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Academics Attraction and Retention Trends at a South African University

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ABSTRACT This discussion explores the attraction and retention of academics at a formerly disadvantaged South African university. Data for this predominantly quantitative study was gathered through a questionnaire that was sent to the entire university staff and was responded to by 206 respondents. Chi-square and correlation analysis was done for the gathered data. The global challenge posed by failed attraction and retention came to the fore. This study established that professional support, promotion by teaching, remuneration and teaching load are the four top ranked factors that attract and retain academics. It further emerges that the university under study was not doing enough to attract and retain its academics. The need for university management to be proactive in managing attraction and retention matters came to the fore.

INTRODUCTION

This study sought to establish whether the university of study was managing to attract and retain properly qualified academics. The subject of staff retention has been explored extensively in the corporate sector, but what remain largely undocumented are the efforts of higher education institutions in retaining their valuable staff members (Netswera et al. 2005). Universities are predominantly tasked with the provision of teaching-learning, research and community engagement services. According to Schiller (2008), having large numbers of college graduates in a region increases that region's economic growth; such spill overs (also called externalities) are an important factor in generating more rapid growth in a region. Furthermore, education is an investment in the knowledge and skills that are necessary to increase people's ability to earn and grow.

With a view to achieve their part in creating such an environment, universities must have the ability to attract and retain properly educated and experienced academics who can steer the pursuit of these core university functions. According to Tettey (2010), the quality of higher education is determined not only by the number of teachers but - even more importantly - by their qualifications and staff. One significant measure of professorial capability for quality research and instruction is doctoral-level certification. Therefore, the brain drain that South Africa and the region are experiencing needs to be addressed and the first step towards this end is to identify and solve the problems that lead to the brain drain.

According to Pienaar and Bester (2008), the retention of human resources refers to attempts that are aimed at ensuring that employees stay in the organisation and that voluntary turnover will be minimized. Attracting and retaining employees involve processes such as job analysis, job description, job evaluation, job grading and selection, all culminating in employee retention. According to Ehlers (2011: 4) employee retention, "refers to all the strategies, action plans and methods used to retain talent or valuable employees in the organisation in order to achieve and sustain competitive advantage".

However, much of the expertise base of African universities has been eroded to the extent that there is insufficient capacity to provide quality training and education for new generations of citizens (Tettey 2006). This state of affairs is due to a variety of factors, including inadequate and non-competitive salaries vis-à-vis local and international organisations, and also a lack of

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job satisfaction due to non-monetary reasons. The disciplines that are most profoundly affected by the brain drain and high turn-over in African institutions are the health sciences, engineering, business, economics and computer/information science.

While academic staff recruitment and retention remain a challenge across the globe, the situation in many African countries appears to be particularly urgent (Tettey 2010). Leaders of African universities acknowledge the devastating impact of staff shortages on the goals of institutions of higher education. The leaders also warn that if something is not done very soon, the African academy will not only lose its ability to produce adequate personnel to support the countries' human resource needs, but also to uphold and protect the quality of intellectual life in the Africa region.

With reference to South Africa, it needs to be stated that since the dawn of democracy in 1994, the South African government has made decisions meant to afford its citizens access to education up to tertiary levels. According to the South African Constitution Section 29, "everyone has the right to further education, which the state, through reasonable measures, must make progressively available and accessible". This period saw the intensification of efforts aimed at making university education accessible to all citizens, including those from formerly 'disadvantaged' communities. These efforts, among others, resulted in the merging of some tertiary institutions. The rationale for this move, among others, was to pursue a simpler governance model, together with an attempt at streamlining and a standardisation of efforts meant to ensure the provision of quality tertiary education (Makondo 2013).

According to Pienaar and Bester (2008), higher education institutions - more than any other organisations – are dependent on the intellectual abilities and commitment of academic staff. The intellectual and creative abilities of academic staff determine the survival and sustainability of higher education institutions (Pienaar 2005). Consequently, in order to function effectively, higher education institutions are, to a large extent, dependent on the commitment of academics.

