Academic Staff Retention As A Human Resource Factor: University Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The shortage of academic staff and the failure of universities to retain quality academic staff continue to be crucial to the changing prospects and potentials of knowledge formation and learning. This paper intends to examine factors that influence the poor retention rate of academic staff at selected universities in South Africa. The survey involved 80 academic staff lecturing at the selected institutions. The sample was chosen in such a way that more than 35 percent of the selected academic staff have worked at higher education institutions for more than 10 years. Prior to conducting the study, a provisional literature review was performed on recent research regarding reasons for academic staff quitting the profession or changing universities. The study attracted responses from 80 academic staff and the survey discovers job satisfaction as the main factor keeping academic staff in their profession. However, job satisfaction was also linked with career growth and academic development. The study could not rule out the probabilities of working conditions as a factor influencing retention.

While these intrinsic factors play an important role, there were also extrinsic factors, as construed from the findings. Respondents considered an academic profession to be a meager paying job, with little opportunity for growth. However, it can be argued that salary is a concern, even though academic staff considers that the academic profession has a superior reputation in society. Nonetheless, many academics believe that the profession has a heavy workload, making it difficult to meet promotion requirements and poor mentoring and capacity development, which would benefit from academic support, unambiguous promotion guidelines and clear, homogenous salary packages.

Keywords: Retention; Job Satisfaction; Growth; Salary Progression

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

To focus on their obligations of teaching and learning, research, and community engagement effectively, universities need adequate academic staff suitably qualified and motivated to work effectively. Surely, RoU (1992) advocates that the eminence of a university cannot surpass that of its academic staff, which is harmonious with the interpretation advanced by Horwitz (1991), who opines that the essence of any institution is in its ability to attract and retain first-class academic staff. In countless cases, it has become a challenge to retain a well-developed and motivated academic staff force that is suitably qualified to work effectively (Ssekamwa, 1999), frequently requiring enormous financial resources because the market rate of academic staff, and the cost of their development are usually high.

Retention of employees in higher education institutions (HEIs) is a serious concern; the high turnover rate of academic staff poses a major challenge to these institutions. High employee turnover has grave implications for the quality, consistency, and stability of academic enterprises. Turnover can have detrimental effects on students and remaining academic staff members, who struggle to give and receive quality services, when positions are vacated and then filled by inexperienced personnel (Powell, 2010). High turnover rates can reinforce clients' mistrust of the system and can discourage workers from remaining in, or even entering, the field (Horwitz, 1991). Yet, there are few empirical studies examining causes and antecedents of turnover. Moreover, no attempt has been made to pull these empirical studies together in order to identify major trends that emerge.

The role of universities in the delivery and development of the work force required for the social, economic, and technological innovation of any organisation cannot be over-emphasised (Ng'ethe, Iravo, & Namusonge, 2012, p. 205). The unique nature of universities allows academics to be the repository of the most specialised and skilled intellectuals, thus the demand and competition for highly qualified academics have increased. According to Bushe (2012, p. 279), growth in global mobility and shifting demographic profiles means employing and retaining talented and knowledgeable lecturers and researchers is an ever-increasing challenge. This calls for a high degree of competency and proven scholarship from the university academic employees in particular; hence, universities serve as a storehouse of knowledge for cultivating worker needs of the nation and meeting the needs of the community for a good and caring society.

Mapesela and Strydom (2004) are of the view that institutions must ensure that they deliver, in accordance with the required standards, to ensure their survival within the highly demanding HEI environment; that African and South African institutions must discern options for dealing with, among other issues, the increasing costs of institutional operation and maintaining sustainability amongst decreasing government subsidies; increasing inter-institutional struggle for the best students; and the ever-changing demands of the various HEIs stakeholders.

