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Motivating Lecturers in State Universities for Sustainable Development: A Case Study of a State University in the Midlands Province

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Abstract

In the continuous teaching and learning processes of state universities, motivation has become indispensable for improving efficiency and the quality of education. *State universities experience high staff turnover which undermines the quality of education.* This may result in failure to fulfil the sustainable development goals. Regardless of these challenges, there are opportunities for *improving lecturer motivation in order to improve lecturer retention.* This study examines the barriers to effective motivation and explores strategies that can enhance the attainment of sustainable development goals and contribute to improving socio-economic outcomes. The paper also identifies the benefits of motivation in state universities. *The study employed a case study design in which lecturers from a state university in the Midlands Province were the main participants.* The study adopted an ontological position aligned with an interpretivist epistemological approach. Data were collected using interviews and analysed using the Grounded Theory analysis, where hypotheses and theories were created through qualitative data collection and evaluation. The study found that lecturer motivation was constrained by low remuneration, heavy workloads, inadequate resources, weak

research support, and limited recognition. Supportive leadership and professional development enhanced motivation, while gaps between sustainability policy and practice undermined long-term engagement. Several recommendations were proffered to improve lecturer motivation in state universities. The authors hope that this research provides useful contributions to policy-makers, administrators, and lecturers on how to deal with motivation issues for sustainable development.

Keywords: *Motivation, sustainable development, quality education, productivity, dissatisfaction and morale.*

Introduction

University education is vital as students are equipped with knowledge and skills. However, lecturers' motivation is worth considering as it increases lecturers' productivity which results in the attainment of quality education in state universities. Low motivation among university lecturers results in high staff turnover and poor service delivery. The human resources departments of state universities face serious challenges with staffing and retention of lecturing staff. Well-motivated lecturers perform well and improve the quality of education in state universities. Motivation is therefore indispensable because without effective lecturer motivation in state universities, quality education cannot be attained. The performance of students in state universities is adversely affected if their lecturers are lowly motivated. Low participation by lecturers contributes to high student failure rates. Students would lack adequate, relevant tuition and expert supervision if their lecturers are not highly motivated.

Statement of the problem

The main problem facing Zimbabwe's state universities seems to be the lack of job satisfaction and motivation among lecturers. It is believed that a well-motivated and satisfied teaching staff perform their duties efficiently. The attitudes of academic staff are influenced by their working conditions, including salary, teamwork, opportunities for promotion, fringe benefits, and career development. When university authorities make decisions and behave as if the teaching staff's opinions are not important, the teaching staff feel relegated and demoralised. *This indicates the presence of job dissatisfaction and low motivation.* It may lead to low productivity, intentional absenteeism, brain drain and low job

performance. It is sad to note that because of lack of job satisfaction and effective motivation, academic staff may *leave Zimbabwean universities to seek employment abroad*. The teaching staff need to experience higher levels of job satisfaction and motivation.

Research questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What motivational factors influence lecturers' job satisfaction in state universities in the Midlands Province?
2. What strategies can university authorities implement to effectively motivate lecturers for sustainable development in state universities?

Materials and methods

The research was conducted in Zimbabwe at a state university in Midlands Province and aimed to explore factors affecting motivation and job satisfaction among teaching staff using one state university. The research design, methods, and tools were carefully chosen to ensure the collection of rich, relevant data while upholding ethical standards.

The study was conducted at a state university in the Midlands Province which was experiencing high teaching staff turnover. The choice was justified for the researcher's convenience and also the state university's alignment with the study's focus on the importance of motivation among lecturers of state universities for sustainable development.

A qualitative research design was employed to investigate participants' attitudes and lived experiences. Qualitative methods were essential to delve into the complexities of the phenomenon under investigation. The study utilised the confirmatory triangulation and incorporated interviews in order to comprehensively appreciate the issue. Triangulation ensured the reliability and validity of the findings through cross-verifying information obtained from different participants.

