

**AN ASSESSMENT OF OCCUPATIONAL TALENT RISKS ASSOCIATED WITH ACADEMIC STAFF IN A SELECTED PUBLIC HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION**

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**—Abstract —**

The main objective of this research was to explore the occupational talent risks of academic staff in a selected South African higher education institution. A quantitative research approach was followed with a newly developed occupational talent risk tool distributed to a convenience sample of academics (N=220) of a selected South African higher education institution. Exploratory factor analyses resulted in five factors for the occupational talent risk measure: Career development, talent attraction, compensation, performance management and talent retention. The results highlighted showed that inadequate compensation was the highest risk for academic staff. The academics in this sample reported very high levels of turnover intentions. Recommendations are made.

**Keywords:** Academic staff, talent management, talent risks

**JEL classification:** JEL 24

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The talent risk management of academic staff in South African public universities is becoming essential as these institutions are struggling to attract and retain top talent (Njanjobea, 2016; Pienaar & Bester, 2016). Estimates show that at least 6 000 new academics are required to replace retiring academics within the next five years (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2015). There is some evidence to suggest that higher education institutions are not attractive hires due to poor compensation, student unrest, political agendas, discrimination, a lack of infrastructure and a lack of government funding (see Bigirimana, Sibanda & Masengu, 2016; Bozalek & Boughey, 2014; Kissoonduth, 2017; Mabaso & Dlamini, 2018; Postma, 2016; Salau, 2017; Zulu, 2016). Moreover, the continuous changing nature of academic institutions without a clear strategic direction and vaguely defined performance indicators for a 'modern academic' career are escalating the turnover intentions of many top academic talents (Graham, 2015; Seyama & Smith, 2015).

Limited research currently exists on addressing specifically the talent management of academic staff in South African higher education institutions (Barkhuizen, Schutte & Nagel, 2019; Erasmus, Naidoo & Joubert, 2017; Lesenyeho, 2017; Mabaso & Dlamini, 2017; Njanjobea, 2016; Roodt, 2013; Saurombe, 2015; 2017; Theron, Barkhuizen & Du Plessis, 2014). The available research clearly points out the talent management challenges in higher educational workplaces that pose significant threats for the career success of talented academic staff. Academics are the main foundation for competitive advantage. Therefore, it is important for the heads of schools, deans and human resource managers to provide new and current academics with the necessary resources such as adequate training and professional development (Baron, Clake, Turner & Pass, 2010) to prepare them for the new academic world. The risks of poor talent management practices and situational factors related to working in higher education institutions can in most cases result in poor quality service, high turnover, absenteeism and stress, which all accumulate to labour disputes (Annakis, Dass & Isa, 2014).

Against this background, this research aimed to explore the occupational talent risks of academic staff in a selected South African higher education institution. This research is built on previous research by Mokgojwa (2018), who identified

occupational talent risks for academics such career development, talent attraction, compensation, performance management and talent retention from the perspective of academic managers. What have yet to be tested are the talent risk experiences of academic staff. In what follows next, a brief overview is presented on the occupational talent risks as they relate to the academic context.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Talent and talent management**

Despite the proliferation of research on talent management worldwide, the conceptualisation of ‘talent’ within the context of the workplace is yet to be clarified (Dries, 2013). A recent study by Lubinda (2017) showed that management and HR practitioners viewed talent as a concept reserved for celebrities only, and are yet to be introduced in the workplace. The lack of a clear definition of talent and high potential individuals had a negative spillover effect on the effective implementation of talent management practices in Lubinda’s studies. The lack of conceptual clarification of talent and the theoretical foundation thereof (van Zyl, Mathafena & Ras, 2017) further complicates the methodology used for the detection of talent in the workplace and the talent management practices implemented to accommodate these individuals.

Currently, there are two methodologies for the detection of talent in the workplace: inclusivity and exclusivity. Swailes and Downs (2014) refer to exclusive talent strategies as those focusing on the personal and career development of the minority of employees for as long as they are in the talent pool. The definition of inclusive talent is more complicated. Previous researchers view inclusive talent management as an approach whereby all employees are viewed as a talent and can contribute to the core business of an organisation (Iles, Preece & Chuai, 2010; Preece, Iles & Chuai, 2011). Swailes and Downs (2014) contest this notion and advocate that an inclusive approach to talent is merely traditional human resource management. Moreover, these authors advocate that talented employees can only exist in relation to others in the workplace and that the vast majority of employees cannot be considered as talented. Erasmus, Naidoo and Joubert (2017), in their study among management at a large open and distance South African higher education institution, criticised the use of an inclusivity approach to talent management. Poorly applied talent management practices cause risks for higher educational competitiveness and sustainability over the long term,

as academics are likely to leave for greener pastures elsewhere (Lesenyeho, 2017; Theron et al., 2014).

