

Determinants of Academic Staff Retention in Public Universities in Kenya: Empirical Review

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Abstract

Employee retention is one of the challenges facing many organizations both public and private, occasioned by globalization that has intensified competition and increased mobility of highly skilled employees. Retention of academic staff is a pertinent issue in Public Universities in Kenya yet these institutions are operating in a highly competitive environment and hence depend on these staff for success and sustainability. Indeed retention of academic staff will help the universities accomplish their vision and mission and hence become centres of excellence. This study aims to review literature related to academic staff retention with the aim of establishing gaps for further research.

Key words. Determinants, Academic staff retention, Public universities in Kenya

1. Introduction

The role of Universities in the provision and development of manpower required for the social economic and technological advancement of any nation cannot be over-emphasized. By their unique nature universities are expected to be a repository of the most specialized 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 realization of University goals and objective are the academic staff whose roles are crucial and their number, quality and their effectiveness makes the difference in university education production function and to the wider society (Mwadiani, 2002). Pienaar (2008) strongly argues that the academic profession is fundamental to the functioning of any university. Without well qualified and committed academic staff, no academic institution can really ensure sustainability and quality over the long haul. Higher education institutions are therefore more dependent on the intellectual and creative abilities and commitment of the academic staff than most other organisations. This therefore makes it critically important to retain this cadre of staff.

1.1 Background of the Study

The most valuable asset available to an organisation is its people, thus retaining staff in their jobs is essential for any organisation. Indeed there is a paradigm shift from human resource to human capital which consists of the knowledge, skills and abilities of the people employed in organization which is indicative of their value (Armstrong, 2009). When employees leave their jobs, it is often a sign that something is going wrong. According to Zhou *et al*, (2004), the costs of academic staff turnover, such as subsequent recruiting expenses, disruptions of course offerings, discontinuities in departmental and student planning, and loss of student graduate advisors, are borne at individual, departmental and institutional levels and have an impact on quality of services and the image of the institution. In addition, Pienaar *et al* (2008) note that academic staff turnover has several disadvantages such as costs related to decreased organizational loyalty, the loss of knowledge and experience regarding the institution, and the increase in time and cost in training novice academics. Tetey (2006) argues that while individuals who move to other organizations may contribute to the specific activities of that organization, their departure from academia means that the synergies that come with a group of academics working together is diminished, and the impact and scope of knowledge production and dissemination is lessened.

Despite the foregoing, academic staff retention has been a pertinent issue in higher education institutions. Indeed the problem of academic staff retention is a global one which affects both developing and industrialized countries. Yousaf (2010) observes that the difficulties of academic staff retention within the industrialized countries are well documented. In the United States, for example about 7.7% of the full time academic staff left their institutions for other places within one academic year from 1997 to 1998, of these only 29 were retirees, the remaining 71% left for variety of reasons. A year 2000 survey of full time faculty members in the US showed that more than 40% 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 on academic recruitment and retention. Similarly it was suggested that in the early 21st century, there would be a crisis in Australian higher education with an estimated academic labour shortage of 20,000 if the trend was not addressed (Mathews, 2003 cited in Tettey 2006). In a study carried out in Australian higher education institutions, 68% of the academic personnel indicated that they wished to leave higher education (Sanderson *et al*, 2000).

The issue of staff attrition and retention of academic staff in developing countries has been less documented in the literature. This is because as Mihyo (2007) observes the issue tends to be subsumed under the general category of brain drain without particular attention being devoted to it. This sub-summation reflects the close relationship between the brain drain and staff retention in many countries. Indeed the triggers identified for the brain drain in general are identified to those behind academic staff attrition and thus the two processes are intertwined as many highly skilled immigrants tend to be current academic or potential ones. In the African context, much of the expertise base of universities has been eroded to the extent that not enough teaching capacity is available to provide quality training for new generation of citizens. Many institutions are negatively affected by the fact that some African students who are studying abroad or current faculty members who are sent abroad to pursue further education, do not return because of pull and push factors (Tettey, 2006). This problematic situation is evident in South African higher education institutions, since data indicates that a substantial number (between 5% and 18%) of academics leave higher education institutions (Pienaar *et al*, 2008). Osalusi *et al* (2010) observes that brain drain was a phenomenon that had afflicted the Nigerian University system most severely in the 1980's through to the 21st century and that country had lost its experienced academic to even smaller African countries such as Ghana and Rwanda and bigger countries such as Britain, America, France and Germany.