Employee retention is one of the most critical issues facing organisational managers because of the shortage of skilled workers, economic growth, and high employee turnover (Samuel & Chipunza, 2013, p. 100). Once an organisation has captured skilled employees, the return on investment requires closing the back door to prevent them from walking out. Employees are more likely to remain with the organisation only if they believe that the organisation shows more interest and concern for them, if they know what is expected of them, if they are given a role that fits their capabilities, and if they receive regular positive feedback and recognition (Samuel & Chipunza, 2013, p. 99). Employees feel comfortable remaining longer in positions where they are well informed on relevant issues concerning the organisation and their well-being.

"While retention strategies across different occupational groups and industries have many common features, such as competitive pay, good working environment, and progressive human resource policies that offer opportunities for advancement, they need to be context-specific and evidence-based to be more effective" (Tithe, 2010, p. 11). Therefore, an appropriate understanding of employees' expectations of their work environments is a critical issue in higher education institutions' ability to retain academic employees; hence, the problem of academic staff retention is a global one, which affects both developing and industrialised countries. By understanding the nature of the retention problems, an institution can decide whether to adopt targeted retention initiatives to manage overall levels so that there is sufficient labour (Musah & Nkuah, 2013, p. 119).

An understanding of the causes and antecedents of turnover is a first step for taking action to reduce turnover rates. To retain workers effectively, employers must know what factors motivate their employees to stay in the field and what factors cause them to leave. Employers need to understand whether these factors are associated with worker characteristics, or with the nature of the work process, over which they may have some control (Horvat, 2004).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Figure 1 provides a theoretical framework that guides this study and demonstrates the possible influence of retention of staff organisational commitment. Figure 1 further highlights the most important factors that are crucial for the current research.

The retention process is designed to increase employees' control over their work, thereby improving job satisfaction and enhancing organisational commitment. Retention varies from university to university and from department to department within universities. Employee retention is not a new concept. It has always been part of the transition in HEIs; the increasing demands may even be expected to increase as the number of students grows substantially. Meeting the expectations of employees and staying up-to-date with the job prospects for new and existing employees, to the level which other organisations meet these expectations, is demanded for employee retention. An exploration of employee retention literature reveals that efforts to retain employees are focused more on employees with core competencies or in core business units (Netswera, Rankhumise, & Mavundla, 2005, p. 35).
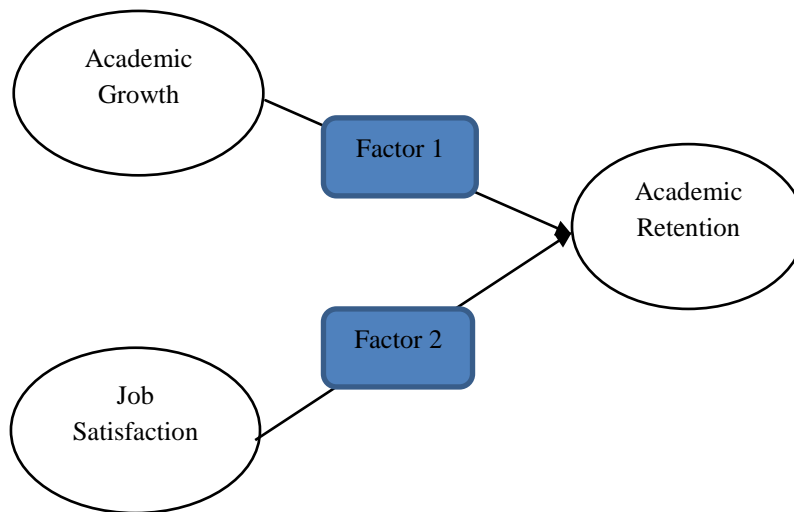
Figure 1: Theoretical Framework on Academic Retention

In order to retain the best talents, strategies aimed at satisfying employees' needs are implemented, regardless of the size of the organisation. Retaining skilled employees is beneficial to any organisation in gaining a competitive advantage, which cannot be substituted by other competitors in terms of producing high morale and satisfied coworkers who will provide better customer service and enhanced productivity (Hong, Hao, Kumar, Ramedran, & Kadiresan, 2012, p. 60).

