

EMPLOYEE QUALIFICATIONS AND COMPETENCIES VERSUS DEPLOYMENT: EXISTING GAPS IN THE CONTEXT OF MASINDE MULIRO UNIVERSITY OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY (MMUST), KENYA

¹Beatrice BARASA, Annette W. OKOTH², Selline OOKO³, Fridah NJERU⁴, Judith
DIPONDO⁵, Jairus OWUNZA⁶

^{1,2,3,4,5,6} Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology

¹bbarasa@mmust.ac.ke, ²aokoth@mmust.ac.ke, ³selline.ooko@mmust.ac.ke,

⁴jowunza@mmust.ac.ke, ⁵fnjeru@mmust.ac.ke, ⁶jdipondo@mmust.ac.ke

Corresponding Author's email: aokoth@mmust.ac.ke

Abstract

Staff competency is a key factor in ensuring an organization performs and delivers on her mandates. Both professional and academic are important indicators of competency and it evolves over time in line with presenting scenarios. A mismatch between staff competencies and deployment creates apathy towards work which greatly compromises performance. At Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology for instance, in the first half of the financial year 2021/2022, about 3% of employees left the service in search for greener pastures elsewhere. This was largely due to job dissatisfaction arising from improper deployment among other reasons. This study was conducted to establish the relationship between staff qualifications and competencies vis-à-vis deployment and the extent to which this relationship affected staff performance. A Mixed Methods Research Design, allowing a blend of both quantitative and qualitative paradigms was employed. A cross-sectional design was adopted as the study targeted a cross-section of staff across all cadres. Results show that while a majority of staff are qualified for the various assignments they are assigned to perform, a small proportion do not have the requisite skills. This could be explained by the fact that the University has not fully operationalized her HR manual and therefore the machinery for measuring staff performance is weak and needs improvement. Further, it is also evident that apart from academic qualifications, professional training is equally vital. There is therefore need for continuous professional training which should equip staff with the most current skills needed for effective delivery of services.

Key Words: Competency, Qualification, Deployment, Staff Performance

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Introduction

Competency is the capability, ability or an underlying characteristic of an individual which is casually related to effective or superior performance (Boyatzis, 2007). The concept of competence is used to refer to applied knowledge and skills, performance delivery and the behaviors required in getting things done very well (Armstrong & Baron, 1995). Competency depends on

qualifications, both professional and academic, possessed by an employee and also evolves over time in line with presenting scenarios. According to Wright & Geroy (2001), employee competencies change through effective training programmes. Routine training not only improves the overall performance of employees but also enhances their knowledge, skills and attitudes (Wright & Geroy, 2001). This contributes to superior organizational performance. In addition, staff complaints, absenteeism and turnover can be greatly reduced when employees are well trained. This enables them to experience the direct satisfaction associated with the sense of achievement and the knowledge that they are developing their inherent capabilities (Pigors & Myers, 1989). If there is a mismatch between staff competencies and deployment, staff usually develop apathy towards work which greatly compromises performance. Due to the aforementioned, this study was done to establish the relationship between staff qualifications, competencies and their deployment at Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology, (MMUST).

Statement of the Problem

At Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology (MMUST), human resources consist of both academic and non-academic staff. The MMUST HR Manual clearly stipulates the procedure for recruitment of both academic and non-academic staff. As per the outlined procedure, staffing needs originate from heads of cost centers who make requests to University Management Board (UMB) in writing. A cost center is a functional area where specific tasks of management are performed; at MMUST; each functional area is normally allocated a budget to enable the respective heads to implement both short and medium term strategies.

The requests outline job descriptions and specifications together with the requisite professional qualifications, skills and competencies. UMB in liaison with the University Council will upon receipt of these requests, evaluate and either approve or reject, in line with the approved five-year manpower plan (Staff Establishment). Once approved, the Registrar Administration who is in charge of Human Resource Management sends out an advertisement to the public requesting interested and suitable candidates to apply. Upon receipt of applications and on expiry of the deadline, shortlisting committees are constituted by the Registrar Administration to evaluate and rank candidates according to the agreed criteria as per the advertisement. Once done, the shortlisted candidates are invited for interview and those who are successful interviews are appointed and asked to report, once they report, they are taken through an induction process and thereafter deployed.

