



Compensation Strategies and Retention of High-Quality Academic Staff in Public Universities in Uganda

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Abstract

Higher Education Institutions in Sub-Saharan Africa continuously face the problem of academic staff retention, affecting the development of Nations. This study examines how compensation strategies influence retention of high-quality staff in public universities in Uganda with staff designation as moderating factor. Data was collected from five public universities using a questionnaire and interviews. The findings show that job security ($\beta = 0.153$), salary ($\beta = 0.149$), promotion ($\beta = 0.176$), and recognition ($\beta = 0.216$) at 0.05 predicted staff retention. The study concludes that effective compensation packages should consider factors beyond standard salary regulations, according to the findings of the study. Interviews also revealed that the criteria and the time required for promotion, along with the failure to meet requirements, discourage staff and thereby affecting retention.

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Introduction

The capacity of universities to deliver quality teaching, research, and community engagement depends fundamentally on their ability to attract and retain competent academic staff (Mushemeza, 2016). However, throughout Sub-Saharan Africa, most public universities continue to struggle with persistent turnover, low morale, and challenges in maintaining a stable academic workforce (Ng'ethe et al., 2012). Uganda is no exception. Despite policy reforms in the higher education sector in Uganda such as sector liberalization, public-private partnerships, affirmative action for women and disadvantaged groups, and shifting towards science and technology programme and enhanced investments in higher education institutions (HEIs), public universities continue to face staffing shortages. These challenges include delayed promotions, limited research support, salaries that are non-competitive, and inconsistent implementation of human resource policies (Kyaligonza & Kamagara, 2017; Ssali et al., 2019). These constraints undermine institutional performance and compromise the broader goals of national development and knowledge production.

Academic staff compensation strategies such as improved salary, non-pecuniary benefits, promotion opportunities, recognition, and job security, remain central

predictors of academic staff retention in many developing country university systems (Adil et al., 2020; Mabaso & Dlamini, 2021; Selesho & Naile, 2014). In the Ugandan context, the link between compensation reforms and actual retention outcomes is complex. Although government policies have periodically adjusted salary structures and introduced harmonized pay scales, empirical studies indicate that staff members continuously seek employment elsewhere, including in private and international organizations, or even at universities abroad (Bennion & Locke, 2010; Mushemeza, 2016). This suggests that formal policies, on their own, may be insufficient to generate the intended retention outcomes when their implementation at the institutional level is fragmented, inconsistent, or poorly communicated.

Academic Staff in Public Universities frequently cite uncompetitive salaries, a lack of promotion opportunities, career progression challenges, and limited benefits as significant sources of dissatisfaction that lead to academic staff turnover (Kyaligonza & Kamagara, 2017; Ssali et al., 2019). While salary enhancement schemes have been introduced, concerns persist regarding salary disparities, where science-based academic staff and professors earn higher pay than those in the humanities (Rwothumio et al., 2020). These salary disparities are most likely to demoralize academic staff leading to issues of increased academic staff turnover.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the strategies of retaining high quality academic staff in public universities in Uganda.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the relationship between compensation packages and the moderating role of designation on academic staff retention in Ugandan public universities.
2. To evaluate the relationship between recognition, promotion opportunities, and job security and retention intentions of academic staff in Ugandan public universities.

Theoretical Review

Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory

Hygiene factors and motivators are distinguished by Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory (Herzberg, 1968, 2015). Salary, job security, organizational policies, and working circumstances are examples of hygiene variables that work together to prevent unhappiness. While their presence alone does not guarantee long-term contentment, their absence can lead to turnover. In contrast, motivator factors, including recognition, achievement, professional growth, and opportunities for promotion, drive intrinsic satisfaction, engagement, and long-term commitment. Hygiene factors in public universities encompass the administrative and structural elements that academic staff provide.

Social Exchange Theory (SET)

According to the SET (Blau, 1964), the relationships between an individual and his/her institution rely primarily on reciprocal performance. Academic staffs are motivated to stay within institutions that demonstrate fairness and cater to their welfare.

