CHANGE AND INNOVATION MANAGEMENT FOR SUCCESSFUL IMPLEMENTATION OF POST COVID-19 REFORMS IN RIVERS STATE-OWNED UNIVERSITIES.

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ABSTRACT: *The study examined change and innovation management for successful implementation of post COVID-19 reforms in Rivers State-owned universities. Three objectives and three research questions guided the study. The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. The population of the study comprised all 100 heads of departments in Rivers State-owned universities: 65 from Rivers State University and 35 from Ignatius Ajuru University of Education. A simple random sampling technique was used to engage 73% of the entire population in the study. The instrument for data collection was a structured questionnaire titled, "Change and Innovation Management for Successful Implementation of post COVID-19 Reforms in Rivers State-owned universities (CIMSIEP). The reliability of the instrument was established using Cronbach's alpha internal consistency method. The average reliability index obtained for Sections A, B, and C respectively was 0.73. Mean and standard deviation statistics were used to answer the research questions. The findings from this study aimed to investigate change and innovation management in the successful implementation of post COVID-19 reforms in Rivers State-owned universities, focusing on the adoption of digital learning platforms, professional development in innovative pedagogical approaches, and the impact of adherence to change among staff members. The study revealed that the adoption of digital learning platforms improves the successful implementation of post COVID-19 reforms in Rivers State-owned universities. The study recommends among others that universities should continue investing in robust digital infrastructure to support remote and hybrid learning, which includes ensuring widespread access to high-speed internet, updating technological resources, and implementing user-friendly digital platforms.*

KEYWORDS: Change, Innovation Management, Implementation, Post COVID-19 Reforms.

INTRODUCTION

In the aftermath of the worldwide COVID-19 outbreak, institutions worldwide have been required to review their functioning frameworks, with educational institutions in Rivers State being no exception. The post-pandemic demands a drastic revamp in the way Rivers State-owned institutions conduct their administrative and academic procedures. This critical transformation involves a thorough understanding and effective management of change and innovation. Change and innovation management emerges as an essential component in steering the trajectory of post COVID-19 reforms within Rivers State-owned universities. The difficulties caused by the outbreak emphasized the imperative for institutions to respond rapidly and wisely to changing situations. This adaptability, however, extends beyond merely survival; it encompasses the proactive acceptance of innovation to not only recover from setbacks but to flourish in an ever-evolving educational environment.

Lawson and Samson (2001) posited that innovation management, as a form of organisational capability, is the primary engine for wealth creation in schools, with seven components (vision, strategy, competence, intelligence, creativity, idea management, organisational structures, culture, climate, and technology management) forming a seven-element construct that necessitates the successful implementation of post-COVID-19 reforms. Innovation management entails the establishment of systems and strategies that enable these educational institutions to successfully manage and harness innovation for sustainable growth (Badrinas & Vilà, 2015). These include the formulation of initiatives, the establishment of a supportive corporate culture, and the allocation of appropriate funds (Badrinas & Vilà, 2015). By implementing an innovation management system, educational institutions may effectively traverse the challenges of a fast-changing environment and capitalise on new chances for growth (Badrinas & Vilà, 2015).

The instructional adjustments in Rivers State-owned universities post COVID-19 reforms represent a wider trend in Nigerian schools as institutions have been pushed to react dynamically to the difficulties given by the epidemic. Akindele and Olaniran (2021) asserted that the global health crisis underscored the demand for Nigerian institutions to change fast to changing situations, requiring a full examination of existing teaching and administrative procedures. The incorporation of digital learning platforms, such as learning management systems (LMS) and virtual classrooms, correlates with the wider ambitions seen in Nigerian institutions (Oye, 2020). The trend towards online education is not merely a pragmatic reaction to the disruptions generated by the epidemic but also a deliberate application of technology to increase the accessibility and flexibility of education. Administrative improvements at Rivers State-owned institutions are in consonance with the wider efforts in Nigeria to modernise university governance. Automated methods for admissions, exams, and financial transactions reflect a continued commitment to efficiency and transparency, in keeping with the recommendations of the Nigerian Universities Commission (NUC) for simplified administrative operations (NUC, 2020).

