**ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE**

**AN EXAMINATION OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RECRUITMENT FREEZES AND THE WORKLOAD OF ACADEMIC STAFF IN SELECTED FEDERAL UNIVERSITIES IN THE SOUTH-SOUTH REGION OF NIGERIA**

**Abstract**

**Background:** Recruitment covers the entire process from identifying a staffing requirement to filling it. Extreme understaffing is a common issue in Nigerian public and private institutions. The lack of employees has led to unfavourable and unhealthy working conditions.

**Aim:** The study aimsto examine the relationship between recruitment freezes and the workload of academic staff in Federal Universities in the South-South region of Nigeria.

**Methodology:** The study was a cross-sectional survey research which utilised purposive sampling technique to select three universities (University of Benin, University of Port Harcourt and Federal University Otuoke) out of the eight federal universities in the study area. The sample size consists of 400 lecturers. Questionnaire was utilised in gathering data. Quantitative method of data analysis was adopted. For descriptive statistics, percentage and frequencies were used while chi square and Spearman’s correlation were used for hypothesis testing.

**Result:** Spearman’s correlation revealed no statistically significant relationship between recruitment freezes and teaching workload (r = 0.018, p = 0.752). The study found that recruitment freeze does not significantly impact academic staff's teaching workload. This finding points to the ability of lecturers in the study area to accommodate a heavy workload regardless of inconsistent recruitment and recommends continious investment in the support and well-being of academic staff.

**Keywords:** Recruitment freeze, Employee workload, and Academic Staff.

**Introduction**

Recruitment covers the entire process from identifying a staffing requirement to filling it. Recruitment is the process of assembling a number of applicants (potential employees) who meet the requirements set by an organisation in order to perform a job (Innocent-Nwosu et al., 2024). Recruitment freeze on the other hand as discussed by Chua (2024) refers to the temporal refrain of employee hiring which is often done to reduce cost of running a business in the aspect of salary payment or structural change. Studies have shown that human resource is the most valuable asset in any organisation whether in the public or private sector (Edoho et al.,2024).Bakti (2023) observed that the quality of the workforce of any organisation has a direct implication on the success of the organisation in achieving its goals. Harnmeijer and Dieleman (2006) noted that productivity and staff morale can both be significantly increased through efficient recruiting and selection. This enables businesses to develop a workforce of highly skilled workers who, when combined, delivers better services.According to the findings of multiple researchers, extreme understaffing is a common issue in Nigerian public and private institutions (Okocha & Eyiolorunshe, 2017: Lawal-Solarin, 2016). The lack of employees has led to unfavorable and unhealthy working conditions. Asamoah and Mackin (2015) examined the barriers to higher education in Sub-Saharan Africa. The findings indicated that obstacles impeding higher education, such as a lacklustre mentor-ship program, outdated curricula, and delayed hiring of qualified lecturers, increased workload. Sixbert and Onyango (2022) looked into how job performance in public secondary schools in the Geita District is affected by the teacher shortage brought on by delayed recruitment. On the contrary, employees blame the lack of commitment (low productivity) on the insensitivity of management towards welfare of University staff in Nigeria (Idika et al., 2024).Similarly, a report by Suleiman (2024) revealed that there has been a downward trajectory in the ranking of Nigerian Universities. Only two Universities, one of which is a privately owned university, made an appearance on the list of the top 1000 Universities by the Times Higher Education World University Ranking 2024 one of the reasons for this is poor lecturer to student ratio and high workload which hinders efficiency. The workload of academic staff significantly impacts their performance, as evidenced by various studies (Adeolu & Arinze, 2018; Akpomi & Elendu-Ikenga, 2023). Workload for teachers is defined as the amount of time they spend on co-curricular activities, administrative tasks, and extracurricular activities (Hosain, 2016).Janib et al., (2021) noted a negative correlation between workload and academic performance at Malaysian research universities.Teachers are dissatisfied with the amount of time they spend planning lessons when they are unable to correctly grade students' assignments in a timely manner, are unable to conduct tutorial courses, or are unable to complete the extracurricular work for students (D’Andrea, R. & O’Dwyer, 2017)**.** Furthermore, the findings of several research studies indicates that there was gross inadequate staffing condition prevalent in both public and private institutions in Nigeria (Okocha & Eyiolorunshe, 2017: Lawal-Solarin, 2016). On the other hand, Kocko and Wells (2015) noted that instructors who believe they have enough time for planning are often happier with their workload and teaching load as well as the overall quality of their work life. Instructors voice concerns regarding the excessive volume of paperwork linked to the documentation procedure. Most studies were conducted in other study areas: Sutcher et al. (2019) USA; Innocent-Nwosu et al. (2024) Africa; Aminullahi and Olojuola (2021) South-West Nigeria; Ikgbusi and Iheanacho (2016) Onitsha; Asamoah and Mackin (2015) Sub Saharan Africa. Similarly, most studies focused on impact of recruitment freeze on workload in secondary schools (Ikgbusi & Iheanacho 2016: Sixbert & Onyango 2022). To fill this gap, this study will examine the relationship between recruitment freezes and the workload of academic staff in federal universities in the south-south region of Nigeria.

