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RESEARCH ARTICLE

WORKFORCE DIVERSITY IN ACADEMIC LIBRARIES IN SIERRA LEONE

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ABSTRACT

Workforce diversity refers to a wide range of differences among employees in organizations including, age, gender, race, religion, ethnicity, educational background, personality, tenure, cognitive style, nationality, and organizational function. Managing workforce diversity goes beyond respecting people's differences; it entails appreciating the importance of differences, knowing, embracing, fighting prejudice, and fostering inclusiveness to improve the organization's effectiveness. Invariably, this study explored workforce diversity in academic libraries in the University of Sierra Leone libraries and its impact on employee performance. The population of the study was drawn from employees in the three constituent campuses' libraries and a purposive sampling method was used to collect data. The findings revealed that age, educational background, work experience and attitude dimensions can significantly influence employee generational differences and foster a learning culture within the University of Sierra Leone libraries.

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INTRODUCTION

Workforce diversity has become a major strategic pillar that many organizations feel is required of them to advance justice and fairness in the workplace. This equal opportunity principle, which ensures that diversity can be useful to boost the efficiency and effectiveness of organizational activities instead of losing bright people based on these differences, is largely responsible for the emergence of the workforce (Henry and Evans, 2007; Moi Barak, 2015). The world's increasing globalization requires more interaction between people from diverse cultures and backgrounds than in the past. In the library and information world, advancement in technology and the emergence of new set of users with IT skills requires library managers to hire and manage employees from varied backgrounds. The University of Sierra Leone (USL) is a unitary system comprising Fourah Bay College (FBC), the Institute of Public Administration and Management (IPAM), and the College of Medicine and Allied Health Sciences (COMAHS) campuses. Each of these campuses has its own library with a total staff component of sixty (60). In these institutions the surge in student roll due to the massive success of candidates at the West African Senior Secondary Certificate Examinations with different needs, the emergence of ICTs and their application in information service institutions, and the consistent USL campuses' re-engineering process have compelled authorities to take a strategic

organizational approach to workforce. In the USL campus libraries there is keen competition for every resources (money, material and manpower) to provide satisfactory services to their numerous clientele. This represents a shift from the activities and assumptions defined by affirmative action to management practices that are inclusive, reflecting workforce diversity and its potentials. Diversified workforce can provide advantages such as creativity, problem solving and bringing individual talents and experiences together in suggesting ideas that are flexible and adapting to fluctuating user demands which can lead to competitive advantage. This diversity is viewed as a positive force for employees' job performance (Choi and Rainey, 2010). Studies have shown that organizations with high levels of well-managed diversity are effective and steering ultimately producing corporate cultures that have new perspectives, pioneering capabilities and fresh ideas which necessary to survive (Childs Jr, 2005). In Sierra Leone in general and the USL in particular workforce diversity has not been paid enough attention for examining those variables that may influence employee performance, especially there are no studies that focus on how age diversity, educational diversity, gender and religious diversity, work experience diversity and attitude diversity on the job of employees which influence their performance in their respective library and information service institutions. This study therefore, examined workforce diversity and employee performance in USL academic libraries and its would be impact on employee performance.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In examining workforce diversity and staff performance in the USL libraries this study is grounded in the theoretical framework of Social Categorization Theory (Turner et al., 1979) and Social Identification Theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). Social Categorization Theory explains how individuals mentally categorize others based on their characteristics, leading to the formation of social groups within the workplace. The Theory holds that individuals categorize others into different social groups, and these categories influence their attitudes and behaviour. It suggests that when diversity is effectively managed, it can lead to a range of positive outcomes such as innovation, creativity, problem-solving capabilities and better decision-making (Cox and Blake, 1991). The social integration highlights the importance of creating an inclusive work environment that fosters positive interactions, cooperation and mutual respect among diverse employees. This perspective suggests that when employees feel included and valued, then they are more likely to engage in effective collaboration and contribute to enhanced organizational performance. The Social Identity Theory, on the other hand, provides a theoretical framework for understanding social categorization and group identification on employee performance in the context of the workforce diversity. This Theory emphasizes the importance of individuals' identification with specific social groups based on shared characteristics such as age, gender, religion, ethnicity and educational background. According to the Social Identity Theory, when employees identify their respective groups, they develop a sense of belonging and derive positive self-esteem from their group membership. This, in turn, influences their attitudes, behaviour and performance within the organization. Researches drawing on this Theory have examined the effects of group identification based on diversity dimensions, revealing its impact on employee motivation, commitment, job satisfaction and performance (Sahabuddin et al., 2023; Tajeddin et al., 2023). Workforce diversity involves recognizing, understanding, accepting, valuing and celebrating differences among individuals in terms of age, class, ethnicity, gender, physical and mental ability, race sexual orientation, spiritual practice and socioeconomic status (Esty et al., 1995). Embracing diversity in the workplace benefits both employees and employer as fostering respect for individual differences, enhances performance or productivity and can impact marketing, recruitment, innovation and organizational reputation while mitigating the risk of legal issues, Esty et al. added. Diversity encompasses the different and multifaceted characteristics found in animate and inanimate realms, encompassing visible and invisible traits (Akinnusi et al., 2017). It involves a range of conscious behaviour that necessitates a comprehensive understanding and appreciation of individuals, cultures and the environment, along with valuing differences, traits and experiences. Human resources are important assets in any organization and properly managing them could lead to attainment of organizational objectives alongside employee development and satisfaction. When an organization employs human resources having different age, gender, perception, attitudes, ethnicity, religion and region, to cite but a few examples and are properly managed, then there is a likelihood for improved performance or productivity

