

The Impact of Cultural Differences on Teamwork among Faculty Staff at Gaborone University College of Law and Professional Studies (GUC) in Botswana

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Abstract: Teamwork is an important aspect of work systems in a higher education institution where sharing of ideas and resources among faculty enriches the academic experience of learners. As universities and colleges in Botswana draw their faculty staff from different countries, it is imperative to investigate the impact of culture differences on teamwork among faculty staff in higher education institutions. This qualitative study was conducted at Gaborone University College of Law and Professional Studies (GUC). Data was collected through email questionnaire from twenty faculty staff of different nationalities in four departments. Data analysis was aided by the use of Nvivo Pro 11 qualitative data analysis software. The study found that, factors like differences in vernacular language, differences in approach to work and respect to deadlines, differences in the level of interpersonal interactions between opposite sex members, and differences in acceptable leadership styles affect teamwork among faculty staff. The study also found that, faculty staffs of GUC respect their cultural differences; they accommodate and trust each other although the above barriers to teamwork were prevalent. The study recommended effective implementation of cultural diversity management policies to guide the staff in their formal and informal interactions in order to improve teamwork among faculty staff in GUC.

Key terms: Teamwork, Faculty Staff, Culture Diversity, Work Ethics

I. INTRODUCTION

The diversity of faculty staff's cultural backgrounds creates a rich learning environment for students; however, it comes with challenges on teamwork. This is due to the different patterns of behaviour, beliefs and value systems that each person brings to the institution. The existence of these differences create mixed perceptions, feelings, and attitudes towards work, organisational systems and leadership. On the other hand, a university expects teamwork among academic staff so that they argument each other in curriculum development and delivery, learner assessment and research. This would enhance the cumulative performance of the university and improve student's learning experience. The research sought to assess the impact of cultural differences on teamwork among academic staff at GUC. The results of the research were based on qualitative data collected from 20 academic staff through emails and face to face interviews.

Background of research

Universities are complex institutions in which staff members are supposed share information, resources and offer peer support. Teamwork among academic staff is essential for enriching students' learning experiences [1]. As universities and colleges recruit faculty staff from diverse cultural backgrounds, teamwork may be hindered by the different value systems that they bring in the university environment. Culture plays a fundamental role in regulating people's interactions both in formal settings and on informal grounds. This research sought to assess the impact of cultural differences on teamwork among academic staff of Gaborone University College of Law and Professional Studies (GUC). GUC is an accredited private higher education institution in Botswana offering Business Management, Law, Education, Engineering and Health related programmes up to masters' degree level. The University College was established in 2006; currently it operates 7 campuses in Botswana. The headquarters of the University College where this study was conducted has a total of 70 faculty members under four departments. The owners of the college originate from India. The faculty staffs come from Zimbabwe, Zambia, India, Kenya, Malawi, Uganda and Botswana which makes the staffroom a melting port of cultures. The diverse staff composition in GUC is as a result of movement of skilled personnel into Botswana over the past 20 years [2]. From 1998, Botswana has sought to build up its tertiary education system, however; it had no adequately skilled academics to support that strategy so it had to rely heavily on skilled expatriates from Zimbabwe, Kenya, Zambia, Malawi and Uganda who came looking for employment opportunities [3].

Research Questions

This research sought to answer the following questions:

- What aspects of culture differ among GUC faculty staff?
- How do cultural differences affect teamwork among the faculty staff of GUC
- What measures are applied by GUC faculty staff to work effectively in a culturally diverse work environment?

