

LEGAL RESEARCH COMPETENCY AND RESEARCH EFFECTIVENESS AMONG NIGERIAN LAW SCHOOL STUDENTS.

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Abstract

The study examined the influence of legal research competency on research effectiveness among Nigerian Law School Students. The study was guided by three research questions and two hypotheses. Descriptive survey design was adopted. The population of the study comprised all 3722 law school students across the Abuja, Lagos and Kano campuses of the Nigerian Law School, from which a sample size of 348 students was selected. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire administered online through Google Forms, with a response rate of 84.78%. The data were analyzed using frequency counts, percentages, mean, and standard deviation, while Pearson's Product-Moment Correlation (PPMC) was employed to test the relationship. Findings revealed that Nigerian Law School students possess high levels of legal research competency and research effectiveness. The test of hypotheses revealed legal research competency had no significant effect on students' research effectiveness. The study concludes that external factors such as instructional methods, research supervision, and institutional support may be more decisive drivers of research outcomes than technical skills alone. The study therefore recommends that the Nigerian Law School implement hands-on, practice-based training, including structured workshops and real-life problem-solving tasks. Such initiatives are necessary to bridge the gap between students' theoretical competence and practical research effectiveness.

Keywords: Legal Research Competency, Research Effectiveness, Nigerian Law School

Introduction

Within the legal field, research stands as the backbone of legal analysis, argumentation and decision-making. Anyim (2020) confirmed that research is undoubtedly the bedrock of a successful legal profession. Legal research is the systematic process of

identifying and retrieving information and applicable laws necessary to support legal reasoning. It is the step-by-step approach involved in discovering, evaluating and applying facts to solve legal issues. A lawyer's competency is often directly proportional to their skill in identifying, interpreting and applying relevant legal authorities. Consequently, law students undergoing rigorous training at the Nigerian Law School are expected to cultivate high-level legal research competency.

Legal research competency is a multifaceted skill set indispensable for the effective practice of law. Legal research competency requires not only familiarity with traditional print resources but also mastery of electronic legal databases and online resources. It encompasses proficiency that extends far beyond simple information location but specifically includes interpreting complex statutes and dense case law, employing appropriate search strategies and critically analyzing legal texts for ratio decidendi and binding authority. It also involves mastery in using legal databases, understanding legal citation formats, and maintaining familiarity with digital libraries, open-access legal resources, and institutional repositories relevant to the Nigerian jurisdiction. For Nigerian law students in particular, developing legal research competency is essential for navigating the complex and evolving landscape of Nigerian legal sources, which include legislation, case law, scholarly commentary, and international materials (Akpoghome & Idiegbeyan-Ose, 2018). Without adequate training and support, students may struggle to locate, interpret, and apply the appropriate authorities, ultimately affecting the quality of their legal writing and argument.

Research effectiveness on the other hand, is a critical measure of research quality, mirroring how thorough, original, and ethically sound a research work can be. According to Singh and Kumar (2019), research effectiveness is the ability to plan and conduct research that is accurate, relevant, analytical, clear, well-structured, and ethical. In the context of legal education, where precision, authority and relevance are non-negotiable, research effectiveness becomes even more critical. For students getting ready for professional practice, it is the ability to locate, evaluate, and synthesize legal information to solve complex problems and contribute meaningfully to legal discourse that influences their academic performance and future competence as legal practitioners. Despite the availability of diverse print and digital information resources, it was observed that law school students still struggle to utilize these resources effectively due to the lack of legal research competencies required to produce effective and evidence-based legal research. It is on this basis that this study investigated the relationship between legal research competency and research effectiveness among Nigerian Law School students.

Research Questions

1. What are the legal research competencies possessed by Nigerian Law School Students?
2. What is the level of research effectiveness among Nigerian Law School Students?

Hypothesis

Ho₁: There is no significant influence of legal research competency on research effectiveness among Nigerian Law School Students.

Literature Review

The Concept of Legal Research Competency

Research is a systematic and rigorous process of inquiry directed toward the discovery, interpretation and application of knowledge. It involves a structured investigation aimed at generating new insights, validating existing knowledge, or addressing identified problems with a discipline. Building on this conceptualization, research assumes a central role in professional disciplines, especially in law, where the ability to generate, interpret and apply knowledge is fundamental. Anyim (2020) affirms that research is undoubtedly the bedrock of a successful legal profession.