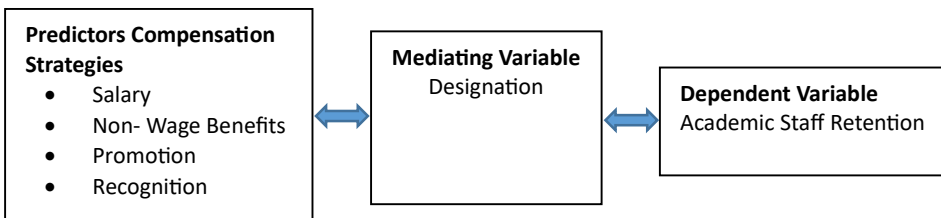
When institutions offer fair compensation, transparent promotion procedures, and recognition for academic contributions, staff may reciprocate through loyalty and continued service, in the context of Ugandan public universities.

The Conceptual Framework

This study focuses on the relationship between compensation strategies and academic staff retention in public universities in Uganda with designation as a mediating factor. This relationship is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1

The Conceptual Diagram



In Figure 1, compensation factors such as salary, non-monetary benefits, job security, promotion, and recognition constitute the independent variable and are expected to lead to retention of high-quality academic staff in public universities. On the other hand, for this study the dependent variable is academic staff retention. Designation is a moderating factor between compensation factors and academic staff retention.

Methodology

The Research Paradigm, Design, and Approach

This study was leaning more on the positivist research paradigm which is rooted in the ontological principle and doctrine which suggests that truth and reality are free and independent of the viewer and observer (Creswell, 2009; Moeller et al., 2016). The study followed a correlational cross-sectional survey research design which mainly allows both qualitative and quantitative approaches that enable the sampling of a large number of 'units of analysis in a relatively short time and enabled the generalization of findings to many universities in Uganda. To a small extent, qualitative approaches were used to corroborate findings from the quantitative approaches. The mixed design is justified in this study because besides the quantitative figures showing the linkage between variables one would also wish to hear the voices from stakeholders on how compensation strategies are affecting staff retention.

Methods of Data Collection and Research Instruments

The structured questionnaire was used as an empirical method to collect data from academic staff in five public universities. A structured questionnaire was preferred for this study because the study requires standardized data on facts and opinions to be provided by respondents and the respondents would give answers to identical items. Interviews were used to collect qualitative data from purposively selected administrators from the five selected universities.

Methods of Data Analysis

Data screening was done to check for missing values. Descriptive statistics specifically the mean, the standard deviation, and the Shapiro-Walk test along with histograms and scatter plots were used to check whether data fulfilled the assumptions of normality, linearity, and bi variate normal distribution and if there were extreme outliers.

The Pearson Correlation was conducted in IBM SPSS 24 to measure the strength and direction of the relationship between the predictor variables of academic staff compensation factors and retention of academic staff in public universities in Uganda. A multiple regression analysis was also done in order to establish which factors in the university academic staff compensation variable were most important in determining academic staff retention.

Findings of the Study

Correlation between Compensation Factors and Staff Retention

The relationships between compensation factors and employee retention were examined using correlation analysis (Table 1). This method measures the strength and direction of linear associations between independent and dependent variables (Hazra & Gogtay, 2016; Schober et al., 2018).

Table 1

Correlation Analysis of Compensation Factors and Retention

		Salary	Benefits	Job security	Promotion	Recognition	Retention
Salary	Pearson Correlations	1					
	Sig. (2-tailed)						
	N	326					
Benefits	Pearson Correlation	.509**	1				
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000					
	N	326	326				
Job security	Pearson Correlation	.527**	.593**	1			
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000				
	N	326	326	326			
Promotion	Pearson Correlation	.406**	.438**	.561**	1		
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000			
	N	326	326	326	326		
Recognition	Pearson Correlation	.441**	.462**	.647**	.662**	1	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000		
	N	326	326	326	326	326	
Retention	Pearson Correlation	.451**	.451**	.534**	.512**	.547**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	
	N	326	326	326	326	326	326

**Correlation is significant at *p*-value of .01, 0.05 and .001 levels (2-tailed).

The results in Table 1 indicate that all measured compensation factors had a statistically significant positive relationship with employee retention ($p < .001$). The association was strongest for recognition ($r = .547$), with job security ($r = .534$) and promotion opportunities ($r = .512$) also showing strong correlations. Salary and benefits were moderately and equally correlated with retention, with a correlation coefficient of .451. The findings indicate a significant and positive correlation between the academic staff compensation factors and academic staff retention.