Conceptual framework

Employee motivation

Motivation is fundamentally meant to facilitate behavioural change. It is a force that permits an individual to act in the direction of a particular objective. According to Adam M. Grant's (2008) study on employee motivation, motivation significantly influences important work outcomes

such as productivity, performance, and persistence. Furthermore, studies by Richard M. Ryan and Edward L. Deci (2000), as well as Kenneth W. Thomas (2002), as cited in Grant (2008), indicate that motivated employees tend to value autonomy and freedom, and are generally more self-driven than those who are less motivated. e. Similarly, employee commitment to their work and jobs is more if they are motivated (Guay et al., 2000; Vansteenkiste et al., 2007). The issue of motivation is extensively deliberated in the subject of organisational behaviour which encompasses a multiplicity of models and theories aligned to motivation. According to Abraham Maslow, Clayton Alderfer, David McClelland, J. Richard Hackman, and Frederick Herzberg (2007), opportunities for growth are among the most important motivators, as they enable individuals to fully develop and utilize their capabilities in the workplace *Worker motivation is one of the most important components for organisational success in both public and private institutions* (Chintallo & Mahadeo, 2013). In another study on how worker motivation impacted employee performance it was established that if employees are motivated their performance improves (Asim, 2013).

Employee performance

The performance of employees is conceptualised as what an employee does and what he does not do. Employee performance involves the quantity and quality of output, existence at work, its accommodative and helpful nature and the timeliness of output. According to Yang's (2008) study on individual performance the performance of individuals cannot be verified. Similarly, he proclaims that organisations can award direct bonuses and other rewards based on individual performance if improved employee performance is noticed (Yang, 2008).

Similar to Yang (2008), Bishop (1987) found that acknowledging, recognizing, and rewarding improved employee performance helps distinguish differences in employee productivity. The morale and productivity of employees is generally affected by the overall effectiveness and performance of an organization as well as its reward management system (Yazıcı, 2008). Ironically, firms try their best to satisfy customers but do very little to satisfy their employees. However, customers would actually be served better by a satisfied work force. If employees are satisfied they will do more work which eventually trickles down to more customer satisfaction (Ahmad, 2012). Employee

performance is essentially prompted by motivation since motivated employees perform their tasks more diligently, thereby improving performance (Azar & Shafighi, 2013).

Theoretical framework

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

According to Maslow (1943) employees have five levels of needs, namely; physiological, safety, social, ego, and self-actualising needs. Maslow (1943) argues that lower-level needs are primarily fulfilled before the next higher-level need. The hierarchy shows that people's responses to rewards are based on where they fall on the hierarchy. "At the bottom, we all have essential physiological survival needs (food, water, shelter, security), trailed by the requisite for social interaction, then respect from others, then self-esteem, and lastly a need for personal growth and development" (Gallos, 2006, p. 637). What this leads to is that once a person meets a need, or a reward has been attained, then another need takes its place. This could be a financial interest or a need related to personal achievement. Thus, employers need to understand what motivates their employees while allowing constant conversations to sustain motivation and improve the individual's well-being. Reward can also be referenced when contemplating the motivation linking to positive action within organisational change efforts. Gilley, Gilley, and McMillan (2009) deliberated on how to compliment strategic shifts with creating buy-in among employees: Leaders secure desired results through a compensation and reward philosophy that recognises employees for their performance. Rewarding change efforts demonstrates the importance of and need for change, along with leaders' understanding that "The things that get rewarded get done" (Gilley, Gilley, and McMillan 2009. p.82). In this case, reward is connected openly to positive behavior, imperative to fashioning value for an individual. Thus, reward can positively strengthen the behaviours leaders want to be repeated instead of penalising the resisters.

Literature review

Academic staff are essential to the success of universities because they provide the support that sustains the entire institution. Teachers are often regarded as nation builders and are highly valued in educated

societies. However, in recent years there have been growing concerns about the performance and commitment of lecturers in universities. Stakeholders argue that some academic staff are no longer fully dedicated to their work. Isaac et al. (2011) state that it is unexpected for academicians, who are responsible for promoting values such as honesty, integrity, discipline, and devotion, to show low commitment to their duties. According to Kayuni and Tambulasi (2007), lack of motivation among lecturers negatively affects students' learning and may put the future development of learners at risk. Lecturers' contributions to human capital development and technological progress depend greatly on their motivation and willingness to take initiative.

