

Managing Institutional Factors for Enhancing Undergraduate Students' Retention in Universities in Bayelsa State, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This study examines institutional factors that enhance undergraduate students' retention in universities in Bayelsa State, Nigeria, with a focus on academic and financial support services and the implications of their effective management. Employing a descriptive survey design, data were collected from 300 undergraduate students and 80 academic staff across two universities: Niger Delta University, Ammassoma, and the University of Africa, Toru-Orua. The research instrument used in gathering data for the study is a 15-item self-constructed questionnaire prepared by the researchers titled "Managing Institutional Factors for Enhancing Undergraduate Students' Retention Questionnaire (MIFEUSRQ), yielding a Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficient of 0.78. Findings revealed that academic support services significantly enhance student retention, as evidenced by the grand mean score of 3.25 for items such as faculty mentoring, advisory committees, and workshops. Financial support services also contributed substantially, with a grand mean of 3.17, highlighting the positive impact of scholarships, financial aid awareness programs, and grants on reducing students' financial burdens. Furthermore, the aggregate percentage score of 85% of academic staff emphasized that effective management of institutional factors, including academic and financial support services, could serve as a model for resource-constrained universities to enhance retention. They also noted the importance of cross-institutional collaboration and community engagement in fostering supportive learning environments. This study concludes that managing academic and financial support services is pivotal to retaining students in Bayelsa State universities. The findings underscore the need for strategic policies, collaborative efforts, and resource optimization to improve student retention rates, reduce attrition, and ensure institutional sustainability. These insights provide actionable recommendations for university administrators, policymakers, and stakeholders committed to enhancing higher education outcomes in Nigeria.

Key words: Management, Institutional factors, Students retention and undergraduate students.

INTRODUCTION

Education, within the Nigerian context, is more than just an academic pursuit; it is a comprehensive process of personal and societal development. It emphasizes the acquisition of knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes that empower individuals to navigate life's complexities and contribute meaningfully to society. This holistic perspective underscores the role of education in nurturing well-rounded individuals who are prepared to positively impact their communities and the nation at large. Akinwumiju and Agabi (2008) highlight that education serves as a cornerstone of national development, fostering critical thinking, creativity, and innovation. The tertiary educational level, as defined by the Federal Republic of Nigeria (FGN) in its National Policy on Education (2014), is the highest level of education in the country. It includes post-secondary learning at institutions such as universities, colleges of education, monotechnics, polytechnics, and other specialized institutions.

Universities, as tertiary educational institutions, are instrumental in producing high-level manpower capable of driving self-reliance and national progress. They provide specialized knowledge and skills in diverse fields, enabling students to pursue undergraduate and postgraduate degrees, engage in research, and enhance their expertise. Universities fulfill these objectives by producing skilled professionals, serving as centers for

research and development, engaging with communities, and instilling national values such as patriotism, integrity, and social responsibility (Ogunu, 2000). According to Leigha et al. (2023), universities play a critical role in producing skilled professionals by providing specialized training in fields such as medicine, engineering, law, education, and technology to meet labor market demands. Additionally, universities serve as centers of research and development, contributing to the advancement of new knowledge and technologies that address national challenges (Agi and Adiele, 2015). Jones and George (2003) emphasize that universities engage with local communities through outreach programs, public service initiatives, and partnerships with organizations. They also promote national values by fostering a sense of national identity and pride, instilling values such as patriotism, integrity, and social responsibility (James, 2018). In this context, the importance of adequate student retention in achieving the goals of university education cannot be overstated.

Student retention, as defined by Smith and Johnson (2020), refers to the ability of an educational institution to keep students enrolled in school and actively pursuing their educational goals from the beginning of their program until graduation. Retention is influenced by various factors that make the student's experience at the university engaging and fulfilling. When students can meet their financial needs, attend classes regularly, engage with course content, and perform well academically, they are more likely to remain enrolled. Seidman (2005) underscores that student retention is a critical metric for evaluating the effectiveness of institutional policies, practices, and support systems in ensuring student persistence and success. Olawole and Adeyemi (2022) suggest that retention is influenced by a combination of academic, financial, social, and personal factors that impact students' ability to stay engaged and complete their studies. High retention rates are often linked to a supportive learning environment, effective academic support services, and the availability of financial aid, all of which contribute to student success.