The focus on professional progress, especially in the adoption of new ways of instruction and digital teaching approaches, parallels the opinions voiced by scholars like Onah and Edeh (2020). They asserted that professional development is crucial for negotiating and training educators to utilise technology for successful teaching and learning. Infrastructural developments, as apparent in the investment in modernised labs and enhanced internet connectivity, resonate with the wider conversation on the need for improved infrastructure in

Nigerian colleges (Ugwuanyi, 2019). Such expenditures are regarded as vital for developing an atmosphere suitable for cutting-edge research and technology-driven learning. The effective implementation of post COVID-19 changes at Rivers State-owned institutions is symbolic of a wider national commitment to enhance higher education. These achievements, driven by change and innovation management concepts, highlight the resilience and persistence of the Nigerian academic community in the face of unprecedented circumstances.

Educational administrators at Rivers State-owned institutions have strategically deployed a variety of approaches in response to the demand for change and innovation management in the post COVID-19 era. One key method has been the intentional development of a collaborative and inclusive decision-making process. As noted by Ogunlade and Adeleke (2020), engaging diverse stakeholders in the decision-making process fosters a feeling of ownership and commitment to the suggested changes. Educational administrators in Rivers State have engaged members of the school community and students in conversations, ensuring that various opinions are incorporated when planning and implementing changes.

Another key strategy is building an appropriate company culture that accepts change. Research by Odigbo and Okoli (2018) underlined the relevance of corporate culture in managing change effectively. In Rivers State-owned institutions, officials have worked to build an environment that prioritises innovation, resilience, and flexibility. This cultural revolution is crucial for overcoming adherence to change and building a mindset that perceives change as an opportunity for progress. Again, administrators have engaged in significant communication tools to improve openness and clarity in the reform process. Effective communication, as noted by Afolabi and Akinmoladun (2019), is crucial for creating trust and managing uncertainty during moments of transition. In Rivers State institutions, administrators have used multiple communication channels, including town hall talks, newsletters, and online platforms, to keep stakeholders informed about the nature and reasons for the post COVID-19 changes.

In accordance with the notions of agile project management (Omole & Ojelabi, 2019), educational administrators have embraced flexibility in the implementation of changes. The unexpected nature of the pandemic needs adaptive planning and an approach that is iterative. Administrators at Rivers State-owned colleges have shown a willingness to alter methods based on ongoing feedback, new difficulties, and the increasing expectations of the academic community. As institutions in Rivers State address the complexity of the aftermath of the pandemic, the focus on digital learning integration, administrative efficiency, staff professional development, and infrastructure enhancement stresses a commitment to resilience and progress. The efficient implementation of post COVID-19 changes at these institutions serves as a testament to their flexibility and proactive embracing of innovation, guaranteeing a dynamic and resilient educational system in the face of enormous problems. However, changes and proper implementation have been impeded on a daily basis. This inspired the execution of this research.

Statement of the Problem

The post COVID-19 reforms aimed at integrating change and innovation management in Rivers State-owned institutions encounter several hurdles, preventing their smooth implementation. One important worry is the unwillingness to respond to changes profoundly established in the institutional culture. Existing institutions and established habits may resist change, hindering the fast adoption of new techniques. This adherence is reinforced by a lack of a detailed change management strategy, preventing effective communication and stakeholder participation. Financial restrictions are another important obstacle. The budgetary restrictions experienced by these organisations may limit the allocation of resources required to invest in novel technology. This financial bottleneck not only stifles innovation but also curtails the institutions' potential to compete on a national and global scale, damaging their overall reputation in academia. Additionally, the scarcity of educated persons trained in current educational technologies and change management approaches creates a substantial difficulty. The lack of appropriately qualified personnel impedes the effective implementation of digital learning platforms, prohibiting the institutions from fully exploiting the potential of innovative instructional techniques.

