

WORKPLACE ETHICS AND ENGAGEMENT PRACTICES AMONG HEADS OF DEPARTMENT IN FACULTIES OF EDUCATION IN UNIVERSITIES IN RIVERS STATE

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Abstract

This study examined Workplace Ethics and Engagement Practices among Heads of Department in Faculties of Education in Universities in Rivers State, using an analytic descriptive survey design. Two research questions and three hypotheses guided the study. The population comprised all HoDs in Faculties of Education across three selected Rivers State universities, and a census approach was adopted due to the manageable size of respondents. A researcher-developed instrument titled Workplace Ethics and Administrator Engagement Questionnaire (WEAEQ), structured on a four-point Likert scale, was used for data collection. The instrument was validated by three experts in Educational Management and Measurement and Evaluation, and reliability was established using Cronbach Alpha coefficients of 0.81 and 0.78 for the two main sections. Data were analysed using mean and standard deviation to answer the research questions, while two-way factorial ANOVA tested the hypotheses at 0.05 significance level. Results showed that HoDs generally demonstrated fairness and respect in their engagement practices. No significant differences were found in fairness across universities and ranks, while respect varied significantly across academic ranks, with Professors and Associate Professors demonstrating higher levels of respect than Senior Lecturers. It was recommended that universities should institutionalize fairness policies in departmental administration, strengthen leadership training, and adopt mentorship programmes where senior HoDs guide junior ones in respect-based leadership practices.

Keywords: Workplace Ethics, Fairness, Respect, Administrator, Engagement Practices.

Introduction

Engagement practices refer to the strategies, behaviours, and processes through which administrators involve their subordinates in decision-making, encourage participation in departmental activities, and foster collaborative work environments. In higher education, particularly within Faculties of Education, the engagement practices of Heads of Department (HoDs) are critical because they influence staff motivation, collegiality, and the attainment of institutional goals (James-Ngochindo & Kayii, 2025.). Effective engagement practices go beyond routine supervision; they embody inclusive leadership, participatory governance, and the cultivation of trust and commitment among staff members (Ineye-Briggs & Kayii, 2024).

In the contemporary university system, the role of HoDs extends beyond administrative oversight to include the nurturing of ethical climates and the advancement of professional practices that sustain both academic quality and organizational harmony. When HoDs demonstrate fairness, transparency, and respect in their engagement with staff, they enhance institutional effectiveness and create a culture of accountability (Ede & Obi, 2022). Conversely, weak engagement practices; such as favoritism, exclusion, or autocratic decision-making can undermine staff morale, breed conflict, and compromise the integrity of academic processes.

Closely connected to engagement practices is the dimension of workplace ethics, which embodies the values, standards, and moral principles guiding administrative conduct. Fairness and respect are central ethical values that shape how administrators relate to subordinates, allocate resources, and evaluate performance. Research has shown that institutions where leaders emphasize ethical practices are more likely to enjoy higher levels of staff satisfaction, cooperation, and productivity (Amoako & Asante, 2022; Zhao et al., 2023). In the context of Faculties of Education, where HoDs coordinate diverse academic programs and manage both human and material resources, workplace ethics directly impacts how engagement practices are perceived and enacted. As universities adapt to the demands of a rapidly changing knowledge-driven economy, administrators must not only demonstrate technical competence but also embody ethical values that sustain professional relationships. In Rivers State universities, HoDs play a strategic role in balancing institutional policies with departmental needs. Their ability to integrate fairness and respect into their engagement practices is vital for fostering trust, enhancing collaboration, and ensuring the smooth functioning of educational programmes. However, anecdotal evidence and prior studies suggest that variations exist across universities and academic ranks in how workplace ethics and engagement practices are implemented, raising questions about consistency and effectiveness (Ineye-Briggs, 2023).

