

INVESTIGATING STRUCTURAL CAREER PLATEAU AND THE PERFORMANCE OF ACADEMICS IN THE INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER LEARNING

ANÁLISE DO ESTAGNAÇÃO ESTRUTURAL NA CARREIRA E DO DESEMPENHO DOS DOCENTES NAS INSTITUIÇÕES DE ENSINO SUPERIOR

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Abstract

The professional growth and productivity of university lecturers are essential drivers of academic excellence, yet structural career plateau remains a persistent challenge in higher education. This research investigates how structural career plateau affects academics' job performance, with particular attention to career stagnation and its impact on teaching quality. The study focused on a total population of 6,250 academic staff, from which 362 were chosen through stratified sampling using proportional representation. Information was gathered using structured questionnaires, and the data were analysed with descriptive statistical methods and Spearman's Rank Correlation through SPSS software. The results indicated a strong and statistically significant association between structural career plateau and the performance of academics. The study concludes that structural career plateau significantly impacts academics' performance. It is recommended that institutions of higher learning adopt policies to improve career progression, institutionalize continuous professional development, and provide mentorship and sabbatical opportunities, thereby

Resumo

O crescimento profissional e a produtividade dos professores universitários são fatores essenciais para a excelência acadêmica; no entanto, o estagnação estrutural na carreira continua sendo um desafio persistente no ensino superior. Esta pesquisa investiga como a estagnação estrutural na carreira afeta o desempenho profissional dos docentes, com especial atenção à estagnação na carreira e seu impacto na qualidade do ensino. O estudo concentrou-se em uma população total de 6.250 docentes, dos quais 362 foram selecionados por meio de amostragem estratificada utilizando representação proporcional. As informações foram coletadas por meio de questionários estruturados, e os dados foram analisados com métodos estatísticos descritivos e a correlação de Spearman por meio do software SPSS. Os resultados indicaram uma associação forte e estatisticamente significativa entre o estagnação estrutural na carreira e o desempenho dos acadêmicos. O estudo conclui que o estagnação estrutural da carreira impacta significativamente o desempenho dos docentes. Recomenda-se que as instituições de ensino



enhancing academics' performances, student outcomes, and overall institutional effectiveness.

Keywords: Academics. Career Stagnation. Performance. Structural Career Plateau. Teaching Effectiveness.

superior adotem políticas para melhorar a progressão na carreira, institucionalizem o desenvolvimento profissional contínuo e ofereçam oportunidades de mentoria e licença sabática, melhorando assim o desempenho dos docentes, os resultados dos alunos e a eficácia institucional geral.

Palavras-chave: Docentes. Estagnação na Carreira. Desempenho. Estagnação Estrutural da Carreira. Eficácia do Ensino.

1 INTRODUCTION

Structural career plateau refers to a condition in which employees experience limited opportunities for upward movement due to organisational constraints rather than personal inadequacies. The concept originates from early career research, where career advancement was conceptualised as a hierarchical and linear progression within organisations (FERENCE *et al.*, 1977). In such traditional models, promotion to higher ranks signified success, professional growth, and increasing organisational influence. However, contemporary organisations, particularly, especially in knowledge-intensive institutions such as universities, structural limitations such as a limited number of senior positions, rigid hierarchies, and slow turnover contribute to prolonged periods without promotion or advancement, resulting in career stagnation (CHANG *et al.*, 2024). Career stagnation occurs when employees remain at the same rank for extended periods despite having the required competence and experience, reflecting the effects of structural barriers that impede vertical career movement (CHANG *et al.*, 2024). Empirical evidence indicates that career plateaus are increasingly associated with negative outcomes such as diminished job performance, reduced organisational justice perceptions, and lowered employee engagement when advancement opportunities are perceived as limited (CHANG *et al.*, 2024; *European Management Journal*, 2025). Furthermore, recent organisational research highlights how structural constraints on career progression can lead to alienation and disengagement, underscoring the relevance of career stagnation as a practical proxy for structural career plateau in contemporary career studies (*European Management Journal*, 2025). In modern organisational contexts, structural career plateau is largely

shaped by institutional characteristics such as flattened hierarchies, limited senior positions, rigid promotion policies, and constrained financial resources. These organisational realities restrict advancement opportunities even for highly competent and productive employees (Ng & Feldman, 2014). Unlike a psychological career plateau, which reflects subjective perceptions of stagnation, a structural career plateau is objectively rooted in organisational design and governance systems that limit mobility regardless of individual performance (Erdogan & Bauer, 2021). As organisations reduce managerial layers and stabilise workforce structures, promotion opportunities become scarce, thereby increasing the likelihood of employees remaining in the same rank for prolonged periods. A telling example from Nigerian universities illustrates this phenomenon: in several federal institutions in the South-East, lecturers who have consistently published in reputable journals, supervised postgraduate students, and contributed to administrative committees often remain at the lecturer or senior lecturer level for more than a decade. Despite meeting the formal requirements for promotion, bureaucratic delays, limited higher-rank positions, and occasional politicisation of appointments have stalled their career progression, leading to frustration, reduced motivation, and disengagement (Agu *et al.*, 2023; Qureshi *et al.*, 2022). This scenario underscores how structural constraints, rather than individual inadequacy, drive career stagnation, highlighting the urgent need for transparent promotion policies, mentorship programmes, and professional development initiatives to sustain academic engagement and performance. Within academia, structural career plateau is particularly pronounced due to the highly formalised nature of promotion systems and the limited availability of senior academic positions. Academic career progression is typically regulated by stringent criteria related to research output, tenure requirements, teaching effectiveness, and administrative approvals, all of which are embedded within institutional and regulatory frameworks. Teaching effectiveness, often assessed through student evaluations, peer reviews, and instructional innovations, represents a core dimension of academic performance; however, excellence in teaching alone rarely guarantees upward mobility when promotion pathways are structurally constrained. Consequently, many academics experience delayed or stalled career progression not because of inadequate competence or performance, but due to institutional bottlenecks and capped senior roles (Ng & Feldman, 2022). This situation is further exacerbated in universities where growth

