



DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION INITIATIVES AND ORGANIZATIONAL PERFORMANCE OF PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES IN RIVERS STATE

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Abstract: *The study investigates diversity and inclusion initiatives and organizational performance of public universities in Rivers State. The predictor variable (diversity and inclusion initiatives) was measured with inclusive workplace culture and equitable policies and practices, while the criterion variable was measured with employee engagement and productivity and career growth and professional development. A sample size of 346 drawn from a population of 3,475 academic staff of the 3 public universities in Rivers State. A simple random sampling technique was used. Data was collected through structured questionnaires, and Spearman's rank correlation coefficient was employed to analyze the relationship among the variables. The findings indicated a significant positive relationship between diversity and inclusion initiatives dimensions and organizational performance. The study concludes that diversity and inclusion initiatives relate with organizational performance of public universities in Rivers State. The study recommends enhancing inclusive workplace culture and equitable policies and practices for improved organizational performance.*

Keywords: *Diversity and Inclusion Initiatives, Inclusive Workplace Culture, Equitable Policies and Practices, Organizational Performance*

INTRODUCTION

Organizational performance serves as a benchmark for organizational effectiveness, efficiency, and overall impact (Al-Shaiba, et al, 2019). High organizational performance in universities has to do with enhancing fulfillment of primary mission of providing quality education, conducting significant research, and serving the communities. Educational excellence is a primary outcome of strong organizational performance, leading to improved teaching methodologies, better learning outcomes, and enhanced student experiences. It ensures that universities maintain high academic standards and continuously innovate their curricula to meet the evolving needs of society (Eromafuru, et al., 2023; Ruben, 2007). Furthermore, public universities are hubs for research and innovation. Strong organizational performance supports robust research programs, attracts funding, and fosters a culture of inquiry

and discovery, which contributes to the advancement of knowledge and technology (Valavanidis & Vlachogianni, 2016).

Effective public universities actively engage with their communities, addressing local needs and contributing to social and economic development. High performance in this area strengthens community ties, enhances the university's reputation, and fulfills its social responsibilities (Guo, 2024). Additionally, efficient use of resources, including financial, human, and physical assets, is vital for the sustainability of public universities. High organizational performance ensures optimal allocation and utilization of resources, reducing waste and improving overall operational efficiency (Ramachandran, 2023). Organizational performance also impacts the morale, engagement, and retention of faculty and staff. Universities that perform well create supportive work environments, offer career development opportunities, and maintain high levels of job satisfaction among their employees.

Diversity and inclusion (D&I) initiatives play a significant role in shaping the organizational performance (Onuorah, 2024). These initiatives foster a culture of respect, equity, and inclusion, which positively impacts various aspects of university operations. A diverse workforce brings a variety of perspectives, experiences, and ideas, fueling creativity and innovation. Inclusive environments encourage open dialogue and collaboration, leading to novel solutions and approaches in teaching, research, and administration (O'Donovan, 2018). Moreover, D&I initiatives create a sense of belonging and support among employees, boosting their engagement and productivity. When staff members feel valued and included, they are more motivated to contribute to goals and perform at their best (Ugwu, 2019). Public universities in Rivers State, Nigeria, like their counterparts globally, are recognizing the critical role that D&I initiatives play in enhancing organizational performance. This performance can be evaluated through various metrics, including staff engagement, productivity, retention, and professional development. As public institutions that serve diverse populations, these universities must implement comprehensive D&I strategies to ensure they are accessible and welcoming to all members of their communities.

Universities that prioritize D&I are more attractive to top talent from diverse backgrounds. Effective D&I strategies enhance reputation and aid in the recruitment and retention of skilled and dedicated employee (Oruebo and David-Alonge, 2024). Diverse and inclusive teams make better decisions by considering a wider range of perspectives and minimizing groupthink, leading to more comprehensive and effective policies, programs, and strategies within the university (Oruebo and David-Alonge, 2024). Commitment to D&I enhances the university's reputation among students, staff, and the broader community. It demonstrates the university's dedication to social justice, equity, and excellence, which can lead to increased support, funding, and partnerships.