In this regard, Marzuki (2022) clarified that legal research differs from empirical or behavioral research in both purpose and methodology. He posited that legal research is a prescriptive science, meaning that it focuses on proposing solutions to legal problems through interpretive reasoning rather than data verification. Legal research competency is a central requirement for effective legal education and professional legal practice. It refers to the ability to identify legal problems, locate relevant legal authorities, evaluate their relevance and authority, and apply them appropriately to legal reasoning and writing. Unlike general academic research skills, legal research competency is shaped by the distinctive structure of legal systems and the professional standards governing legal work.

As a result, competence in legal research is not achieved simply through access to information resources but through the development of specialized knowledge and analytical skills (American Association of Law Libraries [AALL], 2020).

Scholars identified the key elements of legal research competencies, which typically include: legal issue identification, source selection, search strategy, authority evaluation, citation, and ethics. Strong legal research skills are a core competence needed to practice law, especially when working as a new attorney (Dunn and Whiteman, 2022). Developing a solid legal research competency is important for navigating the complex and evolving landscape of Nigerian legal sources as well as international materials (Akpoghome & Idiegbeyan-Ose, 2018), which remains very difficult without adequate training. Previous studies examining legal research competency among students suggest that competence levels vary widely. Muhammed, Ali, and Mohammed (2020), in a study of Nigerian Law School students, found that while students demonstrated familiarity with basic legal resources, many lacked confidences in using advanced database features and in applying retrieved materials analytically. Students were often able to locate cases and statutes but struggled to determine their relevance or to integrate them effectively into legal arguments.

The Concept of Research Effectiveness

Research effectiveness refers to the extent to which research activities achieve their intended purpose by producing outcomes that are accurate, relevant, coherent, and analytically sound. In academic contexts, effectiveness is measured not simply by the

completion of research tasks but by the quality of the research output and the extent to which it demonstrates critical engagement with relevant sources. Within legal education, research effectiveness assumes particular importance because legal research forms the basis of legal reasoning, advocacy, and decision-making. Unlike empirical research in the natural and social sciences, legal research effectiveness is evaluated largely through doctrinal analysis, interpretation of legal texts, and application of legal principles to specific problems. Effective legal research therefore requires students to demonstrate clarity of legal reasoning, appropriate use of authority, logical organization of arguments, and adherence to accepted standards of citation and referencing. Gestel, Byland, and Lienhard (2018) argue that effective legal research is characterized by coherence with existing legal doctrine and the ability to justify conclusions through authoritative sources. Recent literature conceptualizes research effectiveness as an outcome variable influenced by several interrelated skills. Singh and Kumar (2019) describe research effectiveness as the product of effective planning, systematic information gathering, critical evaluation of sources, and coherent presentation of findings. In the legal context, this means that research effectiveness depends heavily on students' ability to integrate information retrieval skills and legal research competency into a unified research process.

Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. This quantitative approach is considered appropriate for this study due to the large and geographically dispersed sample of the Nigerian Law School students across the selected campuses and because it

allows for crucial correlational analysis to determine the relationship between the variable under study. The population for this study consists of 3,722 students enrolled in the Nigerian Law School Abuja Campus, Lagos Campus and Kano Campus during the 2025 academic session. This population was obtained from the directorate of academics in each of the campuses under study. The Cochran formula, modified for a finite population at a 95% confidence level ($Z = 1.96$), was used to determine the sample size of 348 students. To ensure fair representation of students across the selected campuses, a Proportionate Stratified Random Sampling technique was employed. Within each campus stratum, Simple Random Sampling was used to select participants, giving every student an equal chance of inclusion in the study. Data was collected using a structured questionnaire, which was administered through online Google Forms across the Nigerian Law schools under study. A total of 295 responses were obtained from the same size. The returned responses were analyzed using mean, standard deviation, simple percentages, and appropriate inferential statistics.

Result and Discussion

Research Question One: What Are the Legal Research Competencies Possessed by Nigerian Law School Students?