## **2.2 Occupational talent risks for academic staff**

### **2.2.1 Career development**

Changes in higher education require academic staff to consistently reinvent themselves to remain attractive hires. A new trend to emerge is the concept of dispositional employability, whereby academics take responsibility for managing their own careers by being proactive, optimistic, motivated, resilient and open to change (Barkhuizen, Schutte & Lesenyeho, 2018; Roodt, 2013). Talent research among academics also shows that the availability of career development opportunities enhances their organisational commitment (Mabaso & Dlamini, 2018), job satisfaction (Theron et al., 2014), organisational satisfaction (Barkhuizen, Schutte & Nagel, 2017) and reduces physical and psychological ill-health (Vorster & Barkhuizen, 2018) and turnover intentions (Barkhuizen et al. 2018; Saurombe, 2015; Theron et al., 2014).

Researchers highlight the importance of role clarity for academic career development (Barkhuizen et al. 2018; Callaghan, 2015). Callaghan (2015) found that role conflicts contributed to crisis milestones in academic careers, which need to be resolved before career progression to doctoral and professional designations can occur. Cameron and Woods (2016) alluded to the importance of equipping academic development practitioners with the necessary skills to develop the professional career of academics. Farooq, Othman, Nordin and Ibrahim (2016) further maintain that higher education management need to have a greater understanding of talent management in order to develop and retain academic staff.

### **2.2.2 Talent attraction**

Talent attraction can be referred to as an umbrella term that takes all the activities that organisations perform to market themselves to potential employees (Graham-Leviss, 2011). Limited research currently exists to explain the factors that can attract novice and top scholars to higher education. The available research shows that the attraction of quality academic staff to state universities remains a

challenge. Onah and Anikwe (2016) found that brain-drain, gender gap, unattractive salary packages and a lack of adequate training are factors hampering academic talent attraction. A comprehensive study by Metcalf, Rolfe, Stevens and Wolfe (2005) showed that in many cases academic vacancies remain unfilled because of a rapid decline in quality applicants. Of great concern in this study was that just over a half of existing academics were still keen on having an academic career.

Studies focusing on the talent attraction of academic staff highlighted several factors that higher education should consider when attracting top scholars. Saurombe, Barkhuizen and Schutte (2017b) found that factors such as reputation and image, organisational culture and identity, strategic vision, corporate social responsibility and work, and surrounding environment are the key ingredients for a higher educational brand for academic staff. Saurombe, Barkhuizen and Schutte (2017c) further found that fringe benefits/ incentives and remuneration, leadership and managerial support and occupational health and safety are the most important factors affecting the employment brand of a higher education institution.

### **2.2.3 Compensation**

When referring to recognition, rewards and compensation, many studies have shown the negative implications that these factors have on turnover, attraction and retention (Lesenyeho, Barkhuizen & Schutte, 2018b; Saurombe et al., 2017a; Yousaf, 2010). Furthermore, numerous research studies have found that employee commitment can be promoted by highly competitive wage systems and therefore result in the attraction and retention of a superior labour force (Tettey, 2010). In a similar vein, a study by Mabaso and Dlamini (2018) showed that a total rewards strategy (consisting of compensation, performance management, recognition, talent development and career opportunities, compensation, benefits and work-life balance) significantly enhanced the organisational commitment of academic staff members in selected South African higher education institutions. Compensation should therefore be of strategic importance to any higher education institution if they are to attract and retain talented academics.

According to Bryant and Allen (2013), the costs of employee turnover often exceed 100% of the annual salary of the vacant position. These authors advocate that managers should consider innovative compensation and benefits to reduce

turnover. Poor compensation is often the main reason why academics quit their jobs (Theron et al., 2014). Available research within the South African context shows that academic salaries are not comparable with counterparts in the industry (Lesenyeho, 2017). Current trends show that higher education institutions are struggling to attract the requisite number of younger generation employees to replace a soon retiring workforce (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2015). Therefore, financial rewards and inducements are necessary to attract talent in environments where there is a shortage of human capital skills (Schlechter, Hung & Bussin, 2014).

