




# Factors affecting the retention of millennial academics



## Authors:

Rudo R. Marozva<sup>1</sup>   
 Emmerentia N. Barkhuizen<sup>1,2</sup>   
 Masase E. Mageza-  
 Mokhethi<sup>1</sup> 

## Affiliations:

<sup>1</sup>Department of Industrial Psychology and People Management, College of Business and Economics, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa

<sup>2</sup>Centre for Work Performance, College of Business and Economics, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa

## Corresponding author:

Emmerentia Barkhuizen,  
 nbarkhuizen@uj.ac.za

## Dates:

Received: 05 Apr. 2023  
 Accepted: 28 Sept. 2023  
 Published: 20 Mar. 2024

## How to cite this article:

Marozva, R.R., Barkhuizen, E.N., & Mageza-Mokhethi, M.E. (2024). Factors affecting the retention of millennial academics. *SA Journal of Human Resource Management/SA Tydskrif vir Menslikehulpbronbestuur*, 22(0), a2301. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajhrm.v22i0.2301>

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**Orientation:** South African higher education institutions (HEIs) face significant challenges in attracting and retaining younger-generation academics. This results in a critical shortage of a talented pool of scholars required for succession and the sustainability of HEIs over the longer term.

**Research purpose:** This study aimed to explore the factors affecting the retention of millennial academics in South Africa.

**Motivation for the study:** The retention of millennial academics is essential to the success of HEIs. Research on the factors affecting the retention of this cohort of academics is scarce despite their growing importance in sustainable HEI practice.

**Research approach/design and method:** The study adopted a cross-sectional qualitative research approach using semi-structured interviews to collect the data. The sample included 14 millennial academics representing various public HEIs in South Africa. Thematic analyses were applied to analyse the data.

**Main findings:** The findings showed that five factors should be considered to retain millennial academics: career and growth opportunities, work environment, rewards, leadership and work–life balance.

**Practical/managerial implications:** The study concluded that an integrated talent retention strategy should be developed that, at a minimum include opportunities for career development, employee growth, healthy employee–employer relationships, employee support and market-related compensation to retain millennial academics.

**Contribution/value-add:** This research contributes to the limited knowledge of the factors affecting the retention of millennial academics.

**Keywords:** academics; higher education institutions; millennials; retention strategies; turnover intentions.

## Introduction

Higher education institutions (HEIs) are critical to the advancement of any nation. Nhamo and Mjimba (2020) assert that higher education systems are common denominators in prosperous countries. In particular, they play an essential role in the economic development of nations where economic benefits emanate from their ability to enhance economic growth (Pouris & Inglesi-Lotz, 2014). Moreover, HEIs fulfil an economic role by educating and equipping individuals with high-level skills that address the employment requirements of both the private and public sectors (World Bank, 2017). In the social arena, HEIs are important in redressing social inequalities by enabling the upward class movement of previously disadvantaged members of society (Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET], 2019)

Higher education institutions in South Africa embarked on a massive student enrolment initiative to fulfil their social and economic mandate. According to Tjønneland (2017), South Africa witnessed an overall student growth rate of 1.75% from 2012 to 2017, aiming to reach 1.5 million students by 2030. The anticipated increase in student enrolment exerts pressure on HEIs. Hlengwa (2019) observes that increased student enrolment amid a shortage of academics negatively impacts staff–student ratios. Higher education institutions are affected by imbalanced staff–student ratios, and the sector is now dominated by an ageing workforce (Musakuro & De Klerk, 2021). The increase in student enrolment, an ageing workforce, and high turnover rates at HEIs saw the government of South Africa adopting the Staffing South Africa Universities Framework (SSAUF) (Hlengwa, 2019). The SSAUF's main goal was to help identify and nurture young academics by adopting the New Generation of Academics Programme (nGAP) to attract and retain young academics (Moosa, 2020).

Despite these well-attempted efforts, HEIs still face a severe problem of retention, management, and attraction of academics who can assist in achieving the national economic objectives of any country (Hoque & Tshutsha, 2022). Highly qualified academics are increasingly moving to the private sector and other HEIs, which can offer better rewards and benefits (Erasmus et al., 2015). Young academics, primarily millennials, are expected to close the gap in staffing at HEIs (DHET, 2019).

The main objective of this research is to explore the factors affecting the retention of millennial academics at South African HEIs. More specifically, the research aims to address the following questions:

- What are the current push factors that influence the retention of millennial academics?
- What are the current pull factors that affect the retention of millennial academics?

While several studies have been conducted to explore the intentions to leave or stay among academics (see Barkhuizen et al., 2020; Erasmus et al., 2015; Muleya et al., 2016), few studies (ChaaCha, 2017; Daniels & Davids, 2019) sought to explore the pull and push factors affecting the retention of millennial academics. This research aims to close the gap in this knowledge. Job hopping is prevalent among millennials. Daniels and David (2019) state that millennials change jobs up to nine times before they reach 30, making them a complex group of individuals to keep in an organisation. Retaining millennial employees is important because millennials are now the largest population in the workforce (Ngotngamwong, 2020). Moreover, institutional continuity and sustainability depend on millennials as the dominant population in the workforce. Statistics of South Africa (2021) reports that millennials comprise 60% of the South African labour force, and 40% come from other generations; hence considering talent-management practices that help attract and retain millennials was critical.

