

TALENT RETENTION OF ACADEMIC STAFF IN SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

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—Abstract —

Voluntary turnover intentions of academic staff in South African higher education institutions (HEIs) are escalating. High turnover of academics present several challenges to higher education such as additional costs for the induction and training of new staff, loss of research outputs and organisational productivity, and reduced quality of teaching due to mid-semester replacements of lecturers. Therefore higher education institutions need to become more talent intelligent and retain quality academics to remain relevant and sustainable. The main objective of this research was to determine the factors affecting the talent retention of early career academics in selected South African Higher Education Institutions.

A mixed-method research approach was used for this study. A Talent Retention Diagnostic Tool was administered among early career academics from selected HEIs (n=117). Follow-up interviews (n=23) were done with early career academics from different HEIs within South Africa.

The findings showed that the respondents were slightly satisfied with their compensation. Some respondents alluded to a significant lack of recognition despite high performance. On average it appeared that the participants were satisfied with management support. Some participants however pointed out that more attention should be paid to talent management and performance evaluation. The results further showed that the participants were moderately satisfied with general institutional practices. Compensation and recognition and institutional practices had the largest effect on employees' intention to quit their jobs.

This study identified the factors that potentially affect early career academic's intentions to quit their profession. HEIs are advised to redevelop talent management practices with regard to compensation and recognition, career development, and general institutional practices to cater for the diverse needs of a new generation of academic staff. HEIs are encouraged to build a supportive work environment for early career academics that will retain them in higher education institutions.

Key Words: Compensation, Early career academics, Management support, Talent management, Turnover intentions

JEL Classification: J24

1. INTRODUCTION

Voluntary turnover intentions of academic staff in Southern African higher education institutions (HEIs) are escalating (Makondo, 2014; Ntisa, 2015). A variety of factors can be attributed to this phenomenon such as poor compensation and incentives (Mabaso & Dlamini, 2017), a lack of infrastructure and continuous unsafe work environment because of student unrest (Mokgojwa, Barkhuizen & Schutte, 2017), low performance organisational culture (Barkhuizen & Schutte, 2017), unrealistic transformation initiatives (Du Preez, Simmonds & Verhoef, 2016) and the absence of a compelling talent value proposition to adequately manage the career life cycle of early career scholars (Saurombe, 2017). According to Jain (2013), high turnover intentions present several challenges to higher education, such as additional costs for the induction and training of new staff, loss of research outputs and organisational productivity, and reduced quality

of teaching due to mid-semester replacements of lecturers. Consequently South African higher education institutions need to become more business intelligent and retain quality academics to remain relevant and sustainable (Calitz, Bosire & Cullen, 2017).

The main objective of this research was to explore the factors affecting the talent retention of early career academics in selected South African Higher Education Institutions. Currently there are three challenges relating to the retention of early career academics in HEIs. First, higher education needs to compete with industry to retain young, skilled, and talented academics, as these individuals are leaving for more attractive compensation in the private sector (Erasmus, Grobler & van Niekerk, 2015). A report by Higher Education South Africa (2014) showed that early career academics earn comparably less than their counterparts in the industry. Second, HEIs need to ensure that early career academics are equipped with the relevant teaching skills to enhance the employability of students. However, a lack of career development infrastructure and government funding significantly hinder academic staff development initiatives (Busch & Ledingham, 2016). Finally, novice academics are expected to contribute to institutional cultures, especially at historically white universities. Research evidence shows that unfair discrimination practices and inequity still prevail at most HEIs, resulting in novice scholars leaving academia (Hemson & Singh, 2010).

This research adopts the talent retention framework of Theron (2015). According to this framework factors such as compensation and recognition, management support, and satisfaction with organisational practices are key contributors for the talent retention of early career academics. Next, a brief literature review is presented on the possible retention factors for early career academics. This is followed by a discussion of the research method adopted for this study, where after the results of the study are reported. This article concludes with recommendations for practice.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Compensation and recognition

The compensation and recognition of academic staff remain a burning issue in higher education. A study by Ng'ethe, Iravo and Namusonge (2012) confirmed that employees will stay with an organisation when they feel that their capabilities, efforts and performance are recognised and appreciated. The greatest bulk of research continues to confirm the poor pay and inadequate recognition of academic staff see (Makondo, 2014; Onah & Anikwe, 2016). Chabaya, Tshephe,

and Molotsi (2014) found that, in most cases, academic staff feel that they are worth more than the pay they receive from their employers. Compensation has also been highlighted as one of the key reasons why academics leave or consider leaving their occupation (Selesho & Naile, 2014). A properly structured compensation package, together with an effective reward strategy, needs to be linked to the talent management system, in order to facilitate talent retention processes (Smit, Stanz & Bussin, 2015).