Despite the commendable efforts of universities to produce skilled professionals for national development, many students who begin their studies at the university level do not complete their education, often dropping out midway for various reasons. Moreno and Támara (2024) emphasize that student dropout in higher education is a complex issue that requires urgent attention. Similarly, Aguja et al. (2023) highlight dropout as a major challenge in higher education, particularly in Latin America, where factors such as family environment, educational challenges, and social issues contribute to students discontinuing their studies. This issue is also prevalent in Nigeria. A variety of factors, including the poor management of institutional factors, likely contribute significantly to the high rates of student attrition observed in universities.

Institutional factors are the elements within an educational institution that encompass personnel, resources, and services required to achieve the overall goals of the institution (John, 2012). Brown (2014) defines institutional factors as the internal mechanisms, structures, and resources that significantly influence student success, retention, and satisfaction. Key components of institutional factors include robust academic support services, accessible financial aid options, well-maintained campus facilities, extracurricular activities, and high-quality instruction delivered by skilled educators. Effective student services, supportive administrative frameworks, and a curriculum aligned with academic and industry standards also contribute to enhancing the educational experience (Soria, Chirikov, and Jones-White, 2020). Smith (2016) highlights the critical role of institutional factors in achieving educational objectives, while Brown (2014) argues that the absence of key institutional elements has contributed to the ongoing issue of student attrition within universities. Effective management of these factors creates a conducive environment that supports students in overcoming academic and personal challenges, ultimately improving retention rates.

Managing institutional factors involves organizing, directing, coordinating, and allocating resources to meet the institution's goals. Specifically, managing academic and financial support services is a crucial task for university administrators. Academic support services, including mentoring, tutoring, and workshops, are vital in enhancing student retention. Williams (2015) argues that these services significantly improve students' academic performance and retention rates. The absence of such services can lead to diminished student engagement and increased attrition (Davis, 2014). According to Braxton et al. (2004), students who feel academically supported are more likely to persist in their studies. Eze et al. (2021) further stress the importance of structured academic support in improving student engagement and retention. However, resource constraints in Nigerian universities often limit the availability of these services. Institutions that invest in tutoring and

mentoring systems tend to have higher retention rates, as these services provide students with the necessary resources and guidance to overcome academic challenges (Ogunleye, 2019). Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) note that universities that invest in academic support services, such as peer tutoring and advising, foster higher retention by improving students' integration into the academic environment.

Similarly, managing financial support services entails overseeing financial assistance programs, including scholarships, grants, loans, and donations. Aina (2021) emphasizes that financial aid plays a critical role in reducing the financial barriers that contribute to student attrition. Akande (2012) highlights that inadequate financial support can create significant stress and negatively impact students' academic performance, ultimately affecting their ability to remain enrolled. Leigha et al. (2023) identify financial constraints as one of the leading causes of student dropout, particularly for students from low-income families. In Nigerian universities, inadequate financial support is a significant contributor to attrition, as many students struggle to cover tuition fees, accommodation, and other essential expenses. Muljana and Luo (2019) point out that inadequate provision of academic and financial support is particularly detrimental during the first two critical years of enrollment. This period is essential for ensuring student retention and success. Management challenges in universities often include inadequate learning facilities, poor interpersonal relations, resistance to change, and poor educational policies and their implementation (Agi and Adiele, 2015).

In Bayelsa State, universities face significant challenges in effectively managing institutional factors. Leigha et al. (2023) identify key issues such as inadequate funding, limited infrastructure, insufficient academic support services, and the lack of effective financial aid programs as major barriers. These challenges diminish the quality of students' educational experiences, making it difficult for them to engage effectively with their studies. Williams (2015) notes that the management of academic support services has a direct impact on student retention and, by extension, the academic performance of universities. Financial stress due to poor management of financial aid services also negatively affects students' mental health and academic outcomes, further increasing the likelihood of attrition (Okeke, Obinna, and Amadi, 2021). Therefore, it is crucial to explore and implement more effective strategies for managing institutional factors to enhance student retention.