**Theoretical Framework**

Fedrick Herzberg developed the two factor theory in 1959. This theory, identified two critical factors in the area of motivation. According to Vijayakumar and Saxena (2015) respect, accomplishment, avenues for growth, advancement on the job, and the duties itself are some of the motivating factors which are the most important as they lead to job satisfaction. On the other hand, salary, coworker relationships, corporate policies, working environment, and job security are some examples of the second set known as hygiene factors. As put by Shaikh et al. (2019) individuals are not driven by hygiene factors, because they do not inspire; rather, they decrease discontent. In relation to recruitment freeze and workload of academic staff, many individuals in the academia are driven by passion (Cannizzo, 2015) which is a motivating factor in itself as opposed to work conditions that is an hygiene factors. Hence, they may accept burdensome workloads as a result of the internal drive steming from their passion (Cannizzo, 2015).

**Research Objectives**

The objective of the study is to ascertain the extent to which recruitment freezes affects the workload of academic staff in federal Universities in the South-South region of Nigeria. The study objective was achieved by testing the stated hypothesis:

**Hypothesis (H1):** There is a relationship between recruitment freeze and teaching workload of academic staff.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

**Research Design**

The study was quantitative cross-sectional, survey-based research.

**Study Area**

The study area is the South-South region of Nigeria. It is one of the six geopolitical zones in Nigeria. General Sani Abacha created it from the eastern and western regions in 1997 (Anejionu & Ahiarammunnah, 2021). It comprises of six states namely Akwa-Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo and Rivers states (figure 1). This region encloses much of the Niger-Delta. Even though this region represents just five percent of Nigeria’s landmass, it contributes greatly to the nation’s economy due to its extensive oil and natural gas reserves present in all the six member states of the region (Harry et. al., 2022). The major economic activity in this region is the production of crude oil with the presence of multinational, national and indigenous oil companies (Onah & Tiamiyu, 2021). There is also mining activities here, with the extraction of limestone and iron-ore in Edo and Delta state respectively (Udo, 2023). Due to the abundance of large water bodies, the rural population is involved in mainly farming and fishing (Harry et. al., 2022).



**Figure 1:** Nigeria Map showing the South-South States **Source**:Ugwueze & Asua(2021).

**Data collection Method**

The instrument of data collection utilized in the study is questionnaire.

**Population**

Population of the study consist of all academic staff in the federal universities in the south-south region of Nigeria. The universities that constitute the population for this study are listed below: University of Benin, Benin City, Edo state. (UNIBEN), University of Uyo, Akwa Ibom state. (UNIUYO), Federal University Otuoke, Bayelsa state. (FUOTUOKE),

Nigerian Maritime University, Okerenkoko, Delta state. (NMU), Federal University of petroleum resources, Effurun. (FUPRE), University of Calabar. (UNICAL), University of Port Harcourt, Rivers state. (UNIPORT), Federal University of Technology, Ikot Abasi, Akwa Ibom State (FUT).

**Sampling Technique/ Size**

Purposive sampling technique was used to select three universities out of the eight universities. University of Benin, University of Port Harcourt and one new generation Federal University, (Federal University Otuoke) was selected. With staff population of 1896, 1420 and 572 respectively which sums up to 3,888.

