UNRAVELLING THE LINK BETWEEN ACADEMIC STAFF TENURE AND MOTIVATION: EXTENDED CURRICULUM PROGRAMME DILEMMA FOR STAFF RETENTION

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ABSTRACT

Staff retention is a critical aspect in fostering effective teaching and learning practices and promoting collaborative between staff members and management. In the context of higher education institutions, employee retention poses significant challenges globally, including South Africa. This study examines various factors affecting job satisfaction, motivation and retention of Extended Curriculum Programme (ECP) academic staff in higher education institutions. Employing a qualitative case study research design, this research uses focus group interviews to collect data. The findings highlight the importance of a balanced blend of both intrinsic and extrinsic factors in motivating staff. These factors include salaries, incentives, rewards, and recognition, as the prime factors that impact on the retention of academic staff. Furthermore, lack of standardization in the contract structure as well as discrepancies in resource allocation and workload distribution emerged as pressing challenges faced by the ECP academic staff. Based on these findings, the study recommends robust monitoring and evaluation processes for standardisation and promoting clear integration of the ECP into mainstream programmes to positively contribute to staff motivation and retention. By addressing these issues, higher education institutions can enhance staff satisfaction, improve retention rates and create an optimal environment for effective teaching and learning.

Keywords: ECP, employee retention, higher education institutions, human resources, job satisfaction, motivation, staff turnover.

1. INTRODUCTION

The retention of academic staff in higher education institutions is a critical issue that has garnered substantial attention in recent years. African universities, in particular, face numerous challenges in this regard. One significant contribution to the understanding of staff retention challenges in South African higher education institutions comes from a study conducted by Ashley (2018). The author highlights inadequate remuneration and benefits, limited career development possibilities, poor work-life balance and an unsupportive organizational culture as some of the

primary factors contributing to the academic staff turnover. The author further emphasizes the need for institutions to address these issues to enhance staff retention rates and establish a positive and supportive work environment. Kissoonduth et al. (2019) highlight the critical role of remuneration policies guiding academic staff compensation, such as performance rewards, salary structures and governance, as well as the relevance of remuneration committees in maintaining fairness. They conclude that remuneration is critical for attracting, retaining and motivating academic staff in public higher education institutions. To improve attraction and retention, the authors advise having a competitive employer value proposition, rewarding team performance and good communication of remuneration policies. In their examination of the influence of organizational culture and leadership styles on academic staff retention in Kenyan public universities, Ng'ethe et al. (2012) concur that supportive and inclusive organizational culture, as well as effective leadership practices, are essential to keep staff. Erasmus et al. (2015) argue that from the organisational development perspective, employees' motivation is fuelled by more than their remuneration. Such aspects of the organisational culture as job enrichment, career growth, challenging assignments, feedback from peers and sound leadership are vital for staff retention in higher education institutions.

Various theories have been developed to understand motivation and its impact on organizational culture, providing valuable insights for management. Three prominent theories in this regard are Maslow's needs-hierarchy theory, Herzberg's two-factor theory, and Adams' Equity Theory. Maslow's needs-hierarchy theory focuses on employee needs as a source of motivation (Maslow, 1943). Employees have five degrees of needs, which are prioritized hierarchically, according to this notion. These include biological and physiological requirements, safety needs, social needs, esteem needs and self-actualization needs. Maslow suggested that lower-level needs must be met before higher-level demands can motivate employees. Herzberg's two-factor approach distinguishes between motivation and 'hygiene' (Herzberg, 1966). Motivators, which are intrinsic elements such as performance and acknowledgment, contribute to job happiness. On the other hand, hygiene factors, which are extrinsic variables like as compensation and job security, can lead to job discontent among employees. Adams' equity theory highlights the necessity of equity in the workplace (Adams, 1963). Employees strive for fairness in comparison to their peers.

