

APPLICATION OF INCLUSION AND RETENTION STRATEGIES OF SUCCESSION PLAN ON THE MANAGEMENT OF AHMADU BELLO UNIVERSITY, ZARIA – NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study examined the application of retention and employment of external successors on the management of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria – Nigeria. Two objectives and two research questions were formulated to guide the study: to identify methods of including successors in the university leadership circle and to determine the application of strategies for successors' retention at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria – Nigeria. The research questions and the significance of the study were aligned with these objectives. The researcher employed a case study design due to its qualitative nature. The target population consisted of 267 respondents, ranging from heads of departments to the vice chancellor, and non-probability sampling techniques were used. Respondents were selected based on convenience, following the recommendation of Crouch and McKenzie (2006), who proposed that fewer than twenty participants in qualitative research allow the researcher to build and maintain close relationships, thereby improving the openness and frankness of information exchange. A sample of 17 respondents was ultimately used, achieving data saturation. Data were collected through interviews, and both content validity and reliability were ensured following qualitative research procedures. Thematic content analysis, supported by Nvivo 14 software, was used to analyze the generated data. The study found that successors with proven integrity and prospects were included in the university leadership circle through value addition, recommendations, and consultations, while retention strategies primarily focused on counseling and encouragement. Based on the findings, it was recommended that successors with proven integrity and prospects continue to be included in the leadership circle through value addition, recommendations, and consultations, and that additional retention strategies be employed, including staff motivation, improved welfare packages, and offering a fifty percent discount on school fees for the biological children of university staff, in consideration of the limited salaries and current economic realities.

Keywords: application, inclusion, retention, succession and management

Introduction

Continuity in leadership is crucial for the stability, growth, and long-term success of higher education institutions. Universities are complex systems that depend on effective leadership at all levels to ensure academic excellence, operational efficiency, and strategic development. When leadership succession is poorly managed, institutions risk administrative disruption, loss of institutional memory, and weakened organizational performance. At present, many Nigerian universities, including Ahmadu Bello University in Zaria, are reportedly confronted with leadership challenges arising from an ineffective application of succession planning strategies. These challenges often manifest during the appointment and transition of principal management officers and other key leadership positions, leading to inconsistencies in policy implementation, reduced institutional continuity, and weakened governance structures. Succession planning is the deliberate and systematic process of identifying, developing, and retaining individuals who have the potential to occupy key leadership positions in the future (Rothwell, 2015). The core purpose of succession planning is to ensure organizational continuity, enhance productivity, improve decision-making capacity, and safeguard institutional knowledge against leadership vacuums. The application of inclusion and retention strategies within succession planning is particularly important, as these strategies ensure that potential leaders are chosen based on merit, leadership potential, and demonstrated performance rather than personal affiliation or bias. Retention strategies such as mentorship programs, leadership training, performance incentives, and career development pathways help to sustain the career progression of talented staff and reduce the loss of institutional human capital.

Regardless of its recognized importance, succession planning in many Nigerian universities remains weak, largely due to biased selection processes, inadequate talent development mechanisms, and weak retention frameworks. Favoritism and tribal considerations have been identified as recurrent issues in leadership appointments, often superseding merit and professional competence. Such non-meritocratic practices undermine organizational effectiveness and staff morale, and diminish confidence in institutional leadership structures. Studies indicate that when leadership appointments are based on familiarity rather than qualifications and performance, the quality of administration and academic delivery suffers (Ololube, 2021). In addition to bias, corruption has also infiltrated leadership selection processes in higher education, where financial influence and political patronage often determine leadership outcomes. Corrupt practices distort the principles of fair competition, reduce professional accountability, and erode institutional values (Adeyemi & Adewale, 2022). Furthermore, inadequate retention strategies contribute to the migration of skilled academics and administrators to other institutions or sectors, creating gaps in leadership continuity and weakening organizational capacity (Adewale, 2023). Research also suggests that effective succession planning is associated with greater leadership readiness, improved organizational performance, and enhanced employee commitment (Day, 2018). Inclusive succession strategies encourage diversity, empower a broader pool of employees, and support sustainable institutional development. Similarly, retention strategies that focus on career progression, professional development, and employee recognition help reduce turnover, strengthen employee engagement, and build a resilient leadership pipeline.