The next section provides a literature review on the push and pull factors affecting the retention of millennial academics in HEIs.

## Literature review

### Characteristics of the millennial employee

The study of generations is traced back to Plato's time (428 BCE) and has ignited the interest of many academics in various fields to explore trends that emerge among individuals of the same cohort (Troksa, 2016). Although there is a great dearth of opinion about the classification of workforce generations, the authors adopted the definition of Timonen and Conlon (2015, p. 1) who define a generation as 'a group of members who have similar attitudes, worldviews and beliefs grounded in their shared context and experiences accumulated over time'. The focus of this study is on millennials. Millennials are considered the most educated workforce compared to their predecessors, having been born

in an emerging digital world, and proficiency in technology is common among them (Zaharee et al., 2018). Millennials' work behaviours and attitudes in the workplace are attributed to the social, economic, and technological environment they have been exposed (Jain & Dutta, 2019). Unfortunately, there are general stereotypes that have been attached to millennials. They are considered a selfish generation that is very difficult to motivate, has no respect, has no work ethic, and lacks loyalty (Hadiyat et al., 2020). More positively, millennials have a significant influence on shaping the world of work. Their expectations about their career aspirations, values and attitudes at work, and fluency in technology will significantly impact the 21st-century organisational cultures (Rudi, 2021).

### Employee retention

According to Kumar and Mathimaran (2017), employee retention relates to efforts by employers to establish a work environment that encourages employees of an organisation to remain with their employer. Sishuwa and Phiri (2020) explain retention as 'a process in which employees are encouraged to remain with the organisation for the maximum period' (p.145). Amushila and Bussin (2021) conceptualise employee retention as 'all the activities and practices used by organisations to avoid the departure of talent' (p. 3). This study will adopt Singh's (2019) definition, which explains employee retention as 'various measures taken by an organisation to encourage its employees to remain with the organisation for a longer duration of time' (p. 425).

### Push and pull factors for millennial academic retention

*Push factors* are reasons premised on the idea that an employee is unhappy with a current employer and leaves an organisation because of dissatisfaction (Sudhashini, 2018). *Pull factors* explain reasons that positively attract an employee to a new or different employer (Mgoduka, 2019). Haldorai et al. (2019) argue that these are uncontrolled factors as they are out of the control of an organisation. Push factors influence turnover intentions more than pull factors (Mgoduka, 2019). The following section describes some of the most prominent push and pull factors for millennial academics in HEIs.

### Growth and career opportunities

Growth and career opportunities relate to how employees perceive that they can achieve their career goals within their current organisation while growth opportunities entail the worker perception and organisation efforts to advance individual careers (Ambrous, 2019; Van Osch & Schaveling, 2020). Sepahvand and Bagherzadeh Khodashahri (2021) argue that growth and career development have a direct impact on the retention of employees. Al Mamun and Hasan (2017) maintain that training and development are crucial to career development. A clearly defined career path is critical in retaining academic employees at HEIs; this explains why most universities have detailed career progression

opportunities for academics (Bossu, Brown, & Warren, 2019). In addition, academic growth and promotion potentials enhance embeddedness and job satisfaction, positively impacting retention (Selesho & Naile, 2014). Academics at HEIs join the profession to grow in teaching and research continually. Failure to provide a well-defined career path causes dissatisfaction among millennial employees (Todorović & Pavićević, 2016). Daniels and Davids (2019) indicate that millennials expect a promotion at an organisation within 6 months of joining it, indicating the importance of career progression. Pandey (2019) found that a lack of clear career growth was one of the major reasons for job-hopping tendencies among millennials.

### Work environment

The work environment is categorised as the physical and non-physical environment. The physical relates to factors around the work itself, while the non-physical entails other organisational factors that impact the execution of tasks (Meirina et al., 2018). Organisational culture, flexible time, organisational structure, feedback, and communication make up a work environment. Organisational culture is important in attracting and retaining employees, and high turnover rates may point to dissatisfaction with the organisation's culture (Mgoduka, 2019). Fomunyan (2017) indicates that student protests and a culture of violence dominating African HEIs influence the academic work environment. Institutional responses to these protests impact the employment of academics. Czerniewicz et al. (2019) indicated that measures adopted by HEIs to mitigate protests result in academics working under pressure when they seek to make up for the lost time.

According to Anees et al. (2021), a favourable work environment provides a flexible atmosphere and is crucial for employee retention. Mofokeng (2017) observes that millennial employees prefer to work for an organisation whose values, beliefs and norms are compatible with their values. In addition, millennial employees prioritise working for an organisation that offers flexible working hours. Daniels and Davids' (2019) study found a positive relationship between work environment and job satisfaction. Millennial employees also seek to work for organisations that maintain good social relations (Rattu & Tielung, 2018). Meirina et al. (2018) found a positive relationship between the work environment and the intention to stay among millennials in Indonesia. All combined, a supportive work environment creates a perception that the employer cares about employees, which positively influences retention (Torsabo & Ezekiel, 2021). Moreover job autonomy enhances work-life balance among employees, which in turn reduces intentions to leave among employees (Novianti & Fuadiputra, 2021).

### Rewards

According to Alhmoud and Rjoub (2020), rewards focus on the intrinsic, extrinsic, and social forms of compensation given to the employees by the employer. More specifically rewards are categorised as intrinsic, extrinsic, and social.