Multiple regressions Analysis

This investigates the linear correlation between outcome variable and a number of predictor variables (Huang, 2023; Pandey, 2020). Correlation quantifies the relationships between predictor and outcome variables (Hazra & Gogtay). This study employs both simple linear regressions (with one independent variable) in Equation (1) and multiple regression (with multiple independent variables) to analyze the data as in Equation (2).

Simple Regression Equation:

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \varepsilon \dots\dots\dots (1)$$

Multiple Regression Equation:

$$\hat{Y} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \dots\dots\beta_n X_n + \varepsilon \dots\dots\dots (2)$$

Where:

\hat{Y} is the dependent variable

X is the independent variable

β_0 is the y- intercept or constants

β_1 is the slope or coefficient on X

ε is the error term

Table 2

The Regression Analysis Threshold

Criterion	Threshold values
R ² (R-squared)	≥ 0.10
Adjusted-R ²	≥ 0.10
Variance Inflation Factor (VIF)	< 5
t-value	≥ 1.96
Statistical significance (p-value)	P < 0.05

Source: (F. Hair Jr et al., 2014; Hair et al., 2015)

Table 3
Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Staff Retention

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients			t	Sig.	95.0% Confidence Interval for B		Collinearity Statistics	
	B	Std. Error	Beta			Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Tolerance	VIF
(Constant)	.42	1.20		.35	.725	-1.9	2.8		
1 Salary	.12	.04	.15	2.74	.007	.03	.20	.65	1.54
Benefits	.07	.04	.11	1.89	.060	-.003	.15	.59	1.71
Job security	.13	.05	.15	2.32	.021	.02	.23	.44	2.28
Promotion	.13	.04	.18	2.91	.004	.04	.21	.52	1.91
Recognition	.21	.06	.22	3.29	.001	.08	.33	.45	2.24

Note: Significant at p -value < 0.05

As indicated by the threshold for multiple regression according to Hair Jr. et al. (2019) in Table 2, $R^2 \geq 0.10$, Adjusted- $R^2 > 0.10$, $VIF \geq 0.10$, and significance at $p < 0.05$. The multiple regression models (Table 3) met all required statistical assumptions and revealed four significant predictors of staff retention. Using the threshold of $p < 0.05$, salary ($B = 0.118$, $p = 0.007$), job security ($B = 0.126$, $p = 0.021$), promotion ($B = 0.127$, $p = 0.004$), and recognition ($B = .206$, $p = .001$) showing statistically meaningful contributors, while benefits ($p = .060$) did not meet the criterion. The 95% confidence intervals for the significant predictors did not cross zero, confirming their stability. Multicollinearity ($VIF = 1.54$ – 2.28) was within acceptable thresholds. The multiple regression results also indicate that all factors of the compensation variable are important in the model.

Simple linear regression

According to Bangdiwala (2018), simple linear regression is a statistical method for modeling the relationship between one dependent variable and a single independent variable.

Table 4
Simple Linear Regression Predicting Retention of Academic Staff (N = 326)

Predictor	Unstandardized Coefficients				Sig.	R^2	F
	B	SE	β	T			
Salary	.36	.04	.45	8.951	.000	0.20	80.11
Benefits	.30	.03	.45	8.96	.000	0.20	80.22
Job security	.44	.04	.53	11.2	.000	0.29	125.15
Promotion	.37	.04	.512	10.57	.000	0.26	111.72
Recognition	.52	.05	.547	11.57	.000	0.30	133.90

Significant at p -value of .01, 0.05

For each predictor, a separate regression model was estimated using:

$$\hat{Y} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \epsilon \dots\dots\dots (3)$$

Where \hat{Y} is the predicted Retention, B_0 is the constant, B_1 is the coefficient of B , and X is the predictor variable.

A series of simple linear analyses were conducted to evaluate the unique analytical influence of five factors on the retention of academic staff (N = 316). Each predictor was entered into a separate model. As summarized in Table 4, all predictors demonstrated statistically significant positive associations with retention at the $p < 0.001$ level.

