

ABSORBING BEST GRADUATING STUDENTS INTO CIVIL SERVICE: A STRATEGIC APPROACH TO PUBLIC SECTOR DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This paper looked at the strategic integration of the best graduating students into the Nigerian civil service as a catalyst for public sector transformation. It critically examined systemic challenges such as inefficiency, weak meritocracy, and institutional inertia that have impeded national development. The paper argued that establishing a deliberate, merit-based recruitment pipeline for top academic performers can inject fresh perspectives, modern competencies, and strong ethical standards into the civil service. It underscores the pivotal role of effective educational planning through curriculum alignment, quality assurance, and manpower forecasting in ensuring the sustainability and success of this policy. By adopting this integration approach, the civil service can evolve from a static bureaucracy into a dynamic, knowledge-driven institution capable of addressing the complex demands of the 21st century economy. The paper highlighted the knowledge-driven benefits of this strategy, including enhanced evidence-based policymaking, accelerated technological adoption, and improved innovation capacity within government agencies. While acknowledging the need for substantial investment and institutional reforms, it concludes that this policy offers a viable pathway to curb corruption, reduce brain drain, and develop a competent, responsive public sector. Ultimately, it presents a roadmap for leveraging Nigeria's intellectual capital to achieve sustainable development and good governance.

Keywords: *Absorbing, Best Graduating Students, Civil Service, Strategic Approach, Public Sector Development*

Introduction

The Nigerian civil service, as the primary machinery for policy implementation and public service delivery, has long been a subject of critical scrutiny. Its effectiveness is often questioned due to persistent challenges such as inefficiency, corruption, and a lack of meritocracy in recruitment and promotion processes (World Bank, 2018). These systemic issues have created a perception of the civil service as a less desirable career path for Nigeria's brightest minds, leading to a significant brain drain to the private sector and international organizations. Consequently, the

public sector often struggles to attract and retain the high-caliber talent needed to drive meaningful development and meet the complex demands of a modern economy. This backdrop of an underperforming public service necessitates innovative and strategic approaches to reform, with a focus on human capital development.

The idea of a meritocratic civil service is not new; it is a foundational principle of effective governance. Historically, developed nations have utilized civil service examinations and recruitment from elite universities to build a competent and professional bureaucracy (Peters & Pierre, 2012). This model ensures that public office is held by individuals with the highest intellectual and ethical standards. In Nigeria, however, the recruitment process has been heavily influenced by informal networks, political patronage, and the "federal character" principle, which, while intended to promote national unity, has sometimes been implemented in a way that compromises merit (Fatile & Adejuwon, 2011). The result is a civil service workforce that may not possess the requisite skills or motivation to effectively serve the public, leading to a disconnect between government policies and their intended outcomes.

A critical missing link in Nigeria's development agenda has been the deliberate and strategic alignment of the educational system with the public sector's talent needs. Nigerian universities produce thousands of graduates annually, with a small percentage achieving top academic honors. These "best graduating students" represent a valuable, untapped resource for national development. By failing to create a formal pipeline to attract this talent, the public sector is effectively ceding its future leadership to other sectors. The lack of a clear, attractive career path for top graduates within the civil service perpetuates a cycle of mediocrity, as young, ambitious individuals bypass public service for what they perceive as more rewarding opportunities elsewhere. This paper explored a structured approach to change this narrative.

The concept of absorbing top graduates is fundamentally a human capital strategy. It is premised on the belief that a skilled, knowledgeable, and motivated workforce is the most valuable asset for any organization, including the government. When applied to the civil service, this strategy has the potential to introduce fresh perspectives, modern skills, and a strong work ethic into the public sector (United Nations Development Programme, 2017). These young professionals, trained in contemporary fields and equipped with critical thinking abilities, can act as catalysts for innovation and efficiency. Their presence could challenge outdated bureaucratic norms, promote a culture of transparency and accountability, and drive the digital transformation of government services. This would not only improve public service delivery but also enhance the government's legitimacy in the eyes of the citizenry.