According to Bushe (2012, p. 279), academic staff retention refers to the process of the ability of an institution to not only employ qualified academic staff, but also retain competent staff through the establishment of a quality work-life, motivated staff climate, best place of work, and being an employer of choice, depending upon dedicated formulation and execution of best practices in human resource and talent management. This involves influencing academic employees' decisions to be committed and remain with the institution, even when job opportunities do not exist within the organisation, by reducing structural change, and reducing change in administrative demands and the demands of quality reviews, while maintaining high academic standards. This is because universities, by their unique nature, serve as a storehouse for knowledge and very few institutions can afford to employ, train and permit their most valued and talented employees to leave when it is difficult to find better replacements (Netswera et al., 2005, p. 36). Bushe, Chiwira, and Chawawa (2012, p. 84) affirm that the retention of talented academic employees is at a critical juncture, as low retention represents a potentially large, yet controllable, organisational expense and demand and competition for highly qualified academics has intensified.

In order for HEIs to effectively manage and retain their academic employees, they should pay specific attention to the importance of job satisfaction and its effect on the performance level of employees. According to Dockel, Basson, and Coetzee (cited in Mubarak, Wahab, & Khan, 2013, p. 69) compensation, training and development, and promotion are the most important retention factors for skilled employees. Moorhead and Griffin (2009) add that an employee's intention to leave or stay not only depends on work factors, but also on non-work factors. These authors are of the view that the issues within the broader areas of work-life and retention have a significant, direct, or indirect impact on the intended turnover of academic employees.

To encourage retention in higher education institutions, Netswera et al. (2005, p. 36) suggests that the following elements are of importance for an effective human resource management:

- Communicating how each employee contributes to the corporate vision and mission
- Developing a climate of trust
- Improving the skills level of the managers who supervise professional staff
- Providing management training, including effective leadership skills, by emphasising development
- Clarifying the understanding of employees' needs and reinforcement of frequent communication

- Clarifying roles and responsibilities to accelerate learning contribution
- Investing and maintaining ongoing commitment by paying the best talent what they are worth

However, these approaches do not offer a quick fix and need careful implementation strategies for the success of the institution. A human resources management strategy, therefore, emanates from, and is based directly upon, the corporate strategy. Hence, competent human resource management planning that integrates policies, practices, and procedures, to achieve the right numbers of people in the right jobs at the right time, is required (Horwitz, 1991, p. 116).

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Economy in the 21st century is knowledge-based which is highly global, informative, technology-based, and increasingly concerned with society and the environment. In higher education institutions, which are considered the hub of knowledge, the retention of knowledge-workers, commonly referred to as academics, has become a crucial issue (Mubarak, Wahab, & Khan, 2012, p. 66). According to Hong et al. (2012, p. 61), there are many retention practices around the globe, operated routinely by either small set-ups or big enterprises, even in the private education sector.

Increasing intense recruitment and global demands makes retaining scarce skills more difficult, the main shortcoming not only being the fear of losing key members, but also the lost productivity and replacement cost based on the following problems:

- There is some feeling that academics are underpaid and over-burdened professionals and that the things, which once made the profession attractive, no longer exist; academic employees are burdened by increasing workload and bureaucratic conditions (Coaldrake & Stedman, 1999). Thus, employees who have the feeling that they are underpaid or not getting appropriate training or promotions are highly likely to leave the organisation.
- Principles for retaining or firing highly qualified academics in higher education are, in many cases, ambiguous and unclear; consequently, there is concern about the adequacy of the future supply of academics.
- Unfavourable working conditions and low and unattractive remuneration have, in most industries and in specific skill areas, led to skills migration, even between countries (Netswera et al., 2005, p. 37).