Given the contextual challenges and the pivotal role of leadership continuity in institutional success, it becomes imperative for university management to adopt and implement structured inclusion and retention strategies as part of succession planning. Such strategies are instrumental in identifying personnel with current leadership competence or the potential to be developed into future leaders. By doing so, institutions can enhance administrative performance, promote organizational stability, and ensure that leadership transitions are seamless. In this light, the present study examines the application of inclusion and retention strategies of succession planning on the management of Ahmadu Bello University in Zaria, Nigeria. By investigating how these strategies are applied and their impact on organizational management, this study seeks to generate insights that can support strategic leadership development, strengthen human resource planning, and improve institutional governance in Nigerian universities.

Current research indicates that succession planning, when effectively applied, enhances leadership continuity, organizational performance, and talent retention in higher education institutions. Inclusion strategies, such as merit-based selection and diversity in leadership pipelines, alongside retention strategies like mentorship, professional development, and career progression, are increasingly recognized as essential for sustainable institutional management. Recent studies highlight that universities that integrate structured succession planning experience fewer leadership crises, improved decision-making, and higher staff motivation and engagement. Advancements in organizational research emphasize the critical role of proactive leadership development and strategic human resource planning to ensure institutional stability and academic excellence. Notwithstanding these advancements, there is limited empirical evidence on how inclusion and retention strategies of succession planning are specifically applied within Nigerian universities, particularly at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. Existing studies often focus on general succession planning without examining the operationalization of these strategies or their direct impact on institutional management outcomes. This study aims to fill this gap by investigating the application of inclusion and retention strategies of succession planning and assessing their effect on university management, leadership continuity, and administrative effectiveness.

Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of the study was to examine the application of retention and employment of external successors on the management of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria – Nigeria. Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. identify methods of successor's inclusion in the university leadership circle at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria - Nigeria.

2. determine the application of strategies for successor retention at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria - Nigeria.

Research Questions

The research sought to answer the following questions:

1. What methods does university management employ to include successors in the leadership circle at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria - Nigeria?
2. What strategies do university managements adopt to retain successors at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria - Nigeria?

Methods

The researcher used case study design method. For a case study to be considered as a qualitative study, the researcher must be interested in the meaning of experiences to the subjects themselves, rather than in generalizing results to other groups of people. Case studies, one of the most common qualitative designs, are used to examine a person, group, community or institution. To conduct the case study, the researcher may draw upon multiple sources of data, such as observation, interviews and documents. All participants chosen must share a unifying factor, which means they all must have a direct or indirect connection to the research question or subject being studied (Lissie, 2021). The target population of the study consists of 267 respondents which include: Vice Chancellor, 2 Deputy Vice Chancellors, Registrar, 2 Deputy Registrars, 2 Directors, 2 Deputy Directors, 2 Deans, 2 Deputy Deans, and 2 Heads of Departments, respectively. Non-probability sampling techniques were employed. The selection of respondents was based on conveniences in line with the recommendation of Crouch and Mckenzie (2006), who proposed that less than 20 participants in qualitative research help a researcher build and maintain a close relationship and thus improve an open and frank exchange of information. The sample size used was 17 respondents, where data saturation was achieved. The researcher used an interview method to generate data. Both content validity and reliability were determined according to the procedures of qualitative research. The researcher administered interview questions to the participants using a mobile phone to record their responses. The essence of using a mobile phone as recorder in qualitative research is to avoid unnecessary interference with raw data collection so as to minimize the researcher's bias and allow for first-hand information. The interview was conducted in English as a medium of communication in Nigerian universities. However, the interview was only conducted with the respondents that were actually indicated in the study to avoid the repercussions of extraneous variables. The researcher adopted the interview approach because it gives the most direct and straightforward approach to gathering detailed and rich data regarding a particular phenomenon. The researcher used thematic content analysis and Nvivo 14 software to analyze the generated data.

