

## Full Length Research

# Managing Library Staff Ethnic Diversity for Effective Service Delivery and Productivity in Nigerian University Libraries: Issues & Strategies

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Accepted 30 May 2025

The ethnic diversity of Nigeria, comprising of approximately 250 ethnic groups and more than 500 languages, is a great yet multifaceted human diversity that can be found in all domains of national activity, and the field of academic library is not an exception. The demographic situation of university libraries in Nigeria is that a large number of staff members represent different ethnic, linguistic, religious, and cultural groups, which both sets opportunities of offering innovative services and poses considerable management challenges. This paper explores the principle and practice of leading the ethnic diversity of library staff to ensure effective service delivery and productivity in the libraries in Nigerian universities based on Human Resource Management (HRM) theory, Diversity Management theory and empirical data provided by the Nigerian and international library studies. The paper evaluates problems, issues and evidence-based approaches to utilizing ethnic diversity as a productive resource instead of an institutional dysfunction. Evidence from the Evidence Based Library and Information Practice journal (Omosekejimi et al., 2024), the Covenant University Journal of Library and Information Science (Adetayo et al., 2022), and the Nigerian Library Association's 2024 Garden City Conference theme—Promoting Diversity and Inclusiveness through Innovative Library and Information Service Delivery—demonstrates the centrality of this issue to contemporary Nigerian library practice. Some of the strategic recommendations include inclusive HR policy, training intercultural competency, diversity-sensitive leadership, and service design that is equitable.

**Keywords:** Ethnic Diversity, Library Staff, Human Resource Management, Service Delivery, Nigerian Universities, Workforce Diversity, Inclusiveness, Productivity

**Cite This Article As:** Olubiyo, P.O. (2025). Managing Library Staff Ethnic Diversity for Effective Service Delivery and Productivity in Nigerian University Libraries: Issues & Strategies. *Inter. J. Acad. Res. Educ. Rev.* 13(2): 69-74

## CONCEPT OF HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

Human Resource Management (HRM) is the strategic, integrated and coherent approach to the employment, development and wellbeing of the people who work in organisations (Armstrong and Taylor, 2020). In library context, HRM is the sum of activities involved in the attraction, selection, orientation, training and development, performance management, compensation and separation of library employees. The modern theory of HRM acknowledges that human capital which is the sum of knowledge, skills, creativity and relationship capabilities of the workforce in an organisation is the most valuable and sustainable competitive advantage of the organisation.

Resource-Based View (RBV) of the firm by Barney (1991) and subsequently extended to the public sector and non-profit organisations such as libraries assumes that sustainable organisational advantage arises as a result of resources that are valuable, rare, inimitable and non-substitutable (VRIN). The diverse, well managed and highly skilled library workforce can fit all four criteria of VRIN- it is valuable (diverse skills can satisfy diverse user needs), rare (diverse skill teams are not common), inimitable (specific team arrangements are unique to institutions) and non-substitutable (relationships with human services cannot be completely replicated by technology). This theoretical framework explains the importance of considering effective HRM of ethnic diversity as not just a social justice issue but a strategic performance requirement to the Nigerian university libraries.

A subfield of HRM, Diversity Management (DM) is a proactive organisational approach in relation to the deliberate use of diverse viewpoints, experiences, and talents of a heterogeneous workforce so that it can result in improved organisational performance, creativity, and quality of services. Strategic DM considers diversity as a competitive resource, a source of creativity, problem-solving skills, and cultural competence, which improve organisational performance, unlike compliance-based strategies, which treat diversity as a legal requirement (Thomas, 2013; Gomez-Mejia et al., 2007). In the library setting, DM refers to the establishment of structural, cultural and leadership environments in which the staff of all ethnic and cultural backgrounds can make their maximum and equal contribution to the library mission.

