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RESEARCH ARTICLE

ASSESSMENT OF ACADEMIC LEADERSHIP PRACTICES IN PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES IN NIGERIA

OKORO Patience¹, AKPOTU Nelson E.² and ASIYAI Romina I.²

1. Post Graduate Student, Department of Educational Management and Foundations, Delta State University Abraka, Nigeria.

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2. Department of Educational Management and Foundations, Delta State University Abraka, Nigeria.

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Abstract

This study focused on evaluating the academic leadership practices within public universities in Edo and Delta States, Nigeria. Its primary objective was to identify the different types of academic leadership practices prevalent in these states. The research design employed was ex post facto, with a target population of 1.957 junior academics. A sample of 375 junior academics was selected using the simple random sampling technique, and data collection relied on a questionnaire. The analysis was carried out using mean and standard deviation, with a benchmark set at 2.50 for acceptability. The results of the analysis unveiled the existence of five distinct forms of academic leadership practices among academic leaders in federal and state universities in Delta and Edo States. These five forms included: stirring common academic vision leadership practice (SCAVLP), promotion of academic relationship leadership practice (PARLP), provision of academic feedback leadership practice (PAFLP), encouraging academic advancement leadership practice (EAALP), and academic mentorship leadership practice (AMLP). Among these, academic mentorship was found to be the least commonly observed form of academic leadership practice among the five identified in the study. In light of these findings, the study recommends that university management should initiate a mentorship program to educate all staff on the principles and concepts of mentorship. Additionally, junior academics should be formally assigned to senior academics for mentorship purposes.

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Introduction:-

Academic leadership encompasses leadership responsibilities across various aspects of academia, such as teaching, research, goal setting, motivation, and the sharing of a common vision (Madugu & Manaf, 2019). Essentially, academic leadership refers to leadership within the academic context (Nguyen & Barry, 2015). Tshishonga (2020) defines academic leadership in higher education as the leadership provided by respected academics and administrators, with the primary aim of creating a favorable environment for both individual and institutional growth and progress. This type of leadership is all-encompassing and permeates the entire leadership structure of higher education institutions (Kohtamäki, 2019). Academic leaders are individuals who possess an in-depth understanding of their field of expertise and possess the necessary skills to drive transformation within their domain. They excel in

Corresponding Author:- OKORO Patience

Address:- Post Graduate Student, Department of Educational Management and Foundations, Delta State University Abraka, Nigeria.

harnessing the capabilities of their colleagues toward shared objectives and play a pivotal role in initiating change, with the institution's vision serving as a central motivating force (Mehmood, Khan, Raziq, & Tahirkheli, 2012).

Academic leadership encompasses a range of crucial roles, including the development of a vision, the generation of innovative ideas, and the facilitation of collaboration among academics. Within this context, academic leaders are defined as experienced academics, including those holding the rank of associate professor and higher, who play a central role in guiding and providing mentorship to junior lecturers. The concept of academic leadership has been influenced by various sources in the literature, underscoring its focus on qualities such as vision, skills, adaptability to change, effectiveness, and the ability to drive transformation (Asaari, Dwivedi, Lawton & Desa, 2016; Gedminiene & Kaminskiene, 2016; Mehmood et al., 2012; Koen & Bitzer, 2010). Rowley and Sherman (2003) stress that leadership within universities should prioritize decision-making that takes into account its impact on building trust, fostering loyalty, and earning respect. Additionally, it should promote positive relationships with both labor unions and administrative departments.

In higher education institutions, academic staff members have traditionally played a significant leadership role, which includes responsibilities related to teaching, research, scholarly activities, and service (Strathe & Wilson, 2006). According to Askling and Stensaker (2002), academic leadership is viewed as an official duty and is regarded as a way of life that governs, guides, and directs individuals and groups toward the common goals of the university. From this perspective, academic leadership encompasses a range of responsibilities held by individuals in authoritative positions within higher education, such as department heads, deans, provosts, directors, and others (Marshall, Adams & Cameron, 2000). Additionally, academic leadership can be seen as the functions carried out by department heads, which involve curriculum development, the management of departmental and faculty-related activities, and the fulfillment of academic commitments driven by personal motivation (Jones & Holdaway, 1996). Essentially, academic leadership entails overseeing the duties of lecturers, including teaching, research, and community service, all with the overarching aim of achieving the university's shared objectives.

