

Enhancing academic staff retention in an open distance e-Learning higher education institution in South Africa¹

Tebogo Kefilwe Molotsi, University of South Africa, South Africa
Adele Bezuidenhout, University of Portsmouth, United Kingdom
Yvonne Joubert, University of South Africa, South Africa

ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a Human Resource risk management conceptual framework for enhancing academic staff retention in an open-distance e-learning higher education institution in South Africa. The study utilised an interpretative phenomenological analysis research design. Data were collected from academics by means of semi-structured individual interviews and focus group interviews guided by an interview schedule. Three superordinate themes emerged from the data analysis, namely: determinants of academic staff retention; human resource risk assessment; and human resource risk management. The findings of this study resulted in the development of a conceptual framework that has practical utility for promoting academic staff retention in an open-distance e-learning higher education institution. Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory and its promoting and hindering factors underpin the study and enabled the development of the Human Resource risk management conceptual framework. The identified risk factors are intrinsically and extrinsically instrumental in influencing and determining academics' decisions to leave or remain at their respective open-distance e-learning higher education institutions as their place of employment.

Keywords: academic staff retention, Herzberg's Two-Factor theory, human resource risk management, open distance e-learning institution.

INTRODUCTION

The paper focuses on the development of a Human Resource (HR) risk management conceptual framework for the retention of academic staff in an open distance e-learning (ODeL) higher education institution in South Africa. The term, 'academic staff' refers to ODeL higher education employees with specific roles and responsibilities of teaching, research, scholarly citizenship, and community engagement (Bezuidenhout, 2015; Van Eeden, Eloff & Dippenaar, 2021). Both the existing body of literature and outcomes of the study have eclectically shown the compelling need for an increased understanding of HR risk management and academic staff retention in ODeL higher education institutions in South Africa (Amushila & Bussin, 2021; Huang et al., 2017; Mitrofanova et al., 2018). Responding to this need, this study aims to propose a conceptual framework that is intended to enhance academic staff retention guidelines in ODeL higher education institutions in South Africa.

Globally, ODeL higher education institutions have experienced numerous challenges in respect of the recruitment and retention of qualified, capable and appropriately skilled and knowledgeable academic staff (Amushila & Bussin, 2021; Musakuro & de Klerk, 2021). In Africa, the above-cited situation has become even more precarious and urgent. The main duty of an academic is to provide quality education to students in respect of their acquisition of relevant knowledge and skills (Blau, 2021; Leisyte & Wilkesmann,

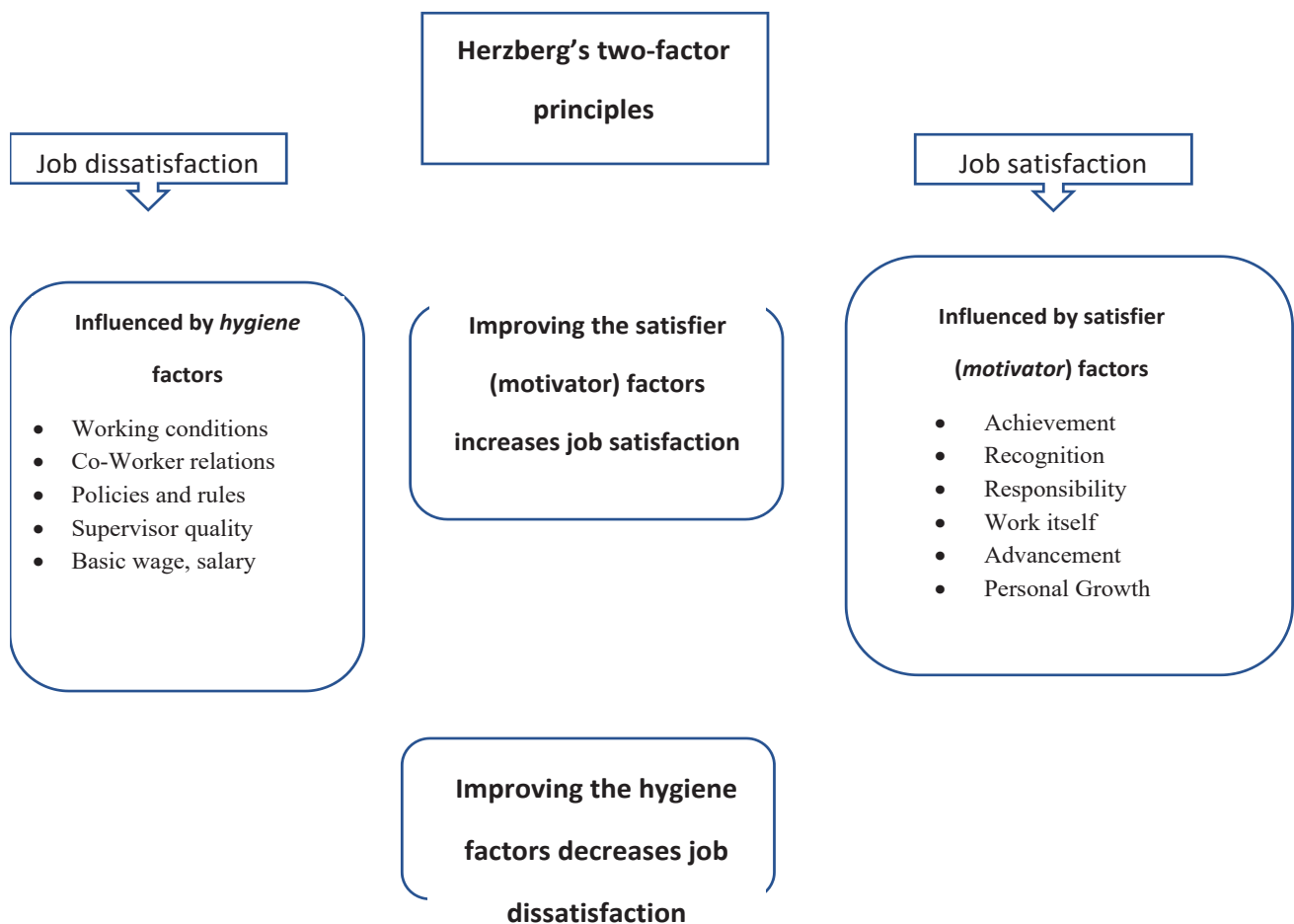
2016). However, Cross, Maluleke and Matsepe (2019), Khoza (2017); Magiledzhi (2022) and Ntuli (2017) suggest that the challenge of retaining existing academic staff is induced by the fact that most ODeL higher education institutions do not have adequate staff to give effect to the required academic functions. This state of affairs has exacerbated institutional risks as described by Renn (2017), and could potentially become a severe event whose occurrence, if ignored, could prevent affected universities from achieving their goals and objectives. Such recruitment and retention challenges constitute institutional risks and threats whose manifestation, magnitude and predictability are only understood to a limited degree (Hillson, 2017).