Table 1: Mean Responses on the Legal Research Competencies Possessed by Nigerian Law School Students

S/ N	Item	SA F (%)	A F (%)	D F (%)	SD F (%)	Mean	ST.D
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1	I am able to define researchable legal questions from complex case scenarios	78 (26.44)	185 (62.71)	22 (7.46)	10 (3.39)	3.12	0.68
2	I am confident in applying correct legal methods to resolve practical legal problems	79 (26.78)	187 (63.39)	20 (6.78)	9 (3.05)	3.14	0.66
3	I can effectively use library catalogues and legal electronic databases to find relevant information	71 (24.07)	174 (58.98)	43 (14.58)	7 (2.37)	3.05	0.69
4	I can evaluate the credibility, relevance, and currency of legal information retrieved from print and electronic sources	68 (23.05)	172 (58.31)	46 (15.59)	9 (3.05)	3.01	0.71
5	I can apply retrieved legal information logically to resolve complex legal issues	83 (28.14)	178 (60.34)	25 (8.47)	9 (3.05)	3.14	0.69
6	I can synthesize multiple legal sources into a coherent argument or legal opinion	83 (28.14)	169 (57.29)	36 (12.20)	7 (2.37)	3.11	0.70
7	I know how to cite retrieved legal authorities (case law, statutes and treaties) correctly using proper legal citation formats (e.g., OSCOLA, NALT)	97 (32.88)	154 (52.20)	34 (11.53)	10 (3.39)	3.15	0.75
8	I can present research findings in a clear and structured legal opinion format	104 (35.25)	161 (54.58)	22 (7.46)	8 (2.71)	3.22	0.70
LRC Index						3.12	0.57

Source: Field Survey, 2025

Table 1 reveals that students of the Nigerian Law School have a high research capacity in terms of legal research (Legal Research Competency (LRC) with an overall mean = 3.12 (SD = 0.57). The respondents agreed on the scores, with the mean of all items falling between 3.01 and 3.22. Students were also found to be highly competent in terms of

presenting research findings in a clear and structured legal opinion format (Mean = 3.22), using standard citation formats to correctly reference legal authorities (Mean = 3.15), applying correct legal methods in resolving practical legal problems and using legal information to solve complex legal problems (Mean = 3.14).

The findings revealed that students of the Nigerian Law School are highly competent in legal research. This is consistent with international findings by Jan, Ashfaq, and Ullah (2022). Their study of legal practitioners in Pakistan similarly revealed that respondents were highly confident in recognizing their information needs and evaluating the credibility of legal sources. This alignment suggests that the cognitive aspects of legal research, that is, the ability to conceptualize a problem and judge the weight of a precedent, are robustly developed within the professional legal training framework, regardless of geographical location.

Research Question Two: What is the Level of Research Effectiveness Among Nigerian Law School Students?

Table 2: Mean Responses on the Level of Research Effectiveness Among Nigerian Law School Students.

S/ N	Item	Correct n (%)	Wrong n (%)	Mea n	SD
1	A client approaches you, claiming her employer terminated her employment without giving notice. She wants to know whether she has a valid legal claim under Nigerian labour law. What is the primary legal issue to investigate in this scenario?	256 (87.07)	38 (12.93)	0.87	0.34

2	You are asked to advise on whether a contract signed electronically (via email) is enforceable in Nigeria. Which of the following is the most appropriate step in your legal research?	277 (93.90)	18 (6.10)	0.94	0.2 4
3	You are preparing a legal opinion on <i>cybercrime liability</i> under Nigerian law. You need to determine how <i>Nigerian courts</i> have interpreted the <i>Cybercrimes (Prohibition, Prevention, etc.) Act 2015</i> . Which of the following search strategies would be most effective for retrieving <i>relevant case law</i> from an online legal database (e.g., LawPavilion, Westlaw, or LexisNexis)?	234 (79.32)	61 (20.68)	0.79	0.4 1
4	While researching a contractual dispute, you want to find judicial interpretations of certain clauses. Which resource would be most effective?	222 (75.25)	73 (24.75)	0.75	0.4 3
5	You are preparing a legal opinion on <i>intellectual property rights in digital media</i> . You decide to use an AI-powered research assistant to speed up your work. The AI tool generates a detailed legal argument, including case law references. When you check the citations, you notice that some of the cases do not actually exist in the Nigerian Law Reports. What is the most appropriate action to take in this situation?	258 (87.46)	37 (12.54)	0.87	0.3 3
6	You find two conflicting judgments on the same legal issue. How should you proceed?	257 (87.12)	38 (12.88)	0.87	0.3 4
7	You are writing a legal research paper on <i>the doctrine of precedent in Nigerian jurisprudence</i> . You referred to a case decided by the Supreme Court in 2018 titled <i>A.G. Lagos State v. A.G. Federation</i> . You want to cite it correctly in your reference list and in-text. Which of the following represents the most appropriate legal citation format for this Nigerian case according to standard legal referencing conventions (e.g., <i>Nigerian Weekly Law Reports – NWLR</i>)?	244 (82.71)	51 (17.29)	0.83	0.3 8
8	After completing your research on corporate governance reforms, you are required to present your findings to your supervising	268 (90.85)	27 (9.15)	0.91	0.2 9