Despite several studies on D&I initiatives (Ugwu, 2019; Oruebo and David-Alonge, 2024; O'Donovan, 2018 and organizational performance respectively Eromafuru, et al., 2023; Valavanidis & Vlachogianni, 2016; Ruben, 2007; Al-Shaiba, et al, 2019), the dearth of empirical study on D& I initiatives on Public Universities in Rivers State, motivate this study. This study will bridge the observed gap in study, providing a thorough analysis of the impact of diversity and inclusion (D&I) initiatives on organizational performance in public universities in Rivers State. The goal is to

understand how these initiatives influence various performance metrics, such as academic excellence, staff retention, student satisfaction, and overall institutional effectiveness.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Previous studies have shown that creating an inclusive workplace culture is crucial for the success of D&I initiatives (Ugwu, 2019; O'Donovan, 2018; Oruebo & David-Alonge, 2024). However, It remains unclear to what extent public universities in Rivers State have successfully fostered an environment where all individuals feel valued and respected. Public universities face several challenges in organizational performance stemming from the implementation of diversity and inclusion (D&I) initiatives. One significant issue is the potential for resistance to change among staff and faculty members. When D&I initiatives are introduced, some individuals often feel threatened by the shifts in organizational culture and practices (Okatta et al., 2024).). This resistance often manifests in various ways, including passive non-compliance, active opposition, or subtle undermining of D&I efforts, all of which can hinder the overall effectiveness of these initiatives.

Public universities also experience administrative inefficiencies, resource constraints, and challenges in adapting to technological advancements, all of which complicate the implementation of diversity and inclusion (D&I) initiatives. Bureaucratic delays and tight budgets hinder decision-making and limit the allocation of resources necessary for effective D&I programs (Sharma & Cotton, 2023).). These financial and administrative obstacles often slow the adoption of inclusive hiring practices, equitable policies, and necessary training programs, ultimately affecting the institution's ability to foster a truly inclusive environment. Additionally, resistance to technological changes can impede the development of platforms and tools needed to support D&I initiatives, further limiting their impact and effectiveness (MoldStud, 2024).

D&I initiatives often requires implementation of equitable policies and practice (Daviau, 2024), which often brings substantial changes to existing policies and practices. Some neglect revising hiring practices to ensure fairness and inclusivity, they often fail to develop new evaluation criteria, and the implementation of bias mitigation strategies is also a challenge. Changes in policies are often resource-intensive and time-consuming, potentially diverting attention and resources away from other critical areas of operations, thereby impacting overall organizational performance. Furthermore, D&I initiatives sometimes lead to unintentional divisions (Shijo, 2024; Onuorah, 2024). When efforts to promote diversity and inclusion are not effectively communicated or perceived as favouring certain groups over others, it can create feelings of exclusion or resentment among those who do not see themselves as beneficiaries of these initiatives. This perception often negatively impacts team cohesion, collaboration, and overall morale, which are essential components of a productive and harmonious academic environment (Oruebo & David-Alonge, 2024). This Research will provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of D&I efforts in these institutions. Addressing these issues is critical for understanding and enhancing the role of D&I initiatives in improving organizational performance in public universities in Rivers State.

AIM AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The aim of the study is to investigate the influence of D& I initiatives on organizational Performance of Public Universities in Rivers State. The specific objectives is to:

1. Determine the influence of inclusive workplace culture on employee engagement and productivity of Public Universities in Rivers State
2. examine the influence of inclusive workplace culture on career growth and professional development of Public Universities in Rivers State
3. Assess the influence of equitable policies and practices on employee engagement and productivity of Public Universities in Rivers State
4. Investigate the influence of equitable policies and practices on career growth and professional development of Public Universities in Rivers State

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How does inclusive workplace culture relate with employee engagement and productivity of Public Universities in Rivers State?
2. How does inclusive workplace culture relate with career growth and professional development of Public Universities in Rivers State?
3. How does equitable policies and practices relate with employee engagement and productivity of Public Universities in Rivers State?
4. How does equitable policies and practices relate with career growth and professional development of Public Universities in Rivers State?

RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

- Ho₁: There is no significant association between inclusive workplace culture and employee engagement and productivity of Public Universities in Rivers State
- Ho₂: There is no significant association between inclusive workplace culture on career growth and professional development of Public Universities in Rivers State
- Ho₃: There is no significant association between equitable policies and practices on employee engagement and productivity of Public Universities in Rivers State
- Ho₄: There is no significant association between equitable policies and practices on career growth and professional development of Public Universities in Rivers State

SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY (SIT)

Social Identity Theory (SIT), developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner in the 1970s, posits that individuals derive self-esteem from their group memberships (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This theory is relevant to diversity and inclusion (D&I) initiatives in public universities, as it emphasizes creating an inclusive environment where all members feel valued. By addressing ingroup and outgroup dynamics, D&I initiatives can reduce biases and promote a sense of belonging, enhancing cooperation, morale, and overall productivity among faculty, staff, and students. Implementing D&I initiatives based on SIT principles can significantly improve organizational performance in public universities. A strong leadership commitment to fostering inclusion can create a cohesive and supportive community, leading to better decision-making, innovation, and problem-solving abilities. This inclusive culture can enhance the university's financial performance and competitive edge, ultimately helping the institution achieve its educational goals more effectively.

DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION INITIATIVES

Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) initiatives are organizational efforts and policies designed to create a more equitable and inclusive workplace by acknowledging and valuing

diverse backgrounds, perspectives, and identities. These initiatives aim to ensure that all individuals, regardless of their race, gender, age, religion, disability, or sexual orientation, feel respected, valued, and integrated into the organizational culture (Shore et al., 2018). D&I initiatives often include measures such as bias training, diverse hiring practices, mentorship programs, and the establishment of employee resource groups, all aimed at fostering a supportive and inclusive environment (Roberson, 2019).

The importance of D&I initiatives is increasingly recognized in both academic and professional settings, as research indicates that they contribute to improved organizational performance and innovation. A diverse workforce brings a variety of perspectives that can enhance problem-solving and creativity, leading to better decision-making and outcomes (Page, 2007). Additionally, inclusive workplaces tend to have higher levels of employee engagement, satisfaction, and retention, which are crucial for organizational success (Roberson, 2019). As such, implementing effective D&I initiatives is essential for organizations seeking to thrive in today's diverse and competitive marketplace. Implementing D&I initiatives helps universities comply with legal and regulatory requirements related to equal opportunity and anti-discrimination. It also mitigates risks associated with workplace conflicts, discrimination lawsuits, and reputational damage.

Inclusive Workplace Culture

An inclusive workplace culture is one where all employees feel valued, respected, and empowered to contribute to their fullest potential, regardless of their diverse backgrounds. This culture is built on principles of fairness, respect, and open communication, ensuring that every individual's unique contributions are recognized and appreciated (Roberson, 2019). In an inclusive culture, organizations actively work to remove barriers to participation and success, providing equal opportunities for growth and development. This environment fosters a sense of belonging and psychological safety, which can lead to higher levels of employee engagement, satisfaction, and retention (Nishii, 2013).

Creating an inclusive workplace culture involves ongoing efforts and commitment from all levels of the organization, particularly leadership. Leaders play a crucial role in modeling inclusive behaviors, setting clear expectations, and holding everyone accountable for maintaining these standards (Shore et al., 2018). Training programs focused on diversity awareness and inclusive practices, along with initiatives such as employee resource groups and mentorship programs, are instrumental in promoting inclusivity. Research has shown that companies with inclusive cultures are more innovative, perform better financially, and are more attractive to top talent (Hunt, Layton, & Prince, 2015).

Equitable Policies and Practices

Equitable policies and practices are essential for fostering fairness and justice within an organization. These policies ensure that all employees have access to the same opportunities, resources, and support, regardless of their background or personal characteristics (Roberson, 2019). Equitable practices involve systematically identifying and addressing disparities in areas such as hiring, promotions, pay, and access to professional development. Thus, implementing policies that promoting

equity, can help organizations mitigate biases and barriers that may otherwise prevent individuals from achieving their full potential.

