

Attrition and Retention of Senior Academics at Institutions of Higher Learning in South Africa: The Strategies, Complexities and Realities

Michael O. Samuel¹ and Crispin Chipunza²

¹*School of Economic and Business Sciences, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa*

E-mail: Olorunjuwon.samuel@wits.ac.za

²*Department of Human Resources Management, Central University of Technology, Bloemfontein, South Africa*

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ABSTRACT The competition for top academics across the higher education and research landscape of South Africa has assumed a prominent dimension and this phenomenon has resulted in the ever increasing attrition of this category of employees from one institution to the next. This paper seeks to identify and evaluate factors that facilitate the attrition and retention of senior academic employees in South African universities. The study adopted survey research method using quantitative research design. A self-administered questionnaire was used to gather primary data from respondents. The study examines the influence of certain work attributes on the retention of 255 senior academic staff in 10 universities across South Africa. Results of the study indicates that most of the respondents place greater importance on challenging work, inter-personal relationship, access to research resources and job security. Results are discussed in terms of the implications for retention practices in the universities.

INTRODUCTION

Demand for senior academic staff in higher education and training landscape of South Africa has been increasing and may be expected to continue to increase given the government's resolution that participation in higher education should increase substantially, leading to the almost concluded plan to establish two additional public universities in the country (by 2014). However, at the heart of this expansionist programme is the general problem of skills shortage in the country, particularly in the higher education sector. The problem of attrition and retention of academic employees in developing countries has not been sufficiently documented in literature as distinct from that of brain drain. The problem, as noted by Mihyo (2007) is subsumed under the general category of brain drain without particular attention being devoted to it. For example, qualified academic employees have resigned from public universities in Kenya in order to take up better paying jobs abroad (Waswa et al. 2008). Similarly, there is concern about the adequacy of the future supply of academics in South Africa due to better service attraction in the public and private sectors. The pressure is also heightened in South Africa due to the es-

tablishment of additional university in Botswana, and the expansion of academic programmes by the Polytechnic of Namibia. These neighbouring institutions of higher learning consider South Africa as a catchment area to attract highly qualified academic staff. All these factors will continue to put a lot of pressure on existing academics thus facilitating their attrition. At the same time, global recruitment and retention problems have been growing in prominence (Tettey 2006) and there has been a long-standing concern that the higher education sector faces a 'retirement bulge', as academics from the 1960s expansion reach retirement.

Nwadiani and Akpotu (2002) note that university education in contemporary times the world over, is becoming an exceedingly complex enterprise. This complexity requires a high degree of competence and proven scholarship from the university academic staff in particular and the entire staff in general. This is so because universities, by their unique nature are expected to be a repository of the most specialised and skilled intellectuals. They serve as storehouses of knowledge for nurturing the manpower needs of the nation and hence, for satisfying the aspirations of the people for a good, and humane society. Central to the realisation of the univer-

sity education goals and objectives are the academic staff whose roles are crucial. The number and quality of academic staff, coupled with their effectiveness make the difference in university education production function. As Evenson (2004:174) surmises, "the escape route from the mass poverty now endemic in most African countries is improved income. This means invention and reinvention, innovation, and reverse engineering. Such processes require skills that can be produced only in higher education programs." Unfortunately, the universities themselves do not seem capable of mobilizing the intellectual strength needed to drive these processes. Indeed, "staff development/retention remains a major challenge" (Njuguna et al. 2003).

Background to the Study

Attracting, motivating and retaining knowledge workers have become important in a knowledge-based and tight labour market, where changing knowledge management practices and global convergence of technology has redefined the nature of work. While individualisation of employment practices and team-based work may provide personal and organisational flexibilities, aligning HR and organisational strategies for competitive advantage has become more prominent (Horwitz et al. 2003).