According to Birt et al. (2004), knowledge workers are the ones who, through their intellectual capital, control the competitive advantage of the universities. In addition, Pienaar and Bester (2008) rightly note that the academic profession is central to the functioning of any university. Without well-qualified and committed academic staff, no academic institution can ensure sustainability and quality over the long haul (Pienaar 2005). Chakeredza et al. (2008) further submit that suitable graduates are technologically competent, relevant and equipped with the necessary 'soft skills' as well as business skills. The war for talent is rife and skilled employees have a greater choice of employment than most, both locally and globally (De Villiers 2006). Furthermore, the issue of skills shortage is compounded by universities failure to retain their best employees due to 'globalization and economic realities' (Obasi 2011). Therefore, as Küskü (2003) proposes, higher education institutions are more dependent on the intellectual and creative abilities and commitment of their academic staff than most other organisations.

This study draws heavily on the researcher's experience and insights as an educator, lecturer and administrator at several high schools, teacher training colleges and universities in Zimbabwe and South Africa. This study is also to an extent anchored on the observation by Makondo (2013, 2012, 2010) that student throughput rate can be enhanced if a university is resourced with properly qualified, experienced and motivated academics. There are strategic human resource planning issues that university management has to consider with a view to ensure the availability of, "the right number of qualified people into the right job at the right time" (Grobler et al. 2006.131). This should take place within the eight Human Resource Management outcomes meant to ensure that academics are, "available, competent, motivated, healthy, diverse, organised, focused and satisfied" (Ehlers 2011: 6).

Significance of the Study

The present study is important because in recent years, according to Holland et al. (2007), attraction and retention of employees has become an increasingly significant aspect of building organisational capabilities with a view to ensure sustained competitiveness. In addition, this study is significant since it highlights the importance to universitiesof retaining its academics, because failing to do so results in high

turnover costs (Laudon and Laudon 2011) as well as the costs incurred by the university in recruiting and training new employees.

Furthermore, insights from this study will help university management to consider innovative ways of attracting and retaining motivated academics within their sections. The retention of academics should be a strategic priority, since – according to Simmons (2002) – it is difficult to replace the knowledge, skills and experience of academic staff because their skills are acquired over a long period of time and are accompanied by extensive experience. The findings of this study will be applicable to all universities that might find themselves grappling with attraction and retention issues. Policy-makers will also benefit from suggestions presented in this study so that they can contribute meaningfully towards stabilizing the issue of high staff turnover in universities.

TRENDS IN THE EDUCATION SECTOR

This section begins by reviewing literature on the attraction and retention of teachers in schools before zeroing in on academics in tertiary institutions. This review makes reference to attraction and retention trends in the United States of America, England, Canada, Germany, Sweden, New Zealand, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Gambia, among others, before focusing on South Africa in general and a formally disadvantaged university in particular.

Global Challenge

Concerns about educator turnover and attrition are widely reported as a global phenomenon (Masaiti and Naluyele 2011). According to BBC online news, Sweden, Germany, New Zealand and Britain's education attrition is reported as a national crisis. In the USA, teacher shortages as a result of turnover are widely reported in many states (Ingersoll 2002). Also, the Canadian Teachers' Federation reports on teacher shortages resulting from teacher attrition in Ontario and Australia.

It would, however, appear that in future, higher education institutions will be increasingly obliged to make the retention of academics a strategic priority, in view of a finding that 68% of the academic personnel in a study in Australian higher education institutions indicated that they wished to leave higher education (Anderson et al. 2002). This problematic situation is also being experienced in South African higher education institutions, since data indicates that a substantial number (between 5% and 18%) of academics leave higher education institutions (Pienaar and Bester 2008).

This study also draws on insights from the two studies of five Anglophone universities in sub-Saharan Africa, namely the University of Botswana, the University of Ghana, the University of Ibadan (Nigeria), the University of KwaZulu-Natal (South Africa) and Makerere University (Uganda) by Tettey (2006, 2010). As Tettey (2006) observes, Africa is losing, in significant numbers, a fundamental resource in socio-economic and political development – namely its intellectual capital. As the processes of globalization take shape, it is becoming abundantly clear that full, effective and beneficial participation in the world that is emerging will depend in no small measure on the ability of societies to build and take advantage of their human resource capabilities. A well-developed human capacity base is not only an asset that enables countries to promote forward-looking ideas, initiate and guide action, and build on successes; it also makes those countries attractive destinations for investment and intellectual collaboration, both of which, if managed appropriately, will lead to positive returns (Makondo 2013). A solid higher education base is crucial for such transformation to take place.