## **LIBRARY STAFF IN NIGERIAN UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES**

Nigerian University libraries have staff working at the various levels of professional and paraprofessional grade with the University Librarian on the top level, followed by the Deputy and Senior Librarians, Librarians I and II, Assistant Librarians, Library Officers, and clerical staff. Federal Civil Service Commission and University service regulations, which regulate the employment in the federal university libraries, also focus on merit-based hiring but are applied in the context of the Federal Character Principle, which requires a fair representation of the diverse states and regions in the institutions ( Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999 Constitution, Section 14[3]).

Although meant to facilitate national unity and equal representation, the Federal Character Principle adds an ethnic aspect to the staffing of libraries whose staffing decisions may cause tensions between professional standards of merit and the representational equity agenda. In research investigating perceptions of tribalism and ethnicity among librarians in federal university libraries in Southern Nigeria (population: 296 librarians below senior management rank), Omoisejimi et al. (2024) revealed that a large percentage of the research participants believed that their senior library managers practiced tribalism and ethnicity in making recruitment, promotion, and task allocation decisions. These perceptions, whether objective or not, have quantifiable adverse impacts on employee morale, job satisfaction and quality of service delivery.

A 2024 survey published in the International Journal of Information Management Sciences on Human Resources Development Challenges and its Effects on Library Services in Nigerian Tertiary Institutions surveyed 118 academic libraries within the six geopolitical zones in Nigeria and discovered that the lack of HRD programme was exacerbated by ethnic tensions, ineffective management processes, and insufficient training to negatively impact service delivery outcomes in the sample institutions

## **MANAGING LIBRARY STAFF: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS**

### **The Contact Hypothesis**

The Contact Hypothesis by Gordon Allport (1954) argues that when there is an equal status, shared interests, intergroup collaboration and support of social authority, prejudice between groups diminishes as members of the different groups engage. This theory can be applied to ethnic diversity management in libraries of Nigerian universities, which implies that inter-ethnic collaboration in library work teams (through projects, committees, service units, etc.) can be structured to reduce ethnic bias and establish the relational trust required to conduct effective multicultural teamwork. The contact conditions that lessen in-group favouritism and out-group prejudice are achieved by library managers who strategically organize diverse work teams based on objectives of shared services (Omoisejimi et al., 2024; Adetayo et al., 2022).

### **Social Identity Theory**

The Social Identity Theory devised by Tajfel and Turner (1979) is a theoretical explanation of how membership in social groups (including ethnic groups) and the development of self-concept in the members of such groups leads to the situation

where one would like to favour the members of their own group (in-group bias) and discriminate against the members of an out-group. Social Identity Theory works out that in the Nigerian library workplace, where ethnicity is a relevant identity category, unmanaged ethnic diversity is bound to organically result in in-group favouritism, out-group hostility, and competitive inter-ethnic relations that have a negative effect on collaborative service provision. Diversity management should thus respond to the social identity processes that breed ethnic tension, but not via ethnic identity suppression but by establishing superordinate (shared) identities on the basis of professional values, service excellence and institutional mission.

## NIGERIAN ETHNIC DIVERSITY

Nigeria is the most populated country in Africa that has around 220+ million people (World Bank, 2023) and is represented by about 250 different ethnic groups, each having its language, traditions, and history. Hausa-Fulani (above all in the North), Yoruba (South-West), and Igbo (South-East) are the largest groups, and they occupy about 60-65 percent of the population, the rest 35-40 percent being represented by hundreds of small groups, such as Ijaw, Tiv, Efik, Ibibio, Edo, Kanuri, Nu

Although a source of tremendous cultural richness, this ethnic diversity has been both historically a source of political tension, resource competition, and workplace conflict. Ethnicity is institutionalised as a source of entitlement, representation, and patronage through the federal system of Nigeria with its Federal Character Principle and through its system of states, local government areas, and indigene-settler inequalities that affect even the employment in university libraries. It is important to recognize that the particular expressions of ethnic diversity in the Nigerian library work environment cannot be comprehended and managed without being sensitive to these structural dimensions, as opposed to interpersonal cultural differences (Igwe, 2024; Omosekejimi et al., 2024).

