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Assessing the Utilization of Pre-Recruitment Competencies in the Malawi Police Service: Case Study of the 2017 and 2022 Airport Police Cohorts.

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the extent to which pre-recruitment competencies are identified, utilized and integrated into the operations of the Malawi Police Service (MPS). The focus was specifically on the 2017 and 2022 cohorts who are working under the Airport Police Branch. Drawing upon both qualitative and quantitative research methods, the study investigates the types of competencies possessed by recruits, their application in operational duties, and the implications for career development and organizational performance. Findings reveal that while recruits enter the service with diverse competencies, the MPS lacks structured mechanisms for systematically leveraging these capabilities. Some of the competencies which the officers obtained before joining Malawi Police Service are computer literacy, interpersonal communication, teaching and prior security training. As a result, many competencies remain underutilized, with limited recognition in deployment, training, and promotion decisions. The article underscores the importance of competency-based recruitment frameworks, alignment of training curricula with existing skills, and institutional reforms that recognize and reward diverse capabilities among recruits. Recommendations include introducing competency profiling during recruitment, developing databases to track recruits' skills, adopting competency-sensitive training designs, and fostering workplace cultures that value professional diversity. This research contributes to human resource management scholarship in policing within sub-Saharan Africa while offering practical implications for strengthening organizational effectiveness and public trust in the MPS.

Keywords: Pre-recruitment competencies; Malawi Police Service; Airport Police Branch; Human Resource Management; Competency-based recruitment

1. Introduction

Background of the Topic

The concept of pre-recruitment competencies has gained increasing recognition within human resource management (HRM), particularly in law enforcement institutions where public safety, operational efficiency and professional accountability are central concerns. Pre-recruitment competencies refer to the skills, knowledge and experiences individuals acquire before joining an organization. In policing, these may include technical abilities, interpersonal skills and contextual expertise. Examples of these pre-recruitment competencies are ICT literacy, driving, security training, communication, teamwork, customer service, photography and cultural awareness to just mention a few.

Globally, scholars argue that leveraging pre-existing competencies can improve performance, reduce training costs, enhance morale and contribute to long-term organizational success (Armstrong & Taylor, 2020). Yet, in many African police services, including Malawi's, recruitment processes emphasize physical fitness and educational qualifications while neglecting systematic assessment of these competencies.

Importance and Purpose of the Article

This article focuses on the Malawi Police Service's (MPS) Airport Police Branch. These are environments which requires high security for its operations. Some of the airports which requires intensive security are Kamuzu International Airport, Bakili Muluzi International Airport, Mzuzu Airport, Karonga Airport and Club Maclear Airport. These airports demand officers with advanced competencies for communication and address intercultural sensitivity. Airports also require skills, knowledge and experience for its technological status. Despite this, institutional frameworks for identifying and utilizing recruits' competencies remain weak in the Airports Police Branch.

The purpose of this article is to assess how pre-recruitment competencies are utilized within the MPS, using the 2017 and 2022 Airport Police cohorts as case studies. This article will be used by different stakeholders. For the MPS, they inform strategic improvements in recruitment and personnel management by identifying areas where current processes may be misaligned with operational needs. For policymakers and human resource managers,

the study provides empirical evidence to guide policy reforms and the refinement of competency-based recruitment models within public service institutions. Training academies and institutions benefit from insights into curriculum effectiveness and the need for targeted skill development, particularly for specialized roles in aviation security and international law enforcement.

Moreover, the study contributes to academic discourse by addressing a critical literature gap concerning competency-based recruitment in law enforcement agencies in sub-Saharan Africa. It offers a foundation for further research in workforce planning, performance appraisal, and career development within public security sectors in developing countries.

Finally, the broader public and civil society stakeholders stand to gain from improved transparency, professionalism, and accountability in police recruitment and operations. The study underscores the value of merit-based human resource practices in strengthening public trust and institutional legitimacy in Malawi and similar contexts.

Objectives of Research

The research pursued the following objectives:

General Objective

To assess the extent to which pre-recruitment competencies of the 2017 and 2022 police recruits in the Airport Police Branch are effectively utilized.

Specific Objectives

1. To identify the types of pre-recruitment competencies possessed by the 2017 and 2022 Airport Police recruits.
2. To assess the extent to which these competencies are utilized in operational duties.
3. To evaluate the impact of competency utilization on long-term career development.
4. To examine challenges hindering the integration of competencies in the MPS.
5. To recommend strategies for improving competency-based recruitment and deployment.