Causes

The retention of academics is made increasingly difficult because an academic career is probably no longer as desirable and attractive an option as was previously believed (Makondo 2013). Research conducted by Anderson et al. (2002) among academics in Australian universities confirms this sentiment, since 71% of the respondents of the studies believe that the image and status of an academic career are declining.

According to Rosser (2004), the single best indicator that can be used to determine whether a person is indeed going to leave an organisation or an institution is that the person makes mention thereof or indicates such intent at one stage or another. Rosser (2004) notes that labour turnover takes place when a person is both

dissatisfied with his or her work, and when he or she gives indications that he or she is going to leave the institution or organisation.

With reference to the South African context, Rasool and Botha (2011) regard the nature of the education and training system of the country as the main contributor to the national skills crisis. The system is characterised by low education standards, declining enrolments at Further Education and Training colleges, lack of resources, under-qualified teachers, weak management, poor teacher morale, high failure rates in schools, colleges and universities offer little hope of addressing the skills shortages. Ramphele (2009) notes this phenomenon with reference to mathematics and presented a number of observations that explain the dwindling numbers of students who enrol for fields like engineering, business science and architecture.

Furthermore, Richardson (2007) notes that South African tertiary institutions are not producing a sufficient number of graduates with relevant qualifications to keep abreast of the demands of the labour market. He also submits that the institutions seem to rather be producing graduates in fields where the demand for these skills is not growing. On the other hand, Harris (2011) argues that in other global economies, the challenges within the South African education sector mean that many employers have found that they have to invest heavily in training and development to get the workforce they need. If you add this to the cost of employee turnover, then retaining and developing talent becomes a simple economic equation.

Skills shortages in South Africa are the consequences of the interplay of several complex socio-political and economic factors (Rasool and Botha 2011). With the advent of democracy in 1994, the new government inherited a divided education and training system that comprised of the fifteen education departments that the apartheid government established along racial and regional lines. The apartheid education and training system consequently produced superstructural chaos that wasted funds, was inefficiency and has very poor graduate outputs.

Consequently, many Black students who enter tertiary institutions are reluctant to pursue careers in the science and technology fields (Pandor 2008). Furthermore, a large number of these students remain marginalised because they lack the specialised skills that the economic turnaround requires. For example, a university study found that nearly 50% of all dropouts aged between 18 and 20 were Black first-year students (Ray 2009). Furthermore, Kraak (2008) reports that the rising aspirations of the previously disadvantaged majority of the population further compound the demand-driven needs of the labour market.

Furthermore, a study by Pienaarand Bester (2008) established that more than 21% of the academics in the early career phase at a South African higher education institution are committed to the institution in question. They found that original respondents left the institution while the research was still underway. Insufficient financial remuneration was the most important reason why the respondents considered leaving the institution.

The Cost

There are several costs associated with failed retention efforts that literature has identified. Pienaar and Bester (2006) comment that, indeed, there are numerous negative organisational outcomes associated with increased labour turnover in general. These organisational outcomes include: high direct and indirect financial costs; a decrease in financial sustainability; a decrease in productivity; problems with rendering services and standards; interruptions in workflow; a loss of experience and specialist knowledge; an increase in administrative processes; a decline in the organisation's image; an interruption in the internal and informal social liaison and communication channels, and an increased feeling of job dissatisfaction among the remaining staff (Pienaar and Bester 2008).

Conversely, according to Pienaar and Bester (2008), labour turnover can be an advantage or a disadvantage for higher education institutions. As already indicated, the disadvantages revolve especially around the costs related to decreased organisational loyalty; the loss of knowledge and experience regarding the institution; and the increase in time and cost in training novice academics. Institutions may, as Rosser (2004) notes, save on the financial remuneration packages of experienced employees by appointing novices at a lower scale. It would seem, however, that the disadvantages of increased labour turnover outweigh the advantages. For this reason it is important that organisations should attempt to

retain as many employees who consider leaving their current organisations as possible.