Results

Research Question 1: What Methods does University Management Employ to Include Successors in the University Leadership Circle at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria – Nigeria?

The third research question of the study was aimed at determining the methods of including successors in the university leadership circle in the management of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. Three sub-questions were formulated as line-specific variables of the research objective as well as the research question. The results are shown in Figure 4 below:

Figure 1: Nvivo 14 Cloud of thematic Content Analysis of Research Question 3: What Methods does University Management Employ to Include Successors in the University Leadership Circle at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Nigeria?



Source: Field Work (2023)

Figure 1 shows the Nvivo results analysis. The analysis includes words such as mentoring, recommendations, and consultation. Nine (9) respondents responded using different methods of inclusion, while the other eight decided to mute or respond inappropriately in line with the research variables. The methods of including successors in the university leadership circle in the management of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, include recommendation, as opined by (10): the methods of including successors in the university leadership circle are done through recommendation to those successors with prospects already, and successors are included in the circle of leadership through recommendations and references to their past leadership record (14). In a similar response, the method of including successors in the university leadership circle is done through collective agreement among senior staff (R8).

In a different opinion, the methods of including successors in the university leadership circle are factors that are too political and natural phenomena outside academic performance (R2), when successors are given the same level of ground and demonstrate their performances (R7), and the methods of including successors in the university leadership circle are done through monitoring (R13). With regards to the methods of including successors in the university leadership circle, (R1) viewed that the application of mentorship is used to include successors in the circle of leadership, though democracy sometimes decides otherwise. More so, (R3) sees succession planning in A.B.U. and methods of including successors in the university leadership circle, but we call it mentoring in academics (R30), and finally, methods of including successors in the university leadership circle are all about mentoring (R12).

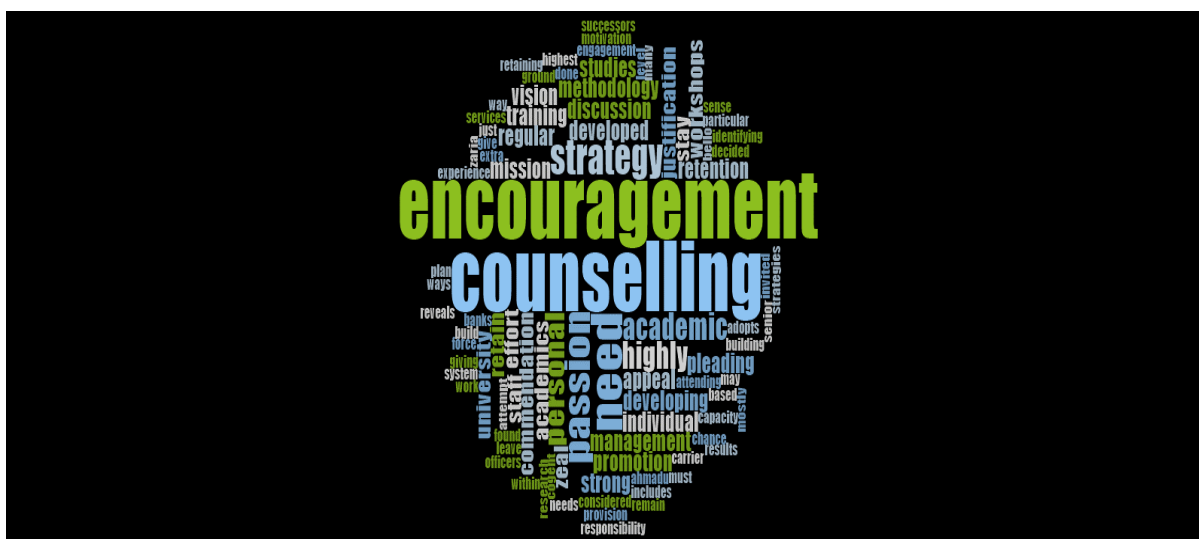
Based on the above, the answer to the research questions is as follows:

The methods of including successors in the university leadership circle are: recommendation to those successors with prospects and proven integrity already; references to their past leadership record or position held; collective agreement among staff, which is political; natural phenomena outside academic performance; and value addition; when successors are given the same level ground to demonstrate their performances.