According to the Chartered Institute of Personnel Development (CIPD 2006), the changing demographics of the labour market, enduring skills shortages and employee demands for work-life balance have created a so-called 'war for talent'. In this 'war', successful organisations look to improve their strategies, policies and practices for the attraction, development, deployment and retention of talent vital for their business needs. Superior talent is increasingly recognised as the prime source of sustainable competitive advantage in high performance organisations. Underlying this trend is the rapidly changing business environment and the growing need for globally aware managers and professionals with multi-functional fluency, technological literacy, entrepreneurial skills, and the ability to operate in different cultures, structures and markets (Chambers et al. 1998). At the same time, the signs are that attracting and retaining talented employees is becoming harder. In fact, a number of surveys suggest that many large organisations are already suffering a chronic

shortage of talented people. In the US, for instance, three-quarters of the 400 corporate officers recently surveyed said their companies had 'insufficient talent sometimes' or were 'chronically talent-short across the board' (Chambers et al. 1998). Similarly, Sparrow and Hiltrop (1994) alluded to the growing problem of talent shortages in most European countries. In France, for example, the National Institute for Statistics and Economic Studies statistics show that the proportion of manufacturing organisations experiencing difficulties in recruiting all categories of staff rose from 25 per cent in 1976 to nearly 50 per cent by 1989. According to Brewster and Bournois (1991), the greatest problems are in the managerial and technical labour markets, where the channelling of investment into new computers and machinery, increases in production capacity and new organisation methods have all been associated with a growing requirement for talented people.

The situation is not very much different in African continent, and particularly South Africa. The South African labour-market suffers from a dearth of skilled manpower and a continuous brain drain (Kinneer and Sutherland 2001) suggesting that South African organisations are under pressure to retain available talent. The retention of talent has however become a major challenge to human resource practitioners since; according to Harris (2007) talented job candidates in the global skills market have the luxury of choice. This is affecting South African organisations since they have to compete not only with one another, but with organisations abroad. The situation has tremendously increased competition for talent in South Africa with many organisations going to great length to retain their best employees. Competition has therefore put skilled employees who are already in short supply under pressure as they are being attracted by more than one organisation at a time with various kinds of incentives. This scenario is becoming increasingly noticeable in the higher education institutions and research landscape of South Africa where universities and research institutions are competing with one another in the recruitment of top academics and researchers. This has particularly become necessary due to the emphases placed on research outputs and teaching excellence by the departments of higher education and training and science and technology respectively. All over the world, univer-

sities are rated based on, amongst other criteria, their research outputs (demonstrated in terms of publications in referred journals, number of postgraduate outputs (particularly doctoral), and the quality of academic staff (doctoral).

Although the science of employee selection is very well developed, the science of attraction and retention is less so (Barber and Bretz 2000; Taylor and Collins 2000). In particular, despite the fierce battles being waged for talented employees in today's competitive labour markets, very little is known about the ways in which high ability and high achieving applicants differ from others in terms of what they are seeking in the work environment (Rynes 1991). Despite the fact that many managers provide their talented employees with competitive remuneration and stimulating work environment, organisations that could be referred to as employers of choice still experience persistent turnover of their talents. This phenomenon has therefore presents a compelling curiosity amongst researchers as to what actually motivate this category of employees to constantly change their employers.

Previous research has long shown that most new college graduates tend to experience some degree of disillusionment shortly after beginning their first professional positions (Schein 1978; Wanous 1978). However, Trank et al. (2002) suggest that those students (and indeed high performing employees) who are most attractive to employers during recruitment may also be the most disgruntled shortly after hiring, especially if their organisational experiences do not match their motivational profiles. Thus, the very characteristics that make high-achieving students and employees attractive to organisations may also make their recruitment and retention more problematic.

Against this background, this study is designed to investigate variables that facilitate the attrition of high performing academics and researchers, particularly from the universities in South Africa that are generally referred to as 'previously disadvantaged'. The findings will go a long way in assisting these institutions in their recruitment and retention practices.

Objectives

Identify and evaluate the factors that facilitate the attrition and retention of senior academic employees in South African universities

Considering the objective of the study as stated above, and deducting from existing literature, the present study hypothesised that:

There is a significant positive relationship between identified attrition and retention variables and actual attrition of senior academic employees in universities.

For the purposes of this study, senior academic staff was defined as jobs in higher education and research institutions (comprehensive universities, universities of technology and specialised research institutions) whose main function was academic teaching or academic or specialised research, with doctoral degrees. Thus, lecturing (for example, Professors, Senior lecturers and Lecturers) and research staff (for example, Post-doctoral Fellows and Senior Research Fellows) are included.

