



Impact of merit-based recruitment on the quality and efficiency of public service delivery in Nigeria

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Abstract. Few studies have tested whether merit-based recruitment actually changes how well federal agencies in Nigeria deliver services. This study fills that gap. It asks whether merit-based recruitment raises service delivery quality and whether it improves service delivery efficiency in Nigeria's federal civil service. It also asks whether institutional capacity carries those effects, that is, whether it acts as a go-between in both relationships. A cross-sectional survey was used. Questionnaires were administered to 493 civil servants drawn from 18 federal ministries, departments, and agencies (MDAs) in Abuja. Hypotheses were tested using ordinary least squares regression through Hayes' PROCESS macro v4 for SPSS, Model 4, with 5,000 bootstrap resamples. Merit-based recruitment has a significant positive effect on institutional capacity, service delivery quality, and service delivery efficiency. Institutional capacity also has a significant positive effect on both service delivery outcomes. Institutional capacity partially mediates the relationship between merit-based recruitment and each of the two outcomes. The Federal Civil Service Commission (FCSC) and related oversight bodies in Nigeria need to apply merit-based recruitment standards more firmly and invest in building institutional capacity if they want to see real improvements in public service delivery.

Keywords: merit-based recruitment, public service delivery, institutional capacity, civil service reform.

Introduction

Service delivery in Nigeria's federal civil service has been a problem for a long time. Citizens frequently complain about slow processing times, inaccurate outputs, and staff who appear to lack the skills needed for their jobs. Researchers and government reports have pointed at many causes, but one that keeps coming up is how civil servants are recruited in the first place (Nwosu and Okolie, 2021). When a person gets a government job because of ethnic connections or a political patron rather than because of demonstrated ability, the institution suffers. It ends up with staff who may not have the training or the commitment to do the work well.

Merit-based recruitment is supposed to prevent this. It means selecting job candidates purely on the basis of their qualifications, their scores in competitive assessments, and the results of structured interviews, with no weight given to who they know or where they come from (Dasuki and Salisu, 2022). In Nigeria, the Federal Civil Service Commission is the body that is supposed to make sure this happens. The FCSC Act and the 1999 Constitution both require recruitment into the federal civil service to be merit-based. In practice, however, political patronage, ethnic balancing, and godfatherism continue to shape who gets hired (Eme et al., 2022; Ibrahim, 2023). The gap between what the policy says and what actually happens is wide, and it costs citizens.

Internationally, the connection between recruitment quality and public sector performance has received attention (Olufemi and Adeyemi, 2023; World Bank, 2021). Within Nigeria specifically, however, there is very little empirical work that directly tests the effect of merit-based recruitment on service delivery outcomes. Most available studies describe the problem or review reform policies without actually measuring what changes when merit standards are applied. This study addresses that gap.

Two theoretical frameworks guide the analysis. Human capital theory (Becker, 1964; Schultz, 1961) argues that organisations that recruit people with higher levels of relevant education and skills will

perform better, because those people bring greater productive capacity to their roles. Public service motivation (PSM) theory (Perry and Wise, 1990) argues that people who are genuinely selected for their fit with a public service role are more likely to show strong intrinsic commitment to serving citizens well. Together, these two frameworks predict that merit-based recruitment will raise institutional capacity, which will in turn improve the quality and efficiency of services delivered.

The study has four specific objectives. First, to test whether merit-based recruitment has a direct positive effect on service delivery quality. Second, to test whether merit-based recruitment has a direct positive effect on service delivery efficiency. Third and fourth, to test whether institutional capacity mediates each of those relationships. Beyond filling the empirical gap, the study produces actionable recommendations for the FCSC and for management within federal MDAs.

Literature Review

Merit-Based Recruitment

Merit-based recruitment is a staffing approach in which candidates are assessed and selected based solely on job-relevant criteria such as educational qualifications, technical knowledge, and scores in competitive written examinations and structured interviews (Olowu, 2022). The idea traces back to the Weberian model of bureaucracy, which argued that a capable civil service requires professional staff who are selected on merit and shielded from political interference (Eme et al., 2022). When these conditions are met, the resulting civil service tends to be more technically capable, more ethically grounded, and more aligned with the public interest (Dasuki and Salisu, 2022).