in student enrolment and academic staff strength is not accompanied by a corresponding expansion in senior academic positions, thereby intensifying career stagnation despite sustained effectiveness in teaching and other academic responsibilities. Empirical evidence consistently links structural career plateau to adverse work outcomes. Research demonstrates that employees experiencing structural stagnation report lower job satisfaction, reduced organisational commitment, and diminished work engagement (Erdogan & Bauer, 2021). In academic settings, these outcomes manifest as declining research productivity, reduced enthusiasm for teaching, and limited participation in institutional governance. Structural constraints that inhibit promotion can weaken academics' motivation to invest in long-term scholarly activities, particularly when efforts are perceived as unlikely to yield career advancement (Ng & Feldman, 2014). Over time, this can undermine institutional research output, teaching quality, and leadership capacity. Furthermore, prolonged exposure to a structural career plateau has been associated with withdrawal behaviours, including reduced discretionary effort and intentions to exit the organisation or profession altogether (Erdogan & Bauer, 2021). For universities, the persistence of structural career plateau represents not only a human resource challenge but also a strategic risk, as disengaged academic staff weaken institutional performance and competitiveness. Ideally, academic careers within federal universities should follow structured, transparent, and merit-based progression systems in which excellence in teaching, research, and service is equitably recognised and rewarded. Promotion criteria in higher education are most effective when they balance objective research output measures with indicators of teaching quality, professional engagement, and institutional service, and when these criteria are clearly communicated to academic staff (Nature Editorial, 2024). In such systems, teaching effectiveness should be assessed through validated instruments such as student feedback, peer review, and evidence of pedagogical innovation, with regular access to professional development opportunities that enhance pedagogical skills (Nature Editorial, 2024). Likewise, research productivity measured through publications in reputable journals and success in securing competitive funding should be supported with institutional resources, including research infrastructure and collaborative networks that enable sustained scholarly activity (Nature Editorial, 2024). Engagement in university governance and leadership roles also constitutes an important dimension of academic contribution and should be

acknowledged within promotion frameworks, as this engagement strengthens institutional effectiveness and accountability. The literature on academic careers emphasises that organisational structures and policies play a central role in shaping career dynamics, such that transparent, equitable, and responsive promotion systems contribute to higher levels of job satisfaction and professional commitment (Nature Editorial, 2024). Recent research also highlights that opaque or metric-biased promotion criteria, particularly in contexts with high reliance on quantitative research outputs, can entrench inequities and diminish motivation among academics (Nature Editorial, 2024). Structural supports such as mentoring, workshops, and career planning programmes are thus essential for helping academics navigate promotion pathways and sustain high performance throughout their careers. Nevertheless, in several federal universities across South-Eastern Nigeria, these goals are often compromised due to the persistent challenge of structural career plateau. Empirical research focusing on federal universities in Nigeria has identified structural career plateau as a significant barrier to academic performance, with limited promotional opportunities, bureaucratic delays, and unclear advancement criteria negatively affecting staff productivity and engagement (Agu *et al.*, 2023). Structural career plateau in these contexts is characterised by prolonged tenure in the same academic rank regardless of individual competence, reflecting rigid organisational hierarchies and constrained career pathways (Agu *et al.*, 2023). The consequences of structural career plateau are substantial. Studies in similar academic contexts have shown that structural constraints on career progression are associated with reduced motivation and diminished performance outcomes, including lower research output and weakened engagement in professional activities (Chang *et al.*, 2024; Agu *et al.*, 2023). In particular, a structural career plateau can discourage academic innovation, reduce commitment to teaching improvement, and limit active participation in governance roles, thereby undermining both individual career fulfilment and institutional effectiveness (Chang *et al.*, 2024). Over time, these dynamics can erode student outcomes, diminish academic standards, and weaken the competitiveness of federal universities within national and global higher education landscapes. Addressing structural career plateau, therefore, requires organisational interventions such as transparent promotion systems, alternative career pathways, and expanded recognition of diverse academic contributions beyond traditional promotion criteria. Therefore, understanding how structural career plateau

impacts academic performance in South-East Nigeria's federal universities is crucial for informing policy reforms that strengthen promotion systems, support professional development, and enhance institutional excellence.

2 STUDY OBJECTIVES

The primary objective of this study is to investigate the impact of structural career plateau on the performance of academics. The specific objective is to determine the extent to which career stagnation affects teaching effectiveness.

3 UNDERSTANDING THE RELATED LITERATURE

3.1 Theory of social exchange

Social Exchange Theory (SET), originally advanced by Blau (1964) and Homans (1958), explains social behaviour as a process of reciprocal exchanges in which individuals evaluate relationships based on perceived costs and benefits. Within organisational contexts, SET posits that employees invest effort, loyalty, and performance in anticipation of valued returns such as recognition, career advancement, professional development, and job security. When organisations reciprocate these investments fairly, positive work attitudes and sustained performance are reinforced; when reciprocity is perceived as absent or inequitable, commitment and discretionary effort decline (Cropanzano *et al.*, 2017; Shore *et al.*, 2020). Applied to higher education, Social Exchange Theory provides a compelling framework for understanding the effects of structural career plateau, particularly in federal universities where promotion systems are rigid and advancement opportunities are limited. Structural career plateau occurs when organisational constraints such as capped senior positions, bureaucratic promotion procedures, and resource limitations prevent upward mobility irrespective of academic competence or performance (Erdogan & Bauer, 2021; Ng & Feldman, 2022). From a social exchange perspective, such conditions signal a breakdown in reciprocity between academics and their institutions. When sustained investments in teaching excellence, research productivity, and institutional service do not translate into promotions,

leadership opportunities, or professional recognition, academics may reassess the value of continued high-level engagement. In federal universities in South-East Nigeria, structural career plateau is particularly salient due to prolonged promotion timelines, limited professorial slots, and inconsistencies in promotion implementation. Within the logic of Social Exchange Theory, these structural constraints alter the perceived balance between contributions and rewards. Academics who perceive that institutional rewards are no longer commensurate with their efforts may respond by reducing work engagement as a means of restoring balance in the exchange relationship (Shore *et al.*, 2020). Empirical evidence across higher education contexts indicates that career stagnation is associated with reduced motivation, lower organisational commitment, and declining performance outcomes, especially in research and teaching (Erdogan & Bauer, 2021; Chang *et al.*, 2024). This imbalance in social exchange relationships often manifests behaviourally through diminished research output, reduced innovation in teaching, and withdrawal from governance and service roles. Research productivity may decline as academics perceive limited career returns from publishing or grant acquisition, while teaching effectiveness may suffer due to reduced investment in curriculum development and student mentorship. Studies grounded in Social Exchange Theory demonstrate that when employees experience unmet expectations regarding career progression, they are more likely to engage in withdrawal behaviours and limit contributions beyond core contractual duties (Cropanzano *et al.*, 2017; Ng & Feldman, 2022). In academic institutions, such behaviours can undermine student learning outcomes, collegial governance, and institutional competitiveness.