According to Pienaar and Bester (2008), the present-day academic is likely to experience frustration and disillusionment. This might be the case because currently, an academic career is probably becoming one of the most stressful of jobs and this field no longer enjoys its previous status and prestige (Barkhuizen et al. 2004). With reference to the United States of America, Reuters (2011: 6) notes that, the most lucrative major is petroleum engineer, but any major that has a strong mathematical basis has very high earnings out of college and long-term earnings that are really stellar. The lowest-–paying degrees are those in education, counselling and the arts and liberal arts come somewhere in the middle.

Key Retention Strategies

From the Independent Education Union of Australia (IEUA) (2011) it emerges that conditions such as continuity of employment, professional development and career advancement are factors that have a significant impact on attraction and retention of educators in Australia. The absence of a clear career path or access to senior teacher/accomplice teacher training, or other higher levels of classification fails to support and recognize teachers with experience and highly developed pedagogical skills. IEUA (2011) further submits that attraction of school leavers and other new workforce entrants, together with the retention of existing workers is difficult when staff employed are underpaid, undervalued and have less favourable conditions than other sectors.

Davies and Davies (2011) argue, quite rightly, that talent management in England is increasingly regarded as a critical factor in developing successful organisations of all kinds and is equally critical for schools success. They suggest that talent management will contribute to other strategic objectives such as building a high-performance learning environment, a notion that all school leaders would readily agree with, since the ability to marshal staff into a cohesive team is clearly a key factor in enhancing school effectiveness. Moreover, Davies and Davies (2011) suggest that leaders of such future schools will need to be change champions, leaders of innovation, flexible, able to live with ambiguity, able to grasp opportunities and be entrepreneurial.

Furthermore, insights from Canada suggest that schools and education organisations cannot sit back and wait for talent to come their way (Makondo 2013). In like manner, they count on retaining their best people without being creative about retention strategies. Indeed, schools must become more aggressive about creating magnetic work environments that allow people to grow and motivate them to stay (Gergen and Vanourek 2007).

In order to meet the challenge of employee retention that confronts the ZMOE, Masaiti and Naluyele (2011) note that it is essential for ZMOE to provide a congenial working environment for all its employees. All employees need to be motivated to continue working for the ministry. It has emerged that when an employee is satisfied with his or her working conditions, he or she is more likely to stay with the organisation. Also, ZMOE managers have to be aware that different employees have different needs and the causes of attrition can be different depending on what an employee values.

In most sub-Saharan countries, teacher attrition is associated with poor conditions of service and also with the HIV/AIDS epidemic (Masaiti and Naluyele 2011). ZMOE has consistently lost employees through resignation, migration and other natural causes as death due to HIV and AIDS. Similarly, Kamara (2002) cites the President of the Gambian Teachers' Union who reports a massive exit of teachers from the profession due to, amongst other reasons, inadequate salaries, allowances, housing and promotion.

Alternatively, ZMOE states clearly that the educators' dissatisfaction with conditions of service relates to a lack of proper accommodation; lack of a housing scheme to prepare teachers for retirement; inadequate provision of loans; absence of a health scheme for teachers; inadequate provision of in-service training; poor promotion prospects and lack of clear guidelines on promotion; concern that there is corruption in promotions and selections for in-service training; and difficulties in communication with the employer, which create the sense that teachers' problems are disregarded.

According to Croasmun (2002), there are a number of key retention strategies, namely (a) offering performance feedback, praise good efforts and results; (b) involving employees in decisions that affect their jobs and the overall direction of the company whenever possible;

(c) recognizing excellent performance, and especially, link pay to performance; (d) demonstrating respect for employees at all times; (e) and, finally, according to research by the Gallup organisation, encouraging employees to have good, even best, friends, at work. In addition, the ZMOE is using bonding as a strategy for retaining staff (Masaiti and Naluyele 2011). However, bonding is not reliable because employees can be willing to forfeit their terminal benefits. Penalty for defaulting bonding agreements can be surpassed by offers for prospective jobs.

With reference to experiences of academics, Krivokapic-Skoko et al. (2009) have addressed the content of psychological contracts within academia at an Australian University. Using exploratory factor analysis of the data collected from the cross-sectional survey, their research classified the academics' obligations to the University as meeting academic expectations, commitment; above and beyond the call of duty. With regard to the University's obligations as perceived by the academics, the authors' research has identified the following eight factors: fair treatment in promotion; staff development and support; good management and leadership; academic life; fairness and equity; appropriate remuneration; rewarding performance and good workplace relations.