#### **2.2.4 Performance management**

The importance of an effective performance management system is imperative for the teaching and research performance of academic staff (Tourish, 2012). Ghosh and Das (2013) define performance management, within the context of higher education, as the integration of performance appraisal systems with broader human resource systems on an ongoing and interactive basis to ensure alignment between academic work behaviour, capability, productivity and institutional goals. According to Türk (2016), a detailed performance management system enables academic staff members to achieve higher results during times of restructuring and change at universities. Maimela and Samuel (2016) found that a sample of South African academic staff were satisfied with the implementation of a performance management system by management; however, they were less satisfied by the payment of performance bonuses.

A study by Graham (2015) highlighted the difficulties that higher education management experiences in terms of managing academic staff performance effectively. This study showed that academic workload and performance management are not aligned on operational level, which undermines the effectiveness of performance evaluation. In the study of Seyama and Smith (2015), higher education management was of the opinion that the performance management system is a business-oriented practice and not in line with the nature and objectives of higher education institutions. In this study, management further pointed out that performance reward strategies are insufficient in motivating performance behaviour because of inconsistent ratings and poor monetary rewards.

### **2.2.5 Retention strategies**

Talent retention can be defined as a tendency or need to keep talented employees working for their organisation for particular talent management practices such as empowerment, career development opportunities, competitive compensation and rewards, just to name a few (Cegarra-Leiva, Sánchez-Vidal & Cegarra-Navarro, 2012). Talent retention grants organisations the chance to sustain growth and avoid unnecessary expenses for talent attrition (Lahkar Das, 2013).

South African higher education institutions are currently experiencing unprecedented high levels of academic turnover intentions. Research studies showed that almost half of the academics across all spheres of their academic career considered quitting their jobs (Barkhuizen et al, 2017; Lesenyeho, 2017). Although causes for academic staff turnover have been a repeating issue for many decades, surprisingly the application of talent retention strategies still remains the poorest applied talent management practice in government institution such as higher education (see Barkhuizen, 2015). Researchers further found that academic talent management is yet a strategic or operational priority in many institutions of higher learning and effective talent management policies and practices are yet to be understood and implemented (Erasmus et al., 2017). Bhattacharyya (2015) advocates that successful organisations should develop tailor-made talent retention strategies and implement these from the first day that talent is acquired.

## **3. RESEARCH DESIGN**

### **3.1 Research approach**

A quantitative research approach was followed with surveys distributed to academic staff in a selected South African higher education institution. This design was appropriate to obtain the research objective of the study, namely to determine the occupational talent risks experienced by academic staff. A cross-sectional research design was followed whereby the data was collected at one point in time (Field, 2018).

### **3.2 Sampling**

The target population for this study was academic staff of a selected South African higher education institution. A total of 320 questionnaires were distributed, of which 220 were returned and used for analyses. This represented a

68.8% response rate. Most of the respondents in the sample were male (56.8%), aged between 30 and 49 years (51.1%) and representative of the black ethnic group. Most of the participants were in possession of a master's degree (42.9%), employed on lecturer level (40.9%), had between one and 10 years of work experience in higher education, and were employed between 0 to four years in their current position (34.5%).

### **3.3 Research procedure**

Permission to execute the study was obtained from the relevant higher educational authorities. The questionnaire was distributed in both hard copy and electronically to the respondents. The study was subjected to ethical clearance prior to the execution thereof. Confidentiality was maintained at all times.

### **3.4 Measuring instrument**

An occupational talent risk questionnaire was developed based on themes that were identified during the initial interviews with management from a higher education institution. The occupational talent risk measure consists of 32 items and measures five factors: Talent attraction, compensation, career development, performance management and talent retention. The responses to the questionnaire are collected on a six-point Likert scale ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (6). The questionnaire was distributed to subject matter experts prior to its distribution to ensure face and content validity.

### **3.5 Data analyses**

Data analyses were carried out with the aid of SPSS software (SPSS, 2018). Descriptive statistics such as means, standard deviations, skewness and kurtosis were used. Exploratory factor analysis was applied to determine the factor structure of the questionnaire. Cronbach's alphas were used to determine the reliability of the measuring instrument and its items. A cut-off point of 0.7 was used as a guideline for acceptable reliabilities (Field, 2018).