According to Northouse (2017), leadership actions within the academic realm are defined by the interactions between academic leaders and their junior colleagues. These actions manifest through the dynamic exchanges between academic leaders and junior faculty members across various situations. It is through these interactions and the impact they have on others through their behaviors that academic leaders function as authentic leaders, empowering individuals to actively engage in processes of change. Leadership practices can be understood as the approaches employed by individuals in leadership roles when engaging with their subordinates (Bono & Judge, 2004). These practices involve deliberate actions taken by leaders to inspire subordinates to align with their personal visions within an organization (Okoye and Ukwuoma, 2020). They encompass the patterns of behavior used by leaders to influence group members in matters related to an organization's mission, strategy, and day-to-day operations, as elucidated by Kiboss and Jemiryott (2014). Furthermore, leadership practices involve the processes of guiding, motivating, and executing plans (Memon, 2014). Additionally, they encompass the leader's behaviors, both in their words and actions, as perceived by others (Christiana and Moses, 2018). In essence, leadership practices represent the chosen methods through which an individual applies their leadership skills and abilities.

According to Akidi and Chukwueke (2020), the qualities and actions of a leader are pivotal in enabling lecturers to carry out their responsibilities effectively. Academic leaders should employ practices that are in line with efficient management and leadership within the university context. It's crucial for a leader's approach to leadership to be tailored to the institution's specific needs, effectively guiding the behaviors of academic staff members on specific issues to attain the institution's objectives. As highlighted by Gharehbaghi and McManus (2003), effective leadership practices significantly contribute to improving employees' performance in their tasks. Weiner's (2003) research underscores the importance of leaders possessing specific qualities such as innovation, a willingness to take calculated risks, adaptability, technical expertise, and a readiness to learn in order to function effectively. Consequently, academic leaders should equip themselves with the requisite skills and knowledge to efficiently manage both human and material resources (Akparobore & Omosekejim, 2020).

The effectiveness of leadership and the overall success of institutions are closely interconnected with the strategies employed by those in leadership positions (Christiana & Moses, 2018). Consequently, leaders who aim for success should select practices that are in line with the attainment of their established objectives. Leadership practices refer to the methods that leaders use to transform both personal and institutional goals into reality through their conduct and interactions with their followers. These practices encompass providing guidance, implementing plans, and

motivating others to carry out their tasks effectively. In the context of universities, departmental heads hold a pivotal role since universities are institutions that undergo transformation through various academic departments. To be efficient in their role, departmental heads must possess the knowledge and skills essential for leadership and management. Given the diverse nature of leadership, academic leaders should have a comprehensive understanding of different leadership practices and be adept at applying them based on the specific circumstances within the institution. Different situations within the institution may require varying forms of leadership, thus demanding a leader's adaptability and proficiency in various practices.

The primary objective of this assessment was to deliberately pinpoint different manifestations of academic leadership practices within public universities situated in Delta and Edo States. Additionally, it sought to underscore specific areas requiring enhancement and offer suggestions to improve the overall quality of academic leadership practices in these universities.

Methodology:-

This study employed an ex-post-facto research design. The target population included 1,957 junior academic staff members working in both federal and state universities located in Delta and Edo States, as indicated in Table 3. These universities consisted of three federal and two state-owned institutions. The study's sample size comprised 375 junior lecturers, which represented 20% of the total academic staff. The selection of participants was carried out using the simple random sampling technique.

For data collection, the research utilized a questionnaire known as the "Forms of Academic Leadership Practices Questionnaire." Junior academics were tasked with indicating the various forms of academic leadership practices exhibited by their senior colleagues, who were regarded as academic leaders within the study. This questionnaire section contained fifty questions related to the five identified academic leadership practices, which encompassed academic mentorship, promotion of academic relationships, encouragement of academic advancement, stirring a common academic vision, and provision of academic feedback.

The questionnaire underwent a rigorous review process by two study supervisors and an additional expert in measurement and evaluation. Feedback and comments from these experts were incorporated into the instrument, resulting in the final version that was approved for use. Consequently, the research instrument demonstrated both face and content validity. To assess reliability, a split-half method was employed, yielding a reliability coefficient of 0.97. The researcher, along with four well-trained assistants, distributed the questionnaires to the participants.

Data collected from the instrument were subjected to analysis using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 23 software. Mean and standard deviation were utilized to address the research question. The acceptable mean score benchmark was set at 2.50, taking into account the four-point measuring scale employed in the study. Any mean scores falling below this benchmark were considered unacceptable.

Results:-

Research question one:

What are the forms of academic leadership practices in public universities in Delta and Edo States?

Table 1:- Forms of Academic Leadership Practices in Public Universities in Delta and Edo States, Nigeria.