Objectives of the study

The objectives of the study are to

- Identify the diversity dimensions of the workforce in USL libraries;
- Explore whether or not there is a policy on workforce diversity in USL libraries;
- Investigate the impact which adopting workforce diversity can have on employee performance in USL libraries.

Research questions

In order to achieve the above study objectives the following research questions were asked:

- What diversity measurement dimensions that are considered by library management workforce performance in USL libraries?
- Is there a policy on workforce diversity in USL libraries?
- What impact can workforce diversity have on employee performance in USL libraries?

Delimitation of the study

Workforce diversity is the degree of homogeneity among employees that is precisely limited to specific cultural attributes such as age, class, gender, ethnicity, physical and mental ability, race, economic status, educational background, marital status, union affiliation, work content morale, beliefs and interests as well as work experience. However, this study is limited to age, gender, educational background, work experience, religion, ethnicity and attitude towards work diversities. This is because workforce because is broad and encompasses a wide range of concepts which cannot be explored comprehensively at a given go since research is only based on a narrow phase of knowledge. The study is further limited in terms of the population studied as it only dealt with employees in the constituent USL libraries. There is also delimitation in terms of the research instruments used; a questionnaire was used as main research instrument complemented by covert observation.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The population of the study was drawn from employees in the three constituent campuses' libraries and a purposive sampling method was used to collect data. A questionnaire was used to collect data from employees. The three campuses' libraries have a total workforce of sixty (60) to whom the questionnaire was administered and fifty-eight (58) returned their questionnaires in usable form. The questionnaire sought information on staff demographics; the degree of relatedness of workforce dimensions i.e. age, gender, education, experience, religion, ethnicity, nationality, and attitude with respect to work; the availability of a policy on workforce diversity; and the impact which workforce diversity can have on employee performance in their respective libraries. Data were analyzed using percentages and were presented in tabular form.

Analysis and discussion

Research Question 1: What diversity measurement dimensions that are considered by library management workforce performance?

Workforce diversity means similarities and differences among employees in terms of age, gender, education, experience, religion, cultural background, physical abilities, race, ethnicity, staff attitude to work and sexual orientation. No two people are alike. People are different not only in terms of gender, culture, race, and psychological characteristics but also in their perspectives and prejudices. Diversity makes the workforce heterogeneous provided it is properly managed. In this study the workforce researched on were limited to age, gender, education background, work experience, staff attitude, religion and ethnicity as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. Diversity measurement dimensions considered by library management

Dimension	Frequency	Percentage
Age	56	96.6
Gender	56	96.6
Education	56	96.6
Work experience	56	96.6
Staff attitude	56	96.6
Religion	28	48.3
Ethnicity	20	34.4

From Table 1 it is evident that a significant 96.6% of participants indicated that age, gender, education, work experience, and staff attitude respectively were indicated as diversity measurement dimensions considered by management in USL libraries; 48.3 % indicated religion and a minority 34.4% indicated ethnicity as diversity measurement dimensions considered by USL library management.