Furthermore, this policy has significant implications for fostering a knowledge-driven economy. A knowledge-driven economy is one where the production and use of knowledge are central to economic growth. By bringing in a new generation of civil servants who are digitally literate, data-savvy, and research-oriented, the government can improve its capacity for evidence-based policy formulation and implementation (Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 2000). This shift from a reliance on intuition to data-driven decision-making is crucial for tackling complex national challenges, from economic diversification to climate change. The integration of top graduates, who are products of a modern academic system, will accelerate this transition and position the civil service as a hub for intellectual capital and innovation.

In line with the foregoing, it is perceived that the poor performance of the Nigerian civil service, driven by systemic flaws in recruitment and human resource management, has created an urgent need for reform. This paper posits that a strategic and deliberate policy to absorb best graduating students into the civil service is a powerful, yet underutilized, tool for public sector development (Amadi & Odu, 2022). It is a policy that not only addresses the immediate need for

talent but also lays the groundwork for a more meritocratic, efficient, and knowledge-driven public sector. By examining this approach, the paper seeks to provide a roadmap for policymakers to harness the nation's intellectual capital for sustainable national development.

Concept of Absorbing Best Graduating Students

The concept of absorbing best graduating students into the civil service is a strategic human resource management approach aimed at infusing a government bureaucracy with high-caliber talent. This policy moves beyond traditional recruitment practices by creating a deliberate, merit-based pipeline that targets individuals who have demonstrated exceptional academic performance and intellectual capacity (Peters & Pierre, 2012). The core idea is to leverage the nation's intellectual capital by offering these graduates a prestigious and attractive career path in public service, thereby addressing a long-standing challenge of talent drain from the public to the private sector. By attracting the brightest minds, a government can improve its capacity for evidence-based policy-making, technological adoption, and ethical conduct, ultimately enhancing its effectiveness and legitimacy in the eyes of the public (UNDP, 2017).

Concept of Strategic Approach

The concept of a strategic approach in public sector development involves a systematic, deliberate, and forward-looking process for achieving long-term goals and creating public value. Unlike reactive or short-term planning, a strategic approach integrates strategy formulation and implementation to proactively align an organization's mission, values, and resources with its environment (Bryson, 2011). In the context of the Nigerian civil service, this entails a conscious effort to move away from ad-hoc reforms and towards a comprehensive, sustained plan that addresses systemic issues. This process includes analyzing the current environment (e.g., challenges in recruitment), defining a clear vision for the future (e.g., a knowledge-driven civil service), and developing a detailed roadmap with specific actions, resource allocation, and performance metrics to guide the organization toward its desired state (Ferlie & Ongaro, 2015).

Concept of Public Sector Development

Public sector development refers to the deliberate process of improving the performance, efficiency, and accountability of government institutions and state-owned enterprises to better serve the public. It encompasses a wide range of reforms, from modernizing administrative systems and strengthening financial management to enhancing human resource capacity and promoting good governance (Ani & Anieti, 2022). This concept is crucial for achieving a nation's broader development goals, as an effective public sector is responsible for providing essential services like education and healthcare, regulating the economy, and building critical infrastructure. By focusing on these areas, public sector development strategies aim to create a more responsive and effective government that can drive sustainable economic growth, reduce poverty, and improve the overall quality of life for its citizens (World Bank, 2018).

Challenges Impeding Nigerian Civil Service for National Development

- i. **System Inefficiency:** The Nigerian civil service suffers from significant systemic inefficiencies that hinder its capacity to drive national development. Inefficiency manifests in poor coordination between ministries, departments, and agencies (MDAs), duplication of responsibilities, and slow administrative processes. These systemic weaknesses reduce responsiveness to public needs, delay policy implementation, and contribute to wastage of

public resources. In this regard, overlapping mandates between MDAs often lead to conflicts, miscommunication, and suboptimal outcomes. Such inefficiency not only stalls economic growth but also erodes public confidence in government institutions (Okotoni, 2018).

Furthermore, systemic inefficiency is compounded by a lack of performance measurement frameworks and weak accountability structures. Without proper monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, civil servants are rarely held responsible for delays or substandard work. This fosters complacency and encourages a culture where inefficiency is normalized. In turn, the civil service struggles to meet the demands of a modern economy that requires agility, innovation, and timely service delivery. Addressing these inefficiencies will require restructuring administrative processes, investing in digital governance systems, and ensuring strict compliance with performance benchmarks (Olaopa, 2020).