Using Taro Yamane (1967) formula to determine the sample size:

n = $\frac{N}{1+N(e^{2})}$ Equation (1)

Since our population is 3888, n=sample size=400. Based on the table below, proportion for questionnaire distribution for University of port Harcourt, University of Benin and Otueke is 146, 195 and 59 respectively.

**Table 1** Calculation of the proportion for questionnaire distribution across the Universities.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **University** | **Proportion Calculation** | **Approximate Outcome** |
| University of Port Harcourt | (1420/3888) \*400 = 146.09 | 146 |
| University of Benin | (1896/3888) \*400 = 195.06 | 195 |
| Federal University Otuoke | (572/3888) \*400 = 58.8 | 59 |
| Total |  | 400 |

**Source:** Researcher’s Computation, 2024.

The retrieval rate was 75.25% with 301 out of 400 distributed questionnaires successfully retrieved.

**Method of data analysis**

The method of data analysis used is quantitative. Both descriptive and

inferential statistics was used. For descriptive statistics percentage and

frequencies were used. The quantitative data was analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20. Hypothesis was tested using chi Square and Spearman’s correlation.

**RESULTS and DATA ANALYSIS**

**RESULTS**

**Socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents.**

**Table 2** Socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents.

|  |
| --- |
| Total valid Respondents (N) = 301. |
| 1. | **AGE RANGE** |  |  |
|  | 31-40years | 31 | 10.3 |
|  | 41-50years | 104 | 34.6 |
|  | 51-60years | 79 | 26.2 |
|  | 61-70years | 87 | 28.9 |
| **2.** | **GENDER** |  |  |
|  | Male | 169 | 56.1 |
|  | Female | 132 | 43.9 |
| **3.** | **POSITION** |  |  |
|  | Graduate Assistant | 2 | 0.7 |
|  | Assistant Lecturer | 10 | 3.3 |
|  | Lecturer II | 6 | 2.0 |
|  | Lecturer I | 68 | 22.6 |
|  | Senior Lecturer | 125 | 41.5 |
|  | Associate Professor | 24 | 8.0 |
|  | Professor | 66 | 21.9 |
| **4.** | **INSTITUTION** |  |  |
|  | UNIPORT | 102 | 33.9 |
|  | FUOTUOKE | 51 | 16.9 |
|  | UNIBEN | 148 | 49.2 |
| **5** | **LENGTH OF YEARS IN SERVICE** |  |  |
|  | 1-5 years | 19 | 6.3 |
|  | 6-10 years | 57 | 18.9 |
|  | 11-15 years | 128 | 42.5 |
|  | 16-20years | 31 | 10.3 |
|  | 21-30years | 2 | 0.7 |
|  | Above 30years | 64 | 21.3 |

**Source:** Researcher’s Computation, 2024.

Table 2 above shows the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents. With respect to the age of respondents, the data revealed that there were no respondents within the age range of 21-30 years. The data shows that majority of the respondents 104(34.6%) were within the ages 41 – 50years, while the age range with the lowest respondents 31(10.3%) were those within the ages of 31 – 40years. The gender composition of respondents showed that majority of the respondents 169 (56.1%) were male, with females representing 132 44% of the population. This shows that the gender composition of the respondents is balanced. In terms of the position of respondents, Senior Lecturer position had the highest distribution of respondents 125 (41.5%), with only 2(0.7%) of the respondents being Graduate Assistant. The data also captured that 66 (21.9%) and 24(8.0%) of the respondents were Professors and Associate Professor respectively. Due to the proportional sampling used, majority of the respondents 148(49.2%) are academic staff of University of Benin, while 51(16.9%) are from Federal University Otuoke. The remaining respondents 102(33.9%) are from the University of Port Harcourt. Table 2 also shows that majority of the respondents 128(42.5%) have been teaching between 11 to 15years. Meanwhile, only 2(0.7%) which is the lowest distribution have been in service between 21 to 30years. Only 6% of the respondents have been in service for 1-5years while 19% of the respondents have been in service for 6-10years. This means that 25% of the population have been in service for 1-10years.