Age diversity: Age diversity dimension has been a significant area of research and many studies have examined its impact on employee performance. For instance, Odhiambo (2018) investigated the relationship between age diversity and employee performance in public universities in Western Kenya and found out that age diversity positively influenced employee performance, as it brought together a range of experience, perspectives and skills. Similarly, Mekasha (2020) conducted a study on Save the Children in Ethiopia and found out that age diversity has a positive effect on employee performance. These studies concluded that age diversity can enhance problem-solving, decision-making, and knowledge sharing within organizations thereby contributing to improved performance. In contrast Joseph (2014) posited that age-based value inequalities have a negative effect on work productivity. He cited that in-group favouritism and out-group stereotyping and prejudice can hinder cooperation, cohesion and communication between employees of different ages in an organization that could result to confrontation. Szatmari (2021), after conducting a survey and utilized literature concluded that there was negative relationship between age diversity and performance.

Gender diversity: The impact of gender diversity performance has been widely explored in the literature. Zhuwao et al. (2019) investigated the relationship between gender and diversity and employee performance in South African higher education. The study revealed a positive association and employee performance, highlighting the diverse perspectives, skills and insights that gender diverse teams bring to the workplace. Bennouri et al. (2018) conducted a study on the negative impact of gender diversity in 394 French firms and found out that gender diversity proved to negatively significantly affect market-based performance.

Education diversity: This has been recognized as an asset in organizations contributing to employee performance. Mugwe and Moses (2020) focused on Information Technology firms in Nairobi County and found out that educational diversity was associated with enhanced organizational performance. The study highlighted the diverse knowledge, skills and perspectives that employees with different educational background bring to the workplace. By leveraging educational diversity, organizations tap a wide range of expertise and foster a culture of continuous learning, leading to improved performance.

Work experience diversity: This is about the length of experience of employees in a given occupation. It deals with the differences in knowledge, skills and abilities gained by employees in a specific career line. Most researchers revealed that there is a positive relationship between employee experience and job performance (Kotur and Anbazhagan, 2014).

Attitude diversity: This is about the contribution and different feelings, beliefs and attachment to one's job (Jones, 2016). According to Shore et al. (2009) positive job attitudes help to predict constructive behavior whereas negative job attitudes help to predict undesirable behavior.

Religion diversity: The influence of religious diversity on employee performance has received relatively less attention in the literature. Ali et al. (2021) examined the role of religious diversity on employee performance and found a positive association between the two. They suggested that embracing religious diversity can contribute to a more inclusive and harmonious work environment, fostering employee satisfaction and engagement and ultimately organizational performance.

Ethnicity diversity: This has been recognized as an important dimension of workforce diversity implications for employees. Muange and Kiptoo (2020) examined selected universities in Kenya and found a positive relationship between ethnic diversity and employee performance. The positive impact of ethnic diversity on employee performance can be attributed to the varied cultural perspectives, experience and knowledge that diverse workforce bring to the organization. By embracing ethnic diversity organizations can tap into a rich pool of ideas and approaches leading to enhanced teamwork, creativity and problem-solving abilities.

Research Question 2: Is there a policy on workforce diversity in USL libraries?

An organization's success and competitiveness depends upon its ability to embrace diversity and realize the benefits. Organizations that promote and achieve an efficient diverse workplace will attract and retain quality employees and increase customers' loyalty. This diversity is viewed as positive employee performance. Thus, the need for the provision of a policy on workforce diversity in organizations. From Table 2 it is crystal clear that 25.9 % affirmed that there is a policy on workforce diversity in USL libraries while a significant 74.1 % indicated that there is no policy on workforce diversity in the aforesaid libraries.