- ii. **Weak Meritocracy:** Weak meritocracy remains a critical barrier to the professionalization of Nigeria's civil service. Recruitment, promotion, and appointments are often influenced by nepotism, favoritism, and ethnic or political considerations rather than competence and qualifications. This undermines the credibility of the service, discourages high-performing officers, and creates an environment where mediocrity thrives (Adebayo, 2019). In such a setting, career advancement is perceived as dependent on connections rather than hard work, which discourages merit-based competition.

The erosion of meritocracy also reduces the civil service's ability to attract and retain top talent. Graduates with high qualifications and specialized skills are less inclined to join a system where merit plays a secondary role in career progression. This weakens institutional capacity and limits the public sector's potential for innovation and excellence. Restoring meritocracy will require transparent recruitment processes, competency-based assessments, and performance-driven promotion systems backed by strong legal frameworks to prevent political or personal interference (Ezeani, 2020).

- iii. **Institutional Inertia:** Institutional inertia in the Nigerian civil service refers to the tendency of the system to resist change and maintain outdated practices. This stagnation often results from entrenched bureaucratic traditions, rigid hierarchies, and a culture that discourages innovation. Such resistance slows down reform efforts and perpetuates inefficiencies, making it difficult for the civil service to adapt to evolving socio-economic challenges (Onyeoziri, 2019). Even when reforms are introduced, they are frequently met with reluctance, leading to partial or superficial implementation.

This inertia is also reinforced by the absence of incentives for embracing new methods and technologies. Civil servants accustomed to traditional ways of working may perceive reforms as threats to their positions or routines. The result is a self-perpetuating cycle of inefficiency, where the system fails to evolve in response to national development needs. Overcoming institutional inertia requires a shift in organizational culture, continuous professional training, and leadership committed to championing innovation and change management (Olaopa, 2020)

- iv. **Political Interference:** Political interference undermines the independence, professionalism, and objectivity of the Nigerian civil service. Appointments, promotions and even disciplinary actions are often influenced by political considerations rather than administrative merit. This politicization disrupts continuity in governance, as each new administration may replace competent officers with political loyalists (Adebayo, 2019).

Such practices compromise the neutrality of the civil service and weaken its role as a stable and impartial instrument of governance.

Moreover, political interference can distort policy priorities, diverting attention from long-term developmental goals toward short-term political gains. This erodes institutional stability, discourages qualified professionals, and undermines trust in public institutions. Strengthening civil service laws, ensuring tenure security for positions, and insulating administrative processes from political manipulation are essential steps to reduce the damaging effects of political interference (Ezeani, 2020).

- v. ***Inefficiency and Bureaucratic Red Tape:*** Bureaucratic red tape in the Nigerian civil service manifests through excessive paperwork, overly centralized decision-making, and rigid procedural requirements. These cumbersome processes delay policy execution, discourage innovation, and limit the ability of public institutions to respond quickly to societal needs (Okotoni, 2018). Citizens and businesses often face long delays in accessing services, which can stifle economic activity and erode public trust.

The roots of bureaucratic inefficiency lie in outdated administrative regulations and an overemphasis on process rather than results. Civil servants often follow procedures mechanically without considering their impact on efficiency or service quality. Streamlining administrative processes, decentralizing decision-making, and adopting e-governance tools can help reduce bureaucratic bottlenecks and improve service delivery. Such reforms must be backed by strong leadership commitment and institutional accountability mechanisms (Olaopa, 2020).

- vi. ***Skill Gaps and Outdated Competencies:*** Many Nigerian civil servants lack the technical, managerial, and ICT skills required for effective performance in today's knowledge-driven economy. This skill gap limits their ability to formulate and implement evidence-based policies, adopt modern technologies, and provide high-quality public services (Adeyemi & Abiodun, 2017). Inadequate training and limited access to professional development programs exacerbate this problem, leaving many officers ill-equipped to meet contemporary governance challenges.

Furthermore, outdated competencies reduce the civil service's ability to adapt to emerging global trends such as e-governance, data-driven decision-making, and sustainable development practices. Without continuous upskilling, civil servants risk becoming obsolete in their roles, thereby impeding institutional performance. Addressing this challenge requires sustained investment in capacity-building programs, partnerships with academic institutions, and mandatory training linked to career progression (Nwosu, 2021).

