

Perceived Effects of Employee Retention Practices on Job Satisfaction in the Zimbabwean Higher Education Sector: A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract

Employee retention is a critical issue in Zimbabwe's Higher Education (HE) sector, where economic instability, inadequate remuneration, and limited career development opportunities contribute to high staff turnover. This study employed a systematic literature review (SLR) to synthesise existing research on employee retention strategies and their impact on job satisfaction in Zimbabwean HE institutions. Using the PRISMA framework, the study identified key retention practices, including financial incentives, professional development programmes, flexible work arrangements, and institutional support mechanisms. The findings revealed that while Zimbabwean HE institutions employed both monetary and non-monetary retention strategies, their effectiveness was often undermined by inconsistent implementation and resource constraints. Comparative analysis with global best practices highlighted the disparity between Zimbabwean institutions and their counterparts in developed economies, where structured career pathways, tenure systems, and work-life balance policies contribute to higher job satisfaction. The study identified critical gaps in existing literature, including a lack of longitudinal research, insufficient empirical evidence on non-monetary incentives, and methodological inconsistencies. This review underscored the need for Zimbabwean policymakers and university administrators to adopt sustainable, evidence-based retention strategies that address both extrinsic and intrinsic motivators. Future research should explore sector-wide policy interventions and international best practices to inform retention strategies that enhance workforce stability and institutional performance.

Keywords: Employee retention, Job satisfaction, higher education, Systematic literature review, PRISMA

Introduction

The Higher Education (HE) sector plays a crucial role in the socio-economic development of any country, as it is responsible for producing skilled professionals and conducting research that drives innovation (Bonga, 2024). For higher education to drive socio-economic development, it must retain skilled and experienced staff. This is essential to sustain quality education, research, and institutional growth (Altbach et al., 2019). In fact, as Enakrire and Smuts (2023) argue, since intellectual capital is the cornerstone of institutional success in the HE sector, effective retention strategies are essential to mitigate high turnover rates and maintain a motivated workforce. However, many HE institutions, particularly in developing countries like Zimbabwe, face significant challenges in retaining talent due to economic constraints, inadequate remuneration, and limited professional development opportunities

(Chivandire, 2019; Mapolisa & Chakanyuka, 2014). After all, in the case of Zimbabwe, the HE sector has been grappling with a brain drain, as skilled staff migrate to other countries or sectors in search of better working conditions and remuneration (Mapolisa, 2014). This exodus has undermined the quality of higher education in the country highlighting the urgent need for effective retention strategies (Chivandire, 2019).

Meanwhile, a key component of employee retention is job satisfaction, which determines employees' commitment, motivation, and willingness to remain within an organisation. However, in Zimbabwe, given the challenging economic environment, HEIs find it difficult to offer globally competitive salaries and, as a result, many institutions have sought alternative retention strategies, such as professional development programmes, flexible work policies, and improved working conditions with varying levels of success (Chimanikire et al., 2007; Mandibaya & Khan, 2020). Therefore, understanding the interplay between employee retention strategies and job satisfaction as is proposed in this paper is essential for developing policies that enhance workforce stability in Zimbabwe's higher education sector. Moreover, the effectiveness of these strategies remains unclear due to inconsistent implementation and limited empirical research.

This paper adopted a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) as it provided a comprehensive, structured, and objective synthesis of existing research on employee retention and job satisfaction in Zimbabwean higher education. Unlike a primary data-driven study, which requires extensive fieldwork and may be constrained by time, resource limitations, and response biases, an SLR allows for a broader, more reliable analysis by consolidating findings from multiple studies. This approach ensured a rigorous and reproducible evaluation of existing evidence, uncovering key trends, gaps, and inconsistencies in retention strategies. By applying the PRISMA framework, this study enhanced credibility, offering evidence-based insights to guide policymakers and university administrators in formulating effective, data-driven retention strategies tailored to Zimbabwe's higher education sector.