Both the collective bargaining agreements (CBA) between the University and the various unions representing different categories of staff and the staff training policy specify available opportunities and guidelines for staff development. This has enabled a number of them to pursue further training which they expect management to recognize through regular review resulting into re-deployment or re-designation. This is however not always the case, consequently, there is quite a blaring mismatch between staff competencies and deployment. This scenario has resulted into a number of the affected staff developing apathy towards work which greatly compromises

performance; some eventually seek for avenues to exit in order to seek for more fulfilling and challenging engagements elsewhere.

Up to some level, staff turnover is healthy to an organization but when it goes beyond certain acceptable margins, any organization that values performance has to be worried. For instance, within the first half of the financial period 2021/2022, twenty-five (25) members of staff left the service, out of whom fourteen (14) resigned in search for greener pastures elsewhere largely due to job dissatisfaction arising from improper deployment among other reasons. This represents 3% of the staff in MMUST at the time, translating to an annual turnover of at least 6%, a situation that is not healthy for an organization.

It is against this premise that this study sought to establish the relationship between staff qualifications and competencies vis-à-vis deployment at MMUST. The study also sought to establish the extent to which this relationship affected staff performance.

The objective of the study was to establish the relationship between employee qualifications and competencies vis-à-vis deployment.

Methodology

The study was conducted within Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology which is located in Kakamega County, Western Kenya. The University lies 30km north of the Equator and about 1,500 meters above sea level. MMUST was established through an Act of parliament on 30th December 2006. In 2013, the MMUST Act 2006 was repealed and replaced by a MMUST Charter, 2013, as provided for in the Universities' Act 2013. The University's Mission is to provide excellent University education, training and research through integrating Science, Technology and Innovation into quality programs to suit the needs of a dynamic world. To actualize its Mission, the University is guided by the Vision, 'To be a Premier University in Science, Technology and Innovation'. The charter allows the University to operate through Schools and Directorates. At the time of this study, there were ten (10) Administrative Directorates and eleven (11) Schools among others. The survey targeted both teaching and non-teaching staff deployed in various sections/departments of the University.

The sample size was obtained using the formula for finite populations (Yamane, 1991), cognizant of the entire sampling frame. The sampling techniques included purposive, stratified and simple random sampling. A total sample of four hundred (400) staff was engaged for the study with a response rate of 45.25%. The distribution of the respondents is presented in Table 1

Table 1: Distribution of Respondents

Category	Number of respondents
Teaching	46 (25.41%)
Non-teaching	105 (58.01%)
Key informants (Heads of Departments/Sections)	30 (16.58%)
Total	181 (100.00%)

Source: Office of the Registrar, Administration, MMUST

The study adopted a Mixed Methods Research Design. This enabled the research team to draw on strengths of both qualitative and quantitative paradigms, contributing to better results in terms of quality, scope, in depth and breadth analyses that would not be effectively achieved if one approach was adopted (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). A cross-sectional design was adopted as the study targeted a cross-section of staff across all cadres, from non-teaching to teaching.

Validity and Reliability of Research Instruments

Face and content validity was used to validate the questionnaires under the guidance of the researchers. Face validity entailed assessing the instruments and ensuring that they were relevant, meaningful and appropriate to the respondents (Cohen, Manion & Marrison, 2000). Content validity on the other hand entailed critical and careful examination of the items on the instruments to ascertain that they contained adequate traits expected to measure the domain under study.

To assess reliability, a pilot study was carried out among 40 members of staff from Kibabii University and Kaimosi University College (10% of the sample size), since the prevailing conditions at these institutions were similar to those at MMUST. Cronbach Alpha test was used to test reliability of the data collection tools based on the Likert scale questions. A score of $0.91 \geq 0.7$ for the Cronbach alpha was considered reliable (Kathuri & Pals, 1993, Mugenda & Mugenda, 2003).