The development and enforcement of equitable policies require a strategic approach and commitment from organizational leadership. This includes conducting regular audits and assessments to identify gaps and areas for improvement, as well as engaging in transparent communication about goals and progress (Breslin et al., 2017). Additionally, organizations must provide training and resources to managers and employees to ensure that these policies are understood and effectively implemented. Research (Bambang,2024) indicates that organizations with strong equitable practices not only foster a more inclusive and positive work environment but also experience enhanced performance, employee satisfaction, and retention.

ORGANIZATIONAL PERFORMANCE

Performance is an across-the-board indicator which mixes productivity and quality, uniformity and other factors (Ikegwuru & Acee-Eke, 2020). Organizational performance refers to how well an organization achieves its goals and objectives, encompassing various dimensions such as financial results, market share, customer satisfaction, and employee engagement. Effective organizational performance is often the result of a strategic alignment between the company's vision, mission, and operational practices (Richard et al., 2009). High-performing organizations are typically characterized by strong leadership, clear strategic direction, and effective resource management. These organizations also tend to foster a positive organizational culture that supports innovation, adaptability, and continuous improvement (Senge, 2006). By aligning their resources and efforts with their strategic goals, these organizations can maintain competitive advantages and sustain long-term success. Metrics commonly used to measure performance include profitability, return on investment (ROI), and productivity rates. By consistently monitoring these metrics, organizations can identify areas for improvement and implement strategies to enhance overall efficiency and effectiveness.

High organizational performance is not solely dependent on financial outcomes; it also involves creating a supportive environment that fosters innovation and continuous improvement. This includes investing in employee development, maintaining a positive corporate culture, and ensuring robust internal communication channels (Beharry, 2023). Furthermore, research (Hunt, et al., 2015) indicates that organizations prioritizing diversity and inclusion initiatives tend to perform better because they leverage a wider range of perspectives and ideas, leading to improved decision-making and problem-solving capabilities.

Employee Engagement and Productivity

Employee engagement refers to the level of commitment (emotional and psychological commitment) and enthusiasm employees have towards their work, goals and organization. Engaged employees are more likely to be motivated, productive, and loyal, contributing significantly to the organization's success (Mansor, et al.,2023). Factors influencing engagement include job satisfaction, recognition, career development opportunities, and a supportive work environment. Organizations that actively foster engagement typically experience higher levels of innovation, customer satisfaction, and overall performance (Beharry, 2023).

Productivity, closely linked to engagement, measures how efficiently employees accomplish their tasks and contribute to organizational goals. Engaged employees are more productive because they are emotionally invested in their work and willing to go above and beyond their basic job responsibilities (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008). To enhance engagement and productivity, organizations can implement strategies such as providing regular feedback, recognizing achievements, and creating opportunities for professional growth. Studies have shown that organizations with high employee engagement are more likely to achieve better financial results and have lower turnover rates (Gallup, 2013).

Effective organizational performance is not only about achieving immediate goals but also about building capacity for future challenges. This involves investing in technology, developing employee skills, and nurturing a culture of collaboration and accountability (Cameron & Quinn, 2011). Performance measurement systems, such as the Balanced Scorecard, help organizations track progress and identify areas for improvement. Furthermore, high-performing organizations are proactive in addressing external changes and uncertainties, ensuring they remain resilient and agile in a dynamic business environment (Dyer & Ericksen, 2005).

Career Growth and Professional Development

Career growth and professional development are critical components of employee satisfaction and organizational success. Career growth refers to the progression of an employee's career through promotions, increased responsibilities, and opportunities to acquire new skills (Noe, 2010). Professional development, on the other hand, involves continuous learning and skill enhancement through training programs, workshops, and other educational opportunities. Organizations that invest in the career growth and professional development of their employees often benefit from higher retention rates and a more skilled and adaptable workforce (Noe et al., 2014). Providing employees with opportunities to develop their skills and advance their careers helps retain top talent and fosters a culture of continuous learning. Career development initiatives, such as training programs, mentorship, and clear career progression paths, enable employees to enhance their competencies and take on new challenges. This not only benefits individual employees but also strengthens the organization's overall capabilities (Lent & Brown, 2013).