Furthermore, Social Exchange Theory highlights the role of the psychological contract, the implicit set of expectations between employees and organisations in shaping responses to structural career plateau. When promotion systems are perceived as opaque or inequitable, trust in institutional leadership erodes, weakening the social exchange relationship and intensifying disengagement (Shore *et al.*, 2020). Over time, this erosion may prompt academics to redirect effort toward external opportunities such as consultancy, international mobility, or alternative income sources, thereby reducing their commitment to institutional goals. These dynamics are particularly damaging in resource-constrained university systems, where institutional success depends heavily on the sustained commitment and intellectual contributions of academic staff.

3.2 Structural career plateau

Structural career plateau has become an increasingly prominent concern in contemporary organisational and higher education research, particularly within institutions characterised by rigid promotion systems and limited advancement opportunities (Herlina *et al.*, 2025). In federal universities in South-East Nigeria, structural career plateau is especially pronounced due to entrenched institutional arrangements that constrain upward mobility regardless of individual competence, productivity, or professional commitment. Unlike personal or content-related career plateaus, which are often associated with declining motivation or skill mismatch, a structural career plateau is rooted in organisational architecture and governance systems. It emerges from bureaucratic rigidity, narrow hierarchical structures, limited promotional positions, and institutional power dynamics that systematically restrict career progression for academic staff (Yang *et al.*, 2019; Wang *et al.*, 2020; Yaqoup, 2025). Structural career plateau is commonly conceptualised as a sustained period during which employees experience minimal or no opportunity for vertical advancement as a result of organisational constraints rather than personal limitations. Empirical evidence consistently indicates that this situation is linked to adverse psychological and behavioural consequences, such as increased emotional fatigue, lower levels of work motivation, and a decline in job performance (Lee *et al.*, 2021; Park *et al.*, 2023). In public university systems, where academic ranks are rigidly defined and promotion remains the primary indicator of career success, the consequences of structural plateau are particularly severe. When promotion timelines extend far beyond stipulated guidelines, academics increasingly perceive their career trajectories as blocked, fostering frustration and disengagement. Ufomba *et al.* (2025b) assert that the growing prevalence of moonlighting behaviour among public sector workers raises critical concerns regarding its implications for organisational commitment and job performance. This phenomenon can be closely linked to structural career plateau, as limited promotion opportunities, prolonged career stagnation, and rigid hierarchical structures often reduce employees' expectations of upward mobility within public organisations. When career progression is perceived as structurally constrained rather than merit-based, employees may seek alternative sources of income, professional fulfilment, or career growth outside their primary employment. Consequently,

moonlighting may emerge as a coping or adaptive response to structural career plateau, reflecting employees' attempts to offset stalled career trajectories and perceived inequities within the organisation. Such behaviour can, in turn, weaken organisational commitment and divert effort away from core job responsibilities, thereby affecting overall job performance. In Nigerian federal universities, structural impediments to career advancement are embedded within bureaucratic promotion procedures and hierarchical governance frameworks. Promotion processes are frequently prolonged by administrative bottlenecks, inconsistent evaluation practices, and limited institutional support for meeting promotion requirements. Although research productivity remains a core criterion for advancement, academics often face structural barriers such as inadequate research funding, excessive teaching workloads, and limited access to mentorship and international research networks. These constraints disproportionately affect early- and mid-career academics, reinforcing perceptions of career immobility and institutional neglect. Similar patterns have been documented across public higher education systems in developing and emerging economies, where structural inefficiencies exacerbate career stagnation among academic professionals (Wang *et al.*, 2020; Qureshi *et al.*, 2022). Ambiguity and inconsistency in promotion criteria further intensify the experience of structural career plateau. When standards for advancement are perceived as unclear or unevenly applied, academics are more likely to interpret promotion outcomes as politically influenced rather than merit-based. Research suggests that such perceptions of organisational injustice significantly amplify the negative effects of career plateau, leading to reduced organisational commitment, job dissatisfaction, and psychological withdrawal from work roles (Lee *et al.*, 2021; Park *et al.*, 2023). In academic environments, where professional identity is closely tied to scholarly recognition and rank progression, these perceptions erode trust in institutional leadership and weaken long-term engagement. Beyond vertical advancement, a structural career plateau is reinforced by limited access to lateral developmental opportunities. Opportunities such as sabbatical leave, administrative leadership roles, interdisciplinary research collaboration, and international academic exchange play a critical role in sustaining career vitality. However, in many public universities, these opportunities are either scarce or inequitably distributed, depriving academics of alternative pathways for growth and professional renewal. Contemporary career theory emphasises that sustainable academic careers

require continuous learning, role expansion, and skill diversification rather than exclusive reliance on hierarchical promotion (De Vos *et al.*, 2020). When such developmental mechanisms are structurally constrained, career plateau becomes a persistent organisational condition rather than a temporary career phase. Scholars have long recognised career plateauing as a multidimensional phenomenon, distinguishing among hierarchical, content, and personal plateaus. Hierarchical plateauing, which closely aligns with structural career plateau, refers specifically to the absence of promotion prospects despite an individual's readiness and capability to assume higher-level responsibilities. This form of plateau is particularly prevalent in academic systems governed by rigid rank structures, where advancement opportunities are limited to narrowly defined positions and often influenced by tenure, timing, or institutional politics rather than scholarly merit alone (Yang *et al.*, 2019; Park *et al.*, 2023). Consequently, career progression becomes shaped not only by academic achievement but also by access to informal power networks and structural positioning within the institution. The growing scholarly attention to structural career plateau reflects increasing recognition of its detrimental implications for employee well-being and institutional sustainability. For academics in developing contexts, particularly within Nigerian federal universities, structural career plateau represents more than an individual career challenge; it constitutes a systemic human resource issue that undermines motivation, innovation, and long-term faculty retention. Persistent career blockage weakens intellectual vitality, disrupts succession planning, and ultimately compromises the capacity of universities to fulfil their teaching and research mandates. Addressing structural career plateau, therefore, requires comprehensive institutional reforms aimed at enhancing transparency, expanding developmental opportunities, and aligning promotion systems with principles of equity, merit, and sustainable career development (De Vos *et al.*, 2020; Wang *et al.*, 2020).