Despite several approaches and attempts to address the risk of academic staff retention in the past, this concern is still a growing problem in ODeL higher education institutions in South Africa (Altbach, Reisberg & Rumbley, 2019; Letseka, Letseka & Pitsoe, 2018). Examples in this regard include mentorship and supervision programmes, professional development opportunities and competitive salaries (Kuuyelleh, Alqahtani & Akanpaadgi, 2022; Selesho & Naile, 2014; Towns, 2019). Despite these attempts, academic staff retention remains a high-risk factor in ODeL higher education institutions in South Africa (Molotsi, 2021). Recently, Stone (2019) reported a high prevalence of academic staff attrition in ODeL higher education institutions. The latter is probably the result of limited understanding concerning factors that could influence academic staff retention and approaches for enhancing such retention in this population. Hence, this study seeks to develop a risk management conceptual framework for enhancing academic staff retention in an ODeL higher education institution. This framework could be of practical utility for similar higher education institutions in South Africa and other parts of the African continent and other developing countries experiencing similar challenges.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory is one of the seminal motivational theories that provide explanations for the implementation and management of change, which in this case, relates to enhancing academic staff retention in ODeL higher education institutions in South Africa (Lee et al., 2022). Despite its generalistic focus, some foundational aspects or principles of this theory are applied in this paper to guide the theoretical grounding and development of a context-specific understanding of the seminal concepts within the study's developed HR risk management framework. Furthermore, the aforementioned theory is viewed as relevant in this paper because of its practical utility in respect of change and change management in several disciplines (Chiat & Panatik, 2019; Hammargren & Hendricks, 2022; Katanga, Parimoo & Dixit, 2020). Accordingly, Figure 1 below depicts Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory and its foundational principles.

Figure 1:
Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory



Adapted from Herzberg, Mausner & Snyderman (1959)

Figure 1 explains the link between job satisfaction and dissatisfaction factors as core interdependent principles or variables. According to Chien et al., (2020) and Heyns and Kerr (2018) and Herzberg, Mausner and Snyderman (1959) most employees are motivated by internal values, rather than values which are external to their work and workplace. Thus, employees are more willing to work due to their internal motivation. Examples of intrinsic or internal factors that galvanise employees to work satisfactorily include (but are not limited to): their involvement in decision-making, responsibility, recognition, advancement and personal growth (Azeez, 2017; Wright, Gerhart & Hollenbeck, 2018). Employees with a higher level of intrinsic motivators tend to be more satisfied with their work (Molinaro, 2019). Contrastingly, employees are often not satisfied by external factors, which include hygiene, conditions of employment and basic salary. Examples of extrinsic factors include policies, salary and supervisory or management styles (Vasantham & Swarnalatha, 2016). In the context of this paper, Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory implies that the improvement of academic staff retention is contingent on (amongst other considerations or factors), HR managers addressing both intrinsic and extrinsic factors to avoid dissatisfaction. Therefore, if HR managers plan to increase academic staff retention and decrease attrition, they need to focus emphatically on job environments through policies, procedures, supervision and working conditions (Irlabor & Okolie, 2019). It is in this regard that Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory and its practical application informed the researchers' development of the HR risk management conceptual framework, which is viewed as relevant for enhancing academic staff retention in an ODeL higher education institution.

METHODOLOGY

The interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach was used to develop the HR risk management conceptual framework for staff retention in an ODeL higher education institution in South Africa. The study was conducted at an ODeL higher education institution in South Africa, and the participants were academic staff members working at the Pretoria (Muckleneuk) and Johannesburg (Florida) campuses. The sample size was 20 permanently employed academic staff members with a minimum of three years of working experience in the same ODeL higher education institution. According to Alase (2017), such a small sample size is not uncommon in IPA contexts. Criterion-referenced purposive sampling was employed in the selection and recruitment of participants since they were highly knowledgeable about the investigated phenomenon (Alase, 2017; Noon, 2018) of academic staff retention in an ODeL setting.