Workplace ethics provide the moral framework that guides administrators' decisions and interactions, with fairness (organizational justice) and respect emerging as two central dimensions in leadership research. Studies consistently show that ethical leadership grounded in fair and respectful practices promotes positive organizational climates, ethical conduct, and staff commitment in educational settings (Guo et al., 2023). Empirical evidence from Nigeria and higher education contexts further demonstrates that perceived fairness—through equitable outcomes, transparent procedures, and respectful interactions—significantly predicts ethical behaviour, engagement, and performance (Adekanmbi, 2022; Khan et al., 2023). Respect from leaders is also highly valued, yet surveys reveal substantial deficits in higher education, with low levels of perceived respect linked to reduced trust, cooperation, and morale (Gallup & Inside Higher Ed, 2020; Rogers, 2018). African studies similarly affirm that respectful leadership strengthens collaboration, creativity, and inclusive engagement, underscoring fairness and respect as critical ethical drivers of effective leadership outcomes.

Fairness and Engagement Practices

Fairness, often conceptualized as organizational justice, is a key ethical dimension in workplace relationships. It encompasses distributive fairness (equity in outcomes), procedural fairness (transparency of processes), and interactional fairness (respectful interpersonal treatment). Despite broad recognition of their importance, empirical research has rarely examined fairness and respect in relation to the engagement practices of Heads of Department (HoDs), particularly within Faculties of Education in Nigeria. While Nigerian studies confirm the role of fairness in shaping ethical behaviour and perceptions of credibility among staff and students (Adekanmbi, 2022; Olorunfunmi & Kayii, 2019), much of this literature aggregates data across institutions or focuses on non-administrative actors. Consequently, limited attention has been given to how HoDs demonstrate fairness in workload distribution, evaluation, and staff development, and how respect informs their engagement practices. This gap highlights the need for focused research on HoDs in Rivers State universities to better understand how fairness and respect function as ethical foundations for administrator engagement (Adekanmbi, 2022; Colquitt et al., 2013; Guo et al., 2023; Khan et al., 2023).

Respect and Engagement Practices

Respect is a vital ethical element that influences organizational climate by affirming staff dignity, value, and contributions. Research shows that respect from leaders strongly predicts staff morale, trust, and engagement, yet evidence from higher education indicates notable deficiencies, with only a minority of faculty reporting respectful treatment. A lack of respect in administrative practices is

associated with reduced cooperation, weakened organizational trust, and higher turnover intentions. Studies from African contexts further emphasize its importance, demonstrating that respectful leadership enhances collaboration, inclusiveness, creativity, and positive staff-student relationships. Despite these findings, limited research has examined how respect specifically influences Heads of Department's engagement practices within Nigerian universities. This gap highlights the need for focused investigation, particularly within Faculties of Education and across varying institutional and academic contexts. Consequently, the present study seeks to assess the extent to which fairness and respect are demonstrated by administrators in higher institutions and how these ethical dimensions relate to engagement practices.

In higher education institutions, the leadership role of Heads of Department (HoDs) is critical to ensuring smooth academic administration, staff motivation, and the attainment of institutional goals. Their engagement practices that is, the ways in which they involve, consult, and collaborate with staff are expected to reflect ethical standards such as fairness and respect. Evidence from international and Nigerian studies confirms that fairness (organizational justice) and respect are central to ethical leadership and have significant effects on staff commitment, ethical conduct, and performance (Adekanmbi, 2022; Guo, Xue, He, & Yasmin, 2023; Khan, Gan, Khan, & Saif, 2023). However, existing research also suggests that fairness and respect are not consistently demonstrated in academic settings, with many faculty members reporting low levels of perceived respect and fairness at work (Gallup & Inside Higher Ed, 2020; Rogers, 2018).

Despite these findings, most studies either focus on general employees in public service or broadly on academic staff, without specifically examining HoDs as key administrative leaders in Faculties of Education. Yet, HoDs play a strategic role in shaping departmental climates through their decisions on resource allocation, workload distribution, and performance evaluation areas where fairness and respect are most visibly demonstrated. Where fairness is absent, staff morale and trust are weakened, while disrespectful engagement practices can foster tension, reduce collaboration, and threaten institutional harmony.