Purpose of Study

The study came at a time when all public and private higher education institutions in Botswana employ a significant percentage of expatriate academic staff. Studies have been undertaken on the management of diversity in higher education institutions in Botswana [4]. However, the impact of cultural differences on teamwork in these institutions has not been explored. This paper revealed the underlying cultural factors hindering teamwork among faculty in GUC. On the surface cooperation and teamwork among faculty seems to exist but there are several complexities that individual staff members deal with on a daily basis. Given that institutions of higher learning employ faculty from diverse cultural backgrounds as a way of enriching their student learning experiences. The paper provides essential knowledge for effective management of teamwork in higher education institutions with culturally diverse faculty. The results of this study can be generalised among other institutions with similar faculty staff characteristics.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Culture refers to the set of attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviours shared by a group of people, communicated from one generation to the next [5]. It consists of the ‘derivatives of experience, more or less organized, learned or created by the individuals of a population, including those images and their interpretations transmitted from past generations, from contemporaries, or formed by individuals themselves’ [6]. Every culture distinguishes itself from others by the specific solutions it chooses to certain problems, therefore when people from different cultures work together, it is likely that they have different views on the approach to work and life as well as solutions to problems. An organisation or group with people from different cultures or nationalities is regarded as ‘culturally diverse’. Cultural diversity in the workplace implies the differences in people based on their identifications with various cultural groups within an organisation [7]. Primary elements that define culture diversity in organisations are values, beliefs and attitude towards work and life.

There are several commonalities in the national cultures of African countries whose people are part of the GUC faculty staff. Previous studies have found that Zimbabwe, Malawi, Nigeria and Kenya are high in collectivism, feminism and uncertainty avoidance. These cultural dimensions positively correlate with teamwork [8]. Within the context of the Zimbabwean culture, there is an aspect of teamwork which is highly valued through the Shona proverb ‘*chara chimwe hachisvini mota*’ which is interpreted as ‘one finger cannot press a swollen boil’ [9]. The concept of teamwork (*Nhimbe*) embraces the modern day team work in organisations, thus, the Zimbabwean culture supports the notion that ‘unity is strength’ through which individualism is discouraged [10]. In Malawi, a study on the influence of national culture on project management concluded that, professionals and organisational leaders in Malawi show low power distance, high

collectivism, high feminism and high uncertainty avoidance [11]

Nigerian culture is similar to Kenyan culture, it is characterised by strong tribal and family loyalty, and it also supports ethnic and religious loyalty [12]. Nigerian and Kenyan societies are guided by the idiom “Togetherness is Strength”. What makes Nigerian to succeed in foreign countries is their culture of unity and complementing each other. A study conducted on the Ugandan cultural values and implications for managerial behaviour revealed that, Ugandan culture is low in power distance, masculinity, collectivism, and high in uncertainty avoidance. Uganda is also short-term in its orientation towards time [13]. Therefore Ugandans are expected to be less oriented towards teamwork and collaboration than other Southern Africa countries.

As they work in their departments, faculty staff members share responsibility for the goal of making students succeed in their programmes. This goal has to be collectively achieved. Faculty staffs are accountable for the collective performance of the department. The synergetic outcomes of the collective effort of departmental staff can generate performance greater than the sum of the performance of individual members [14].

Culture influences ones approach and disposition in the work environment [15]. Communication style, acceptance to leadership styles utilized and approach to job tasks are key work related aspects that reveal individual differences in a multicultural organisation [16]. According to [17], working with people who speak foreign languages, and with different cultural values and beliefs can complicate the process of communication in the working environment. In a multi-language organisation, people always resort to their national languages whenever opportunities arise regardless of the existence of policies that promote the use of one official language in the organisation. Language differences and communication issues have the potential to reduce the motivation of organisational members to complement and support each other towards a common goal [18].

Cultures differ in the expectations of leadership styles, some cultures accept autocratic leadership whilst others are comfortable with democratic leadership [19]. In Autocratic cultures, leaders give clear instructions, often written, and leave people alone to do their work. Subordinates obey the orders given by superiors out of the respect of their leaders’ functional role. The extent to which an individual faculty member would accept the leadership style of the Head of Department (HoD) depends on the acceptance of the leadership style used by that HoD. This also determines the energy put by that faculty member in working with others to achieve common departmental goals.

Culture also influences the level of diligence with which individuals approach their job and the extent to which people value individual effort than collective achievement of goals. African cultures are commonly based on collectivism which implies that people believe in collective effort in order to

achieve organisational goals [20]). Further, cultures differ in respect of verbal and nonverbal interactions in both formal and informal setting. Meetings are essential formal decision forums for decision making in a university. In GUC departmental meetings are held on a monthly basis where faculty staff present their progress reports regarding teaching and any challenges they are facing. Verbal and non-verbal communication skills are essential in these meetings [21]