Review of Related Literature

The problem of attrition among high performing academics is a global phenomenon. According to Tettey (2006), the problem of academic staff retention is a global one which affects both developing and industrialised countries. The difficulties within Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries are well documented. In the United States, for example, about 7.7 per cent of all full-time academic staff left their institutions for other places within one academic year – from Fall 1997 to Fall 1998. Of these, only 29 per cent were retirees; the remaining 71 per cent left for a variety of reasons (National Centre for Educational Statistics 2001). A 2000 survey of full-time faculty members in the US showed that more than 40 per cent of them had contemplated changing careers (Sanderson et al. 2000). In Canada, it has been argued that one of the challenges that universities will face over the next decade or so is academic recruitment and retention (Carleton University 2000; The Laurier Institution 2000). Similarly, "it has been suggested that early in the 21st century there will be a crisis in Australian higher education with an estimated academic labour shortage of 20,000 if this trend is not addressed" (Mathews 2003:313).

A staff survey conducted for the *Independent Review of Higher Education Pay and Conditions* (Bett 1999) in the United Kingdom, pointed to a considerable increase in recruitment and retention difficulties for both academic and sup-

port staff since 1998. Around one in five institutions reported experiencing difficulties filling academic positions in 2001 (18 per cent), compared to one in twenty in 1998 (six per cent). The subject areas causing the most problems, according to the report included computing/IT, business subjects (accountancy/finance, business/management, law and economics), engineering, science subjects (biological sciences, chemistry and physics), nursing/midwifery and professions allied to medicine, and education. The percentage increase in retention difficulties was of a similar magnitude, with 7.6 per cent reporting retention difficulties 'most of the time' or more in 2001, compared to 2.2 per cent in 1998. Departments most frequently mentioned as having a turnover problem were: computing and computer science; law; accountancy and finance; business management and information systems; engineering (including electrical); and education (European Union Control Association (EUCA) 2002). Institutions reported that lecturers were the most difficult to recruit, with almost 60 of all institutions reporting difficulties. The percentage reporting difficulties in recruiting lecturers was similar in new and old universities, but lower in colleges. More old universities than new found it difficult to recruit professors and research assistants. Recruitment and retention problems were particularly acute in areas which had to compete with the private sector, such as law, IT and engineering (EUCA 2002). However, the same was true in areas competing with other public sector jobs with higher pay, such as education and subjects allied to medicine (EUCA 2002). The result of this was that Higher Education Institutions reported difficulties attracting many candidates and those that they did attract were often not of the requisite quality. Moreover, they also reported that it was difficult to recruit good young academic staff as a result of low starting salaries. Furthermore, human resource managers and heads of department in the case study universities reported greater difficulty recruiting senior level staff, particularly for readerships and chairs.

Tettey (2006) contends that the issue of academic staff attrition and retention in developing countries has been less well documented in the literature. This is because the issue tends to be subsumed under the general category of 'brain drain', without particular attention being devoted to it. This assumption reflects the close rela-

tionship between the brain drain and staff retention in many countries. In fact, the triggers identified for brain drain, in general, are identical to those behind academic staff attrition. While brain drain suggests movement of skills across borders, this study is concerned with intra and inter skills movement within the higher education and research institutions in South Africa.

Factors Affecting Recruitment and Retention of Organisational Staff

High performance organisations are consistently out-performing their competitors on a number of human resource factors, including the level of teamwork and openness between co-workers, the training and development opportunities they offer to employees and the degree of pro-activity in HR planning. Developing this capability begins with the realisation that effective human resource management underpins the competitiveness of organisations (Hiltrop 1999). According to Metcalf et al. (2005), recruitment and retention is affected by the whole employment package (the rewards and disbenefits of the job) relative to other employment. These include pay and fringe benefits, intrinsic aspects of the job (for example, for academics, teaching and research), job security, work organisation, autonomy, progression, family-friendly practices, congeniality of colleagues and the working environment etc. The more attractive the overall package, the more likely it will attract applicants and retain employees. The relative importance of these factors differs for recruitment and retention, due to informational differences between those in a job and potential recruits. Applicants (particularly those entering the sector) have less knowledge and the factors influencing recruitment tend to be those on which information is more easily available. This means that pay tends to loom larger for recruitment than retention. Moreover, the expected and the actual package may differ, leading to turnover (Metcalf et al. 2005).