Lecturers are expected to possess personal and professional qualities that promote confidence and effectiveness in the classroom. They should communicate learning content in a calm and controlled manner. A motivated lecturer is usually confident, maintains discipline, and captures students' attention, while nervousness and lack of confidence reduce credibility and classroom control. Nadeem et al. (2011) identify several factors that affect the motivation of academic staff, including heavy workloads, time pressures, low salaries, and poor student behaviour. These challenges often create negative attitudes toward work and reduce commitment. In addition, lack of support from colleagues and administrators contributes to low morale among lecturers.

To address these challenges, it is important to identify both the positive and negative factors influencing lecturer motivation. Sarital and Tomer (2004) describe teaching as one of the most respected and influential professions in society, emphasizing that lecturers are the lifeblood of any educational system. Institutional resources such as classrooms, libraries, and buildings are meaningless without competent academicians. Despite their importance, lecturers often face several conditions that negatively affect their performance. These include low incentives, heavy workloads, overcrowded classrooms, limited teaching materials, and inadequate technological facilities.

The socio-economic status of lecturers also affects their level of motivation. Lack of respect for the teaching profession in society can reduce morale and job satisfaction. Personal and professional issues such as mental health challenges, family responsibilities, attitudes, and moral standards also influence lecturer performance. Other challenges include long distances to workplaces and examination-related stress. Institutional factors such as political interference, discrimination, poor cooperation

among staff, student pressure, and weak relationships with supervisors create unfavorable working environments. Kazeem (1999) argues that lecturers are more satisfied when salaries are paid on time.

Adequate salaries are essential for improving motivation because they help lecturers meet their personal and professional needs. Mehboob et al. (2009) explain that nations with strong institutions and highly skilled academicians are more likely to achieve innovation and development. Educational institutions depend heavily on the human element, particularly teachers, because they contribute knowledge, skills, and positive attitudes that shape society. Similarly, Razzak (2011) notes that organisational performance is strongly influenced by employees' contributions and attitudes. In universities, lecturers are the key drivers of academic excellence and knowledge production.

Bias and favouritism in institutional policies may also reduce morale and increase dissatisfaction among academic staff. Bamisaye (1998) notes that unfair treatment discourages lecturers and weakens commitment. Memon (2007) explains that educational institutions aim to develop individuals socially, intellectually, and mentally in ways that support national economic and cultural development. University lecturers therefore occupy an important place in society because they are responsible for transferring knowledge and preparing future professionals.

Employee behaviour and performance are influenced by organisational management styles and administrative systems. Different institutions use different approaches to manage staff, and these approaches affect motivation levels. Razak (2011) states that decision-making processes and the implementation of policies can either encourage or discourage employees. Robbins et al. (2007), through Herzberg's Motivation Hygiene Theory, explain that factors such as promotion opportunities, recognition, responsibility, career advancement, and achievement motivate employees because they provide intrinsic rewards.

The quality of education largely depends on the quality and commitment of teachers. Rou (1992) argues that educational standards improve when institutions employ knowledgeable, motivated, and committed staff. Corcoran et al. (2004) further state that teacher quality is one of the most important factors affecting student learning. Eton (1984) also found that salaries, promotions, and other financial rewards strongly influence teachers' attitudes toward work. Research by

University College Kotli (2003) revealed that salary differences affect lecturers' job satisfaction and their willingness to perform their duties sincerely and effectively.

Unlike many office jobs, the academic profession requires lecturers to perform several roles at the same time. Academicians serve not only as teachers, but also as mentors, trainers, advisors, role models, and sometimes parental figures to students. Because of these multiple responsibilities, maintaining lecturer motivation is essential for improving educational quality, staff performance, and institutional productivity.

Methodology

The study was rooted in the interpretivist philosophy because interpretivism aligns with qualitative studies (Creswell, 2009). This study employed the qualitative approach. Qualitative research places emphasis on understanding through looking closely at people's words, actions and records (Market & Morehouse, 1994). The researcher employed the qualitative methodology because using participants' words better reflects the postulates of the qualitative methodology. The qualitative research looks to understanding a situation as it is constructed by the participants. It attempts to capture what people say and do (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994).