Examining them separately helps to determine which reward positively impacts employee retention (Alhmoud & Rjoub, 2020). Faisal et al. (2020) assert that competitive rewards enhance job embeddedness. Muleya et al. (2016) argue that dissatisfaction with remuneration impacts employees' attitudes and behaviours, determining their level of satisfaction with an organisation. Anees et al. (2021) continue to add that competitive reward systems are the foundation of successful employee retention strategies.

Rewards are key in attracting and retaining academic employees (Mabaso & Dlamini, 2018). Many HEIs are losing valuable academic staff members to the private sector or other industries that offer more competitive reward packages (Seeletse & Thabane, 2016). Comparably, AKhatar et al. (2015) believe academics at HEIs value intrinsic rewards more than extrinsic rewards and adopting a total reward strategy helps HEIs retain competent and qualified academics. Among millennials, remuneration is considered unimportant although it enables them to meet their physiological needs (Hee & Rhung, 2019). Mofokeng (2018) observes that millennials prefer to structure their remuneration packages. A study by Hee and Rhung (2019), showed that rewards were important for determining voluntary turnover among millennials. Therefore, as highlighted by Orajaka (2021) a good reward-management strategy enhances the retention of skilled employees in an organisation.

### Leadership

Strategic leadership is critical in the retention of millennial employees; it helps organisations to align employee needs with the needs of the organisation, which can lead to high levels of satisfaction among millennial employees (Younas & Bari, 2020). As such, satisfaction with an organisation's leaders reduces turnover intentions resulting from leadership behaviour (Erasmus et al., 2015). ChaaCha (2017) mentioned that leadership at HEIs is very important because leaders assume their positions based on academic accomplishments instead of leadership qualities or competencies, which can negatively impact organisational efforts to motivate and retain academics. Poor leadership practices negatively affect academics' morale, leading to dissatisfaction and eventually higher turnover among early-career academics (Barkhuizen et al., 2020). Moreover, adopted leadership styles such as autocratic leadership contributed to academic staff leaving leaders and not necessarily the institution (Mkulu, 2018). Similarly, millennial academics, place great importance on leadership and are more inclined to leave management and not their jobs (Mofokeng, 2017). Millennials prefer transformational leadership, which breeds critical thinking and devolves decision-making powers, which propagates satisfaction among millennials (Ngotngamwong, 2020). Lesenyeho (2017) found that management support for talent management was a significant predictor of the voluntary turnover intentions of early career academics, of which the greatest cohort was representative of millennials.

## Work–life balance

Sánchez-Hernández et al. (2019) argue that the influx of millennials into the workplace has seen the growing importance of work–life balance. As a result, millennial employees are attracted to organisations that balance work and life. Daniels and Davids (2019) notice that work–life balance is essential among millennials while considering their ideal job. According to Diego-Medrano and Salazar (2021), the nature of work for academics hinders work–life balance. Increased student enrolments and other expected outputs from academics have increased academics' workload, requiring them to put in extra hours, which in most cases result in 'spillovers' (Chatterjee, 2018). For example, academics teach and travel for conferences to present research while working extra hours to achieve the required outputs for promotion, affecting family commitments. Similarly, Bartlett et al. (2021) argue that the higher education work environment prioritises productivity, resulting in academics putting in many working hours to achieve various key result areas while affecting their commitment to other areas of life. According to Ronnie et al. (2022) work–life imbalance impacts negatively on the emotional well-being of academics, work–life merge causes emotional taxation. Work–life imbalance and ill-being were two major reasons that made academics leave their employers (Hall, 2023). A study by Hudiono and Sari (2022) identified work–life balance as a critical factor that impacts retention of millennial employees. Fontinha et al. (2019) highlight that HEIs should have work–life balance initiatives to mitigate the negative impact of the increased teaching and other administration duties expected from academics. Franco et al. (2021) argue that not having a work–life balance in HEIs affects academics' work commitment and engagement, impacting their retention.

In sum, the given section highlighted some of the most prominent factors contributing to the retention of millennial academics in HEIs. These include rewards, work–life balance, career and growth opportunities, leadership and work environment. The nature and application of these factors can either attract (pull) millennial academics to HEIs or push (force them to leave) them to leave their respective institutions. In the next section, the research design adopted for the study is described followed by a presentation of the findings.

## Research design

### Research approach

A cross-sectional qualitative research approach using semi-structured interviews was followed in this study. Qualitative research adopts an inductive style to explore and understand meanings that individuals or groups attach to human or social problems (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study followed the interpretivist paradigm. Interpretivism is based on relativist ontology and uses the unique context of the study to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under study rather than generalising it (Pham, 2018).

## Research strategy

A case study strategy was used for this study. Gustafsson (2017) defines a case study as an 'intensive study about a person or group of people or unit aimed to generalise over several units' (p. 2). Okesina (2020) notes that a case study strategy isolates a unique case for analysis and could be an individual, group, or an institution. Multiple case studies were used to gain an in-depth understanding of the cases as a unit. Using multiple case studies allows the researcher to compare for similarities and differences of individual cases and provide more reliable evidence than using a single case (Heale & Twycross, 2018).