Krivokapic-Skoko et al. (2009) note that it is critical for the University and its academics to be sensitive to possible differences in expectations, since unrealized expectations may result in demotivation, decreased commitment, increased turnover and loss of trust in the organisation. These contracts motivate employees to fulfil commitments made to employers when they are confident that employers will reciprocate and fulfil their side of the contracts.

DISCUSSION

Upon getting permission from the management of the concerned university, a questionnaire with fifteen items was distributed to randomly selected academics at the university under study. This section presents chi-square and correlations examination of the research data and tables shall be given to enhance the discussion.

Chi-square

The chi-square values between demographic variables such as age, race, gender, working years, university title and whether academics receive professional support from management and support units shown in Table 1 are highly significant as they show a strong relationship. For example, gender and responses on professional support with a chi square value of 13.707 and a degree of freedom of 1 are highly significant with probability of 0.00001 confirming that the association between gender and responses on professional support from management and support units in the sample of 206 is strong enough to be generalised to the population from which the sample was drawn.

Secondly, from the responses the chi-square test reveals that gender does not have an association with the responses on whether teaching load is manageable. Other demographic variables; age, race, working years and university title matter in explaining this relationship. On these variables there appears to be no doubt that there is an association between responses given and management of the teaching load. In which case, a chi-square of 92.892 with degrees of freedom of 3 and a probability of 0.0001 shows a strong relationship between all other demographic variables and teaching load management except gender which is statistically insignificant.

Thirdly, all demographic variables in the study show statistical significance with responses on tenure and remuneration as attraction methods to retaining academics. Statistically, significant chi-square values of 150.495; 51.883; 113.528; 138.323 and 147.742; 5.139; 43.520; 129.802 and 145.939 through with a probability value of 0.0001 shows that there is strong association between demographic variables and responses on tenure and remuneration. The probability of the chi-square test statistics on whether promotion by teaching and research responses and demographic variables such as age, working years, race and university years is less than the significance level of 0.005. The null hypothesis that promotion by research and promotion by teaching performance is independent of differences in demographic variables is rejected. However, we cannot reject the null hypothesis that responses on promotion by research are independent of gender with a chi-square value of 6.991 and a probability of 0.008.

More so, all other demographic variables such as age, race, working years and university title shows a strong association with response on whether enough is being done to attract and

Table 1: Chi-square table of demographic variable

	Age	*Gender*	*Race*	*Working years*	*University title*
Q6 Professional support	157.858	13.707	35.361	146.043	166.280
Q7 Teaching load	116.199	.05	12.564	108.558	92.898
Q8 Tenure	150.495	1.148	51.883	113.528	138.323
Q9 Remuneration	147.742	5.139	43.520	129.802	145.939
Q10 Promotion by teaching	150.082	8.102	39.999	135.221	152.681
Q11 Promotion by research	194.427	6.991	23.842	206.000	176.283
Q12 Attraction	114.923	.052	12.298	106.257	90.929
Q13 Retention importance	147.742	5.139	43.520	129.802	145.939
Q14 Retention upbeat	120.439	.147	13.388	115.671	98.984
Q15 Managing retention	117.544	.006	12.835	110.893	94.896

retain academics. With a probability value of less than 0.0001 it is highly significant to conclude that a strong association exists. However, gender shows that such responses can be explained independently of gender hence the null hypothesis of no association cannot be rejected. The test also shows that demographic variable except gender show highly significant association between responses on retention importance, retention upbeat and management of retention with chi-square significant values with probability values of less than 0.0001. There is no doubt that demographic variables show an association and generalisations can be made to the population from which the sample of 206 was obtained.

Correlations

This study notes that correlation coefficient indicates the strength and direction of a linear relationship between two random variables. Usually, the correlation ranges are as follows: small (0.1 to 0.3), medium (0.3 to 0.5) and large (0.5 to 1).The N in this study is 206. This study notes that correlation that are above the absolute value of 0, 01 (2-tailed) is significantly not zero for population hypothesis shows a strong relationship. In essence, the ranges for this study are 0.8 to 0.980. It also emerges that all values above 0.05 are significant. This study takes the 2-tailed statistical test to be used in inference, in which a given statistical hypothesis (the null hypothesis) will be rejected when the value of the test statistic is either sufficiently small or sufficiently large (Wikipedia, accessed 28 September 2013).