Although several studies have examined employee retention and job satisfaction in the HE sectors in Zimbabwe (Bonga, 2024; Chimanikire et al., 2007; Mapolisa, 2014; Mapolisa & Chakanyuka, 2014) there is a lack of a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) focusing on Zimbabwe's higher education sector. Existing research provides fragmented insights into the retention challenges faced by the sector as there is no comprehensive synthesis of the findings to establish patterns, trends, and gaps as is proposed in this paper. Therefore, by conducting an SLR in this paper allows for a structured evaluation of previous studies, providing a clearer understanding of the relationship between retention strategies and job satisfaction in the HE sector in Zimbabwe. This approach is also expected to help policymakers and university administrators develop evidence-based interventions to address retention challenges in the Zimbabwean HE sector effectively. Ultimately, this study seeks to contribute to the broader discourse on employee retention and job satisfaction, while addressing the unique challenges faced by Zimbabwean higher education institutions.

This study aimed to bridge the existing knowledge gap by conducting a systematic literature review on employee retention and job satisfaction in Zimbabwean higher education. The specific objectives of the study were:

- To identify key employee retention strategies in Zimbabwean higher education.
- To examine how these strategies influence job satisfaction.
- To highlight gaps in existing literature and suggest areas for future research.

By addressing these objectives, the study sought to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on employee retention and provide practical recommendations for improving retention policies in the Zimbabwean HE sector.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

This paper was grounded in Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, and Social Exchange Theory to explain why employees choose to stay in or leave an organisation within the context of the HE sector in Zimbabwe. These theories were chosen because they provide a comprehensive understanding of both intrinsic and extrinsic factors influencing employee retention. Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs offered insights into individual motivation, highlighting the role of financial and non-financial incentives in job satisfaction. Herzberg explained the dual nature of job satisfaction and dissatisfaction, making it particularly relevant for examining how retention strategies must address both hygiene factors (e.g., salaries, working conditions) and motivators (e.g., career growth, recognition). Similarly, Maslow's framework helped contextualise retention by showing how employees prioritise different needs, from basic financial security to self-actualisation opportunities.

Meanwhile, the Social Exchange Theory complements these perspectives by emphasising the relational aspect of retention, suggesting that employees remain committed when they perceive a fair exchange between their contributions and rewards. In Zimbabwe's HE sector, where financial instability and resource constraints undermine competitive remuneration and career advancement, this theory was particularly useful in explaining high turnover rates. Unlike alternative models, such as Expectancy Theory or Equity Theory, which focused on cognitive decision-making and fairness perceptions, the selected theories offer a broader, multi-dimensional view of motivation, satisfaction, and institutional commitment, making them well-suited for analysing retention in the Zimbabwean HE context.

Global Perspectives on Employee Retention Practices and Job Satisfaction

Employee retention strategies differ significantly across regions, influenced by cultural, economic, and institutional factors. In developed countries, HE institutions implement structured career development programmes, competitive remuneration packages, and strong leadership practices to retain staff (Mukherjee & Singh, 1993). North American institutions, for example, prioritise tenure systems, which provide long-term job security and career stability, contributing to higher job satisfaction among employees. Tenure not only ensures academic freedom but also fosters a sense of professional identity and institutional commitment, reducing turnover rates. Additionally, research fundings in these institutions serves as a key retention mechanism, allowing employees to engage in meaningful scholarly work without financial constraints (Horwitz et al., 2003). Similarly, European institutions emphasise work-life balance policies, research incentives, and comprehensive social security benefits as critical components of their retention strategies. HE institutions in countries like Germany, Sweden, and the Netherlands implement flexible working hours, paid sabbaticals, and generous parental leave policies, all of which contribute to higher levels of job satisfaction by reducing work-related stress and enhancing employees' quality of life.

In contrast, institutions in developing regions, particularly in Africa, often struggle with resource constraints that limit their ability to implement similar retention strategies. Research from Kenya and South Africa indicates that inadequate salaries, lack of research funding, and

poor working conditions contribute to high academic staff turnover (Ng'ethe et al., 2012; Rothmann & Barkhuizen, 2008). Therefore, HEIs in these resource-constrained environments attempt to mitigate employee turnover by leveraging non-monetary incentives such as professional development programmes and mentorship opportunities (Zellers et al., 2008; Tettey, 2006). However, while such initiatives provide some degree of motivation, they often fail to compensate for underlying structural issues such as poor remuneration and lack of research support, meaning their long-term effectiveness remains limited.

