

**ASSESSMENT OF SUPPORT SERVICES AVAILABLE FOR STAFF ON PROBATION IN
UNIVERSITY OF EDUCATION, WINNEBA**

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ABSTRACT: *For staff on probation to be effective and efficient, they need to be properly supported in their line of duty. Planned and systematic probation periods are usually used by organizations to increase commitment and maximize employee contribution as quickly as possible. Another importance of the probation is to give newly appointed employees sufficient support and guidance to enable them become effective and efficient members of staff. Despite these, it seems support services available to staff on probation in the University of Education, Winneba are not adequate. This study adds to the existing knowledge focusing on the special case of the University of Education, Winneba. Data was collected by administering questionnaire. The study targeted all senior members and senior staff of the Winneba and Ajumako campuses of the University of Education, Winneba who were on probation or had just been confirmed with a sample size of fifty (50). Data collected was analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). The study revealed that most newly appointed staff were not satisfied with the support services available for their probation; due to inadequate orientation given, lack of regular feedback on performance and absence of socializing activities. The study recommended that the University of Education, Winneba should institutionalize support services by having a comprehensive guide to manage probation periods to monitor and ensure easy integration of all staff.*

KEYWORDS: *probation periods, induction, orientation, training*

INTRODUCTION

No employer intentionally hires 'bad employees' but it can happen irrespective of how thoughtful and thorough the selection process is. This could be one of the reasons that employers may decide to put newly recruited employees on probation. A probationary period is the period of time within which a new or existing employee receives extra supervision and coaching, either to learn a new job or to turn around a performance problem (Guerin & Hall, 2017). Probationary periods are defined periods of time that employees are exempt from certain contractual items, most importantly the notice period required for termination. The probationary period allows both employee and employer to see if they are a 'good fit' and to make things easier if they need to terminate the contract. The probationary period can be as short as a month or as long as a year, depending on the situation (HRzone, 2017).

Probationary periods are designed to make it easier for managers and employees to terminate the arrangement more easily should the employment not work out as expected. Managers use the probationary period to evaluate the worker's performance, skills and abilities and also whether they engage with the existing organizational culture.

On the part of employees, probationary periods are there to see if they enjoy working for the employers and whether the employer is a suitable match for their skills and abilities. Once the probationary period is over, if both parties are happy with the employment arrangements, the employee is typically removed from probation. This may involve a raise or promotion but will also enable certain contractual obligations as defined in the employment contract, such as a longer notice period or access to certain benefits including pension schemes.

The essence of the probation period is to afford the employer the opportunity to assess the competence, level of knowledge, skills and abilities of the new employee. In doing this, formal structures, systems and procedures must be put in place. This will grant the new employee the opportunity to quickly settle down and get used to the organization's culture.

Despite the importance of the probation period to any institution, it seems higher education institutions in Ghana do not have well documented policies that guide employees and supervisors during the probation period and University of Education is no exception. In a study conducted by Alabi & Abdulai (2016) it was observed that structures, systems and resources for integration of Early Career Academics in universities in Ghana are not adequate. They noted that even though some preparations exist formalized structures and systems of preparation are inadequate.

Informal discussions held with a cross-section of the staff of the University of Education, Winneba has revealed that some staff are not able to settle down within the probation period. In some cases, the probation period is extended because employees have not learnt what they were expected to learn within the probation period. It seems the support services available to staff on probation are not well institutionalized. For instance, according to the Conditions of Service for Senior Members in Public Universities of Ghana, "the Head of Department shall at the end of the first year of probation give the Senior Member a progress report indicating his strengths and weaknesses". But in practice, this is not done in some departments. Also, support services offered to staff on probation differed from department to department. While efforts are being made to increase staff strength in African Universities, the need for updating their skills and preparing for the task ahead should not be given little attention (Teferra, 2016). This study intends to assess the support services offered by the University to its staff who are put on probation and make recommendations for the institutionalization of the probation period.

LITERATURE REVIEW

What is Probation Period?

In a workplace setting, probation (or probationary period) is a status given to new employees of a company or business. Probation can be broadly defined as a trial period for newly recruited workers. Probation is usually defined in a company's employee handbook, which is given to workers when they first begin a job. It is usually a fixed period of time at the beginning of the employment relationship, during which the new employee is exempt from some contractual items.