2.2. Management Support

The importance of management support for talent management is well documented. Management support in the academic context should include effective performance management and recognition, participative and informed decision-making, opportunities to apply skills, and joint problem-solving (Matata, Elegwa, & Maurice, 2014; Mohamed & El-Shaer, 2013). A great deal of research has also shown that a lack of management support and poor leadership styles are key contributors to the turnover intentions of academic staff (Hundera, 2014; Jain, 2013). Mokgojwa et al. (2017) found that there is a considerable disconnect between what management perceive as human capital risks in higher education compared to those of academic staff. Moreover Calitz and colleagues (2017) found low maturity levels from management in the use of business intelligence technologies. This have adverse implications for effective strategic planning.

2.3. Institutional practices

Theron (2015) classified institutional practices in terms of general practices (i.e. mentorship, support from the HR department, and access to information), institutional funding opportunities, diversity management, and community service. Mentorship is important for the employability and retention of newly hired academics (Lo & Ramayah, 2011). A study by Pithouse-Morgan, Masinga, Naicker, Hlao, and Pillay (2016) highlighted collegial relationships as critical to new academics' self-belief. McKay and Monk (2017) advocate that self-sustaining peer support and information mentoring from more senior staff should be part of professional learning.

Research productivity (as defined by the number of outputs), is a key indicator of academic success for early career academics (Sutherland, Wilson & Williams, 2013). Soogwan, Jang, Kang and Han (2018) alludes to the importance of research funding as a critical enhancer of academic staff research performance. Busch and Ledingham (2016) found that early career academics experience

stressors relating to structural barriers in the application of and access to research, publishing issues, and advice in relation to accessibility of research outputs.

Researchers have also highlighted infrastructural challenges relating to Southern African HEIs. According to the National Development Plan, South African HEIs are expected to increase student enrolment from 1 million to 1.6 million by 2030 (Bozzoli, De Kadt, De la Rey, Habib, Laband *et al.*, 2015). Consequently, HEIs will be faced with heavy infrastructural demands in the midst of budget cuts (Mushemeza, 2016). Ondari-Okemwa (2011) found that a lack of infrastructure and declining budget allocations limit HEIs' ability to produce knowledge. McGregor (2009) furthermore highlighted the importance of proactive investment in infrastructure for the retention of academic staff.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

3.1. Research approach

A mixed-method research approach was used in the present study. Mixed-method research is defined as a process whereby a researcher combines the elements of quantitative and qualitative research for the purpose of gaining more breadth and depth in understanding and corroboration in research (Onwugbuzie, Bustamante, & Nelson, 2010). Mixed-method research is increasing in popularity. According to Molina-Azorin (2012), mixed-method research has been receiving more citations than research using one data-gathering method only.

3.2. Sampling and research procedures

This study included early career academic staff members from 11 public HEIs in South Africa. The researcher distributed 294 surveys of which 117 were returned and usable for analyses. This represented a 40% response rate. The majority of the participants consisted of women (51.3%) and representative of the white ethnic group (47.9%). The participants were primarily aged between 40-49 years (34%) and in possession of a Master's degree as their highest level of educational qualification (49.65). Most of the participants were employed as lecturers (54.7%), had between 0-5 years of work experience in higher education institutions (53%) and were employed for the same period of time in their current job (70.9%). Follow-up interviews were done with 23 early career academics from selected HEIs. Most of the participants for the qualitative interviews in were male (N=15), employed as lecturer (N=16), in possession of a Master's degree (N=13) and representative of the black African ethnic group (N=14).

3.3. Measuring Instruments

An adapted version of the **Talent Retention Scale** of Theron (2015) was used. The scale consists of the following sections: Compensation and Recognition Scale (nine items), Management Support (nine items), Satisfaction with Institutional Practices Scale (16 items) and Intention to Quit Scale (3 items). Responses for Satisfaction with Institutional Practices were measured on a four-point Likert scale ranging from *Extremely dissatisfied* (1) to *Extremely satisfied* (4). Responses for the rest of the questionnaire were measured on a six-point Likert scale from strongly disagree (1) to Strongly Disagree (6).