The implications of effectively managing institutional factors, such as academic and financial support services, are significant for enhancing undergraduate student retention in universities in Bayelsa State. When academic support services, such as tutoring, mentoring, and workshops, are effectively implemented, they directly contribute to improving students' academic performance, fostering a supportive learning environment, and reducing dropout rates. Similarly, effective management of financial aid ensures that students from diverse economic backgrounds can access necessary resources, thereby alleviating financial stress and enhancing their ability to persist in their studies. Properly managed academic and financial support services not only improve students' academic outcomes but also promote overall well-being, reducing stress and fostering a sense of belonging and engagement. Thus, the effective management of these institutional factors can play a pivotal role in improving retention rates, ensuring that students can complete their academic programs and contribute to the nation's development. This study, therefore, aims to investigate the management of these factors and their implications for undergraduate retention in universities in Bayelsa State.

Statement of the Problem

University education plays a crucial role in shaping high-level manpower necessary for national and global development across various sectors, including economic, political, and social spheres. It is expected that undergraduate students, as the final products of university systems, undergo comprehensive training and experiences that equip them for both the national and international job markets. Central to achieving these goals are institutional factors such as academic support services and financial support services, which, when properly managed, contribute to creating an environment conducive to student success. These services should ensure that students are supported both academically and financially, allowing them to focus on their studies and personal growth.

However, universities in Bayelsa State are facing significant challenges in the effective management of these

institutional factors. Specifically, academic support services and financial aid programs are inadequately managed, leaving many students to navigate the demands of their coursework with minimal support. This lack of adequate academic guidance contributes to increased feelings of isolation and hopelessness among students, which, in turn, negatively affects their academic persistence. Moreover, limited access to financial aid options exacerbates the financial pressures on students, intensifying their stress and anxiety. As a result, students become increasingly frustrated, and their motivation to succeed in their studies declines. This situation has contributed to a rising trend in student attrition rates in universities within Bayelsa State in recent years. Despite these challenges, it remains unclear whether the high rates of student dropout are primarily due to the unsatisfactory management of institutional factors. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the management of academic and financial support services and their role in enhancing student retention in universities in Bayelsa State.

Purpose of the Study

This study aims to investigate institutional factors enhancing undergraduate students' retention in universities in Bayelsa State, Nigeria. The specific objectives of this study were to:

1. Examine the extent to which academic support services enhance undergraduate students' retention in universities in Bayelsa State, Nigeria.
2. Determine the extent to which financial support services enhance undergraduate students' retention in universities in Bayelsa State, Nigeria
3. Determine the extent of implications of effective management of institutional factors (Academic and Financial Support Services) for enhancing undergraduate students' retention in universities in Bayelsa State, Nigeria

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study.

1. To what extent does Academic Support Services enhance undergraduate students' retention in universities in Bayelsa State, Nigeria?
2. How does financial support services enhance undergraduate students' retention in universities in Bayelsa State, Nigeria?
3. What are the implications of effective management of institutional factors (Academic and Financial Support Services) for enhancing undergraduate students' retention in universities in Bayelsa State, Nigeria?

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a descriptive survey design, a methodology well-suited for understanding the perceptions and experiences of a population. This approach facilitated the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data, enabling a comprehensive exploration of the research objectives. To deepen the insights, the descriptive survey design was complemented by semi-structured interviews, allowing for an in-depth understanding of students' lived experiences and lecturers' perspectives on institutional support services. The target population for the study consisted of 2,564 undergraduate students and 112 academic staff from two universities in Bayelsa State: Niger Delta University, Ammassoma, and the University of Africa, Toru-Orua. A stratified random sampling technique was employed to ensure representation across faculties, gender, socio-economic status, and academic levels. From this population, a total sample of 300 students and 80 academic staff was selected, constituting approximately 14% of the total population. This sample size was considered sufficient to provide reliable insights while maintaining manageability.