Ethical Considerations

This being a study that involved humans, it demanded anonymity of respondents, informed consents, confidentiality, value for human dignity, professional practice and observation of data protection. The aforementioned formed the foundation of the study. Ethical approval to conduct the research was obtained from the Institutional Ethics and Research Committee (IERC), MMUST. Computerized data was pass-word protected.

Data Analysis

The completed questionnaires were coded and data entry done using epidata software. Analysis was done using Stata statistical software version 15. Analysis took both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Quantitative data was analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics including means, standard deviation, frequencies and percentages were used to summarize the findings while inferential statistics (F/t-tests) were used to establish the relationships between staff qualifications, deployment and competencies. Findings on quantitative data were presented in form of tables and charts (pie chart and bar graphs). Qualitative data generated from Key Informant interviews were analyzed thematically and used to triangulate the quantitative findings.

Findings

Deployment of Staff with Regard to Relevant Training/Skills

An assessment was done to determine the relationship between qualifications of staff and the tasks assigned to them in their deployed areas. The guiding question was: “Do you have relevant training hence requisite knowledge, skills and attitudes that enable you perform your current tasks?” The findings are presented in Figure 1.

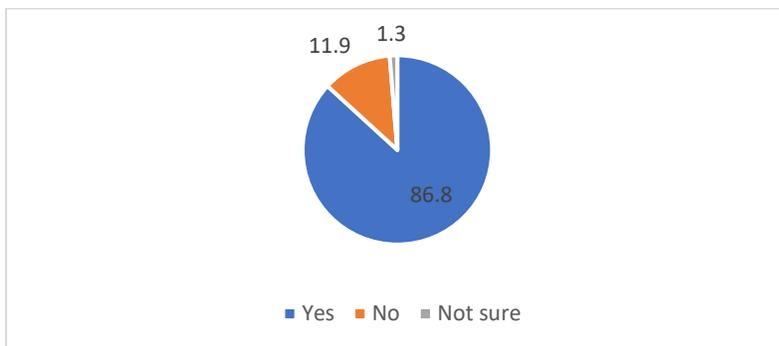


Figure 1: Deployment of Staff with Regard to Relevant Training/Skills

More than three quarters 131(86.8%) reported to have relevant training/skills that enabled them perform tasks in their deployed sections/departments. This implies that 13.2% did not have the requisite skills or were not sure. This communicates a competency gap that MMUST needs to urgently address.

A Key Informant who holds position of a supervisor of some of the staff observed thus: *Whereas a large number of employees have requisite skills, there are a few who require some induction so that they are up to date with the unfolding/emerging scenarios. Such scenarios would include among others, embracing technology particularly regarding the use of ABNO*

applications. (ABNO is a data management system used by MMUST) (A Male key Informant, 54yrs, ICT Department)

When asked if given opportunity to recommend re-deployment/retention of staff under their supervision, most Key Informants indicated that they would retain those who had relevant skills and also competent in their work meaning that whereas a majority of members of staff had the requisite skills, a few of them did not possess the necessary competence. This corroborates the quantitative findings in Figure 1 which indicates that 13.2% of the respondents did not possess the requisite skills and competences to perform their assigned duties.

This further communicates that a number of staff are deployed in areas where they are not endowed with corresponding qualifications and this impacts negatively on their ability to deliver. The respondents' opinion regarding whether they had relevant training and the attendant skills for their deployed sections was also assessed based on staff categories; thus, teaching and non-teaching as highlighted in Table 1. The findings are presented in Table 2

Table 2: Relevant Training/ Skills Per Staff Category

Variable: Staff category	Have relevant training		
	No	Not sure	Yes
Academic (Teaching)	4(8.7%)	1(2.2%)	41(89.1%)
Non-teaching	14(13.3%)	1(1.0%)	90(85.7%)