In Rivers State universities, anecdotal reports point to variations in how HoDs demonstrate fairness and respect in their engagement with staff. These variations may be influenced by institutional cultures or by the academic ranks of HoDs, but systematic empirical evidence remains scarce. Without such evidence, it is difficult to determine whether fairness and respect as ethical dimensions of workplace behaviour, are consistently integrated into administrator engagement practices across universities and ranks. Therefore, the problem of this study is the lack of empirical knowledge about how HoDs in Faculties of Education in Rivers State universities demonstrate fairness and respect as dimensions of workplace ethics in relation to their engagement practices, and whether significant

differences exist across universities. Therefore, the this study aimed to examine workplace ethics and administrator engagement practices among Heads of Department in Faculties of Education in universities in Rivers State. Specifically, the study seeks to:

6. assess the extent to which Heads of Department in Faculties of Education in universities in Rivers State demonstrate fairness as an aspect of workplace ethics in relation to their engagement practices;
7. determine the extent to which Heads of Department in Faculties of Education in universities in Rivers State exhibit respect as an aspect of workplace ethics in relation to their engagement practices

The following research questions guide the study

12. To what extent do Heads of Department in Faculties of Education in universities **in** Rivers State demonstrate fairness as an aspect of workplace ethics in relation to their engagement practices?
13. To what extent do Heads of Department in Faculties of Education in universities **in** Rivers State exhibit respect as an aspect of workplace ethics in relation to their engagement practices?

The following hypotheses have been formulated to guide the study:

- There is no significant difference in the mean responses of Heads of Department in Faculties of Education in universities **in** Rivers State demonstrate fairness as an aspect of workplace ethics in relation to their engagement practices.
- There is no significant difference in the mean responses of Heads of Department in Faculties of Education in universities **in** Rivers State exhibit respect as an aspect of workplace ethics in relation to their engagement practices.

Methodology

The study adopted an analytic descriptive survey design. According to Nwankwo (2016), this design is suitable for comparing responses across different categories of respondents using hypotheses and statistical tools. It was considered appropriate for this study because it enabled the researcher to gather data from Heads of Department (HoDs) in Faculties of Education and examine variations in workplace ethics and engagement practices across universities and academic ranks. The population of the study comprised all Heads of Department in Faculties of Education across universities in

Rivers State. Specifically, the universities included Rivers State University (RSU), Ignatius Ajuru University of Education (IAUE), and the University of Port Harcourt (UNIPORT). At the time of the study, the Faculties of Education in these universities had 26 departments (RSU = 9, IAUE = 9, UNIPORT = 8), each headed by a Head of Department. Therefore, the target population consisted of 26 HoDs. Given the relatively small size of the population, a census approach was adopted. This meant that all 26 Heads of Department in Faculties of Education across the three universities were included in the study. The census method was chosen to ensure comprehensive coverage and to avoid sampling bias. In cases where any HoD was unavailable or declined participation, replacement was not considered since each department's headship is unique and central to the study. Data were collected using a self-structured questionnaire titled "Workplace Ethics and Administrator Engagement Questionnaire (WEAEQ)." All items were rated on a 4-point Likert scale; Very High extent-VHE, High Extent-HE, Moderate Extent-ME and low Extent-LE). Higher scores indicated stronger perceptions of workplace ethics and practices. The instrument was subjected to content validity. Three experts of which two from Educational Management and one from Measurement and Evaluation reviewed the items for clarity, relevance, and appropriateness to the study objectives. The reliability of the instrument was established through a pilot test involving five Heads of Department in a Faculty of Education outside the study universities. Data from the pilot were analyzed using the Cronbach Alpha method, which yielded coefficients of 0.82 for the Workplace Ethics Scale and 0.79 for the Administrator Engagement Practices Scale. These results indicated acceptable internal consistency reliability, as both values exceeded the 0.70 threshold recommended by Nunnally (1978). Copies of the questionnaire were distributed directly to all Heads of Department in Faculties of Education, either in person or via email, depending on availability. Mean and standard deviation were used to answer the research questions on fairness, respect, and administrator engagement practices. While, A two-way factorial Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was employed to test the hypotheses at a 0.05 significance level. Results were presented in tables with corresponding interpretations. Post-hoc tests (Tukey's HSD) were conducted where significant differences were detected.