3.4. Data analyses

The data in this study was analysed using SPSS (SPSS, 2019). The researchers applied exploratory factor analyses to uncover the factor structure of each of the measurements used. Descriptive statistics such as frequencies, means, standard deviation, skewness and kurtosis were used to analyse the magnitude of the factors of the measurements in this study. The reliability of the factors were determined by using Cronbach Alpha coefficients of $\alpha \geq 0.70$ (see Field, 2018). The quantitative results in this study were further analysed by using follow-up interviews with a selected group of early career academics. The findings of the qualitative interviews were used to supplement and explain the quantitative results in more detail.

4. RESULTS AND FINDINGS

4.1. Factor and Reliability Analyses

The results of the factor analyses, descriptive statistics and reliabilities are reported in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Factors, Descriptive Statistics and Reliabilities of Questionnaires

Factors	MSA	Variance Explained	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	α
Compensation and Recognition	0.828	53.514%	3.406	1.110	-0.176	-0.667	0.890
Management Support	0.898	69.333%	4.261	1.205	-0.841	-0.071	0.942
Satisfaction with General Institutional Practices	0.735	61.592%	2.752	0.620	-0.352	0.258	0.910
Satisfaction with Research Funding			2.749	0.711	-0.574	0.698	0.812
Intention to quit	0.735	85.478%	2.946	1.599	0.518	-0.829	0.913

The results in Table 1 show acceptable Measure of sample adequacy (MSA) above 0.60 for factor analyses (Hair, Black, Babin and Anderson, 2010). The results of the factor analyses resulted in factor for Compensation and Recognition (variance explained = 53.514%), Management support (variance explained = 69.333%), two factors for Satisfaction with Institutional Practices (variance explained = 61.592%) and one factor for Intention to Quit (variance explained = 85.478%). The results in Table 1 further show good to excellent reliabilities for the measurements, which comply with the guideline of $\alpha \geq 0.70$ (Field, 2018). The results of the measurements are further explored in the section that follows, and are supplemented by quotes from the participant interviews.

4.2. Compensation and Recognition

From the mean scores, it is evident that the respondents were in slight agreement that the compensation and recognition practices of HEIs were adequate. Similar findings were observed from follow-up interviews with early career academics. One participant noted:

“Remuneration, I think, is one challenge of the university. They are trying to make it more market-related, because industry will eventually take the candidates in terms of remuneration. I don’t think industry can attract you any other way. I think the fact that some people will consider going back into industry will be due to monetary reason” (Participant 8, female, lecturer, Master’s degree).

Another participant added:

“I think the salaries are not compatible at all, but we all know that money alone doesn’t bring happiness. If you compare this university’s salaries with other universities, I think we are a little behind” (Participant 10, female, senior lecturer, doctorate).

and

“We struggle to attract talented people to the academic world, because people consider the pay to be not great, so you will find that your top people will always go to places where the remuneration is top class. We have to be very specific to the people that we attract to the academia” (Participant 11, male, lecturer, Master’s degree).

Participant 2 reflected on challenges relating to benefits offered by the institution:

“For issues like medical aid, where you have to pay around five to six thousand rand, and which means you go home with about nothing. Now it becomes a

problem, meaning lecturers don't even have medical aid because of that, and that is one thing I'm not very happy about" (Participant 2, male, lecturer, Master's degree).

4.3. Management Support

Mixed results were observed relating to management support for early career academics. From the quantitative analyses, it was evident that the respondents were mostly in agreement that they received adequate management support. Some participants were of the opinion that more attention should be paid to talent- and performance management, as mentioned by one:

"Talent management, as we really need to try and customise performance management and try to individualise it. In the academic field, it is very stupid to have a standard set of templates of managing someone's performance. To individualise the rewards and recognition that is linked to your performance" (Participant 8, female, lecturer, Master's degree).

Another respondent noted dissatisfaction with management support by stating:

"The managerial module of the university has changed into a corrupt one. The academic has been reduced in stages because of way of managing us" (Participant 9, female, lecturer, Master's degree).

4.4. Satisfaction with General Institutional Practices

Respondents in this sample were slightly satisfied with general institutional practices. Most of the interview participants were in agreement that administrative support functions needed improvement, as mentioned by one of the respondents:

"The IT support function, on the other hand, is very poor. There are some departments that are very supportive, then there are others departments that need to lift their game in order to deliver better support" (Participant 11, male, lecturer, Master's degree, white).

Participant 7 supported this view by adding:

"Administrative support ... I think lecturers should have the time available to prepare for classes and do research, but then they should really give more support in terms of assistance. Administrative support would be valuable in a university environment" (Participant 8, female, lecturer, Master's degree).