This study identified sixteen positive strong correlations within the 0.906 to 0.980. The first ranges in this category are within the 0.906 to 0.937. Such correlation exists between retention importance and promotion by teaching (0.906), recruitment and professional support (0.909), promotion by teaching performance and remuneration (0.920), attraction and teaching load (0.922), retention importance and promotion by research (0.925), promotion by research and tenure (0.926), retention upbeat and teaching load (0.933), managing retention and teaching load (0.937).

The second positive strong correlation ranges from 0.944 to 0.980. Correlations within this

Table 2: Correlations

	Q6 206	*Q7 206*	*Q8 206*	*Q9 206*	*Q10 206*	*Q11 206*	*Q12 206*	*Q13 206*	*Q14 206*
Q6 Professional support									
Q7 Teaching load	.881								
Q8 Tenure	.893	.816							
Q9 Remuneration	.909	.858	.968						
Q10 Promotion by teaching	.944	.879	.896	.920					
Q11 Promotion by research	.868	.863	.926	.946	.866				
Q12 Attraction	.875	.922	.825	..846	.888	.843			
Q13 Retention importance	.890	.857	.953	.980	.906	.925	.853		
Q14 Retention upbeat	.865	.933	.840	.859	.865	.853	.951	.868	
Q15 Managing retention	.858	.937	.830	.849	.860	.844	.945	.860	.980

category constitutes promotion by teaching performance and professional support (0.944), managing retention and attraction (0.945), promotion by research and remuneration (0.946), retention importance and tenure (0.953) and remuneration and tenure (0.968). The two highest correlations are between retention importance and remuneration (0.980) and managing retention and retention upbeat (0.980).

From these sixteen positive strong correlations, remuneration is mentioned five times. The other variables namely promotion by teaching, promotion by research, work load, retention upbeat are mentioned three times each. On the other hand, tenure, attraction and professional support are mentioned two times each. Therefore, the correlation analysis helps this study to rank the contribution of the variables to the attraction and retention of academics discourse.

Furthermore, twenty-eight positive strong correlations have been identified in the 0.816 to 0.896 ranges. For exemplification, this study picks seven correlations within 0.870 to 0.899) which top this category. Such correlations are between attraction and professional support (0.875), promotion by teaching and teaching load (0.879), teaching load and professional support (0.881), attraction and promotion by teaching (0.888), retention importance and professional support (0.890), tenure and professional support (0.893), promotion by teaching and tenure (0.896). From these seven correlations, professional support is mentioned four times, followed by promotion by teaching identified three times. Teaching load, tenure and attraction importance are mentioned twice each while retention importance is mentioned once.

This study's correlation findings show that remuneration tops in the 0.906 to 0.980 range yet it is not mentioned in the 0.870 to 0.899 ranges. Instead, professional support which tops the 0.870 to 0,899 ranges by being mentioned four times was only mentioned twice in the 0.906 to 0.980 range. By way of ranking the results of the top two considered ranges from 0.870 to 0.980, two variables mentioned six times each namely professional support and promotion by teaching were ranked top. In the second position is teaching load and remuneration mentioned five times while the third position is occupied by three variables namely attraction, retention importance and tenure which were mentioned four times each. This means that professional support, promotion by teaching, remuneration and teaching load are the four top ranked factors that attract and retain academics (See Table 2).

CONCLUSION

Attracting and retaining academics should be core to the operations of a university. The significance of a university having properly qualified academic cannot be over emphasized. This suggests that universities need to be proactive enough to manage their attraction and retention strategies in ways that enhance their strategic positioning.Through chi-square and correlation analysis, this study established the importance of having a university avail professional support, recognize academics' effort by promoting them based on their teaching, remunerate them commensurate to their qualifications, expertise and experience. Also, the need for a well-managed teaching load that leaves academics with time to manage their family affairs, execute their research and community engagements came out as a key academic attraction and retention variable.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This study recommends the following;

i) A study of this nature can be enhanced by having one that involves several universities in one country or by having a that that examines regional trends. These researches would shed much light on the status quo.

ii) A study of this nature need to get insights from exit interviews, a source that might avail some insights on attraction and retention issues.

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