



Talent retention strategies for female academics in the higher education sector: A Sub-Saharan Africa context



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ABSTRACT

This study aimed at identifying talent retention strategies for female academics in the higher education sector, paying particular attention to the Sub-Saharan context. Higher education institutions rely on the knowledge, abilities and skills of their academics in order to keep abreast of the changing nature of higher education globally. These institutions of higher learning are required to be competitive and achieve their strategic goals in order to remain relevant in the sector. Studies have shown that female academics are leaving the higher education sector for the private sector for numerous reasons, including better salaries and further development. Additionally, some female academics are emigrating to European countries in search of greener pastures. Therefore, higher education institutions have to ensure that talent retention strategies are implemented to retain female academics, as well as to facilitate their progress to top leadership positions. The study utilized four crucial retention strategies identified in Kenya by Mutiria, Rukangu and Kubaison in 2015. These retention strategies include compensation and benefits, formal succession planning, training and development and career development opportunities. A quantitative research design was adopted for this study, whereby online questionnaires were completed by 112 female academics at a Sub-Saharan university. The data were analyzed using the Statistical package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 27 for Windows. The results revealed a significant relationship between the four identified strategies and retention. Thus, institutions of higher learning should effectively implement these strategies in order to retain talented female academics, considering the dynamics in the sector.

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Introduction

In Sub-Saharan Africa, higher education participation has increased tremendously over the past two decades. However, despite this scenario, enrollments have remained modest compared to other parts of the world. The increased number of university enrollments turn implies that the number of academics increased as well. According to Selesho and Naile (2014), the retention of academics in higher education institutions is a serious concern due to high labour turnover. This poses a significant challenge to academic institutions as stability, quality and consistency will be affected. Musakuro and de Klerk (2021) attest that higher education institutions, like any organizations in the public or private sector, compete for talent. Therefore, it is crucial for institutions to introduce talent retention strategies to ensure that talented individuals remain with the institution for longer periods. This study pays particular attention to the retention of talented female academics because most institutions are 'racing' to meet their gender quotas as per most governmental policies in Sub-Saharan tertiary institutions. When institutions employ a talented female academic in top leadership positions, it is published in the media and is perceived as an anomaly. This is due to the gender discrimination and patriarchy which has existed in higher education for a long period of time, and which is often rooted in historical, socio-economical and political contexts. Females feel like second-class citizens due to the patriarchal nature of higher education, which influences their decisions to choose to work in other sectors (Mandleco 2010). Most women are also migrating overseas in search of better opportunities, while some top academics are being head-hunted, especially the in the fields of science, technology, engineering and

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mathematics (STEM). This leads to the necessity for tertiary institutions in Sub-Saharan Africa to devise strategies in order to retain those females who are talented and still working for the respective institutions.

Literature Review

Women in Higher Education: The Sub-Saharan Africa context

According to Bayusuf *et al.* (2021), 43% of Sub-Saharan university students are women. On the other hand, Mulwa (2021) attests that across sub-Saharan African tertiary education institutions, only 24% of academic staff are female. However, university enrollments for females have increased by 9% from 2011 to 2020 (UNESCO, 2020). Durrani and Halai (2020) posit that most countries in Sub-Saharan Africa have been colonized by European countries and most colonialists had laws which did not support women attaining educational proficiencies and qualifications. For instance, Gaidzanwa (1997) confirms that in Zimbabwe, colonial women's education was designed to prepare women as housewives and subsistence farmers. In South Africa during the apartheid era, Martineau (1997) reveals that black women faced a double tragedy in being a woman and being black. Thus, women were segregated, especially in the higher education sector. In contrast, countries in the Sub-Saharan region have implemented policies to promote women in all sectors, including higher education. For example, Botswana has non-discriminatory and gender equality legislation, whilst Zimbabwe has passed 17 pieces of legislation to advance the gender equality and equity objective (The National gender policy 2013).