**Table 3** Responses on the regularity of recruitment.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **S.no** | **Variables** | **Frequency (F)** | **Percentage (%)** |
| Total valid Respondents (N) = 351. |
| **1.** | **How has the recruitment freeze affected your personal ability to engage in community service?** |  |  |
|  | Significantly reduced | 111 | 36.9 |
|  | Moderately reduced | 123 | 40.9 |
|  | Minimally reduced | 64 | 21.3 |
|  | No impact | 3 | 1.0 |
| **2.** | **How has the recruitment freeze affected your motivation to engage in community service?** |  |  |
|  | Significantly decreased | 105 | 34.9 |
|  | Moderately decreased | 100 | 33.2 |
|  | Minimally decreased | 89 | 29.6 |
|  | No impact | 7 | 2.3 |
| **3.** | **What specific community service activities have you had to reduce or postpone due to the recruitment freeze?** |  |  |
|  | Mentorship programs | 22 | 7.3 |
|  | Community research project | 195 | 64.8 |
|  | Volunteer work | 53 | 17.6 |
|  | Educational Outreach | 2 | 0.7 |
|  | Advocacy work | 2 | 0.7 |
|  | Not really engaged in any community service | 27 | 9.0 |
| **4.** | **What are the biggest challenges you face in engaging in community service due to the recruitment freeze?** |  |  |
|  | Increased workload | 120 | 39.9 |
|  | Lack of resources | 105 | 34.9 |
|  | Feeling overwhelmed | 30 | 10.0 |
|  | Work-life balance | 39 | 13.0 |
|  | None | **7** | 2.3 |
| **5.** | **What solutions could be implemented to mitigate the impact of the recruitment freeze on lecturers' community service engagement?** |  |  |
|  | Increase funding for community service activities | 38 | 12.6 |
|  | Provide incentives for community service work | 172 | 57.1 |
|  | Reduce workload for lecturers | 90 | 29.9 |
|  | Not my problem | 1 | 0.3 |

**Source:** Researcher’s Computation, 2024.

Table 3 above shows the responses on the regularity of recruitment. It demonstrates that majority of the respondents 123(40.9%) choose the option that states “recruitment freezes moderately reduced their personal ability to engage in community service”. Only 1% stated that recruitment freeze had no impact on their personal ability to engage in community service. Majority of the respondents 105(34.9%) were of the opinion that recruitment freezes moderately decrease their motivation to engage in community service. Majority of the respondents

195(64.8%) identified community outreach programs as the specific community service activities they had to reduce or postpone due to the recruitment freeze. Highest distribution of the respondents 120(39.9%) identified “Increased workload” as the biggest challenges faced in engaging in community service due to the recruitment freeze. Lastly, majority of the respondents 172(57.1%) suggested that providing incentives for community service activities could be implemented to mitigate the impact of the recruitment freeze on lecturers' community service engagement.

**Table 4** Responses on teaching workload.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **S.no** | **Variables** | **Frequency (F)** | **Percentage (%)** |
| Total valid Respondents (N) = 351. |
| **1.** | **How many courses do you teach per semester at the undergrad and postgrad level?** |  |  |
|  | 1-2 courses | 16 | 5.3 |
|  | 3-4 courses | 233 | 77.4 |
|  | 5 or more courses | 52 | 17.3 |
| **2.** | **On average, how many hours per week do you spend on teaching-related activities?** |  |  |
|  | Less than 10 hours | 92 | 30.6 |
|  | 10-20 hours | 199 | 66.1 |
|  | 20-30 hours | 6 | 2.0 |
|  | 30-40 hours | 4 | 1.3 |
| **3.** | **Do you feel your current workload is manageable?** |  |  |
|  | Yes, I have ample time for all my responsibilities | 89 | 29.6 |
|  | Somewhat manageable, but I often feel stretched thin | 196 | 65.1 |
|  | No, I am consistently overwhelmed and struggling to keep up. | 16 | 5.3 |
| **4.** | **What are the biggest challenges you face in managing your teaching workload? Select only three.** |  |  |
|  | Lack of time for lesson planning and preparation | 93 | 30.9 |
|  | Excessive grading workload | 98 | 32.6 |
|  | Meeting the diverse needs of students | 10 | 3.3 |
|  | Lack of support from colleagues or administration | 25 | 8.3 |
|  | Balancing teaching with research or other responsibilities | 75 | 24.9 |
| **5.** | **What changes could be made to improve your teaching workload?** |  |  |
|  | Reduce administrative tasks and paperwork, increase funding for teaching assistants or other support staff | 173 | 57.5 |
|  | Offer more professional development opportunities related to teaching and workload management | 34 | 11.3 |
|  | Provide more support for grading, reduce administrative tasks and paperwork | 94 | 31.2 |
| **6.** | **Do you feel your current workload allows you to provide high-quality instruction to your students?** |  |  |
|  | Yes, I am able to provide excellent instruction | 178 | 59.1 |
|  | Somewhat, but I am concerned about the impact on my teaching quality | 98 | 32.6 |
|  | No, I am struggling to meet the needs of my students. | 25 | 8.3 |
| **7.** | **Do you feel your current workload allows you to maintain a healthy work-life balance?** |  |  |
|  | Yes, I have a good balance between work and personal life | 91 | 30.2 |
|  | Somewhat, but I often feel stressed and overworked | 179 | 59.5 |
|  | No, my work is constantly encroaching on my personal time. | 31 | 10.3 |