Scope of the Discussion

The article articulated across five dimensions. The first is thematic scope. The study centered on pre-recruitment competencies, encompassing both formal and informal qualifications and attributes. It includes academic background, vocational expertise, digital literacy and interpersonal skills. It explores the extent to which these competencies are leveraged in day-to-day policing tasks post-recruitment. The second scope is on population. The research focused exclusively on officers from the 2017 and 2022 cohorts assigned to the Airport Police Branch. This targeted population enables a longitudinal and comparative evaluation of how recruitment profiles and competency application have evolved over time, providing insight into trends in retention, promotion, and job satisfaction. Thirdly, the study is geographically confined to the Airport Police Branch of the MPS, a specialized unit dealing with high-security and international environments. This context provides a unique lens for assessing the operational relevance of various competencies, especially those related to communication, diplomacy, and technical interaction with global aviation systems. The third scope is on temporal. The study covered a five-year period (2017–2022), the study offers a medium-term analysis of institutional practices, tracking changes in recruitment, training, and the strategic deployment of human resources.

Literature Review

Overview of Previous Studies

Competency-based recruitment (CBR) has emerged as a dominant model in human resource management, emphasizing the identification and measurement of behaviors linked to effective performance (Boyatzis, 1982; Campion et al., 2011). In policing, pre-recruitment competencies—such as cognitive ability, decision-making, ethical orientation, physical fitness, and emotional resilience—are crucial predictors of success (Silzer & Church, 2009).

Empirical evidence supports the adoption of structured competency frameworks. In Norway, Eriksen et al. (2021) developed a six-domain, 13-competency model for police recruitment and training. In South Africa, Bazana (2016) argued for validated tools to ensure fairness and alignment in police recruitment. Despite these successes, research in Nigeria and Malawi shows that such models remain underutilized, leading to poor role fit and underutilization of human capital (Adetula, 2022; Kadzamba & Chikoko, 2019).

Theoretical Framework

This article draws on five interrelated theoretical perspectives:

1. **Competency-Based Recruitment Theory** – Advocates for systematic identification and testing of job-relevant skills.
2. **Human Capital Theory (HCT)** – Treats skills and experiences as assets that increase productivity (Becker, 1964).

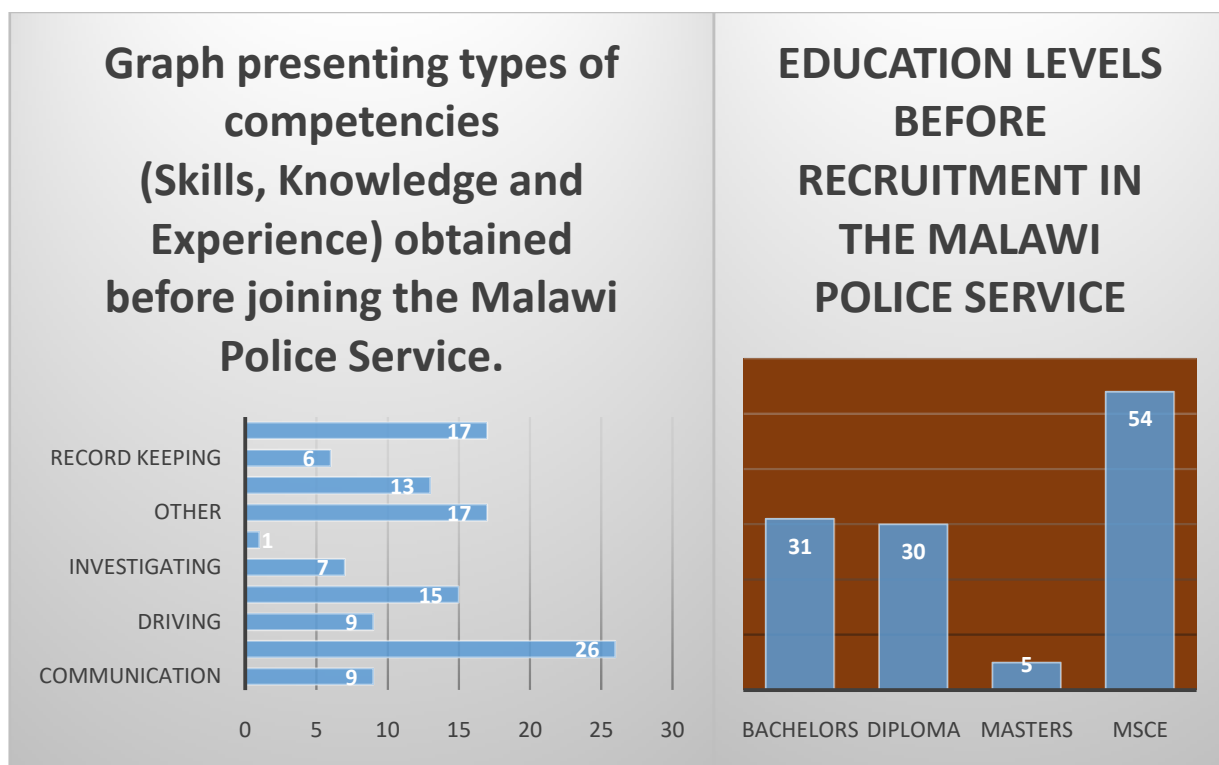
3. **Organizational Behavior Theory (OBT)** – Highlights the alignment between individual traits and organizational culture (Robbins & Judge, 2017).
4. **Interactionist Theory** – Suggests that behavior results from the interaction of personal traits and situational factors (Mischel, 1968).
5. **Competency Framework Models** – Provide structured methods for categorizing core, technical, and behavioral competencies (Boyatzis, 1982).