Providing clear career paths and development opportunities can significantly enhance employee motivation and engagement. Employees who see a future within the organization are more likely to be committed and perform at higher levels (Hall, 2002). Moreover, professional development initiatives help employees keep up with industry trends and technological advancements, ensuring the organization remains competitive. Research indicates that organizations that prioritize career growth and professional development tend to have more satisfied employees, better organizational performance, and a stronger ability to attract and retain top talent (Jehanzeb & Bashir, 2013).

Empirical Review

Okatta, et al., (2024) meta-analysis examines the impact of diversity and inclusion (D&I) initiatives on organizational performance. By synthesizing various studies, it reveals that organizations implementing D&I initiatives benefit from increased innovation, better decision-making, and higher employee engagement and

satisfaction. These initiatives create an inclusive environment where diverse employees feel valued, boosting productivity and overall performance. The research highlights the crucial role of leadership commitment in driving D&I success, showing that organizations with strong leadership support for D&I see improved financial performance and a competitive edge. Overall, D&I initiatives significantly enhance organizational performance, helping organizations achieve their goals and thrive in a diverse marketplace.

Mansoret al., (2023). investigate the relationship between employee engagement and organizational performance. A stratified sampling method was used to ensure diverse representation from various groups and levels within the population. The sample consisted of 103 respondents from a private company in Johor. Data analysis was conducted using SPSS software, employing Pearson's correlation analysis and mean analysis to examine the relationships between the independent and dependent variables. The results indicated a significant positive relationship between employee engagement and organizational performance.

Onuorah, O. L. (2024) investigates the management of workplace diversity and the promotion of inclusion within Nigerian public organizations. It explores the concepts of diversity and inclusion across various dimensions, such as race, ethnicity, gender, age, sexual orientation, religion, and socioeconomic status. Theoretical frameworks, including Social Identity Theory (SIT), are utilized to understand the complexities of diversity management, intergroup relations, and identity formation within these organizations. The study identifies several challenges, including cultural differences, religious diversity, gender inequality, the absence of inclusive policies, and resistance to change. However, it also highlights opportunities for growth and success, such as increased creativity, improved problem-solving abilities, and enhanced organizational performance.

Bambang (2024) presents a research framework aimed at understanding the impact of diversity and inclusion on employee retention via job satisfaction. Grounded in existing literature, the theoretical foundation of this research encompasses aspects such as inclusive leadership, quality of work life, work-life balance, leaders' emotional intelligence, and compensation as determinants of job satisfaction. The proposed model suggests that diversity and inclusion positively influence employee retention indirectly by enhancing job satisfaction.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilized a cross-sectional survey design. It was conducted in Nigeria, targeting the 3,475 academic staff members of public universities in Rivers State. The study uses the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) table, to determine a sample size of 346. Data collection was carried out using a structured questionnaire comprising both close-ended and multiple-choice questions. The instrument's validity was confirmed through face and content validity assessments, while its reliability was measured using Cronbach's Alpha, adopting a threshold of 0.7. The data analysis was performed using Spearman's rank correlation coefficient with the aid of SPSS version 25.0.

RESULT

346 questionnaires were distributed, but only 330 (95.4%) copies were returned. 12 (3.5%) are wrongly filled and discarded, while 318 (91.9%) copies of the questionnaire constitute the valid questionnaire. The hypotheses test is undertaken at 95% confidence interval. Hypothesis are rejected when $P < 0.05$ and accepted when $P > 0.05$.

Table 1: Inclusive workplace culture and Organisational performance

		Correlations			
		Inclusive workplace culture	Employee engagement and productivity	Career growth and professional development	
Spearman's rho	Inclusive workplace culture	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.645**	.685**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000	.000
		N	318	318	318
	Employee engagement and productivity	Correlation Coefficient	.645**	1.000	.635**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.	.000
		N	318	318	318
	Career growth and professional development	Correlation Coefficient	.685**	.635**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.
		N	318	318	318

Source: SPSS Output, 2024.

Inclusive Workplace Culture and Employee Engagement and Productivity: The result of the data analysis reveals that at a significant level $p < 0.05$ ($0.000 < 0.05$), $\rho = 0.645^{**}$. The significance level of 0.000 is less than the alpha level of 0.05. The rho value of .645 shows a strong positive correlation between inclusive workplace culture and employee engagement and productivity. Therefore, the null hypothesis (H_{01}) is rejected, and the alternate hypothesis (H_{a1}) is accepted. This proposes that inclusive workplace culture and employee engagement and productivity have a significant positive strong relationship.