Nigeria's FCSC was created precisely to enforce this principle in the federal civil service. Its mandate includes conducting competitive recruitment examinations, verifying credentials, and ensuring that appointments are not influenced by political considerations. Despite this, studies consistently show that recruitment outcomes in Nigeria are regularly shaped by non-merit factors (Ibrahim, 2023). Federal character provisions, while constitutionally important for national cohesion, have sometimes been applied in ways that override competence criteria (Nwosu and Okolie, 2021). The practical result is that some MDAs carry significant numbers of staff whose qualifications do not fully match the demands of their positions.

Institutional Capacity

Institutional capacity refers to the overall ability of a public organisation to perform its assigned functions effectively (Okeke and Nwachukwu, 2023). It has three layers. The first is human capacity, which covers the qualifications, skills, and work motivation of staff. The second is organisational capacity, which covers management systems, internal processes, and how responsibilities are organised. The third is systemic capacity, which covers the broader environment of rules, accountability arrangements, and coordination between agencies. In a federal MDA, institutional capacity is closely linked to the quality of its recruited personnel. Where merit-based recruitment consistently brings in well-qualified staff, the organisation's ability to handle complex service delivery tasks grows over time (Olufemi and Adeyemi, 2023).

Service Delivery Quality

Service delivery quality refers to how well a government agency's services meet what citizens actually need, in terms of accuracy, reliability, responsiveness, and fair access (Adeyemi and Bello, 2022). In federal MDAs, this includes things like processing applications without errors, providing correct information when citizens ask for it, and treating members of the public respectfully and without

discrimination. It is increasingly tracked through citizen satisfaction surveys, internal performance reviews, and service charter compliance checks (Okonkwo and Eze, 2024).

Service Delivery Efficiency

Service delivery efficiency means getting services to citizens within the required time and at the lowest necessary cost, without unnecessary steps or duplication of effort (Ugwu and Dibia, 2023). In Nigerian federal agencies, poor efficiency frequently shows up as backlogs, misfiled records, long waiting times, and the need to repeat tasks because they were done incorrectly the first time. These problems have been linked to inadequate staff competence as much as to funding shortfalls (World Bank, 2021).

Human Capital Theory

Becker (1964) and Schultz (1961) argued that education and skill development are a form of investment that raises the productive capacity of individuals and, through them, of the organisations they work in. Applied to the civil service, this means that an institution which consistently recruits qualified candidates will gradually build a workforce that is technically stronger than one that recruits on other grounds. Staff with relevant degrees, appropriate technical training, and demonstrated competence are better equipped to carry out complex administrative and service functions (Olufemi and Adeyemi, 2023). In the Nigerian context, merit-based recruitment is the primary lever through which this kind of human capital investment happens at an organisational level.

Public Service Motivation Theory

Perry and Wise (1990) proposed that people who are genuinely motivated to contribute to the public good perform better in civil service roles than those who join public service for purely personal reasons such as job security or salary. This intrinsic motivation is called public service motivation. The theory implies that merit-based recruitment, because it screens candidates on their genuine suitability for a public role, is more likely to attract people with strong PSM (Nwosu and Okolie, 2021). Patronage-based recruitment, by contrast, tends to attract candidates whose primary interest is the job rather than the work it involves. Perry et al. (2010) provided further evidence that PSM predicts performance in public sector jobs even when controlling for other factors. Both theories together predict that merit-recruited civil servants will build stronger institutional capacity and deliver better services.

Hypothesis Development

Direct Effects Of Merit-Based Recruitment

Olowu (2022) reviewed civil service reform across Africa and found that countries with functioning merit-based recruitment systems consistently produced better public service outcomes than those where patronage dominated. Within Nigeria specifically, Eme et al. (2022) and Ibrahim (2023) both document cases where non-merit appointments contributed to demonstrably poor service delivery, including errors in document processing, delays in benefit payments, and poor citizen satisfaction scores. Dasuki and Salisu (2022) argue from an institutional perspective that where recruitment criteria are clearly defined and consistently applied, the resulting staff profiles align better with job demands, reducing the competence gaps that drive poor quality and inefficiency.