Inconsistent with Metcalf argument, a number of studies have shown that in most countries and industries, pay does not have a strong effect on employee attraction or retention. According to Challenger et al. (1999) 'low' pay is low on managers' lists when deciding to join or leave an organisation. As long as pay was not seen to be insultingly out of line, other things

mattered much more. The two things that managers cited most often when discussing loyalty were corporate pride and trust in their chief executive's ability to take decisions. Pay, as a way of keeping talent, came third. Furthermore, using pay as a key method to attract and keep talent may be costly. As Pfeffer (1994) asserts, 'pay is the most fungible of all the resources at an employer's disposal; if it is an employer's sole source of loyalty, then he always runs the risk of being outbid'.

Considering the risks and problems associated with pay as a device to attract and keep talent, some experts argue that many firms will have to find other ways of attracting and keeping good people, including realistic job previews, good employer orientation, opportunities for career development, and challenging work assignments. This suggestion is consistent with the view that the ability to attract and retain talented people depends largely on non-monetary factors such as the quality of supervision and the extent organisations utilise the skills and knowledge of their employees (Hiltrop 1999). Consequently, Hiltrop consider the following as crucial for attraction and retention practices in organisations - employment security, opportunities for training and skill development, recruitment and promotion from within, career development and guidance, opportunities for skill development and specialisation, autonomy and decentralisation of decision-making, opportunities for teamwork and participation, equal benefits and access to perquisites for all, the employees, extra rewards and recognition for high performance, openness of information about corporate goals, outcomes and intentions, pro-active personnel planning and strategic human resources management.

As the retention of talent with critical skill sets is acknowledged by organisations as vital for achievement of business growth and the building of organisational competencies, some organisations strive to be the 'employer of choice' by creating a positive environment and offering challenging assignments that, foster continued personal growth. An 'employer of choice' (Eoc) is an organisation that outperforms its competition in the attraction development and retention of people with business, required aptitude, often through innovative and compelling human resources programmes (Dessler 2000; Clarke 2001). High talent individ-

uals want work that is interesting, challenging and that has an impact. They also expect work to be appropriately designed, with adequate resource available and with effective management, work flows and teams to create more exciting and challenging work (Guest 1999; Messmer 2000; Stein 2000; Beck 2001; Clarke 2001).

The growing priority given by individuals to work-life balance (Kersley et al. 2004; Bonney 2005) also has implications for the design and implementation of talent management strategies. A shift in employers thinking and policy development from considering hours spent at work to the quality of contribution made while at work will do much to ensure as wide and diverse a talent pool as possible is accessed within their organisations. One example, according to the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) is the alignment of flexible working policies with career development schemes. Some career schemes may appear closed to those employees who don't work full time or have continuity of employment, so under-utilising organisational talent (EOC 2005; Grant et al. 2005)

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Methodology

The study adopted survey research method using quantitative research design. A self-administered questionnaire was used to gather primary data from respondents. The survey research strategy is an effective tool to get opinions, attitudes and descriptions as well as getting cause-and-effect relationships. Ghauri and Gronhaug (2005) describe surveys and questionnaires as among the most popular data collection methods in business and social science research.

Sampling/Research Participants

Since it was not practicable to get the sampling frame of academic staff in the universities that were surveyed, convenience sampling was used in selecting the research participants. According to Cooper and Schindler (2003) convenience sampling is a non-probability sampling technique where subjects are selected because of their convenient accessibility and proximity to the researcher. Academic staff with doctoral degrees was targeted since that category of staff

has a higher attrition tendency than other academics with lower qualifications. It is believed that this category of participants is knowledgeable about the subject of investigation because some of them must have either been attracted from their previous employment, or has lost some of their colleagues to attrition.

Measuring Instrument

A 52-item self-developed survey questionnaire was used as a data gathering instrument for the study. The 52-items were factored into seven (7) components using principal component analysis as follows: stimulating academic environment/challenging work; work autonomy; individual basic pay and related financial benefits; job security/employment tenure; work flexibility; availability of research resources; and inter-personal relationship. The questionnaire was developed after a comprehensive review of the literature had been undertaken, thus enriching the construct validity of the instrument. The research questionnaire had an overall Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.81, thus confirming its reliability. According to Nunnally (cited in Struwig and Stead 2001), for consistency to be present, the alpha must be above 0.7, but not higher than 0.9. The Cronbach alpha result for the questionnaire used in the present study can therefore be considered as reliable.