Data were collected from 20 individual interviews and four focus group discussions, which were all conducted with the guidance of the IPA semi-structured interview schedule. Participants were asked five questions during the individual interviews and focus group discussions. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes, during which participants were allowed to express their experiences, feelings and views with respect to the principal subject matter under investigation as proposed by Polit and Beck (2017). The participants also consented to be audio-recorded. Data saturation was reached by the 20th semi-structured individual interview, as well as during the fourth focus group discussion.

The researcher ensured participants' confidentiality, privacy, anonymity and their right to withdraw their participation at any point during the study (Cassel, 2015). All participants signed their respective consent forms, after which individual interviews and focus group discussion sessions were scheduled with those who expressed their willingness to participate in these two initiatives. A follow-up letter was sent to each eligible participant to schedule and confirm the dates, times and venues of the interviews for the duration of the data-collection phase of the study (Sileyew, 2019).

A moderator's assistance was sought in the focus group discussions to capture data aspects such as the non-verbal behaviour and actions of the participants, as well as for assistance with monitoring the overall proceedings during the discussions as outlined in the IPA (Mavhandu-Mudzusi, 2018). Table 1 below is indicative of the interview schedule from which the audio-recorded participant responses were generated and transcribed verbatim from conversion to pertinent data (Cho, 2018).

*Table 1:
Interview schedule – sample of questions and prompts*

1. Please tell me about your experiences concerning academic staff retention in an ODeL higher education institution.
Prompt: Please tell me more about these experiences and perceptions.
2. Please tell me about your perceptions (views/opinions/observations) of academic staff retention in an ODeL higher education institution.
Prompt: Please elaborate on these perceptions and the feelings they engender.
3. In your view, what are the barriers (obstacles) to academic staff retention in this ODeL higher education institution?
Prompt: Do you view these barriers as causing stress to academic staff?
4. In your view, how can academic staff retention be promoted in this ODeL higher education institution?
Prompt: Please tell me more about your relationships with your colleagues. What else can you add in this regard?
5. Can you please tell me about the 'best practices' for retaining academic staff members in an ODeL higher education institution?
Prompt: In your view, is there anything else that can be done to improve academic staff retention? Please elaborate on that point.

DATA ANALYSIS

The IPA technique of data analysis was opted for, based on the study's primary focus on understanding the meaning of participants' experiences as integrated aspects of two symbiotically linked phenomena (Smith, 2019; Noon, 2018); that is, HR risk management and academic staff retention in an ODeL institution. For this study, the researcher adopted both insider (the knowledgeable 'other') and outsider (a detached observer) perspectives to maximise her understanding of the participants' authentic perspectives (Jeong & Othman, 2016). This dualistic hermeneutic approach of the IPA fitted well in this study because it provided comprehensive insights (Smith, 2019; Noon, 2018) into the researcher's envisaged HR risk management conceptual framework for academic staff retention in an ODeL higher education institution.

All interviews were fully transcribed and analysed manually according to the principles of the IPA research design. The services of a co-coder were utilised for independent analysis of both the individual interviews and focus group discussions, as well as to ensure the study's credibility, dependability and confirmability (Regoniel, 2015).

FINDINGS

Table 2 is a representation of the data generated from the three superordinate themes that emerged from the analysed data. These three superordinate themes include determinants of academic staff retention, HR risk assessment and HR risk management.

Table 2:
Superordinate/ Global themes generated from the findings

Superordinate Themes	Sub-themes	Keywords/ Phrases	Number of references: Individual Interviews	Number of references: Focus Group Interviews
1. Determinants of academic staff retention	<i>Promotional factors</i>			
	● Intrinsic promoting factors	-Stress is part of work	1,1	1,3
	● Extrinsic promoting factors	-Collaboration with other colleagues -We are paid less, and salary attracts us -Opportunities for promotions	1,6 3,2 2,3	4,3 2,2 1,5
	<i>Hindering factors</i>			
	● Intrinsic hindering factors	-Anger, anxiety, frustration, inadequate resources	2,5	1,5
	● Extrinsic promoting factors	-Work overload -Unfair promotions	1,5 3,6	3,2 2,1
2. Human resource risk assessment	<i>Principles of risk assessment</i>			
	● A dynamic process	-Workplace risk -Lack of communication	4,2 8,5	3,6 4,2
	-Ecllectic approach			
	-Uncertainty	-Contract employees do not get permanent positions	3,4	4,3
	<i>The practice of risk assessment</i>			
	-Subjectivity	-Sense of uncertainty	10,1	3,6
-Actual principles	-Lack of uniformity within colleges	9,6	2,7	
-Mixed/ Multiple principles	-Policies are implemented differently	12,4	4,6	

