



Rethinking best practices in promoting academic staff performance in Zimbabwean State Universities

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Abstract

This study sought to find ways to improve the performance of academic staff in Zimbabwean State Universities (ZSUs). The study adopted a quantitative research strategy and used 351 academic members from ZSUs as the sample size. Structured questionnaires were used as modes of data collection. Based on structured questionnaires of academic staff members of the thirteen ZSUs, the study concluded that, for academic members to improve their performance, ZSUs should provide motivational strategies such as Staff Development Fellowships programmes, increase remuneration to motivate staff, engage promotional reviews and many more. The study recommends that institutions should engage motivational strategies so that academic employees will improve their performance.

Key words: Performance improvements, academic, staff performance

INTRODUCTION

Describing the necessity for rethinking best strategies in a university setting, PricewaterhouseCoopers Consulting (2018) argues that universities are currently facing competitive pressures driven by a number of key factors. These factors include the increasing student expectations, internationalisation of higher education, increased student university choices, technological changes, ever-changing environment and competitive market for high-performing academics staff. In addition, the government is demanding a refocus on higher education to education 5.0 which focuses on teaching, research, community service, innovation and industrialisation from education 3.0 which was focusing on teaching, research and community service. Given the new demands, many universities in





both developed and developing countries are increasingly realising that performance improvement strategies are fundamental in enabling academic staff members to achieve their potential and contribute to the provision of effective teaching, research and community development service (Bakah, 2011). In such kind of environment, the major efforts must be directed at improving overall academics staff performance through various strategies. Therefore, this study focuses on identifying performance improvement strategies that can be implemented by ZSUs.

1.1 Understanding Academic Staff performance

Mandibaya and Khan (2020) views performance in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) as the alignment of university mandate to the identifiable objects of human capital development, research, community service and innovation. Anitha (2014) also notes that all organisational activities, policies, practices, knowledge management strategies, and employee engagement have a significant impact on an individual's or an organisation's performance. These factors play a crucial role in encouraging high levels of employee performance. In support, Islami, Mulolli, and Mustafa (2018) acknowledge performance as a planned process, with agreement, measurement, support, feedback, and positive reinforcement serving as its main constituents. This process affects results in terms of performance expectations. Additionally, Bataineh (2017) emphasises that employee performance combines an employee's everyday duties' efficacy and efficiency in order to match the expectations of the stakeholders.

The study is conducted in an academic setting. Rosswell and Ashwin (2018) define an academic as personnel associated with, varying degrees, autonomy and freedom, intellectual stimulation, teaching and research, and ideas around making a difference and a sense of calling (Boyd and Smith, 2016; Fanghanel 2012). Relatedly McNeese (2021) believes an academic is a person expected to enhance the learning environment through instruction, applied research, scholarly activities and services that support the institution's mission. These academic staff members have various roles they play in an institution. The variation in academics' roles has been described most notably in terms of the extent to which they identify with either being a researcher (Ylijoki 2013), a teacher (Kreber 2010; Van Lankveld et al, 2017), a researcher and teacher (Feather, 2010), an academic, a professional, (Whitchurch, 2013) or a manager (Winter, 2009). Previous studies have indicated that the latter has greater significance in the lives of early career academics (Skelton 2012). This academic is evaluated against certain measures of performance. The performance is viewed





as the systematic assessment of the adequacy of execution of a particular or general behaviour that is germane to the achievement of organisation's tasks. Performance is measured using a function of ability and motivation. Thus, Job performance = f (ability) (motivation) (AccelTeam, 2008). Adomako, Opoku & Frimpong (2018) believes that to attain a sustainable performance at its highest level, employees should be the concern of every organisation. This demands adequate concentration on how people can best be motivated through performance improvements strategies such as incentives, rewards, leadership and the organisational context within which they carry out the work (Adomako, Opoku & Frimpong, 2018; Armstrong, 2006). In general, performance can be explained using the direction and determination of action. It is concerned with why people choose a particular course of action in preference to others, and why they continue with the chosen action often over a long period and in the face of difficulties and problems (Mullins, 2005). Every manager tries to encourage his or her employees to higher performance in achieving organisational goals. Motivational strategies are the plans that can help achieve success through ensuring the good working life of employees within an organisation. According to Accel-Team (2008) there are many performance improvements strategies which can be used in organisations. These strategies include high expectations, discipline and punishment, fair treatment, satisfying employee's needs, goal setting, restructuring jobs and provide rewards on job performance. While Akinfolarin (2016) believes that for both organisations and employees to perform they need to employ performance improvement strategies such as basic needs. Relatedly Babatunde and Victor (2014) believe that in organisations such as universities academic staff need to be motivated through empowerment, recognition and feedback.