3.3 Career stagnation

Career stagnation has increasingly been recognised as a significant concept within organisational behaviour and higher education research, particularly in systems characterised by rigid career hierarchies and limited opportunities for advancement. Career stagnation refers to prolonged periods during which individuals experience little

or no progress in their professional growth, whether through vertical promotion or lateral developmental roles, despite possessing the qualifications, experience, and motivation to advance (Wang *et al.*, 2020; Darling & Cunningham, 2023). In academic institutions where structural career plateau conditions prevail, stagnation is often driven by organisational inertia and bureaucratic constraints rather than individual inadequacies. In such settings, promotion processes are frequently prolonged by opaque evaluation criteria, lengthy administrative procedures, and inadequate institutional support for meeting advancement benchmarks. Empirical research in public sector contexts highlights how these structural impediments contribute to blocked career trajectories, as opportunities for mentorship, research support, and professional development are unevenly distributed or insufficiently institutionalised (Darling & Cunningham, 2023; Chang *et al.*, 2024). This institutional rigidity creates an environment where even high-performing faculty members perceive their career paths as constrained, reinforcing a sense of professional stagnation. The psychological and emotional implications of career stagnation are profound. When academics perceive that sustained effort, scholarly contributions, and professional achievements do not lead to meaningful career progression, they are likely to experience declines in intrinsic motivation, professional fulfilment, and job satisfaction. Studies examining the effects of career plateau, including stagnation, demonstrate that employees in such positions frequently report elevated levels of emotional exhaustion, decreased organisational commitment, and reduced engagement in core job functions (Chang *et al.*, 2024; Qureshi *et al.*, 2022). These outcomes resonate with broader career research showing that persistent stagnation undermines individual well-being and weakens internal drivers of performance, such as autonomy and a sense of professional purpose. Behaviourally, prolonged stagnation often manifests in reduced enthusiasm for teaching, diminished research productivity, and lower participation in institutional initiatives. Academics who feel structurally constrained may disengage from their roles or exhibit decreases in organisational citizenship behaviours, which in turn can weaken departmental morale and collegial collaboration. Recent studies show that such disengagement not only impacts individual performance but also has cumulative effects on institutional output and workplace climate (Wang *et al.*, 2020; Park *et al.*, 2023). Additionally, career stagnation has been associated with increased turnover intentions and

higher rates of workplace withdrawal, as faculty members seek alternative employment or psychologically detach from their work (Qureshi *et al.*, 2022).

The implications of career stagnation are particularly serious within academic institutions, where the quality of education, mentorship, and research innovation depends heavily on the sustained motivation and engagement of faculty. When structural factors impede career progression and recognition, the broader mission of universities to generate and disseminate knowledge is compromised. Furthermore, stagnated career structures hinder talent retention and succession planning, resulting in a loss of institutional memory and disruptions in academic continuity. Longitudinal career research underscores that sustained stagnation is not merely a static career plateau but a dynamic process that can deteriorate over time without organisational intervention (Park *et al.*, 2023). Addressing career stagnation thus requires systemic institutional reforms that go beyond ad hoc solutions. Effective strategies include the development and consistent application of transparent promotion criteria, the expansion of lateral and developmental career pathways (such as research leadership roles, interdisciplinary collaboration opportunities, and structured mentorship), and merit-based advancement systems that reward innovation and productivity rather than seniority alone. Institutional leadership must also foster a professional culture that supports continuous growth and recognises diverse forms of academic contribution. Without such reforms, career stagnation will persist as a structural barrier, stifling individual potential and limiting the collective excellence of academic institutions.

3.4 Performance of academics

Academic performance among university faculty encompasses multiple dimensions, including teaching effectiveness, research productivity, and service contributions to the institution (Brew & Boud, 2020). Ufomba *et al.* (2025a) assert that in the past, academic performance assessment was mainly based on subjective evaluations rather than standardised criteria. These elements collectively determine the quality and impact of academics' work within higher education institutions. However, the ability of academics to sustain high performance levels is closely tied to their career development trajectory. A significant impediment to continuous growth and productivity is career

plateau, a state in which faculty members perceive limited opportunities for either vertical promotion or lateral movement within the institution (Ng & Feldman, 2022). This perception of career stagnation often stems from structural limitations, such as a rigid hierarchical system, scarcity of senior positions, or insufficient institutional mechanisms for professional development (Monyei, Ufomba & Ukpere, 2025; Gupta & Kumar, 2023). The consequences of experiencing a career plateau extend beyond personal frustration; they are associated with diminished motivation, reduced job satisfaction, and lowered engagement with professional duties (Lopez & Hall, 2021). In academia, where intrinsic motivation fuels innovative teaching and rigorous research, such declines can have tangible impacts on performance outcomes. Specifically, plateaued academics may show decreased enthusiasm for developing and implementing effective teaching methods, which adversely affects student learning experiences. Moreover, research output may decline as faculty reduce their involvement in scholarly activities, collaborative projects, and grant-seeking endeavours (Martínez & Rojas, 2022). Beyond teaching and research, plateau effects can also reduce participation in institutional service roles, thereby limiting academics' overall contribution to university goals. Therefore, career plateau represents a critical challenge that can significantly undermine academic performance and, by extension, the success of higher education institutions. Teaching quality, a cornerstone of academic performance, is often compromised when faculty experience a career plateau. The absence of career progression prospects may lead to decreased enthusiasm for pedagogical innovation and professional development (Gupta & Kumar, 2023). Consequently, plateaued academics might show diminished engagement in adopting new teaching methods, negatively impacting student learning experiences (Lopez & Hall, 2021). Research productivity, another vital dimension of academic performance, also suffers in the context of a career plateau. Research indicates that a perceived lack of growth opportunities correlates with lower research output due to diminished intrinsic motivation and decreased institutional support (Martínez & Rojas, 2022). Additionally, plateaued academics may be less inclined to seek collaborative projects or pursue competitive grants, further limiting their scholarly contributions (Cheng *et al.*, 2023). The organisational environment plays a crucial role in either mitigating or exacerbating career plateau effects. Supportive administrative policies and clear career development pathways can alleviate feelings of stagnation, thereby sustaining academic motivation and