In the context of South African universities and colleges, a highly motivated workforce is crucial to face global competition, achieve growth and ensure sustainability. Despite the management's recognition of the critical role of motivation in organizational competitiveness and its incorporation into the strategic plan, there is a lack of action to understand staff motivation and retention factors. Furthermore, there is a need for the implementation of effective approaches and practices to enhance motivation and staff retention (Bernard, 2012). Retention of staff has emerged as a significant challenge in the majority of higher learning institutions (Tanius et al., 2017). Efforts are consistently made by these institutions to retain their employees over a prolonged period of time, recognizing the detrimental

effects that diminished retention can have on the sustainability of the institution. In today's academic landscape, the responsibilities of academic staff extend far beyond delivering lectures in the classroom. They are also tasked with various administrative duties that require a greater level of commitment from the staff (Tanius et al., 2017). Consequently, work-related pressure and stress have become prevalent within the higher education context (Nur Aqilah & Juliana, 2012). These stressors contribute to a higher turnover rate among university academics, as the challenging work environment takes its toll on their job satisfaction and overall well-being (Nur Aqilah & Juliana, 2012). Furthermore, better employment offers from different institutions, for example, more significant pay, a good outstanding task at hand and improved opportunities for professional development may likewise add to this issue. A high turnover rate among academic staff has significant implications for the long-term profitability and efficiency of institutions. It not only tarnishes the reputation of the institution but also undermines students' confidence, potentially leading them to choose other institutions with better reputations. Research has shown that the turnover of experienced and skilled individuals can negatively impact the university's reputation (Abu Bakar et al., 2015). Hence, the primary objective of this paper is to identify the factors that influence the motivation of contract staff in the selected case study.

An overview of the Extended Curriculum Programme in South Africa

The Extended Curriculum Programme (ECP) in South Africa is an intervention in higher education that holds significant importance for the context of curriculum transformation (CHE, 2013). The primary goal of the ECP is to create curriculum space aimed at enabling academically capable but underprepared students to establish a strong foundation for success in higher education (CHE, 2013; Arise, 2022). This and similar programmes have earned considerable recognition and use in South Africa and around the world as a successful strategy for addressing learning gaps and facilitating students' educational journey (e.g., Slabbert & Friedrich-Nel, 2015; Sibiya & Mahlanze, 2018; OECD, 2020). Starting in 2004, South Africa's implementation of the ECP received direct state subsidies in the form of 3-year block grants and ring-fenced funds (CHE, 2020). These monetary contributions indicate the government's commitment to supporting and sustaining the ECP as a vital component of higher education.

The ECP strives to bridge the preparation gap and equip students with the required skills and knowledge to flourish in their chosen fields of study through a combination of specialized courses, mentoring, tutorial support and academic interventions. The function of the ECP in employee motivation and retention in higher education institutions is a topic of discussion and research. While there are current studies on factors impacting staff motivation and retention in higher education (Manogharan et al., 2018; Tirta & Enrika, 2020), further research is needed to investigate how specific features, opportunities and challenges influence staff motivation and retention, so higher education institutions can develop targeted strategies to attract and retain

qualified and committed staff members. Such strategies may include provision of professional development opportunities, recognition, fair compensation and creation of a positive work environment (Kamalaveni et al., 2019). Understanding the factors that affect staff motivation and retention in the ECP is crucial for effective management and the long-term success of the programme.

Theoretical framework

The Equity Theory was developed by John Stacey Adams in 1963 (Fig. 1), and its primary focus is on employee discernment of how equitably they are treated compared to their peers. In an institution, employees will thrive for fairness. The ratio of an employee's input to their outcomes must be aligned to the ratio of other employees' inputs to their outcomes. Some of the most common outcome factors determining equity are salary, compensation, bonus, recognition and promotion. Therefore, if an employee has the necessary skills to perform duties those are clustered as input factors, which are determined by his age, education, hours worked, work performance and experience. All these factors can be comparable to those of his colleagues, depending on the nature of their job and roles in the institution. The Equity Theory is adopted in this study to examine the impact of equity or inequity on the ECP academic staff motivation.