Performance improvement is an expectation on every academic. Haryonoa, Supardib and Udin (2020) report that performance improvements give higher recognition, position and appreciation and since performance improvements strategies are also motivating factors, they assist in achieving personal satisfaction, pride, higher social status, income and employee stability (McShane & Glinow, 2017). Haryonoa et al (2020) also believe that job promotion is an important factor in improving the performance of employees in different organisations. Due to the creation of new jobs, job promotion opportunities have a variety of positive effects on organisations by giving employees the chance to improve their creativity and innovation for the benefit of the company as a whole. They also increase and expand employee knowledge and work experience, which motivates other employees. According to Dean & Joseph (2015), job promotion is an increase in workforce or employees in better jobs, compared to previously greater responsibilities, achievements, facilities, higher status,





higher proficiency demands and additional wages or salaries and benefits the other. Job promotion refers to several indicators such as increased responsibility, increased tasks, increased rights and increased authority. Research conducted by Imam (2019), Saharuddin & Sulaiman (2016), Kiruja & Mukuru (2018), and Awosusi and Jegede (2011) indicate that performance improvement strategies had a positive and significant effect on employee performance.

Moreover, Lockley (2012) believes that for employees to improve their performance they need to be offered training and development programmes that effectively contributes to personal and professional growth of individuals. At the same time, Lockley (2012) warns that in order for motivational aspects of training and development initiatives to be increased, ideally, they need to be devised and implemented by a third party with relevant competency and experience. Alternative training and development methods such as job-rotating, job sharing, staff exchange and flexible working have been branded as effective motivational tools by Sabir (2017). Moreover, Sabir (2017) argues that motivational aspects of alternating the training and development methods along with its other benefits are being appreciated by increasing numbers of organisations, however, at the same time; some organisations are left behind from benefiting from such opportunities. Furthermore, Wylie (2004) recommends other performance improvement strategy which is celebrating of birthdays and other important dates with the participation of the whole team. This makes the employees more recognised and they will improve their performance since they will have a sense of belonging.

Universities are also organisations which have human capital as important resources and they need to employ the performance improvements strategies to enhance performance of the employees. Since academic members are the backbone of every university Bungai and Perdana (2018) believe that there are the ones who determine the quality of education and graduates at the university and the university itself. If the academic members have high quality, then the quality of the university will also be high, and vice versa. As good as any educational programme that proclaimed, if not supported by the high-quality lecturer, it will end in unsatisfactory results. That is why the academic members need constant performance improvements strategies to enhance their performance (Bungai and Perdana, (2018). In developing countries where the countries are characterised with turbulent environments, lack of infrastructure, lack of conducive environment, technological changes and many more, it is important for universities to maintain their staff and constantly employ performance improvements strategies to avoid staff turnover.





Universities in Zimbabwe are facing many challenges which impact academic performance. These challenges include technological changes, large classes, heavy workload, inadequate facilities and infrastructure, lack of conducive teaching and learning environment, nepotism in promotion, brain drain, modularisation, corruption in promotions and the demands for education 5.0. These challenges are causing academic staff to perform poorly in publications, income generating projects, grant proposal writing, innovations and research skills. These challenges are also resulting in exodus of academic employees to greener pastures.