**Table 1: Nigeria's Major Ethnic Groups and Their Geographic Concentration**

Ethnic Group	Primary Region	Approx. % Population	Language Family
Hausa-Fulani	North-West, North-East, North-Central	~29%	Afro-Asiatic (Chadic)
Yoruba	South-West	~21%	Niger-Congo (Volta-Niger)
Igbo	South-East	~18%	Niger-Congo (Volta-Niger)
Ijaw	Niger Delta (South-South)	~10%	Niger-Congo (Ijoid)
Kanuri	North-East	~4%	Nilo-Saharan (Saharan)
Tiv, Efik, Ibibio, Edo, Nupe, Others	Distributed across all regions	~18%	Various Niger-Congo subfamilies

*Table 1: Compiled from World Bank (2023); NPC (2023); Igwe (2024)*

## ISSUES IN ETHNIC DIVERSITY AMONG LIBRARY STAFF IN NIGERIA

### Tribalism and Favouritism in Recruitment and Promotion

Empirical data provided by Omosekejimi et al. (2024), shows that perceived practice in federal university libraries in Southern Nigeria is tribalism, i.e., giving co-ethnics preferential treatment in recruitment, promotion, and task allocation decisions. Their investigation involving 296 librarians who held positions lower than senior management established that there was a considerable number of librarians who felt that senior management were ethnically favourable in their decision making with the negative consequences being job satisfaction and motivation to deliver services. Such ethnic bias perception, whether objective or not, fosters a hostile workplace environment of suspicion, frustration, and lack of motivation directly affecting the quality-of-service delivery.

### Communication Barriers and Misunderstanding

Diversity in terms of ethnicity in the Nigerian university libraries presents a lot of communication problems. Although English is the universal language of library operations, ethnic-regional dialects, styles of communication, non-verbal

messages and cultural frames of reference differ greatly among the major ethnic groups in Nigeria. Misinterpretations based on the differences in the cross-cultural communication may lead to the perceived ethnic antagonism, which will cause interpersonal conflicts and will interfere with service delivery and lower the productivity of the work team (Federal Polytechnic, Ilaro case study, 2024).

### **Inter-Ethnic Competition and Resource Allocation Disputes**

Within the context of resource-constrained libraries in Nigerian universities, ethnically homogeneous groups of the library staff can struggle over scarce training opportunities, promotions, office placements, and workload allocations along ethnic lines. Nwokpoku et al. (2017, cited in Federal Polytechnic Ilaro, 2024) discovered that ideological differences and beliefs in conflict often impede collaboration in libraries, where ethnic cleavages are typically used as an organising structure of workplace competition. This kind of competition undermines the organisational cohesion and divert energy of the institutions in the process of service improvement by internal ethnic politics.

## **SERVICE DELIVERY AMONG LIBRARY STAFF IN NIGERIAN UNIVERSITIES**

The quality of delivery of library services is essentially based on competence, motivation, teamwork, and patron orientation of the staff. Nigerian university library service delivery has been typified by endemic problems such as poor staff attitude, lack of responsiveness to customer demands, and inconsistent service delivery among various service units (Staff Attitude and Service Delivery study, 2024). These service quality shortcomings can be partly attributed to motivation issues which are based on ethnic tensions, perceived inequities and poor HRM practices.

The 2024 Annual Conference of the NLA in Port Harcourt (themed Promoting Diversity and Inclusiveness through Innovative Library and Information Service Delivery in Nigeria) recognized diversity management as the key to improving the quality of service delivery in the diverse society and the understanding that a workforce professionally competent and culturally inclusive is required to deliver the services in a diverse society (Igwe, 2024; NLA A study by Adetayo et al. (2022) on ethno-religious diversity in Nigerian academic libraries has shown that swarm intelligence strategies, whereby heterogeneous teams are problem-solving without a hierarchical guide, can enhance the outcomes of service innovation when the ethnic diversity is addressed inclusively instead of being stifled.