Data collection relied on a self-constructed, 15-item Likert-scale questionnaire titled Managing Institutional

Factors for Enhancing Undergraduate Students’ Retention Questionnaire (MIFEUSRQ). The questionnaire was designed to gather both quantitative and qualitative data, divided into three sections focusing on academic support services, financial support services, and their implications. Each item was rated on a four-point scale ranging from Very High Extent (VHE) to Very Low Extent (VLE). To ensure validity and reliability, the research instruments underwent rigorous validation by a panel of experts in education and research methodology. Their feedback informed the refinement of both the questionnaire and the interview guide, ensuring clarity and relevance. The reliability of the questionnaire was evaluated using Cronbach’s Alpha, which yielded a coefficient of 0.78, indicating an acceptable level of internal consistency. The data collection process spanned six weeks. The questionnaire was distributed to the 300 students through a combination of online and in-person methods to maximize participation. Additionally, semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face with the 80 academic staff, allowing for detailed responses and the opportunity to ask follow-up questions.

Given the inherent biases associated with self-reported data, such as social desirability and recall bias, the study employed triangulation to enhance the credibility of its findings. Quantitative survey data were cross validated with qualitative insights derived from interviews and institutional records. To encourage honest reporting, participants were assured of anonymity, and interview data were analyzed independently to corroborate the survey results. For data analysis, quantitative data were summarized using descriptive statistics, including Mean (\bar{x}) and Standard Deviation (SD), to identify trends and levels of agreement. A criterion mean of 2.50 was used to determine the significance of responses. Qualitative interview data were thematically analyzed and reported in percentages to provide rich insights that complemented the quantitative findings, with a criterion percentage of 50% used to assess response significance. The combined findings were interpreted in light of the research questions and existing literature to provide a robust understanding of the issues under study.

RESULTS

Research Question One: To what extent does Academic Support Services enhance undergraduate students’ retention in universities in Bayelsa State, Nigeria?

Table 1 : Mean and Standard deviation responses on the extent to which academic support services enhance undergraduate students’ retention in universities in Bayelsa State, Nigeria.

S/No	Academic support services and students retention: School Administration	VHE (x4)	HE (x3)	LE (x2)	VLE (x1)	Total	Mean (\bar{x})	SD	Decision
1.	Faculty members' support and guidance through creating advisory committees to provide the needed academic advice contribute significantly to my academic persistence.	140 (560)	110 (330)	35 (70)	15 (15)	975	3.25	0.75	HE
2.	Coordinate students course registration through easy access to websites, motivates me to remain enrolled in my program.	135 (540)	115 (345)	35 (70)	15 (15)	970	3.23	0.74	HE
3.	Organizing regular academic workshops and seminars by the university to keep students abreast with	130 (520)	120 (360)	35 (70)	15 (15)	965	3.22	0.76	HE

	academic levels required of them enhance students retention								
4.	Coordinating effective instruction delivery by providing lecture time table that keeps students actively engaged and improve students learning.	135 (540)	125 (375)	25 (50)	15 (15)	980	3.27	0.77	HE
5.	Encourage students engagement in tutorial class sessions as back up to lectures	140 (560)	120 (360)	25 (50)	15 (15)	985	3.28	0.78	HE
	Grand Mean						3.25	0.76	

N=300; Critical Mean=2.50

The results in **Table 1** above indicate that all the items had mean values above the criterion mean of 2.50. The grand mean of 3.25 was also above the criterion mean of 2.50. This is an indication that undergraduate students responded highly on the extent to which academic support services enhance students retention in universities in Bayelsa State, Nigeria.

Research Question Two: How does financial support services enhance undergraduate students' retention in universities in Bayelsa State, Nigeria?

Table 2: Mean and Standard deviation responses on the extent to which financial support services enhance undergraduate students' retention in universities in Bayelsa State, Nigeria.