Questionnaire items were measured on a five-point Likert-Scale ranging from "strongly agree" (5) to "strongly disagree" (1). Example of questions asked under each sub-head include: "I left my previous employment because the work environment is not stimulating enough". "I did not find new challenges in my previous job". "I left my previous employment because I did not have total freedom to do my job". "The principle of academic freedom is compromised in my previous employment". "The basic pay and fringe benefits in my previous employment was not competitive enough". "My previous employment did not guarantee a long-term tenure". "I left my previous employment because I could not conveniently schedule my working hours". "My previous employment could not provide me with sufficient resources for teaching and research". "I did not enjoy good working relationship with my colleagues in my previous employment". "My colleagues in my previous employment relate with me on the basis of my nationality/ethnicity".

Statistical Analysis

Correlation statistics using Chi-Square technique was used to establish whether there is any relationship between the selected variables and attrition of academic staff as hypothesised in the study. The normality of the data was determined by using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. The significance of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was greater than 0.05 in all the tests. This implies that the normality of the data can be assumed. The pairwise deletion method was used to treat missing values. Principal component analysis was used to group the questionnaire items into 7 factors.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The Chi-square value for stimulating academic environment/challenging work was $\chi^2(4) = 11.41$ with an associated P-value of 0.03 (Table 1). The result provided strong evidence of an association between this variable and actual attrition of academic staff. There was no evidence of association between work autonomy with a Chi Square value of $\chi^2(4) = 22.32$ with an associated P-value of 0.13 and actual attrition of academic staff. Although individual basic pay and related financial benefits provided evidence of association between this variable and actual attrition of academic staff with a Chi Square value of $\chi^2(4) = 9.61$, the level of association was not significant (P-value of 0.08). Job security/employment tenure attracted a Chi-square value of $\chi^2(4) = 19.71$ and an associated P-value of 0.01 thus demonstrating a strong association between the variable and actual attrition of academic staff. Work flexibility attracted a Chi-square value of $\chi^2(4) = 39.61$ and an associated P-value of 0.21 suggesting lack of association while availability of research resources had a Chi-square value of $\chi^2(4) = 18.36$ with an associated P-value of 0.02. The result provided strong evidence of an association between this variable and actual attrition of academic staff. Academic staff were also significantly influenced by inter-personal relationship with a Chi-square value of $\chi^2(4) = 21.93$ and an associated P-value of 0.04.

The research results provided significant positive relationships between attrition variables and actual attrition of academic staff (inter-personal relationship, job security/tenure, availabil-

ity of research/teaching resources, stimulating academic environment/challenging work), on one hand, and negative correlation between other variables (work flexibility, basic pay/related benefits, work autonomy/workload), on the other hand. The research hypothesis (as stated) can therefore neither be accepted nor rejected.

Table 1: Levels of significance between attrition/retention variables and actual attrition of academic staff from their present employment

S. No.	Attrition/retention variable	P -value	χ^2 value
1	Inter-personal relationship	0.004	21.93
2	Job security/tenure	0.001	19.71
3	Availability of research/teaching resources	0.002	18.36
4	Stimulating academic environment/challenging work	0.003	11.41
5	Work flexibility	0.21	39.61
6	Basic pay/related benefits	0.008	9.61
7	Work autonomy/workload	0.13	22.32

P<0.05 level of significance

The seven factors were further confirmed by the rotation sums of squared loading after Varimax rotation. The seven factors are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Rotated factor loading for attrition variables

Attrition variables	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4	Factor 5	Factor 6	Factor 7
Interesting academic curriculum				0.715			
Interesting students				0.538			
Availability of infrastructure				0.563			
Freedom to design task					0.441		
Degree of supervision by superior					0.348		
Nature of workload					0.444		
Competitive salary						0.440	
Merit pay						0.441	
Salary commensurate with experience/qualification						0.404	
Other financial benefits						0.458	
Non-financial benefits						0.346	
Permanent appointment		0.698					
Fixed-term contract		0.489					
Option of working from home							0.491
Can influence working hours							0.433
Work schedule permit other engagements							0.501
Research incentives			0.666				
Research funding			0.568				
Modern teaching technology			0.583				
Research networking			0.585				
Co-operation from colleagues	0.598						
Frustrated relationship with colleagues	0.601						
Experience ethnicity	0.682						
Experience racial discrimination	0.483						
Hostile relationship with colleagues based on nationality	0.783						

DISCUSSION

Attrition Factor – Inter-personal Relationship

Inter-personal relationship in this study goes beyond the usual lack of co-operation and collegiality amongst colleagues as reported in many previous studies. Many respondents in the instant research alluded to hostile behaviour from colleagues, behaviours that were informed by ethnic and national affiliations. It should be reported here that universities in South Africa attract good number of expatriates from other African countries, and indeed the world over. Although the biographical section of the measuring instrument in this research does not include ethnicity/nationality of respondents, their response to some questionnaire items suggest that many of them were expatriates and others belonging to other races/ethnic groupings within South Africa.