Inclusive workplace culture and career growth and professional development: The result of the data analysis reveals that at a significant level $p < 0.05$ ($0.000 < 0.05$), $\rho = 0.685^{**}$. This means that there is a significant connection between inclusive workplace culture and career growth and professional development. The null hypothesis, H_{02} , is rejected and the alternate accepted. This suggests that there is a strong positive relationship between inclusive workplace culture and career growth and professional development.

Table 2: Equitable policies and practices and Organisational performance

		Correlations			
		Equitable Policies and Practices	Employee Engagement and Productivity	Career Growth and Professional Development	
Spearman's rho	Equitable Policies and Practices	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.655**	.622**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000	.000
		N	318	318	318
	Employee Engagement and Productivity	Correlation Coefficient	.655**	1.000	.625**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.	.000
		N	318	318	318
	Career Growth and Professional Development	Correlation Coefficient	.622**	.625**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.
		N	318	318	318

Source: SPSS Output, 2024.

Equitable Policies and Practices and Employee Engagement and Productivity:

The result of the data analysis reveals that at a significant level $p < 0.05$ ($0.000 < 0.05$), $\rho = 0.655^{**}$. The significance level of 0.000 is less than the alpha level of 0.05. A strong positive correlation exists equitable policies and practices and employee engagement and productivity. Therefore, the null hypothesis (H_{03}) is rejected, and the alternate hypothesis (H_{a3}) is accepted. This proposes that equitable policies and practices and employee engagement and productivity have a significant positive relationship.

Equitable Policies and Practices and Career Growth and Professional Development:

The result of the data analysis reveals that at a significant level $p < 0.05$ ($0.000 < 0.05$), $\rho = 0.622^{**}$. This means that there is a significant association between equitable policies and practices and career growth and professional development. The null hypothesis, H_{04} , is rejected and the alternate accepted. This suggests that there is a strong positive relationship between equitable policies and practices and career growth and professional development.

Discussion of findings

The test of hypotheses one and two revealed that inclusive workplace culture is positively correlated with the organisational performance of the public universities in Rivers State. The outcomes of the bivariate analysis show that inclusive workplace culture was associated with the measures of organisational performance (employee engagement and productivity and career growth and professional development), This implies that that fostering an inclusive workplace culture can significantly enhance the overall performance.

The positive correlation between inclusive workplace culture and employee engagement and productivity suggests that when employees feel included and valued, their engagement levels increase, leading to higher productivity, as an inclusive environment likely promotes better communication, collaboration, and a sense of belonging, which can drive employees to contribute more effectively to the

organization's goals. This finding conforms with Shore et al., (2018) and Mansor et al., (2023) that inclusivity within the workplace enhances employee well-being, engagement, and organizational performance.

Inclusive workplace culture is also positively correlated with career growth and professional development. This indicates that inclusivity within the workplace provides employees with more opportunities for growth, learning, and advancement. An inclusive culture likely supports diverse perspectives, mentorship, and equitable access to resources and opportunities, which can help employees to develop their skills and advance in their careers. This aligns with Sabharwal, (2014) whose findings reveal that beyond just diversity management, a focus on inclusivity significantly improves organizational performance metrics like career growth, satisfaction and productivity.

The results of testing hypotheses three and four showed a positive correlation between equitable policies and organisational performance. The bivariate analysis's results indicate that equitable policies and practices was linked to organisational performance metrics, such as employee engagement and productivity and career growth and professional development. This suggests that implementing equitable policies can significantly enhance the organizational performance of public universities in Rivers State. The positive correlation identified in the bivariate analysis indicates that when universities adopt equitable policies and practices, they experience improvements in key performance metrics such as employee engagement and productivity, as well as career growth and professional development opportunities. This conform with Groeneveld, and Verbeek, (2012). that implementation of diversity and equity policies in public sector organizations, has a positive impact on organizational performance. It also aligns with Onuorah (2024) that workplace diversity and the promotion of inclusion relates with organizational performance.