performance (Smith & Johnson, 2023). Conversely, rigid hierarchical structures and excessive bureaucratic demands intensify plateau experiences, reducing faculty engagement and innovation (Ng & Feldman, 2022). Studies emphasise the importance of proactive institutional strategies, such as mentorship programs, flexible career paths, and opportunities for skill diversification, to counteract career plateau and enhance academic performance (Chen *et al.*, 2022; Gupta & Kumar, 2023). Addressing career plateau not only benefits individual academics but also improves overall institutional effectiveness and academic excellence. Career plateau represents a significant barrier to optimal academic performance. Institutions must prioritise career development interventions to maintain faculty motivation, promote teaching excellence, and sustain research productivity in an increasingly competitive academic landscape.

3.5 Teaching effectiveness

Teaching effectiveness is a fundamental component of academic performance, reflecting the ability of faculty to facilitate student learning, engage diverse learners, and foster critical thinking skills (Green & Bowden, 2021). Effective teaching not only benefits students' academic outcomes but also enhances faculty's professional satisfaction and institutional reputation. However, the experience of a career plateau can substantially undermine teaching effectiveness. When academics perceive limited opportunities for advancement, their intrinsic motivation to innovate in pedagogy and pursue continuous professional development may decline (Gupta & Kumar, 2023). This reduction in motivation often translates into less engagement with new teaching methods, reduced willingness to adopt technology-enhanced learning tools, and diminished participation in faculty development programs (Lopez & Hall, 2021). For example, plateaued faculty may revert to routine teaching practices, avoiding experimentation with active learning or inclusive pedagogy approaches that require additional effort and creativity (Ng & Feldman, 2022). Furthermore, career plateau can impact the psychological well-being of academics, increasing feelings of frustration and job dissatisfaction, which are negatively correlated with teaching performance (Nguyen *et al.*, 2023). Academics who feel professionally stuck are less likely to invest energy in preparing dynamic course content or providing individualized student support, which are

critical for effective teaching. Research has also shown that faculty with higher career satisfaction report greater engagement in mentoring and advising roles, which contribute to holistic student development (Smith & Johnson, 2023). Conversely, those experiencing career stagnation may withdraw from such activities, further diminishing their overall teaching impact. Institutional strategies to address career plateau, such as offering opportunities for lateral career development, pedagogical training, and recognition for teaching excellence, have been shown to reinvigorate faculty motivation and improve teaching quality (Chen *et al.*, 2022). By fostering an environment that supports continuous growth and values teaching contributions, higher education institutions can mitigate the negative effects of career plateau and sustain high standards of teaching effectiveness.

3.6 Empirical insights

Recent empirical research highlights the pervasive impact of career plateau on employee and academic performance across diverse contexts. Chang *et al.* (2024) examined 368 employee supervisor pairs to investigate the relationship between career plateau and job performance, with a focus on the mediating role of perceived organisational justice. Their study found that employees experiencing a career plateau reported lower job performance and diminished perceptions of fairness within their organisations. Notably, employees with low positive psychological capital were more adversely affected. The authors concluded that a career plateau undermines performance outcomes, particularly when individuals perceive a lack of reward for their contributions. They recommended that organisations enhance fairness in promotion and reward systems while strengthening employees' psychological capital through mentoring and coaching programs. Similarly, Agu *et al.* (2023) explored both structural and content career plateau among academic staff at the University of Nigeria, Enugu Campus. Using data collected from 305 respondents and analyzed through multiple regression techniques, the study revealed that both forms of plateau negatively influenced research productivity, teaching effectiveness, and participation in administrative roles. The researchers identified institutional constraints, such as limited promotional opportunities and bureaucratic bottlenecks, as key drivers of career stagnation. To address these challenges, they

recommended that universities adopt transparent promotion policies, expand lateral and developmental career pathways, including research grants, administrative roles, and sabbaticals, and ensure equitable access to professional development initiatives. Qureshi *et al.* (2022) further corroborate these findings by examining the effects of career stagnation on job performance across multiple sectors. Their results indicated that perceptions of career plateau reduced job satisfaction and organisational commitment, which in turn impaired overall performance. The study concluded that career stagnation significantly diminishes employee engagement and effectiveness. Accordingly, the authors suggested that organisations foster transparent promotion systems, structured career advancement pathways, and a culture of organisational justice to sustain employee motivation and performance. In addition to performance metrics, career plateau has been shown to influence the psychological and emotional well-being of employees. Bai *et al.* (2023) investigated the motivational and emotional correlates of career plateau among professionals and found that plateaued employees exhibited lower intrinsic motivation and higher levels of negative work emotions. These emotional states were associated with reduced engagement and productivity. The study recommended proactive career management strategies, such as mentoring programs, skill development initiatives, and opportunities for lateral growth, to maintain motivation and mitigate performance declines associated with career plateau. Finally, Wang *et al.* (2020) conducted a comprehensive review of empirical studies on career plateau, summarising its effects on job performance, satisfaction, and broader organisational outcomes. Their review concluded that structural career plateau consistently undermines work performance and diminishes employee engagement across professions, including academic settings. They recommended that organisations and universities implement multi-faceted strategies combining clear promotion criteria, professional development opportunities, and recognition mechanisms to counteract the negative consequences of career plateau and sustain institutional performance. Collectively, these studies underscore the detrimental effects of career plateau on both individual performance and organisational effectiveness. They consistently highlight the importance of transparent promotion systems, structured professional development, mentoring, and recognition frameworks as critical interventions to mitigate career stagnation and support sustained academic and professional productivity.