2: What strategies does the management of the university adopt to retain successors at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Nigeria?

The fourth research question of the study was aimed at determining the strategies employed by the management of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, to retain their highly developed successors to stay within university services and not run away from their mother university. Two sub-questions were formulated for line-specific variables of the research objective as well as the research question. The results are shown in Figure 1 below:

Figure 2: Nvivo 14 Cloud of thematic Content Analysis of Research Question 4: What Strategies do Managements of Universities Adopt to Retain Successors in Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Nigeria?



Source: Field Work (2023)

Figure 2 reveals the Nvivo results analysis. The analysis includes words such as encouragement, counselling, and passion. In an attempt to retain their highly developed successors to stay within university services, the management of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, adopts many strategies, including pleading, counselling, and appeals by senior officers and management of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria (R3 and R14). Most are invited for discussion, and staff have decided to leave, but some have strong justification (R6). Some developed successors are giving extra motivation to stay through encouragement; attending training and workshops gives them a sense of responsibility (R7), so somebody must have the highest level of zeal to remain in the system. It may just be a way of commending effort (R8), and A.B.U. retains its successors through engagement (R2). To ensure retention of a highly experienced work force, the personal and academic needs of some individuals are considered by developing methodologies or ways of identifying the needs of a particular individual, including their personal and academic needs (R16), the provision of a chance to further studies to build their career (R5), and passion is the key to retention. Passion for academics, mission, and vision of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria (R12)

Contrary to the above strategies employed by the and management of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, some respondents feel that there are no such strategies, such as: I don't think if the university has the capability to provide what will keep them; the university could only pay for their regular promotion (R9); we don't have a cogent strategy of retaining some of the best staff (R10); and lastly, there is no such plan on the ground to retain highly developed staff (R11).

Based on the above, the answer to the research questions is as follows:

Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, retains its highly developed successors through pleading, counselling, and appeals by senior officers and university management, as they don't have money to give them. They also encourage them with commendations of effort and consider them by developing methodologies or ways of identifying the needs of a particular individual, be it personal or academic, such as regular promotion, accommodation, attending training, and workshops.

Summary of Major Findings

Based on the analysis presented above, the summary of the major findings are:

1. Identified successors with proven integrity and prospects are included in the university leadership circle through value addition, recommendations, and consultations.

2. The application of successive retention strategies prioritized on counselling, encouragement, and capacity-building of highly developed successors.

Discussion

The study of the application of retention and employment of external successors on the management of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria – Nigeria, was investigated to understand the complex level at which succession planning was practiced in the study area. Five specific objectives and five research questions were formulated to guide the study. The result reveals that some respondents had the same responses, some had slightly similar responses, and others had entirely different responses to the research questions, respectively.

Figure 1 research question 1, it was found that the methods of including successors in the university leadership circle in the management of Ahmadu Bello University include recommendations to those successors with prospects and proven integrity already, and successors are included in the circle of leadership through references to their past leadership record or position held, and it is done through collective agreement among senior staff, which is described as a political process. It is also found that the methods of including successors in the university leadership circle are factors that are too political and natural phenomena outside academic performance by giving the same level of ground to demonstrate their performances. This is what researchers call value addition when successors are given the same level of ground to demonstrate their performances. Lastly, it was found that other methods of including successors in the university leadership circle were done through monitoring and mentoring. This is used to include successors in the circle of leadership, though democracy decides otherwise, sometimes on highly eligible and competent successors.