Armstrong and Long (1994) believe that the objective of the reward system must include the attraction, motivation, and retention of staff at all organisational levels. To achieve these objectives, management has to consider a number of significant policy issues, such as pay incentives, to compensate and reward individuals or group behaviour. Therefore, this places demands on institutions to develop even more competitive terms of service and remuneration packages, to recruit skilled academics, and to retain their services.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Participants

The present study of academics' views on retention was undertaken with the academic staff at selected universities; 80 academic staff were selected to participate in this study. The participants were randomly selected; however, the sample was chosen in such a way that more than 35 percent of the selected academic staff had been working at HEIs for 10 years or more. These random selections included academics from different universities. The data were obtained from the human resources department and academics' names were randomly selected from the lists. The sample size was 80 and the response rate was 100 percent. This good response rate can be attributed to the fact that the questionnaires were administered during staff workshops and conferences.

Data Collection Instrument

Identifying similar phrases, relationships between themes, distinct differences between target blocks, and common self-administered questionnaires containing structured and unstructured items were applied. Items in the

questionnaire focused on job satisfaction and pay progression as factors that drive academics' mobility and success at university. It is in this regard that the study ought to follow the questionnaires as the data collection instruments. Closed circuit questions helped in eliciting specific information, while the open-ended questions enabled the respondents to express their views freely, without restriction. In a prior distribution of questionnaires, a pilot study of ten academic staff was conducted in order to test the reliability, validity, and practicality of the questionnaires. In some instances, the lecturers were asked to rate their experiences of the various academic orientation initiatives at their institutions.

Procedure

The researcher conveniently selected academic staff members at different universities in South Africa from which participants were drawn. These academic staff were selected based on their accessibility to the researcher and, furthermore, induction programs mostly affect them. The researcher personally administered the questionnaires to the conveniently selected academic staff and collected them when complete. This technique was ideal for it allowed for triangulation of the data and threading of key responses and thus provided valuable insights into the transition dimension in relation to a first year induction program. Data analysis and interpretation were done using the interactive model of qualitative data analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994), which first involved sorting or shifting through the data and sequences.

As the methodological paradigm applied in this research is explanatory, the study may be classified as qualitative, mixed-mode research.

DATA ANALYSES

After all the questionnaires had been returned, it was important that mass data collected should then be reduced to a format suitable for analysis. The respondents' responses were then coded according to the emerging themes. The data were analysed by using the Microsoft Excel program.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results obtained from the empirical study will now be discussed according to the emerging themes from the variables stated in the literature.

Table 1 shows that public HEIs in South Africa employ close to 17,000 permanent academic staff, over 25,000 administrative staff and close to 5,000 service staff. On average, therefore, there is one academic staff member to about 59 students. In reality, though, the lecturer:student ratio is likely to vary considerably across HEIs as well as across programs, courses, and subjects. Forty-five percent of all academic staff employed in public HEIs are Black (African, Coloured, Indian/Asian), while 67 percent of all administrative staff are Black. Females comprise 45 percent of all academic staff employed at public HEIs, 63 percent of all administrative staff, and 41 percent of all service staff. While it can be argued that the student:lecturer ratio is quite impressive at comparisons among 23 universities, it can be argued that when this challenge is cascaded at the individual university level, the matter is different, as lecturers are overloaded depending on the department or program headcount. Therefore, it is vital to consider the student:lecturer ratio at the university and departmental level to demonstrate the impact of academic recruitment and retention.

Table 1: South African Universities Staff Headcount

Academic Staff	Black			Female		
	Academic	Administrative	Services	Academic	Administrative	Services
16,935	45%	67%	97%	45%	63%	41%

Source: Census report (2013)

Table 2 also shows that the majority of students enrolled in public HEIs are female and Black (African, Coloured, and Indian/Asian). Table 2 above shows that 58 percent of all students enrolled in public HEIs were female. Female students comprise 54 percent of all students enrolled in contact programs and 63 percent of those

enrolled in distance education programs. Black African students comprised 78 percent of all students enrolled in contact programs and 83 percent of all those enrolled in distance education programs. The racial composition of students across HEIs reflects both racial demographic distribution patterns across the country, as well as historical continuities.