Table 2. Availability of workforce diversity policy in USL libraries

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	15	25.9
No	43	74.1

Participants who indicated the unavailability of a policy on workforce may not be far from the truth as the USL Administrative and Human Resources Policy document only notes that "in dealing with staff/employees the USL will not discriminate on the grounds of race, gender, tribe, age, colour, religion, origin and physical disability"(p.10). The USL does not have any comprehensive policy document on workforce diversity like in other organizations.

Table 3. Workforce diversity and its anticipated impact on employee performance

Dimension	Frequency	Percentage
Age	28	48.2
Gender	35	60.3
Education	52	89.6
Work experience	52	89.6
Attitude	40	68.9
Religion	15	25.8
Ethnicity	10	17.2

The modern workforce is far more varied in its composition than it has been previously. The success of any organization depends on its employees or workforce because they carry out its operations. For organizations to be successful they must have a great view and commitment to ensure that workforce is part of their day-to-day operations. In today's world workforce diversity is perceived as and it has become an interesting issue at the workplace and market. Organizations that promote an efficient diverse workforce will attract and retain quality employees and will increase customer loyalty. In order to create an inclusive workforce there is need for organizations to ensure that everyone feels valued and respected for who they are. This includes recognizing and celebrating people's diverse perspectives and experiences. Since the future of work requires a long-term commitment to create a welcoming environment there is need for the provision of a policy on workforce diversity in organizations which will guide the creation of an inclusive culture in the workplace wherein everyone will feel respected, valued and

included. This policy should hover around access, integration, support, development, success enablement and accessing impact.

Research 3: What impact can workforce diversity have on employee performance in USL libraries?

Employee performance refers to the actions and accomplishments of employees as they carry out their signed duties in line with organizational policies, standards and expectations. It is influenced by factors such as ability, effort and task perception, which contribute to efficiency and effectiveness of tasks, ultimately enhancing organizational productivity and yielding high-quality outcomes (Hee et al., 2019). From Table 3 it is evident that a significant majority of 89.6% indicated that education and work experience diversity dimensions respectively can have impact on employee performance; 68.9% indicated attitude dimension can have impact on employee performance; 60.3% indicated gender dimension can have impact on employee performance; 48.2% indicated age dimension can have impact on employee performance while 25.8% and 17.2% religion and ethnicity dimensions respectively can have impact on employee performance in USL libraries. Numerous studies have been conducted on how workforce diversity dimensions such as age, gender, educational qualifications, experience and attitude towards work, religion and ethnicity such as those conducted by Fredetta and Berstein (2019), Vairavan and Zhang (2020) and Orazalin and Badaulefor (2020). These studies found out that workforce dimensions do have impact on employee performance. Backes-Gellner and Veen (2009) conducted a study on 18,000 firms and 2,000,000 employees and found out that workforce dimensions can positively impact companies in terms of creativity and innovation which contribute to companies' performance. Odhiambi's (2014) study arrived at the same conclusion that workforce dimensions are positively and significantly related to employee performance. Similarly Dokko, Wilk and Rothban (2009) also found out that there is a positive relationship between diversity dimensions and employee performance. According to them the benefits of diversity in the workforce will:

- Increase productivity and better results;
- Ensure greater innovation and creativity;
- Promote branding; and
- Facilitate workforce retention.

Saxena (2014) asserted that an organization's success and competitiveness depends on its ability to embrace diversity and realize the benefits. When organizations actively assess their handling of workforce diversity issues, develop diversity plans, multiple benefits can be derived such as:

- It stimulates innovation and productivity and creates a world class culture that can outperform the competition.
- Employing a diverse workforce can supply a greater variety of solutions to problems in service, sourcing and allocation of resources.
- Employees from diverse backgrounds bring individual talents and experiences in suggesting ideas that are flexible in adapting fluctuating markets and customer demands.
- A diverse collection of skills and experiences allows a company to provide service to customers in a global basis.
- A diverse workforce that feels comfortable communicating varying points of view provides a larger pool of ideas and experiences (p.83).