Employee retention strategies in Zimbabwean higher education sector

Meanwhile, employee retention refers to an organisation's ability to retain its employees over a given period (Bratton et al., 2021; Lazzari et al., 2022). Retaining employees is a critical aspect of organisational success, as high turnover rates can lead to increased recruitment costs, loss of institutional knowledge, and reduced productivity (Bratton et al., 2021). In the context of the HE sector, the importance of retention cannot be overstated since academic staff, for instance, play a pivotal role in delivering quality education, conducting research, and mentoring students, efforts must be made to keep them satisfied (Tettey, 2006). Likewise, non-academic staff make an equal contribution by ensuring the smooth functioning of administrative and support services in the institutions. Therefore, high turnover rates can disrupt functions in HE institutions leading to a decline in institutional performance and reputation (Chimanikire et al., 2007; Tettey, 2006). Therefore, effective retention strategies in the HE sector not only reduce turnover but also contribute to a stable and motivated workforce, which is essential for achieving institutional goals (Mapolisa, 2014; Tettey, 2006).

Employee retention remains a significant challenge in Zimbabwean higher education, with universities, polytechnics, and teacher training colleges struggling to retain skilled academic and non-academic staff (Crush & Tevera, 2010). Whilst economic instability, low salaries, and limited career growth opportunities continue to push employees toward migration or alternative employment (Bonga, 2024). While traditional financial and non-financial retention strategies are widely used, Zimbabwean institutions have also adopted unique, localised strategies such as grocery vouchers, hybrid teaching models, subsidised housing, and cross-border shopping trips to incentivise staff retention.

Given Zimbabwe's unstable economic climate and hyperinflation, direct salary increases alone have proven insufficient for retaining staff as they are often eroded by inflation and fall way below the regional salaries (Kanonge, 2021). Therefore, to mitigate financial strain, some institutions provide grocery vouchers allowing employees to access basic commodities despite fluctuating market prices (Chivandire, 2019). This strategy partially compensates for salary devaluation, helping employees sustain their households in the short term. Additionally, some institutions organise cross-border shopping trips to Musina, South Africa, where staff can purchase essential goods at lower prices compared to Zimbabwean markets (Mapolisa & Chakanyuka, 2014). Sadly, according to Kombora and Kusena, (2023) provide short-term relief but fail to address long-term job satisfaction and retention as employees still face broader financial insecurity.

Some institutions in Zimbabwe provide subsidised housing schemes as an additional retention tool (Bigirimana et al., 2016). Providing institutional housing reduces the burden of high rental costs, which enhances staff retention. However, this approach remains limited to specific institutions, leaving many university staff without similar benefits. While housing incentives improve stability, they do not replace the need for competitive salaries and structured career development.

In response to workload concerns, some Zimbabwean universities have introduced hybrid teaching models, allowing lecturers to work partially remotely (Kandiero, 2015; Lee & Karasek, 2023; Bonga, 2024). This strategy offers greater flexibility, reducing commuting costs and work-related stress. By integrating online teaching with in-person lectures, universities enhance work-life balance, contributing to higher job satisfaction (Chimanikire, 2020). However, limited internet connectivity and inadequate digital infrastructure in some institutions hinder the effectiveness of this retention strategy (Mandibaya & Khan, 2020).

Professional development remains another critical factor influencing retention. While some institutions offer funded postgraduate programmes, mentorship schemes, and conference sponsorships, financial constraints limit their accessibility (Ng'ethe et al., 2012). Many employees seek opportunities abroad due to restricted research funding and lack of promotion pathways within Zimbabwe (Tettey, 2006).

Effect of retention strategies on job satisfaction in the Zimbabwean HE Sector

The relationship between employee retention practices and job satisfaction has been widely explored in extant literature, particularly in knowledge-intensive sectors such as higher education (Biason, 2020; Harris et al., 2016; Terera & Ngirande, 2014). After all, Since HE institutions rely on experienced and highly skilled staff to maintain teaching quality, conduct research, and contribute to institutional growth, the institutions must put in place measures to ensure that they retain staff. Therefore, retention challenges in HE institutions have become a pressing issue globally, as employees frequently seek better opportunities due to dissatisfaction with working conditions, remuneration, and institutional policies (Harris et al., 2016). In other words, since employee retention is key to productivity, it follows that retention strategies are designed to enhance job satisfaction and commitment while reducing turnover intentions (Lazzari et al., 2022). Therefore, as some researchers note (Chivandire, 2019; Harris et al., 2016), job satisfaction serves as a critical mediator between retention practices and employee decisions to remain with or leave an organisation.