2. METHODOLOGY USED IN THIS STUDY

A quantitative research methodology was used to conduct this research. The population of this study primarily encompassed all the academic staff in Zimbabwean thirteen state universities. The research was carried out under the 13 universities namely University of Zimbabwe, Chinhoyi University of Technology, Midlands State University, Bindura University of Science and Education, Great Zimbabwe University, Lupane University, Manicaland State University, Marondera University of Agricultural Science and Technology, Gwanda State University, Harare Institute of Technology, Zimbabwe National Defense University, National University of Science and Technology and Zimbabwe Open University. The total population of academic staff members from ZSUs were 3990 and a sample of 351 was used. The sample was calculated using Raosoft sample calculator. The researcher employed the mixed sampling technique for data collection which include stratified random sampling, systematic random sampling, purposive sampling and convenience sampling. This means that the sample was divided into four strata (lecturers, senior lecturers, professors, and associate professors) using the stratified random sampling approach, and samples were chosen from each stratum using the systematic random sampling technique. Additionally, certain important members of the population were chosen using the purposive sampling method, while convenience sampling was utilised for informants who were deemed to be key to the study. A structured questionnaire was designed by the researcher for the academic members. The questionnaire is measured on a four-point Likert-type-rating scale, namely: “Strongly Agree (SA)”, “Agree (A)”, “Strongly Disagree (SD)” and “Disagree (D)”. The reliability of the instrument was also determined through the use of Cronbach Alpha. Data collected were critically analysed using SPSS version 26.





2.5 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1: Mean and standard deviation on strategies for improving academic staff performance

| Item code | Item description | Mean score | Response | Std. Deviation |
|-----------|---|-------------|--------------|----------------|
| 1 | Staff development fellowship programmes | 4.39 | Agree | 1.229 |
| 2 | Constant revenue of Promotions | 4.28 | Agree | 1.254 |
| 3 | Increased remuneration | 3.62 | Agree | .832 |
| 4 | Issuing Incentives for income generation projects | 3.30 | Neutral | 1.244 |
| 5 | Supporting Sabbatical leaves | 3.86 | Agree | 1.023 |
| 6 | Providing Tenure when due | 3.53 | Agree | 1.226 |
| 7 | Giving Rewards and recognition | 3.84 | Agree | .901 |
| 8 | Giving Grants | 3.38 | Neutral | 1.263 |
| 9 | Awards on good proposal writing | 3.96 | Agree | .729 |
| 10 | Appreciation good performance | 3.45 | Neutral | 1.317 |
| 11 | Rewards for outstanding community service | 3.46 | Neutral | 1.324 |
| | Overall | 3.55 | Agree | 1.12 |

Source: Field Survey

Table 1 above shows that all the items were ranked high in terms of capacity to motivate performance of the academic staff. This implies that the majority did accept the performance improvements strategies mentioned above improves academic performance. These performance improvements include staff development fellowship programmes with a mean of 4.39, and promotions with a mean of 4.28. It can be deduced that majority of academic members in ZSU feel that the universities are not doing enough to motivate them to improve their performance.

Results in table 1 above reveals that for academic members to improve their performance, state universities should engage academics in Staff Development Fellowship programmes, increase remuneration to motivate the staff, support sabbatical leaves, provide





tenure when due to the staff, give reward and recognition, awards on good proposal writing and also giving incentives for income generating projects. These results are in line with Knight (2021) who reports that providing a sabbatical leave of absence with pay for purposes of intensive study or research increases the quality of the individual's future contribution to the university and can be granted as a motivational way to an individual who has demonstrated performance through publication, teaching, exhibition or performance, research, or other creative accomplishment. The results also concur with Otto and Kroth (2015) who believe that sabbatical leave increase the level of knowledge, update teaching and research's skills and empower the academic members to a professional university toward a better rank in comparing to other universities of the world. Relatedly Sima (2016) believes that sabbatical leaves allow for rejuvenation, reflection, fresh perspectives, opportunity for development of new professional relationships, staying current in his or her discipline and ultimately enhancing teaching (Sima, 2016). For the institution, it offers increased faculty efficiency, versatility, productivity, strengthened programs, enhanced learning environments, higher morale, increased institutional loyalty, enhanced faculty recruitment and retention and enhanced overall academic climate and reputation (Sima, 2016).