Companies may also place employees on a probationary period if their performance has been unsatisfactory or if they have been guilty of misconduct. This probationary period is typically a time for the employee to improve their performance, in the case of misconduct, for an investigation to take place. Probation period varies widely depending on the business but can last anywhere from 30 days to several years. In cases of several years, probationary levels may change as time goes on.

The probation period status allows a supervisor or other company manager to evaluate closely the progress and skills of the newly hired worker, determine appropriate assignments, and monitor other aspects of the employee such as honesty, reliability and interactions with co-workers, supervisors or customers.

If the new employee shows promise and does well during the probationary time, they are usually removed from probationary status, and may be given a raise or promotion as well (in addition to other privileges, as defined by the regulations of the business). The probationary period also allows an employer to terminate an employee who is not doing well at their job or is deemed not suitable for a particular position. Whether or not this empowers employers to abuse their employees by, without warning, terminating their contract before the probation period has ended is open for debate. To avoid problems arising from the termination of a new employee, many companies are waiving the probationary period entirely, and instead conducting multiple interviews of the candidate, under a variety of conditions – before making the decision to hire.

Induction

According to Armstrong (2007) induction is the process of receiving and welcoming employees when they first join a company and give them the basic information they need to settle down quickly and happily and start work. He explains that induction has four main aims. These are:

- To smoothen the preliminary stages when everything is likely to be strange and unfamiliar to the starter
- To establish quickly a favourable attitude to the company in the mind of the new employee so that he or she is more likely to stay
- To obtain effective output from the new employee in the shortest possible time
- To reduce the likelihood of the employee leaving quickly

Induction and Retention

According to Torrington, Hall & Taylor (2005), another process often credited with the reduction of turnover early in the employment relationship is the presence of effective and timely induction. It is very easy to overlook in the rush to get people in key posts quickly and it is often carried out badly, but it is essential if avoidable early turnover is to be kept to a minimum. This is supported by a study carried out by Gregg & Wadsworth (1999), which revealed that as high as 42% of new employees had left within the first year of employment. These departures were due either to poorly managed expectations or ineffective inductions.

Induction has a number of distinct purposes all of which are concerned with preparing new employees to work as effectively as possible and as soon as is possible in their new jobs. These include:

- Help new employees to adjust emotionally to their new workplace
- Provide a forum in which basic information about the organization can be transmitted. This may include materials about the organization, organization's purpose, its mission statement and key issues it faces.
- To convey to new starters important cultural messages about what the organization expects and what employees can expect in return. In this way, new employees are clear about what they need to do to advance their own prospects in the organization.

Importance of Probation

It is important that during the early stages of new employees' appointments they are given sufficient levels of support and guidance to enable them become effective members of staff and for them to understand what is expected of them. It is also important for the employees to receive adequate and timely feedback so that when necessary, they may modify their performance, to meet the required standard to enable their employment to be confirmed.

Employers use probationary periods to coach and evaluate new employees, employees placed in a new position, and employees with performance problems. A probationary period can be a useful management tool, but can also cause legal trouble (Lisa Guerin, 2017). The purpose of a probationary period is to suspend or modify the usual employment rules for an employee who is learning a job or struggling to perform.

Taking care to induct new employee to the organization is very important. Proper induction during the probation period reduces the cost and inconvenience of early leavers, increases commitment, clarifies the psychological contract, accelerates progress up the learning curve and helps the new employee to build relationships with colleagues. There are many reasons employee probation is important. Employees on a probationary period would not have worked long enough to qualify for unfair dismissal protection. However, they are still protected against harassment and dismissal for 'protected reasons' such as gender, age, ethnicity, disability, religion and cultural background. Protection is also provided against wrongful dismissal, which can occur during probation when an employer fails to follow the contractual dismissal process.

A common reason for using probation periods is that the standard recruitment process, which usually ends with a job interview or practical assessment, is not seemingly perfect. However thorough your process might be, you can still end up with someone who underperforms or simply does not fit in your organization. It is common for employers to discover, a few weeks into the employment relationship that new hires do not deliver the skills or performance they promised at interview, have poor timekeeping or attendance and are a bad fit in terms of personality or organizational culture. Probation periods therefore give the employer the opportunity to assess new recruits on the job for a defined period. The probationary period also allows an employer to manage the relationship more flexibly, so that all problems can be addressed before agreeing on a full contract.

