used autocratic decision-making approaches.

In the same vein, the researcher established the status of work performance levels of academic staff in relation to teaching and the overall mean response for all the 21 items that measured teaching

performance was 3.81 close to code 4 in the Likert Scale used. Code 4 in the said scale corresponds to the word “frequently”. With this type of results, it was evident that the academic staff was frequently involved in teaching given the high levels of teaching performance as revealed by statistical tests.

However, in establishing the work performance levels of academic staff in relation to research, the overall mean score for all the 13 items that measured research was 2.32. This mean score was close to code 2 in the Likert Scale used. Code 2, on the said scale, corresponds to the word ‘rarely’. With these results, it was noticeable that the academic staff rarely researched one of their cardinal work performances; thus, the low levels of research performance revealed by this study.

Similarly, in finding the status of work performance levels of academic staff in relation to community engagement, the overall mean score for all the seven items that measured community engagement was 2.03. This mean score of 2.03 was close to code 2 in the Likert Scale used. Code 2, on the said scale corresponded to the word ‘rarely’. These results showed that the academic staff rarely engaged in community engagement as one of their cardinal work performance.

Emanating from the findings above, it meant that work performance levels of the academic staff in public universities in Uganda were generally low. Contextually, the study findings supported the premise on which the study was designed: public universities in Uganda were faced with a challenge of low work performance. Accordingly, the low work performance was beefed up with numerous responses from the interviewees which clearly manifested that too much time was spent on teaching than research thus explaining the poor work performance in research and community engagements. The participants pointed accusing fingers on the leadership traits of the academic unit managers for exhibiting dictatorial tendencies when it came to making decisions regarding teaching workloads and research funding. This, therefore, suggested that the autocratic decision-making approach, especially on research resources, was the major factor that affected the current low research

work performance among the academic staff in public universities in Uganda.

The qualitative phase of the study gave more insights. For example, participants shared that if there were no research work performance requirements in their appraisal system, they would not do any research work. At the same time, they also shared how the monetary incentives in doing community engagement are very limited, and this does not motivate them at all. These call for future studies to investigate how to enhance the work performance levels of the academic staff in all the public universities in the country.

The above findings were confirmed when this study regressed the dependent variable against the independent variable to establish whether the autocratic decision-making approach predicted the academic staff's work performance. A significant positive effect was revealed which confirmed the hypothesis statement of the study that, the autocratic decision-making approach significantly affected the work performance of the academic staff in the public universities. This study finding was agreeable with several studies by researchers like Nakafero (2002) who studied decision-making and the environment of professional nuns in the management of women religious institutions in Uganda and found that the workers preferred to participate in solving problematic issues in an institution. Nakafero (2002) suggested that participation in decision-making enhanced the enthusiasm to perform better and brought about good workplace relationships in terms of supervisor-subordinate relationships.

The findings in this study also revealed a significant positive effect of the autocratic decision-making approach on the work performance of the academic staff in public universities. This was in total agreement with scholars like Neema-Abooki, (2004) who studied the integration of total quality management in the management of universities in Uganda and reported that autocratic approach to decision-making in modern management could not be positively held particularly in higher educational institutions.

Furthermore, the results of this study were also in conformity with those of Jennifer (2002), who

studied organizational behaviour in the United States and found out that an individual decision was generally not rational because it was impossible for the behaviour of a single, isolated individual to reach any high degree of rationality. This finding has linkages with the arguments by Weiss (2002), who found out that rationality was hard to conceive as an individual following the myriad alternatives to be explored.

The researcher also found out that the finding of this study that autocratic DMA affects academic staff work performance collaborates with the findings of earlier researchers (Facione & Facione, 2007) who studied, *“Thinking and reasoning in the human decision-making.”* The current study findings concurred with their earlier findings, which stated that many of the decisions made by autocratic managers in their capacity have disastrous effects on the task performance of workers. Thus, I can authoritatively state that the autocratic decision-making approach in relation to WP should only be seen as a solution that is good enough but not necessarily optimum in improving WP among academic staff.

Such shared experiences reveal that increasingly, there is a growing agreement with evidence amongst scholars on the issue that an autocratic decision-making approach if used more often than not, affects the worker's morale, productivity, and engagement both positively and negatively. However, the study finding that autocratic DMA affects work performance of academic staff was contrary to those of Awan and Tahir (2015) who revealed that whereas working environment in an organization increased the level of job performance, the autocratic decision-making style used was a crucial factor in keeping an employee performance better in today's business world, if other factors remained constant. This apparent disagreement concurred with the studies of Guo, Liao, Liao, and Zhang (2014) who found out that the performance of employees in any institution, regardless of the context had a direct bearing on the autocratic decision-making approach used by the managers in place. To Guo et al., the performance of the employees improved much better if the autocratic approach was used by the managers. So this is a manifestation of the merits of using autocratic approach by the unit managers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the conclusions drawn from the previous discussion of the findings, the study makes the following recommendations. To enhance the work performance of the academic staff, the autocratic decision-making approaches if applied, should not be given priority in all instances. This is because the study found that an increase in the use of an autocratic decision-making approach by the academic unit managers by one unit is associated with a corresponding decrease in academic staff work performance by negative 3.1%. Therefore, the autocratic decision-making approach should not be over-emphasized.

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