Locally, qualified academic staff have resigned from Kenyan public universities and secured better paying jobs abroad (Waswa *et al*, 2008). Brain drain among the academic staff is real within the public universities and this affects staff retention. Internal brain drain is also rampant with movement of highly skilled academics to other sectors in the country (GOK, 2006).

There is a dearth of research on retention of academic staff in the Kenyan context. yet it is important for public universities in Kenya to know why academic staff stay in their organisations, since as Armstrong, (2009) observes, proper retention strategies are based on the understanding of the factors that affect whether or not employees leave or stay. As noted by Kiamba (2005) public universities in Kenya have commercialized most of their services and hence heavily rely on their staff for quality services and product. Naris *et al*, (2010) observes that every educational institution wants to have a competitive edge in order to attract more students and potential employees. It is through retention of academic staff that they will be able to have competitive advantage by ensuring continuity in provision of quality services and products.

This paper aims to review literature related to academic staff retention in Kenyan public universities with an aim of establishing gaps.

2. Theoretical review

Various theories address employee needs and have been advanced by a number of authors as basis of retention strategies in organizations. Most notable are; Equity theory (1965) Expectancy theory (1964); Hertzberg (1959) two factor theory and Human capital theory, all of which are all relevant to this study.

2.1 Equity Theory

Equity theory (1965) is concerned with the perceptions people have about how they are treated as compared with others. The theory posit that employees seek to maintain equity between the input they bring into a job (education, time, experience, commitment and effort) and the outcome they receive from it (promotion, recognition and increased pay) against the perceived inputs and outcomes of other employees.

Failure to find equity leads to various actions one of which may be to leave the organization. The major strength of this theory is that, it recognizes that individual inputs such as education, experience, effort should be recognized in such way that equity is experienced. It also shows that individual employees are part of the larger system. This theory therefore guides in understanding what may influence academic staff to leave in that they keep on comparing what academic staff earn in other universities and other comparable organizations in order to realize a balanced state between the inputs-outcome ratios. In turn this contributes to labour mobility within and outside the academia. The major weakness in this theory is subjectivity of the comparison process. There is a tendency in human nature to distort their inputs especially in regard to effort and hence becomes subjective when comparing (Beardwell *et al*, 2007).

2.2 Expectancy Theory

Expectancy theory is widely used in turnover intentions (Vroom 1964, Porter & Lawler 1968, Lawler 1994). Basic to the idea of expectancy theory is the notion that people join organisations with expectations and if these expectations are met they will remain members of the organisation (Daly *et al*, 2006). According to turnover and retentions frameworks developed from this theory decisions to stay or leave an organization can be explained by examining relationships between structural, psychological, and environmental variables. Empirical studies (Johnsrud & Rosser, 2002; Zhou & Volkwein, 2004; Daly & Dee, 2006) employ the model of employee intent to stay that is grounded on expectancy theory which includes structural, psychological and environmental variables. Structural variables include, work environment, autonomy, communication, distributive justice and workload. Psychological variables include job satisfaction and organizational commitment and the environmental variables include availability of job opportunities. However, Sutherland (2004) established that job satisfaction and organizational commitment do not necessarily lead to loyalty, long defined as the intention to remain with the employer.

2.3 Herzberg Two Factor Theory

Herzberg (1959) two factor theory argue that employees are motivated by internal values rather than values that are external to the work. In other words, motivation to work is internally generated and is propelled by variables that are intrinsic to the work which include achievement, recognition, the work itself, responsibility, advancement, and growth. Conversely certain factors induce dissatisfying experiences to employees and these factors largely result from non-job related variables also called extrinsic variables. These are company policies, salary, coworker relationships and supervisory or management styles, work environment (Armstrong, 2009). This theory is relevant to this study in that it recognizes that employees have two categories of needs that operate in them and that both should be addressed.