4 MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study utilises an integrated survey and descriptive research design to investigate the effect of structural career plateau on the performance of academics in the institutions of higher learning in South-Eastern Nigeria. The survey approach is considered appropriate because it offers a structured means of studying large populations through representative sampling, thereby enabling the collection of firsthand data that reflects the views and experiences of lecturers (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The descriptive aspect enhances this approach by facilitating the systematic description and interpretation of the study population's characteristics, behaviours, and outcomes without manipulating variables, thus providing a holistic understanding of the phenomenon being examined. The choice of federal universities in South-East Nigeria, namely the University of Nigeria, Enugu Campus (UNEC), Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka (UNIZIK), Federal University of Technology, Owerri (FUTO), Michael Okpara University of Agriculture, Umudike (MOUAU), and Alex Ekwueme Federal University, Ndufu-Alike (AE-FUNAI) is based on their institutional relevance and strategic importance within the regional higher education landscape. Collectively, these universities reflect variation in staff strength, academic fields, and administrative frameworks, making them suitable for analysing career plateau and its implications for academic productivity. In addition, these institutions play key roles in teaching, research, and community development in South-East Nigeria, ensuring that the study's findings remain both contextually relevant and transferable to similar federal universities. Both primary and secondary sources of data were used in this study. While secondary information was obtained from scholarly literature, journals, institutional records, research publications, and reliable internet sources, primary data was obtained by means of a standardised questionnaire given to academic staff. The study population consists of 6,250 academic staff members, encompassing junior and senior lecturers across the five selected universities. The demographic distribution includes 3,180 junior and 3,070 senior academic staff, offering a comprehensive representation of the target population (Personnel Unit of the selected universities, 2025). Utilising Cochran's (1977) formula for finite populations, which takes into account variables including population size, margin of error, and confidence level, the sample size was established. 362 respondents in all were chosen based on this

computation to guarantee sufficient statistical representation. A balanced representation of junior and senior personnel was ensured by using stratified sampling, which distributed the sample proportionately across institutions and academic ranks. Bowley's proportional allocation technique guided the sample distribution, resulting in 108 respondents from UNEC, 98 from UNIZIK, 70 from FUTO, 52 from MOUAU, and 34 from AE-FUNAI, comprising 184 junior and 178 senior academic staff overall. Two sections of a structured questionnaire served as the data gathering tool. Section A, gathered demographic data, including age, gender, marital status, level of education, and employment history. A five-point Likert scale, with "Strongly Agree" (5) to "Strongly Disagree" (1) as the extremes, was used to record responses to the items in Section B, which measured academic performance and structural career plateau. Both construct and content validation techniques were used to establish the validity of the instrument. Academic supervisors and subject matter experts evaluated the content to ensure content validity, and the degree to which the instrument matched theoretical expectations for performance results and career plateau was used to evaluate construct validity (DeVellis, 2017). Cronbach's alpha coefficient was used to evaluate reliability; an internal consistency threshold of 0.70 or more was deemed appropriate (Gliem & Gliem, 2003). The reliability coefficient of 0.995 obtained from pilot testing confirmed the instrument's suitability for the study and showed an extraordinarily high level of consistency. Both descriptive and inferential statistical methods were used in the data analysis process. The demographic profiles of the respondents and their answers to the research questions were compiled using descriptive statistics, such as frequencies and percentages. By examining monotonic connections without assuming a normal data distribution, Spearman's Rank Correlation was used at the inferential level to evaluate hypotheses regarding the association between academic achievement and structural career plateau. All things considered, the established methodology offers a thorough, representative, and methodologically sound framework for investigating the ways in which academic staff performance in South-East Nigerian federal universities is impacted by structural career plateau.

Table 1*Population Distribution of the Universities*

S/N	Universities	Junior Academic Staff	Senior Academic Staff	Total
1.	University of Nigeria, Enugu Campus (UNEC)	1023	854	1,877
2.	Nnamdi Azikiwe University Awka (UNIZIK)	903	787	1,690
3.	Federal University of Technology, Owerri (FUTO)	551	648	1,199
4.	Michael Okpara University of Agriculture, Umudike (MOUAU)	452	447	899
5.	Alex Ekwueme Federal University, Ndufu Alike (AE-FUNAI)	251	334	585
	Total	3,180	3,070	6,250

Source: Personnel Unit of the Selected Universities, 2026

5 ANALYSES OF DATA

In this section, responses to the questions addressing the impact of career plateau on the performance of academics in the institutions of higher learning in South-Eastern Nigeria

Table 2*Career Stagnation and Teaching Effectiveness*

	CONSTRUCTS	RESPONSES				
		SA	A	U	D	SD
	Career Stagnation					
1.	Lack of advancement opportunities affects lecturers' motivation to teach effectively.	172 52%	142 43%	4 1%	5 2%	5 2%
2.	Career stagnation reduces lecturers' interest in classroom activities.	195 59%	124 38%	3 1%	3 1%	3 1%
3.	The absence of promotion prospects affects lecturers' willingness to adopt innovative teaching methods.	260 79%	57 17%	3 1%	5 2%	3 1%
4.	Limited career growth contributes to low teaching commitment.	204 63%	113 34%	4 1%	3 1%	4 1%
5.	Career stagnation leads to reduced job satisfaction among lecturers.	189 58%	131 40%	3 1%	3 1%	2 0%
	Teaching Effectiveness					
1.	Career stagnation negatively affects lecturers' classroom performance.	287 88%	33 10%	3 1%	2 0%	3 1%
2.	Lecturers experiencing stagnation put in less effort in preparing learning materials.	245 75%	76 23%	2 0%	2 0%	3 1%
3.	Lack of career progress reduces teaching quality.	215 67%	107 33%	2 0%	2 0%	2 0%
4.	Career stagnation reduces lecturers' engagement with students.	271 83%	51 16%	1 0%	4 1%	1 0%

5.	Stagnated lecturers are less effective in meeting learning objectives.	191 59%	128 39%	3 1%	2 0%	4 1%
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Source: Field Survey, 2026

The descriptive analysis of Career Stagnation, as presented in Table 2, indicates that most respondents acknowledged that limited opportunities for career advancement negatively influence lecturers' motivation to teach effectively. In particular, 172 respondents (52%) strongly agreed, while 142 (43%) agreed with this assertion. Only a small proportion expressed neutrality or disagreement, with 4 respondents (1%) undecided, 5 (2%) disagreeing, and 5 (2%) strongly disagreeing. Furthermore, the results revealed that 195 respondents (59%) strongly agreed and 124 (38%) agreed that career stagnation diminishes lecturers' enthusiasm for classroom engagement. In contrast, minimal opposition was recorded, as only 3 respondents (1%) were undecided, 3 (1%) disagreed, and 3 (1%) strongly disagreed. Concerning the influence of promotion opportunities on innovation in teaching, the findings showed that 260 respondents (79%) strongly agreed and 57 (17%) agreed that the absence of promotional prospects discourages lecturers from adopting innovative teaching practices. Only a negligible number reported otherwise, with 3 respondents (1%) undecided, 5 (2%) disagreeing, and 3 (1%) strongly disagreeing.