Figure 2 reveals that, in an attempt to retain their highly developed successors to stay within university services, the management of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, adopts many strategies, including pleading, counselling, and appeals by senior officers and the management of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. This is supported by James (2021), who found that retention is high among university research administrators, and perceived supervisory and upper management support were key motivational factors attributed to both retention and voluntary turnover intentions. It was also found that, mostly, any academic staff who submits their resignation letter is invited for discussion to identify the need of a particular individual, be it a personal need or an academic need, such as regular promotion in line with Joel's opinion (2022), accommodation, attending training and workshops, or if the staff has decided to leave because of their strong justification. This is in line with the findings of Amie-Ogan and Deekae (2020), who found that staff development programmes such as conferences and workshops influence teacher performance in public primary schools in Gonaka and Khana Local Government Areas of Rivers State to a very high extent. Furthermore, it was found that some developed successors are giving extra motivation to stay by attending training and workshops, which give them a sense of responsibility and a way of commending effort and engagement. More importantly, some of the highly experienced work force decided to staff the university no matter the level of their development due to their passion for academics, mission, and vision of Ahmadu Bello University. Contrary to the above strategies employed by the management of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, it was also found that a few of the respondents felt that there were no such strategies or plans on the ground to retain highly developed staff.

Contribution to Knowledge

This study contributes to the existing knowledge on university administration and leadership by providing empirical evidence on the application of inclusion and retention strategies in succession planning at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. It highlights how structured approaches to identifying, developing, and retaining potential leaders can enhance organizational stability and continuity in higher education institutions. By examining both the processes and outcomes of succession planning, the study provides insights into best practices for promoting merit-based inclusion, minimizing biases, and ensuring equitable access to leadership opportunities. Furthermore, the findings emphasize the importance of aligning succession strategies with institutional goals to improve decision-making, staff motivation, and

overall administrative effectiveness. This contribution is particularly significant for policymakers, university management, and human resource practitioners, as it offers practical guidance on fostering leadership continuity and enhancing the efficiency and sustainability of academic institutions.

Educational Implications

The findings of this study have significant educational implications for the management and development of higher education institutions. First, the study underscores the importance of applying structured inclusion and retention strategies in succession planning to ensure leadership continuity, which is critical for maintaining institutional stability and promoting quality education. University administrators are encouraged to prioritize merit-based identification and development of potential leaders, ensuring that talented staff are nurtured and prepared to assume key positions when needed. Furthermore, the study highlights that effective succession planning can enhance staff motivation, job satisfaction, and commitment by providing clear pathways for career advancement and professional growth. This contributes to a more engaged and competent workforce, which directly impacts the quality of teaching, research, and administrative efficiency. By incorporating retention strategies, such as mentorship programs, continuous professional development, and equitable opportunities for leadership roles, institutions can minimize the adverse effects of leadership gaps and reduce disruptions in academic and administrative operations. Finally, the study emphasizes that policymakers, university management, and human resource practitioners should integrate succession planning into the strategic framework of universities. Doing so not only strengthens institutional governance but also promotes a culture of transparency, accountability, and inclusivity, thereby enhancing the overall performance and reputation of the university system.

Conclusions

The study concludes that the application of succession planning strategies in the management of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria – Nigeria, has yielded several key insights. First, the inclusion of successors in the university leadership circle is guided by multiple approaches. These include recommending individuals with proven integrity and leadership potential, considering their past leadership records or positions held, reaching collective agreements among staff which may sometimes involve political considerations—and recognizing value addition when successors are provided equal opportunities to demonstrate their capabilities. These mechanisms ensure that potential leaders are identified and positioned to contribute meaningfully to the university's continuity and development.

Second, the study found that Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, retains its highly capable successors through non-monetary strategies, such as counseling, mentorship, and appeals by senior officers and university management. Since financial incentives are often limited, the university relies on commendations of effort, acknowledgment of achievements, and the development of tailored support mechanisms. These may include regular promotions, provision of accommodation, access to training programs, and participation in workshops, all of which address both personal and professional needs. By implementing such strategies, the university fosters loyalty, motivation, and sustained engagement among its future leaders, thereby strengthening institutional stability and performance.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the researcher made the following recommendations:

1. Giving successors with proven integrity and prospects the same level ground to demonstrate their performances is highly encouraged. It's also proving a just and equal opportunity for all.
2. More retention strategies need to be employed in the areas of staff motivation, improving welfare packages, and offering a fifty percent discount on school fees to the biological children of university staff, considering the meager salary earned by the university staff and our present economic reality.

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