A notable attribute across all ECP lecturers is that they are all junior staff working on the 2-year bimonthly contract basis, where none have a Doctoral degree and only
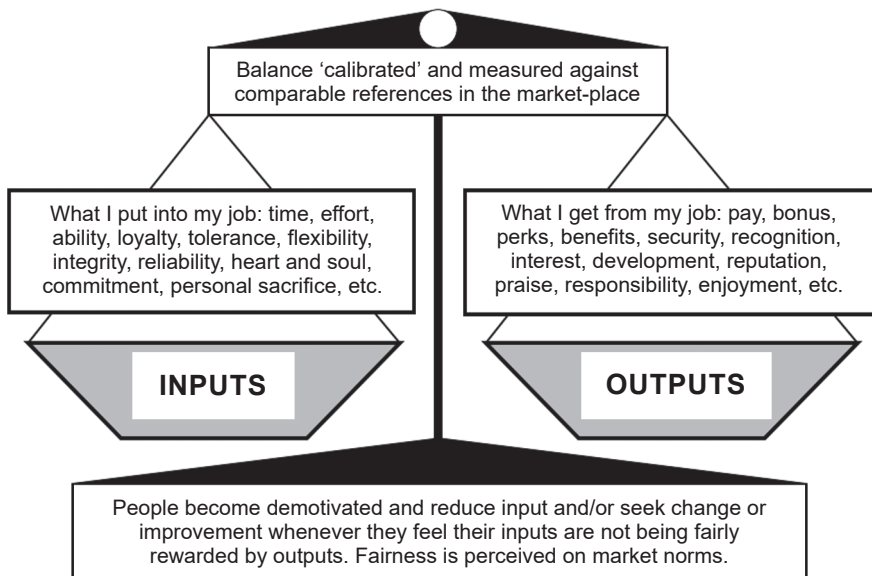

Figure 1. Job motivation according to the Adams' Equity Theory (1963).

two possess teaching qualifications out of all staff members. The lack of appoint-ment policy and procedures compromises the sustainability of skilled personnel and opens room for staff turnover. Most staff members are novice lecturers without adequate skills to practise with limited learner support interventions, thereby affec-ting the throughput rate of the ECP students. The conditions of employment and remuneration vary between faculties and the ECP staff (Mgutsini, 2019). Therefore, the present study seeks to highlight some of the main factors that may contribute to the ECP staff motivation according to Adams's Equity Theory, and eventually lead to staff turnover.

Motivation and job satisfaction of academic staff: salaries, **rewards and job security**

The notion that no education system can rise above the quality of its teaching staff infers the significance of the academic staff to national development. The development of nations depends on the quality of their education systems, and investments in education are seen critical for the future of the well-being of societies (Hanushek, 2016; OECD, 2022). It is further noted that teaching is a complex and multi-dimensional task in nature and, therefore, requires motivated and dedica-ted staff. A study conducted at the University of Dar es Salaam established that salaries, incentives, rewards and recognition are some of the prime factors that impact on the employee motivation and further affect retention of the academic staff (Akafo & Boateng, 2015). Managers and other organizational leaders thus have the responsibility of providing a conducive work environment for all their employees (Mansor et al., 2011; Zakaria et al., 2020), with a decent pay being among the key factors that promote job satisfaction. Devito with co-authors (2016) emphasize the importance of wages for employees' motivation throughout time as it remains pi-votal for their financial stability. Moreover, the authors emphasize the job security as the second most important factor that reduced employees' fear of unemployment (De Vito et al., 2016). With the ECP lecturers in South African universities being hired on fixed-term contracts, the issue of job security and correspondingly the staff motivation remains in question.

Motivation and job satisfaction have been extensively examined, most notably in the 20th-century Hawthorne studies (e.g. Muldoon, 2012). According to Bavendum (2000), job satisfaction is a pleasant emotional state that results from evaluating one's job or job experience. The author notes the importance of professional recognition, a competitive compensation, positive interpersonal interactions, and work stability in boosting job happiness, which leads to greater learning and productivity. To support this point of view, Osakwe (2014) emphasizes the importance of motivation in the teaching-learning process and highlights that academic staff success is heavily de-pendent on their level of motivation. In essence, motivating elements are critical in influencing academic staff efficiency and success. Similarly, Herzberg's theory also highlights the value of pay and job security for staff motivation, among other factors (Aworemi et al., 2011; Yusoff et al., 2013). With teaching being a complex

and demanding profession, a need for adequate university policies and administration in terms of pay/salary and rewards that are proportionate to the work academics do could improve their motivation and subsequently improve teaching and learning (Ghenghesh, 2013).