<p>3. Human resource risk management</p>	<p><u>Risk management approaches</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Promotion of employee wellness -Orientation and induction programme -Academic staff training and development -Mentorship and coaching 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Academia is a demanding profession, difficult to balance work and health -First impression counts, mentors to be assigned -Fantastic training and development opportunities -Felt appreciated 	<p>5,2</p> <p>8,4</p> <p>3,1</p> <p>1,1</p>	<p>2,2</p> <p>1,4</p> <p>2,4</p> <p>2,1</p>
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Each of the three global themes shown in Table 2 also comprises several sub-themes (indicated in bold or italics), and a few narrative statements that support discussions based on the applicable or corresponding themes. Further extrapolated from Table 2 is that, concerning the **determinants of academic staff retention**, participants referred to *deciding whether to continue or discontinue their employment at an ODeL higher education institution* as being both a **promoting and hindering factor**. Noticeably, this theme consists of a set of *intrinsic and extrinsic promoting factors* that influence academic staff decisions to work in an ODeL higher education institution. Participants reported that *intrinsic promoting factors* are internally situated values embraced by an academic staff member, and may have a motivating effect on the choice between remaining, or not remaining at an ODeL higher education institution as a place of employment. Therefore, the influence of job satisfaction on academic staff retention varies among academics, as further endorsed by Korantwi-Barimah (2017).

The participants further acknowledged that the link between job satisfaction and self-fulfilment could enhance academic staff retention strategies, as expressed in the following extract:

Working in an ODeL higher education institution can be stressful, and the stressful experiences can be exacerbated if academics do not derive satisfaction from their day-to-day teaching and learning activities. (Interview)

The participants also reported that extrinsic promoting factors may positively influence strategies for attracting and retaining academic staff members. They cited travel opportunities and collaboration with others as examples of these critical external factors. This view is exemplified further in the following excerpt:

Even though academia is a stressful profession, most of us enter it because it offers opportunities to travel to a wide range of destinations to attend local and international conferences and other academic-related meetings. (Interview)

Bonuses and travelling opportunities are considered by some participants as attractive factors for academic staff retention, while others associate academic staff retention with an increase in salaries. Some participants also reported that they were influenced to remain employed at an ODeL higher education institution by the fair availability of promotion opportunities as demonstrated in the following excerpts:

We are paid less compared to what we are doing. But the annual increase in salaries attracts us to this profession. (Focus Group)

I must tell you that I am here because I have been promoted to the position of Associate Professor. (Interview)

The aspect of *hindering factors* is similar to that of promoting factors and consists of intrinsic and extrinsic hindering factors that may or may not influence academic staff decisions to leave or remain in ODeL higher education institutions. This view is captured in the following focus group discussion and interview-based excerpts:

Anger, anxiety and frustration always made us not effectively carry out our duties as academics. (Focus Group)

I do agree with my colleague that we are always frustrated and angry here. We do not have adequate resources (such as ICT support) to perform our duties. (Interview)

In addition to the intrinsic hindering factors, participants repeatedly referred to externally driven factors which could potentially influence their continued loyalty to the ODeL higher education institution for which they are working.

Extrinsic factors may also influence academics to leave the ODeL higher education institution. Examples of these hindering factors include work overload and unfair promotions, amongst other considerations. In particular, work overload was cited as a stress factor due to the onerous and long working hours induced by increased student-staff ratios, as well as the marking of teaching assignments and student examination scripts. The following excerpts attest:

When I started my job, I was promised a low teaching load so that I can focus on my studies. Now I am overloaded with my work, and they have added another module to my workload. (Interview)

I possess the appropriate qualifications and experience required for promotion. Added to this, the institution favours external academics. This approach frustrates internal academics, and their repeated quest to leave the institution. (Focus Group)

Promotions are not done fairly.... just a few academics are promoted each year in my department and the process is extremely biased. It was better at my previous employment where they had annual comprehensive promotions for all the academics. (Interview)

The **HR risk assessment** theme pertains to factors associated with the retention of academic staff in an ODeL higher education institution. Participants highlighted mechanisms to promote academic staff retention. Examples of such mechanisms, in the participants' view, include the awareness of risk assessment as a dynamic process, and the adoption of an eclectic approach as mentioned below:

Risk assessment is guided by a range of principles (an eclectic approach and a team approach) that we must follow in order to mitigate academic staff attrition in an ODeL higher education institution. (Focus Group)

Participants claimed that risk assessment is a dynamic and fluid process that should involve multiple stakeholders. They stressed that the involvement of multiple stakeholders from different professional backgrounds, departments and ranks within the workplace could lead to a comprehensive risk assessment and risk management intended to thwart academic attrition trends. This view was expressed by the participants thus:

Most academics with qualifications have been on contract for many years. Some academics may have the required qualifications for advertised permanent positions, yet they continue to get contract appointments. (Interview)

The following excerpts reflect the uncertainty, poor decision-making, inability to predict future events, lack of partnership and team approach to problem-solving when addressing workplace risk assessment, which was emphasised by participants in their respective focus group discussions and individual interview sessions.

In my department, we have permanent vacant positions, but most of my colleagues are on contract and they don't get reasons why they cannot be permanently employed. (Focus Group)

Subjectivity was also mentioned as a constraint to the implementation of risk management strategies, as depicted below:

Opportunities for promotions are awarded based on favouritisms. This is done irrespective of how well we perform. (Interview)

Participants further mentioned that actuarial principles should be employed in the implementation of risk assessment to enhance the retention of academic staff members.