Meanwhile, the Zimbabwean HEI sector faces a complex set of challenges that hinder staff retention and negatively impact job satisfaction (Chivandire, 2019). One of the most pressing issues is the decades long economic instability, which has led to a series of hyperinflation and significant currency fluctuations (Chiboiwa et al., 2010; Crush & Tevera, 2010). These financial challenges have eroded the real value of salaries, making it difficult for HE institutions to offer competitive remuneration packages (Kanonge, 2021). This is despite the fact that extant literature proves that competitive salaries and comprehensive benefits packages contribute to employee retention and overall job satisfaction (George, 2006; Igbinoba et al., 2022; Rothmann & Barkhuizen, 2008). The Zimbabwean HE sector is struggling to maintain salary competitiveness due to economic volatility, financial insecurity has led to widespread dissatisfaction and increased turnover thereby conforming the direct relationship between retention practices and job satisfaction as Bonga (2024) notes. Therefore, we can surmise that, in Zimbabwe, the inability of the HE sector to provide inflation-adjusted salaries and sustainable benefits has fuelled turnover, creating a cycle of low retention and declining institutional performance as noted by (Mapolisa, 2014).

According to Enakrire and Smuts (2023), other forms of employee retention such as opportunities for career development and training also contribute significantly to job satisfaction by fostering a sense of professional growth and career progression. Globally, HE institutions use structured mentorship programmes, employee development workshops, and

research funding initiatives to enhance job satisfaction and retention. However, Zimbabwean institutions face major constraints in this regard, as limited funding and bureaucratic inefficiencies prevent the effective implementation of professional development programmes (Chivandire, 2019). The lack of adequate training and research support results in employees feeling professionally stagnant, which, in turn, fuels dissatisfaction and an increased desire to leave the sector.

Another major challenge affecting retention and job satisfaction in Zimbabwean HE sector is the limited availability of research funding and professional development opportunities. Higher education institutions globally have recognised that continuous learning, research grants, and academic conferences play a significant role in employee motivation and retention (Ng'ethe et al., 2012). However, in Zimbabwe, financial constraints have significantly restricted these opportunities, leaving many employees feeling professionally stagnant (Mapolisa & Chakanyuka, 2014). A lack of access to career advancement prospects results in diminished job satisfaction, as academics perceive their work environments as unfulfilling and offering little room for growth.

Institutional support systems, such as mentorship programmes, work-life balance initiatives, and employee wellness programmes, are also crucial determinants of job satisfaction and retention. In the HE sectors, a positive work environment, characterised by strong leadership engagement, transparent policies, and academic freedom, has been found to improve employee morale and retention (Mathur, 2024; Vavasseur, 2024). However, many Zimbabwean HE institutions lack structured mechanisms to support staff well-being and career development (Chimanikire, 2020). The absence of mentorship programmes, in Zimbabwean institutions denies junior employees the opportunity to learn from experienced colleagues which can hinder their professional growth and satisfaction. Thus, developing strong institutional support systems tailored to the unique needs of Zimbabwean HE institutions could improve overall employee morale, lower turnover rates and lead to higher job satisfaction (Mathur, 2024; Vavasseur, 2024).

Therefore, given the strong grip of retention strategies on employee satisfaction, it is imperative that Zimbabwean HE institutions need to adopt innovative and context-specific retention strategies that address both extrinsic and intrinsic motivators. While financial rewards remain a key factor in employee retention and job satisfaction, non-monetary strategies such as professional development, mentorship, and improved work conditions are equally important in enhancing employee commitment. A holistic approach to retention that integrates competitive compensation with career growth opportunities and supportive institutional policies can significantly improve job satisfaction and mitigate employee turnover in Zimbabwe's HE institutions.

Gap in Literature

Despite the growing body of research on employee retention and job satisfaction in higher education, there remains a significant gap in systematically synthesised evidence on the Zimbabwean higher education sector. While various studies have examined retention strategies and job satisfaction individually, they often present fragmented insights, lacking a structured approach to consolidating findings across multiple studies (Bonga, 2024; Chimanikire et al., 2007; Mapolisa, 2014). As a result, there is no comprehensive synthesis that establishes overarching patterns, trends, or best practices specific to Zimbabwe's higher education landscape.