Studies such as Ssesanga *et al*, (2005) used a model developed from Herzberg theory to establish factors influencing job satisfaction of academics in Uganda. Michael (2008) and Samuel *et al*, (2009) used the theory to establish motivational variables influencing staff retention in private and public organizations in South Africa. Radivoev (2005) used the theory to study factors influencing retention of Sales Consultant in South Africa. This theory therefore can guide a researcher in establishing determinants of academic staff retention in Public universities in Kenya.

3. Determinants of staff retention

3.1 Leadership

Leadership has many definitions but no real consensus; essentially it is a relationship through which one person influences the behavior or actions of other people. One of the critical roles of management is to create a work environment that will endear the organization to employees. It also includes influencing these employees' decision to be committed and remain with the organization even when other job opportunities exist outside the organization (Michael, 2008). Beardwell (2007) observes that the role of leadership and a supervisor is crucial in staff retention, and argues that employees leave managers not companies. Employees are more likely to remain with an organization if they believe that their managers show interest and concern for them, if they know what is expected of them, if they are given a role that fits their capabilities and if they receive regular positive feedback and recognition. The quality of relationship an employee has with his or her immediate managers elongates employee stay in an organization (Ferreira, 2007 cited in Michael, 2008).

Research conducted on the state of South African Training industry indicated that management style was the most prominent retention factor in South Africa (Netswera, 2005). The leadership in the universities who include top management and Chairmen of Departments who are the immediate supervisor to the academic staff can play crucial role in portraying to the staff that their University is the employer of choice.

3.2 Distributive justice

According to Price (2001) distributive justice is the extent to which rewards and punishments are related to job performance. Kipkebut (2010) contend that distributive justice is concerned with fairness in the allocation of outcomes such as pay and promotions. Distributive justice is grounded on Adams (1965) equity theory which hold that employees brings inputs into the organization such as education, effort experience among others and in return, expect to receive fair outcomes from the organization such as pay, promotions, accurate and timely feedback or recognition among others. Outcomes will be perceived to be just when the ratio of outcomes, for example, pay and promotions to inputs for example education and effort is perceived as equal across individuals (Daly *et al*, 2006). Perceptions of unfairness will lead to frustrations and resentment resulting in loss of productivity, loyalty and attachment to the organization or a decision to seek alternative employment elsewhere. Distributive justice is not constrained to solely focusing upon employee rewards or favourable outcomes but is also concerned with punishment in a fair and just manner. Studies (Lambert, 2003, Lambert *et al*, 2007, Haar and Spell, 2009 in Kipkebut, 2010) found distributive justice to be a positive predictor of organizational commitment and job satisfaction, and a negative predictor of turnover intentions.

3.3 Work environment

Work environment is one of the factors that affect employee's decision to stay with the organization. Productivity and efficiency are directly affected by how people work, and this equally is affected by their work environment. This may include issues such as office space, equipments, air conditioning, comfortable chairs just to mention but a few. Many people are dissatisfied if working conditions are poor (George and Jones, 1999). Working environment that is comfortable, relatively low in physical psychological stress, facilities and attainment of work goals will tend to produce high levels of satisfaction among employees. In contrast, stressful working environment result to low level of satisfaction. Academic staffs also require office space, research and book support to be able to access latest information for their teaching and research outputs. Obwogi (2011) observed that some lecturers in Kenyan public universities did not have access to some of the basic teaching facilities like offices and desks.

Increased workload is the most stressful aspects of faculty careers. Daly *et al* (2006) observes that heavy workloads, including assignments to teach large classes, may generate hostility toward the organization and diminish levels of faculty commitment to the institution. Gilbert (2000) cited in Yousaf (2010) observes that increasing workload caused by massification of student numbers certainly impact on the well-being of employees at higher education institutions. It is widely held belief that the workload of the academic staff has been increasing especially due to expansion of higher education and this has contributed to increased stress level (Metcalf *et al*, 2005). Waswa *et al* (2008) observe that in Kenyan Public Universities, heavy workloads manifest themselves in the form of large classes brought about by increasing enrolments and the integration of government sponsored and self sponsored students.