There is a lack of uniformity in different colleges. For example, the College of Economic and Management Sciences should operate the same as the College of Science, Engineering and

Technology. But it looks like management has given colleges different mandates, policies, rules and regulations that must be followed. (Interview)

Participants expressed the view that **mixed or multiple** risk assessment policies should be employed as part of mitigating academic attrition.

I do agree that the university has good policies, but the problem is a lack of consistency when implementing them. That is why the operational running of the university is different from one college to the other. (Focus Group)

Various risk assessment factors are critically linked to the principles and practices of risk assessment aimed at ultimately advancing the goal of academic staff retention. The management of these factors is entailed in the third theme that relates to the sub-theme of **HR risk management approaches** as it pertains to the enhancement of productivity and the retention of academic staff members in an ODeL higher education institution. To that effect, most participants recommended the promotion of a **wellness programme** to address risk factors associated with academic staff retention, as expressed below:

Oooops ... academia is a demanding profession. I always find it difficult to balance my work and my health. (Focus Group)

Furthermore, participants were of the view that a good **orientation and induction** programme positively influences the attitudes of academic staff members insofar as remaining in the institution. They iterated that such a programme should include the welcoming and introduction of new members to the institution, their colleagues and to other staff members, as reflected below:

Phew.....the first impression counts. New employees must be well-inducted and be given the welcome packs on their first day of employment. (Focus Group)

This theme resonates with some of the participants who advocated for a fully functional training and development programme based on sound career advancement opportunities for the retention of academic staff members. There was also mention of equitable access to training and development opportunities for all academics.

We have fantastic training and development opportunities ... I have learnt and gained a lot since I started working here. (Focus Group)

Participants emphasised the need for professional development and career progression through the provision of **mentorship and coaching** programmes, particularly for young and female academics. The programme would help the institution to retain talented and skilled academics. This is corroborated in the following extract:

I had an opportunity to participate in the university's mentorship and coaching programme that was organised for young academics. (Interview)

DISCUSSION

The study aimed at developing an HR risk management conceptual framework to enhance academic staff retention in the context of an ODeL higher education institution in South Africa. Three major themes emerged in this regard, namely: determinants of academic staff retention (promoting and hindering factors), HR risk assessment, and HR risk management. Herzberg et al.'s (1959) Two-Factor Theory refer to promoting factors as job satisfiers while hindering factors are referred to as job dissatisfiers. The study revealed that many participants viewed promoting and hindering factors as influential in academic staff retention. In this regard, personal development, recognition and accomplishment are promoting factors that could influence academic staff retention. Drawing on the

HR risk management framework, hindering factors refer to those aspects that are inimical to academic staff retention, and are exemplified by factors such as low morale and high staff turnover. Such factors could contribute to academic staff leaving an institution, a view that is resonant with Herzberg et al.'s (1959) Two-Factor Theory. This theory is concerned with factors that may influence employee choices and decisions to stay or leave the workplace.

The participants are of the view that the risk assessment of academic retention and attrition in an ODeL higher education institution is an ongoing process that requires teamwork and collaborative information sharing. This view aligns with that of Bailey et al. (2018). Human resource risk management in an institution commences at the risk assessment stage (Lussier & Hendon, 2019). Thus, failure to conduct a comprehensive and appropriate risk assessment could result in poor risk management generally. Poor risk management is fundamentally premised on the failure to mitigate factors that contribute to the incidence of specific risks, such as academic staff attrition (Becker & Smidt, 2016). In this study, participants identified a range of HR risk management strategies which include orientation and induction, training and development, mentorship and coaching, and the promotion of employee wellness. It is largely from these participant-centric perspectives that the researcher developed an evidenced-based HR risk management conceptual framework (see Figure 2), which is supported by the reviewed literature, the researcher's practical experience as an HR specialist (Molotsi, 2021); as well as the opinions of other experts such as Bezuidenhout (2015) and Erasmus, Grobler and Van Niekerk (2015) in the field of HR risk management and academic staff retention.

The developed HR risk management conceptual framework also draws from the three-way framework proposed by Walker and Avant (2019). The framework itself entails three different but interrelated aspects, namely: derivation, synthesis, and analysis. In turn, each of these aspects is characterised by three interrelated framework development components, namely: concepts, statements, and theories. The researcher opted for Walker's and Avant's (2019) framework due to its synthesis-focused approach and appropriateness for concept development in settings where possibilities for such development are sparse or virtually non-existent. Researchers and other subject experts can apply their practical or professional experience and relevant subject information to develop new concepts and statements; and subsequently a new theory or framework in situations or contexts of conceptual paucity (Bloom et al., 1956). The framework development strategies are discussed hereafter in the context of concept synthesis, statement synthesis and theory synthesis.

Concept synthesis

Concept synthesis can be described as an inductive and mechanical framework development strategy that is exemplified in mental constructs, images, ideas or symbolic representations of an object, process, or action (Polit & Beck, 2017). In this study, the identified concepts relate to the constructs, images and ideas which enabled the researcher's identification and categorisation of participants' experiences, the researcher's practical and professional experiences, as well as her immersion in the wider body of existing literature in the field being studied (Gray, Grove & Sutherland, 2017). The researcher's practical experience in HR risk management and academic staff retention enabled her identification and clustering of similar concepts, with each cluster subsequently assigned a name following the constant reorganisation of concepts from one cluster to another. Each concept was appropriately placed under a cluster that best reflected its meaning. This process was applied repeatedly to the point of theoretical saturation; that is, the point at which no new concepts emerged concerning the aim of the study (Smith, 2019). Examples of the identified concepts include hygiene factors, motivators, work-life balance, talent management, psychologically safe work environments, mentor-mentee relationships, academic support strategies, training and development, retention strategies, as well as recruitment and selection strategies. These concepts were clustered according to their similarities and differences, and thereafter assigned names that reflected the meanings of the concepts to which they referred (Walker & Avant, 2019).