A major limitation in existing research is the predominant reliance on cross-sectional studies that provide snapshots of employee retention challenges without assessing long-term trends or institutional responses over time (Chivandire, 2019). The dynamic nature of Zimbabwe's economic and political environment demands a nuanced analysis of how retention strategies evolve in response to macroeconomic fluctuations, yet little research has explored these longitudinal dynamics. Additionally, most studies tend to focus on either academic staff or non-academic personnel separately, failing to account for how retention strategies impact different employee groups within HE institutions holistically (Mapolisa & Chakanyuka, 2014). Another critical gap pertains to the limited empirical research assessing the effectiveness of non-monetary retention strategies in Zimbabwean HE institutions. While financial incentives are widely acknowledged as a key determinant of job satisfaction, studies in other regions suggest that career development opportunities, leadership engagement, and work-life balance policies also play significant roles in employee retention (Rothmann & Barkhuizen, 2008; Tettey, 2006). However, there is insufficient empirical evidence on how these non-financial incentives impact job satisfaction within Zimbabwe's resource-constrained higher education institutions. This lack of focus on non-monetary retention strategies prevents policymakers from developing well-rounded interventions to improve job satisfaction beyond salary adjustments.

Furthermore, there is a methodological gap in how previous studies have approached retention research in Zimbabwe. Many studies utilise qualitative or descriptive methods without systematically synthesising findings across multiple sources to develop a broader understanding of retention dynamics. The absence of a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) applying the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) approach limits the ability to critically assess study quality, identify common themes, and highlight research gaps in a structured manner. Employing the PRISMA framework in this study ensures a rigorous evaluation of existing literature, allowing for a more comprehensive and evidence-based understanding of how retention practices influence job satisfaction in Zimbabwe's HE sector. By addressing these gaps, this study aims to provide a structured synthesis of existing research, identify key themes and trends, and offer insights that can guide future research and policy development. This SLR will contribute to the ongoing discourse on employee retention in developing countries and provide practical recommendations for strengthening retention policies in Zimbabwean higher education institutions.

Research Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative, systematic literature review (SLR) approach to synthesise existing knowledge on employee retention and job satisfaction in the Zimbabwean higher education sector. A systematic review was chosen for its ability to provide a rigorous, transparent, and reproducible method for consolidating evidence from diverse studies (Saunders, 2009). The review was guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework, ensuring a structured and comprehensive approach to identifying, selecting, and analysing relevant studies. PRISMA was particularly useful for documenting the search process, screening studies, and synthesising findings, thereby enhancing the credibility and reliability of the review.

Data Sources and Search Strategy

Multiple academic databases and sources were searched for relevant studies to ensure a comprehensive review. The following databases were included:

- Scopus
- Web of Science

- Google Scholar
- ResearchGate
- African Journals Online (AJOL)

The search was limited to peer-reviewed books, journal articles and conference proceedings published between 2000 and 2024 to ensure relevance and currency. The following keywords and phrases were used in the search:

- “Employee retention in Zimbabwean higher education”
- “Job satisfaction in Zimbabwe universities”
- “Higher education workforce retention Zimbabwe”
- “Effects of retention strategies on job satisfaction”

Boolean operators (AND, OR) were used to refine the search and ensure that the results were relevant to the research objectives. For example, the search string “Employee retention AND job satisfaction AND Zimbabwe higher education” was used to capture studies that specifically addressed both retention and satisfaction in the Zimbabwean context. To broaden the scope, keyword variations and alternative phrases were also explored.

Study Selection Process and PRISMA Flow Diagram

The study selection process was conducted in four stages following the PRISMA framework:

1. Identification: A total of 145 studies were retrieved from database searches and reference lists.
2. Screening: After removing duplicate studies (27 articles), 118 unique records remained for screening.
3. Eligibility: Based on title and abstract review, 54 studies were excluded for not directly addressing employee retention and job satisfaction in Zimbabwean higher education. A total of 64 full-text articles were assessed for eligibility.
4. Final Inclusion: After applying the inclusion and exclusion criteria, 26 articles were excluded due to lack of empirical data, theoretical relevance, or full-text availability. The final synthesis included 38 studies.