Talent management and its impact on staff retention in higher education institutions

Retention is a process by which employees are encouraged to stay with the organisation for a maximum period or until the objectives are met, to enable them to develop the necessary knowledge, skills and experience to perform exceptionally in a particular organisation, without the need for further training (Manogharan et al., 2018; Khalid & Nawab, 2018). As a result, by retaining its employees the organisation is more likely to achieve its long-term goals (Tirta & Enrika, 2020). More so, employee retention becomes an important part of a company's operational, particularly long-term, activities, such as development and taking over a certain market (Tirta & Enrika, 2020). The concept of retention is also defined as policies and practices adopted by organizations to keep valuable employees from quitting their jobs (Dagogo & Amina, 2019).

Organisations that fail to retain top talents spend more money finding replacement staff and in providing training (Manogharan et al., 2018). Apart from this, a high turnover erodes morale amongst those who stay and may affect customer retention. Numerous factors—such as dissatisfaction with benefits, compensation and supervisor-subordinate relationships, poor organisational culture, lack of two-way communication, corporate identity, status, working environment etc.—contribute to organisations losing their human resources (Manogharan et al., 2018; Altassan & Rahman, 2023).

Talent management refers to additional management processes and opportunities made available to people in an organization (Pandita & Ray, 2018). Effective talent management recommends that employees begin to see themselves as part of the organization, add value to the organization and stay loyal to it (Pandita & Ray, 2018). More importantly, talent management ensures that employees remain professional in their business practices, serve meritoriously, and that the right people—experts, who have excelled in their professions and have the necessary integrity, skills and experience—are employed in right positions (Pandita & Ray, 2018). Talent management also involves the organized identification, development, attraction, engagement, retention and deployment of highly prospective and efficient candidates, to make a significant impact on the organization's sustainable competitive advantage (Tirta & Enrika, 2020). As a result, retention is beneficial not only for reducing turnover expenses and minimizing the cost of recruiting and training but also in keeping a talented workforce and preventing employees from getting poached (Khalid & Nawab, 2018). When an employee terminates his or her career, the organization is prone to loosing customer loyalty and expertise, to additional organizational expenditure (hiring, administrative and training) and to

disruption in daily operations, all of which can be costly and disastrous for the organization in the long run (Khalid & Nawab, 2018). Furthermore, when an employee leaves, he or she may take valuable information about the organization, its clients, current projects and the company's records to the new employer (Biason, 2020). Time and money have been spent on an employee in the expectation that he works for the organization's future return; however, when the employee leaves this investment is not realized (Biason, 2020). Employee retention may be enhanced by practices such as delegative participation, consultative participation, through pay raises, wise recruiting, discussing careers, providing direction, offering flexibility, attractive employee welfare measures and human resource practices for high performance and binding contracts (Khalid & Nawab, 2018; Kamalaveni et al., 2019). To retain talented employees, employers and managers must provide staff with opportunities such as challenging tasks, a certain level of autonomy and liberty in their jobs, and venues to advance their learning and development (Khalid & Nawab, 2018; Biason, 2020).

In today's world, where employees' skills and expertise are among the most important competitive enablers of performance, organizations cannot overlook the importance of attracting and retaining talented people (Matongolo et al., 2018). It has become a daunting task to retain employees for organisations, especially in private higher educational institutions. As a result, all organisations regardless of their size, are struggling with the issue of keeping productive employees (Serrat, 2017). A debate has been raging for many decades, whether it is important to retain employees or to have a succession plan across the organization (Serrat, 2017).

A review of the Employment Equity Act 55, 1998 and Skills Development Act 97, 1998 in the context of the South African higher education landscape

South Africa has been affected by the ramifications of apartheid and other discriminatory practices. Over the years, disparities in employment, occupation and income have characterised the national labour market. These discrepancies create pronounced disadvantages for certain categories of people which cannot be remedied merely by repealing and adjusting discriminatory laws. Therefore, the purpose of the Employment Equity Act 55 of 1998 is to (1) promote the constitutional right of equality and the exercise of true democracy, (2) eliminate unfair discrimination in employment, (3) ensure the implementation of employment equity to redress effects of discrimination; (4) achieve a diverse workforce and (5) promote economic development and efficiency in the workforce (RSA, 1998a).