partner. Which of the following best demonstrates effective communication of findings?

RE Score	6.83	1.66
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Source: Field Survey, 2025

Table 2 indicates that the students of the Nigerian Law School have a high level of research effectiveness with respect to the high percentage of correct answers on all items. The percentage of students who chose the correct option in each scenario is between the range of 75.25% and 93.90%, which means that the majority of the Law School students have a high level of research effectiveness. The highest score was recorded when the students were asked to advise on whether a contract signed electronically (via email) is enforceable in Nigeria. 93.90% of students correctly answered that they will consult the Evidence Act and relevant provisions on electronic transactions. Next to it is the students' answers when asked what is the most effective way to communicate findings to a supervising partner after completing research on corporate governance reforms. 90.85% of students answered correctly that they will prepare a concise, structured legal opinion that states the problem, legal analysis, and recommendations. The high effectiveness rates were also found in the identification of legal matters, dealing with conflicting judgments, cross-checking legal citations generated by AI, and using the right research strategies. Even though there was a slight decrease in performance in the selection of useful resources towards judicial interpretations and retrieved case law, the correct response rates in the areas were in excess of 75 percent, illustrating the satisfactory performance.

This study also found a high level of research effectiveness among Nigerian Law School students. This finding is supported by evidence from Project Information Literacy (Head, 2020), which reports that students in professional and postgraduate programs often perform well on structured, scenario-based research tasks when expectations are clearly defined and aligned with assessment formats.

Hypothesis One: There is No Significant Influence of Legal Research Competency on Research Effectiveness Among Nigerian Law School Students.

Table 3: Influence of Legal Research Competency on Research Effectiveness Among Nigerian Law School Students

	Estimate	Std. Error	P-value
Intercept	6.4856	0.5401	0.000
Legal research competency	0.1117	0.1705	0.513

Source: Field Survey, 2025

The regression outcome shows a coefficient ($B = 0.1117$), which means that a unit change in legal research competency would cause a predicted increase in the research effectiveness by an estimated 0.112 units. Nevertheless, this impact is very small. Since the p-value (0.513) is greater than 0.05, the null hypothesis is thereby accepted. Hence, legal research competency has no statistically significant influence on research effectiveness among students of the Nigerian Law School.

The result proved that students of the Nigerian Law School have a high level of research effectiveness, which allows them to perform appropriate, ethical, and practical legal research. The null hypothesis is thereby accepted. Hence, legal research competency has no statistically significant influence on research effectiveness among students of the Nigerian Law School.

Recommendation

1. Nigerian Law School curriculum planners and instructors should sustain and standardize the already existing legal research competency training practices ensuring consistency in instructional delivery and assessment standards.
2. Beyond skill acquisition, law curriculum planners and instructors should strengthen teaching approaches, research supervision and institutional support structures such as mentorship initiatives, time management guidance and research support services to improve students' research effectiveness.
3. Performance-based research assessments, including practical research simulations and case-based tasks, should be employed to further reinforce and continuously monitor the high level of Nigerian Law School students' overall research effectiveness.
4. Lecturers and supervisors can provide closer guidance on how students apply retrieved legal information, not just on identifying sources, to enhance effective research outcomes.

Conclusions

This study concludes that possessing theoretical or perceived competence may not always align with actual research outcomes. This is because legal research competency does not have a significant independent influence on research effectiveness. Other aspects not captured in this model could affect the effectiveness of research, specifically among Nigerian Law School students, including time constraints, assessment structure, pre-academic exposure, or examination conditions. This implies that competency in legal research is not adequate on its own to forecast research effectiveness.

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