UNESCO (2020) avers that in Sub-Saharan Africa, the percentage of female academics decreased from 26% to 24% in the period 1995 to 2018; while in other regions, the numbers have increased. This is due to the failure by institutions of higher learning to recruit, retain and promote females in academia. Consequently, the region has the lowest share of female lecturers compared to other regions globally. The other trend to be noted in Sub-Saharan higher education is the low number of females in top management. For example, in the South African higher education context, of 26 public universities, there are only five female vice-chancellors. In addition, in Zimbabwe, of 20 private and public institutions, there are only two female vice-chancellors. The trend is the same in all Sub-Saharan African higher education institutions, which might be due to the failure of higher education institutions to retain talented females in the region as those who are talented prefer to go to other sectors or other regions offering better opportunities (Nkomo 2018).

Furthermore, Sub-Saharan African higher education is characterized by male dominance and patriarchy. Studies conducted in Kenyan universities have shown that interview panels are male-dominated and female candidates are often subjected to gender-biased questions, which are also irrelevant to the posts being applied for (Onsongo 2006). Still in Kenya, Onsongo (2006) further revealed that male networks, nepotism, tribalism and political loyalties affect females in higher education, especially when it comes to promotions, as those who are not connected struggle to survive in the male-dominated sector. In the Ghanaian context, Liani, Nyamongo and Tolhurst (2020) posit that females fail to progress in higher education due to heavy workloads such as administration, lecturing, mentorship and counselling, as compared to men who exclusively focus on research and publication output. This puts men in an advantageous competitive position because in higher education, publications and research are considered when applying for promotion, salary increases and professional recognition. However, this leads to dissatisfaction and disillusionment amongst female academics, resulting in higher turnover rates.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is guided by Bourdieu's Theory of Cultural Capital, which was developed by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu in the 1970s. The cultural capital idea was developed to explain how power and social classes were transferred in the society (Maunah 2020). Bourdieu identified three sources of cultural capital, namely: embodied, objective and institutionalized. Roose *et al.* (2020) note that an example of embodied cultural capital includes one's dialect or accent, whilst a luxury car can be an example of objective cultural capital. Lastly, institutionalized cultural capital includes credentials and qualifications such as degrees or titles that symbolize cultural competence and authority. This theory is relevant to the study because the different kinds of capital present an understanding of how talent is perceived in higher education. Higher education institutions will need to implement retention strategies suitable to enhancing the status of female academics. The theory highlights that academic qualifications symbolizes cultural competence. Female academics are well-educated, hence financial and non-financial retention strategies are required to ensure that their standards of living are maintained, as well as their social class.

Retention Strategies

Retention is defined as the measures utilized by employers to encourage productive and qualified employees to continue working for the organization (Ndeipanda 2018). Werner, Schuler and Jackson (2012:152) reveal that the primary goal of retention is to minimize unwanted voluntary turnover of staff intended to be kept by the organization. In this paper, retention strategies are referred to as all activities undertaken by higher education institutions to increase the commitment of employees and providing them with numerous opportunities to grow by out-performing others. Therefore, it is crucial for institutions of higher education to provide a holistic framework designed to offer workforce benefits, which will deter employees from leaving the institution.

Khurana (2011) posits that in higher education, retention can be functional or dysfunctional. In functional retention, employees who are non-performers leave, while performers remain in the organization. Functional retention assists higher education institutions to increase optimal performance. Furthermore, in dysfunctional retention, performers leave and non-performers remain working in the institution. Consequently, organizational performance and innovation is compromised. Thus, numerous higher education institutions in Sub-Saharan Africa are striving to retain the best talent, which is shown by various institutions collaborating on the continent. For instance, Maassen (2020) confirms that the African Research Universities Alliance (ARUA) was set up by institutions in Sub-Saharan Africa to pool limited resources, enhance research activities and share skills .