- vii. ***Resistance to Change and Reform:*** Resistance to change in the Nigerian civil service is rooted in a culture that values stability over innovation. Many civil servants view reforms as threats to their job security, workloads, or established routines, leading to passive or active opposition. This resistance slows reform processes and prevents the adoption of more efficient systems (Onyeoziri, 2019). Change initiatives are often abandoned mid-way due to lack of buy-in from rank-and-file employees.

Additionally, poor communication of reform objectives and benefits contributes to skepticism among civil servants. Without understanding the rationale for change, employees are less likely to commit to new systems or procedures. Overcoming this resistance requires transparent communication, participatory reform processes, and incentive structures that reward adaptability and innovation (Olaopa, 2020).

viii. ***Policy Inconsistency and Poor Implementation:*** Policy inconsistency is a major challenge to national development, as frequent changes in leadership often result in abrupt shifts in policy direction. Initiatives started under one administration are frequently abandoned or altered by the next, regardless of their developmental potential (Onyeoziri, 2019). This lack of continuity wastes resources, disrupts long-term planning, and discourages investment.

Poor implementation further compounds the problem, as many policies are inadequately funded, lack clear execution strategies, or are undermined by weak monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. The result is a proliferation of well-intentioned but ineffective initiatives that fail to achieve their objectives. Ensuring policy consistency will require stronger institutional frameworks, cross-administration agreements, and depoliticized development planning processes (Olaopa, 2020).

Justification for a Merit-Based Recruitment Policy

A merit-based recruitment policy is a fundamental pillar of effective public administration, particularly in developing nations like Nigeria. Its justification rests on the premise that the public sector's performance is directly tied to the quality of its human capital. A system that recruits based on merit defined as a combination of academic excellence, skills, and ethical disposition ensures that the most competent and qualified individuals are entrusted with the crucial task of governance. This approach contrasts sharply with patronage or quota systems that can lead to the appointment of underqualified individuals, ultimately undermining institutional capacity and public trust (Peters & Pierre, 2012). By prioritizing merit, a government signals its commitment to professionalism and efficiency, which are non-negotiable for sustainable development.

The implementation of a merit-based system is also a powerful tool for combating corruption and promoting ethical conduct. When civil service positions are earned through hard work and academic achievement, rather than through personal connections or financial influence, the incentive for corrupt practices is significantly reduced. This creates an environment where civil servants feel valued for their contributions, rather than indebted to a patron. A merit-based system also makes it easier to enforce accountability, as performance can be measured against clear standards of competence and professionalism. The perception of fairness in recruitment and promotion can boost employee morale and foster a culture of integrity, which is essential for rebuilding public confidence in government institutions (UNDP, 2017).

Furthermore, a merit-based recruitment policy is critical for fostering a knowledge-driven civil service. The challenges of the 21st century from economic diversification to climate change and technological disruption require a workforce that is not only competent but also adaptable and innovative. By recruiting the "best graduating students," the government gains access to individuals who are trained in the latest theories, methodologies, and technologies. These young professionals bring fresh perspectives and a readiness to embrace change, which can challenge outdated bureaucratic norms and introduce more efficient, data-driven approaches to policy-making and service delivery. This infusion of intellectual capital transforms the civil service from a static bureaucracy into a dynamic engine of innovation (Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 2000).

A justification for this policy is its potential to address the pervasive issue of brain drain. Nigeria's top graduates often seek opportunities abroad or in the private sector where career progression and compensation are perceived as being directly linked to performance. By creating a prestigious and attractive career path for them within the civil service, the government can retain a significant portion of this valuable talent pool. A merit-based system that offers competitive salaries, opportunities for professional development, and a clear path for advancement can make

public service a compelling alternative. This not only keeps talent within the country but also ensures that the intellectual dividends of public investment in education are reaped by the nation (World Bank, 2018).

A merit-based policy also promotes equity and inclusivity in a way that patronage systems cannot. While the "federal character" principle aims to ensure representation, it can be executed in a way that sacrifices quality for quotas. A merit-based system, however, can be designed to be transparent and fair to all, regardless of their background or connections. It empowers individuals from all regions and social strata to compete on an equal footing, provided they have the intellectual capacity and drive to succeed. This fosters a sense of national unity based on shared excellence, rather than on regional or ethnic affiliation. It sends a message that success in the public sector is a reward for hard work and talent, a powerful incentive for educational attainment across the country (Fatile & Adejuwon, 2011).