Sampling

Convenience sampling was used. In educational settings, for example, an accessible group may be used, what researchers call "convenience sampling" (Schumacher & McMillan, 1993; Fraenkel & Wallen, 1993; Gall *et al.*, 1996). Convenience sampling is often used in educational research because of its practical benefits, as it is seldom feasible to get access to the theoretically ideal sample, so researchers "*often need to select a convenience sample or face the possibility that they will be unable to do the study*" (Gall *et al.*, 1996, p. 228). Convenience sampling can involve, for example, an available class of students or a group of people gathered for a meeting (Schumacher & McMillan, 1993). 15 Lecturers were conveniently sampled from the Faculty of Education, Faculty of Commerce, Faculty of Engineering and Faculty of Social Sciences because they were readily available on campus.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were employed as data generation tools. The participants who were involved in focus groups were not selected for

interviews. Denzin (1978) suggests using multiple methods for triangulation, which was the case in this study. Triangulation is a strategy for improving the validity of qualitative research and it provides a rich and complex picture of some social phenomenon being studied (Mathison, 1988).

Data Analysis

The emerging themes were categorised with relevant voices given. Participants for both interviews and focus group were coded L1–L15 to ensure anonymity.

Trustworthiness

To ensure trustworthiness, the study employed strategies aligned with Lincoln and Guba's criteria. Credibility was enhanced through triangulation of data sources and member checking. Thick descriptions of the institutional context were provided to support transferability. Dependability was ensured by maintaining an audit trail of research procedures, while confirmability was achieved through reflexive journaling and peer debriefing. Ethical considerations, including confidentiality and informed consent, were strictly observed to protect participants in the state university context.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance from the university authority was obtained prior to data collection. Informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and anonymity were ensured. Participants were protected from harm, and data were securely stored. The study adhered to ethical principles of respect, beneficence, and integrity (Mathison, 1988).

Findings and Discussions

Work overload

The issue of work overload was raised by many participants from the interviews. Participants reported that handling too many modules and students caused a lot of stress and health problems to many lecturers. This resulted in many lecturers in many departments feeling demoralised, which lowered their efficiency and effectiveness in their work as lecturers.

Two participants who were interviewed said the following:

- L4: *I find it very difficult to handle 6 modules and mark too many assignment scripts. Sure, we are working under strenuous conditions.*
- L8: *The teaching load is too much for one lecturer. There are many administrative duties lecturers are required to do, at times lecturers are given short notice for doing tasks.*

The responses from participants confirm that lecturers at the university are overloaded with work, which they find difficult to sustain. This causes them to develop low morale at the workplace. This concurs with Wu et al. (2017), Akah et al. (2020), Eggley et al. (2021), Mustafa and Yusoff (2017), Masuku and Muchemwa (2015), and Egu et al. (2014) who confirm that lecturers face challenges such as high teaching loads, administrative roles and research output expectations, leading to their being overwhelmed with work and stressed.

Low salaries

Participants' responses indicate that low salaries caused dissatisfaction at work place. The salaries paid to lecturers did not align with their qualifications, experience, and academic rank. Many participants said they could not meet their daily costs using their salaries. They confirmed that many lecturers have resorted to some personal projects which they undertake at their homes to supplement the low salaries they are given.

During the interviews, some participants had this to say:

- L2: *The salary issue is a major factor affecting our motivation as lecturers. The salaries that are paid to holders of Doctorates and Master's Degrees are very low such that the status of lecturers is relegated in society.*
- L9: *The University is operating with an abnormal salary structure which causes a lot of alarm at the university. It appears lecturers are paid the same regardless of qualifications and experience. Salary differences basing on grades are not considered.*

These findings from the participants affirm that the salaries paid to lecturers at the university are very low and not matched to the qualifications and experience of the teaching staff. The results of this study are in line with research by Ni'am et al. (2018), Bukhori (2018) and Tarigan (2018) which revealed that salary has a significant influence on employee motivation. The salaries given to employees are based on employees' work productivity and performance. This may motivate employees to produce more products in accordance to the huge salaries they get. Therefore payment of low salaries for university lecturers demotivates the teaching staff and affects their performance.