Mokoditsoa (2011) affirms that numerous retention strategies could be used by institutions to retain talented academics, namely:

Compensation and benefits

Akbar and Khanfar (2020) affirm that for organizations to retain talented employees, competitive compensation and benefits should be provided in the form of salaries, bonuses, health insurance and retirement packages. Lauder and Mayhew (2020) also revealed that institutions of higher learning should structure salary increments to stay competitive in the sector. Female academics with doctoral degrees and prolific research portfolios are in high demand in Sub-Saharan Africa. Therefore, institutions that are willing to pay bigger salaries and offer competitive benefits can acquire talented academics. It is imperative to note that higher education institutions should distinguish between bottom and top performers in the institution. This will go a long way to ensuring that academics performing in the top quartile are rewarded, compensated and recognized accordingly in comparison to those staff in the other quartiles. This notion is supported by Adam's Equity theory, which advocates for a balance between the inputs (skills, performance) and the outputs, also called rewards (Yuchtman 2020). Taylor *et al.* (2020) further postulate that if higher education institutions do not have a proper incentive scheme or pay-for-performance plans, academics will move on to other institutions offering better compensation and benefit packages. A study conducted by Musakuro and de Klerk (2021) also supported the notion that compensation and benefits act as crucial retention strategy initiatives. These assertions derive the rationale for this study to hypothesize the following:

H₁: There is a positive relationship between compensation and benefits and the retention of female academics **Formal Succession Planning**

Maphisa, Zwane and Nyide (2017: 18) aver that "succession planning is a deliberate and systematic effort by an organization to ensure leadership continuity in key positions; the retention and development of intellectual and knowledge capital for the future; and the encouragement of individual advancement". Washington (2016) confirms that succession planning is not considered by numerous higher education institutions. However, institutions with a formalized succession plan ensure that talented employees are retained and developed for future leadership positions. This acts as a motivator to academics as the process will be transparent, and highly effective individuals will be retained. Maphisa, Zwane and Nyide (2017) confirm that a succession plan in higher education offers a blueprint for growth and is vital for the institution's competitiveness. Therefore, these assertions lead to the formulation of the second hypothesis:

H₂: Formal succession planning has a significant and positive effect on the retention of female academics

Training and Development

Higher education institutions in Sub-Saharan Africa strive to acquire skilled and long-serving academics as this takes institutions to a better position in world university rankings. The longer the tenure of an academic at a tertiary institution, the more skilled and productive the academic becomes. Yaghi and Bates (2020) highlight that institutions should invest in the training and development of their academics. Training and development benefits both the staff member and the institution. Adejare *et al.* (2020) also note that training and development ensures that employees keep abreast of new knowledge and skills, which in turn ensures that employees feel empowered and loyal towards the institution, thus leading to them staying with the organization for a longer period of time. A study conducted in the South African higher education sector by Musakuro and de Klerk (2021) confirmed that tertiary institutions should have departments responsible for training and development and they should also consider female-focused training and development programs. Based on the literature reviewed, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H₃: Training and development has a significant and positive effect on the retention of female academics

Career Development Opportunities

According to Fadhallah (2013: 575), a "career is a life experience behavior and attitude of a person with respect to the activities and work experience, values and aspirations to develop throughout one's life-time". Additionally, Johnson (2020) defines career development as a process of exploration, self-knowledge and decision-making that shapes an individual's career. It also involves managing an individual's career in the organization through learning new skills and making improvements. Career development is a process that is ongoing and lifelong. Therefore, it is important for institutions of higher learning to offer career development opportunities to female academics due to the gendered nature of higher education in Sub-Saharan Africa (Moodly and Toni 2017). Moyo and McKenna (2021) further aver that due to shortages of funding in higher education, some institutions cannot promise job security. Thus, career development also assists academics to remain viable in the job market. Studies have shown trends in higher education of job flexibility that encompasses flexible career options such as mentoring, workstation accommodation, training,

reduced work hours and sabbatical leave (European Commission 2021). Based on the discussed literature, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H4: There is a significant relationship between career development opportunities and the retention of female academics

