

## CONSIDERATIONS OF TALENT MANAGEMENT IN RETENTION OF ACADEMICS IN THE NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF LESOTHO

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### Abstract

The aim of the study was to examine the contribution of talent management practices at the National University of Lesotho in the retention of talented academics. The university has immense competition within the local, regional and international labour market. It is threatened by high mobility and low retention of highly qualified staff, which has affected the quality of learning, especially postgraduate programmes. The study employed Bourdieu's social theory and Adam's theory of equity as a theoretical lens to understand talent management practices to retain talented academics. Bourdieu's theory was used to offer insight on the various forms of capital, and how the capitals could be instrumental in the design and implementation of talent management practices in order to increase retention of talent in universities. In this study 'talent' is used to refer to holders of doctorates, associate professors and professors or researchers of new information and theories and inventors of new technology with great potential to make a significant impact on the university's productivity. A literature review was undertaken to examine how the social theory of Bourdieu, particularly the conversion of different kinds of capital (symbolic capital) are used by the university to recognise the value of talented academics in order to retain these academics. Following a qualitative methodology and purposive sampling, data was generated through semi-structured interviews and document analysis to advance a critical and interpretive understanding of the perspectives of talent management from both management and talented academics in the university. Thematic analysis was used to synthesise the data. The data from fourteen (14) participants composed of management and academics revealed that, though the university is implementing talent management practices, it does not have an official and structured talent management program, which is imperative in retaining academics. This study concludes by advocating the design and implementation of a formal, contextual and structured talent management framework, in consultation with all key stakeholders, in order to increase retention of talent academics in the National University of Lesotho.

**Keywords:** *Equity theory, Bourdieu's social theory, talent management, talented academics.*

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### 1. Introduction

The aim of the study was to examine the contribution of talent management practices at the National University of Lesotho (NUL) in the retention of talented academics. Khoreva and Kostanek (2019) found that most Talent Management (TM) studies targeted Human Resource (HR) practitioners who may have a different interpretation than any other groups in firms, hence the keen to survey academics who are beneficiaries of TM practices in universities. Higher education institutions are facing some difficulties and challenges in attracting qualified staff, particularly in the areas of safety and security, workloads and conflicting opinions (Mohammed, Hafeez-Baig & Gururajan, 2018). Higher education institutions are based sturdily on the attraction of experienced staff to fill crucial positions (Mohammed, Hafeez-Baig & Gururajan, 2018). There is no clear conception of TM and how it impacts on retention (Mensah, 2015), in practical terms, hence organizations implementing TM may not understand the mechanism through which TM improves employee retention and how this translates into organisational brand name (Mensah, 2015). The construct "talent" and "talent management" lack theoretical vigour and standardized definition (Ansar & Baloch, 2018; Damarasri & Ahman, 2020) hence the existence of inconclusive debate among scholars. Despite this focus and attention, various researchers noted that talent management literature continues to be under-explored (Collings & Mellahi, 2009; Garrow & Hirsh, 2008; Hoglund, 2012; Lewis & Heckman, 2006; Reilly, 2008; Yarnall, 2011). Collings and Mellahi (2009) noted that the literature of talent management remains unclear about the concept as a whole especially in terms of its definition and

theoretical boundaries. In addition, from the practitioner's perspective, Yarnall (2011) posited that institutions, such as public universities (NUL) are implementing talent management without careful considerations to the consequences of such application neither on the talent pool nor on the remaining employees.

## 2. Theoretical framework

This study draws insights from Adam's equity theory and Bourdieu's cultural capital theory in an endeavour to establish the effectiveness of talent management within a university context in an attempt to retain the highly talented academics. According to Armstrong (2009:328), equity theory states that individuals compare their job inputs (physical and mental ability) and outcomes (rewards) with those of others internally and externally, and then respond to eliminate inequalities, sometimes by leaving the organisation. According to Swanepoel, Erasmus, Wyk and Schenk (2011:478), in order for universities to encourage highly talented members to stay, rewards system, training, and promotion opportunities must provide sufficient returns. There should also be a perceived equilibrium when employees compare own institution rewards with what is received by their counterparts performing comparable jobs in other or similar institutions. According to Nenty and Bioa (2013:7), promotional criteria should be clearly stated in the university's promotion guidelines and reflect equity.

Bourdieu's work sees the education structures of industrialised communities as functioning to validate class inequalities. According to Sullivan (2002:144), Bourdieu's theory states that fundamental powers are embedded in all forms of capital (cultural capital, social capital, economic capital and symbolic capital) that are observed and acknowledged as legitimate. Cultural capital is seen as forms of cultural knowledge, competences or dispositions or intellectual acquisitions that equips the individual with appreciation for or skills of a specific subject area or field of study, Bourdieu (1993:7). These may be educational qualifications that one holds, for example, certificates, diploma, degrees, publications etc. Cultural capital is accumulated through a long process, learning through the family, society or formal institutionalised educational process.