## **4. RESULTS**

The metric properties of the measurement were first examined. This was done using the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure to determine the sampling adequacy and sphericity of the item-correlation matrix; exploratory factor



analysis to discover and identify the dimensions of the measurements; and reliability analysis, using Cronbach alpha coefficients, to give the measure of accuracy of the instruments and determine how repeatable the results were. The occupational talent risk measure obtained an MSA of 0.855, which, according to the guideline of higher than 0.6, was adequate for factor analysis (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2010). The results of the factor analyses are reported next.

#### **4.1 Factor analyses: Occupational talent risk management**

Exploratory factor analyses using the principal components extraction method were done on the occupational talent risk management questionnaire. Although the eigenvalues showed that seven factors could be extracted, a closer inspection of the scree plot clearly specified five factors. An exploratory factor analysis using Varimax rotation was done specifying five underlying factors for the occupational talent risk management questionnaire. The results showed that five factors can be distinguished for the questionnaire, and these were labelled as follows: Talent attraction (factor 1), performance management (factor 2), compensation (factor 3), career development (factor 4) and talent retention (factor 5). The five factors explained 56.655% of the variance of the questionnaire. One item was deleted because of problematic loadings. All items showed acceptable loadings of above 0.40. The results of the total variance explained and the rotated component matrix are reported in Tables 1 and 2 below.

**Table 1: Total variance explained for the occupational talent risk measure**

Component	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	8,759	28,254	28,254	8,759	28,254	28,254
2	2,930	9,452	37,706	2,930	9,452	37,706
3	2,480	8,000	45,706	2,480	8,000	45,706
4	1,990	6,418	52,124	1,990	6,418	52,124
5	1,405	4,531	56,655	1,405	4,531	56,655
6	1,275	4,113	60,768			
7	1,113	3,591	64,359			
8	0,918	2,962	67,321			
9	0,808	2,607	69,928			
10	0,787	2,539	72,467			
11	0,723	2,333	74,800			
12	0,684	2,206	77,006			
13	0,649	2,094	79,100			
14	0,595	1,918	81,018			
15	0,561	1,809	82,827			
16	0,523	1,687	84,514			
17	0,506	1,633	86,147			
18	0,478	1,541	87,688			
19	0,412	1,331	89,019			
20	0,384	1,238	90,256			
21	0,368	1,187	91,443			
22	0,359	1,158	92,601			
23	0,331	1,067	93,668			
24	0,325	1,048	94,716			
25	0,296	0,955	95,671			
26	0,277	0,893	96,564			
27	0,260	0,840	97,404			
28	0,247	0,795	98,199			
29	0,222	0,715	98,914			
30	0,174	0,562	99,475			
31	0,163	0,525	100,000			

**Table 2: Rotated component matrix for the occupational talent risk measure**

	<b>Talent Attraction</b>	<b>Performance Management</b>	<b>Compensation</b>	<b>Career Development</b>	<b>Talent retention</b>
OTM1	0,723	0,021	0,134	0,114	-0,050
OTM2	0,665	0,070	0,190	0,088	0,089
OTM3	0,737	0,218	0,069	-0,036	0,064
OTM4	0,749	0,138	0,097	0,201	0,045
OTM5	0,754	0,042	0,136	0,139	0,169
OTM6	0,706	0,070	0,204	0,163	0,072
OTM7	0,712	-0,018	0,080	0,282	0,113
OTM8	0,633	0,129	0,304	0,115	0,047
OTM9	0,373	0,294	0,540	0,035	0,107
OTM10	0,200	0,210	0,664	0,106	0,095
OTM11	0,263	0,030	0,646	0,084	0,077
OTM12	0,106	-0,021	0,740	0,064	0,145
OTM13	0,103	0,124	0,774	0,118	0,082
OTM14	0,128	0,188	0,727	0,035	0,038
OTM15	0,134	0,276	0,660	0,087	-0,010
OTM16	0,156	0,149	0,115	0,575	-0,095
OTM17	0,129	0,067	0,223	0,719	0,077
OTM18	0,231	0,059	0,124	0,791	-0,027
OTM19	0,131	0,411	-0,013	0,569	0,042
OTM20	0,183	0,387	-0,040	0,597	0,175
OTM21	0,129	0,413	0,060	0,486	0,200
OTM23	0,177	0,600	0,005	0,296	0,051
OTM24	0,204	0,720	0,131	0,214	0,053
OTM25	0,084	0,704	0,259	0,158	0,072
OTM26	0,116	0,807	0,172	0,048	0,062
OTM27	0,003	0,714	0,123	0,191	0,170
OTM28	-0,026	0,623	0,244	0,009	0,110
OTM29	0,180	0,064	0,108	0,113	0,718
OTM30	0,118	0,060	0,100	-0,078	0,784
OTM31	0,037	0,130	0,172	-0,034	0,739
OTM32	0,028	0,166	0,002	0,127	0,663

The descriptive statistics of the questionnaires are reported in Table 3 below.