Shortage of proper infrastructure and teaching materials

Another response from the participants was on the serious shortage of proper infrastructure and teaching materials. Two participants gave the following responses:

L7: There is not much teaching space for lectures. There are no special rooms for practical modules, library and internet facility.

L12: We use our own laptops and smart phones to conduct online distance teaching for block release students. This is costly for us, looking at the meagre salaries we are earning.

These responses clearly express the lecturers' discontentment with the nature of infrastructure at the university, which also distresses and negatively affects their morale. Hassan (2017) affirms that lack of infrastructure holds back economic development. Such a standpoint suggests that lecturers find it very difficult to work in a working environment that does not have adequate and proper infrastructure and teaching materials. Shortage of relevant infrastructure and teaching materials lowers lecturers' morale at the workplace.

Power cuts and shortage of water

From the interviews conducted participants confirmed that erratic power cuts and shortage of water at the university affected lectures that were conducted face-to-face and online, respectively. Two of the participants said the following:

L9: Shortage of power supply makes us fail to offer online lessons to online distance learning students and supervise their research work.

L12: Water supply at the university is not reliable. This causes the outbreak of diseases and serious health problems at the university.

These sentiments from the participants clearly reveal the lecturers' dissatisfaction with erratic power cuts and shortage of water at the university. Power cuts affect WIFI connection and the conduction of face-to-face lectures where electrical digital technologies are used and online lessons which also requires reliable WIFI connections. This is supported by a quotation from the *University World News* (2017) where Benon Ncube, the president of the Zimbabwe National Students Union, said "some institutions of higher learning conduct both face to face and online lessons, and the latter are being affected by power cuts".

Social factors

Participants also raised the concern that lecturers faced challenges in attaining the social status that tallies with their job titles and qualifications. The social factors stated by the participants include social connections, employment status, income, food security and economic stability. Three of the participants had these responses to make:

L4: A lecturer who holds a Doctor of Philosophy degree is paid a salary of US \$320.

This lowers the status of lecturers such that their status in community is undermined.

L14: With the low salaries we get as lecturers, we cannot buy stands to build our own houses, pay school fees for our children at boarding schools, buy enough food for the family and advance in education.

L10: We need to spend more time doing piece jobs and other projects for us to meet our bread winner's expectations and role in our families. There is no reason why a lecturer should come to work when he or she cannot afford to give financial and material support to the family.

These responses clearly show that the status of lecturers at the university have been affected by poor working conditions and salaries they are receiving. Their statuses have been degraded due the poor working conditions at the university. Lecturers cannot afford to buy stands to build their own houses, pay school fees for their children at some boarding schools and provide enough food for their families. The teaching staff feel demotivated such that many of them are seeking lecturing posts at other universities in other countries. Most of the lecturers cannot declare proudly that they are lecturers in the communities they stay. Brainard (2005) avers that logic leads us to conclude if an employee does not have access to transportation, stable and affordable housing, safe community, childcare and access to healthy food choices, their health and thus productivity will suffer. When health suffers, healthcare costs rise for employers. When productivity suffers, employer's profitability is impacted. Such a viewpoint recommends that when employees get lower salaries that do not permit them to meet their social needs, productivity will suffer due to low motivation.

Lower students' enrolment

During the interview sessions participants concurred that rapid fall in students' enrolment affected their job security. A viable class must have at least ten students. Lecturers felt they might lose their jobs due to rapid fall in students' enrolment figures at the university. Three of the participants submitted the following responses:

- L11: *Our University is failing to recruit students in large numbers due to the current harsh economic conditions affecting the country. I don't think I am going to stay at the university for a long time if student enrolment figures continue to fall rapidly.*
- L13: *For a class to be viable as per university recruitment policy, a class must have at least ten students. This year in our department we failed to get intake 1.1 because the class was not viable. If this continues to happen at our institution, I may lose my job.*
- L14: *The University is failing to get viable classes for many degree programmes. A class cannot be allowed to start lectures if the number of students is below ten. This kills my confidence in my job security.*

