An Assessment of factors that influence the attraction and retention of senior academic staff at the Zimbabwe Open University

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Abstract

The Zimbabwe Open University lost quite a number of senior academic staff during the period 2002-2009. Most of the academic staff found employment in the SADC region which offered better salaries and improved conditions of service. Under these circumstances, the Zimbabwe Open University encountered several challenges in the execution of its mandate of empowering people through Open and Distance Learning.

To date the University is still grappling with the challenge of the shortage of senior academic staff. This study therefore sought to identify the key strategies that could be used to increase the number of senior academic staff with PhD and Professor qualifications at the Zimbabwe Open University.

The study employed the quantitative survey research design. The questionnaire instrument was used to collect data from ZOU employees. Questionnaires were administered to a sample of 50 senior academic staff. Human Resources records of senior academics who left the University were also analysed to ascertain their reasons for leaving ZOU.

The research findings highlighted several factors which attract or de-motivate senior academic staff at ZOU. These include shortage of work related resources, inadequate research support, unfulfilled contractual benefits and low recognition of the contribution of senior academic staff in areas of decision making.

The study concluded that senior academic staff are not motivated solely by financial rewards, but that they also seek satisfaction of higher level needs. These include recognition and self esteem.

The study recommends that the University should improve in the provision of basic office space, furniture and research support services. The University should also foster an organizational culture that recognises the contribution of senior academic staff on vital academic and administration related decisions.

Background to the study

The Zimbabwe Open University is the only state university mandated to offer Open and Distance Learning (ODL) in Zimbabwe. The University has a staff complement of 850 and an annual registration of about 16 000 students. The University was established by an Act of Parliament (ZOU Act Chapter 25:20) of 1999. The University’s vision is “To be a World Class Open and Distance learning University”.

The Zimbabwe Open University lost key staff including senior academics during the period 2002-2009. Currently the University has within its granted establishment 191 full time academic staff members and about 2000 part time academic staff. Among the 191 full time academics, only 30 had PhD qualifications while six are professors. This number is too low in relation to the expectations of the Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education (ZIMCHE). ZIMCHE is a government body which controls the quality of higher education in Zimbabwe. The body expects the majority of academics at a University to be PhD holders and Professors. This shortage of senior academic staff inhibits the institution’s ability to fulfil its vision of becoming a world class Open and Distance Learning institution.

The increased number of Universities in Zimbabwe in relation to the availability of senior academic staff implies that competition for senior academics is high. It is very important, therefore, that management is kept abreast of key factors that help to attract and retain senior academics. This study investigates factors that contribute to senior academic staff turnover or retention at the Zimbabwe Open University. The study also contributes new knowledge by way of proffering possible staff retention and attraction strategies that can be used to maintain an adequate pool of senior academic staff at the University. An adequate senior academic staff complement is an important organisational competence especially in the higher and tertiary education sector. The credibility of a University, its brand name and programmes, highly depends on the quality and competence of its senior academic staff.

Lawrence and Norhia (2002), Clayton Alderfer (1970) and Frederick Herzberg (1959) among other scholars, contributed immensely to the field of employee motivation. This study integrated such scholarly work as referred to above with the research findings to develop strategies for attracting and retaining senior academic staff at the Zimbabwe Open University.

Statement of the Problem

As highlighted above, the Zimbabwe Open University lost a significant number of its staff, mainly senior academic staff during the period 2002-2009 when Zimbabwe experienced severe political and economic challenges. Many Doctoral degree holders and Professors went into the SADC region and beyond for greener pastures. Table 1 below shows resignations of academic staff at ZOU from 2006-2009:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of ZOU academic staff resignations</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>20</td>
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</table>
Currently, there are 30 PhD holders and 6 Professors at ZOU. The shortage of PhD holders and Professors was recognized as a key strategic issue to the extent that the ZOU Strategic Plan 2010-2014, goal number 5, of “people empowerment and performance,” tasked the Registrar to “increase the number of PhD holders to about 30% of academics by the year 2014.”

To this effect, the statement of the problem can be stated as; How can ZOU attract and retain senior academic staff?

Purpose of the Study
The purpose of this study is to assist the University to come up with clear strategies and a roadmap of how to increase the number of senior academics with PhD and Professional qualifications. The study was guided by the objectives below.

Objectives of the Study
* To identify push and pull factors for senior academic staff at the Zimbabwe Open University.
* To identify key attraction strategies to increase the number of senior academic staff at the Zimbabwe Open University.
* To recommend attraction and retention strategies for senior academic staff at the Zimbabwe Open University.

Key Research Questions
The study sought to address the following questions:
* Why were senior academic staff leaving the University? What are the push factors?
* What are the factors that could attract senior academic staff to the Zimbabwe Open University?
* What could be the most appropriate attraction and retention strategies for senior academic staff at the Zimbabwe Open University?