Some respondents reported what has become known in South Africa as 'xenophobic' abuses, a trend which is supposedly strange to academic community. This reported behaviour is inimical to healthy teaching, learning and research environment. This research report is consistent

with the findings of Report of the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) to the University of Venda (2011). According to the report,

the Panel heard about and observed that there are serious manifestations of xenophobia and sexism at the University. In relation to the former, interviews with staff and the staff unions pointed to tensions between local and foreign personnel emanating.

The Panel report stated further:

The issue of the appointment of foreign nationals to senior academic positions in a context in which the University is not managing to attract local staff also needs to be addressed as part of UNIVEN's orientation towards the African continent and to internationalisation; and cannot be undermined by an institutional culture that is not tolerant of diversity. The Panel also heard about the difficulties that South African non-Venda staff have experienced at the University. These are serious issues that must be addressed in the context where the cultural and intellectual mark of a university as an institution of higher learning is precisely its universality.

Finally,

The Panel encourages the University to investigate the extent of xenophobia and intolerance between local and foreign staff and urgently develop appropriate interventions to create an environment in which tolerance and appreciation of diversity are regarded as essential values by the University community. Given the role of internationalisation and linkages in the strategic plan of the University, UNIVEN cannot afford to leave unattended a situation which might jeopardise the achievement of its status as an internationally-oriented university.

Attrition Factor – Competitive Salary/ Fringe Benefits

Individual salary and other financial fringe benefits was the only variable that does not positively influence academic staff to move from their previous employment. This result is inconsistent with many other studies (Kinnear and Sutherland 2001; Chiboiwa et al. 2010) which found salary and financial incentives to be positively related to employee retention. However, the instant research result concurs with the findings of other studies which argue that money

has not remained as good a motivator as it was in the past (Amar 2004), the efficiency of money as a motivator for skilled employee is quite low. Hays (1999) advises that if managers reward performance with only money, they will be losing the substance of retention because there are other more powerful ways of motivating quality employees and these include freedom and flexibility in the organisation. It can, however be argued that salary of academic staff in South Africa, particularly those in senior positions compares favourably with others in the world. For example, results of a recent survey of Commonwealth universities reveal that the purchasing power of the average academic in South Africa is now higher than those in Canada, the UK and New Zealand (Association of Commonwealth Universities 2011). South African academics earn on average only 6% less than their counterparts in Australia, the top-ranked country, when cost of living is taken into account, the report concluded.

However, salary differential would, perhaps be a significant factor if the emphasis in this study was movement of academic staff from universities to the private sector. This sector (private) has been known to have used money as a major variable in attracting academics. In their comparison of jobs in the Higher Education (HE) sector with similar jobs in the public and private sector, the Hay study in Bett (1999) found that not only did academic jobs compare unfavourably with similarly 'sized' jobs in the private sector, but also with other public sector employment. For the Independent Review on Pay and Conditions, Hay Consulting (in Bett 1999) conducted a job evaluation of academic jobs and compared these jobs with other jobs in the public and private sectors of similar content or 'size'. The conclusions of the study are that there were indeed large pay differentials between the HE sector and elsewhere. These were largest at the top and bottom of the scale (that is, professors and senior lecturers, or equivalents). And in London and the South East, the most competitive wages were to be found at the Lecturer level in the old university sector and at the Senior Lecturer level in new universities and colleges. The study also conducted an exercise in order to take into account other non-pecuniary factors (for example, the length of the working week, holidays, cars, pensions and other fringe benefits) that might offset or amplify these dif-

ferences in salary. The results of this exercise were that the picture remains broadly the same, with tangible rewards lower for academic jobs. Indeed, for some more senior roles, rewards were even less competitive when the broader package is taken into account.