By drawing on this empirical evidence, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how equitable policies can enhance organizational performance. It also emphasizes the importance of implementing such policies to foster employee engagement, productivity, and career development. Future research can build on these insights to further explore the mechanisms through which equity and inclusion drive organizational success, offering practical guidance for institutions aiming to improve their performance through equitable practices.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to evaluate the impact of diversity and inclusion (D&I) initiatives on the organizational performance of public universities in Rivers State, focusing on four specific objectives. The findings have significant implications for enhancing employee engagement, productivity, and career development within these institutions. The influence of an inclusive workplace culture on employee engagement and productivity was evident. The results reveal a positive correlation between an inclusive workplace culture and employee engagement and productivity. When employees feel valued and included, they are more likely to be engaged in their work and exhibit higher levels of productivity. This underscores the importance of fostering an inclusive environment where all employees feel respected and part of the team.

The study found that an inclusive workplace culture positively impacts career growth and professional development. Inclusive practices provide equal opportunities for all employees to advance their careers and develop professionally. This not only enhances individual career trajectories but also contributes to the overall talent development within the university. The analysis also indicates that equitable policies and practices are significantly linked to employee engagement and productivity. Equitable policies ensure fairness and equal treatment, which in turn motivates employees to engage more deeply with their work and perform at higher levels. This highlights the need for public universities to implement and maintain equitable practices to achieve better organizational performance. Lastly, the findings show a positive correlation between equitable policies and career growth and professional development. When universities adopt and uphold equitable practices, they create an environment that supports the career aspirations and professional development of all employees. This fosters a culture of continuous learning and growth, which is essential for the long-term success of the institution.

The alignment of these findings with existing literature and theories not only reinforces their validity but also provides a robust foundation for future research and practice in the field of D&I. Public universities in Rivers State and similar institutions can benefit from these insights by adopting and strengthening inclusive and equitable practices. Future research could explore the specific mechanisms through which these practices influence organizational performance, offering deeper insights and practical guidance for enhancing D&I initiatives. The study demonstrates that fostering an inclusive workplace culture and implementing equitable policies significantly enhance employee engagement, productivity, and career development in public universities in Rivers State. These initiatives are essential for building a motivated, productive, and professionally satisfied workforce, ultimately contributing to the overall success and competitiveness of these institutions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are proposed to the public universities:

1. Conduct regular training sessions to educate employees and management on the importance of inclusivity and how to foster an inclusive environment, establish groups that provide support and networking opportunities for employees from diverse backgrounds and Establish metrics to measure the effectiveness of D&I initiatives and hold leaders accountable for progress in these areas
2. Encourage leadership styles that emphasize empathy, active listening, and valuing diverse perspectives, ensure that university leadership is committed to D&I initiatives and actively participates in and supports these efforts and use employee surveys to gather feedback on the inclusivity of the workplace culture and identify areas for improvement.
3. Develop programs that connect employees with mentors and sponsors to guide their career development and provide growth opportunities and clearly outline career paths and advancement criteria to ensure that all employees understand how to progress within the organization.

4. Ensure all employees have equal access to professional development resources, workshops, and training programs, implement talent management practices that recognize and nurture potential in all employees, regardless of their background and foster a culture of continuous improvement by regularly assessing the impact of D&I initiatives and making necessary adjustments
5. Adopt transparent and unbiased recruitment and promotion processes to ensure fairness and equity and implement recognition and reward systems that fairly acknowledge and celebrate employee contributions and achievements.
6. Conduct periodic reviews of organizational policies to identify and eliminate any potential biases or inequities and establish support programs such as flexible working arrangements, childcare support, and wellness programs to cater to the diverse needs of employees.
7. Enforce policies that guarantee equal opportunities for career advancement and professional growth for all employees, provide regular feedback and developmental support to help employees understand their strengths and areas for improvement and engage with the broader community to promote diversity and inclusion both within and outside the university.
8. Create targeted development programs aimed at supporting the career growth of underrepresented groups within the university and develop individualized professional development plans that take into account the unique strengths and aspirations of each employee.

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