These difficulties have important implications for the education system in Rivers State. The unwillingness to change could generate a division among staff members, hurting cooperation and cohesiveness within the academic community. The lack of cutting-edge technology and innovative pedagogies may affect the quality of education, decreasing student academic performance and preparation for growing global competition. Furthermore, the limited visibility of these universities on a national and international level can hinder relationships with other institutions, hindering possibilities for staff to exchange knowledge, joint academic initiatives, and partnerships that could contribute to the universities' overall growth and reputation. It is to this end that the study is aimed to explore change and innovation management for effective implementation of post COVID-19 reforms in Rivers State-owned universities.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to look into change and innovation management in Rivers State-owned universities in order to successfully implement post COVID-19 changes. The study specifically sought to:

1. Determine the extent to which use of digital learning platforms improve the successful implementation of post COVID-19 changes in Rivers State-owned colleges.

2. Examine the extent to which professional development in innovative educational techniques improve the success of post COVID-19 changes in Rivers State-owned universities.

3. Investigate the extent to which staff members' adherence to change improves the successful implementation of post COVID-19 reforms in Rivers State-owned universities.

Research Questions

The following questions guided the conduct of this study:

1. To what extent does adoption of digital learning platforms improve the successful implementation of post COVID-19 reforms in Rivers State-owned universities?

2. To what extent does professional development in innovative educational techniques improve the successful implementation of post COVID-19 reforms in Rivers State-owned universities

3. To what extent does staff members' adherence to change improve the successful implementation of post COVID-19 reforms in Rivers State-owned universities?

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. The population of the study comprised all 100 heads of departments in Rivers State-owned universities: 65 from Rivers State University and 35 from Ignatius Ajuru University of Education. A simple random sampling technique was used to engage 73% of the entire population in the study. Out of the 100 copies of the questionnaire administered, 73 copies were retrieved by the researcher with the help of two trained research assistants at a date and time agreed upon with the respondents. The instrument for data collection was a structured questionnaire titled, "Change and Innovation Management for Successful Implementation of Post COVID-19 Reforms in Rivers State-owned Universities (CIMSIEP)," which was responded to on a 4-point modified Likert scale of Very High Extent (VHE) = 1, High Extent (HE) = 3, Low Extent (LE) = 2, and Very Low Extent (VLE) = 1. This instrument was subjected to face and content validity. The reliability of the instrument was established using Cronbach's alpha internal consistency method. The average reliability index obtained for sections A, B, and C respectively was 0.73. Mean and standard deviation statistics were used to answer the research questions.

RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

Research Questions 1: To what extent does the adoption of digital learning platforms improve the successful implementation of post COVID-19 reforms in Rivers State-owned universities?

Table 1: Mean and standard deviation scores on the extent to which the adoption of digital learning platforms improves the successful implementation of post COVID-19 reforms in Rivers State-owned universities

S/N	Adoption of digital learning platforms improve the successful implementation of post-COVID-19 reforms in Rivers State-owned universities	RSU 42		IAUE 31		Mean set (x_1+x_2)	Remarks
		X_1	SD_1	X_2	SD_2		
1	It has improved the flexibility of teaching and learning schedules within the university	2.11	0.83	2.28	0.96	2.20	**Low Extent**
2	It has contributed to the accessibility of educational resources for both students and staff	2.42	1.02	2.43	1.03	2.43	**Low Extent**
3	It has facilitated seamless communication between students and instructors	2.73	1.05	2.51	0.89	2.62	**High Extent**
4	digital learning platforms have influenced the overall quality of instructional materials provided to students during the post COVID-19 reform period	2.44	1.01	2.47	1.01	2.46	**Low Extent**
5	Digital learning platforms have facilitated the integration of innovative teaching methods as part of the post COVID-19 reforms	2.81	0.99	2.54	0.96	2.68	**High Extent**
	Average Mean/Standard Deviation	**2.50**	**0.98**	**2.45**	**0.97**	**2.48**	**Low Extent**