Probation periods allow managers to monitor employees performance over a period of time, ensuring they are meeting their job roles and responsibilities. When carrying out probation reviews, it can often be more efficient to have a 3 and 6-month review. Using a probationary review proforma to complete

during the meeting is essential as this gives both the employee and employer a document to refer to. Below are a few reasons why carrying out employee probation periods are important:

- To identify areas of weakness – It is important to liaise with other staff who work within the same room as the new employee as often things can be identified during everyday practice and these will need to be shared during the employee's probationary review meeting.
- To ensure all employees have been treated fairly – All employers should make sure they adhere to the Equality Act 2010 and treat all employees fairly. By conducting probationary periods for all employees, this shows a fair and equal HR procedure.
- To identify training needs – Probation periods are an ideal opportunity to identify any training needs that are required. This can be discussed during the probationary review meeting.
- To openly discuss employee's performance – A probationary period review allows both parties to come together during a meeting and talk openly about their performance, targets can be set using a probation review proforma.

Above are just some of the reasons why carrying out probation periods are important. A point to remember when conducting a probationary review meeting is to highlight the positives, not just the negative points.

Extension of Probation Periods

An alternative to dismissal is to extend an employee's probation period, thereby giving them the opportunity to improve. There is no law limiting the length of employee probation periods. Probation periods usually end with a review meeting between the employee and their manager (Brighthr, 2017). At this meeting, you can assess how well your new employee is performing, what his or her training needs are, and whether they are a good fit for your company. Probation makes this possible — and you have the option to develop the employee or dismiss them.

What Support Services Are Available For Staff On Probation?

In helping new hires to settle down, there is the need for a formal induction course. At the formal induction course, the new recruits are assembled in groups so that a number of them are given consistent and comprehensive information at the same, instead of relying on information to be provided solely by supervisors. The formal induction course provides an opportunity to deliver messages about the institution, its mission, its vision and core values using a range of media. The content of the formal induction course may be selected from the following:

- Information about the organization
- Learning arrangements and opportunities
- Performance management processes
- Health and safety
- Conditions of service
- Pay and benefits
- Policies, procedures and working arrangements
- Trade unions and employee involvement

Managing Employees During Probation

It is important to remember that although probation allows you to terminate new recruits more easily, the real aim of probation is to bring an effective employee on board. During the probation period, the employer is expected to support the new employee to:

- Know what is expected from them during and after the probation period
- Develop the knowledge and skills needed to fulfil their new role, through training and support
- Address problems with their performance before the probation period is over

Probation Periods in UEW

The Unified Conditions of Service for Unionized Staff of the Public Universities of Ghana (2008) in Article 7 stipulates the following:

- A person appointed to an established post shall normally be on probation for one year after which he will be eligible for confirmation in his/her appointment subject to a report of satisfactory work and conduct from the Head of Department concerned.
- The Registrar on the recommendation of the Head of Department concerned may extend the probationary period of a member of staff for not more than three months if he considers it necessary, in which case an increment will be awarded after the first year of service.
- The Vice-Chancellor may, on the advice of the Registrar, reduce the probationary period of a member of staff by not more than 3 months if he considers it necessary.

The Criteria for Appointment and Promotion of Academic Staff (Revised June 2010), also states that an applicant who possesses a researched Master's degree, if appointed shall serve a two-year induction period. It is further explained that first appointments shall be for a period of six (6) years, two of which may be for induction.

The University of Education, Winneba statute is silent on the probation period. However, in the Conditions of Service of Senior Members of the Public Universities of Ghana, the following provisions are made in Article 3 subsection 3.4 and 3.5 with regards to Contract Duration and Probation:

- A Senior Member who is appointed without any previous University or other relevant experience shall be required to serve two years' probation from date of appointment. This probation period is to afford the appointing University and the relevant department the opportunity to observe the Senior Member's performance and general suitability for work in the academic setting.
- The Head of Department shall at the end of the first year of probation give the Senior Member a progress report indicating his strengths and weaknesses. At the end of the probation period, the Senior Member shall be assessed by the Head of Department and an assessment report submitted to the Vice-Chancellor through the Provost, Dean or Registrar as appropriate. This report should be supported by any necessary evidence such as course evaluation, evidence of involvement in the life of the University etc. Based on the report, the Senior Member will be issued a letter confirming his or her appointment as well as indication of new location on the salary scale. Such relocation should in principle reflect at least two (2) incremental jumps up the scale. Should the report be unsatisfactory, the University reserves the right to terminate the

appointment or extend the period of probation. These activities should in principle take place within two (2) months of the end of the probation period and any decisions taken communicated to the Senior Member within this period.