From a human capital theory perspective, merit-recruited staff bring higher levels of relevant knowledge and skill to their roles, which should reduce error rates, speed up processing, and produce more accurate outputs. From a PSM theory perspective, staff who enter service through transparent, fair processes are more likely to show the kind of discretionary effort that improves both quality and

efficiency, especially in roles requiring judgment and citizen interaction. On this basis, the following hypotheses are proposed:

- H1. Merit-based recruitment has a positive effect on service delivery quality;
- H2. Merit-based recruitment has a positive effect on service delivery efficiency.

The Mediating Role of Institutional Capacity

Merit-recruited staff do not work in a vacuum. Their individual competence produces organisational-level benefits only when the institutional environment can channel that competence into systematic service delivery. Okeke and Nwachukwu (2023) found that in several Nigerian federal agencies, even well-qualified staff were constrained by poor management systems, inadequate coordination mechanisms, and unclear accountability structures. Conversely, where merit recruitment consistently raises the human capital stock within an MDA, the organisation's internal systems tend to improve over time, as capable staff redesign processes, identify bottlenecks, and strengthen institutional knowledge.

This logic suggests a mediated pathway: merit-based recruitment raises institutional capacity, and stronger institutional capacity then produces better service delivery quality and efficiency. Okonkwo and Eze (2024) found that Nigerian civil servants who perceived their recruitment as fair and merit-based showed stronger commitment to institutional service standards, which they attributed partly to the PSM argument and partly to the fact that competent colleagues created a better working environment. Olufemi and Adeyemi (2023) similarly found that human capital investment in sub-Saharan African public agencies produced stronger service delivery only when accompanied by institutional capacity improvements. The following hypotheses are therefore proposed:

- H3. Institutional capacity mediates the relationship between merit-based recruitment and service delivery quality;
- H4. Institutional capacity mediates the relationship between merit-based recruitment and service delivery efficiency.

Research Methodology

Research Design and Sample

A quantitative cross-sectional survey design was used. This design was appropriate because the study's goal was to test directional hypotheses using data collected at a single point in time from a defined population. The target population was civil servants at Grade Levels 7 to 14 in federal MDAs based in Abuja. This grade range was chosen because officers at these levels are directly involved in both internal recruitment processes and frontline service delivery activities, making them well placed to assess both dimensions.

Eighteen MDAs were purposively selected to cover the main functional areas of the federal civil service, including social services, economic regulation, physical infrastructure, and general administration. Thirty civil servants were selected from each MDA using a systematic sampling approach, giving a target sample of 540. A total of 493 questionnaires were returned and usable, representing a response rate of 91.3%.

Of the 493 respondents, 291 (59.0%) were male and 202 (41.0%) were female. In terms of education, 134 (27.2%) held a Bachelor's degree, 256 (51.9%) held a Master's degree, and 103 (20.9%) held a doctorate or professional qualification. Regarding years in service, 179 (36.3%) had worked for fewer than 10 years and 314 (63.7%) had worked for 10 years or more. These figures suggest that respondents had enough experience and education to give reliable assessments of the study variables.

Data Collection

Before the main data collection, a pilot study was conducted with 50 civil servants from a federal MDA not included in the main sample. Cronbach's alpha values from the pilot ranged from 0.79 to 0.87, all above the 0.70 threshold recommended by Hair et al. (2019). An exploratory factor analysis using Principal Component Analysis with Varimax rotation confirmed the factor structure of each scale. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin value was 0.81, above the minimum of 0.50 (Kyriazos and Poga, 2023). These results confirmed that the instruments were reliable and structurally valid before main data collection began. Four trained research assistants administered the questionnaires in person across all 18 MDAs. Participation was voluntary. Respondents were told the purpose of the study, assured of confidentiality, and asked to sign a consent form before responding. Data collection lasted 52 days.