This study examines the Employment Equity Act 55 of 1998, a legislation intended at fostering workplace equity, equal opportunities and fair treatment of employees. The oppressive legacy of the apartheid government is visible in South Africa's higher education system, which is marked by racial, gender, class and spatial disparities. In 2004, the South African higher education landscape underwent a substantial upheaval, resulting in the transformation of 36 institutions into 23. Previously, the higher education system was represented by 21 traditional universities and 15

technikons, which have since transformed into major universities and universities of technology institutions (Townsend, 2010). Universities of technology, formerly known as technikons, have established a strong reputation for offering career-oriented programmes designed to prepare graduates for the workforce. These institutions prioritize collaboration with industry to ensure programme relevance and applicability (SAQA, 2019).

Universities of technology have played an important role in the development of their countries' and regions' economies by providing graduates with practical skills for the workforce and applying their research expertise to societal and industry challenges (RSA, 2009). Equal access to education is vital for the reform of higher education. The Skills Development Act 97, 1998 (RSA, 1998b) (1) establishes an institutional framework for developing and enhancing the skills of the South African labour force through national, sector and workplace strategies, (2) integrates these approaches with the National Qualifications Framework established by the South African Qualifications Authority Act, 1995, (3) provides recognized occupational qualifications through learnership, (4) finance skills development through a levy-grant scheme and National Skills Fund, (5) regulate employment services, and (6) address related matters. Therefore, it is crucial for higher education institutions to align with these laws and integrate them into the policies, rules and regulations governing their Extended Curriculum Programme offerings.

2. METHODOLOGY

Research design and approach

To investigate the link between academic staff tenure and motivation within the context of the Extended Curriculum Programme (ECP) and its impact on staff retention in higher education institutions, a qualitative case study research design was employed. This approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of the experiences and perspectives of academic staff members directly involved in the ECP, including one researcher who served as an ECP lecturer. The qualitative research approach was chosen to assess the phenomenon and its significance (Johnson et al., 2020). Smith (2018) also suggests that employing key informants who possess insider knowledge can significantly contribute to the richness and depth of qualitative research.

Data collection and analysis

Purposive sampling was utilized to select participants, who were representative of the population and had significant experience and expertise within the ECP (Acharya et al., 2013). A pool of 15 participants, including the ECP lecturers and coordinators, formed the online focus group for this study. The convenience of the participants played a role in selecting these individuals, as they were available and willing to participate in the discussion. Focus group interviews were conducted virtually using Microsoft Teams due to the safety precautions imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic. Online focus groups have been proven to be effective in

gathering qualitative data and encouraging open discussions (Stewart & Williams, 2005; Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009; Stancanelli, 2010; Wettergren et al., 2016). The interviews were recorded to ensure accurate capture and transcription of the shared information. The moderator used a semi-structured open-ended interview schedule to guide the group interaction, and participants completed an online confidentiality agreement prior to the interview.

Data analysis involved several steps. First, the recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim. Then, the research team familiarized themselves with the data contents. Open coding was used to categorize the data and identify emerging themes, ensuring the validity and reliability of the analysis. The results of the analysis are presented according to the research questions and objectives, with themes emerging from the data. The implications of teaching the ECP students on academic staff, the skills required by institutions of higher learning to deliver the ECP, factors contributing to the ECP academic staff turnover, and the influence of equitable work conditions on staff motivation were among the explored themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006)

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings and rigor of the study, measures such as member validation and triangulation were employed. Member validation involved sharing the preliminary findings with participants to authenticate and confirm the accuracy of their experiences as portrayed in the analysis. Triangulation was achieved by incorporating multiple data sources, including supplementary documentation and existing literature, to further enhance the credibility and reliability of the study (Cohen et al., 2018).

3. RESULTS

The implications of teaching ECP students on academic staff

The ECP lecturers felt that delivering the ECP to students affected them in the way that they had to adapt their teaching styles, which in some instances would work with students in the main programmes but could never suffice in the extra support that they needed to offer ECP learners. This required immense effort from their side, in the content and lesson preparation, mediation and pastoral roles. Teaching ECP students also meant receiving ill treatment from colleagues who saw not just you but also students as inferior to those in the main programme. Constant comparison bruised morale of staff and ECP students, who would constantly complain about in class that they felt themselves alienated in the department. A staff member who was teaching the main programme would not offer help to the ECP students because they were allocated "people to help them", in this case the ECP staff members.