S/n	Financial support services and students retention: School Administration	VHE (x4)	HE (x3)	LE (x2)	VL E (x1)	Total	Mean (\bar{x})	SD	Decision
6.	Coordinating access to scholarship opportunities has positively influenced my decision to remain enrolled.	120 (480)	125 (375)	35 (70)	20 (20)	945	3.15	0.68	HE
7.	Creating financial outlets that enable students to repay loans without much pressures reduce the financial burden on students, encouraging them to complete their studies.	110 (440)	125 (375)	35 (70)	30 (30)	915	3.05	0.72	HE
8.	Collaborating with philanthropists and NGOs to provide financial donations have significantly improved my overall academic experience and retention	120 (480)	130 (390)	30 (60)	20 (20)	950	3.17	0.71	HE

9.	Co-ordinate students timely access to financial grants helps students focus on their studies and reduces the likelihood of attrition.	140 (560)	120 (360)	25 (50)	15 (15)	985	3.28	0.70	HE
10.	Organizing financial aid awareness programmes from time-to-time to keep students constantly abreast with how to meet up with their financial needs while in school	130 (520)	120 (360)	35 (70)	15 (15)	965	3.22	0.69	HE
	Grand Mean						3.17	0.70	

N=300; Critical Mean=2.50

The results in **Table 2** above indicate that all the items had mean values above the criterion mean of 2.50. The grand mean of 3.17 was also above the criterion mean of 2.50. This is an indication that undergraduate students responded highly on the extent to which financial support services enhance students' retention in universities in Bayelsa State, Nigeria.

Research Question Three: What are the implications of effective management of institutional factors (Academic and Financial Support Services) for enhancing undergraduate students' retention in universities in Bayelsa State, Nigeria?

Table 3: Frequency and Percentage Analysis of the implications of effective management of institutional factors (Academic and Financial Support Services) for enhancing undergraduate students' retention in universities in Bayelsa State, Nigeria.

S/No	Implications of effective management of Academic and Financial Support Services	VHE	HE	LE	VLE	Freq. (HE)	% (HE)	Freq. (LE)	% (LE)	Decision
11	Universities with similar socio-economic contexts can adapt academic and financial support practices for students' retention.	35	30	10	5	65	81.25%	15	18.75%	HE
12	Effective management of institutional factors can serve as a model to make informed policies for other universities in resource-constrained settings.	40	30	5	5	70	87.50%	10	12.50%	HE
13	Improved management of academic and financial services alongside maintaining existing structures sustains retention	38	30	7	5	68	85%	12	15%	HE

	efforts.									
14	Cross-institutional collaboration on academic and financial services enhances institutional frameworks for students' retention.	32	35	8	5	67	83.75%	13	16.25%	HE
15	Community engagement contributes to supportive learning environment for students' retention	37	33	5	5	70	87.50%	10	12.50%	HE
	Aggregate Percentage Score					68	85%	12	15%	

N= 80: Criterion Percentage = 50%

The results in Table 3 above indicate that all the items had percentage scores values above the criterion percentage score of 50%. The aggregate percentage score of 85% for (HE) as against 15% for (was also above the criterion percentage score of 50%. This is an indication that academic staff responded highly on the implications of effective management of institutional factors (Academic and Financial Support Services) for enhancing undergraduate students' retention in universities in Bayelsa State, Nigeria.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The results from Research Question One revealed a strong consensus among respondents on academic support services in terms of faculty members' support and guidance through creating advisory committees to provide the needed academic advice; coordinating students course registration through easy access to websites; organizing regular academic workshops and seminars by the university to keep students abreast with academic levels required of them; coordinating effective instruction delivery by providing lecture time table that keeps students actively engaged and improve students learning as well as encouraging students engagement in tutorial class sessions as back up to lectures as enhancing undergraduate students retention in Bayelsa State universities. This result is likely to be so since institutional factors that are provided only require adequate and effective management systems. The result is in line with the studies of Davis (2014) who found that social and academic integration is vital for students to feel connected to their institutions and these students are more likely to persist. In corroboration, Ogunyemi and Afolabi (2010) maintain that the absence of effective academic support services leads to diminishing students productivity and increases in attrition rates. Universities in Bayelsa State can leverage these findings to strengthen academic support services, improve retention rates, and enhance overall student success.