Measures

All four constructs were measured using previously validated scales adapted for the Nigerian federal civil service context. Items were rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). Merit-based recruitment was measured with nine items adapted from Dasuki and Salisu (2022) and Olowu (2022). The items covered competitive selection, transparency, qualification-based shortlisting, and freedom from political interference. A sample item reads: 'Recruitment in my MDA is based mainly on candidates' qualifications and performance in competitive assessments.'

Institutional capacity was measured with seven items adapted from Okeke and Nwachukwu (2023), covering human, organisational, and systemic capacity. Two items tapped human capacity (staff qualifications and work motivation), three items tapped organisational capacity (management systems, internal processes, and role clarity), and two items tapped systemic capacity (accountability arrangements and inter-agency coordination). After the pilot validation and removal of two items with loadings below the 0.70 threshold, five items were retained in the final scale (IC1–IC5). The retained set included both human capacity items, two of the three organisational capacity items, and one systemic capacity item, meaning that human and organisational capacity are somewhat more fully represented in the final measure than systemic capacity. This is acknowledged as a limitation of the operationalisation. A sample item reads: 'My MDA has enough technically qualified staff to carry out its service delivery responsibilities.'

Service delivery quality was measured with six items adapted from Adeyemi and Bello (2022) and Okonkwo and Eze (2024), covering accuracy, responsiveness, and citizen satisfaction. A sample item reads: 'My MDA consistently provides accurate and reliable services to citizens.' Service delivery efficiency was measured with five items adapted from Ugwu and Dibia (2023), covering timeliness and resource use. A sample item reads: 'Services in my MDA are delivered within the required time without unnecessary delays.' Because the same questionnaire was used to measure all variables, the data were checked for common method bias using Harman's single-factor test in SPSS. A Principal Component Analysis was run on all items. The first factor accounted for only 22.17% of the total variance of 74.83%, which is well below the 50% threshold used to flag common method bias (Kock et al., 2021). The test result suggests this is not a significant problem.

Reliability and Validity

Table 1 shows the reliability and validity results for the main data. Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (CR) values were all above 0.70 for every construct, confirming internal consistency (Hair et al., 2019). Average variance extracted (AVE) values were all above 0.50, confirming convergent validity. Items with factor loadings below 0.70 were removed before these figures were finalised. Discriminant validity was assessed using the Fornell-Larcker criterion, which requires the square root of each

construct's AVE to exceed its highest correlation with any other construct (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). This condition was met for all constructs.

Table 1. Reliability and Validity Results

Variable	Retained items	Item loadings	Cronbach's a	CR	AVE	sqrt(AVE)
Service delivery quality	SDQ1-SDQ4	0.71-0.84	0.83	0.87	0.62	0.79
Service delivery efficiency	SDE1-SDE4	0.73-0.86	0.81	0.85	0.60	0.77
Merit-based recruitment	MBR1-MBR4	0.72-0.83	0.79	0.83	0.59	0.77
Institutional capacity	IC1-IC5	0.74-0.88	0.84	0.88	0.63	0.79

Note: CR = composite reliability; AVE = average variance extracted; sqrt(AVE) = square root of AVE used to assess discriminant validity

Hypotheses were tested using ordinary least squares regression through Hayes' PROCESS macro version 4 for SPSS, applying Model 4 (simple mediation). A bootstrapping technique with 5,000 resamples was used to generate confidence intervals for indirect effects. An indirect effect was considered statistically significant if its 95% bootstrap confidence interval did not include zero. This approach is consistent with standard mediation analysis practice in management and public administration research (Nitzl et al., 2016).