Since the naming of the clusters was a repetitive process, it required the researcher's patience, creativity and imaginative acumen (Bloom et al., 1956). The repetitive process itself resulted in assigning names to the clusters of concepts that were consistent with the HR risk management conceptual framework. Examples of clusters and the concepts to which they referred include positive factors such as recognition, job satisfaction, benefits and salary increase; as well as negative factors such as low morale, loss of benefits, work overload, and discrimination. The clusters and their respective concepts are useful in explaining HR risk management and the factors that might influence academic staff retention. The interrelatedness of these clusters of concepts was examined and discussed in prosaically synthesised statements.

Statement synthesis

Statement synthesis shows the relationships between the building blocks used for the development of the conceptual framework (Walker & Avant, 2019). In essence, the synthesis of statements aims to highlight the relationship between two or more concepts based on existing evidence gathered through observation. In this study, the theoretical statements concerning the investigated phenomenon studied (i.e., HR risk management and academic staff retention) were obtained from the reviewed literature, the research findings, and the researcher's observations in HR practice. This stage is regarded as both an inductive and deductive process of conceptual framework development. The following are examples of theoretical statements obtained from the reviewed literature.

Statement 1: Every academic staff member has an internal motivational energy that enables them to decide whether or not to stay or leave a university as a place of employment. Accordingly, internal motivational energy is referred to as a factor.

Statement 2: Every academic staff member has external motivational energy that may enable them to stay or leave a university as a place of employment. Accordingly, external motivational energy is referred to as a factor.

Theoretical statements are often rephrased to clarify their meanings. Given that the theoretical statements derived from the literature described two sets of concepts about academic staff retention and attrition, the statements were then restructured to clarify their meanings. Statement 1 was rephrased into two theoretical sub-statements as follows:

- Academic staff are influenced by internal factors (such as job satisfaction and recognition) that may enable them to stay in ODeL higher education institutions
- Academic staff are influenced by internal factors (such as low morale and academic jealousy) that may enable them to leave ODeL higher education institutions.

Statement 2 was also rephrased into two theoretical sub-statements as follows:

- Academic staff are influenced by external factors (such as salary increases and bonuses) that may enable them to stay in ODeL higher education institutions.
- Academic staff are influenced by external factors (such as discrimination and work overload) that may enable them to leave ODeL higher education institutions.

Both the study findings and the researcher's empirical observations in HR practice informed the statements concerning the academic staff's decision to stay or leave an ODeL higher education institution. The decision was dependent on concrete and abstract factors which the participants

described as both external and internally motivated factors. Accordingly, the researcher formulated the following statements:

- Academic staff in an ODeL higher education institution are influenced by two main factors, namely: internally and externally motivated factors.

Each of the internal (intrinsic) and external (extrinsic) motivating factors may enable academic staff to either leave or stay in an ODeL higher education institution. Therefore:

- The magnitude of the intrinsic or extrinsic force determines whether an academic staff member will stay or leave an ODeL higher education institution.

There are two concepts common to these theoretical statements (both derived from the observation of HR practice), namely: motivational factors and motivational force. The researcher then rephrased the theoretical statement based on these commonalities:

- Academic staff in an ODeL higher education institution is influenced by internal motivating factors that have intrinsic forces which may enable them to either leave or stay in an ODeL higher education institution.
- Academic staff in an ODeL higher education institution are influenced by externally motivating factors that have extrinsic forces which may enable them to either leave or stay in an ODeL higher education institution.

It is the magnitude or degree of influence of the force of the factors, not the factors themselves, that may influence an academic to either stay or leave an ODeL higher education institution.

The theoretical statements derived from the reviewed literature, study findings and the researcher's empirical observations are not unexpected discoveries, but authentic patterns of reality that exist in the field of HR risk management (Walker & Avant, 2019). While the developed theoretical statements are grounded in the findings of this study, they also serve as a bridge to theory synthesis, which is the next and final stage of the framework development process.