The results from Research Question Two indicated to a high extent of undergraduate responses on financial support services in terms of coordinating access to scholarship opportunities; creating financial outlets that enable students to repay loans without much pressures reduce the financial burden on students, encouraging them to complete their studies; collaborating with philanthropists and Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) to provide financial donations; coordinating students timely access to financial grants as well as organizing financial aid awareness programmes from time-to-time to keep students constantly abreast with how to meet up with their financial needs while in school enhance undergraduate students retention in Bayelsa State owned universities. The findings of this study is in agreement with the works of Akande (2012) who found that financial support programs such as scholarships and grants can significantly alleviate financial burdens and, by extension, improve retention rates. These findings align with Aina (2021) assertion that institutional support, including financial aid, plays a pivotal role in student persistence. Aguja, Guerrero and Rincon (2023) highlighting the significant impact of financial constraints on student retention noted that the lack of financial support has contributed to students dropping out of the universities, by addressing issues related to timely disbursement and equitable access to financial aid, universities in Bayelsa State can enhance

their retention strategies and support the academic success of their students.

The results from Research Question Three indicated to a high extent of academic staff responses regarding the implications of effectively managing institutional factors, particularly academic and financial support services, for enhancing undergraduate student retention in universities in Bayelsa State, Nigeria. All items recorded percentage scores above the criterion percentage of 50%, with an impressive aggregate percentage score of 85%. This indicates a high level of consensus among academic staff on the importance of these factors. Specifically, 81.25% of respondents agreed to a high extent that universities with similar socio-economic contexts could adapt academic and financial support practices identified in this study to enhance student retention. Furthermore, 87.50% of respondents affirmed that the effective management of institutional factors could serve as a model for developing informed policies in resource-constrained settings. This underscores the broader applicability of the findings beyond Bayelsa State. In addition, 85% of respondents highlighted that improved management of academic and financial services, combined with maintaining existing institutional structures, is crucial for sustaining retention efforts. Similarly, 83.75% emphasized that cross-institutional collaboration on academic and financial support services could significantly enhance institutional frameworks, fostering better retention outcomes. Finally, 87.50% of respondents stressed the importance of community engagement in creating a supportive learning environment that contributes to student retention. This reflects the recognition of external partnerships and stakeholder involvement as vital components of effective retention strategies. The high percentage scores across all items demonstrate a shared understanding among academic staff of the critical role that effective management of institutional factors plays in addressing retention challenges. These findings align with the work of Seidman (2005), who emphasized the importance of integrating academic and financial support systems to improve student persistence. Similarly, Tinto (2012) highlighted the role of institutional structures and community engagement in fostering a sense of belonging among students, which is critical for retention. These findings underscore the need for universities to prioritize robust academic and financial support systems and leverage collaborations with communities and stakeholders to ensure sustainable retention outcomes.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the influence of academic and financial support services on undergraduate students' retention in universities in Bayelsa State, Nigeria. The findings revealed that academic support services, such as faculty mentoring, advisory committees, and academic workshops, significantly contribute to students' retention by enhancing their sense of belonging and academic success. Similarly, financial support services, including scholarships, grants, and financial aid awareness programs, were found to reduce students' financial burdens and improve retention rates. Effective management of these institutional factors was highlighted as a critical determinant of student persistence, with academic staff underscoring the importance of strategic resource allocation and cross-institutional collaboration. The study concludes that addressing retention challenges in Bayelsa State universities requires a deliberate focus on strengthening academic and financial support services. Universities must adopt a holistic approach to student retention by integrating these services into their broader institutional policies and fostering an inclusive learning environment that meets the diverse needs of students. By doing so, institutions can improve retention rates, reduce attrition, and contribute to the overall sustainability of higher education in the region.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Universities should strengthen academic support services by establishing a robust mentoring program, organize skill-development workshops, and enhance communication between students and faculty through academic advisory committees.
2. Universities should enhance financial support services by increasing scholarships and grants for low-income students, conduct awareness campaigns on funding opportunities, and partner with government and private organizations for additional financial aid resources.

3. Universities should optimize institutional resource management by using data-driven strategies to allocate resources effectively, regularly assess support services, and foster collaborations with institutions and communities to improve student retention.
4. Government should formulate strategic frameworks for prioritizing student retention, align policies with Bayelsa State's socio-economic context, and integrate monitoring mechanisms for continuous improvement.

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