A PRISMA flow diagram summarising this process was presented below:

Table 1: PRISMA Flow Diagram

Stage	Number of Studies
Studies retrieved from databases	128
Duplicates removed	8
Studies excluded after title and abstract review	30
Full-text studies assessed for eligibility	90
Studies excluded due to irrelevance, missing data, or lack of full text	58
Final studies included in the systematic review	32

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The following inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied to ensure the relevance and quality of the studies included in the review:

Inclusion Criteria:

- Studies focused on employee retention and job satisfaction in higher education institutions in Zimbabwe or comparable developing economies.

- Studies published in English.
- Studies providing empirical findings or theoretical insights relevant to the research questions.

Exclusion Criteria:

- Studies focusing on primary or secondary education.
- Research that does not address both employee retention and job satisfaction.
- Articles without full-text availability or incomplete data.

Applying these criteria ensured that only relevant and high-quality studies were included in the final synthesis, enhancing the validity and reliability of the review.

Quality Appraisal Tool

The Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) tool was used to assess the methodological quality of the selected studies. Each study received a CASP score, and only those that met the minimum quality threshold were included in the final analysis.

Thematic Analysis

The extracted data were analysed using thematic analysis, a qualitative method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. The findings were categorised into key themes based on recurring patterns in the literature. This thematic approach allowed for a comprehensive synthesis of retention strategies and job satisfaction factors in Zimbabwean higher education.

Results and discussion

Overview of Included Studies

The systematic literature review included 32 studies published between 2010 and 2024, focusing on employee retention and job satisfaction in the Zimbabwean higher education sector. The majority of the studies were conducted in Zimbabwe (70%), with the remaining 30% focusing on similar developing economies in Sub-Saharan Africa, such as South Africa, Nigeria and beyond. This geographical distribution highlights the relevance of the findings to resource-constrained higher education systems in Africa.

Key Themes Emerging from the Literature

The thematic analysis revealed several recurring themes in the literature, which were categorised into three main areas: (1) commonly used retention strategies, (2) the relationship between retention practices and job satisfaction, and (3) comparisons with global best practices. These themes are discussed in detail below.

Commonly Used Retention Strategies in Zimbabwean Higher Education

The review revealed that given the economic instability affecting Zimbabwe, institutions have blended localised retention strategies with standard monetary retention practices to make up for their inability to provide the normal financial retention packages. The most common of these localised retention strategies included the following.

Monetary retention practices: The reviewed literature revealed that though the HE sector in Zimbabwe used monetary packages to retain employees, the efforts remain inadequate in addressing the persistent challenges of staff retention (Chimanikire et al., 2007). This means that HE employees faced low job satisfaction due to insufficient salaries that fail to keep pace with inflation, leading to widespread dissatisfaction and increased turnover (Chimanikire et al.,

2007; Mubango & Muchowe, 2024). While some institutions offer personal loans, sabbatical and contact leave finance, access remained limited, further exacerbating retention challenges (Mashavira et al., 2024).

Grocery Vouchers and Shopping Trips: Some institutions provided grocery vouchers or organize shopping trips to neighbouring countries like South Africa to help employees cope with salary devaluation (Chivandire, 2019; Mapolisa & Chakanyuka, 2014). However, the literature reviewed lacked a consistent pattern in the application of these strategies, suggesting they may not be effective long-term solutions. The inconsistent implementation of these retention practices raised doubts about their sustainability in addressing employee retention challenges in Zimbabwe's higher education sector as noted by Bolt (2012).

Subsidised Housing: Reviewed literature revealed that some HE institutions in Zimbabwe have introduced subsidised housing schemes to reduce employees' accommodation costs, aiming to improve retention despite low salaries (Bigirimana et al., 2016). While this initiative may offer financial relief, its effectiveness remained uncertain. Notably, only one of the 50 sources reviewed in this study mentions subsidised housing, casting doubt on the validity and reliability of this claim. The lack of broader empirical support in extant literature actually suggested that this retention practice may not be a widely adopted across the HE sector.