Table 2: South African Universities Student Headcount

Headcount Student Enrolment			Black Students as Proportion Headcount Totals %		Percentage of Contact and Distance Headcount Enrolment in Major Field of Study %		
Contact	Distance	Totals	Contact	Distance	SET	Business	Humanities
556,695	381,506	938,201	78%	83%	28%	31%	41%

Source: Census Report (2013)

It can be concluded that enrolments have sharply risen in recent years in South African universities (see Table 2) and there is a need to create additional universities, and proportions of teaching staff have declined in response to the increase in national headcount and graduates. Perhaps the most notable change, however, has been a gradual decline in attracting quality academic staff. This decline has caused pressure to the academic sector.

The above rating data clarifiy that a comparison could be made between categories as listed by the order of ranking in Table 3. The Cohen D statistic is defined as the largest absolute difference between the two sample (empirical) distribution functions, where the differences are calculated for all values of the specific characteristic under consideration. The ability to retain academic staff differs from institution to institution and, to a large degree, from different departments within higher education institutions. The significant effect size on the Cohen D statistic of 0.075 indicates that incompetent academic leadership in the respective section or academic department compounds academic staff retention problems. The mean 4.852 was recorded on the ranking, which indicates the absence of proper visionary leadership that inspires growth among academics and often results in the under-utilisation or mis-utilisation of talented academics.

Table 3: Academics' Staff Ratings on Important Aspects that Attract them to University Careers

Retention Analysis	Mean	Standard Deviation	T-Value	Significant	Cohen D	Effect Size
Job satisfaction and Leadership	4.852	0.578	2.450	0.018	0.7561	Large
Salary	4.790	0.568	2.050	0.125	0.6877	Medium
Academic development	4.125	0.7229	1.619	0.138	0.6381	Medium
Promotion prospect	3.67	0.966	1.922	0.056	0.5624	Medium
Job security	3.33	1.017	0.893	0.354	0.281330	Small

While academic job satisfaction leadership was the biggest significance on the Cohen D statistics, from the table it can be depicted that retaining staff by the university was also influenced by the ability to pay them market-related salaries. Considering the D statistics of 0.678, its effective significance on the academic satisfaction to stay with their jobs was influenced by the salary that they receive, among other things. Although the mean was relatively high (4.790), this further identified pay progression as a major influence on recruitment and retention of academic staff. These explore the implicit remuneration of academic staff to identify whether compensation disparities may be a serious driver of resignations and shortages of academic staff. While comparisons of academic salaries were not the same among different universities, the costs of living were also different between universities. Surely this has had an impact on the salaries offered by various universities. Stagnant academic salaries, when coupled with the more frequent vacancies of senior positions in public and private sectors, have provoked many academic staff to abandon their profession. The consequence for university teaching and administration is a loss of quality.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Academic growth, to the majority of the respondents, is the drive that can keep them in the university's employment; the Cohen D statistics' significance of 0.6381 from Table 3 demonstrates that academic growth and professional development is the only way that will ensure that respondents grow in the academic profession. Rosser (2004) argues that deprived of efforts in this direction, intellectual capital can stagnate and the relevance of universities to society may diminish. However, it is necessary for universities to support professional growth by providing the necessary resources. Respondents in this study did have a different view regarding the operation in the

department. Faculty members thrive on the intellectual and collegial stimulation from their peers when they attend professional activities and research functions (Rosser, 2004). It is therefore imperative to conclude that the rate of investment on human capital and budgetary requirement of limited nature is committed to this significant aspect of academic engagement and replenishment in some universities (see mean 4.125).

For the purpose of the current research, there is some variation on how this process is applied across institutions. However, despite the different modes, respondents were resentful about the inequalities on how to support studies, particularly when considering that only 45 percent of the staff profile of the South African Higher Education Institutions comes from historically disadvantaged representation (see Table 2). In this regard, some universities have had a dedicated unit within their structure with the sole purpose of ensuring that academic development and professional growth takes place. These units were also responsible for mentoring programs as, in some instances, mentoring can provide a very useful mechanism by which members of such an underrepresented group can be attracted to academia and encouraged to stay. Moreover, mentoring programs can create a self-sustaining pool of mentors over time.