Within their departments, faculty staff members share responsibility for the goal they seek to achieve collectively, they are accountable for the collective performance of the department. Therefore, faculty staff should devise strategies to manage their cultural differences. These may include; learning to respect the autonomy of each one's culture and to accommodate different views, customs and traditions [21]. There is need for good intercultural dialogue based on the atmosphere of respect and trust. Trust is another key factor to ensure coherence in multi-cultural teams. In a team, members work in a climate of trust and are encouraged to openly express ideas, opinions, disagreements and feelings. Members are so cautious about what they say, that real understanding is not possible. They practice open and honest communication. They make an effort to understand each other's point of view. Having a shared responsibility and desisting from a blaming one another when things go wrong is one strategy that keeps team members together. Those teams that resort to pointing fingers at one another during times of crisis are less cohesive [22]. Members also practice emotional intelligence which is the ability to recognize and understand your moods, emotions, and drives as well as their impact on others. Emotional self-awareness is also about knowing what motivates you, what brings you fulfilment, and what lifts your heart and fills you with energy and aliveness [22].

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a phenomenological research design. Phenomenological research is oriented toward lived experience [23]. The researcher first looked at the cultural differences of faculty staff in the various departments and reflected on the possible challenges and opportunities experienced in this phenomenon and then sought to establish the consequences of this phenomenon basing lived experiences [24]. Further, phenomenological research design is the appropriate approach for understanding human experience; it uncovers concealed meaning in the phenomenon [25]. Through this design, the researcher sought to understand the social and psychological perspectives of cultural differences and how that affects teamwork among faculty staff. The headquarters of GUC has a total of 70 faculty staff excluding the management, and administrative staff. Academic programmes are delivered through four departments (Law and security, Education, Business, and Health Sciences). All departments comprise of faculty staff from different nationalities. From each department, 5 faculty staff members were identified to participate in the research which gave a total of 20 participants. The interview questions

were emailed to the identified participants, some participated in face to face interviews. To ensure confidentiality, respondents were given pseudonyms abbreviated by departmental initials and a number in order to detach them from the responses they gave. For example (HS02) represented Health Sciences Department Respondent Number 2. Further, the research instruments and the entire report did not disclose any participant's names or nationality.

The email interview questions sought responses to address the three main research questions-What aspects of culture differ among GUC faculty staff?, How do these cultural differences affect teamwork among the faculty staff and what measures being used by faculty staff to effectively work in a this culturally diverse work environment? Data analysis was aided by the use of NVIVO Pro 11 Software. Data codes were formulated based on the key themes emerging from the responses given by faculty staff to the interview questions. The five key themes which emerged were; language differences, interaction and respect of privacy, approaches to work, teamwork and support and accommodation of differences. The first two themes (language differences, and interactions and respect of privacy) came from the aspects of cultures which staff perceived as incompatible with each other, thus addressing the first research question. The other two themes (approaches to work, and teamwork and support) emerged from responses given in respect of second research question. Accommodation of differences was the last theme which emerged from responses to the question which sought for the strategies used by academic staff to deal with cultural differences.

IV. FINDINGS

All the respondents indicated language differences as a key aspect of cultural incompatibility among academic staff. Respondents raised issues like 'use of national languages by members who come from the same country irrespective of the presence of colleagues from other nationalities'. The Word Frequency Query on Nvivo 11, revealed 20 occurrences of the term 'language differences'. Further, language differences were highlighted to be linked to the creation of informal groups in the staffroom which is a hindrance to teamwork among cross cultural members. In relation to interaction and respect of privacy, respondents indicated that workmates from some nationalities do not respect other's private space, they infringe in others' personal affairs. The term *respect of privacy* was repeated 16 times in the responses of the 20 participants. Two nationalities were identified as aggressive and seeking to dominate others in both formal and informal discussions.

Respondents expressed that teamwork is hampered by the differences in the way different faculty staff respect deadlines set for submission of reports, the quality of work delivered by workmates from different nationalities and the level with which different nationalities observe instructions from leadership. A Word Tree generated through the NVIVO

11 Software showed the links between the use of the term *respect of deadline* with *quality of work*, *respect of authority* and other approaches to work. Some respondents expressed concerns over different ethical approaches to work based cultural differences. Respondents indicated that they value teamwork and collaborative working although their approaches to work differ significantly. One responded said 'I believe in teamwork, it enables better productivity than individual effort'. On the other hand, another responded indicated that working alone makes her more effective than working in teams. 'I can effectively measure my progress if I focus on my tasks alone, sharing ideas and resources may delay achievement of my targets'. Another participant said 'when I am given the academic calendar showing all millstones in a semester by my HoD, why should I wait to see an email reminding me of the deadlines? But I see some of my colleagues waiting to put together their reports on the last minute that does not exist in my space of work ethics'. This reflected how faculty staff members differ in their work ethics.