METHODOLOGY

Population and Sample

The population for the study was all teaching, non-teaching and senior staff of the Winneba and Ajumako Campuses of the University of Education, Winneba who are on probation or have just finished serving their probation period. Statistics obtained from the Planning Unit of the University of Education, Winneba indicated that as at November 1, 2017 the total number of staff in this category were fifty (50). All the fifty staff who were selected for the study. The details of the number of staff who fell within the various categories and number who responded to the questionnaire are provided in the Table 1 below:

Table 1

Categorization of Respondents

Category of Staff	Number	Number of Respondents
Senior Member (Teaching)	29	18 (50%)
Senior Member (Non-Teaching)	5	5 (14%)
Senior Staff	16	13 (36%)
Total	50	36 (100%)

Instrumentation

Questionnaire was used to collect data for the study. The questionnaire which was made up of fifteen items contained both open and closed ended items. The items sought the views of respondents on the support services available to probationary staff at the University of Education, Winneba.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS/DATA

Gender

Out of the 36 respondents used for the study, 13 representing 36% were females and 23 representing 64% were males.

Campus

The study covered the Winneba and Ajumako Campuses of the University of Education, Winneba. Thus respondents were drawn from the two campuses. The total number of respondents from Winneba Campus was 29 (81%) and 7 (19%) were from Ajumako Campus.

Length of Service

It was noted from the data collected that 21 (58%) respondents had spent one year in UEW, 6 (17%) had spent two years, 3 (8%) had spent three years and 5 (17%) provided no response to this item. It can be inferred that most (83%) of the respondents were either within their probation period or had just been confirmed. This is because probation periods in UEW, depending on the category of staff ranges from one year to two years.

Educational Background

Twenty eight percent (28%) of the respondents were undergraduates and 72% were holders of postgraduate degrees.

Duration of Probation Period

Out of the total number of respondents, 56% (20) indicated that they were given a probation period of one year. 13 (36%) were given a probation period of two years.

Table 2

Support Services Available

	Yes	No	Not Sure
Formally made aware of what is expected of you	24 (67%)	8 (22%)	4 (11%)
Formally assigned duties and responsibilities	29 (81%)	4 (11%)	3 (8%)
Formally made aware of training programmes available	13 (36%)	18 (50%)	5 (14%)
Mission and vision of UEW	15 (42%)	16 (45%)	5 (14%)
Relevant policy documents	11 (31%)	18 (50%)	7 (19%)
Where to seek help on issues	14 (39%)	18 (50%)	4 (11%)
Given an office	26 (72%)	8 (22%)	2 (5.6%)
Made aware of how performance will be measured	13 (36%)	16 (44%)	7 (20%)
Assigned to a colleague?	17 (47%)	16 (44%)	3 (8%)
Formally assigned a mentor?	16 (44%)	17 (47%)	3 (8%)
Regular formal meetings with mentor	9 (25%)	22 (75%)	-

From the Table above, it can be seen that most of the staff appointed by UEW were made aware of what was expected of them. To confirm this, the majority of the respondents (81%) indicated that they were formally assigned their duties and responsibilities.

One way of inducting new staff is to make them aware of training programmes the institution offers and how they can be accessed. But 50% of the respondents responded in the negative and 14% were not sure whether they were given such information on assumption of duty. This contravenes the assertion by Torrington, Hall & Taylor (2005) that new employees should be given adequate and clear information on what they need to do to advance their own prospects in the organization.

The mission and vision of any organization is its driving force. Staff are able to conduct themselves in the required manner when they are conversant with the mission and vision of the organization. In

line with this assertion, it came to light that 45% of staff on probation indicated that they were not conversant with the mission and vision of the institution. However, 42% indicated that they were familiar with the mission and vision of the institution. 14% could not confidently indicate that they were conversant with the institution's mission and vision.