Attrition Factor – Stimulating Work Environment/Challenging Work

Stimulating academic environment and challenging work provided a strong evidence of association with attrition of academic staff in our research. This variable has over the time remained a strong motivating factor for employees generally to remain or leave their present organisation. The nature of the job has an important influence on employee satisfaction and hence the balance of the positive and negative factors will impact upon the ability of the higher education institutions to retain current and to attract new staff (Metcalf et al. 2005). It is certainly believed that academics experience substantial intrinsic job satisfaction (Oshagbemi 1996; Ward and Sloane 2000; Bryson and Barnes 2000a).

Academic work in the HE sector is made up of a blend of three elements: teaching, research and administration/management. Some academics may not have to undertake all of these responsibilities, but most, to a greater or lesser extent, do. The balance of these three elements is important to the satisfaction of the workforce and hence turnover (Court 1999). Some staff may not wish to undertake all three of these tasks and forcing all academic staff to undertake all three will push dissatisfied staff out of the sector. According to the Association of University Teachers in the UK, *'There is no reason why staff should not, as an informed career choice, concentrate substantially in any one of the three major components of academic work'* (AUT 1995). Because of this varying mix of teaching, research and administration, Metcalf et al. (2005) note that some factors will affect some members of staff more than others. For example, changes in student numbers may directly affect only those who teach (by increasing teaching hours and marking), but the effects may be felt indirectly by non-teaching staff as pressure is exerted on them to expand their role to include teaching. Anything that places too heavy (or too small) an emphasis on one area of working may

have detrimental effects on recruitment and retention, for example, the perception that promotions depend primarily on research output (Court 1999). Moreover, it appears that the positive aspects of academic life are being squeezed by burdens in areas which staff dislikes, such as bureaucratic administration (Bryson and Barnes 2000a).

Attrition Factor – Job Security/Tenure

Job security is an important influence on job satisfaction and the use of fixed-term contracts has been identified as an important factor causing academics to leave the sector. The result of our study is consistent with this statement as job security/tenure was found to have a strong association with attrition of academic staff. There are essentially three types of contract: permanent, fixed-term and hourly paid (time on task). Indications from the respondents suggest that most of them left their previous employers because they could not get permanent appointments. Those of them who are on fixed-term (contract) appointments are considering leaving as soon as they have opportunity to move to a more secured employment. This consideration seems to have been necessitated by the age of this category of senior academics who, on the average are in their middle-age with family responsibilities and would want some sort of stability in their employment and family-life. This result is supported by a similar finding by Samuel and Chipunza (2009) in a turnover survey of selected public and private sector organisations in South Africa.

The increased use of temporary contracts has been a major concern in studies of recruitment and retention and in studies of academics' job satisfaction. It has often been cited as a reason for retention problems (Bett 1999; Bryson and Barnes 2000a, b). This problem was noted by the British House of Common Committee on Science and Technology (2002b):

We found widespread dissatisfaction and demoralisation among contract researchers, some of whom have been employed on 20 different contracts in as many years. For many researchers there is no career structure and little hope of obtaining a permanent position.... Many researchers are either new in position or searching for their next contract. Research is left unfinished or unpublished..... (Metcalf et al. 2005).

However, evidence from other studies (Amar 2004) contends that job security is not a retention antecedent for the new generation of skilled employees. To this category of employees, job security is a positive feedback of their labour market worth and this makes them look for a daily proof that their work matters to the organisation. This provides employees with a sense of security because, to them, if they are doing a good job, they are secured, if not with their present employers, then with another one.

Attrition Factor – Work Autonomy/ Work-Load/Flexibility

One benefit of working in academia has been the degree of autonomy of the hours and pattern of working. Recent evidence suggests that, at least with regard to the number of hours worked, this is no longer (if it were ever) the case. The results of our study show that respondents equally enjoyed autonomy of work and flexible working hours in their former employment. These factors do not therefore motivate them to leave. The suggestion therefore is that work autonomy and flexible working hours are prevalent factors in institutions of higher learning in South Africa. It also appears that academic staff has come to term with the issue of work load and have considered that to be an important characteristics of academic work. Concurring, the Hays study concludes that academics had flexibility over their work patterns and that there was ‘no reason to regard higher education work as radically more

or less demanding than work in the rest of the economy’ (Bett 1999). Indeed, they argued that the flexibility academics had in organising their work patterns compensated for the extra hours worked. Note however that there are negative aspects to this increased ‘flexibility’. In a study of stress and work-life balance in academic staff, Kinman and Jones (2003) found some worrying issues concerning work-life balance. Their results suggest that the boundaries between home and work in the life of the academic are wafer-thin, particularly for the 20% of those polled who lived with another academic. On average, a quarter of academics’ work is done at home and around 10% of academics check their email five times a day at home.