Respondents were also slightly satisfied with the availability of research funding. However, they felt that it limited their career mobility between institutions, because of contractual obligations:

“If it comes, probably you would go, but for now, because we are also stuck in here because of a certain contract we signed that we have to be here for a certain number of years, otherwise we cannot just quit, because we have already taken up some grants from the university, which we need to stay for about four or five years before you think of leaving, so it’s a problem” (Participant 2, male, lecturer, Master’s degree).

4.5. Intention to Quit

Respondents in this sample were less likely to consider quitting the academic profession. One of the respondents highlighted the difficulty of re-starting a career:

“Well, at my age, I’m not ready to begin going on starting a new, depending what’s on offer. I may consider, so whatever comes on offer should be enticing, to let me leave my current position” (Participant 1, male, senior lecturer, doctorate).

Other participants indicated their passion and commitment towards the academic profession; one participant stated:

“This is the ideal world for me, and I would like to be in a space where I can be involved in academia for the rest of my life, but, for now, I haven’t considered leaving” (Participant 11, male, lecturer, Master’s degree).

5. DISCUSSION

The main objective of this research was to explore the determinants of talent retention of early career academics in selected South African Higher Education Institutions. Participants were of the opinion that the compensation practices of HEIs are not market-related. In line with the report of HESA (2014), this finding highlights a potential retention risk regarding early career academics, as they are likely to leave the academic profession for higher salary packages in the private sector. Other participants also highlighted challenges relating to the benefits offered by a particular HEI. Medical aid benefits were noted not to be comparable with those of the private sector and even those of other South African HEIs. This finding points to the potential risk of not only losing early career talent to the private sector, but also to other South African HEIs. Participants were also dissatisfied with the recognition they received, and felt that this was reserved for

more senior academics. One of the participants indicated the intention to leave the institution because of a lack of recognition. The results of the study therefore confirm that poor rewards and recognition contribute to the turnover intentions of early career academics (Makondo, 2014; Onah & Anikwe, 2016; Selesha, 2014).

The results of the study show that the participants were mostly satisfied with the support that they received from management. This is an important finding, as managers are key to the retention of early career employees (Du Plessis et al., 2015). Some participants, however, expressed a deep dissatisfaction with management, citing corrupt management practices and a lack of attention to talent management practices and performance management. Some participants further indicated that poor management had a negative impact on their morale. This study's findings confirm that management needs to pay more attention to talent management practices and reward early career academics properly.

The respondents in this study were only slightly satisfied with institutional practices. As with previous studies, infrastructural challenges in departments such as information technology prevail. Other participants highlighted the lack of administrative support, which, in turn, increased their workload. Participants also highlighted challenges relating to research funding. Those who had access to research funding felt that they were limited in their career mobility and career advancement, because of contractual obligations. Others were of the opinion that there is no support from the University regarding research funds, and that they have to raise these funds themselves, which left them discouraged. The results therefore confirm that research funding support in HEIs is problematic (Busch & Ledingham; 2016).

The results of this study showed that the academics were in slight agreement that they would like to remain in their job. One participant mentioned that age prevented her from starting a new career. Another participant indicated a sense of loyalty towards his institution and a passion for his profession. In contrast with previous studies mentorship and employment equity practices did not play a role in the retention of the early career academics in the present study (Lo & Ramayah, 2011).

This research had some limitations. First it used a cross-sectional research approach which means that talent retention were measured at one point in time. Given the current changing situation of higher education institutions, these perceptions are likely to change over the long-term. Therefore longitudinal research should be applied to detect turnover intentions of early career academics

over the long-term. Second, this research only focused on early career academics. As a result the findings cannot be generalised to other academic job levels. For future research it is recommended that the sample size be expanded to other academic job levels to do a comparative analyses on turnover intentions. The research should also be expanded to include higher education management and human resource management departments to obtain a more holistic perspective on talent retention in higher education institutions. Future research should also focus on the individual and organisational outcomes of talent retention for early career academics.

6. CONCLUSIONS

In sum, the results of this research confirmed that compensation, management support, and institutional practices, such as research support and infrastructure, are critical for the retention of early career academics. Higher education managers are encouraged to develop talent management policies and strategies to cater for the diverse needs of a new generation workforce. Further the demographic information showed alarming trends in terms of early career academics who have been in the employment of higher education institutions for a long period of time but operating on junior levels. Higher education management should focus on detecting the factors that facilitate and constrain the career advancement of early career academics. This research also highlighted additional factors, such as demographic trends and loyalty that should be considered in the retention of early career academics.

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