More than ever technology is redirecting all facets of education. Academic staffs are expected to use appropriate technology in delivering their services and in their research.. Rosser (2004) observes that few institutions provide adequate support for faculty members to integrate technology into their work. The extent to which lectures feel supported in terms of being provided with adequate and favourable facilities including technology is critically important to the overall quality of their work life and may easily influence their intention to stay or leave.

3.4 Salary

Attractive remuneration packages are one of the very important factors of retention because it fulfils the financial and material desires (Shoaib *et al*, 2009). Less than half of the faculty members in a national study indicated that they were satisfied with their salary and fringe benefits (Rosser, 2004). Salary retirement and job security have been shown to be important personal issues that may affect the satisfaction of faculty members in colleges and universities.

Rosser observed that although much of the overall research on faculty members suggests that salary, in and of itself, is not the most important aspect of their work life and satisfaction, salary is one of the primary reasons why faculty members leave their institution. In examining faculty workload and compensation of Australian academics, Comm and Mathaisel (2003) cited in Kipkebut (2010) found that 51% of the faculty did not believe that they were compensated fairly, relative to those other comparable institutions. As a result, 50% of the respondents felt the need to work outside their institutions to earn extra income. According to Tettey (2006) dissatisfaction with salaries is one of the key factor undermining the commitment of academics to their institutions and careers, and consequently their decision or intent to leave.

3.5 Promotional opportunities

Promotional opportunities refer to the degree an employee perceives his or her chances to grow and be promoted within the organization. Employees expect to work in jobs that provide them with opportunities to be promoted to new and challenging positions. Dockel (2003) strongly agrees that people should not only be rewarded financially but they should also be offered opportunities to grow within the organization. Employees who feel stagnant in their positions generally aren't motivated and will not stay in unfulfilling position. Promotion offers opportunities for growth and is also one of Herzberg motivators which can be used to enhance retention.

Promotion for academic staff is dependent on teaching, research and publications however, due to financial constraints, non-prioritization of research by government and inadequate publishing facilities, publishing of refereed articles has become a monumental challenge for Kenya and other African academics (Kipkebut, 2010). Tettey (2006) established that promotional procedures in African Universities were long, stressful and cumbersome, while the requirements were unreasonable, for example possession of a doctorate as a prerequisite for promotion beyond the position of a lecturer. In Kenya, Waswa (2008) notes that other than the inconsistent promotion criteria, another challenge in Public Universities was how to de-link promotion from establishments and the availability given by the exchequer that this ends up denying deserving persons their rightful upward mobility.

3.6 Training and development

Training is considered a form of human capital investment whether that investment is made by the individual or by the firm. Training provides employees with specific skills or helps to correct deficiencies in their performances, while development is an effort to provide employees with abilities the organization will need in the future (Chew, 2004). The purpose of training in the work context is to develop the abilities of the individual and to satisfy the current and future manpower needs of the organization.

Opportunities for training and development are among the most important reasons why employees stay especially young and enthusiastic ones. Indeed according to Dockel (2003) investment in training is one way to show employees how important they are. One of the factors that Hertzberg identifies as an important motivator is the advancement opportunities. By offering training and development opportunities the academic staff will feel that the university is investing in him or her and that there are opportunities for growth within the organization and hence gives meaning to the current job. Tettey (2006) observes that professional development is the engine that keeps the universities true to their mandate as centers of ideas and innovation. Without efforts in this direction intellectual capital can stagnate and the relevance of universities to society may diminish. Faculty members thrive on intellectual and collegial stimulation from their peers when they attend professional activities and national and international research meetings. Thus, development activities for faculty members continue to be an important aspect associated with their professional work lives (Rosser, 2004).