Results

Research Question 1: To what extent do Heads of Department in Faculties of Education in universities in Rivers State demonstrate fairness as an aspect of workplace ethics in relation to their engagement practices.

Table 1: Mean Response and Standard Deviation on the extent Heads of Department in Faculties of Education in universities in Rivers State demonstrate fairness as an aspect of workplace ethics in relation to their engagement practices

S/No	Statement	RSU=9		IAUE=9		UPHC=8		Decision
		\bar{X}	SD	\bar{X}	SD	\bar{X}	SD	
1	Allocate departmental responsibilities fairly among staff without favouritism.	2.71	0.61	2.85	0.48	2.80	0.55	
2	Apply the same standards when evaluating the performance of all staff.	2.50	0.50	2.75	0.62	2.65	0.58	
3	Ensure that opportunities for training and development are distributed equitably.	2.54	0.71	2.75	0.62	2.70	0.78	
4	Give every staff member equal opportunity to contribute to departmental decision-making.	2.50	0.76	2.90	0.45	2.68	0.62	
5	I am transparent in handling departmental finances and resources.	2.79	0.25	2.95	0.22	2.88	0.30	
6	Treat complaints from staff members with impartiality.	2.50	0.76	2.65	0.73	2.70	0.68	
7	Avoid bias when assigning courses or teaching loads in the department.	2.85	.052	2.85	4.5	2.75	.50	
8	Communicate departmental policies in a way that promotes fairness to all staff.	2.72	0.52	2.85	0.48	2.80	0.45	
Average Mean/SD		2.62	0.58	2.81	0.51	2.74	0.56	

Source: Researcher's Field Result, 2025

Data presented in Table 1 above indicates that all mean scores are above the decision benchmark of 2.50, indicating that respondents generally agreed that they demonstrate fairness in relation to engagement practices. Standard deviations ranged from 0.22 to 0.76, showing that responses were relatively clustered around the means with moderate consistency. The average means indicate that

IAUE HoDs ($\bar{X} = 2.81$) rated their fairness practices slightly higher than UPHC ($\bar{X} = 2.74$) and RSU ($\bar{X} = 2.62$), although all three universities were within the “Agree” range.

The findings suggest that Heads of Department across the three universities demonstrate fairness in their workplace ethics as part of their engagement practices, though IAUE HoDs reported moderate higher levels of fairness compared to their counterparts in RSU and UPHC.

Research Question 2: To what extent do Heads of Department in Faculties of Education in universities in Rivers State exhibit respect as an aspect of workplace ethics in relation to their engagement practices?

Table: 2 Mean Response and Standard Deviation on the extent Heads of Department in Faculties of Education in universities in Rivers State exhibit respect as an aspect of workplace ethics in relation to their engagement practices

S/No	Statement	RSU=9		IAUE=9		UPHC=8		Decision
		\bar{X}	SD	\bar{X}	SD	\bar{X}	SD	
1	Listen attentively to staff opinions during departmental meetings.	2.8	0.55	2.90	0.4	2.75	.50	
2	Acknowledge the contributions of staff members in departmental achievements.	2.65	0.60	2.85	0.45	2.70	0.58	
3	Communicate with staff in a courteous and professional manner.	2.54	0.71	2.75	0.62	2.80	.45	
4	Treat all staff members with dignity regardless of their academic rank or personal differences.	2.70	0.52	2.95	0.30	2.8	0.45	
5	Encourage open dialogue and allow staff to express their views without intimidation.	2.75	0.48	2.85	0.40	2.85	.035	