The models for the non-monetary factors explained a greater proportion of variance in retention. Specifically, recognition ($\beta = .547$, $R^2 = .299$), job security ($\beta = 0.534$, $R^2 = 0.285$), and promotion opportunities ($\beta = .512$, $R^2 = .262$) were the strongest individual predictors. In contrast, the models for salary ($\beta = 0.451$, $R^2 = 0.203$) and benefits ($\beta = 0.45$, $R^2 = 0.203$), while significant, accounted for comparatively less variance.

These findings were corroborated by interview findings where participants presented various views in support to compensation to staff as participant R4 emphasized, "Increase budget allocation to cater for the recognition of staff," highlighting the importance of financial investment in employee appreciation.

I suggest that the university organize monthly recognition events to celebrate high-performing academic staff across all schools and faculties in the university. This initiative would promote motivation, reinforce positive contributions, and create a culture of appreciation within the university (R6).

Another added, "I urge institutions to prioritize appreciating staff who demonstrate strong performance rather than focusing on fault-finding. This approach fosters motivation, reinforces positive behavior, and cultivates a supportive work environment" (R7).

Furthermore, "I urge universities to provide timely recognition, promotions, and salary increases for academic staff, including additional compensation for extra teaching loads" (R9).

Moderation Effects

This study hypothesized that designation is a moderating variable influencing the interaction between predictor (Compensation elements) and outcome variable (retention) for academic staff (See Table 14).

Table 5
Moderation Effects of Designation on Academic Staff Retention

Predictor	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized coefficients Beta	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error			
Main effects	16.985	.202		84.1	.000
Salary_C	.118	.043	.149	2.74	.007
1 Benefits_C	.072	.038	.108	1.88	.060
Job_security_C	.126	.054	.153	2.318	.021
Promotion_C	.127	.044	.176	2.905	.004
Recognition_C	.206	.063	.216	3.290	.001
Interaction effects	16.997	.205		82.93	.000
Salary_CXDesignation_C	.028	.038	.041	.742	.459
Benefits_CXDesignation_C	.002	.039	.003	.056	.955
2 Job_security_CXDesignation_C	.019	.060	.024	.315	.753
Promotion_C Designation_C	-.012	.048	-.016	-.243	.808
Recognition_C Designation_C	.025	.061	.026	.405	.686

Significant at p < 0.05, < 0.01

Note. All continuous predictors such as salary, non-monetary befits, job security, promotion and recognition were found to be important in the model.

In analyzing the interaction between the centered independent variables (salary, benefits, job security, promotions, and recognition) and the centered moderator variable of designation on retention, the results from Model 2 presented unstandardized coefficients. These coefficients are employed in formulating the regression equation model as follows:

$$\hat{Y} = 16.997 + 0.028*Salary_C * Designation_C + 0.02*Benefits_C * Designation_C + 0.019*Job_security_C * Designation_C + 0.012*Promotion_C * Designation_C + 0.025*Recognition_C * Designation_C \dots\dots\dots (4)$$

A hierarchical regression analysis was performed to investigate the moderating role of academic designation. Model 2, which included the interaction terms between designation and the five compensation components, was statistically significant, R² change = .205, F (5, df) = 82.93, p < 0.001. This suggests that designation moderates overall interaction between compensation factors and retention. However, examination of the individual interaction terms revealed that none were statistically significant (all p > .05, see Table 5). This shows that academic staff designation operates as a contextual moderator. It alters the way the compensation package as a whole is evaluated and valued, rather than selectively strengthening or weakening the correlation between any single predictor and retention.

Table 6*Regression Model*

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	R Square Change	F Change	Sig. Change	F
1	.637 ^a	.406	.396	.406	42.302	.000	
2	.641 ^b	.410	.391	.005	.484	.788	

P- Value < 0.05, 0.01

The regression results indicate that compensation-related factors explain a considerable percentage of the inconsistency in academic staff retention ($R^2 = 0.406$, $F = 42.302$, $p < 0.001$). However, the inclusion of additional variable(s) in the second Model resulted in a negligible increase in variance, as indicated by a change in R^2 of 0.005, which was not statistically significant (F -change = 0.484, p -value = 0.788). This suggests that the added variable of designation do not significantly improve the prediction of staff retention beyond the main compensation factors.