Similarly, 204 respondents (63%) strongly agreed, and 113 (34%) agreed that restricted career advancement contributes to reduced commitment to teaching responsibilities. Very few respondents expressed uncertainty or dissent, including 4 (1%) undecided, 3 (1%) disagreeing, and 4 (1%) strongly disagreeing. Finally, the analysis showed that 189 respondents (58%) strongly agreed and 131 (40%) agreed that career stagnation results in lower levels of job satisfaction among lecturers, with only a marginal proportion indicating indecision or disagreement. The descriptive statistics for Teaching Effectiveness, as shown in Table 4.3, further demonstrated strong consensus that career stagnation adversely affects lecturers' classroom performance. Specifically, 287 respondents (88%) strongly agreed, and 33 (10%) agreed that stagnation undermines teaching effectiveness, while only a minimal number expressed neutral or opposing views. Additionally, 245 respondents (75%) strongly agreed, and 76 (23%) agreed that lecturers experiencing career stagnation exert less effort in preparing instructional materials. Only a few respondents expressed neutrality or disagreement. The findings also

revealed that 215 respondents (67%) strongly agreed and 107 (33%) agreed that the absence of career progression negatively affects the quality of teaching, with virtually no recorded opposition. Moreover, 271 respondents (83%) strongly agreed, and 51 (16%) agreed that career stagnation reduces lecturers' engagement with students, while only a negligible number indicated indecision or disagreement. Finally, 191 respondents (59%) strongly agreed, and 128 (39%) agreed that lecturers who experience stagnation are less effective in achieving learning objectives, with very few respondents reporting contrary opinions.

6 TEST OF HYPOTHESES

H₀: There is no statistically significant relationship between career stagnation and teaching effectiveness in the institutions of higher learning in South-Eastern Nigeria.

H₁: There is a statistically significant relationship between career stagnation and teaching effectiveness in institutions of higher learning in South-Eastern Nigeria.

Table 3

Correlations of Career Stagnation and Teaching Effectiveness

			Career stagnation	Teaching effectiveness
Spearman's rho	Career stagnation	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.778**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
		N	328	328
	Teaching effectiveness	Correlation Coefficient	.778**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
		N	328	328

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

6.1 Interpretation

The correlation coefficient in Table 3 is 0.778 at $p = 0.000$ ($p < 0.05$). Since the p-value is less than the significance level of 0.05, the alternative hypothesis is accepted, and the null hypothesis is rejected. In Federal Universities in South-East Nigeria, there is a strong and statistically significant correlation between career stagnation and teaching efficacy, according to the Spearman Rank Correlation study.

7 DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

A Spearman Rank Correlation coefficient of 0.778 at $p = 0.000$ was obtained from the analysis of the association between career stagnation and teaching effectiveness among academic staff in a subset of Federal Universities in South-East Nigeria. The null hypothesis is rejected since the p-value is less than the conventional significance level of 0.05, indicating a strong and significant correlation between teaching efficacy and career stagnation. This outcome implies that increasing levels of career stagnation among academic staff are linked to a notable decline in teaching effectiveness. This result is consistent with existing empirical evidence emphasising the adverse effects of career plateau on employee performance. For example, Chang *et al.* (2024) found that employees facing career stagnation recorded lower job performance, particularly when they perceived limited fairness and inadequate recognition for their efforts. Their study further noted that individuals with lower positive psychological capital were more susceptible to the negative consequences of stagnation, highlighting the role of psychological well-being and career development opportunities in shaping performance. Likewise, Agu *et al.* (2023) examined both structural and content career plateau among academic staff at the University of Nigeria, Enugu Campus, and reported that career stagnation had a negative impact on teaching effectiveness, research output, and administrative involvement. They identified institutional challenges, including bureaucratic obstacles and restricted promotion prospects, as major factors contributing to constrained academic career progression. Furthermore, the findings align with Qureshi *et al.* (2022), who established that career stagnation diminishes job satisfaction and organisational commitment, ultimately impairing performance. Their research underscored that unclear promotion systems and perceived inequities in career advancement weaken employee motivation and engagement, key drivers of effective teaching. Supporting this perspective, Bai *et al.* (2023) highlighted the emotional and psychological implications of career plateau, observing that stagnation is associated with reduced intrinsic motivation and increased negative workplace emotions. These emotional outcomes can lead to decreased professional engagement, including teaching responsibilities, thereby reinforcing the observed negative link between career stagnation and teaching effectiveness. Furthermore, a comprehensive review by Wang *et al.* (2020) corroborates these findings,

summarising that structural career plateau consistently undermines work performance and employee engagement across multiple contexts, including academic environments. Their review emphasises that the lack of opportunities for advancement and recognition systematically erodes the capacity of employees to perform optimally, confirming the strong relationship observed in this study. The strong correlation identified in this research can be justified within the context of the selected South-East Nigerian federal universities. These institutions represent a region with high academic density and a history of bureaucratic and hierarchical challenges that constrain career mobility. By focusing on these universities, the study captures the dynamics of career plateau in an environment where promotion processes, access to professional development, and resource allocation significantly shape academic performance. Consequently, the findings provide contextually relevant insights into how career stagnation influences teaching effectiveness, reflecting both individual and systemic factors.