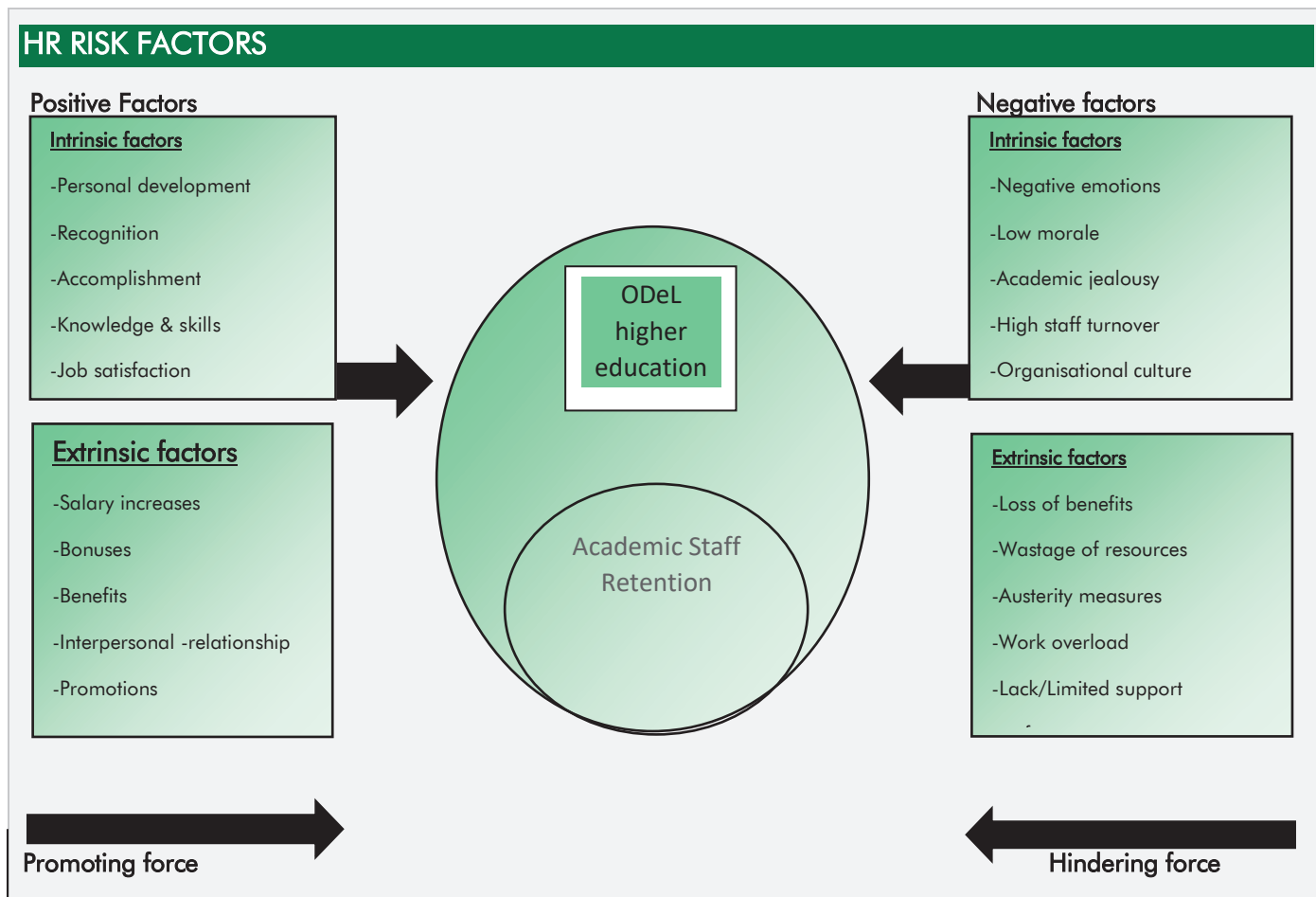
Theory synthesis

Theory synthesis is the stage of conceptualisation that allows the researcher to develop and merge concepts and theoretical statements into an integrated and meaningful whole (Walker & Avant, 2019). Thus, theory synthesis involves a careful and detailed examination of the relationships between, and among the study's concepts and clusters of concepts (Walker & Avant, 2019). In addition, theory synthesis also involves a careful examination of the developed theoretical statements, including their interrelatedness with the concept clusters. This stage, therefore, is considered inductive on account of its development of a conceptual formulation (i.e., integrated whole) from statements and concepts (Gray et al., 2017).

Furthermore, concepts are inherently characterised by distinctive features that are unique and different from each other (Regoniel, 2015; Smith & Osborn, 2015). Most importantly, understanding these different conceptual features and their interrelatedness enhances the researcher's insight into the phenomena being investigated. In this study, the researcher examined each cluster and its respective concepts and identified the influence that the clusters might have on one another. This was a thorough exercise that involved frequent repositioning of the clusters and their respective concepts to match the effects and direction of influence, which is a deductive process (Bimenyimana et al., 2016).

This stage is largely credited with the development of this study's conceptual framework entitled, 'HR Risk Management Conceptual Framework', which is a graphical representation of factors that may potentially influence an academic staff member to either remain or leave an ODeL higher education institution. Figure 2 is a depiction of this synthesised framework, followed by a description of its associated risk factors.

Figure 2:
HR Risk Management Conceptual Framework



Researcher's compilation from various sources

Extrapolated from Figure 2 above, is that the rectangular and spherical shapes include different themes, which are essentially clusters of similar concepts. It is important to note that the arrows on both sides of the spherical shapes (pointing to an ODeL higher education institution and academic staff retention) indicate the direction of influence, and not the relationships among the various HR risk factors. This suggests that the framework is not a statistically predictive, quantitative tool, but comprises factors that may influence academic staff retention in ODeL higher education institutions.

The framework contains HR risk factors that may influence an academic staff member to leave or remain in an ODeL higher education institution. These factors are categorised into two thematic variables, namely, positive factors and negative factors (Walker & Avant, 2019). Positive factors are those that may entice academic staff to remain in an ODeL higher education institution, while negative factors refer to those HR risk factors that may encourage academic staff to leave an ODeL higher education institution. Both the negative and positive factors are further categorised into intrinsic and

extrinsic factors. Syllogistically, the intrinsic factors related to HR risk factors may emanate from within an academic staff member and may enable the particular academic staff member to either remain or leave an ODeL higher education institution. The extrinsic factors, on the other hand, are those factors that have an external influence on an academic staff member's decision to either remain or leave the institution.