Justification of the study
Human capital is the most important resource of any organization. The importance of this study therefore lies in its focus to improve the availability and motivation of key staff at the Zimbabwe Open University. It is expected that the research findings, if implemented, will assist in addressing those factors that contribute to or mitigate against employee motivation at the Zimbabwe Open University and possibly in other Open and Distance learning institutions in the region and beyond. It is hoped that the study will enhance the University’s compliance with the requirements of the Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education to have all senior academics as PhD holders and Professors.

Review of related literature.
The push and pull factors for senior academic staff are premised on biological, social, emotional and cognitive issues (Butkus and Green 1999). The following major theories have been used to explain issues of staff motivation, attraction and retention.

Four Drive Model of Motivation
The Four Drive Model of Employee Motivation was propounded by Lawrence and Nohria in 2002. Lawrence and Nohria (2011) argue that a leader can influence an employee’s motivation using four main drives. These drives are (a) to achieve and acquire (b) bond and belong (c) challenge and comprehend (d) define and defend.

Lawrence and Nohria (2002) emphasized that employees should be empowered to make decisions over areas of their working life. Wisdom Tettey (2010) observes that participants at Makerere University indicated that, some of the staff felt that they did not receive any feedback on whether their inputs had been used in the design and/or improvement of the various University systems. Thus, the involvement of senior academic staff communicates the extent to which they are valued and this builds employees’ self-esteem and commitment to the organisation. The ODL Human Resources Unit should endeavor to put in place effective mechanisms of involving staff in key decision making.

Lawrence and Nohria (2011) also argue that the drive to achieve and acquire is primarily based on a company’s reward system. This drive is met when companies have a total reward system that clearly ties rewards to performance and recognition is consistently given for outstanding performance. Torrington et al. (2008) observe that available reward systems other than the basic salary were very poor at Jimma University of Ethiopia. The majority of senior academic staff were not satisfied with the overall reward systems at Jimma University and this led to high staff turnover. Torrington et al. (2008) argue that rewarding outstanding performance by providing incentives might help the University to retain experienced staff longer. Thus, the University should develop proper strategies which reward outstanding performance.

Existence Relatedness Growth theory
In agreement with Maslow’s theory, Alderfer (1972) proposed that there are three basic needs: Existence (nutritional and material requirements like pay and allowances), Relatedness (need for meaningful social relations, relationships with family, friends and colleagues at work) and Growth (need for developing one’s potential, the desire for personal growth and increased competence).

According to Alderfer’s ERG theory, the lowest level of needs relate to physiological and safety concerns. When employees have satisfied their existence needs, they feel safe and physically comfortable. Alderfer in agreement with Maslow (1970) argued that workers are at the most basic level motivated mainly by remuneration. He also noted that competitive salaries are a very important ingredient in ensuring employee commitment to an organization, particularly in times of economic distress and intense market competition for expertise. At the University of Ghana, Morris et al. (2004) observed that dissatisfaction with salaries was a key factor which undermined the commitment of academics to their institutions and consequently propelled their decision to leave.

Alderfer’s ERG theory points out the need for organizations to find ways to satisfy belongingness needs of employees through social activities in the organization, for example to recognize employees, encourage their participation in decision making, offer opportunities of career development and autonomy in the job. Alderfer (1970) maintains that at a higher level people need
to feel valued by others as well as having a sense of making a contribution to the world. Participation in professional activities, academic accomplishments and team participation can all play a role in fulfilling the esteem needs. Once a person fulfils the sense of belonging, the need to feel important then arises.

Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory of Motivation
Herzberg (1959) believes that organisations should motivate employees by improving the nature and content of the actual job. Herzberg's assertion on hygiene factors can be supported by an observation by the World Federation for Medical Education (WFME) Task Force for Accreditation (2005) which suggests that insufficient resources such as library holdings, limited internet access, dilapidated laboratory equipment and poor funding for research de-motivated senior academic staff at Makerere University and compelled them to resign and join other institutions. WFME (2005) states that according to the Vice-Chancellor of Makerere University, “people who have trained abroad and have been working in good, well-equipped laboratories, find it hard to conduct research in our poor laboratories and working under stressful conditions.” This observation by WFME (2005) points to the fact that, wherever possible, to retain senior academic staff, universities must avail sufficient resources so that senior academic staff can accomplish their tasks.

Tettey and Puplampu (2000, p. 91) observed that in an academic institution, senior academic staff are also motivated by opportunities for appointments and promotion. They observed that the appointment process at the University of Ghana was unnecessarily cumbersome, tedious, and time-consuming. Accordingly, applicants ended up taking appointments elsewhere before the appointment process was over. Generally, academic staff complained about the inordinate bureaucratic red-tape that tends to surround promotion and appointment processes. One can therefore argue that staff promotion committees, among many other strategies, if properly administered may help to address the bureaucratic and secretive nature that often surrounds promotion and appointment in some Universities.