8 CONCLUSION

The findings of this study and supporting empirical evidence indicate that structural career plateau significantly undermines the performance of academics in federal universities in South-East Nigeria. Structural barriers, including rigid hierarchical systems, limited promotional opportunities, and bureaucratic bottlenecks, restrict upward mobility even for highly qualified and committed staff. These constraints negatively affect teaching effectiveness, research productivity, and participation in institutional roles, while also reducing motivation and engagement. Addressing structural career plateau requires systemic interventions such as transparent promotion policies, equitable access to professional development, mentorship programs, and opportunities for lateral career growth. By tackling these structural impediments, universities can enhance academic performance, retain talented staff, and strengthen overall institutional effectiveness.

9 RECOMMENDATION

To mitigate the adverse effects of structural career plateau on teaching effectiveness, federal universities in South-East Nigeria should prioritise creating a transparent and fair promotion system that clearly outlines criteria, timelines, and procedures for career advancement. Institutions should provide structured career development pathways that include opportunities for lateral growth, such as administrative roles, research projects, sabbaticals, and interdisciplinary collaborations, to allow faculty members to progress professionally even when vertical promotion is limited. Mentorship and coaching programs should be established to guide academics, enhance motivation, and build professional resilience, while continuous professional development initiatives, including workshops and skill enhancement programs, can strengthen teaching and research capabilities. Additionally, cultivating a supportive institutional culture that recognises academic contributions and addresses bureaucratic bottlenecks will help sustain motivation, improve teaching effectiveness, and increase research productivity, thereby enhancing overall institutional performance and reducing the negative impact of structural career stagnation.

10 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Despite the meaningful contributions of this study in examining the effect of structural career plateau on academic performance in selected Federal Universities in South-East Nigeria, several limitations must be acknowledged. These constraints relate to the study's scope, research design, methodological approach, and contextual setting, all of which may influence the interpretation and broader applicability of the findings. To begin with, the study was geographically and institutionally confined to five Federal Universities in South-East Nigeria—University of Nigeria, Enugu Campus (UNEC), Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka (UNIZIK), Federal University of Technology, Owerri (FUTO), Michael Okpara University of Agriculture, Umudike (MOUAU), and Alex Ekwueme Federal University, Ndufu-Alike (AE-FUNAI). While these universities play important roles within the region's higher education landscape, the results may not be fully transferable to institutions in other parts of Nigeria that operate under different

administrative systems, promotion structures, and organisational cultures. Additionally, private universities and international institutions often follow distinct governance and career development models, which were beyond the scope of this study. Although the regional focus provided rich, context-specific insights, it limits the generalizability of the findings across diverse higher education settings.

Secondly, the study utilized a sample of 362 academic staff selected from a total population of 6,250. Although Cochran's sampling formula was applied and proportional allocation ensured representation across universities and staff categories, the sample may not comprehensively reflect the full diversity of academic roles across disciplines, faculties, and administrative functions. Furthermore, because participation was voluntary, there is a possibility of self-selection bias, as more motivated or engaged academics may have been more inclined to participate. As a result, the views of less engaged or more dissatisfied staff members may have been underrepresented, potentially shaping the study's outcomes.

A third limitation relates to the use of self-reported data obtained through structured questionnaires. Such instruments are vulnerable to response biases, including social desirability bias, recall errors, and subjective distortions. Participants may have exaggerated or minimized their experiences of career stagnation and teaching effectiveness based on personal perceptions or emotional states at the time of response. Although the instrument demonstrated strong validity and reliability, these inherent limitations of self-report methods may affect the accuracy of the data. Furthermore, it is difficult to determine a causal association between academic performance and structural career plateau because of the cross-sectional research approach used in this study. The study is unable to take into consideration variations in career experiences, motivation levels, or instructional efficacy over several career stages because the data was gathered all at once. Longitudinal or panel research designs would offer more robust insights into how career stagnation evolves over time and its long-term impact on academic performance.

Another limitation stems from the study's emphasis on teaching effectiveness as the primary indicator of academic performance. While teaching is a central responsibility of academic staff, other critical performance dimensions such as research output, grant acquisition, scholarly publications, institutional service, and community engagement

were not examined in depth. Consequently, focusing solely on teaching may not fully reflect the broader effects of career plateau on overall academic productivity and professional contributions. Additionally, the study did not fully control for potential confounding variables that could independently influence teaching effectiveness. Factors such as differences in departmental funding, class size, student characteristics, workload distribution, and access to instructional resources may affect performance irrespective of career stagnation. Personal attributes, including motivation, resilience, personality traits, coping mechanisms, and external career opportunities, may also shape academics' perceptions and work outcomes. The exclusion of these variables suggests that some observed effects may be partially attributable to influences beyond structural career plateau, thereby limiting the internal validity of the findings.

Furthermore, although the research instrument demonstrated high reliability, measuring career stagnation and teaching effectiveness using quantitative Likert-scale items may not fully capture the depth and complexity of these experiences. Important dimensions such as emotional strain, perceptions of institutional justice, mentorship quality, and informal professional networks were not explored. Employing a mixed-methods approach that incorporates qualitative tools such as interviews or focus group discussions could provide more nuanced insights into how structural career plateau influences academics' motivation, behaviour, and professional engagement.

Finally, the study's setting within public Federal Universities in Nigeria, an emerging economy, constrains the extent to which the findings can be generalised to higher education systems in developed countries or institutions operating under different policy, cultural, and structural environments. Career progression systems, promotion criteria, and professional development practices vary internationally, and the manifestation of structural career plateau may differ across contexts. Therefore, caution is necessary when applying these findings to global academic environments or institutions outside Nigeria. Despite the challenges and limitations identified, the research provides clear evidence that structural career plateau has a substantial impact on the professional and academic performance of lecturers. The findings revealed a strong and significant relationship between career stagnation and teaching effectiveness, indicating that as academic staff experience prolonged periods of limited promotion opportunities and

upward mobility, their engagement, motivation, and overall teaching performance decline.

11 SUGGESTION FOR FURTHER STUDIES

Although this study has shed light on the effects of structural career plateau on the performance of academics in selected Federal Universities in South-East Nigeria, several areas merit further exploration. Future research could examine how organisational culture and leadership styles may influence or moderate the relationship between structural career plateau and academic performance.

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