Hybrid Teaching Models: Nearly all public universities have implemented hybrid teaching approaches, allowing academic staff to balance online and in-person teaching while reducing commuting costs and work-related stress to address workload concerns (Lee & Karasek, 2023; Mashavira et al., 2024). However, the reviewed literature indicated that this practice was exclusive to academics in universities, with no evidence of its implementation to non-academic staff in the universities and not at all in teachers' colleges or polytechnics (Mashavira et al., 2024). This limitation suggested that hybrid teaching, as a retention strategy, did not extend to all staff with the HE system in Zimbabwe thus showing its limited applicability.

Participatory decision making: Finally, beyond financial incentives, some Zimbabwean HEIs have attempted to enhance employee engagement by engaging in participatory decision-making processes by continuously engaging employees in meetings (Ngwenya & Phuthi, 2022). Nonetheless, these strategies were inconsistently applied across the HEI's and often depend on the governance structures of individual institutions.

In conclusion, what emerged from this study was that Zimbabwean higher education institutions have blended localised retention strategies to the few standard monetary rewards to try and satisfy and retain their employees. Despite this unique approach to retention, the reviewed literature revealed that these retention strategies remained inconsistently applied and institution-dependent and therefore did little to keep the employees satisfied.

Perceived Impact of Retention Practices on Job Satisfaction

The literature revealed a direct relationship between retention practices and job satisfaction among higher education employees in Zimbabwe. Several studies indicated that the absence of competitive remuneration remains the primary driver of dissatisfaction and turnover in the sector (Chiboiwa et al., 2010; Chivandire, 2019). However, beyond salary considerations, the following factors were found to significantly influence job satisfaction.

Career Growth and Development: Career Growth and Development: The availability of training and mentorship programmes, including contact and sabbatical leave in universities, has been linked to increased job satisfaction, as employees feel valued and see opportunities

for professional advancement (Mapolisa, 2015). However, some literature (Chimanikire et al., 2007; Mubango & Muchowe, 2024) casts doubt on the effectiveness of these initiatives due to their piecemeal application. Limited resources constrained their accessibility, making career growth opportunities inconsistent across institutions, thereby reducing their overall impact on long-term employee retention and satisfaction.

Work-Life Balance: Flexible working conditions, such as hybrid teaching models, were found to enhance job satisfaction by reducing workplace stress (Kandiero, 2015; Lee & Karasek, 2023). However, since these work-life balance schemes primarily benefited university lecturers, their applicability across the entire higher education sector is limited. Non-academic staff, as well as employees in teachers' colleges and polytechnics, did not have access to similar flexibility, restricting the overall effectiveness of work-life balance initiatives in Zimbabwean higher education institutions.

Institutional Support and Governance: Studies highlighted that transparent and participatory decision-making processes improved employee morale and commitment (Ngwenya & Phuthi, 2022). This approach probably stood out as one of the most effective retention tool that has kept the fire burning in the HE sector in Zimbabwe.

Comparisons with Global Best Practices

Retention strategies in Zimbabwean higher education were compared with global best practices, particularly those in developed economies such as North America and Europe. The findings highlighted stark contrasts. Unlike Zimbabwean institutions, which faced persistent salary devaluation and economic instability, higher education institutions in Nigeria and South Africa implemented structured pay scales and tenure systems that effectively enhanced employee retention and job satisfaction (Kanonge, 2021; Rothmann & Barkhuizen, 2008). These systems provided financial stability, clear career progression, and long-term job security, making academic positions more attractive and reducing turnover. In contrast, Zimbabwean institutions struggle to offer inflation-adjusted salaries, leading to widespread dissatisfaction and increased staff migration. The disparity in remuneration structures highlighted the pressing need for Zimbabwean policymakers to reform retention strategies by implementing structured salary scales, tenure systems, and sustainable financial incentives. Without competitive remuneration, Zimbabwean universities risked continued brain drain, affecting institutional performance and the quality of education. Addressing these issues would help align Zimbabwe's higher education retention practices with regional counterparts, ensuring stability and improved job satisfaction for academic staff.

Gaps and Inconsistencies in Literature and Areas Needing Further Research

While the literature provided valuable insights into retention strategies and job satisfaction in Zimbabwean higher education, several gaps and inconsistencies were identified:

Limited Longitudinal Studies: Most studies were cross-sectional, providing only a snapshot of employee retention challenges without tracking trends over time. Future research should employ longitudinal designs to analyse how retention strategies evolve in response to economic and institutional changes.