Qasim (2023) opined that the justification for a merit-based recruitment policy is multi-faceted and compelling. It is a strategic imperative for reforming the Nigerian civil service, moving it from a state of inefficiency and corruption to one of competence and integrity. By prioritizing talent, a merit-based system not only improves the immediate quality of public service but also lays the foundation for a more innovative, ethical, and knowledge-driven government. This policy is not merely about recruitment; it is about nation-building, ensuring that the country's most capable minds are at the forefront of its development agenda.

However, recruiting the best and brightest into the civil service is a critical step toward building a more competent and productive workforce. The current recruitment process is often marred by informal contacts, political patronage, and an overemphasis on the "federal character" principle, which can undermine the selection of the most qualified candidates. By creating a specific, merit-based pipeline for top graduates, the government can:

- i. ***Infuse fresh perspectives and skills:*** Infusing fresh perspectives and skills into the civil service is a direct and powerful benefit of a merit-based pipeline for top graduates. These individuals are often trained in modern academic curricula that emphasize critical thinking, data analysis, and the latest technological advancements. Their integration can challenge the status quo, introduce innovative problem-solving methods, and help bridge the skills gap often found in traditional public sector institutions. By bringing in a new generation of civil servants who are digitally literate and knowledgeable about contemporary governance practices, the government can improve its capacity for effective policy formulation and implementation, ultimately leading to better public service delivery (World Bank, 2018).
- ii. ***Enhance professionalism and ethics:*** Enhancing professionalism and ethics is a cornerstone of this merit-based strategy. When the best and brightest are recruited based on their proven competence and ethical standards, it sends a clear message that the civil service values integrity over patronage. This process helps to dismantle the pervasive culture of corruption and nepotism by creating a workforce that is accountable for its performance, not its connections. By establishing a clear link between merit and career progression, the government can foster a professional environment where public service is seen as a noble calling, not a means for personal enrichment. This systemic shift is crucial for rebuilding public trust and restoring the credibility of government institutions (UNDP, 2017).
- iii. ***Boost morale and performance:*** Boosting morale and performance is a natural consequence of a merit-based pipeline. When employees see that hard work, talent, and

dedication are the primary drivers of success, they are more likely to be motivated and engaged in their work. The presence of highly skilled and ambitious new recruits can create a healthy competitive environment, encouraging existing civil servants to improve their own performance and skills. This culture of excellence can reduce absenteeism, increase productivity, and foster a shared commitment to achieving organizational goals. A motivated and high-performing civil service is essential for translating government policies into tangible results for the populace, thereby justifying the public's investment in its institutions (Fatile & Adejuwon, 2011).

The Role of Proper Educational Planning

The successful implementation of a policy to absorb top graduates into the civil service is inextricably linked to effective educational planning. A well-structured educational system is essential to produce the kind of talent this policy seeks to attract. Proper educational planning must ensure that the curriculum is relevant to the needs of a modern civil service and a knowledge-driven economy. To foster this policy, educational planning should focus on:

- i. **Curriculum Alignment:** Curriculum alignment is a critical role of proper educational planning in preparing the best graduates for the Nigerian civil service. For the policy to be effective, universities must not operate in a vacuum; their curricula need to be strategically aligned with the specific skills, knowledge, and competencies required by a modern, knowledge-driven civil service. This means integrating courses on public policy, data analytics, project management, and digital governance into relevant degree programs. By ensuring that what is taught in classrooms directly corresponds to the needs of government ministries, departments, and agencies, educational institutions can produce graduates who are job-ready and can contribute meaningfully from day one, reducing the need for extensive on-the-job training (Marginson, 2016).
- ii. **Quality Assurance:** Quality assurance is another indispensable component. To ensure that "best graduating students" are genuinely the top tier of talent, there must be a robust and standardized system for quality control across all tertiary institutions. This involves ensuring academic integrity, maintaining rigorous examination standards, and periodically reviewing teaching methodologies and facilities. A strong quality assurance framework guarantees that a First Class degree from any accredited university signifies a consistent level of academic excellence and competence. Without this, the merit-based pipeline risks being diluted by inconsistencies in academic standards, which would undermine the credibility and effectiveness of the entire policy (Varghese, 2008).
- iii. **Manpower Planning:** Manpower planning is the third crucial role of educational planning in this context. This involves a proactive and strategic forecasting of the civil service's future human resource needs. The government, in collaboration with educational planners, must analyze demographic trends, skill shortages, and emerging policy priorities to determine the number and type of graduates required in various fields from engineering and medicine to economics and public administration. This forward-looking approach prevents a mismatch between the skills produced by the educational system and the demands of the public sector. By strategically guiding the education system to produce a talent pool that aligns with national development goals, manpower planning ensures that the merit-based pipeline is not just filled, but filled with the right people for the right jobs (Brouder & Thomas, 2018).

