



FEDERAL CHARACTER AND RECRUITMENT IN THE NIGERIAN PUBLIC SERVICE: PROSPECTS AND IMPLICATIONS

IGBOKWE-IBETO, Chinyeaka Justine (PhD)

Department of Public Administration Faculty of Management

Sciences Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

Corresponding Email: ugochimvereci@yahoo.co.uk

AREMU, Mike Olanipekun

Department of Industrial Relations and Personnel Management

Faculty of Management Sciences Lagos State University, Ojo

Email: mikearemo2004@yahoo.com

Abstract

Within the framework of bureaucratic, efficiency and effectiveness theories, an eclectic approach; the paper examines the prospects and implications of federal character principle on recruitment in the Nigerian public service so as to determine how the federal character has aided or hindered efficiency and productivity in the service. It observed that the federal character has hindered efficiency and productivity in the service. Yet, it has not really achieved its main objective of ethnic balancing and national integration in appointments and placement of civil servants at federal, state or local government levels rather it has been used the elite and politicians to serve their selfish interest by bringing in their own people to fill the positions allocated to their states and not necessarily giving all members of the ethnic groups level playing ground apply for such positions. The paper recommends that merit should be incorporated into the federal character principle and that whatever errors that might have occurred in recruitment as a result of the principle can be corrected through proper training and development within the Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAs). The competition for quota should also be available to all and the federal character principle should be implemented judiciously, and transparently.

Keywords: Efficiency, Hiring, Service Delivery, Productivity, Nigeria

Introduction

Every organization depends on the effective use of its available resources in order to achieve its objectives. The efficiency and effectiveness of any work place whether the private or the public sector largely depend on the caliber of the work force. The availability of a competent and effective labour force does not just happen by chance but through an articulated recruitment and selection exercise. Recruitment is often regarded as a transaction oriented function that merely responds (hopefully in a satisfactory manner) to other departments' requisitions and requirements. It is enough for some recruiters to hire people within reasonable periods of time and within budget who meets most of the required qualifications. However, effective recruitment, selection and placement require much more than that in order to have a truly significant impact on organizational performance.

The Nigeria federal civil service comprises the staff used administratively by the central government. The government, whether at the federal, state and local government level is the highest employer of labour. The government uses the civil

service to transform her policy objectives and electoral promises into objective results that would benefit the citizenry. Therefore, the right caliber of personnel must be placed to perform these varied functions. The Nigerian federal civil service emphasizes uniformity, standardization, transparency in recruiting competent applicants. Despite these emphasizes, it is perceived that the recruitment and selection process lacks equity and transparency, making it difficult if not impossible to recruit the best qualified applicants for available jobs in the civil service. Recruitment and selection over the years is weighed down by favoritism at the negation of merit and has shifted from qualification of individuals based on job description and specification to man know man basis. This makes recruitment and selection subjective rather than objective.

Recruitment and selection are key ingredients in human resource management functions which are geared towards ensuring that an organization is able to attract, choose and place within the organization the most appropriate individuals with the requisite skills, knowledge and abilities to enable the organization to achieve the purpose for which it has been established which in the case of private organization is to make profit while in the public organization is to provide social service. The federal civil service commission is the institution of government saddled with the responsibility of recruitment and selection of civil servants. Due to diversity of both major and minor ethnic groupings in Nigeria, the Government through its constitution put in place a principle referred to as the “Federal Character Principle or Quota System” which states expressly “the desire of the people of Nigeria to promote national integration, foster national unity and give citizens a sense of belonging as enshrined in section 14(3&4) of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria as amended. The paper therefore examines the application of federal character principle on recruitment and selection exercise in Nigerian civil service, its prospects and implications.