6	Respect the personal boundaries and privacy of staff members.	2.60	0.65	2.8	0.55	2.78	0.5
7	Avoid the use of derogatory or dismissive language when addressing staff.	2.55	.07	2.75	0.62	2.65	.60
8	Create an environment where mutual respect is practiced among all departmental members.	2.7	0.5	2.85	0.45	2.78	0.4
Average Mean/SD		2.70	0.55	2.86	0.44	2.76	0.47

Source: Researcher's Field Result 2025

Data presented in Table 1 above indicates that all mean scores are above the decision benchmark of 2.50, indicating that respondents generally agreed that they exhibit respect as part of workplace ethics in their engagement practices. The average means reveal that IAUE HoDs ($\bar{X} = 2.86$) perceived themselves as demonstrating respect more strongly than UPHC HoDs ($\bar{X} = 2.76$) and RSU HoDs ($\bar{X} = 2.70$). Standard deviations ranged from 0.35 to 0.70, indicating moderate variability, but still show that responses were relatively consistent across universities. The analysis suggests that Heads of Department across universities in River State demonstrate respect as an aspect of workplace ethics in their engagement practices, with IAUE HoDs reporting slightly higher respect practices compared to their counterparts in RSU and UPHC.

Hypotheses

1. There is no significant difference in the mean responses of Heads of Department in Faculties of Education in universities in Rivers State demonstrate fairness as an aspect of workplace ethics in relation to their engagement practices.

Table 3: Two-Way ANOVA of Mean Responses on Fairness as an Aspect of Workplace Ethics in Relation to Engagement Practices

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares (SS)	Df	Mean Square (MS)	F-cal	Sig. (p)	Decision
University	0.82	2		1.25	0.302	NS
Academic Rank	1.05	2	0.41	1.62	0.212	NS

University	\times	0.72	4	0.53	0.54	0.705	NS
Rank							
Error		8.85	24	0.18			
Total		11.44	32	0.37			

The results in table 3 show that neither university ($F = 1.25$, $p > 0.05$), fairness as an aspect of workplace ethics on engagement practices ($F = 1.62$, $p > 0.05$), nor their interaction ($F = 0.54$, $p > 0.05$) had a statistically significant effect on engagement practices. This suggests that HoDs across different universities and ranks perceive themselves as demonstrating fairness in similar ways. HoDs across universities and ranks perceive fairness similarly, with no significant differences.

There is no significant difference in the mean responses of Heads of Department in Faculties of Education in Rivers State universities exhibit respect as an aspect of workplace ethics in relation to their engagement practices.

Table 4: Two-Way ANOVA of Mean Responses on Respect as an Aspect of Workplace Ethics in Relation to Engagement Practices

Source Variation		Sum of Squares (SS)	Df	Mean Square (MS)	F-cal	Sig. (p)	Decision
University		1.28	2	0.64	2.45	0.108	NS
Academic Rank		2.12	2	1.06	4.05	0.030	S
University	\times	0.95	4	0.24	0.92	0.467	NS
Rank							
Error		6.28	24	0.26			
Total		10.63	32	0.64			

The results in Table 4 reveal that academic rank had a significant effect on respect ($F = 4.05$, $p < 0.05$). This indicates that the extent to which HoDs exhibit respect in their engagement practices differs significantly across universities. However, no significant differences were found across universities ($F = 2.45$, $p > 0.05$), and the interaction effect was not significant ($F = 0.92$, $p > 0.05$). Academic rank significantly influences how HoDs demonstrate respect, suggesting that more senior or junior HoDs may vary in the degree of respect they show in engagement practices.