## 3. Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research approach. A total of 14 participants were interviewed in this study (3 university management representatives, 3 professors, 4 associate professors and 4 doctoral holders). Informed consent was obtained from all the participants to audio record the interviews and participants were informed of anonymity and confidentiality applied to the research process, de Vos, Strydom, Fouché & Delpont, (2002). Authorisation to conduct this research at the National University of Lesotho was granted by the institutional authorities. Data from the transcribed interviews was thematically analysed where similar categories of data were grouped into themes in order to make sense and find meaning of the data.

## 4. Analysis and Discussion of Findings

The data from the 14 interviews points that in order for talent management to be effective, there should be perceived equity between one's educational investment and their rate of returns in terms of economic and non-economic compensation. The following are some of the themes that emerged from the data which will be discussed briefly:

### 4.1. Theme 1: Retention allowance

All participants seemingly agreed that though there was no written retention strategy at the university, the organisation had made an effort to put in place a 10% retention allowance of basic salary for talented academics. *Participant C4: "As an associate professor, the university offers me 10% allowance of my basic salary on a monthly basis. It is a permanent feature to encourage me to stay. However, the allowance has been eroded by inflation since salaries have been stagnant for a long time."* While the academics suggest for the university to do review the allowance upwards, management expressed that: *The University acknowledges that the allowance had been overtaken by inflation, but because of the shoestring budget from the government that the university is working with, it may not be possible to increase the allowance from 10%. If the financial situation of the university improves anytime, there could be a possibility to raise the percentage, (Participant M2).* This comment concurs with Mgaiwa (2018:3), that a major challenge, especially in government universities, is that the greater part of compensation is financed from the state budget, which could be limiting for designing lucrative reward systems. This leaves the university with a major challenge to think creatively in terms of seeking other sources of income apart from

the government subventions and redesign competitive compensation structures in order to increase the retention allowance to where academics feel appreciated and acknowledged as the valuable assets of the university.

#### **4.2. Theme 2: Extension of retirement age for highly talented academics**

Extended retirement age was one of the retention strategies that most of the professor participants expressed with excitement as most of them were towards retirement. One professor (*Participant C5*) noted that: *“Two years ago (2017), council approved extension of retirement age for associate professors and professors to be moved from 65 to 70 -71 according to individual strength. This has helped to retain professors since most of them are towards retirement.”* From the interviews, this came as a big relief to most talented academics as one participant C2 explained: *“When I turned 60, I felt I was now at the best stage of my career where I am a seasoned researcher, ready to mentor junior academics but knowing that I was going to retire in a few years was affecting me. This came as a big relief for me and to my career.”* This is contrary to what Brewster (2008:129) observes that, some universities have 55-60 years as the retirement age which means the universities lose the best talent when they are at the climax careers with the opportunity to best service to the university through their accrued years of teaching and research experience. Consequently, extension of retirement age was one of the major issues that all talented academic would put serious consideration on as it affected the closure of their careers and any policy that send them to retire early may have deterring factors on retention.

#### **4.3. Theme 3: Allocation of resources**

Bourdieu’s theory is of utmost importance to university management to understand that for a university to remain relevant concerning research, it has to put some groups of academics ahead of others in some points, (Bourdieu (1984). This was motivated by one of the professors (Participant E2) commenting on the limited funds for conferences: *“In my opinion, because the university has limited funds, more funds should be allocated to senior academics, who are professors and doctorates so that we keep abreast with other professors in other universities in terms of research. In other universities, senior and junior lecturers are not allocated the same amount for research. Research grants should be allocated according to seniority. Lack of research leads to academic degradation”.* On the contrary, one of the participants (C6) had this view: *“I think the research funds are enough for me because I do not even have the time to do research because of my workload and I have only claimed the research funds once since I started working at the university in 2004.”* From the responses, the university could support talent’s career advancement by contributing towards sustainable research through provision of opportunities of building social capital through attendance of conferences and research collaborations with other academics in the higher education arena. This could contribute immensely towards self-actualisation of academics as research is one of the key factors towards one’s career growth and promotion.

### **5. Conclusion**

Since talent is a multidimensional construct, the TM practices at NUL need to be initiated to address the social, educational, economic and cultural capital of the talented academics in an equitable manner in order to increase retention and gain a competitive advantage. The study reveals that designing and implementing a formal, contextual and structured talent management framework, in consultation with all key stakeholders, has potential to increase retention of talented academic in universities. The TM program should be exclusively designed and implemented in consideration that those with higher educational qualifications expect to be high on the economic and social hierarchy as a form of recognition and appreciation. Although suggestions about talent management practices such as: competitive economic rewards, challenging work, open communication, allocation of resources, recognition of achievement and more have the potential to improve talent retention, there has to be perceived equilibrium internally and externally between talent’s cultural capital and rate of returns in order to increase retention. A correct balance of inputs and commitment from all stakeholders (management, talent and government) in the design and implementation of talent management yields positive results in increasing talent loyalty to the organisation. In most cases, they will decide to quit or exit environments with restricted academic freedom. Therefore, it is of paramount importance that all the talent management practices aim to address the needs and preferences of talent, individually and collectively in order to achieve both individual and organisational goals.

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