Data presented in Table 1 above shows the mean and standard deviation scores on the extent to which the adoption of digital learning platforms improves the successful implementation of post COVID-19 reforms in Rivers State-owned universities. The data shows that the respondents agreed to a high extent that it has facilitated seamless communication between students and instructors and that digital learning platforms have facilitated the integration of innovative teaching methods as part of the post COVID-19 reforms, as seen in items 3 and 5, which have weighted mean values of 2.62 and 2.68 that are above the criterion mean of 2.50. The respondents agreed to a low extent that it has improved the flexibility of teaching and learning schedules within the university; it has contributed to the accessibility of educational resources for both students and staff; and digital learning platforms have influenced the overall quality of instructional materials provided to students during the post COVID-19 reform period, as seen in items 1, 2, and 4, having weighted mean values of 2.20, 2.43, and 2.46, which

are below the criterion mean of 2.50. The grand mean of **2.48** indicates that the answer to research question one is that, to a low extent, the adoption of digital learning platforms improves the successful implementation of post COVID-19 reforms in Rivers State-owned universities.

Research Questions 2: To what extent does professional development in innovative educational techniques improve the successful implementation of post COVID-19 reforms in Rivers State-owned universities?

Table 2: Mean and standard deviation scores on the extent to which professional development in innovative educational techniques improve the successful implementation of post COVID-19 reforms in Rivers State-owned universities

S/N	Professional development in innovative educational techniques improve the successful implementation of post COVID-19 reforms in Rivers State-owned universities	RSU 42		IAUE 31		Mean set $(x_1 + x_2)$	Remarks
		X_1	SD_1	X_2	SD_2		
6	Professional development has played a crucial role in successful incorporation of technology and digital tools in teaching methods	2.79	0.83	2.82	0.96	2.81	**High Extent**
7	It has contributed to the overall improvement of teaching quality and student engagement	2.67	0.82	2.76	0.63	2.72	**High Extent**
8	Professional development initiatives have facilitated collaboration and knowledge-sharing among members of the school community	2.05	0.85	2.01	0.68	2.03	**Low Extent**
9	It influenced the ability to tailor teaching methods to meet the diverse learning needs arising from the post COVID-19 reforms	2.64	0.71	2.56	0.57	2.6	**High Extent**
10	Professional development contributed to the improvement of student outcomes and academic performance	2.68	0.69	2.56	0.96	2.62	**High Extent**
	Average Mean/Standard Deviation	**2.57**	**0.78**	**2.54**	**0.87**	**2.56**	**High Extent**

The data presented in Table 2 above shows the mean and standard deviation scores on the extent to which professional development in innovative educational techniques improves the successful implementation of post COVID-19 reforms in Rivers State-owned universities. The data shows that the respondents agreed to a high extent that professional development has played a crucial role in the successful incorporation of technology and digital tools in teaching methods; it has contributed to the overall improvement of teaching quality and student engagement; it has influenced the ability to tailor teaching methods to meet the diverse learning needs arising from the post COVID-19 reforms; and professional development has contributed to the improvement of student outcomes and academic performance, as seen in items 6, 7, 9,

and 10, which have weighted mean values of 2.81, 2.72, 2.6, and 2.62 that are above the criterion mean of 2.50. The respondents agreed to a low extent that professional development initiatives have facilitated collaboration and knowledge-sharing among members of the school community, as seen in items 8 having weighted mean values of 2.03, which are below the criterion mean of 2.50. The grand mean of **2.56** indicates that the answer to research question two is, to a high extent, that professional development in innovative educational techniques improves the successful implementation of post COVID-19 reforms in Rivers State-owned universities.