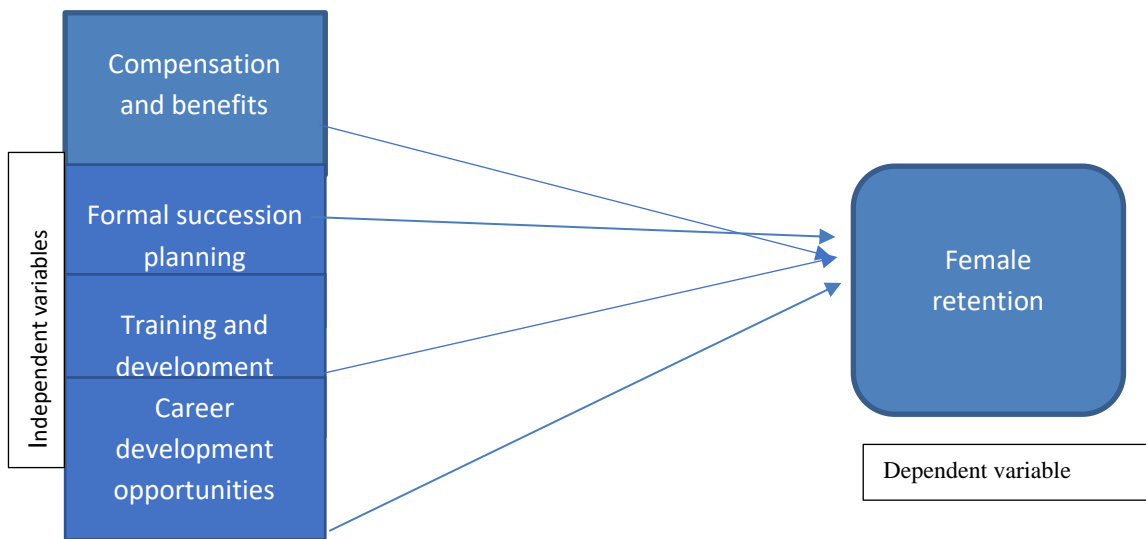


Figure 1: Conceptual framework; Source: Authors' own construction, 202

Research and Methodology

Research approach

The appropriate research approach for this study was the quantitative research paradigm, descriptive in nature to identify the retention strategies utilized by higher education institutions to retain talented female academics. Additionally, the research approach is used to measure the relationship between compensation and benefits, formal succession planning, training and development, career development opportunities and female retention.

Procedure

The authors electronically collected data from female academics at a Sub-Saharan institution of higher learning after ethical clearance was provided by the relevant institutional structures. The research instrument was pre-tested on 10 respondents who were not part of the final respondents to ensure that it measures what it was intended to measure. The respondents were notified that participation in this study was voluntary and that they could withdraw if they felt uncomfortable. To ensure confidentiality, the respondents' names were not captured with the results, and their identities were kept anonymous. One hundred and twenty-two responses were collected via Google Forms and the data were analyzed through the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 27 for Windows.

Descriptive statistics and correlations

According to George and Mallery (2016), a descriptive statistic is a summary statistic that summarizes features from a collection of information. Of the 172 emails sent to the target population, 122 respondents fully completed the questionnaires, giving a response rate of 70%. Data presented in Table 1 show that the majority of the respondents are married female academics (60%), whilst 6% are widows. This result shows that the respondents are family oriented. Therefore, the decisions that they make may impact on their families. Furthermore, 74.6% of the respondents are permanently employed, which suggests that the Sub-Saharan institution considers job security by ensuring that female academics are provided with permanent contracts. Table 1 further shows that the majority of the respondents are holders of master's degrees (53.3%), whilst doctoral holders are 32%. This result is a further indication of a shortage of female doctoral graduates in Sub-Saharan Africa, as supported by Peak and Blumbach (2018). Most of the respondents (33.6%) have been working in higher education for a period of 1-5 years, which shows that they are still early career academics.