Forms of Academic Leadership Practices in Public Universities in Delta and Edo	Federal Universities in		State Universities in		Federal & State Universities in		Remark
States	Delta & Edo		Delta & Edo States		Delta & Edo States		
	States	CD		CD		CD	h
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Stirring common academic vision	3.0268	.41778	3.1031	.68025	3.06495	.56948	Agree
leadership practice							I
Promotion of academic relationship	2.9199	.71829	2.9705	.70431	2.9452	.71013	Agree
leadership practice							I
Provision of academic feedback leadership	2.8953	.56511	2.8943	.80969	2.8948	.70139	Agree
practice							ı
Encouragement of academic advancement	2.8456	.45755	2.8359	.65400	2.8408	.56801	Agree

leadership practice									١	
Academic` Practice	Mentorship	Leadership	2.6603	.45761	2.7194	.73620	2.6899	.61902	Agree	

Source: Fieldwork, 2022.

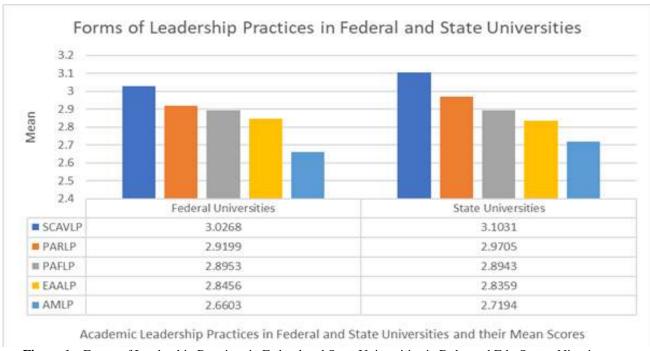


Figure 1:- Forms of Leadership Practices in Federal and State Universities in Delta and Edo States, Nigeria.

TOTAL MEAN OF FORMS OF ACADEMIC LEADERSHIP PRACTICE OF SENIOR ACADEMICS

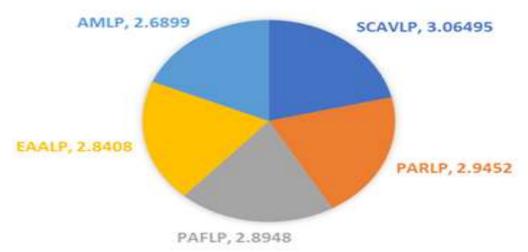


Figure 2:- Total mean scores of forms of Academic Leadership Practices in Public Universities in Delta and Edo States, Nigeria.

Source: Fieldwork, 2022.

Discussion of Results:-

The findings displayed in Table 1 as well as Figures 1 and 2 indicated that there are five distinct manifestations of academic leadership practices within the public universities, encompassing both federal and state institutions located in Delta and Edo States.

The initial academic leadership practice identified was the "stirring common academic vision leadership practice" (SCAVLP), with an average score of 3.0669 observed in both state and federal universities located in Delta and Edo States, as indicated in Table 1 and Figures 1 & 2. The study found that SCAVLP emerged as the most prominent form of academic leadership practice. This outcome suggests that a significant proportion of senior academics in these institutions are confident about achieving future goals. They put forward innovative approaches to completing tasks, express optimism about the future, inspire others to put in extra effort, and motivate junior academics to grasp the exciting possibilities of future accomplishments while keeping their optimism alive. In line with these findings, Kedir and Geleta (2017) argued that change-oriented visionary or transformational academic leaders maintain and propagate their visions, encouraging others to adopt a positive outlook on future achievements. Likewise, Almaki et al. (2016) contended that change-oriented academic leaders motivate, instill confidence, engage others, promote teamwork, and convey an appealing vision. They further suggested that lecturers working under such leaders are stimulated and motivated to surpass their expected performance levels. Abu-Tineh et al. (2009) and Tefera (2018) also asserted that lecturers become motivated when their academic leaders involve them in envisioning improved future conditions. As a result, their dedication and effectiveness are positively influenced. Adding to this perspective, Nwadike (2020) and Ramokgopa (2018) disclosed that change-oriented leaders seek alternative solutions when faced with perceived failure, thereby providing the necessary impetus to achieve results. Moreover, Njoku (2018) noted that change-oriented academic leaders prioritize their staff members and their needs.

The second identified academic leadership practice (ALP), as unveiled by this study, was the "provision of academic relationship leadership practice" (PARLP), with the second-highest mean score of 2.9436, as presented in Table 1. The findings demonstrated that PARLP was observed in both state-owned universities (with a mean of 2.9705) and federally-owned universities (with a mean of 2.9199), as shown in Figure 1. This implies that academic leaders in public universities located in Delta and Edo States foster group discussions, create a conducive environment, facilitate effective communication, establish trust, and are approachable. This form of academic leadership practice is characterized by equality and collaboration. These results align with the findings of Nick et al. (2012), who emphasized that building academic relationships involves fostering collegiality, ensuring effective communication, and cultivating a supportive environment. Furthermore, the findings regarding PARLP in this study are consistent with the research of Ogbah (2013), which indicated that most followers prefer an institutional environment that promotes academic relationships. Ogbah also noted that the promotion of academic relationships encourages subordinates to participate in decision-making processes.