These frameworks collectively illuminate why competency recognition is critical for performance, motivation, and organizational legitimacy in policing.

3. Main Content / Discussion

Types of Pre-Recruitment Competencies

The 2017 and 2022 Airport Police cohorts entered the MPS with diverse competencies. The following graphs present on the types of pre-recruitment competencies and also the education qualification of the the 2017 and 2022 officers:

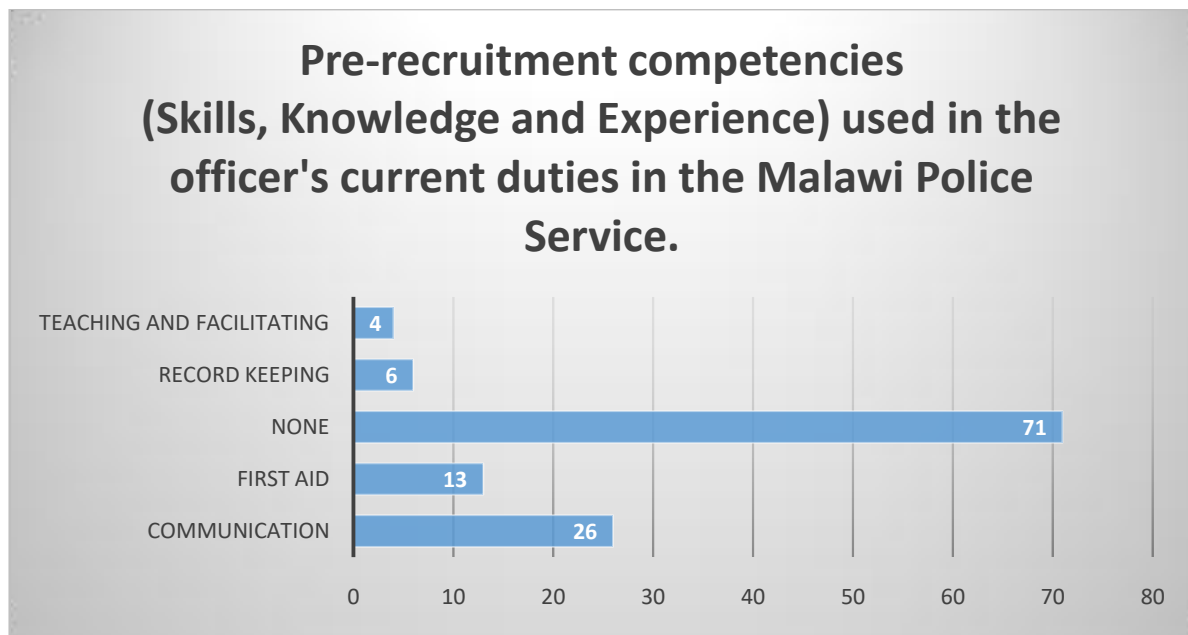


- **Educational Backgrounds:** Several recruits held diplomas or degrees in ICT, teaching, or management.
- **Technical Skills:** Computer literacy, driving, and equipment operation.
- **Vocational Experience:** Prior work in schools, security companies, or customer service roles.
- **Soft Skills:** Leadership, conflict resolution, interpersonal communication, and multilingualism.
- **Security/Military Exposure:** A minority had prior experience in paramilitary organizations.