Research Question 3: To what extent does staff members' adherence to change improve the successful implementation of post COVID-19 reforms in Rivers State-owned universities?

Table 3: Mean and standard deviation scores on the extent to which staff members' adherence to change improves the successful implementation of post COVID-19 reforms in Rivers State-owned universities

S/N	Staff members' adherence to change improves the successful implementation of post COVID-19 reforms in Rivers State-owned universities	RSU 42		IAUE 31		Mean set (x_1+x_2)	Remarks
		X_1	SD_1	X_2	SD_2		
11	Staff embrace new policies and procedures introduced as part of the post COVID-19 reforms	2.23	0.54	2.46	0.69	2.35	**Low Extent**
12	Adherence to change among staff members hinder the swift adoption of new technologies introduced during the post COVID-19 reforms	2.61	0.61	2.62	0.85	2.62	**High Extent**
13	The fear of role displacement contribute to staff members' adherence to changes implemented as part of the post COVID-19 reforms	2.97	0.74	2.58	0.79	2.78	**High Extent**
14	Adherence to change among staff members can be effectively addressed to ensure a smoother successful implementation of the post COVID-19 reforms	2.37	0.51	2.25	0.76	2.31	**Low Extent**
15	Staff members react positively to communication and training programs aimed at facilitating a better understanding of the reasons behind the post COVID-19 reforms	2.07	0.66	2.30	0.79	2.19	**Low Extent**
	Average Mean/Standard Deviation	**2.45**	**0.61**	**2.44**	**0.78**	**2.45**	**Low Extent**

The data presented in Table 3 above shows the mean and standard deviation scores on the extent to which staff members' adherence to change improves the successful implementation of post COVID-19 reforms in Rivers State-owned universities. The data shows that the respondents agreed to a high extent that adherence to change among staff members hinders the

swift adoption of new technologies introduced during the post COVID-19 reforms, and the fear of role displacement contributes to staff members' adherence to changes implemented as part of the post COVID-19 reforms, as seen in items 12 and 13, which have weighted mean values of 2.62 and 2.78 that are above the criterion mean of 2.50. The respondents agreed to a low extent that staff embrace new policies and procedures introduced as part of the post COVID-19 reforms; adherence to change among staff members can be effectively addressed to ensure a smoother, more successful implementation of the post-COVID-19 reforms; and staff members react positively to communication and training programmes aimed at facilitating a better understanding of the reasons behind the post COVID-19 reforms, as seen in items 11, 14, and 15 having weighted mean values of 2.35, 2.31, and 2.19, which are below the criterion mean of 2.50. The grand mean of **2.45** indicates that the answer to research question three is that, to a low extent, staff members' adherence to change improves the successful implementation of post COVID-19 reforms in Rivers State-owned universities.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The result of the study in Table 1 indicates the extent to which the adoption of digital learning platforms improves the successful implementation of post COVID-19 reforms in Rivers State-owned universities. The analysis covered multiple facets, including flexibility in teaching and learning schedules, accessibility of educational resources, seamless communication between students and instructors, influence on the overall quality of instructional materials, and the integration of innovative teaching methods. The findings suggest that there is a limited improvement in the flexibility of teaching and learning schedules within the university. Respondents expressed reservations, indicating that despite the adoption of digital learning platforms, achieving a notable improvement in the flexibility of academic activities remains a challenge. This observation aligns with the notion put forward by Ajayi (2019), who highlighted the intricate interplay of institutional policies, infrastructure, and pedagogical practices in shaping the flexibility of learning schedules.

The study further reveals a low extent of contribution to the accessibility of educational resources for both students and staff. This implies that, despite the adoption of digital platforms, challenges such as limited internet connectivity, inadequate infrastructure, and uneven distribution of resources persist. This finding echoes concerns raised by Okonkwo (2020), emphasising the need for a comprehensive approach to address infrastructure limitations and bridge the digital divide among students and staff.