Internal Promotion

There is evidence that promotion practice in HEIs may affect staff retention (see Table 3). Certainly, the study discovered that essential to the aspect that inspires voluntary turnover was the opportunity for academic growth and promotion potentials. Table 3 (see mean 3.67) cited deprived academic growth for academic staff as a cause for the lack of staff retention. However, this does not mean that all these staff left the sector; some academic staff did leave to join other universities that were larger, had a better reputation, or had better research opportunities. While part of the reason for poor academic growth will, to a large degree, lead to dissatisfaction, many institutions have used the promotion of incumbent staff or the placement of incoming staff on too high a grade to overcome the low pay in the sector.

It was established that there was widespread dissatisfaction with promotion prospects amongst university academics. In a survey of teaching staff, two-thirds of the respondents disagreed with the statement 'I have satisfactory promotion prospects at my current institution,' with the disagreement highest in universities and amongst senior staff. Given possible biases in the sample, this suggests, at minimum, a substantial minority of teaching staff were not satisfied with their promotion prospects within their institution.

Promotion Criteria

Despite academic promotion being a very long and tedious process, the promotion criterion was seen as another element that discourages academics to consider applying for promotion. Although universities in South Africa are encouraged to pursue research, teaching and learning, and community engagement, when it comes to promotion, research excellence appears to be the favoured criteria. Due to this criteria, academics tend to neglect the scholarship of teaching and concentrate too heavily on research as a criterion for recruitment and internal promotion. The respondents asserted their discouragement as they did not wish to pursue a research-led career. They concluded that research excellence strongly influenced academic careers which, in turn, strongly affected recruitment and progression. The promotion policy clearly caused a lot of dissatisfaction among the academic staff; hence, some academic staff felt that they would leave their current university to pursue a career at another institution.

Table 4: Job Satisfaction on Staying at the Current Job

Consider Resigning In < 5 Years	Number Of Lecturers %
Agree	18%
Disagree	71%
Not Sure	11%

Considering the information on the Table 4, it is clear that 18 percent of the sampled respondents were considering leaving the academic profession, should the opportunity arise, while 71 percent indicate their commitment to the profession and their willingness to stay until they reach retirement age. From the analysis, it was clear that 11 percent of the academic staff did not complete this section.

CONCLUSION

In this study, we have examined the retention of academics with regard to their views on the factors that keep them with their current employer. The study revealed that job satisfaction, salary, promotion, and leadership are important among the academics who took part in this study. There are intrinsic, as well as extrinsic, factors that affect the academic retention process. This is because the academic staff see job satisfaction as the most important aspect; job satisfaction was regarded as an intrinsic element that motivates staff to stay within their job. Another element was the fact that academic staff did not have confidence in their academic leaders; this resulted in dissatisfaction in their current job with regard to their growth and development. In support of the intrinsic element, there are also the extrinsic aspects that have an impact, either positively or negatively, on the job environment. Academic staff felt that salaries, academic promotion, and development were the main aspects and with regard to these factors, the respondents felt that their expectations are not met. While academic staff mobility and career progression were the highest priority amongst teaching and research staff, policies and regulations supporting promotions were not clear in the participating universities. Amongst other elements, salary disparities were also identified as one of the main reasons causing academics to leave their profession.

From the current study, recommendations can be made with regard to clear academic support which, in time, will promote academic growth and the retention of valuable academic staff. This will ensure that the academic leader, as a mentor, takes charge of academic progression. Universities will have to ensure that there are unambiguous, comprehensible promotion guidelines, together with processes that take the factors of institutional landscapes and environments into consideration. Finally, clear and homogenous salary packages should be designed for academic staff, encompassing clearly defined, transparent ranking.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

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