Conceptual and Theoretical Epistemology

Conceptualizing and theorizing on social phenomena in the social and management sciences are scientific exercises that aim principally at giving intellectual directions to issues under investigation. They help to comb the various contours of scientific constructs with a view to situating them within the purview of scholarly discourse and analyses of the subject matter of inquiry. Federal character as a concept belongs to the “tribe” of contested concepts, which generate disputes over their actual meanings. The concept of federal character or quota system became part of Nigeria's political vocabulary when it was adopted by the constitution drafting committee in 1975. The phrase Federal Character was first used by the late General Murtala Mohammed in his maiden address to the opening session of the Constitution Drafting Committee on the 18th of October 1975. The federal character principle, according to the committee is the distinctive desire of the Nigerian people to promote national integration, foster national unity as well as giving Nigerian citizens a sense of belonging irrespective of ethnic origin, culture, language or religion diversities. Federal character principle is a quota system and quotas are seen by employers as an unsavory strategy for ratifying the effects of the past 'or present unfair discrimination' (Cascio in Igbokwe-Ibeto, 2012).

In his own contribution, Bodunrin (1989) contends that federal character principle is a political settlement that enables every section of the Nigerian society to be represented in government. He argued, “*the new phrase, 'Federal character'*” in its application and implementation is a mere euphemism for ethnic balancing which has the potential of solving the problem and fear of domination and bring about stability that is needed for development to take place in the country”. The federal character principle or quota system as enshrined in Nigeria's Constitution since 1979, seeks to ensure that recruitment and appointments to public service organizations reflect the linguistic, ethnic, religious, and geographic diversity of the country. The Fundamental Objectives and Directive Principles of State Policy, Chapter two, Section 14(3&4) of the 1999 Constitution as amended states that:

The composition of the Government of the Federation or any of its agencies and the conduct of its affairs shall be carried out in such a manner as to reflect the federal character of Nigeria and the need to promote national unity, and also to command national loyalty, thereby ensuring that there shall be no predominance of persons from a few State or from a few ethnic or other sectional groups in that Government or in any of its agencies (FRN, 1999).

The composition of the Government of a State, a local government council, or any of the agencies of such Government or council, and the conduct of the affairs of the Government or councilor such agencies shall be carried out in such manner as to recognize the diversity of the people within its area of authority and the need to promote a sense-of belonging and loyalty among all the people of the Federation (FRN,1999).

Application of the quota system in recruitment of civil servants as well as the military and paramilitary has confused striking a balance between merit and the quota. This has had adverse consequences for both institutions in terms of discipline, morale, and overall efficiency, productivity and service delivery. The basic idea of the principle is to have an even representation of all states, ethnic and other sectional groups in the federal service. It has a lot of political support, especially from those in the disadvantaged areas- mainly the northern states of Nigeria (Olowu et al, 1997). In order to implement this concept effectively, a commission called the Federal Character Commission was created in 1995. The commission in collaboration with Federal Civil Service Commission and Ministries, Agencies and Commissions (MDAs) is to ensure that recruitment into federal civil service reflects federal character principle.

Recruitment is a process of attracting applicants with certain skills, abilities, and other personal characteristics to job vacancies in an organization. Yet, recruitment is seen as a personnel function which is seen as major human resource planning program designed to attract the qualified workforce required to meet future organizational needs and which also provides a means of achieving affirmative action for goals set by human resource planners and policy makers. Erasmus, Swanepoel, Schenk, Van der Westhuizen and Wessel (2005) conceive recruitment as “those activities in human resource management which are undertaken in order to attract sufficient job candidates who have the necessary potential, competencies and traits to fill job needs and to assist the public service organization in achieving its objectives”. Similarly Cherrington in Motsoeneng (2011) conceive recruitment as a process of attracting potential job applicants from the available force. Recruitment can also be defined as the process of exhausting all the sources for finding prospective employees. It is the process of finding suitable employees and stimulating them to apply for jobs in the institution. Its objective is to increase the selection ratio that is the number of applications per job opening. The definition of recruitment by the Nigerian Civil Service Rules states that, "Recruitment means the filling of vacancies by the appointment of persons not already in the public service of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. It however, excludes the transfer of officers from other public services in the federation to the federal civil service" (PSR, 020201).

According to Banjoko (2009), selection is a process of gathering sufficient information about the candidates for the purpose of evaluating, screening and deciding who among the applicants possess the potentials for successful job performance" It has been argued that “selection” is basically a task of prediction. It presupposes a screening and sorting procedure in the course of which the candidates with the least potential are separated from those with the most potential. Selection is a complex procedure that comprises the following: collection of information, coding, interpretation, retrieval, integration of information and decision -making (See Robert, 2005). An analysis of definitions of recruitment and selection reveals that it is a process of attracting, screening and hiring the right quantity and quality for the job at the right time. This process involves various steps and methods, which include establishing job requirements, job posting, screening candidates, selecting and hiring the best candidate based on set criteria" (Rowena, 2010) .