## Research method

### Entrée and establishing researcher roles

The main researcher used personal access to gain entry; this entails knowing relevant managers or essential individuals in accessing participants. Gatekeepers were therefore used to gain access to other research participants. Creswell and Poth (2018) observe that gatekeepers are the initial contacts for the researcher, and they lead the researcher to other participants who enable the researcher to answer the research questions. Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the University of Johannesburg. The research adhered to all ethical requirements for scientific research, such as informing the participants about the purpose of the study, obtaining informed consent, and ensuring confidentiality.

### Sampling

The unit of analysis for this study was millennial academics at HEIs in South Africa. Fourteen participants ( $N = 14$ ) were selected purposively to participate in the study based on their availability and willingness. Creswell (2014) contends that a sample size of 3 to 10 participants is sufficient for a phenomenological study. A sample size of 14 respondents was sufficient for qualitative analysis as saturation can be reached with 10 respondents. Table 1 provides a detailed breakdown of the demographic characteristics of the millennial academics who participated in the study.

### Data-collection methods

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data for the study. DeJonckheere and Vaughn (2019) highlight the fact that a semi-structured interview is an effective tool for collecting data from participants with personal experiences, attitudes, and beliefs about the phenomenon under study. O'Keeffe et al. (2016) argue that semi-structured interviews bring to light previously unknown information as respondents are considered experts on the phenomenon under study. Open-ended questions were formulated and used to collect data for the study. Open-ended questions allowed research participants to answer questions without being restricted to pre-formulated answers (Beins, 2013).

**TABLE 1:** Characteristics of participants.

Identifier	Gender	Year of birth	Age (years)	Race	Number of years with current employer	Highest qualification	Position
RP1	Male	1981	41	Black	4	Doctorate	Associate professor
RP2	Female	1987	35	Black	5	Doctorate	Senior lecturer
RP3	Female	1984	38	Mixed race	15	Masters	Lecturer
RP4	Male	1990	32	Black	2	Masters	Lecturer
RP5	Male	1983	39	Black	2	Masters	Lecturer
RP6	Male	1984	38	Black	3	Doctorate	Senior lecturer
RP7	Male	1982	40	Black	6	Doctorate	Senior lecturer
RP8	Female	1988	34	Black	8	Masters	Lecturer
RP9	Female	1981	41	White	16	Doctorate	Senior lecturer
RP10	Female	1985	37	Black	1	Doctorate	Senior lecturer
RP 11	Male	1989	33	Black	7	Masters	Lecturer
RP12	Male	1985	37	Black	4	Doctorate	Senior lecturer
RP13	Male	1984	38	Black	6	Doctorate	Senior lecturer
RP14	Male	1984	38	Black	17	Doctorate	Senior lecturer

## Recording of data

Fieldnotes, transcripts and tape recordings are procedures used to record qualitative data; these methods enable the researcher to keep the data for analysis (Tessier, 2012). The primary researcher used audio recordings and transcriptions to enhance the quality of data management for this research. As the interviews were conducted virtually, the researcher sought permission from the participants to record the interviews. Data from the interviews was transcribed verbatim, and the recordings for each participant were carefully typed, taking note of non-verbal actions. The primary researcher safely stored the audio recordings and transcriptions on a password-protected laptop.

## Data analyses

Qualitative data analysis entails interpreting, identifying, and examining patterns and themes in textual data (Islam & Aldaihani, 2022). These patterns help the researcher to understand the phenomenon under study. Qualitative research uses either content analysis or thematic analysis to analyse data. The study used thematic analysis to analyse the data. Kiger and Varpio (2020) argue that thematic analysis is a flexible method to understand experiences, thoughts, or behaviours. The thematic analysis allows for generating themes either deductively or inductively instead of the mere categorisation of codes (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). The researcher adopted the Braun and Clarke (2006) six-phase process for thematic analysis. Neuendorf (2018) summarises Braun and Clarke's process as involving: familiarisation with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, finding, and naming themes and producing a report.

## Ensuring the quality and rigour of the research

Credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability are used in qualitative research to ensure quality data (Nowell et al., 2019). The researchers ensured credibility by providing a detailed explanation of the entire research design that was followed for the study. Korstjens and Moser (2018) propose using an audit trail to ensure the study's dependability. In this study, the researcher provided an audit trail detailing how data were collected, how themes in the

analysis were derived and how decisions were made throughout the study to increase *dependability*. *Transferability* considers how research results can be generalised and transferred to another context or setting with other respondents (Nowell et al., 2019). In line with Creswell (2014), the researchers presented a thick data description for transferability. According to Nowell et al. (2019), confirmability requires the researcher to show how conclusions and interpretations of the study were arrived at. The researchers clearly explained how data for the study was collected, analysed, and interpreted, which are all paramount to establishing the conformability of a study.

## Data presentation

According to Johnson et al. (2020), clarity, accuracy, and consciousness in communicating results are important to the quality reporting of qualitative research. A narrative format using direct quotes from interviews was used to report the research findings in detail (Josephine, 2020). Mabuza et al. (2014) argue that direct quotes enhance the study's trustworthiness. The researchers used the table format to depict themes and sub-themes generated from the study. Direct quotes were used to support emerging themes and sub-themes.

## Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the University of Johannesburg (No. IPPM-2021-584).