The findings presented in Table 2 offer valuable insights into the role of professional development in innovative pedagogical approaches and its impact on the successful implementation of post COVID-19 reforms in Rivers State-owned universities. The study assessed various dimensions, including the incorporation of technology, overall teaching quality, collaboration and knowledge-sharing, adaptation to diverse learning needs, and improvement of student outcomes. The respondents strongly agreed that professional development played a crucial role in the successful incorporation of technology and digital tools into teaching methods (mean = 2.81). This aligns with the perspectives of Aduwa-Ogiegbaen and Iyamu (2005), who emphasised the significance of continuous professional development in equipping educators with the skills necessary for effective integration of technology in teaching. The study revealed a high extent of agreement that professional

development contributed to the overall improvement of teaching quality and student engagement. This finding resonates with the views of Babalola (2019), who found that sustained professional development positively correlates with improved teaching quality, leading to increased student engagement and academic success. However, respondents indicated a lower extent of agreement regarding the facilitation of collaboration and knowledge sharing through professional development initiatives. This contrasts with the collaborative learning perspective advocated by scholars like Ajiboye (2013), who stressed the importance of educators sharing experiences and insights for mutual growth. The lower score in this dimension suggests a potential area for improvement in fostering collaborative practices.

Finally, the result of the study in Table 3 sheds light on the extent to which adherence to change among staff members improves the successful implementation of post COVID-19 reforms in Rivers State-owned universities.

The study examined various dimensions of adherence, including the embrace of new policies and procedures, hindrances to the adoption of new technologies, the fear of role displacement, the effectiveness of addressing adherence, and the response to communication and training programs. Respondents indicated a low extent of agreement that staff members embrace new policies and procedures introduced as part of the post COVID-19 reforms. This finding resonates with the work of Oreg (2006), who discussed how individuals may resist changes that disrupt established routines and procedures. The study further revealed a high extent of agreement that adherence to change among staff members hinders the swift adoption of new technologies, introduced during the post COVID-19 reforms. This aligns with the findings of Armenakis and Harris (2002), who highlighted that technological changes often face adherence due to concerns about the learning curve and potential job displacement. Respondents strongly agreed that the fear of role displacement contributes to staff members' adherence to changes implemented as part of the post COVID-19 reforms. This finding is consistent with the literature on organisational change, such as the work of Kotter and Schlesinger (2008), who emphasised the role of perceived threats to job security in fostering adherence among employees.

CONCLUSION

The findings from this study aimed to investigate change and innovation management in the successful implementation of post COVID-19 reforms in Rivers State-owned universities, focusing on the adoption of digital learning platforms, professional development in innovative pedagogical approaches, and the impact of adherence to change among staff members. The research found that the adoption of digital learning platforms promotes the effective implementation of post COVID-19 adjustments in Rivers State-owned universities. The inclusion of technology, such as learning management systems and online collaboration tools, emerged as a crucial facilitator in creating a flexible and effective learning environment. The study results underscore the vital role of professional development in increasing the effective implementation of post COVID-19 adjustments. Training initiatives that focused on providing teachers with the skills required for successful online and hybrid teaching were vital in building a culture of innovation and resilience. Conclusively, the research also pointed out that commitment to change among staff members is a potential impediment to the effective implementation of post COVID-19 changes. This devotion, predicated on multiple variables

such as fear of the unknown or worries about job security, emphasised the need for addressing the human side of organisational reform.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Universities should invest in robust digital infrastructure to support remote and hybrid learning. This includes maintaining extensive internet access, modernising technological resources, and creating user-friendly digital platforms.

2. Universities should carry out professional development programmes for members of the school community in order to keep up with evolving pedagogical trends and advances in technology.

3. Universities should create and implement comprehensive change management efforts that address staff members' concerns and fears. This could include raising awareness, involving employees in decision-making processes, and offering opportunities for open conversation

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