Findings

Descriptive Statistics, Correlations, and Multicollinearity

Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics, zero-order correlations, and variance inflation factor (VIF) values. Merit-based recruitment correlates positively with institutional capacity ($r = 0.54$, $p < 0.01$), service delivery quality ($r = 0.47$, $p < 0.01$), and service delivery efficiency ($r = 0.43$, $p < 0.01$). Institutional capacity also correlates positively with service delivery quality ($r = 0.51$, $p < 0.01$) and service delivery efficiency ($r = 0.48$, $p < 0.01$). All VIF values are between 1.04 and 1.42, well below the threshold of 5 recommended by Shrestha (2020), indicating that multicollinearity is not a problem in these data.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics, Correlations, and VIF Values

Variable	Mean	SD	VIF	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
(1) Service delivery quality	3.41	0.53	1.10	1.00			
(2) Merit-based recruitment	3.18	0.61	1.04	0.47**	1.00		
(3) Institutional capacity	3.26	0.58	1.42	0.51**	0.54**	1.00	
(4) Service delivery efficiency	3.09	0.66	1.32	0.58**	0.43**	0.48**	1.00

Note: $n = 493$. ** $p < 0.01$ (two-tailed)

Hypothesis Testing

Table 3 presents the full regression results including direct effects, the effect of merit-based recruitment on the mediator, and the bootstrapped indirect effects. Regarding the direct effects, merit-based recruitment has a positive and significant effect on service delivery quality ($B = 0.43$, $SE = 0.12$, $t = 3.58$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI [0.09, 0.77]) and on service delivery efficiency ($B = 0.38$, $SE = 0.13$, $t = 2.92$,

$p < 0.01$, 95% CI [0.06, 0.70]). These results support H1 and H2. Merit-based recruitment also has a positive and significant effect on institutional capacity ($B = 0.52$, $SE = 0.11$, $t = 4.73$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI [0.30, 0.74]). Institutional capacity in turn has a positive and significant effect on service delivery quality ($B = 0.44$, $SE = 0.10$, $t = 4.40$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI [0.24, 0.64]) and on service delivery efficiency ($B = 0.41$, $SE = 0.11$, $t = 3.73$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI [0.19, 0.63]).

For the indirect effects, the bootstrap confidence intervals show that institutional capacity significantly mediates the relationship between merit-based recruitment and service delivery quality (indirect effect = 0.229, $SE = 0.073$, 95% CI [0.096, 0.380]) and between merit-based recruitment and service delivery efficiency (indirect effect = 0.213, $SE = 0.071$, 95% CI [0.083, 0.362]). Neither confidence interval includes zero, confirming mediation. Because both the direct and indirect effects are significant and run in the same direction, the mediation is complementary partial mediation (Nitzl et al., 2016). H3 and H4 are both supported.

Table 3. Regression and Mediation Results

Path	B	SE	95% CI lower	95% CI upper	t	Decision
MBR -> SDQ (direct)	0.43	0.12	0.09	0.77	3.58***	H1 supported
MBR -> SDE (direct)	0.38	0.13	0.06	0.70	2.92**	H2 supported
MBR -> IC	0.52	0.11	0.30	0.74	4.73***	
IC -> SDQ	0.44	0.10	0.24	0.64	4.40***	
IC -> SDE	0.41	0.11	0.19	0.63	3.73***	
MBR -> IC -> SDQ (indirect)	0.23	0.07	0.096	0.380	n/a	H3 supported
MBR -> IC -> SDE (indirect)	0.21	0.07	0.083	0.362	n/a	H4 supported

Note: MBR = merit-based recruitment; IC = institutional capacity; SDQ = service delivery quality; SDE = service delivery efficiency; SE = standard error. 95% CI = 95% confidence interval. ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$. Indirect effects use bootstrap confidence intervals from 5,000 resamples; t-values are not computed for indirect effects (reported as n/a)

Discussion

The first finding, that merit-based recruitment is positively associated with service delivery quality, is consistent with what Olowu (2022) and Dasuki and Salisu (2022) found in their reviews of civil service reform across Africa. When recruitment processes are genuinely competitive and qualification-based, the people who enter the civil service appear to be better equipped to handle service delivery tasks accurately and professionally. In the Nigerian setting, where non-merit recruitment has for years introduced staff whose credentials may not match the jobs they are given (Ibrahim, 2023), this finding matters practically. It suggests that applying merit standards more consistently is associated with improvements in what citizens actually experience at the service counter, although the cross-sectional design of this study means the direction of causality cannot be confirmed with certainty.