The third academic leadership practice identified by junior academics in public universities in Delta and Edo States is the "provision of academic feedback leadership practice" (PAFLP). The findings from the fieldwork revealed an overall mean score of 2.8916 in public universities across both Delta and Edo States, as shown in Table 1 and Figure 2. The results indicated that PAFLP was demonstrated by senior academics in public universities in both states, as the total mean score exceeded the benchmark of 2.50 (Figure 2). This suggests that academic leaders in these institutions encourage extensive academic feedback and provide timely and motivating feedback that enhances academic knowledge. These findings are consistent with previous research that highlights the significance of offering academic feedback in enhancing knowledge, fostering individual development, and promoting critical thinking (Carless et al., 2011; Eather et al., 2019; Adcroft, 2011; Weaver, 2006). Additionally, universities rely on academic feedback for academic improvement and scholastic development (Higgins et al., 2002; Orsmond et al., 2005).

The fourth type of academic leadership practice identified was the "encouraging academic advancement leadership practice" (EAALP), with an overall mean score of 2.8387 (2.8456 for Federal universities and 2.8359 for State universities), as shown in Table 1 and Figure 1. The fieldwork report indicated that EAALP was observed in both federal and state-owned universities in Delta and Edo States, as reflected in Table 1 and Figure 1. The results indicated that the majority of academic leaders in these universities were readily available to assist junior academics in their academic advancement efforts. This finding aligns with the perspective presented by Ojeaga (2019), which asserts that academic leaders promote academic advancement by helping junior academics set career goals and establish clear milestones. Similarly, other studies have established that junior academics who receive mentorship

and guidance from senior academics tend to navigate their scholarly pursuits more successfully throughout their careers (Ekpoh & Ukot, 2019; Anafarta & Apaydin, 2016). Additionally, Nwafor (2012) emphasized the importance of academic leaders ensuring continuous development through career advancements and participation in seminars and workshops. Furthermore, Ofoegbu and Alonge (2017) found that there was a general decline in academic quality in Nigerian universities and that the extent to which these universities achieve their goals is closely linked to the activities of academic leaders and the overall academic quality. Ofoegbu and Alonge also noted that academic leaders placed significant emphasis on facilitating the career advancement of academics through scholarships and opportunities for further training.

Lastly, as depicted in Figure 1, the results indicated that the "academic mentorship leadership practice" (AMLP) was observed in both state-owned universities (with a mean of 2.7194) and federally-owned universities (with a mean of 2.6603). Across both federal and state universities, the findings from the fieldwork revealed that AMLP, with a mean score of 2.6891, was the least commonly exhibited among senior academics when compared to the other five forms of academic leadership practices identified in public universities in Delta and Edo States, as presented in Table 1 and Figure 1. The lower score obtained for AMLP is one of the reasons why some junior academics may struggle to fully comprehend the demands of their job, effectively engage in research, and actively participate in institutional activities. This finding is consistent with the study by Chitsamatanga et al. (2018), which indicated an overall lack of interest and knowledge among lecturers regarding academic mentorship. Chitsamatanga et al. also stressed the importance of gender-balanced mentorship practices in universities. Additionally, the findings regarding AMLP in this study align with the perspective of other researchers, suggesting that academics without academic mentors tend to experience slower career progression compared to those with mentors (Turnbull, 2010; Sambunjak et al., 2006). Furthermore, Banja et al. (2018) noted the absence of mentoring policies for junior academics and identified indifferent attitudes among senior academics towards mentorship. They also highlighted the reluctance of junior academics to seek mentorship, which has had a negative impact on their career development.

Conclusion:-

This research was conducted to evaluate the different types of academic leadership practices within public universities situated in Delta and Edo States. The primary objective of the study was to determine the specific forms of academic leadership practices that senior academics employ in universities located in these two states. Among the academic leaders in both federal and state universities in Delta and Edo States, the study identified five prevalent forms of academic leadership practices. Notably, academic mentorship leadership practice emerged as the least frequently observed among these five forms of academic leadership practices in the study.

Recommendations:-

University administrations ought to arrange mentorship initiatives in which all academics receive training in the principles and concepts of mentorship. This would enable academics to gain a structured understanding of mentorship relationships instead of perceiving them informally. Furthermore, there should be a formal process for assigning junior academics to senior academics for mentorship.

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