Hiring well has significant benefits for an organization. Qualified, motivated and committed employees ensure that organization objectives are achieved. A wrong hire is a waste of organizations resources spent on hiring, training, termination and re-hiring. It can also cause the demoralization of the rest of the staff. Recruitment for any organization is very important right through the entire lifespan of that organization. The process recruitment entails proper analysis of the job i.e. job analysis. Job analysis provides detailed information on the job. It consists of job description and job specification. "Job description focuses on the content of the job i.e. what the job is all about, the hours of work, the hazards involved, and the extent of responsibility for men, money and materials. Job specification on the other hand focuses on what qualification or attributes the person required for the job must possess e.g. the class of degree, years of experience etc." Job analysis is one of the techniques employed to ensure selection of good quality staff.

Several theories may prove adequate for a study of this nature. While other theories may be relevant in their right, we anchor the paper on an eclectic approach of bureaucratic and equity theories. This is because of advantages they present in analyzing issues raised in the paper. Ideal bureaucratic organization was essentially the well-designed machine within which all the component parts work efficiently and without distraction, towards clearly defined goals. The high points of Weber's (1947) arguments are that an ideal bureaucracy is one in which there exist functional specialization, hierarchy, impersonal relationship, standard procedure and rules, authority, legitimacy and competence or fitness.

The federal character principle is based on the equity principle. In a pluralistic society such as Nigeria, the equity principle is geared towards ensuring that group interests are fully taken care of. Lijphart's political model described it as “concessional democracy” and recommends some principles for accommodating group interests in plural societies to

include: that government has to comprise a grand coalition where all main segments of the society are represented; that the decision-making process must be based on the mutual veto principle; that it must not only recognize but also respect segmental autonomy (See for example Amuwo et al, 2004). Thus, the adoption and utilization of the federal character principle in recruitment and selection exercise in the Nigeria civil service seeks to ensure ethnic representation, involvement of all ethnic nationalist in the decision-making process and regard for the sovereignty of each segment of the nation.

Federal Character and Recruitment in the Nigerian Public Service: The Intrigues

Immediately after independence, the Nigerian state was faced with a situation where the political space was dominated by Northern elite, while the administrative machinery of the bureaucracy was dominated by the Southern intellectuals and intelligential. For the political executive to successfully carry out its policies, it required a facilitator in the bureaucracy, which the North was unable to provide in terms of people with required skills, educational qualifications and experience. In this regard, the South with more qualified human resources dominated the public bureaucracy. This meant that while the North dominated the political space, the South, on the other hand dominated the bureaucracy. It was in a bid to resolve the problem of Northern political domination and Southern dominated bureaucracy that gave birth to the introduction of representative bureaucracy that rides on the wing of "Federal Character Principle" (See for example Ayoade, 2000). Thus, the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria recognized the imperative of federal character to Nigeria's administrative system as provided in the section 14 (3) of the constitution.

The reason why the principle is considered more important than merit in the recruitment of federal civil servants is because those in the disadvantaged areas - mainly the Northern part as opined by Olowu et al (1997) are the political leaders of the country. This made it possible for them to use their positions to protect their region using the principle. However, a new problem has since emerged in the area of quality of human resources in the public sector. The Nigeria federal civil service comprises the staff used administratively by the federal government. The government, whether at the federal, State and Local government level is the highest employer of labour. The government uses the civil service to transform her policy objectives and electoral promises into objective results that would benefit the citizenry. The Nigerian Federal Civil Service Commission is responsible for the recruitment of federal civil servants. The Federal Civil Service Commission is a constitutional body established under section 153(1)d of the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Part D, paragraph 11a of the third schedule of the constitution empowers the commission: to appoint persons to offices in the federal civil service; and to dismiss and exercise disciplinary control over persons holding such offices".