Table 5: Tukey's HSD Post-hoc Test on Respect by Academic Rank

Academic Rank (I)	Academic Rank (J)	Mean Difference (I– Std. J)	Error	Sig. (p)	Decision
Senior Lecturer (SL)	Associate Professor (AP)	-0.32	0.18	0.045	S*
Senior Lecturer (SL)	Professor (PR)	-0.40	0.19	0.028	S*
Associate Professor (AP)	Professor (PR)	-0.08	0.16	0.875	NS

Source: Researcher's Field Result, 2025

Table 5 shows the post-hoc comparison test, indicating that Senior Lecturers differed significantly from both Associate Professors ($p = 0.045$) and Professors ($p = 0.028$) in how they exhibited respect in engagement practices. However, Associate Professors and Professors did not differ significantly ($p = 0.875$). This implies that more senior administrators (APs and PRs) report higher respect practices compared to others lecturers. Therefore, the findings suggest that academic rank influences respect, with higher-ranking HoDs (Associate Professors and Professors) tending to demonstrate greater respect in their administrator engagement practices than Senior Lecturers.

Discussion of Findings

From research question 1, the findings of this study revealed that Heads of Department (HoDs) across Rivers State universities generally agreed that they demonstrate fairness in their engagement practices. These results are consistent with Colquitt et al. (2013), who emphasized that fairness conceptualized as distributive, procedural, and interactional justice is strongly linked to employee commitment, motivation, and engagement. Adekanmbi (2022) found that workplace fairness, particularly when combined with ethical leadership, significantly predicted ethical behaviour in the public sector. Similarly, Olorunfunmi and Kayii (2019) noted that fairness in evaluation and resource allocation shaped how students judged lecturers' credibility. These findings align with the present study by suggesting that HoDs who demonstrate fairness foster trust and encourage staff participation in departmental decisions. However, the analysis further showed no significant differences across universities or academic rank in the demonstration of fairness. This contrasts with the assumption that institutional culture or seniority might influence fairness practices. Instead, the result suggests that fairness is viewed as a professional standard of leadership that cuts across universities in Rivers State. This echoes Khan, Gan, Khan, and Saif (2023), who found that organizational justice mediates leadership and staff outcomes, regardless of contextual differences,

underscoring fairness as a universal mechanism through which leaders influence organizational engagement. With respect to workplace ethics, the study found that HoDs agreed they exhibit respect in their engagement practices, particularly in listening to staff, treating them with dignity, and fostering open communication. This is consistent with Rogers (2018), who identified respect from superiors as a core driver of staff morale and trust. Similarly, Porath and Pearson (2013) reported that disrespectful practices undermine cooperation and increase turnover intentions, further validating the importance of respect in administrative leadership.

Interestingly, the ANOVA analysis showed that respect practices varied significantly across academic ranks, with Associate Professors and Professors rating themselves higher than Senior Lecturers. This indicates that senior administrators may be more deliberate in modeling respectful behaviours, possibly due to their broader administrative experience or higher leadership training exposure. This finding supports Amoako and Asante (2022), who noted in a Ghanaian study that leaders who consistently showed respect enhanced collaborative engagement, especially in postgraduate settings. Ineye-Briggs and Kayii (2024) similarly found that respect in Nigerian universities fostered cooperation and innovation, confirming that respect is central to creating an inclusive and engaging academic environment.

Conclusion

The study concludes that fairness and respect are critical ethical dimensions shaping administrator engagement practices. Fairness appears consistent across institutions, whereas respect is more sensitive to rank, underscoring the need for targeted interventions to strengthen respectful leadership among less experienced HoDs.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations were made:

3. University authorities should formalize fairness practices in departmental administration by issuing clear policies on workload distribution, evaluation procedures, and resource allocation.
4. Senior HoDs should mentor junior counterparts to model respect-based leadership behaviours, thereby reducing rank-related gaps in administrator engagement practices.

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