Attrition Factor – Availability of Research/ Teaching Resources

There is a high correlation between availability of teaching and research facilities and attrition of academics. In most universities in South Africa, teaching and research constitutes an important component of academic work and promotions are essentially based on these factors. It is therefore imperative for academics to have facilities that will assist them achieve teaching and research excellence. However, most universities surveyed in this research lacked sufficient provision of these facilities, hence the attrition of their senior academics and researchers. This factor was clearly stated by Olmstead (1993) as thus:

the focus on specific initiatives to support junior faculty stems from the fact that they are the more likely to leave their current positions and also because whatever is done right to retain junior faculty will provide the right signals that will attract others to the institution. Furthermore, when a department makes a new hire at the assistant professor level, it has invested one of its most valuable resources: a tenure-track faculty position. If the department does not nurture that new professor, it greatly reduces the probability of a good return on that investment. On the other hand, if the department facilitates access to good knowledge and resources required to develop a new faculty member’s career, the payoff is likely to be a valued colleague for many years. If a new faculty member is successful, everyone benefits. If a new faculty member is unsuccessful, not only the faculty member suffers; [but so do students, colleagues and the institution as a whole] (Olmstead 1993).

In contrast to the above situation which makes it difficult to attract or retain staff, (Mokopagosi 2005) found that academic staff from the Faculty of Science, at the University of Botswana indicated that “it was generally easier for them to recruit at all levels because of the excellent teaching and research facilities and equipment they have”.

CONCLUSION

The study found the following variables as providing significant grounds for the attrition of academic employees in the universities: inter-

personal relationship, job security/tenure, availability of research/teaching resources, stimulating academic environment/challenging work. On the other hand, other variables such as work flexibility, basic pay/related benefits, work autonomy/workload could not be associated with the attrition of academics in the universities. The study therefore concluded that university authorities should devise a retention strategy around the attrition variables in order to facilitate retention of senior academics in our institutions of higher learning.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Many of the challenges discussed above have put some universities at considerable risks of losing their senior academics and this will have serious implications for teaching and research excellence. These challenges also have the potential of negatively affecting institutional rating amongst top universities in the world. It is therefore important for universities to strategically manage the academic staff recruitment and retention push and pull factors. One important factor for consideration by management and governing council of universities will be the issue of tenure. Senior academics with the potential of making the difference in terms of teaching and research should be considered for permanent appointments. This will significantly improve their job satisfaction and commitment to the university.

Inter-personal relationship, research collaboration and the spirit of collegiality is quite important for a successful academic career. University governing councils and management should initiate policies and programmes that promote and sustain these practices with a view to completely eliminate xenophobic tendencies in our institutions of learning. Although academic staff have come to term with the issue of workload as inherent in academia, management should, as much as possible avoid inordinate workloads which are not only morale-deflating, but physically and psychologically draining. Universities must find a pragmatic ways of balancing student intake with available resources in order to maintain the integrity and credibility of their programmes and credentials.

Even though there has been a plethora of argument against using pay as a retention factor, the fact still remain that rewarding people

based on their contributions to the organisation will not be out of place. There is the need to implement some system of differential rewards if high performing academics are to be retained by individual universities.

Everything put together, attracting and retaining high performing senior academic staff is a HR function and as such, HR departments should put in place mechanisms that will enable them to track the reasons for the resignation of high performing academic employees. Such mechanisms could include exit interviews or a periodic job satisfaction surveys. Information collected through this process will be very useful in understanding the reasons why staff members leave the institutions, or have intentions to leave. This will assist the authorities in determining whether there are significant problems that need to be addressed so as to avoid unnecessary loss of senior academics. Sustainable retention practices in our universities (particularly the previously disadvantaged institutions) will assist in stabilising the quantity and quality of academic and research programmes in the higher education and training sector of the economy.

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