Section 170 of the constitution states thus, "Subject to the provisions of this Constitution, the Federal Civil Service Commission may, with the approval of the President and subject to such conditions as it may deem fit, delegate any of the powers conferred upon it by this Constitution to any of its members or to any officer in the civil service of the Federation". Thereby, empowering the commission to delegate any of its powers and functions as it deems fit. Consequently, the commission has delegated some of its powers on recruitment, promotion and discipline to officers on salary grade levels 01 to 06 and the promotion of officers on salary grade level 07 to 13 to ministries/extra-ministerial departments. In respect of the delegated functions, the personnel department of various ministries, agencies commissions plays a key role in recruitment and selection of employees. This is because; it knows the personnel needs of organizations. The personnel department prepares a concise job description and specification stating clearly the title of the job and responsibility required (Fatiregun, 1992).

If vacancies have to be filled from outside the organization, an advertisement is made through the print and electronic media. The advertisement carries the job description, specification, age of applicants, qualification, experience, and deadline for submission of applications. At the expiration of the deadline for submission of applications, the personnel officers of the ministry, commission or agency sort out the applications to find out those eligible through screening or short listing. Successfully shortlisted applicants are then communicated on the date for interview. Appointments into the senior cadre of civil service are done through recruitment, transfer and secondment. By recruitment is meant "the filling of vacancies by appointment of persons not already in the civil service" (FRN, 2000; PSR, 02201). Appointments in the civil service are determined by three major factors which include:

- a. Availability of vacancies: Vacancies to be filled are to be declared by ministries/extra-ministerial departments to the commission through the office of the head of the civil service of the federation;

- b. Qualification: The specific qualifications and skills required for every post are prescribed in Schemes of Service (2000D); and
- c. Federal Character: By federal character is meant "the distinctive desire of the People of Nigeria to promote national unity, foster national loyalty and give every citizen of Nigeria a sense of belonging to the nation". As stated in Section 14 (3&4) of the Constitution.

Each ministry is required to set up a board referred to as the Personnel Management Board which will carry out recruitment based on general and uniform guidelines set up by the Federal Civil Service Commission. In personnel recruitment, the Scheme of Service indicates the qualifications required for specific posts (cadres) in the service. The scheme of service refers to the job title for different jobs, the requisite skills, knowledge and ability of the job holder, his duties and mode of advancement within the cadre. It is the basis of the civil service structure. Each State has a Civil Service Commission patterned after the Federal Civil Service Commission and recruits in a similar manner. The state civil service commissions can also at its discretion delegate some of its powers to ministries and extra-ministerial departments. It may also issue guidelines as deemed necessary from time to time. Moreover, appointments into vacant positions would be guided by the provisions in book of estimates and based strictly on need as determined from time to time by the respective agencies.

The Nigerian civil service places a lot of premium on the interview method for selection, Decree 43 of 1988 states that "all eligible candidates for appointment shall be interviewed by the appropriate personnel management board or committee. Whatever the case, the principles of merit, that is quota system and federal character are always enforced to determine who to recruit and whom to select. This to a large extent and in the view of Nze quoted in Mukoro (2005) downplays the inevitability of bureaucracies to efficiently and effectively deliver public goods and services. As advocated for by Marx Weber, competence and job specialization cannot thrive where sentiments are brought to play. In any case, successful candidates are notified through letters of appointment duly signed by an officer designated to do so by the ministry concerned or by the civil service commission.

In the civil service for example that is governmentally controlled, especially in third world countries, governments should ever be self advised that good organization structure does not by itself guarantee good performance (Drucker, 1988). It therefore, imperative to match organizations or the public service with very sound and quality staff so that performance would become more effective. Indeed, target setting; performance-measurement and monitoring will be affected without the necessary impetus giving to systematic recruitment and selection mechanisms. Therefore, the right caliber of human resources must be placed to perform these varied functions. However, the Nigeria civil service is weighed down by the familiar problems of the Nigeria federation. These problems according to Fajemirokun (1974) comprise ethnicity, religious strife, corruption, colonial history, and governance/leadership style, the military involvement in politics, the quota system or federal character principles.