The most notable effects of teaching ECP students stem from the lack of appreciation from heads of departments (HOD), staff members and other stakeholders. The ECP is new in some departments and has not been well-received due to the perception of it being additional workload, which in reality it is not. A lack of proper understanding and communication about the programme, especially to individuals

who are not directly involved with it, has hindered its successful implementation and the achievement of desired outcomes.

Respondent 5 said: "*I have been with my institution for twelve years, living on two-year fixed-term contracts, and my HOD last year threatened to close the ECP programme because he does not see the need for it. This man arrived here five months ago, imagine. Every time the contract ends, we must motivate why they should keep us to get new contracts so that affect us. We are constantly looking for other opportunities. Students are aware of all these challenges because some lecturers come and leave as soon as they get secured jobs. The other colleagues do not even know who you are. They think we are inferior to them just because we teach ECP and are earning less than them. Some even mistaken us for tutors, we are not tutoring.*"

Skills required by institutions of higher learning to teach ECP students

All the ECP lecturers possessed either a Bachelor's or Master's qualification, whilst enrolled for the Master's and PhD, respectively. The primary requirement for teaching at a University of Technology is a Master's degree, but for a junior lecturer position, a BTech is acceptable on conditions stipulated in the contract. The Bachelor's degree holders were appointed on the condition that they had a relevant teaching qualification and should register for their Master's degree to further their studies.

The ECP lecturers felt they had the necessary skills to teach the calibre of the ECP students not only because of their qualifications, but experience in the field of education, training offered by the institution and induction when they commenced their duties. They developed their own teaching and learning materials to better suit the ECP students. A majority of these ECP staff members started as tutors in their departments, continued as lecturer assistants and eventually lecturers. Some of them participated in the Continuous Programme Development, depending on whether the HOD allowed it. Some participated in research projects and publications, and presented group papers at different conferences. This was all evident enough that ECP lecturers were well prepared and possesses the necessary skills to teach, and all were aspiring to complete their PhD degrees if they could be offered support from the permanent staff members.

Some respondents said the following:

Respondent 1: "…*I consider myself a teacher more than I am a lecturer. I do not just go to class and do the bare minimum as the tale would have it. I teach. I have been teaching for the past 6 years. We also attend conferences like everyone. We attended the National ECP Colloquium in Pretoria in 2019 and published papers from that. We have been publishing just like mainstream lecturers but we're still facing stigmatization to this day…*"

Respondent 13: "…*Yes, I may not have a PhD, but I have experience and that should be evident enough that I have the necessary skills to be a lecturer, not just an*

ECP lecturer, but overall lecturing in my department. I have mainstream modules that I teach and that is not part of my ECP load nor contract…"

Respondent 3: "*…Having a Masters's or PhD does not determine whether a person can be a good lecturer or not. I have been in my department for the past 12 years, and have never gotten permanently appointed because I am a non-South African. Regardless, I have been teaching and have graduated both ECP and mainstream students in our programmes. I am honestly tired of fighting it because my PhD has not made a difference for 12 good years…*"

Factors which contribute to the ECP academic staff turnover

The ECP lecturers felt a need to look for better opportunities. When asked for reasons why they would want to leave the university, they cited multiple reasons such as inequitable pay, and lack of benefits, rewards and incentives. They were mostly dissatisfied with their remuneration packages, which were substandard and much lower than those of an average academic staff employed at a similar level. They further noted that their packages had little to no benefits, such as, for example, medical insurance.

Respondent 9: "*… We don't have any benefits in our contracts. I could not even afford to buy a car because I was on a contract and could not finance a car…*"

Respondent 2: "*… We always raise the issue of equal pay in our SoTL meetings but nothing ever gets done. At the colloquium, Ian Scott made it clear that the DHET grant is enough to even make us permanent, but these people just don't care…*"

Respondent 7: "*…There are people who get benefits such as medical aid cover and a bonus. It all depends on who your HoD is. It is a known fact and we always talk about it. This is really unfair because all need medical aid for example, but we do not afford it, yet some people get that on the same contract…*"

These findings are consistent with related studies that concluded that salaries, incentives, rewards and recognition are some of the prime factors that impact employee motivation and further affect the retention of academic staff (e.g. Akafo & Boateng, 2015; Zakaria et al., 2020).