The above mentioned theories aptly summarize factors that may have a strong bearing on employee motivation at ZOU.

Research Design
This study used a quantitative survey research design. Data collection was done using the questionnaire instrument which had both open ended and closed questions.

The ZOU senior academic staff members were the target population. These included academic staff members through the 10 regional centres and those at the national centre. The sample was composed of 50 senior academic staff members.

Simple random sampling was used in the study. The ZOU salaries pay roll was used to come up with a list of senior academic staff. This sampling technique was chosen relative to the others because it is easily understood, the sample results may be projected to the target population and there is no (human) interference in the selection of the sample (Cooper Donald R., Emory C. William. 1995).

Delimitations
This study focused on academic staff at the Zimbabwe Open University. Out of 191 academic staff at the Zimbabwe Open University, 50 academic staff (that is 26%) was used as a sample in conducting the survey. The study covered senior academic staff at the 10 regional centres and the national centre.

Assumptions of the study
The study was based on the assumption that all data collected from the field are contributed independently and truthfully by respondents and that the sample population truly represents the opinions of the Zimbabwe Open University academic staff.

Limitations of the Study
The major constraint on this study was the geographical dispersion between ZOU’s ten regional centres. Thus it was a challenge to distribute and collect questionnaires from senior academic staff in various Regional Centres. The University was however able to assist with the necessary logistical support in the distribution and collection of the questionnaires.

Ethical and Legal considerations to the Study
Responses from the respondents were treated with utmost confidentiality and were used for the purposes of this study only. The study was carried out within the legal framework of Zimbabwe.

Discussion of Findings.

The study revealed that, among the participants, 34% of respondents were Master’s degree holders, 46% were PhD holders while 20% of respondents were professors. The Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education requires that all senior academic staff be PhD holders and professors. The Zimbabwe Open University is therefore currently falling short on this requirement as a significant proportion of its senior academic staff are Master’s degree holders.

The majority of respondents were male (73.2%). This clearly shows that more males than females are currently getting the opportunity for career advancement in the Zimbabwean education system. The Zimbabwe Open University should identify strategies to attract more female academic staff. Females are perceived to be more loyal to organisations as they have
lower mobility levels due to family commitments. (Rusbult et al., 1988).

**Age Range**

Figure 2: Age range

The majority of senior academics are middle aged (37%) in the age range of 41-50 years. The 60+ years age group is also significant with 29%. This implies a greater need for the Zimbabwe Open University to invest more in nurturing and mentoring young academic staff.

**Figure 3: Length of service at ZOU**

Figure 4 shows that 37% of respondents were in the ranges below two years while 34% had 2-5 years of service. Thus about 71% of senior academic staff have not served for more than 5 years. Only 16% of respondents had more than 10 years of service at ZOU. This statistical data shows a low retention rate of senior academic staff at ZOU and calls for the introduction of significant loyalty programmes that will assist to retain senior academic staff.

**Voice in decision making**

With regard to voice in decision making, 65% of respondents were of the view that senior academics were not consulted in decision making. As noted by Maslow (1970) workers are not only concerned with money, but are also interested in having their social and esteem needs addressed and this can be done by involving them in decision making.

**Figure 5: Provision of work related resources**

This study revealed that 47.5% of respondents were of the opinion that members of staff do not get adequate resources to do their jobs effectively at ZOU. Only 17.5% of respondents felt that members of staff get adequate resources to do their jobs. Academics get recognition and status in society depending on how best they discharge their duties. Their performance also positions them for competitive consultancy work and other research projects. Thus to be proficient senior academics require sufficient and quality resources to discharge their duties.

**Figure 6: Opportunities for career development**

Table 6 above shows that the majority (68.3%) of respondents agreed that there were opportunities for career development at ZOU. Thus the Zimbabwe Open University should continue to create career development opportunities for all staff as they are critical for staff motivation.

**Academic freedom**

The issue of academic freedom needs to be urgently addressed at ZOU. 46.3% of respondents agreed that there is academic freedom at ZOU while the majority (53.5%) of respondents disagreed and felt that there is no academic freedom at ZOU. Academic freedom is guaranteed in the University charter. It is important, therefore, for management to communicate this position very clearly to all academics. Academic freedom is the bedrock of creativity and innovation.

**Feedback**

The findings revealed that 72.5% of respondents indicated that their immediate supervisors provide feedback, while only 2.5% indicated that they never get feedback from their immediate supervisor. This study therefore confirms the availability of effective communication channels at ZOU.

**Satisfaction with ZOU loan facilities**

Most respondents (61.8%) indicated that ZOU loan facilities are good while 24.0% of respondents said ZOU loan facilities were poor. This study therefore suggests that senior academic staff are generally satisfied with ZOU loan facilities.