**Source: Researcher’s Computation, 2024.**

Table 4 above shows the responses on teaching workload. It demonstrates that majority of the respondents 233(77.4%) teaches 3 to 4 courses per semester at the undergrad and postgrad level. Majority of the respondents 199(66.1%) averaged between 10 to 20 hours of teaching-related activities per week. Only 4(1.3%) respondents averaged between 30 to 40hours of teaching-related activities per week. Majority of the respondents 196(65.1%) somewhat felt their current workload is manageable, that they often stretch thin. Highest distribution of the respondents 98(32.6%) and 93(30.9%) identified excessive grading workload and

lack of time for lesson planning and preparation respectively. Only 10(3.3%) of the respondents recognized meeting the diverse needs of students as their challenge. Majority of the respondents 173(57.5%) and 94(31.2%) identified reduce administrative tasks and paperwork, increase funding for teaching assistants or other support staff and provision of more support for grading, reduce administrative tasks and paperwork as changes needed to improve their teaching workload. Majority of the respondents 178(59.1%) were of the opinion that their current workload allows them to provide high-quality instruction to their students. Lastly, majority of the respondents 179(59.5%) somewhat felt their current workload allows them to maintain a healthy work-life balance.

**Data Analysis**

**Table 5** Result of the Goodness of fit for the Sociodemographic characteristics

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Status variables** | **Chi-square** | **Df** | **Asymp. Sig** | **Remarks** |
| AGE RANGE | 39.027a | 3 | 0.000 | Statistically significant |
| GENDER | 4.548b | 1 | 0.033 | Statistically significant |
| POSITION | 287.860c | 6 | 0.000 | Statistically significant |
| INSTITUTION | 46.930d | 2 | 0.000 | Statistically significant |
| LENGTH OF YEARS IN SERVICE | 198.435e | 5 | 0.000 | Statistically significant |

**Source:** Researcher’s Computation, 2024.

Chi-square Goodness-of-Fit test was carried out on the status variables, to be sure that the sample drawn is true representative of the population. Table 5 demonstrates the Chi Square Goodness-of-Fit test result is significant (p<0.05) for

age range, gender, position, institution, Marital status and Length of years in service. Since the p-value (0.000) is less than the significance level (0.05), it is accepted that observed differences cannot be due to error.

**Table 6** Result of the Goodness of fit for the computed variables for the hypothesis testing.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Variables** | **Chi-square** | **Df** | **Asymp. Sig.** | **Remarks** |
| RECRUITMENT FREEZE | 189.904d | 5 | 0.000 | Statistically significant |
| TEACHING WORKLOAD | 386.159b | 4 | 0.000 | Statistically significant |

**Source:** Researcher’s Computation, 2024.

Chi-square Goodness-of-Fit tests was also conducted on the status variables to be certain that they are fit to achieve the study objectives. Table 6 shows the Chi Square Goodness-of-Fit test result is significant (p<0.05) for recruitment freeze and teaching workload. Since the p-value (0.000) is less than the significance level (0.05), it is accepted that observed differences cannot be due to error.