3.7 Autonomy

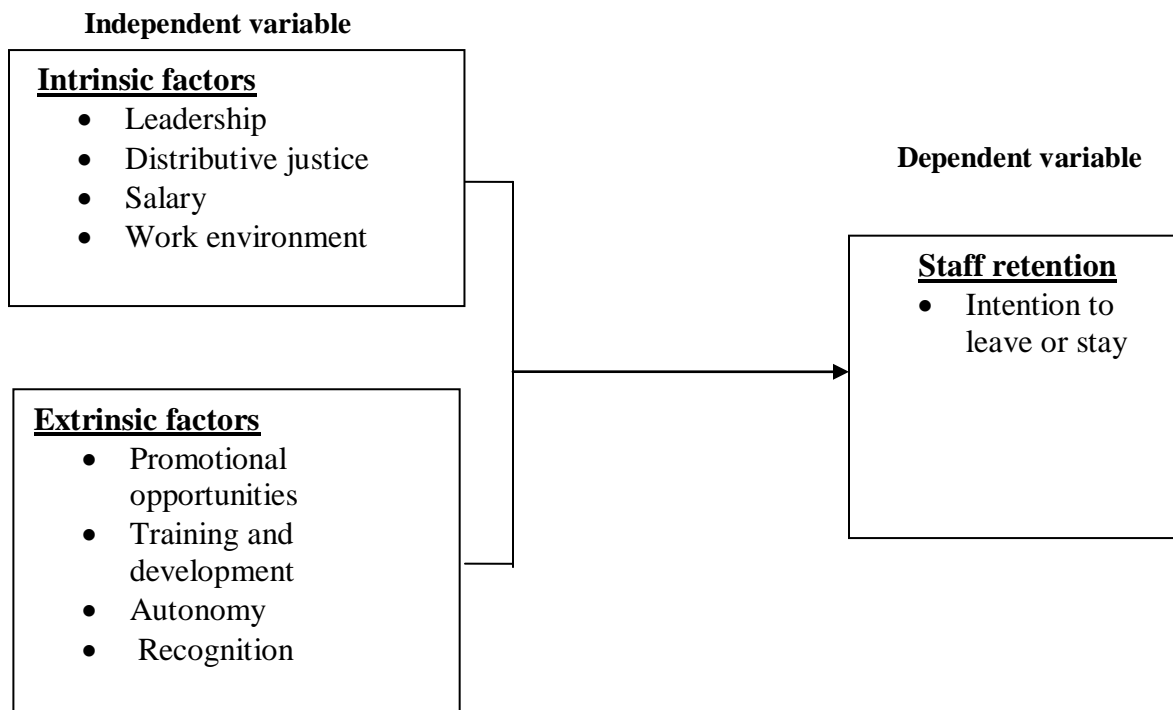
Autonomy is the degree to which an employee exercises power relative to his or her job. It is defined as the ability of employees to set organizational goals and to structure the organization to maximize professional concerns. It refers to increased feelings of personal responsibility and the degree to which the job provides substantial freedom, independence and discretion to the individual to schedule work and determine the procedures used in carrying it out (Dockel,2003). Faculty autonomy refers to the ability of professional to decide work patterns, actively participate in major academic decision making, to have work evaluated by professional peers, and to be relatively free of bureaucratic regulations and restrictions (Daly *et al*, 2006).

Autonomous work may satisfy higher order needs for achievement and accomplishment which in turn can generate positive regard for the employing organization and higher levels of intent to stay. Autonomy is an important construct in faculty value systems however the current competitive environment may impinge upon faculty autonomy due to external demands and thus diminish their intent to stay.