## Results

Five main themes emerged from the data analyses: career and growth opportunities, work-life balance, working environment, leadership, and rewards. Career and growth opportunities occurred most (mentioned 25 times), followed by work environment (mentioned 21 times) and rewards (mentioned 19 times). Themes relating to leadership and work life balance were mentioned to a lesser extent. A summary of the themes and the sub-themes is presented in Table 2.

The themes are discussed in more detail in the section that follows.

**TABLE 2:** Themes and sub-themes.

Theme	Sub-themes	Frequencies per sub-theme
1. Growth and career opportunities	1.1 Create space where young academics can grow	1
	1.2 Clear career progression opportunities	13
	1.3 University still new opportunity to lead.	2
	1.4 Promoted when you get a higher qualification.	2
	1.5 Leadership development programmes	2
	1.6 Progress further with education	3
	1.7 Collaborations	2
	Total	-
2. Working environment	2.1 Increased workload	1
	2.2 Flexible working	3
	2.3 Performance orientated	3
	2.4 Organisational policies	3
	2.5 Organisational culture	4
	2.6 Good organisational infrastructure	2
	2.7 Duties are challenging and a variety	2
	2.8 My views are considered	1
	2.9 Autonomous working	2
Total	-	21
3. Rewards	3.1 Salary	6
	3.2 Reward achievements	1
	3.3 Funding for studies	2
	3.4 Funding for immediate family studies	3
	3.5 Leave to further studies	2
	3.6 Recognised for attending international conferences	1
	3.7 Annual leave, medical aid and retirement annuities	1
	3.8 Research incentivised	3
Total	-	19
4. Leadership	4.1 Supportive leadership	2
	4.2 Micromanaging	2
	4.3 Mentoring and reverse mentoring	3
	4.4 Visionary leaders	2
Total	-	9
5. Work-life balance	5.1 Work at our own pace	3
	5.2 Reduced working hours	1
	5.3 We can work for other organisations	2
	5.4 Working close to home	2
Total	-	8

## Theme 1: Career and growth opportunities

Altogether, the theme of career and growth opportunities was mentioned the most. Sub-themes such as career progression, emerging universities, academic development, managerial training, development, and attending conferences emerged under the theme of career and growth opportunities. A brief description of the most emphasised sub-themes is described further in the text and supported by direct quotes from the participants.

### Sub-theme 1.1: Career progression

The availability of career and growth opportunities was cited as one of the reasons why participants were attracted to their current employers. Three participants highlighted the fact that they have been with their institution for more than 10 years because of the growth opportunities and being able to move through the ranks at a steadfast pace:

'At X university, I have seen myself grow. I joined the university as a junior lecturer and have progressed to be a senior lecturer. You know what you must achieve to be promoted and this has kept me with X university for so long ...' (RP9)

and

'The university gives an inclusive environment which gives room for growth and flexibility, allowing exploring and expanding our knowledge, an opportunity that allows us to harness our skills, a professional development space that we can grow ...' (RP3)

Institutions that did not provide opportunities for growth in terms of career progression forced some academics to leave their institutions. Ten participants highlighted that they have moved between organisations because the organisation they were moving to presented them with opportunities to grow in their careers. They indicated that they often moved to other institutions to assume higher positions than they were holding at their organisations:

'[I] left my previous employer because I felt I was not developing with my career so I wanted a place where I could grow, my goals are being fulfilled now in terms of my career ...' (RP6)

### Sub-theme 1.2: Academic development

Training and development opportunities emerged as other key factors that attract millennial academics to stay with their current employers. Two participants felt that their institutions' training and development opportunities had impacted their intentions to stay. They indicated that their institutions allowed them to further their studies while working and to go on a paid leave to complete their studies:

'[P]ostgraduate fellowship opportunities prepared us for what's to come if you were to be an academic, we had training, we had workshops, we had more time to focus on our studies than working, we were getting paid for studying basically ...' (RP8)

'[O]pportunities have motivated me to stay because we study for free here, and we only pay a small insignificant amount of money ...' (RP14)

### Sub-theme 1.3: Training for career progression

Training provided by HEIs also develops leadership and managerial capacity among academics, making them feel valued by the organisation. Three participants highlighted the fact that their institutions provided them with managerial training and development programmes to prepare them for future managerial positions. This made them realise the organisation had a future that included them, and they stayed with their organisation:

'[I] had opportunities to attend management training as a young academic, opportunities to manage a conference, to manage programs and from that, I have learnt and made the work diverse not just teaching and research but other aspects of leadership and management ...' (RP9)

## Theme 2: Work environment

Overall, the theme of work environment was mentioned second most. The sub-themes that emerged under this theme

included physical environment, organisational culture, increased workload, organisational policies and practices, and organisational infrastructure. A description of some of the sub-themes, supported by direct quotes from the participants, is presented further in the text.

### Sub-theme 2.1: Physical environment

A pleasant work environment was highlighted as one of the factors that influenced the millennial academics' intentions to stay or leave an organisation. The participants highlighted the fact that they want to work in a pleasant environment, and seeing their colleagues grow in their careers has motivated them to stay with their organisations. Another participant indicated that their institution offers an excellent work environment, which is why people do not leave:

'We are motivated by our work colleagues and their growth when people grow around you, you also want to grow ...' (RP8).