The framework refers to the hindering force that may enable academic staff to leave an ODeL higher education institution. Accordingly, if the cumulative strength or magnitude of influence of the positive factors is greater than the cumulative strength or magnitude of influence of the negative factors, an academic staff member would most likely be motivated to remain in the institution. Conversely, an academic staff member could leave an institution on account of the cumulative strength or magnitude of influence of the negative factors becoming greater than the cumulative strength or magnitude of influence of the positive factors. The degree of influence of the HR risk factors may vary from one academic staff member to another, based on factors such as the particular academic's personal and academia-related experiences and coping abilities. This demonstrates that a certain factor may have more influence on one academic staff member, as compared to another (Chaacha & Botha, 2021). However, it should be emphasised here that an academic's decision to remain or leave an ODeL higher education institution is not influenced by the factors *per se*, but by the degree of influence of the impact or force of the factors on the individual. For instance, an academic may leave an institution irrespective of the high income earned when they consider, for example, regular exposure to a perceived autocratic style of management at the institution. In contrast, another academic may continue to work at the same institution regardless of its perceived autocratic style of management.

A factor with a greater strength of force can enable academic staff to either remain at or leave an institution. Therefore, the framework emphasises HR risk management strategies as enhancing the strength or force of positive factors. In this regard, the rationale should premise on encouraging the retention of academic staff in an ODeL higher education institution. Examples of HR risk management strategies include performance appraisals, conflict management, training and development, reward and recognition and employee motivation (Bussin, 2014).

EVALUATION OF THE FRAMEWORK

The rationale is situated in the necessity to identify and justify the purpose for which the framework was developed and its utilitarian value. Among the range of available framework evaluation tools are examples of those developed by Chinn, Kramer and Sitzman (2021), Fawcett (2005), Hardy (1974), and Kirkpatrick and Kirkpatrick (2006). This study adopted Chinn et al.'s (2021) critical reflection tool to guide the evaluation process for the developed framework. The critical reflection tool itself entails five criteria, namely **(i) Clarity:** This relates to how well a framework can be understood, including the consistency with which it is being conceptualised (Chinn et al., 2021). Therefore, the framework is structurally consistent, since its constituent elements interconnect with the positive and negative factors, while their respective sub-categories are used consistently in explaining the phenomenon of academic staff retention in an ODeL higher education institution. **(ii) Simplicity:** To achieve simplicity in the evaluation of the HR risk management conceptual framework, the researcher only has two conceptual categories; that is, being simple and less complex. In that regard, it is easy to understand and apply in HR practice (Chinn et al., 2021). **(iii) Generality:** The HR Risk Management conceptual framework does not only encompass an understanding of academic staff retention but also includes factors that may influence such understanding in the ODeL higher education institution. **(iv) Accessibility:** This is the degree to which the purpose of the framework can be attained through the influence of a range of factors, such as clarity of concepts and their interrelatedness and the clarity of the HR empirical indicators associated with these concepts (Chinn et al., 2021). **(v) Importance:** The developed HR risk management conceptual framework is expected to bridge the gap induced by the absence of a framework to promote understanding of academic staff retention in Africa (Kissoonduth, 2017), as well

as the scarcity of research in this area of HR practice in the continent. The researcher used the criteria to establish the suitability and appropriateness of the developed framework and to enhance the understanding of HR risk management and academic staff retention in ODeL higher education institutions.

CONCLUSION

The objective of the study was to compile a clear explanation of an HR risk management conceptual framework development and its evaluation. This conceptual framework was developed largely from empirical data and existing literature guided by the principles of Walker and Avant (2019). The study found that promoting and hindering factors were influential in determining academic staff retention and attrition. Based on these findings, the developed HR risk management conceptual framework is viewed as contributing significantly to the body of knowledge on academic staff retention and attrition.

The limitations of this study are grounded principally in the review of existing literature, the researcher's practical experience as an HR specialist (Molotsi, 2021), as well as opinions from experts such as Bezuidenhout (2015) and Erasmus et al. (2015). The acquired data were used to synthesise the developed HR risk management conceptual framework, according to which ODeL higher education institutions should endeavour to emphasise the competency development of academic staff members in order to enhance their performance and induce positive attitudinal outcomes. The researcher proposes that the developed HR risk management conceptual framework should be tested on a sample of experienced academic staff members. Accordingly, such a proposition advocates for an increased emphasis on the promoting factors that advance and enhance academic staff retention. However, a future study may add to this stream by incorporating other enablers, such as learning organisations and learning contexts.

The main strength of the study is premised on its mixed methods approach to data collection. In this regard, the study recommends the inclusion of a large sample of participants to obtain and accommodate discordant views. Further research is also recommended to strengthen the poorly researched subject of HR risk management in other non-ODeL higher education institutions in South Africa. Adopting mixed-methods research with a larger sample would help to enrich the knowledge base of HR risk management. It is recommended further that future researchers should test the framework's predictive validity, possibly using the quantitative methodology.

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