3.8 Recognition

Employee recognition is the timely, informal or formal acknowledgement of a person’s or teams behaviour, effort or business result that supports the organization’s goals and values, and which have clearly been beyond normal expectations. Appreciation is fundamental human need and employees respond to appreciation expressed through recognition of their good work because it confirms that their work is valued. Employees tend to stay in organizations when they feel that their capabilities, efforts and performance contributions are recognized and appreciated by others. They want a sense of accomplishment. Chew (2004) argues that compensation provides recognition but other forms of non- monetary recognition are also important, for example from managers, team members and peers, customers and others. Kenyan public universities do not have systematic approaches to recognizing the contributions of staff within the university ad national levels which contributes to turnover and discouraged innovation (GOK, 2006). Academic staffs are the core employees in universities and their contribution in these institutions should be overtly made known for them to feel valued. From the reviewed literature it is postulated that extrinsic factors (leadership, distributive justice, work environment, salary) and intrinsic factors (promotion, training and development, autonomy and recognition) determine academic staff retention. This is diagrammatically illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 2.1 Conceptual Framework



4. Empirical Review

Staff retention is of interest to employers because of the implications of high staff turnover. Dibble (1999) argues that retention of employees needs to be managed and identifies remuneration, development, career opportunity, work environment, performance management and work ,family and flex time as areas that have an effect on retention of employees. Studies have identified an array of factors that influence employee retention. Gaiduk *et al* (2009) observed that previous studies have found that employee intentions to remain with an organization are influenced by three major groups of variable which are: employee personal characteristics such as gender, age, position level; the nature of an employee’s current job; and adequate working arrangements including such aspects as the quality of current supervision, opportunities for promotion, available training, and quality of communication within the organization.

In a study of retention of employees in Australian Organizations, Chew (2004) established that younger employees focused on remuneration, training and development, career advancement, challenging work, growth opportunities and recognition. For older employees autonomy, opportunities to mentor and job challenge were of great importance. A study of 139 academics from Jordanian University (Al- Omari *et al*, 2009) established that job satisfaction and organisational commitment had a significant positive effect on intention to stay among the academic staff. A study by Daly *et al* (2006) on turnover intention of academics in public urban universities, established that structural factors such as faculty work environment, autonomy, communication, distributive justice and workload were related to intent to stay. A study of academics in Makerere University, (Amutuhaire, 2010) established that remuneration and tenure influenced their retention. Locally, Kipkebut (2010) in a study on organisational commitment and job satisfaction of employees in universities in Kenya established that role conflict, promotional opportunities, age were some of the factors that influenced employee intention to quit the university. These findings reflect a mixture of intrinsic and extrinsic factors.

5. Critique of the Existing Literature on academic staff retention

It is evident that employee retention and indeed academic staff retention is critically important because the excellence of higher education is a function of the people it is able to enlist and retain in its faculties. Contrary, a clear picture of critical factors influencing academic staff retention has not emerged from previous studies. It is also noted that the studies are inclined towards staff turnover (Rosser, 2004; Johnshrud *et al*, 2002), also most of the available studies are based on corporate sector. Due to the paucity of research on academic staff retention in Africa, Tettey (2006) recommended institution based studies and surveys in order to develop efficacious strategies for academic staff retention. Chew (2004) used qualitative and quantitative methods in a study on retention of core staff in Australian organisations. Pienaar *et al* (2008) employed longitudinal design to study retention of academics in early career phase in order to determine whether those who had considered leaving the institution indeed did so over a period of time. Tettey (2006, 2009), employed case study method across African Countries. Kipkebut (2010) carried out a cross sectional study using quantitative methods in her study on organisational commitment in universities in Kenya. There is need for a study that will employ both qualitative and quantitative methods in order to bring out clearly factors influencing retention of academic staff in public universities in Kenya.

6. Conclusion

From the foregoing literature review, it is observed that most of the studies conducted on staff retention are from other countries and in addition are based on business oriented environments, and the few studies conducted in higher education in Africa are addressing the issue of brain drain. Most of these studies on academic staff retention are cross sectional studies of various countries and only one by Tettey (2009) incorporated one Kenyan public university. It is also noted that other than going to other countries for employment there is also local competition of employees from other public universities, private universities and the corporate sector. It is evident that the problem of academic staff retention in Kenyan public universities is a pertinent issue and is expected to be worse with the double intake in 2011/2012 academic year. Universities hold the key to the realisation of Vision 2030 by providing the manpower with the requisite skills and Knowledge. These institutions can only achieve this noble goal if they themselves have adequate capacity in terms of human and other resources.

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