Fostering a Knowledge-Driven Civil Service

A knowledge-driven economy thrives on the creation, dissemination, and application of knowledge to spur innovation and growth. Absorbing best graduating students into the civil service is a direct way to accelerate this transition. By bringing in a new generation of civil servants who are digitally literate, research-oriented, and open to new ideas, the policy has significant implications for public sector development.

- i. **Improved Policy Formulation:** Improved policy formulation is a direct outcome of fostering a knowledge-driven civil service. By recruiting highly educated and skilled graduates, the government ensures that policy decisions are based on evidence, data analysis, and critical research rather than on intuition or political expediency. These individuals, trained in modern research methodologies, are better equipped to conduct thorough policy analysis, evaluate potential impacts, and design effective solutions to complex national problems. This shift towards a more rational and evidence-based approach to governance is crucial for creating policies that are both robust and effective, thereby improving public outcomes and enhancing government legitimacy (Head, 2010).
- ii. **Technological Adoption:** Technological adoption is significantly accelerated by bringing top graduates into the civil service. This new generation of civil servants is digitally native and proficient in modern information and communication technologies. Their presence can act as a catalyst for the digitization of government services, the implementation of e-governance platforms, and the effective use of data for decision-making. They can drive the modernization of bureaucratic processes, making them more efficient, transparent, and accessible to the public. By embedding technology-savvy personnel at all levels, the civil service can overcome institutional resistance to change and leverage technology to enhance service delivery and combat corruption (Pohjola, 2002).
- iii. **Enhanced Capacity for Innovation:** An enhanced capacity for innovation is a strategic advantage of a knowledge-driven civil service. The infusion of fresh, creative minds encourages a culture of continuous improvement and problem-solving. Top graduates are more likely to challenge outdated practices and propose novel solutions to long-standing issues, from infrastructure development to public health challenges. By creating an environment that values intellectual capital and rewards new ideas, the government can transform the civil service from a rigid bureaucracy into a hub of innovation. This not only improves internal efficiency but also positions the public sector as a leader in addressing national challenges and driving societal progress (Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 2000).

Cost Considerations in the Implementation of Merit-Based Recruitment Policy

Implementing a merit-based recruitment policy for top graduates in Nigeria's civil service involves significant costing considerations that must be carefully managed. The initial financial outlay for such a reform can be substantial, as it requires overhauling outdated recruitment processes. This includes the cost of designing and administering credible, standardized, and transparent entry examinations, which often involves significant logistical planning, technological infrastructure, and the engagement of independent bodies to ensure integrity. Furthermore, a competitive compensation package is essential to attract the best talent, as top graduates often have more lucrative offers from the private sector or international organizations. Without

competitive salaries and benefits, the policy risks being ineffective, as the most qualified candidates may still choose to pursue other opportunities (International Growth Centre, 2019).

The investment in a merit-based system goes beyond just the recruitment phase and extends to long-term human resource development. To maintain a knowledge-driven civil service, there must be a continuous investment in training, skill-upgrading, and professional development programs for these new recruits. This includes funding for both internal training initiatives and sponsoring further education for high-performing civil servants. The budgetary commitment must also account for a performance management system that links promotion and career advancement to measurable outputs, a element of a merit-based system. While these costs are significant, they are an investment in human capital that yields substantial returns in the long run through improved efficiency and effectiveness (Agyenim-Boateng & Adjei-Twum, 2021).