The PSM literature adds another layer to this. Okonkwo and Eze (2024) found that Nigerian civil servants who believed they were recruited fairly showed stronger day-to-day commitment to service standards. This aligns with Perry and Wise (1990), who argued that people who are selected because they fit a public role, rather than because of who recommended them, are more likely to bring intrinsic motivation to that role. The implication is that merit-based recruitment affects not just the technical capability of the workforce but also its motivational orientation toward citizens.

The second finding, that merit-based recruitment is positively associated with service delivery efficiency, is consistent with earlier work on competence gaps in Nigerian agencies. Ugwu and Dibia

(2023) traced chronic inefficiency in Nigerian federal revenue agencies to staff who lacked the technical skills to carry out procedures correctly on the first attempt. The resulting rework, backlogs, and escalations consumed resources that could have gone into service delivery. Merit-recruited staff, with stronger technical foundations, appear to be better placed to carry out procedures accurately, though the perception-based nature of the present data means this interpretation should be treated as a plausible association rather than a confirmed causal mechanism. The World Bank (2021) reached a broadly similar conclusion in its review of civil service reform in Nigeria, noting that staff competence is one of the stronger correlates of processing time and output accuracy in federal agencies.

The third and fourth findings, showing that institutional capacity mediates both relationships, are perhaps the most practically significant of the four. They suggest a more complete story about how recruitment reform may work. The cross-sectional data are consistent with a pathway in which merit-based recruitment gradually builds the institutional capacity of the MDA, as more capable staff redesign processes, train colleagues, improve internal systems, and build the organisation's collective knowledge base, and that stronger institutional capacity is then associated with the service delivery improvements that citizens notice. Longitudinal research would be needed to confirm this temporal ordering empirically.

Okeke and Nwachukwu (2023) made a similar point in their study of Nigerian federal agencies, finding that human capital improvements produced service delivery gains mainly through their effects on organisational systems rather than through direct individual effort alone. The mediation result here gives empirical weight to that argument. It also implies a practical caution: investing in merit-based recruitment without also investing in institutional capacity development will produce smaller improvements than expected, because the enabling environment needed to channel individual competence into collective performance gains will remain weak.

Implications

Practical implications

These findings are consistent with a case for strengthening merit-based recruitment in Nigeria's federal civil service, but translating perception-based research results into reform priorities requires caution. The political environment in which the FCSC and the OHCSF operate is not a neutral technical one: patronage networks, federal character provisions, and executive interference in appointments have persisted precisely because they serve powerful interests (Eme et al., 2022; Ibrahim, 2023). The recommendations below are therefore offered as a directional agenda rather than a ready-made blueprint, recognising that each measure will encounter political and institutional resistance that this study cannot fully account for. Where the present findings show associations rather than confirmed causal effects, the reform case rests on the pattern of evidence across this and prior studies, not on this study alone. Practical implementation would require political negotiation, phased rollout, and ongoing evaluation that goes well beyond what the present data can specify. With those caveats stated, the evidence points to several areas where the FCSC and OHCSF could direct reform attention. Enforcing competitive, transparent recruitment standards more consistently across federal MDAs would mean mandatory written examinations for all entry-level and mid-level appointments, structured interview panels with written scoring rubrics, and independent verification of academic credentials before any appointment is confirmed. A publicly accessible database of recruitment exercises, showing test dates, candidate numbers, and appointment outcomes, could create citizen-level accountability that reduces the scope for manipulation, though the political will to make such a database genuinely transparent would itself require sustained institutional commitment.