Influence of equitable work conditions on staff motivation

The primary focus of the Equity Theory as adopted in this study is employees' judgements of how equitably they are treated compared to their peers. The ECP lecturers were thus asked if they felt they were treated equally compared to other employees. Most of the respondents stated that their treatment was not equal to that of the permanent staff members. Several reasons were brought forward, including not having appropriate office space, being excluded from meetings and other activities of the department, and not being issued essential work equipment such as laptops. The respondents further noted that, unlike permanent staff members, they had to continuously motivate their existence in the departments to renew their contracts, which created an unstable work environment. Since work environment plays a key role in the motivation and retention of staff members, it was therefore

important to further establish if the unfair treatment affected their motivation. Respondents who felt the treatment and work conditions were not equitable were also highly demotivated. They were always searching for better opportunities and were not motivated to participate in other departmental activities beyond teaching and learning. Although most of respondents noted that they were motivated by their students and the desire to see them succeed, they were still generally unenthused by their employment conditions. This diminution of motivation is concerning as teaching is an overly complex task that requires motivated and dedicated personnel (Akafo & Boateng, 2015).

Respondent 12: "… *I just get demotivated to do anything else except going to class and teach which is basically what they pay me for. Why bother when they do not bother on issues that affect you. I tell myself that this is an opportunity to get all the experience that I need, after that I will leave*…"

Respondent 3 "… *We're always applying to other institutions because even when we apply for other internal posts we never get them. I had a conversation with colleagues from CPUT, UP and UFS, they are permanent, so I guess that's where I am looking for opportunities because we're taken for a fool here*…"

4. DISCUSSION

The ECP has been instrumental in rectifying the injustices of the apartheid era in the South African higher education landscape (Dhunpath & Vithal 2014; CHE 2016). Widening access to universities, developing impactful means of learning and enhancing academic success are among the contributions of the ECP. Even though the ECP is regarded as an all-encompassing curriculum intervention, which aims to redress the academic sector in its entirety and respond to the academic needs of most students, its influence remains constrained and outlying (Leibowitz & Bozalek, 2015; CHE, 2016). Moreover, the capability of the ECP for improving the rates of degree completion by students has encountered criticism. Luckett and Shay (2020) state that with certain exceptions, levels of the ECP completion continue to be unsatisfactory. This occurs during the transition to mainstream programmes. The knowledge gained in the first year of an ECP programme is often lost by the end of the second, third and fourth years when students drop out, leading to academic exclusion. Given the considerable role of the ECP for redressing inadequacies and disparities, the ECP intervention carries an immense responsibility to restructure the inefficiencies in the South African higher education landscape. The complex array of activities linked to teaching and learning in universities impedes the successful roll-out of the ECP to maximize its intended purpose.

The Higher Education Information Management Systems Directorate monitors the academic progress and performance of the first-year undergraduate students in South African Public Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) (HEMIS, 2019; Khulu-vhe et al., 2021). Several reports have been released to date based on data collected from all public HEIs, offering statistics on dropout and throughput rates across

the country (DHET, 2013a, 2013b, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2021, 2022, 2023). The most current publication provides a rich dataset for identifying strategies to improve university student achievement (Khuluvhe et al., 2021). Dropout rates in the second academic year for the first-time entering students pursuing a four-year mainstream undergraduate qualification fluctuated from 21 % in 2000 to 8.2 % in 2016 for contact education, and between 45.3–27.8 % during the same period for distance tuition (HEMIS, 2019).