**Satisfaction with ZOU monetary allowances**

This study confirms that senior academics are generally happy with ZOU allowances. 35.9% of respondents indicated that ZOU monetary allowances were good, 23.1% of respondents indicated that ZOU monetary allowances were average while 20.5% pointed out that ZOU monetary allowances were poor. Maslow (1970) basing on his Hierarchy of needs theory argued that competitive salaries and allowances are crucial in enhancing employees’ commitment to an organization especially in an era of economic depression. This
study therefore concludes that ZOU should strive to increase the amount of ZOU allowances to senior academic staff. ZOU should also maintain a consistent disbursement of these allowances to boost morale of its senior academic staff.

**Figure 7: Rating of ZOU salaries**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Valid Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Valid Excellent</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>9.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>51.2</td>
<td>51.2</td>
<td>61.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>34.1</td>
<td>34.1</td>
<td>95.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>97.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very poor</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This study reveals that the majority of senior academics are generally satisfied with levels of pay offered at ZOU. Table 7 above shows that the majority (95.1%) of respondents indicated that ZOU salaries were good while only 4.8% of respondents pointed out that ZOU salaries were poor. This view confirms the positive impact of the Zimbabwean Government’s intervention to align University salaries with those in the Region.

**ZOU appointment and promotion process**

The study revealed that the majority (92.5%), of respondents highlighted that the ZOU appointment and promotion process is good while the minority (7.5%) of respondents highlighted that the process is poor. Tettey and Puplampu (2000) argue that senior academic staff are highly motivated by opportunities for appointments and promotion. On the basis of empirical evidence from these research findings, ZOU has to continue with the good practice on its appointment process and promotion of academic staff so as to attract and retain senior academic staff.

**Figure 8: Satisfaction with ZOU research support**

This study confirms the need to increase support for research at ZOU. Figure 9 above shows that 27.5% of respondents indicated that ZOU research support is good while 22.5% viewed it as average. 20% of respondents indicate that ZOU research support is poor and 15% very poor. Herzberg’s hygiene theory asserts that organizations should improve on the nature and content of employees’ jobs through providing adequate work related resources in order to motivate employees. Research is one of the core competencies of academic staff hence the need for academic institutions to prioritize research support and funding for academics.

**Satisfaction with ZOU staff development opportunities**

This study confirms that staff development at ZOU is considered good by senior academics. 85% of respondents indicated that staff development opportunities were good while 15% indicated that staff development opportunities at ZOU were poor.

**Satisfaction with ZOU office space and furniture**

The majority (78.1%) of respondents indicated that office space at ZOU was poor while only 21.9% agreed that office space at ZOU was good. This study also revealed that 77.5% of respondents indicated that office furniture at ZOU was poor. The issue of office space and furniture at ZOU came out as an area of major concern by senior academics. The absence of adequate office space and furniture for senior academic staff at ZOU can lead to de-motivation and dissatisfaction. On the basis of these findings, ZOU should invest more in improving office space and furniture for senior academic staff to maintain and improve staff motivation.

**Satisfaction with contractual benefits at ZOU**

The issue of contractual benefits such as contact and sabbatical leave came out as a major area of concern to senior academics. The study reveals that 35.9% of respondents indicated that ZOU contractual benefits were good while 46.2% of respondents were dissatisfied with the manner contractual benefits are administered at ZOU.

**Conclusion**

Basing on the findings discussed above, this research reached the following conclusions. The study highlighted that inadequate work and research related resources such as office space, office furniture and research funding demotivated senior academic staff, as this hampered effective delivery of duty. The study also indicated that senior academics at ZOU feel that they are not being adequately recognised in decision making as key decisions at the University have been made without their involvement. Thus, ZOU should include senior academic staff in key decision making boards of the University. As highlighted in the previous discussion, the Zimbabwe Open University should introduce loyalty packages such as the long service award, worker of the year award, VC’s trophy for outstanding performance and Director/ Manager of the year award. There is an urgent need to fulfill contractual benefits such as sabbatical and contact leave. The ZOU allowance must also be paid on time. This could enhance attraction and retention of senior academic staff.

**Recommendations**

In light of the above findings and taking into account the timelines proposed in the ZOU 2010 – 2014 Strategic Plan document, the University is advised to proceed as follows.

* The University has to invest and improve more in work related resources. These include adequate office space, office furniture and research support.
* ZOU has to honour its contractual obligations to academic staff, chiefly sabbatical and contact leave as well as increasing allowances.
* The ZOU Administration should enhance trust in the institution by improving communication and involving senior academics in decision making.
* ZOU should introduce recognition and loyalty packages for senior academic staff.

References


Barclay, Anthony (2002) “The Political Economy of Brain Drain in Institutions of Higher Learning in Conflict Countries: Case of the University of Liberia,”