'[T]hey staff morale is very important, we want to work with pleasant managerial and work colleagues in a peaceful and respectful environment where everyone gets along ...' (RP3)

### Sub-theme 2.2: Organisational culture

Three participants indicated that the culture in an organisation plays an important role in choosing to stay or leave an organisation. An organisational culture that values all millennial academic contributions emerged as important in their decision to remain with the institution. On the contrary, those participants who perceived that the infrastructure was not conducive and their inputs not valued, were more likely to leave their institution:

'... In Institution X my views are considered in my department which makes me feel that I am contributing to the institution ...' (RP4)

'I left because the internal environment was not conducive, three months down my employment I was not given a laptop and we were working virtually and all departmental meetings were conducted virtually and I could not attend departmental meetings, showing that my inputs were not even needed ...' (RP5)

### Sub-theme 2.3: Flexible work arrangements

Flexitime or flexible working hours offered by HEIs were considered factors that made the higher education industry favourite for many. Working hours in higher education enabled academics to take up other part-time jobs and personal activities:

'[W]e have flexible working hours like now we work from home, I can take the little one to crèche and do other errands while I deliver on my job ...' (RP14)

'[I]f I see anything that brings development, in terms of prospects, it brings in my life or career, the development it is likely to give me the flexibility, I want to do other personal stuff ...' (RP6)

### Sub-theme 2.4: Organisational policies and practices

Organisational policies and processes emerged as one of the reasons that can push an employee out of the organisation. One participant indicated that ambiguity and slow

implementation of policies could cause anxiety among employees, while making employees feel there is no uniform application of policies. Organisational policies and practices surrounding employment status were highlighted as factors that made millennial academics job-hop. Participants indicated that they have been moving across organisations, searching for permanent employment:

'[I]n 2014, I felt like leaving, you know when you feel they are not going to promote you, they were slow with all those processes. When someone achieves something, it made me almost want to change ...' (RP3)

'Well, the reason I left university X was that I was a contractor, we all need security, we need a stable job and I got offered permanent employment elsewhere ...' (RP5)

Two participants noticed the need to do away with rigidity and bureaucracy, create fluid organisations to attract millennial academics, and involve young academics in decision-making:

'[I]ncrease the autonomy, allow them to do the job the way they feel but within the policy frameworks ...' (RP7)

'[I]nvolve millennials in decision making, you know at HEIs, there is bureaucracy, you have to be a professor to make decisions when people feel left out, they look for greener pastures.' (RP10)

### Sub-theme 2.5: Organisational infrastructure

The availability of good structures and infrastructure that can assist employees in achieving their outcomes was highlighted as important in attracting and retaining millennial academics. One participant highlighted that they had been attracted to their institution because of the advanced working facilities provided by the organisation. However, another participant indicated that failure to be provided with performance enablers like computers made them leave their organisation:

'The working facilities are state of the art, internet connection, office space, material in terms of research material, books, journals, we have access to such which many universities cannot match.' (RP6)

'[I] left because the internal environment was not conducive, 3 months down my employment I was not given a laptop ...' (RP5)

## Theme 3: Rewards

Rewards emerged as the third most important factor in the retention of millennial academics. Direct financial and indirect financial rewards emerged as sub-themes under the rewards theme. A description of the sub-themes, supported by direct quotes from the participants, is presented further in the text.

### Sub-theme 3.1: Direct financial rewards

Rewards were cited as a crucial factor that will attract and retain academics from competitors in the same industry or avoid academics opting for the private industry. The participants, in particular, highlighted that for HEIs to attract

millennials from the private industry, HEIs should ensure that they match the pay or even pay higher:

'If you want to attract young quality professionals you need to give them more money, incentivise them with money because they can get more money in the industry without doing more qualifications ....' (RP2)

'The most driving factor has to do with remuneration. If they can improve on the remuneration of academics, it can go a long way in attracting and retaining young academics ...' (RP14)

### Sub-theme 3.2: Indirect financial rewards

Some participants highlighted that even though they were not paid the competitive salaries they dreamed of, their universities offered them other financial rewards like funding their studies and those of their spouses and children. One participant highlighted that they are highly attracted to institutions that fund their research activities more than their salary, as their growth opportunities depend primarily on their contribution to research. Two participants indicated that their organisation offered them other non-monetary rewards, which made them stay at their organisation:

'[T]here are benefits for dependents, they can study for free, the spouse can study for free, I think that can make someone stay with their employer ...' (RP6)

'[T]here are benefits which are non-monetary such as medical aid, leave allocations and retirement annuities ...' (RP7)

Other participants also indicated that incentives that made the industry attractive did not come only in salaries. Three participants indicated that research and supervision of postgraduate students had been incentivised. Employees get financial rewards when they complete a qualification or when their research work is published in accredited journals and when students they supervise graduate. Participants highlighted that such rewards were an income stream and motivated employees to finish their qualifications and do more research, which also impacted their career growth and fulfilment:

'[T]hey also incentivise research, academics are given opportunities to present and read their papers at international conferences and paid when their work gets published, it allows academics to be exposed to various industries, it's an avenue which allows academics to grow ...' (RP1)

'[T]here is qualification reward at my institution when you finish your qualification, you get rewarded with monetary reward and an opportunity to attend an international conference when you graduate with a PhD.' (RP14)

### Theme 4: Leadership

Management practices and supportive leadership subthemes emerged under the leadership theme. Poor management practices were cited as one of the reasons that caused people to leave their previous employers. One participant indicated that micromanaging was one of the factors that made them leave the private sector:

'[M]y manager was really policing me, like micromanaging me and it is one of those things and to thrive in an environment you

cannot be micromanaged and that's one good thing about academia, you have tasks and deadlines how and when you do it is up to you ....' (RP8)

Supportive leaders were cited as key enablers that made academics realise or achieve their goals. One participant highlighted that in research, one needed senior mentoring to be successful. The success of young academics depends on having supportive leaders who will mentor them in research activities:

'[O]nce I have proper leadership, I can establish myself, create a name for myself then obviously there will be rewards thereafter ...' (RP12)

### Theme 5: Work-life balance

Work-life balance was the final theme to emerge from the analyses. Not least important, the participants mentioned that access to their families and working in institutions close to their families is important to them:

'[W]hat attracted me to university X is that I am close to home, I have always wanted to work close to home ...' (RP4)

'I moved to University X because it offered me an opportunity to stay close to my family ...' (RP13)

One participant indicated that the higher education industry does not overwhelm employees with accomplishing work requirements. Still, it is an environment where individuals with families can balance their work and family requirements. In addition, being an academic provides individuals with opportunities to balance life and work challenges:

'[I] am a mother of two small kids so academia, it is busy but manageable than the private industry when you have two small kids ...' (RP8)

### Discussion

The study explored the factors affecting the retention of millennial academics at public HEIs in South Africa. Five themes emerged: career growth and development, work-life balance, work environment, rewards, and leadership. The discussion focused on the study's findings concerning empirical and theoretical literature to deduce areas that need further exploration. Limitations, areas of further research, recommendations, and implications for human resources will be discussed before providing conclusions.

Career growth opportunities in the higher education industry emerged as the primary factor that attracted millennial academics to stay in the industry. With most young academics joining the industry at the lower level, the availability of opportunities to grow in the institution was critical. Hee and Rhung (2019) observe that career growth is a form of extrinsic motivation that attracts employees to stay at an organisation. Other researchers argue that opportunities for growth and development directly impact employee retention (Sepahvand & Bagherzadeh Khodashahri, 2021). The availability of training and development opportunities emerged as a factor



that attracted young academics to the industry. Participants noticed that programmes such as post-graduate fellowships motivate them to focus on furthering their studies and reducing their workload while studying. Ruiz (2017) highlights that training and development opportunities improve employees' abilities and skills, positively impacting job satisfaction and work engagement and lowering intentions to leave an organisation. The findings indicated that millennial academics valued the employer's development initiatives, which prepared them to assume managerial positions in the organisation. This shows that millennial academics appreciate development initiatives that increase their chances of assuming more senior positions in the organisation and initiatives that broaden their job scope. A clear career path (see Bossu et al., 2019), combined with promotion opportunities, enhances the retention of academics (Selesho & Naile, 2014).

The research participants noticed that the job characteristics of academic work attracted them to remain in the industry. The job allowed them to assume teaching, research, and administrative roles. This made the job more fulfilling and exciting. Tumi et al. (2021) observe that job enrichment makes jobs more rewarding and inspiring; it expands the tasks one performs, which makes the job more interesting, adds variety, and brings a sense of fulfilment. Similarly, Sharma and Bora (2020) argue that job enrichment increases motivation among employees, decreases absenteeism and turnover while helping organisations to retain employees. Hee and Hung (2019) highlight that millennial employees seek meaningful and challenging work, and a boring and routine job threatens their motivation and retention. Job autonomy also emerged as an essential factor in attracting millennial employees to the higher education industry. The participants noticed that they could work independently if deadlines were met. Hee and Rhung (2019) argue that job autonomy is an intrinsic reward that motivates employees to stay at an organisation. According to Novianti and Fuadiputra (2021) job autonomy enhances work-life balance among employees, which in turn reduces intentions to leave among employees.

Organisational systems, processes, resources, and policies were seen as part of the work environment that impacts intentions to stay or leave an organisation. Some participants indicated that they were attracted to their institutions because they created an enabling environment that ensured they were highly engaged and satisfied. Veldsman and Coetzee (2014) argue that organisational policies and systems create an enabling work environment, which increases organisational commitment and lowers turnover intentions. Comparably, Torsabo and Ezekiel (2021) argue that a supportive work environment creates a perception that the employer cares about employees, which positively influence retention. The participants also mentioned the importance of a conducive organisational culture as an important consideration for them to remain within their current jobs (see Mgoduka, 2019). As mentioned by Mofokeng (2017),

millennial employees prefer to work for an organisation whose values, beliefs and norms are compatible with their values. Embedded within the organisational culture, the opportunities for flexible work were a key factor for the participants to remain with their institutions, as they could focus on external activities as well (Anees et al., 2021).