Majority of respondents in the teaching domain (89.1%) reported that they had relevant training while 8.7% indicated they did not and 2.2% were not sure. This is a pointer to various challenges regarding human resources and the quality of services expected from employees. Teaching, for instance is such that without the relevant skills and knowledge one cannot deliver. Therefore the 8.7% gap is worrying and requires immediate attention. Regarding the non-teaching staff, 85.7% indicated they had requisite skills while 13.3% observed their skills were not relevant and 1.0% was not sure. Whereas this is an indicator of the bulk of employees in the University having the requisite skills, attention should be focussed on the few who indicate otherwise. A verbatim expression from a number of Key Informants from various departments when asked if the staff under their supervision had requisite qualifications that matched their tasks was as follows;

For academic staff, they observed that *most of them have the qualifications.*

However, regarding those supervising non-teaching staff, they indicated that *a number lacked technical skills for the assigned tasks particularly in Secretarial, ICT and marketing among others. Some had even no training in any field and the basis for their employment was just the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE). The University should utilize findings from performance appraisals for continuous improvement.*

In addition, another Key Informant observed, thus; *There was need to enhance the performance appraisal system. This should entail continuous monitoring, evaluation and reporting aspects for enhancing staff qualifications and performance.*

And yet another KI said; *Given an opportunity to recommend re-deployment/retention of staff, I will retain the teaching and recommend re-deployment of some of the non-teaching staff mainly due to incompetence.*

The aforesaid verbatims communicate the value that should be attached to performance appraisal as a monitoring and evaluation tool for continual improvement. This explains why alternative methods of performance evaluation should be considered by organizations.

Basically, an appraisal system should provide feedback to staff. Armstrong (2010) explains that an employee needs to know their performance at work which serves as a motivator. Further, Armstrong (2010) observes that a successful organization is one that meets workers’ need for a good job and a good working environment.

When asked for their opinion, on what they would advise HR regarding their currently deployed sections and hence tasks assigned to them, their responses were as summarized in Figure 2.



Figure 2: Advice to HR Regarding Current Deployment

A good proportion, 43.2% indicated they preferred to be retained in their current work department; 18.2% wished to be transferred to where their skills and knowledge would enable them perform the assigned tasks while 36.5% observed they needed further training to enhance their performance. Most of the Key Informants observed thus;

There was need to correlate the qualifications of staff against the actual tasks they performed in order to recommend deployment that matches the work they do.

And yet another KI observed: Put the right staff to the right job...staff who have qualifications without skills should be re-deployed in the right places or taken through some induction... As expressed by one KI that she possesses a human resource certificate yet she has been deployed in an office that does not deal with Human resource....

And yet another KI observed that there is need for more seminars and induction workshops; conducting of staff needs; reward system to be enhanced; enhance staff capacities; and invite resource persons to update people on emerging issues....staff should be facilitated to attend trainings organized by professional bodies....

And yet another KI noted that I would recommend that more opportunities be offered to staff to attend proficiency courses/workshops that would enable her acquire skills to work in the. legal office...I strongly recommend on job training for a number of staff in my department who have the academic certificates yet don't have any professional skills.

This is an eye opener to the fact that there are some staff who have paper qualifications, say a degree or Diploma but lack applicable skills/professional training. Such staff are a burden to the institution as they cannot deliver on their mandates in their respective departments. The issue of employees wishing to be retained in their current departments also requires careful scrutiny as some may just have settled in their comfort zones without doing much to improve themselves. Emphasis should therefore be laid on professional development informed by effective staff appraisal. Findings from staff annual appraisals should be followed through to ensure staff growth professionally. Professional training not only develops the capabilities of the employees but also sharpens their reasoning abilities and creativity in order to make better decisions, in good time and in a more productive manner (Elnaga and Imran, 2013). Moreover it also enables employees to deal with the students and respond to their complaints in an effective and timely manner (Elnaga and Imran, 2013). It is therefore, necessary that employees are well prepared and grounded for any emerging challenges.