**Research Objective and Hypothesis Testing**

**Table 7** Spearman’s rho Correlation results of the study hypothesis tests

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Null Hypothesis** | **Correlation coefficient** | **Sig. (2-tailed)** | **Observations** |
| There is no significance relationship between Recruitment Freeze and Teaching workload. | 0.018 | 0.752 | Statistically not significant (P > 0.05), null hypothesis is retained. |

**Source: Researcher’s Computation, 2024.**

Table 7 shows the spearman’s rho correlation results of the study’s hypothesis. The results of the significance are based on 0.05 significance level. It shows that the study failed to reject the null hypothesis testing the relationship between recruitment freeze and teaching workload (correlation coefficient = 0.018 and p – value = 0.752, p < 0.01). This implies that there is no significant relationship between recruitment freeze and teaching workload.

**Discussion**

The study found that recruitment freeze does not significantly impact academic staff's teaching workload. The findings of various research contradict this finding. Kitanda (2008) observed that academic staff workload increased as a result of delayed recruitment brought on by bureaucratically delayed decision-making and other unfavorable working conditions in the education sector, which were further exacerbated by inadequate school administration. Similarly, Mang’uu et al. (2021) noted that teachers mostly believed they had not adequately prepared their pupils for assessment because they felt they had a heavy teaching workload and did not have enough time to plan lessons. Akpomi and Elendu-Ikenga (2023) opined that teaching large classes, serving on numerous committees, evaluating a large

number of students, conducting research, supervising projects, and teaching a large

number of courses were all positively correlated with lecturers' excessive workloads and their performance on the job at Rivers State Universities. According to Adeolu and Arinze (2018), the size of the class determines how much work lecturers have to do. Academic areas, terms of employment, school policies, the calibre of the teaching personnel, and the lecturers' skills, among other factors. The academic and administrative tasks that professors complete as part of their employment in universities and other post-secondary institutions are included in their workload (Amie-Ogan & Fekarurhobo 2021). The finding of the present study might be because majority of respondents 169 (56.1%) are male lecturers who are able to manage the workload and have reduced responsibilities at home. In tandem with the finding of Gan et al. (2025) that instructors who are male show better task performance regardless of workload compared to females. Similarly, the age range of most of these respondents is between 41-50 (34.6%) indicating that they are fit for the cognitive challenge unlike older workers which Enterzarizarch et al. (2025) found to have diminished cognitive capacity, increasing their likelihood of feeling burnout which is usually linked to high workload. Similarly, since most respondents are senior lecturers and above, making up 71% of the population, there is a likelihood that they are attached to either a research assistant or the have some form of assistance from graduate students. Furthermore, by virtue of their position as senior lecturers and above, they have a minimum of 11 years of work experience, hence, might be better able to manage the workload given to them. This is in line with the finding of Zulifia et al. (2024) who explained that work experience has a direct and significant impact on performance and the way workload is managed.

**CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The study found that the academic staff's teaching workload is not significantly impacted by recruitment freezes.This finding points to the ability of lecturers in the study area to accommodate a heavy workload regardless of inconsistent recruitment and limited lecturers. Academic staff members have learnt to adapt to the high teacher-student ratio which can be as high as 1:363 in some schools as identified by Ogunode et al. (2024) and therefore are not significantly impacted by hiring freezes. Based on the findings of this study, it is therefore recommended that Universities should look into recognising and rewarding the resilience and dedication of their academic staff. This could be monetary and non-monetary. Monetary rewards such as increased salary, financial incentives etc. and non-monetary such as providing support staff to reduce non-academic burdens like administrative tasks and paper work. Also, Universities should look into automated grading for students test and exams to reduces the burden of grading scripts for a large class size on lecturers. Wellness and mental health support programs can also be introduced as a preventive measure to help academic staff mitigate stress and burnout.

Disclaimer (Artificial intelligence)

Author(s) hereby declare that NO generative AI technologies such as Large Language Models (ChatGPT, COPILOT, etc.) and text-to-image generators have been used during the writing or editing of this manuscript.

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**COMPETING INTERESTS**

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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