CONCLUSION

Contemporary society is getting multifaceted and diverse individuals' identities are formed by gender, age, religion, sexual orientation, physical ability, ethnicity, race, educational background, nationality and generational cohort. This study revealed that age, educational qualifications and work experience are of significant value as opposed

to gender, staff attitude, religion and ethnicity. That although the afore-mentioned dimensions are visibly used by the constituent campuses' library management but there is no clearly stated policy on workforce diversity in USL libraries like in other academic institutions; mention is barely made of these diversity dimensions in the USL Administration and Human resources Policy document. That the successful application of the dimensions of age, education, employee experience and to a certain extent employee attitude can impact employee performance in their respective USL libraries. Saxena (2014) asserted that no two humans are alike; that people are different not only in gender, culture, race, social and psychological characteristics but also in their perspectives and prejudices. Because of these factors there is need for managers to apply workforce diversity in their respective workplaces to ensure that everyone feels valued and respected for who they are. Anon (2024) stated that for managers to effectively promote workforce diversity they should adopt the following steps:

- Building an inclusive culture and upholding its support workforce diversity and inclusivity;
- Setting goals focusing on diversity;
- Making workforce diversity team effort i.e. involving all employees' effort to build workforce diversity;
- Shaping and reshaping the hiring process to remove any biases or barriers that may prevent diverse candidates from being considered.
- Proactively seeking out and attracting diverse talents and encouraging diversity.

Rafaqat et al. (2022) in their review of the impact of diversity on organizations' performance postulated that applying this principle can boost their efficiency and effectiveness. They furthered that employee performance is crucial to the survival and profitability of modern organizations due to market rivalry for customers, inputs and capital. However, they cautioned that even though diversity could have benefits and advantages in respect of innovation and performance, but there is need for a balanced approach in terms of employee diversity because it may lead to negative impacts, if the diversity exceeds a certain level. Therefore, organizations should opt for strategies to manage the diverse workforce. In a similar vein Patrick and Kumar (2012) asserted that diverse workforces are critical in organizations because they better represent a range of customers by recognizing the demands of the environment. For them effective diversity management will result to higher staff performance. Brimhall et al. (2017) stated that workforce diversity can be both an opportunity and a challenge for an organization but if managed well it will have a greater impact on overall productivity. Saxena (2014) examined the impact of employee diversity on organization's productivity and concluded that diversity in the workplace is a strength for any organization but stereotypes about race, religion and other factors persist, making diversity a challenge. Diversity, she maintained, can increase employee performance if treated correctly. Conclusively this study examined workforce diversity and the impact it can have on employee performance in USL libraries. The findings revealed that gender, education, work experience and staff attitude dimensions can significantly influence employee performance emphasizing the importance of embracing generational differences and fostering a learning culture within USL libraries. The insignificance of age, religion and ethnicity suggest that discriminatory practices should not be encouraged by USL library managers. Therefore, USL libraries' managers should strive to create an inclusive and equitable workforce where all employees are treated fairly regardless of their gender, religion or ethnicity affiliations.

Recommendations

After critically examining the literature, analyzing and discussing data on workforce diversity and the impact it might have on staff performance in USL libraries if adopted the following recommendations are worthy of note:

Workforce diversity can enhance innovation and organizational success; therefore, USL libraries' managers should opt for such strategies in managing their diverse workforce. The study did not include other dimensions such as sexual orientation and capabilities, region, communication and synergy. These dimensions can be considered in future studies especially in the fields of Human Resource Management and Library and Information Management. Also a significant majority of participants indicated that USL does not have a policy on workforce diversity. Noting the importance of these diversity measurement dimensions in modern times management, there is need for USL Administration to provide a policy on workforce diversity focusing on access, integration, support, development, impact and enabling staff success rather than just mentioning it in passing in their Administrative and Human Resources Policy document. In order to create an inclusive workforce USL libraries' managers should ensure that every staff feels valued and respected for who they are. This includes recognizing and celebrating employees, diverse perspectives and experiences. It is further recommended that more studies be done on workforce diversity management and practices in USL libraries to effectively manage employee diversity.

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