These submissions from participants imply that the sharp decline in students' enrolment figures demotivates lecturers as they think they may lose their jobs any time. Some degree programmes at the institution were becoming unpopular to students so students no longer applied for those degree programmes. This may result in some lecturers losing their jobs if the university decides to rationalise staffing basing on students' enrolment statistics. This factor demotivates lecturers at the university because they fear they may lose their jobs due to shortage of students. According to Chika and Chinonye (2023), low student enrollment in universities can limit future employment opportunities and earning potential. This issue is also connected to the university system, where lecturers may face job insecurity due to insufficient and unsustainable enrollment numbers.

Challenges in the implementation of Education 5.0

Participants expressed their disappointment with the implementation of Education 5.0 which is anchored on five pillars, namely; teaching, research, community engagement, industrialisation and innovation (Murwira, 2019). The implementation of the industrialisation and innovation pillars are difficult for many lecturers. In view of this, the participants submitted the following responses:

- L6: *Implementing Education 5.0 is very difficult when it comes to innovation and industrialisation. We do not have enough resources and knowledge on how best we can come up with meaningful innovation and industrialisation.*
- L10: *We are required to publish our journal papers in Scopus indexed journals that are very expensive. The salaries we are receiving are not enough to meet the exorbitant publication costs charged by those Scopus journals.*
- L12: *New lecturers are going to be tenured after three years. One of the requirements is publishing with Scopus indexed journals. The journals are expensive and they take long to publish.*

These responses from the participants suggest that the implementation of Education 5.0 is difficult and expensive. Lecturers cannot meet the publication costs charged by the Scopus indexed journals. New lecturers who are going to be tenured at the end of the three years feel they might not get tenured because they cannot meet the publication costs. In addition, lecturers are required to innovate and industrialise which is also a big challenge to many of them. The university does not give financial support to lecturers to meet publication costs charged by the Scopus indexed journals. This is supported by Dumisani and Bondori (2020,p.57) who found that:

...the absence of adequate physical infrastructure and financial resources to support Education 5.0 adoption is expected since Zimbabwe as a nation is undergoing an economic meltdown. Capital investments need huge financial resources which could not be availed with limited resources available.

Conclusion

Low motivation among teaching staff negatively affects teaching quality and increases staff turnover in state universities. While participants identified key demotivating factors—such as work overload, low salaries, inadequate infrastructure and teaching materials, power cuts, water shortages, social challenges, low student enrollment, and difficulties in implementing Education 5.0—these same challenges highlight areas where effective interventions could enhance motivation. Providing fair compensation, improving working conditions, ensuring adequate teaching resources, and fostering professional development can serve as important motivators. Motivated lecturers are more engaged, productive, and innovative, which contributes directly to the sustainable development of the university by improving educational outcomes, promoting research, and preparing students to meet societal needs. In this way, supporting lecturer motivation is essential not only for individual staff welfare but also for achieving broader institutional and societal goals.

Implications and Future Directions

The findings of this study suggest that enhancing lecturer motivation in Zimbabwean state universities requires systemic and coordinated

institutional responses. Strengthening support for research and publication through accessible funding, reduced teaching loads, and publication incentives has important implications for improving academic productivity and global visibility. Investment in innovation and development infrastructure, including research laboratories, incubation hubs, and university–industry linkages, is critical for positioning state universities as drivers of sustainable development and industrialisation. Addressing lecturers’ welfare through competitive remuneration and access to mortgage loan schemes may enhance retention, commitment, and long-term institutional stability. Furthermore, continuous professional development in innovation, entrepreneurship, and industrialisation is essential for equipping lecturers with skills aligned to Education 5.0 and national development priorities. Expanding strategic marketing and advertising of degree programmes may contribute to increased student enrolment, improved institutional revenue, and enhanced sustainability. Future research should examine the feasibility, funding models, and long-term impact of these interventions across multiple state universities to inform national higher education policy and practice.

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