Policies are sets of ideas or plans of what to do in particular situations that has been agreed to officially by an organization. For this reason, new staff should be made aware of all relevant policy documents. Despite this, it can be deduced from the Table above that 69% of the respondents indicated that they were not supplied with copies of the relevant policy documents of the University. 31% of the respondents indicated that they had access to the relevant policy documents.

New staff who report to an institution must be made aware of where to seek help on specific issues. From the results it was observed that most staff on probation did not know where to seek help on specific issues. This is because 50% answered in the negative, 11% were not sure and 39% answered in the affirmative.

From the Table above, it is clear that majority of new staff recruited were given offices. This is because 72% of the respondents indicated that they were given offices when they assumed duty. It is best Human Resource practice to let new employees know how their performance will be measured. Performance measurement systems helps to keep track on the progress of the organization. However, 64% of the respondents indicated that when they assumed duty, they were not made aware of how their performance will be measured.

To enable new employees settle down quickly, there is the need to attach new employees to their peers and senior colleagues to serve as mentors. From the results, it was observed that about 53% of new staff were not formally assigned to colleagues for mentoring. Also, about 56% indicated that they were not assigned mentors during their probation period.

For the few who were assigned mentors, only 25% indicated that their mentors held regular formal meetings with them. For majority of the respondents (84%), informal meetings with heads of department were held. In the case of those who held regular formal meetings, it was noted that for 17% of the respondents between 1 – 3 meetings were held during the probation period.

To enable new employees improve on their performance, there is the need for regular feedback during the probation period. From the data, it was evident that 58% of respondents were not given regular feedback on their performance. On the frequency of the feedback, it was noted that the feedback was not regular; 11% received feedback monthly, 14% received the feedback quarterly, 5.6% of the respondents indicated that they received feedback half yearly and yearly. It was striking that a whopping 64% did not respond to this item.

As to the form the feedback took, it was noted that 53% provided no response to this item. But 36% indicated that they were given verbal feedback. Responses on written feedback was insignificant (3%). Only 8% had a combination of both written and verbal feedback. To evaluate the level of satisfaction with the support services available at UEW, it was discovered that about 81% of respondents were not satisfied with the support services provided for staff on probation.

86% of the respondents indicated that they would recommend that the following support services be provided for new entrants: formally assigning all new employees to mentors, scheduling regular meetings between new employees and mentees, establishing a regular feedback system that updates staff on their performance and designing of a well-structured probationary period guide. Others also recommended the supply of all relevant policy documents.

FINDINGS

Based on the above, the study arrived at the following:

- Most staff on probation were made aware of what was expected of them
- Majority of new entrants to UEW were duly assigned their duties and responsibilities
- Most new employees were not formally made aware of training programmes available to them
- A good number of new employees were familiar with the vision and mission of institution
- More than half of the respondents were not made aware of all relevant policy documents
- A number of new entrants were not given information on where to seek help on specific issues
- The university provided offices for most of its new staff
- Most new staff were not made aware of how their performance will be measured
- Mentoring system was not very functional; most staff were not assigned to colleagues for socializing neither were they assigned formally to senior colleagues for mentoring
- Mentors did not hold regular formal meetings with mentees
- Regular feedback on performance was not given to staff on probation by their heads of department
- For the few who were given feedback on their performance, it was mostly verbal and not written
- Most staff on probation were not satisfied with the support services provided for staff on probation
- Majority recommended that the following are provided; assigning all new employees to mentors, scheduling regular meetings between new employees and mentees, establishing a regular feedback system that updates staff on their performance and designing of a well-structured probationary period guide.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are made based on the findings of this study:

- Support services for staff on probation should be institutionalized by having a comprehensive guide to manage probation periods successfully.
- A formal induction programme should be organised for newly appointed staff. In such programmes, basic information about the institution including, how they can have access to all relevant documents, where to seek help on specific issues and how their performance will be assessed among others should be given.
- Since Heads of Departments/Divisions are required to give progress report on newly appointed staff before they are confirmed, it is recommended that the heads should hold regular meetings to give timely feedback on the performance of newly appointed staff. This will enable staff on probation modify their performance to meet the required standards if necessary before confirmation.

- It is also recommended that newly appointed staff should be assigned mentors or be requested to identify their mentors for guidance. Mentors should not be in the direct line of supervision of mentees but should be experienced people who know a sufficient amount about the job of mentees. The mentoring system should also be well structured by clearly defining the roles, duties and responsibilities of both mentors and mentees.

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