Prospects of the Federal Character Principle

No matter how dark the Claude is, there is always a silver lining. In a complex and multi ethnic and cultural society like Nigeria, the federal character or quota system has a number of benefits which include:

Predicating employee recruitment within the context of Federal character does not mean that such an employee cannot contribute meaningfully towards the enhancement of the goals of the organization. This is particularly so where appropriate recruitment strategies involving the screening of potential employees based on relevant skills, experience and educational qualifications are adopted. Yet, training, retraining and development are supposed to enhance the performance of staff irrespective of their quality on entry into the civil service. What is imperative therefore is the ability of the individual employed and his or her willingness to work for the enhancement of the organization.

Besides being an administrative platform, quota system or federal character principle in Nigeria has come to represent a political necessity to further integrate the complex and diverse elements that comprise the nation. Given the complexity of multi-ethnic, religious and cultural nature of the country, it is clear that merit as an exclusive principle for recruitment will negate the desire for equal representation of all sections of the country in the civil service. Through proper staff training and development by organizations of their workforce, organizational productivity is enhanced even where incompetent employees would have been employed through inappropriate recruitment strategies (Gberevbie, 2008). However, as a result of the increase in institutions of higher learning, there are competent hands emerging from them.

Federal character helps to protect the interest of the minority. The three major ethnic groups in the country have a tendency to dominate the affairs of the nation and bring more and more of their people into government while the minority groups will have little or no representation or become irrelevant in the scheme of things but for the federal character principle which has created a platform for the representation of all the ethnic groups either major or minor within the arms of government. Women and educationally disadvantaged states are also given chances for better representation. It provides access to opportunities for minority ethnic nationalities which ordinarily they may not be able to compete for.

It promotes patriotism and national integration and unity as it gives every group a say in the formulation and implementation of policies, and addresses the problem of persons from few states and ethnic groups dominating the public service/political power, Qualified persons are recruitment from different parts of the country to occupy various positions. It enhances development in the supposedly less developed zones in the country, such as the South-south and North which is still lagging behind in development and western education. Yet, it gives employees sense of belonging and boosts their confidence in organizations which is seen to represent diverse interest and not just the interest of a few. The place of Federal character in the countries geo-administrative and political equation cannot be overemphasized.

Implications of the Federal Character Principle

We have identified and discussed some advantages of federal character principle or representative bureaucracy to include its ability to create support for government policies, including people who are local and indigenous to the environment in the implementation of government programmes in that particular area and its ability to serve as a platform for the government party to distribute patronage to its supporters (See for example Bodunrin, 1989; Ayoade, 2000). However, there are implications and contradictions in the application of federal character principle in the civil service particularly in the area of employee recruitment and promotion. Every phenomenon has its merits and demerits. Federal character principle is not an exclusion the implications include:

The prescripts of Civil Service Rule are not adhered to because candidates are not appointed on the basis of merit (i.e. competence and qualification). It clearly shows that the best qualified employees are not in the appropriate positions. It means less qualified and less competent candidates are selected and appointed, which adversely affects the civil service effectiveness and productivity, which in turn affects service delivery. This is supported by Cook in Kahn (2005) who argues that competent and qualified candidates are twice as more productive as less qualified candidates and that appointing less qualified candidates is costly to an organization because they are less productive. Subjecting recruitment, appointment and/or promotion to federal character discriminates against merit and is therefore unfair to certain sections of the country to the advantage of others (See for example Ayoade, 2000). The resultant effect is the recruitment of incompetent workforce into the civil service and its attendant poor performance and low productivity.

Yet, the quota system has been used to promote discrimination against other Nigerians in appointment, promotion and admission into schools because of the state of origin, with the undesirable effect of converting backwardness into a permanent advantage. For instance the chairman of Northern Governors Forum (NGF), Mu'azu Babangida Aliyu the governor of Niger State said that one of the problems facing the region is educational backwardness, But despite this problem, it is observed that people from the Northern region are significantly placed in the federal civil service because of the employment of federal character principle (See for example Briggs, 2007). The country's image is at stake if the federal character principle is not limited to minimum acceptable standards. The worst of it is that the principle is 'also applied in the secondment of Nigerians for foreign services."