**Table 3: Descriptive statistics of the questionnaire**

	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	$\alpha$
<b>Occupational Talent Risk Factors</b>					
Talent Attraction	4,1795	0,90266	-1,127	1,312	0,888
Performance Management	4,0492	0,92404	-0,503	-0,342	0,844
Compensation	3,8000	0,97029	-0,625	0,025	0,858
Career Development	3,9258	0,87211	-0,411	-0,338	0,796
Talent Retention	3,9705	0,96232	-0,399	-0,559	0,742

The results in Table 3 show acceptable to good reliabilities for all the factors. The results further showed that more than 30% of the sample experienced risks to all the dimensions of the relating to their occupation. The highest level of risks related to compensation. Further results showed a very high risk relating to the retention of academic staff. In this sample, 66% of the academics considered quitting their jobs.

#### 4. DISCUSSION

The main objective of this research was to explore the occupational talent risks for academic staff in a selected South African higher education institution. Compensation emerged as a high occupational talent risk in this study. Again, as with previous studies, academics' dissatisfaction with compensation remains a pressing problem (Lesenyeho, 2017; see Theron et al., 2014). Higher education institutions should therefore focus on creating market-related salaries, pay academics fairly for the efforts that they put into their jobs, recognise academics fairly for the third-stream income that they generate for their institution and proper incentives for research publications. As mentioned by Bryant and Allen (2013), academic turnover is a costly exercise and higher education institutions should provide financial rewards to attract and keep talent (Schlecter et al., 2014) or implement a total rewards strategy that goes beyond merely offering a base salary (Mabaso & Dlamini, 2018).

The high turnover intentions of academics in this study appeared to be the greatest risk. This is a clear indication of the lack of talent retention strategies that are so

prevalent in government institutions such as public universities (Barkhuizen, 2015). More than two thirds of the academics in this study considered quitting their jobs and were currently seeking other employment. These results confirm the high turnover rate of academic staff in South Africa, as indicated by other studies (Barkhuizen et al., 2017; Lesenyeho, 2017). The results also confirm the findings of Metcalf et al. (2005), who found that more than half of the current staff are not keen to consider academia as a career. Consequently, one can deduce that current staff are not attracted to the institution anymore.

This research makes important theoretical, methodological and practical contributions. From a theoretical point of view, this research contributes to the scarcity of empirical research on the concept of occupational talent risks and its underpinnings. From a methodological point of view, this research confirmed the utility and reliability of a new occupational talent risk measurement. From a practical point of view, this research highlights the risks that academic staff are exposed to in the new higher educational landscape. Higher education management and human resource practitioners should come up with proper talent management policies, strategies and practices aimed at the development of a talent culture for academic staff conducive of service excellence and performance. Higher education institutions are also encouraged to develop talent risk systems that can detect academic turnover intentions in advance and take interventions to mitigate talent risks.

## **5. LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This research had some limitations. Currently, a great scarcity of empirical research theory exists in the field of talent risk management, which made the interpretation of results difficult. Secondly, the sample size and demographic representation thereof did not allow for the test of construct equivalence. Nevertheless, the measurement showed acceptable factor structures and reliabilities. Construct equivalence can be achieved by expanding the sample to other South African higher education institutions that will at the same time also allow for the generalisation of results. Future studies can also benefit from expanding the sample to other higher education stakeholders to obtain a holistic perspective on talent management risks on multiple levels. Lastly, future research should also focus on which occupational talent risks predict the high turnover intentions of academic staff.

## 6. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this research presented a measure that can be used to assess talent risks on individual level. The results of the research proved that the higher educational work environment presents risks for the effective talent management of academics in the sense that it needs more strategic direction for talent management, management commitment towards academic talent management, a conducive work environment complemented by occupational health and safety policies and a proper infrastructure, and finally a talent culture that embraces diversity. The results of this study further call for an improvement in academic compensation as well as talent retention strategies.

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