In support of the need for more focus on finding ways to prompt academic staff performance, (Knight,2021) reports that tenure as a strategy provides a degree of job security and status and it is an important non-pecuniary benefit that is highly valued in academia. This is also supported by Craft, Baker and Finn (2016) who in their study found a positive relationship between tenure and job satisfaction. Similarly, Gentry and Stokes (2015) believe tenure embodies academic freedom for academic members and for the university it is perceived as an asset in recruiting and retaining the best faculty. To others, it is perceived as an impediment to professorial accountability and a constraint on university flexibility and finances (Aktar, Sachu, & Ali, 2012). Tenure may not assure lifetime employment, but it serves as an assurance that the academic member will receive due process in higher education. Desired performance is achieved only when employees perform effectively and efficiently when they get a sense of mutual gain for themselves and for their organisation when they attain a certain goal or target set for them by their employers (Aktar, Sachu, & Ali, 2012). For this reason, it is imperative for employers to motivate their employees so that they are able to contribute to the success of their organisations. Employees generally display higher levels of performance as they gain organisational tenure (Ekerman,2016).





Another perspective by, Dolan & Capell (2015) is that staff development fellowship programmes focuses on professional growth, bringing about change in individuals' knowledge, understanding, behaviour, attitudes, skills, values and beliefs (Dolan and Capell,2015). Through training and development activities staff acquire knowledge about educational issues and problems, develop and utilise new or improved skills or work ethics and methods, clarify work-related attitudes and values, derive greater satisfaction from work with students, and develop more stimulation and supportive relationships with their colleagues (Kinicki and Fugate, 2017). Chivasa, Tapera & Kwandayi (2020) in their study recommend that universities should promote and support continuous personal development as qualified and competent staff members are more prone to offer quality services and positively contribute to quality product development. In support of these results Gathungu, Iravo & Namusonge (2015) in their study on job promotion and motivation found out that job promotion positively affects work motivation. If individuals are motivated to work, they can make positive choices to do something. Scandura (2017) argues that work motivation consists of the need for achievement, the need for strength and the need for affiliation.

In addition to the discussion above, remuneration, rewards and recognition and awards on proposal writing are such incentives that are capable of triggering an increase in the employee motivation (Apriani, Minarti, Yamin & Wahyuni,2019). In public organisations, failure to uphold a competitive salary and the existence of policies that appear in the name of political interests can be viewed as interference to staff freedom and lower work productivity of employees and can increase employee turnover (Evan ,2013). Remuneration becomes a performance measurement tool and an instrument to bring up the motivation of employees to produce really good performance and service quality (Apriani et al,2019). Zikanga, Anumaka, Tamale and Mugizi (2021) believe that the concept of remuneration is influenced by Herzberg's Two Factor Theory which proposes that certain factors are known as motivators or satisfiers in the workplace that cause job satisfaction, and a separate set of factors known as dissatisfiers cause dissatisfaction (Dartey-Baah & Amoako, 2011).Whilst employee recognition has been identified to be a strong motivational tool that enriches employees' energies towards the accomplishment of organisational goals and objectives (Imran, Ahmad, Nisar & Ahmad, 2014) and also have significant positive relationship with employee performance (Rahim & Daud, 2013). Madhani (2020) believes that rewards and recognition are the means for organisations to demonstrate the value of their employees. Moreover, effective rewards and recognition strategies also signal that an organisation cares





about the well-being of its employees and is willing to invest in them. Whilst Harter (2018) supports the idea by reporting that the use of recognition serves as a reminder of commendable performance. Such recognition can further reinforce that the organisation values its employee. When employees receive appreciation and recognition for their work, they often reciprocate with a sense of obligation and respond with continued high performance. The process of award giving helps in recognising exceptional performance and inspiring others (Best, 2011). However, the bureaucracy of teaching awards has resulted in some lecturers being approved for compliance in completing applications rather than for their raw brilliance, creativity and innovation (Evan ,2013; Apriani,2019).

3. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

From the research findings it can be concluded that for the performance, of academic staff to improve, ZSUs should seriously consider doing more in motivating their academic staff. Such practices as Staff Development Fellowships programmes, support sabbatical leaves, provide tenure when due to the staff and, giving awards and recognition to those that excel, can help in increasing job satisfaction, increasing career competences and therefore improve staff contribution to the universities. In general, when motivated, staff members are likely to increase commitment, interests and capabilities, satisfaction, productivity, sense of belonging, morale, confidence, work output, job security, attitudes and improved curriculum delivery.

The study recommends to the university councils setting a good plan to adjust all issues related on performance improvements strategies regularly. This includes setting creating more opportunities for career advancement to increase the level motivation and job satisfaction for the lecturing staff.

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