Regarding how faculty staff are dealing with their differences, the data clearly showed that academic staff were aware of their cultural differences and that they put effort to accommodate such differences. Respondent's used words like 'we acknowledge our culture differences; we understand the differences based on our cultures, we put away our individual differences, we avoid areas where we have differences'. These phrases demonstrated the efforts by academic staff to accommodate their cultural differences. Academic staff indicated that they strive to avoid clashes based on cultural differences.

V. RESULTS DISCUSSION

Regarding the aspects of culture differences among GUC faculty staff, the research found that language differences, interpersonal interactions and respect of privacy were incompatible cultural aspects among the faculty staff of GUC. The research found that the formal language of communication which is supposed to be used in GUC is English. However, academic staff who share the same vernacular language tend to resort to it whenever they get a chance, even in the presence of others who they know cannot hear or speak that language. The study found out that language differences create informal groups based on nationality in the staffroom. This is a big hindrance to teamwork among multicultural staff. Language barrier is the most common problem found in multi-cultural organisation as staff members have to interact with speakers of other languages [26]. The study also found that that all cultures are aware of the meanings of gestures, signs and other nonverbal cues. However, issues were raised regarding behaviours of other nationalities in meetings and other formal forums, they portray an aggressive behaviour of interrupting others when speaking, and seeking to dominate discussions as a way of proving that they know better than others. The discomfort brought by language differences among academic staff

obviously hampers their motivation to cooperate and complement each other in the delivery of their duties. Because of language differences, informal interactions of faculty staff of different nationalities are very limited because they want to minimise chances of cultural clashes. Further, faculty staff saw it better to limit personal interactions with members from other nationalities as a way of avoiding infringing into their personal spaces. However, informal interactions among staff is good for team building [27]. On the effects of cultural differences on teamwork, GUC faculty staff agreed that by combining effort and complimenting each other, they can archive more in their departments. As established in the literature, most African cultures are collectivistic which implies that people believe in collective effort in order to achieve goals. However, research found that, the different nationalities differ in the level of diligence and respect of deadlines. Some cultures resort to last minute rushes whilst others accomplish their tasks before deadlines. If faculty staff operate at different wavelengths in respect of the academic calendar, the possibility of complementing and supporting each other is very low. Those who are always behind tend to be dependent and burdening those whose work is always ahead. Further, the different cultures approach work differently in terms of ethics and respect of quality. Faculty staff from some specified nationalities take sick leaves at least three times in a semester. Such work ethics were disregarded by staff from other nationalities.

The study also found that, academic staff at GUC strives to accommodate their cultural differences. All members seek to avoid situations that can lead to conflicts. They learn each other's culture in order to predict potential behaviours. Individual strategies applied by staff to manage cultural differences in the workplace include, tolerating the differences, seeking to understand aspects of each one's culture, avoiding cultural superiority and accommodating known differences [28].

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is clear that several culturally imbedded factors affect teamwork among academic staff of GUC. Based on the above results and conclusions, the research recommends that, the management of GUC should obtain reports on work approaches and meeting of declines from the HoDs from which they can analyse to identify nationalities which may require training. Management should also produce guidelines to assist staff as they work from different cultural backgrounds. HoDs must enforce the policies on the standard language to be used in formal and informal interactions within their departments. Further, the HoDs should fully control the discussions in the meetings and not allow other people to dominate in the discussions. Faculty staff should accommodate their cultural differences and not allow the differences to affect their collaboration and teamwork because teamwork enables them to produce more output than the effort of each individual in the departments. In an academic set up no individual can successfully achieve without support from

others. Faculty staff have to support each other through peer reviews, shared research projects, guest lecturing and sharing information and resource in order to enhance the student learning experience.

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