The quota system has led to primordial antagonisms in the sense that in an attempt to balance it through the wazobia (Yuroba, Hausa and Igbo) strategy, minorities have been reduced to mere appendices in the federal distributive system. The quota system is mainly use to share privileges that accrue to the various ethnic nationalities. Yet, it has led elevated and institutionalized mediocrity over competence, skills and experience. The apostles and advocates (elites) of federal character have frustrated the application of universal criterion of merit in the distribution of quota within their states, and region. This is evidenced in the way each state allocation revolves around a few individuals and families and some instances, the jobs are sold to the highest bidder as sale of jobs is now a lucrative business in Nigeria.

Federal Character and Public Service Recruitment in Nigeria: The Way Forward

Recommendations will be made on the findings emanating from the discussions in paper. We suggest that Human Resource (HR) planning should lay a solid foundation for recruitment and selection processes to take place. It is therefore imperative for the Federal Civil Service Commission (FCSC) to make expertise available to undertake this process. It would assist the commission to ensure that all critical aspects (skills, knowledge and competencies) are taken into consideration before a post is advertised. To ensure fairness and transparency in the recruitment process, it is important for the FCSC in collaboration with federal character commission to assemble a team of experts that will monitor the recruitment and selection process as well as strengthen their monitoring and evaluation capacity.

Recruitment of persons into the Nigerian public service though based on the federal character principle should be on merit i.e. individual to be recruited from each state or region should be the best the state has to offer. To solve the problem of observing rules on recruitment, it recommends that all ministries and departments must submit vacancy returns quarterly to the Federal Civil Service Commission to keep the Commission abreast of the right number and the state of origin of new entrants that are required. Also, to solve the problem of recruiting poor quality graduates, written test should be administered to all applicants into the service especially the middle and junior cadre where nepotism and inadequate screening of new employees were observed. The application of federal character principle should be contextualized within grade levels (03 - 06) while recruitment into senior officers cadre and appointment should be strictly based on merit and not connections and informal contacts as it is the case presently. Also, the federal government should increase the number of commissioners in Federal Character Commission as well as establish zonal or state offices to reflect the states of the federation. This will make the commission to be alive to its duties and responsibilities, monitor and reduce the extent of delegation of its functions to ministries and extra-ministerial departments.

Faithful implementation of universal and compulsory free and secondary primary education and rehabilitation tertiary education both at state and federal levels are required to ensure equal opportunities for all citizens to compete for civil service positions on the basis of merit. With regard to the military, only rapid implementation of the constitutional provision on compulsory military training and a definitive end to military rule can help to reduce the salience of the "federal character" principle (Adamolekun et al, 1991). Through proper staff training and development by organizations of their employees, employee productivity is enhanced even where incompetent employees have been employed in the bid to ensure that the federal character principle is adhered to. Though recruitment can still be based on the federal character principle, on no account should favoritism be extended to promotion. The competition for state quota should be open to all indigenes of the state, to prevent such allocations being monopolized by political kith and kin. The application of the federal character principle in recruitment should be carried out judiciously, transparently and tactfully.

Conclusion

The issue of federal character and recruitment in the Nigerian civil service as captured by scholars has been espoused with an attempt at clarifying the intellectual "cobweb" surrounding the application of federal character principle in recruitment in the public service. In addition, searchlight was also beamed on the theoretical framework for a better understanding of the concepts under interrogation. Thus, different theories on federal character and recruitment such as bureaucratic and equity theories have been examined. An attempt has also been made to establish the nexus between federal character and recruitment and selection in the public service.

It is the position of the paper that the federal character has hindered efficiency and productivity in the service. Yet, it has not really achieved its main objective of ethnic balancing and national integration in appointments and placement of civil servants at federal, state or local government levels rather it has been used by the elite and politicians to serve their selfish interest by bringing in their own people to fill the positions allocated to their states and not necessarily giving all members of the ethnic nationalities level playing ground to apply for such positions. The paper recommends that merit should be incorporated into the federal character principle and that whatever errors might have occurred in recruitment as a result of the principle can be corrected through proper training and development within the Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAs). Yet, the Nigerian government has to grow beyond that level of primordial sentiments in the making and implementation of rational recruitment policies and practices, if she really wants to achieve efficiency and effectiveness in service delivery.

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