Table 1: Distribution of respondents

	Frequency	Percentage
Marital status		
Single	30	24
Married	73	60
Divorced	12	10
Widowed	7	6
Total	122	100
Employment status		
Permanent	91	74.6
Contract	31	25.4
Total	122	100
Highest educational qualification		
BTech/ Honour's degree	10	8.2
Master's	65	53.3
Doctorate	39	32.0
Professorship	8	6.6
Total	122	100
Years of service		
12 months and below	3	2.5
1-5 years	41	33.6
6-10 years	23	18.9
11-15 years	23	18.9
16-20 years	11	9.0
21-25 years	12	9.8
26-30 years	7	5.7
31+ years	2	1.6
Total	122	100
Leadership at the institution		
Yes	64	52.5
No	58	47.5
Total	122	100

Descriptive statistics and correlations

The correlation analysis shown in Table 2 indicates that all the variables reported statistically significant relationships with retention. The results show that compensation and benefits (0.507), formal succession planning (0.311), training and development (0.510) and career development opportunities (0.408) reflect statically significant correlations ($p < 0.01$). The reported mean score for retention ($M=4.97$, $SD=0.62$) suggests that female academics in the current sample showcase moderately that the retention of female academics is crucial in order to minimize high turnover rate in Sub-Sahara African higher education. Compensation and benefits recorded a mean of 4.05; Formal succession planning, 4.27; Training and development 4.38; and Career development 4.01. The Cronbach alpha Coefficient Test for all the instruments was more than 0.70, which confirms acceptable reliability estimates.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics and correlations amongst the variables

Variable	M	SD	α	1	2	3	4	5
1. Retention	4.97	0.62	0.88	-	-	-	-	-
2. C_B	4.05	0.52	0.85	0.507*	-	-	-	-
3. FS_P	4.27	0.80	0.89	0.311*	0.289*	-	-	-
4. T_D	4.38	0.87	0.86	0.510*	0.315*	0.311*	-	-
5. C_DO	4.01	0.65	0.79	0.408*	0.614*	0.486*	0.527*	-

M, mean; SD, standard deviation; α , Cronbach's alpha. *, $p \leq 0.01$. C_B, Compensation, and benefits; FS_P, formal succession planning; T_D, Training and development; C_DO, Career development opportunities

Multiple regression analysis

The researchers conducted a multiple regression analysis in order to determine the effects of the four variables, namely compensation and benefits, formal succession planning, training and development and career development on female academic retention. Additionally, the proposed hypotheses for this study were tested using multiple regression analysis. In the analysis, female retention was used as the dependent variable, with compensation and benefits, formal succession planning, training and development and career development as independent variables. As reflected in Table 3, the model was statistically significant ($F=79.85$; $p \leq 0.001$), with the variables explaining 20% of the variance in retention.

Table 3: Multiple regression with retention being the dependent variable, compensation and benefits, formal succession planning, training and development and career development opportunities being the independent variables

Model	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>R</i> ²	ΔR^2
	β	SE	β					
(Constant)	42.94	4.08	-	10.52	0.000	79.85	0.20	0.20
C_B	0.79	0.09	0.35	8.18	0.000*	-	-	-
FS_P	0.14	0.04	0.17	3.22	0.001*	-	-	-
T_D	0.21	0.07	0.13	3.11	0.000*	-	-	-
C_DO	0.65	0.08	0.29	8.51	0.000*	-	-	-

Note: *t*, test; *p*, probability value; *F*, overall significance; *R*², percentage variance explained. ΔR^2 , change in percentage variance explained; β , regression coefficient; SE, standard error. *, $p \leq 0.001$. C_B, Compensation, and benefits; FS_P, formal succession planning; T_D, Training and development; C_DO, Career development opportunities

The results further showed that compensation and benefits is a significant factor in the retention of female academics ($\beta = 0.35$; $t = 8.18$; $p < 0.000$). Formal succession planning ($\beta = 0.17$; $t = 3.22$; $p < 0.001$) also indicated a significant and positive effect on retention. The results also showed that training and development has a positive effect on retention ($\beta = 0.13$; $t = 3.11$; $p < 0.000$). Lastly, there is a significant relationship between career development opportunities and retention ($\beta = 0.29$; $t = 8.51$; $p < 0.000$).