Participants called for increased salaries and need for allowances. As one participant stated,

As staff, we urge the university administration and government to prioritize paying staff competitive salaries that align with the qualifications and academic ranks of academic staff, ensuring timely disbursement. We also call for annual salary increments and a yearly review of the pay structure to reflect market trends, inflation, and the rising cost of living. Currently, salaries fail to match the workload (teaching demands) or the quality of output expected from staff. By addressing these gaps, we can foster fairness and retain skilled educators (R15).

On the benefits received by staff in universities, there is need for further review by management. As one participant emphasized,

I urge the university to fulfill the promised extra-load allowances without delay. Critical benefits like medical insurance must never be removed. Additionally, we demand transparency in all stated allowances, timely payments, and salary harmonization to match compensation received by comparable professionals in our field (R22).

One participant pointed the need for health benefits that include family beneficiaries. Stating, "*We urge universities to extend health insurance to our entire families as this is critical for our financial security and well-being*" (R12).

In order to improve staff development, the respondent added, "*We recommend that the university provide adequate offices, equipment, and dedicated training spaces (e.g., labs or workshops)*" (R24, R25). The need for sufficient resources is consistent with Herzberg's principle, which views office equipment and facilities as crucial "hygiene factors." In the same way, the demand for civil participation in labor disputes illustrates the greater significance of procedural justice in organizational commitment.

Discussion

The findings of this study supported the first hypothesis, confirming that motivation factors specifically promotion and recognition demonstrated significantly stronger positive associations with retention intentions than hygiene factors such as

salary, benefits, and job security when modeled simultaneously. This outcome is consistent with Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory, which posits that intrinsic motivators are the primary drivers of job satisfaction, while extrinsic factors serve mainly to prevent dissatisfaction (Herzberg et al., 1959, 1966).

The moderating role of designation was also examined, and findings from Model 1 indicated that designation had a negligible influence on retention, consistent with prior studies (Kasule et al., 2021; Kyaligonza & Kamagara, 2017; Nyberg, 2010; Osibanjo et al., 2014; Rwothumio et al., 2020). However, Model 2, which incorporated interaction terms between designation and compensation components, was statistically significant (R^2 change = .205, $F(5, df) = 82.93$, $p < .001$).

Qualitative insights from participants further contextualize these findings. Staff emphasized the need for competitive salaries aligned with qualifications and academic ranks, timely disbursement, annual increments, and pay structure reviews to reflect inflation and workload demands. Benefits such as transparency in compensation practices were highlighted as essential, with calls for family-inclusive health coverage. Promotion processes were identified as requiring standardization through staff database systems, while recognition practices were recommended to be decentralized to unit levels to ensure everyday contributions are valued.

Taken together, the findings contribute to both theory and practice. Theoretically, they extend Herzberg's framework by demonstrating its applicability in a developing higher education context and by highlighting the moderating role of designation. In practice, they suggest that retention strategies in Ugandan public universities should prioritize recognition mechanisms, transparent promotion pathways, and career development opportunities, while also considering competitive compensation structures.

Conclusion

This study examined the influence of compensation packages and the moderating role of designation on academic staff retention in Ugandan public universities, using a mixed-methods approach. First, compensation package (salary, benefits, job security, promotion, and recognition) collectively and, to varying degrees, individually exert a direct, positive influence on retention outcomes.

The findings revealed that recognition, promotion opportunities, and job security are stronger predictors of retention intentions than salary and benefits, thereby reinforcing Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory and Social Exchange Theory in the Ugandan higher education context. This study demonstrates that although designation alone could not influence the interaction between compensation components, it was statistically significant; meaning that designation of staff members shapes retention outcomes.

Recommendations

The study recommends that;

University academic staff compensation factors including salary, benefits, job security, promotion, and recognition should be improved in order for the universities to maintain high quality academic staff. Academic staff training strategies should also be enhanced in order provide opportunity for young people to grow in the profession.

Limitations of the Study

The principal subjects for this study were mainly university academic staff who gave their opinions on how compensation strategies were affecting staff retention in universities. However, these informants only gave their opinion mainly of how they expected the universities to compensate their work. An in-depth study of how universities actually incentivize their academic staff would have been ideal but this was limited by time constraints and resource constraints.

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