## **MANAGING ETHNIC DIVERSITY AMONG LIBRARY STAFF**

### **Inclusive Leadership**

The management strategy of ethnic diversity in the libraries of Nigerian universities is inclusive leadership, which can be defined as intentional attempts to make diverse personnel feel appreciated, respected, and empowered to make a contribution. Inclusive library leaders more actively mentor under-represented staff of ethnic groups, explicitly discuss merit-based and transparent promotion choices, talk directly about the importance of ethnic diversity, and hold management peers accountable in terms of fair treatment of staff (Thomas, 2013; Igwe, 2024).

### **Intercultural Competency Training**

All library employees, including the cross-cultural approach to communication, awareness of unconscious bias, cultural intelligence and conflict resolution skills, should be trained to become systematic intercultural competency, and this training is necessary to transform the ethnically diverse library workers into the high-performing multicultural service departments. A paper on Workforce Diversity Management (Covenant University, 2022) revealed that one of the main mechanisms used in managing diversity is staff training, which is best intermittent instead of a one-time event.

### **Equitable HR Policies**

The policies of the library HR regarding recruitment, promotion, performance appraisal, access to training, and disciplinary measures should be clearly ethnically neutral and transparently communicated and regularly implemented. Omosekejimi et al. (2024) suggest that well-defined diversity management policies should be integrated in the university library staff

handbooks and that there should be clear grievance procedures to report cases of ethnic discrimination. Elements of the promotion and performance review process should also be anonymised by professional libraries to minimise the opportunity of ethnic bias.

## CHALLENGES TO MANAGING ETHNIC DIVERSITY

In dealing with ethnic diversity in Nigerian university libraries, a number of serious challenges are facing management. To begin with, the institutionalisation of ethnic consciousness in the form of the Federal Character Principle presents a structural conflict between representational equity and professional meritocracy that must be negotiated by library managers in a careful and transparent way. Second, politicisation of ethnic identity within the Nigerian society whereby ethnic allegiance is usually a survival tactic in resource-deprived settings renders de-politicisation of the library workplace very challenging without long-term institutionalisation. Third, a lack of funding on diversity training, team building and staff development limits the diversity management interventions toolkit which library managers can use. Fourth, lack of standardised diversity metrics and reporting demands implies that effectiveness of diversity management activities in libraries of Nigerian universities cannot be systematically evaluated or compared (Federal Polytechnic Ilaro, 2024; Omosekejimi et al., 2024).

## PROFERRED SOLUTIONS

- Formulate and adopt a formal Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) Policy across all university libraries, which includes recruitment, promotion, training, service delivery, and grievance management.
- Create contact conditions that lessen ethnic bias and establish shared professional identity by establishing inter-ethnic team structures of library projects and service units.
- Introduce compulsory intercultural competency training of every staff at the library, including senior managers and the University Librarian.
- Adopt open, written performance appraisal systems that have defined, ethnic-neutral performance appraisal criteria and multi-rater (360-degree) feedback systems to reduce ethnic favouritism.
- Establish a Diversity Champions programme in every university library and assign trained personnel to oversee, promote and report on diversity and inclusion.
- Take advantage of the NLA National Conference platform, as illustrated by the 2024 theme of Garden City, to develop national standards and accountability frameworks of managing ethnic diversity in libraries in Nigeria.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Ethnic diversity management in Nigerian university libraries is not a luxury addition to professional library practice, but an emergency strategic need to quality of service, the productivity of staff and the integrity of the institution. The ethnic complexity of Nigeria with structural strains of the Federal Character Principle and the scarcity of resources of the Nigerian library industry pose a diversity management issue of an unparalleled depth and complexity. Libraries which do not take this challenge into account, letting the ethnic tensions brew without control, will gradually lose its internal cohesiveness as well as the quality of its external services. Ethnic diversity as a management opportunity Libraries that position themselves as harnessing the diversity of their workforce as a management opportunity by deploying inclusive leadership, equal employment practices, and intercultural competency development, will find in their diverse workforce a potent source of creativity, resiliency, and patron-focused service innovation.

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