The positive association between merit-based recruitment and service delivery efficiency is consistent with the view that MDAs carrying significant numbers of under-qualified staff pay an ongoing operational cost in the form of errors, delays, and rework. However, because this finding is based on civil servants' own assessments rather than objective performance data, the actual magnitude of such inefficiencies in specific MDAs would need to be established through independent audit before it could reliably drive redeployment or resource decisions. Periodic competency audits comparing staff qualifications against job specifications could help make these gaps visible in a more objective way and allow management to address them through targeted training or redeployment. Performance management systems should also be designed to make the link between competence and output explicit, so that the institutional case for merit-based recruitment is continually reinforced, though the effectiveness of such systems will depend heavily on the political commitment of agency heads and the civil service leadership.

The mediation findings carry a specific message for reform planners: recruitment reform and institutional capacity development must be pursued together. The OHCSF and the Ministry of Finance should create dedicated capacity development budgets within MDA annual operational plans and require MDAs to tie their performance assessments to capacity development targets. Nigeria's Integrated Personnel and Payroll Information System (IPPIS) and the Government Integrated Financial Management Information System (GIFMIS) are examples of institutional capacity investments that, when staffed by merit-recruited and competent personnel, can significantly improve efficiency across the federal civil service. Without that human capital quality, even well-designed systems underperform.

Theoretical implications

From a human capital theory perspective, this study shows that the theory's core prediction holds in the context of Nigerian federal public administration: organisations that recruit higher-quality human capital perform better. This extends the theory's application beyond the private sector environments in which it was originally developed and tested. The mediation finding adds an important nuance: individual-level human capital advantages produce organisation-level service delivery gains mainly through their effect on institutional capacity, rather than through direct individual action alone.

From a PSM theory perspective, the study supports the argument that fair, merit-based recruitment processes are not just a technical matter but a motivational one. Civil servants who enter service through transparent processes are more likely to perform well, as Perry and Wise (1990) predicted, and as Okonkwo and Eze (2024) observed empirically in the Nigerian setting. Combining these two frameworks gives a fuller account of why merit recruitment matters: it raises technical capability through human capital investment and motivational alignment through its effects on public service motivation.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine a practical question that matters for citizens in Nigeria: is recruiting civil servants on merit associated with improvements in the quality and efficiency of the services they deliver? The answer, based on perception data from 493 civil servants across 18 federal MDAs, is a cautiously affirmative one. Merit-based recruitment shows direct positive associations with both service delivery quality and service delivery efficiency in this sample. It is also positively associated with institutional capacity, which in turn is associated with improved outcomes. The mediation findings are consistent with an improvement pathway that runs substantially through institutional capacity, rather than only through the direct contribution of individual qualified staff. Given the cross-sectional, perception-based design, these results should be interpreted as evidence of consistent associations and a plausible causal mechanism rather than as definitive proof of causality.

For the FCSC and the OHCSF, the message is straightforward: enforcing merit-based recruitment is worth the institutional effort and political resistance it will encounter, because it produces real improvements in what federal agencies deliver to citizens. But that effort needs to be paired with equally serious investment in building the organisational systems and environments through which merit-recruited staff can actually perform well. One without the other will underdeliver. Recruitment reform and institutional capacity development need to move forward together.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has limitations worth stating clearly. The sample covers only federal MDAs in Abuja, so the findings may not apply to state civil services, local government councils, or federal agencies with field operations in other states. Future research should test these relationships at the state and local government levels, where patronage pressures may be even stronger and institutional capacity gaps more severe. The cross-sectional design also means that the direction of causality cannot be confirmed with certainty. Longitudinal data, tracking the same MDAs before and after specific recruitment reforms, would give a clearer picture of how changes in recruitment practice produce changes in service delivery over time. A further limitation is that all four constructs were measured through civil servants' self-reports. This creates a specific risk of systematic overestimation: respondents may rate their own agency's recruitment practices, institutional capacity, and service delivery performance more favourably than independent assessments would warrant. The Harman single-factor test used here addresses statistical common method variance but cannot correct for this substantive social desirability bias. Future studies should triangulate self-report data with administrative records, citizen satisfaction surveys, or independent performance audits to produce more objective estimates of service delivery outcomes. Other variables, such as leadership quality, budget levels, and political oversight intensity, may also mediate or moderate the relationships found here and should be investigated in future studies.

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