These reports emphasize the need to develop and implement instruments supporting student success and highlighted the need to analyse data at the national and institutional levels to identify blockages and appropriate interventions. Despite various official policies by the CHE and the DHET, the average SA graduation rate for 4-year undergraduate qualifications (distance and contact education) for both the mainstream and ECP qualifications is 33.1 % after four years of study. Ten years after students started their studies, only 53.91 % graduated. Against the backdrop of these statistics, respondents were asked to recommend best practices that line managers, often referred to as HODs in the public HIEs, can implement to maximize the effectiveness of the ECP (Fig. 2).
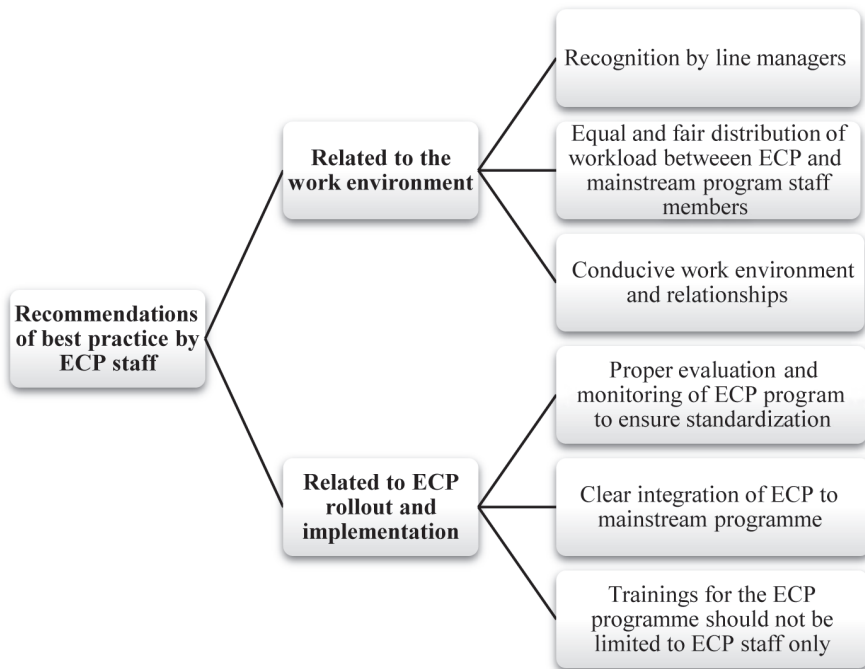
Figure 2. Key recommendations by ECP academic staff on best practices that can be adopted by line managers and policymakers.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The present study's findings show numerous crucial conclusions on the effects of teaching the ECP students on academic staff, who need to adapt their teaching styles to accommodate the unique needs of the ECP students. However, this seems insufficient in supplying extra support required by the ECP students, posing difficulties for academic personnel. Furthermore, the study emphasizes the detrimental impact of frequent comparison and stigmatization by colleagues, which impacts not only staff morale but also causes a sense of alienation among the ECP students within the department. The ECP lecturers clearly possess necessary skills to educate the ECP students, as evidenced by their qualifications, experience and professional development. However, their potential and expertise are frequently overlooked due to prevailing biases and stigmatization. This lack of recognition and appreciation undermines their confidence and inhibits their career advancement. Inequitable remuneration, a lack of benefits and awards, and poor working circumstances all contribute to the turnover of the ECP academic personnel. Findings indicate that salary packages granted to the ECP instructors are frequently inadequate compared to their permanently employed counterparts, resulting in unhappiness and demotivation. The lack of vital benefits, such as contributions to the medical aid, exacerbates the problem and increases the turnover rates. The ECP lecturers also believe they are treated unfairly in comparison to permanent staff employees, citing examples such as being excluded from meetings and activities, having little office space and constantly having to justify their presence in the departments.

Several recommendations can be made based on our findings to address the identified difficulties. First and foremost, it is critical to increase recognition and support of the academic staff and ECP lecturers. This can be achieved by providing specialized training and professional development opportunities tailored to the needs of teaching ECP students. Incentives, rewards and public recognition should be implemented to acknowledge and appreciate the contributions of the ECP lecturers. To guarantee fair and equitable treatment, differences in salary packages, benefits and working conditions between the ECP academics and permanent staff members must be addressed. This includes providing adequate office space, participation in department events and meetings, and supplying necessary work equipment. Furthermore, establishing more permanent posts for the ECP lecturers based on their skills and expertise, as well as promoting their pursuit of higher degrees, can offer job stability and chances for promotion. Fostering a culture of inclusivity, respect and collaboration among all staff members is critical for promoting a healthy work environment. It is critical to engage policymakers and line managers to push fair and equitable policies for the ECP lecturers. This includes advocating proper financing, resource allocation and professional development opportunities. Clear communication channels and awareness campaigns can aid in addressing misconceptions, reducing stigma and fostering a greater understanding of the value and significance of the ECP programmes. Finally, putting these recommendations

into action can help to improve the experiences, work satisfaction and retention of the ECP academic staff. By resolving the identified difficulties, institutions can foster a more inclusive and supportive atmosphere that recognizes and values the ECP lecturers' contributions, eventually benefiting both staff members and the ECP students they serve.

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