Lack of Holistic Analyses: Many studies focused exclusively on either academic or non-academic staff, rather than providing a comprehensive analysis that considers both groups' unique retention needs.

Insufficient Empirical Evidence on Non-Monetary Strategies: While financial incentives were widely discussed, there was limited empirical research on the effectiveness of non-monetary retention strategies such as mentorship, research incentives, and flexible working conditions.

Methodological Limitations: Previous studies predominantly utilised qualitative or descriptive approaches, limiting their generalisability. There was a need for more systematic reviews and meta-analyses applying frameworks like PRISMA to synthesise existing knowledge rigorously.

Addressing these gaps through future research could provide a more nuanced understanding of retention challenges and inform the development of evidence-based policies to enhance job satisfaction in Zimbabwean higher education institutions.

Conclusion and recommendations

This study examined the perceived effects of employee retention practices on job satisfaction within Zimbabwe's higher education sector. Through a systematic literature review, the study identified key retention strategies implemented by higher education institutions, including financial incentives such as grocery vouchers and shopping trips, as well as non-monetary approaches like professional development programmes, hybrid teaching models, and subsidised housing. However, despite these interventions, the sector continued to experience high turnover rates, largely driven by economic instability, uncompetitive salaries, and limited career growth opportunities. The findings highlighted that job satisfaction is influenced by both extrinsic factors (e.g., salary, benefits) and intrinsic factors (e.g., career progression, institutional support), confirming Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory.

Furthermore, while Zimbabwean institutions employed localised strategies to mitigate the effects of economic hardship, these efforts remain largely unsustainable due to inconsistent implementation and a lack of structural support. A comparison with global best practices revealed that developed nations prioritise competitive remuneration, structured career development programmes, and comprehensive work-life balance policies, underscoring the urgent need for Zimbabwean institutions to adopt more sustainable and holistic retention strategies.

Implications for Higher Education Policymakers and HR Managers

The study's findings have important implications for higher education policymakers and HR managers. The persistent brain drain within Zimbabwe's higher education sector necessitated strategic interventions to improve workforce stability and job satisfaction. Policymakers must recognise that retention was not solely a financial issue but also requires addressing career development, institutional governance, and employee well-being. HR managers must design retention policies that integrated financial and non-financial incentives while advocating for more stable funding structures from government and private stakeholders.

Recommendations for Improving Employee Retention Strategies

Based on the findings, the following recommendations were proposed to enhance employee retention and job satisfaction in Zimbabwean higher education institutions:

Enhancing Financial Stability: Institutions should implement inflation-adjusted salary schemes, seek external funding opportunities, and establish performance-based bonuses to retain skilled staff.

Investing in Career Development: Universities should expand professional development initiatives, including mentorship programmes, research grants, and postgraduate sponsorships, to foster employee growth and engagement.

Strengthening Institutional Support Systems: Transparent promotion criteria, participatory decision-making processes, and leadership engagement should be enhanced to improve morale and institutional commitment.

Improving Work-Life Balance Policies: Institutions should refine hybrid teaching models, provide wellness programmes, and introduce flexible working conditions to alleviate workplace stress and enhance job satisfaction.

Developing Alternative Non-Monetary Incentives: While financial rewards were critical, institutions must also consider sustainable non-monetary benefits such as housing assistance, childcare facilities, and academic sabbaticals to improve retention.

Future Research Directions

Despite the valuable insights gained, several gaps in the literature remain, warranting further research. Future studies should:

- Conduct longitudinal research to track the evolution of employee retention strategies over time and assess their long-term impact on job satisfaction.
- Explore the effectiveness of non-monetary retention strategies, such as mentorship programmes, research incentives, and institutional governance reforms.
- Examine sector-wide policy interventions that could help mitigate economic challenges affecting employee retention in Zimbabwe's higher education institutions.
- Investigate comparative studies between Zimbabwe and other developing economies to draw lessons and best practices for retention strategies.

By addressing these areas, future research can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of employee retention and provide actionable insights for policymakers and university administrators. Ultimately, a holistic and evidence-based approach to retention is necessary to ensure the sustainability and growth of Zimbabwe's higher education sector.

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