These competencies had direct relevance to airport policing tasks, including passenger interaction, digital surveillance, and aviation security.

Utilization of Competencies in Operations

The graph below represents the utilization of pre-recruitment competencies



A majority (71 respondents) reported that none of their pre-recruitment skills are used in their current police duties, highlighting a significant underutilization of human capital within the MPS. This reflects a rigid deployment model that overlooks individual backgrounds and professional diversity.

Among the few competencies applied, communication skills are the most commonly used (26 respondents), though still not fully leveraged. First aid (13 respondents) and record keeping (6 respondents) are also underutilized, despite their clear relevance to policing duties. Teaching and facilitating skills are the least used (4 respondents), representing a missed opportunity for internal training and community outreach.

Overall, the findings reveal a competency mismatch, suggesting that the MPS lacks a strategic HR approach to deploy personnel based on their existing capabilities. This undermines productivity, morale, and institutional effectiveness, as emphasized by scholars like Armstrong (2014) and Bratton & Gold (2012).

Impact on Career Development

The diagram below presents information on how pre-recruitment competencies influence the allocation of training opportunities within the Malawi Police Service (MPS).

Response Category	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Not at all	36	30.0%
Very much	36	30.0%
Little	22	18.3%
Moderate	21	17.5%
Much	5	4.2%
Total	120	100%

The analysis shows a bipolar distribution of responses regarding the role of pre-recruitment competencies in training opportunities within the MPS. While 30% of respondents said these competencies had no influence, an equal 30% felt they contributed greatly, with smaller portions reporting little (18.3%), moderate (17.5%), or much (4.2%) influence. This indicates a lack of consistency or standardized framework in linking pre-recruitment competencies to training selection.

The findings imply possible favoritism or unequal access to training, leaving some officers feeling their prior skills are overlooked and undervalued, which may lead to demotivation and dissatisfaction. Misalignment between officers' competencies and training opportunities could also reduce effectiveness and institutional performance.

Broader Implications

International best practices (e.g., Norway's competency frameworks, South Africa's assessment reforms) highlight the potential for competency-based recruitment to improve fairness, efficiency, and public trust. For Malawi, adopting similar frameworks could enhance both officer satisfaction and organizational legitimacy.

4. Findings / Observations

The study's findings can be summarized as follows:

1. **Diverse Competencies Among Recruits:** Officers brought ICT, teaching, driving, communication, and security-related skills into the MPS.
2. **Limited Utilization:** Deployment ignored prior skills, leading to inefficiencies in operations.
3. **Negative Impact on Career Development:** Officers with competencies received little recognition in training, promotions, or specialized assignments.
4. **Continuity of Challenges:** Both cohorts experienced underutilization, despite differences in competency profiles.
5. **Institutional and Cultural Barriers:** Lack of policy frameworks, limited resources, and hierarchical cultures hinder competency recognition.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

This article examined the utilization of pre-recruitment competencies within the Malawi Police Service, focusing on Airport Police recruits from 2017 and 2022. It found that while officers possess diverse skills, institutional mechanisms to recognize and deploy these competencies remain weak. This underutilization undermines operational efficiency, officer morale, and career development.

Recommendations

1. **Competency Profiling in Recruitment:** Introduce structured interviews, situational judgment tests, and profiling tools to capture recruits' skills.
2. **Alignment of Training Curricula:** Incorporate recruits' prior competencies into police academy training to avoid redundancy.
3. **Competency Databases:** Establish institutional databases to track and utilize officer skills in deployment and promotions.
4. **Feedback and Mentorship Systems:** Create supportive supervision models that reinforce and build upon competencies.
5. **Cultural Change:** Foster an organizational culture that values professional diversity and meritocracy.

Future Research

Further studies could compare competency utilization across other MPS branches, assess regional practices in Southern Africa, or evaluate long-term effects of competency-based reforms on organizational performance.

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