According to Azuka (2024), cost considerations must also weigh the direct costs of recruitment against the indirect benefits and potential savings. A merit-based system, while expensive to implement initially, can lead to long-term savings by reducing waste and corruption (Kong-Kola, 2020). A competent and ethical civil service is better equipped to manage public finances, leading to improved fiscal discipline and more efficient allocation of resources. The use of technology in the recruitment process, such as online applications and digital assessments, can streamline operations and reduce administrative overheads over time. Furthermore, a high-performing civil service can deliver better public services at a lower cost, generating economic value that far exceeds the initial investment in talent acquisition (World Bank, 2018).

It is perceived that the effective costing of the policy requires a holistic approach that aligns with broader public financial management (PFM) reforms. The success of the recruitment policy is intertwined with the government's ability to manage its wage bill sustainably. Implementing a new pay structure for top graduates must be done within a realistic medium-term fiscal framework to prevent undue pressure on the national budget. A well-designed policy will identify sources of funding, potentially from savings generated by tackling ghost workers through systems like the Integrated Payroll and Personnel Information System (IPPIS) (Uchime, & Onuorah, 2024). Ultimately, the cost of not implementing a merit-based system in terms of corruption, inefficiency, and poor governance is far greater than the cost of implementing it strategically.

Conclusion

The deliberate absorption of top graduating students into the Nigerian civil service represents a strategic and forward-thinking approach to public sector development. The paper has demonstrated that this policy is not merely about recruitment, but about a fundamental shift toward a meritocratic, knowledge-driven, and ethical civil service. By creating a specific pipeline for high-caliber talent, the government can effectively infuse the public sector with fresh perspectives, modern skills, and a strong work ethic, which are crucial for combating inefficiency and corruption. This approach, however, is contingent on the proper alignment of educational planning with the needs of the civil service, ensuring that universities produce graduates with the relevant competencies required for 21st century governance.

Ultimately, this policy serves as a powerful catalyst for institutional reform, laying the groundwork for a more effective and responsive government. In conclusion, the successful implementation of this policy hinges on a holistic and integrated strategy. It requires a sustained commitment from political leadership, a transparent and standardized recruitment process, and a continuous investment in the training and development of civil servants. The long-term benefits

including improved policy formulation, enhanced technological adoption, and a greater capacity for innovation far outweigh the initial costing considerations. By strategically harnessing the nation's intellectual capital, Nigeria can transform its civil service into a dynamic engine of development, capable of addressing complex national challenges and fostering sustainable, inclusive growth for all its citizens.

Suggestions

Based on the analysis of civil service reform and best practices in Nigeria and similar contexts, the following are suggestions to guide the strategic absorption of best graduating students into the civil service.

- a. The government should establish a dedicated, high-level program to identify, recruit, and integrate top-tier graduates. This program, perhaps named the "Presidential Graduate Fellowship" or a similar title, would be managed by a specialized unit within the Office of the Head of the Civil Service of the Federation (OHCSF).
- b. To effectively attract and retain the best graduates, the government must review and revise the civil service salary structure and benefits. This should offer a competitive salary that aligns with what is obtainable in the private sector for similar skills and qualifications.
- c. A formal and continuous collaboration between the Office of the Head of the Civil Service of the Federation (OHCSF) and the National Universities Commission (NUC) is essential. The objective is to align university curricula with the practical needs of the civil service in areas such as digital governance, data analytics, public financial management, and project management.
- d. Upon recruitment, top graduates should be enrolled in a mandatory, structured mentorship program. They should be paired with experienced, high-performing senior civil servants who can guide them in navigating the bureaucratic system, understanding public service ethics, and applying their skills effectively.
- e. To build and maintain public trust, the recruitment process for this talent pipeline must be transparent and technology-driven. The government should develop a secure online portal for all stages of recruitment, from application to examination and selection. The use of automated systems for initial screening and computerized-based testing (CBT) will reduce human interference and the potential for corruption.
- f. Finally, to sustain a culture of excellence, the government must move away from a seniority-based promotion system. The recommendation is to institutionalize a robust performance management framework where career advancement and promotions for these top graduates are determined by measurable key performance indicators (KPIs) and demonstrable achievements.

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