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to identify the retention strategies used by institutions of higher learning to retain talented female academics, as well as to determine the relationship between these strategies and retention. Based on a study by Mutiria, Rukangu and Kubaison (2015), four retention strategies were adopted and a regression analysis was conducted to ascertain the relationship between these retention strategies and female retention in the sub-Saharan African context. The study found a positive relationship between compensation and benefits and retention. These results are supported by Syahreza *et al.* (2017) in a study conducted in Indonesia. The study concluded that there is positive relationship between compensation and retention, with a result of ($\beta = 0.232$; $t = 3.943$; $p < 0.001$). Employees who are effectively compensated and provided with lucrative benefits are bound to be satisfied with their jobs. Consequently, this leads them to stay with the organization for longer periods of time. A study by Uwimpuhwe, Mushabe and Bally (2018) conducted in Rwandan higher education also confirmed that there is a relationship between compensation and benefits and retention.

Results from the study's regression analysis further confirmed that formal succession planning has a significant and positive effect on retention. A study conducted by Najam ul Hassan and Siddiqui (2020) using Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) confirmed that succession planning significantly affected retention. Institutions with formal succession plans are able to attract talented individuals and implement successful strategies meant to retain talent. If succession planning is transparent, incumbents are able to efficiently transit in the leadership pipeline in organizations, thus giving employees the assurance of remaining with the organization for longer periods of time (Washington, 2016). With the incorporation of Bourdieu's Theory of Cultural Capital, female academics will also be considered for future positions in these institutions, thus eliminating social biases.

Through the regression analysis, the study also found that training and development has a significant and positive effect on retention. Higher education is constantly changing due to the advancement of technology, thus implementing training and development is imperative in order to remain competitive. Studies by Bibi, Ahmad and Majid (2018) and Abba (2018) confirmed that there is a significant and positive relationship between training and development and retention. This result implies that higher education

institutions should focus on offering female academics formalized training and development opportunities and programs in order to ensure female staff retention. However, it is crucial to note that highly skilled employees are headhunted, thus increasing their chances of leaving after attaining training. Consequently, it is crucial for higher learning institutions to incorporate training and development, along with other retention strategies.

Based on the regression analysis for this study, there is a significant relationship between career development opportunities and retention. Hence, if higher learning institutions in sub-Saharan Africa offer opportunities for career development to their female academics, they will be willing to remain working for the tertiary institution for longer periods of time, thus lowering the current turnover rate. This result is also supported in studies conducted by Abubakarr (2014) and Nagarathanam, Venkitasamy and Attiah (2018), who confirmed in their research that there is a significant relationship between career development and staff retention. Siddiqui and Ali (2019) reveal that employees want a stable career and life. This study's respondents are of no exception as the majority are married women. Hence, they would prefer institutions that offer opportunities for career development so that they can grow and progress in the organization without considering leaving.

Conclusion

This study identified retention strategies used by higher education institutions in Sub-Saharan Africa to retain talented female academics. Four strategies were discussed, namely compensation and benefits, formal succession planning, training and development and opportunities for career development. Hypothesis testing was conducted and the results revealed that there is a significant relationship between the four identified retention strategies and retention of female academics. Thus, institutions of higher learning should take these strategies into account when retaining talented female academics. These strategies can be tailored to tertiary institutions based on their capabilities. Results from this study provided useful insights into ensuring that female academics are considered as "first-class citizens", as the literature highlighted that female felt like second-class citizens due to the patriarchal nature of higher education. Further research can be conducted on those who have left higher education institutions in Sub-Saharan Africa for European countries in order to ascertain the differences in retention strategies between the two continents.

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