When the aspect of retention, transfer or retraining was considered per category, the responses were as presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Employees Advice to HR Regarding Current Deployment Area by Category

Advice to HR	Teaching	Non-Teaching
✓ Retain me in my current work station	35(51.47%)	29(48.53%)
✓ Transfer me to where my knowledge, skills and attitudes will enable me to perform better	1(3.70%)	26(96.3%)
✓ Train me to empower me with the required skills and knowledge for the current deployment area	9(20.00%)	45(80.00%)
✓ Not sure	1(20.00%)	5(80.00%)

Source of this table? (Moreover, the variables in this table should be clearly stated to know which category it is meant for or coming from. Needless lumping academic and non-teaching responses together.

A higher proportion of the teaching staff (51.4%) prefer remaining in their current stations compared to 48.53 % of the non-teaching staff. Of those who wished to be transferred, there was a big proportion of 96.3% of non-teaching staff against 3.7% of the teaching staff. A further 80% of non-teaching and 20% of teaching staff indicated they required further training to enhance their skills and knowledge for better performance. To a large extent, most of the teaching staff seem comfortable in their assigned tasks but a good proportion of non-teaching staff require attention as far as enhancing their professional training for purposes of empowering them is concerned. Once more this is a pointer to the gaps that exist. The HR Department needs to relook in to their recruitment and appraisal systems. This will enable them focus on emerging trends with the view to keeping up to date with the changing work environments. As expressed by most of the KIs; *The appraisal in this University is used majorly for conformity to ISO requirements rather than for monitoring employee needs.*

A correlational analysis was further done with the view to establishing the relationship between staff competencies and performance. The results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Correlation between Staff Qualifications and Performance by Category (Teaching and Non-Teaching)

	Staff Performance	
	Teaching	Non-teaching
Staff competence	r=0.523	r=0.313
	p<0.001	p=0.001

Results in Table 4 indicate that there is a significant positive correlation between staff qualifications and performance ($r= 0.523$, $p<0.001$ and $r= 0.313$, $p=0.001$) for teaching and non-teaching staff respectively. The correlation is however stronger for teaching staff ($r= 0.523$) compared to non-teaching staff ($r= 0.313$). This implies that the higher the staff qualification scores the higher the performance score and vice versa. The correlation coefficient for the non-teaching staff however, indicates a weak positive correlation. This means that their level of competency requires to be improved for more meaningful performance to be realised. This could probably be done through organized professional training.

However, a verbatim expression from a Key Informant in one of the non-teaching departments when asked to give his views on staff competences was; *Quite a number of the qualifications they have currently are not relevant to the tasks assigned, which has impacted negatively on their performance. Some have secretarial qualifications but have been assigned administrative duties in the department which has a negative bearing on their performance.* This would probably happen if proper attention is not given to policies governing deployment of staff.

Conclusion

In view of the foregoing, it is evident that a good proportion of MMUST staff are qualified for the various assignments that they are assigned to perform. However, a small percentage does not have the requisite skills. This could be explained by the fact that the University has not fully operationalized the HR manual and therefore the machinery for measuring staff performance needs improvement.

Further, it is also evident that academic qualifications cannot be the only parameter for measuring performance, professional training is equally vital. There is need for continuous professional training which should equip staff with the most current skills needed for effective delivery of services. The findings of such assessments will elucidate existing gaps for improvement of employee training and performance. This should be done with the view to improving performance and not fault finding.

One key finding of the study on the employees' opinions regarding their current departments indicated a strong dissatisfaction and a number wished to be transferred because they

felt that there was a mismatch between their competency and current deployment. A number of them 36.5% of the respondents actually requested for further training to make them relevant in their current departments. This was an indication that the current training could only be focusing on a few isolated staff while the rest are ignored.

Recommendations

- There is an urgent need to deliberately carry out a training needs assessment to help in identifying the training gaps in order to put in place proper planning mechanisms for capacity building.
- There should be rational distribution of training opportunities for all categories of staff.
- A further study should be carried out to establish the criteria for identifying training needs of staff and assess the impact of additional professional training on staff performance.

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