Most research participants felt that rewards were the most effective tool HEIs could use to attract millennials from other industries. Naqvi and Bashir (2015) argue that competitive reward packages attract and retain employees effectively. Similarly, Orajaka (2021) argues that having a good reward management strategy in place enhances the retention of skilled employees in an organisation. Hence, rewards impact intentions to leave or stay at an organisation. Being paid well by respective HEIs was one reason that attracted millennial employees to their employers. Hee and Rhung (2019) contend that salaries are crucial among millennials, and failure to get competitive salaries can adversely affect job satisfaction and cause millennial employees to look for other jobs. According to Hudiono and Sari (2022) providing competitive benefits was an effective strategy of retaining millennial employees. Other research participants were more attracted to other rewards, such as fringe benefits that came with their positions. Participants observed that they were attracted to organisations offering fringe benefits such as study fees for children and spouses, medical aid, annual leave, and retirement annuities. Aslam et al. (2011) observe that providing fringe benefits reduces employees' work-life conflict and increases organisational commitment, which increases intentions to stay with an organisation. Rewards or compensation are the basis of employee compensation strategies in employee retention. Ntuli (2017) observes that compensation strategies are important in retaining academics and emphasise balancing monetary and non-monetary rewards.

The participants showed the need to work in a pleasant environment comprising respectful work colleagues and respectful leaders. The study's findings indicated that leadership is important in steering career growth and the development of academics in the higher education industry. Research participants indicated that supportive leadership was important in shaping their careers and mentoring in research activities. Ngotngamwong (2020) observes that millennial employees care about relationships at the workplace, and organisational leaders can show this by having close relationships with them and knowing them personally. Ruiz (2017) found that good relations with work colleagues motivated millennials to stay with an organisation. Rao et al. (2018) believe that leaders of an organisation should be talent developers and coaches who help employees to grow and develop themselves to be the best in the organisation. The study's findings emphasised that the institution's leadership influenced millennial academics' intentions to leave an organisation. Ruiz (2017) observes that supportive leadership increases the intentions of millennial employees to stay at an organisation. Moreover, poor

leadership results in employees leaving the leader and not the institution (Mkuli, 2018; Mofokeng, 2017).

Finally, the participants found that they are attracted to the higher education industry because it allows them to balance work and life requirements. Muleya (2017) states that a well-balanced work–life permits employees to take time off from work to take care of family issues. Pasko et al. (2020) notice that work–life balance is essential among millennials as this allows them to engage in other leisure activities and spend time with their families. A literature review on retaining millennial employees by Hudiono and Sari (2022) identified work–life balance as a critical factor that impacted retention of millennial employees. Research findings showed that millennial academics were attracted and committed to organisations that appreciated having family duties to fulfil amid their busy schedules (Tladinyane, 2012).

### Implications for human resource management

This research makes an important contribution to the field of human resource management. Although a great deal of research has been devoted to understanding the turnover intentions of academic staff, limited research focusing on millennial academics exists. This cohort of academics is important for succession planning and the future sustainability of HEIs as they make up the largest cohort of employees in the workplace. Therefore, the talent management and retention of these individuals are essential to ensure a stable HEI environment. As highlighted in the findings of the study, career progression and development opportunities are important in retaining millennials in the academic industry. Therefore, it is important to have clear policies on career progression and create a work environment that enhances millennial academics' development and career growth opportunities. The impact of factors that affect retention among millennials differs. Some academic millennials value salaries, while others move across organisations for a better working environment. Therefore, HR must develop an integrated strategy to attract and retain millennials, specifically in the academic industry. An integrated strategy will encompass compensation, growth, employee relationship, and employee support strategies. Leaders play an instrumental role in retention. They influence support, growth, employee relations, and compensation strategies in employee retention. Leadership should therefore adopt the talent mindset to invest in talent to ensure the attraction and retention of talented individuals such as millennials to ensure the continuity of HEIs and educate a nation.

### Limitations and recommendations

This study had some limitations. The sample was limited to the perceptions of millennial academics only. The findings cannot be generalised to other generational cohorts in higher education. The research was also cross-sectional, with data collected at one point. The participants' perceptions might vary during certain periods. Longitudinal research can be useful in tracking the push and pull factors over time intervals to reach definitive conclusions on best practices to

retain millennials more effectively. This research focused mostly on retention factors of millennial academics. Future research can also explore other variables relating to the effective talent management of millennial academics in South African HEIs. Lastly, this research focused on public sector institutions. Further research studies can explore academics at private institutions as retention factors may differ between the private and public sectors.

Millennial academics value challenging tasks and self-fulfilling tasks. It is recommended that job enlargement and job enrichment techniques be used when crafting responsibilities for millennial academics. Job enlargement will expand their tasks across the same organisational level, while job enrichment will expand their responsibilities, authority, and activities vertically along with the different hierarchical levels. The study's findings indicated that those who have stayed over 10 years with the same institutions enjoyed the various tasks offered to them, including managing conferences and various projects. The retention factors of millennial academics can also be quantitatively researched to determine if the broader population will respond similarly.

### Conclusion

The higher education industry plays an important role in developing any country and talented academics ensure that organisational objectives are met. The contribution of academics has resulted in many HEIs adopting various strategies to attract and retain academics and despite these strategies, HEIs are faced with a need for more academic talent. Leaders should therefore strive to create a working environment that encompasses practices and policies that support the growth and development of millennial academics, providing a work–life balance, while ensuring rewards and recognition that enhance job satisfaction. All these factors impact the voluntary turnover of millennial academics.

### Acknowledgements

This article is partially based on the author's thesis entitled Retention strategies for millennial academics in South Africa towards the degree of Master's Commerce in Strategic Human Resource Management at the Collage of Business and Economics: Department of Industrial Psychology and People Management at University of Johannesburg in 2020 with supervisor(s) Prof Nicolene Barkhuizen and Mrs Masase Eve Mageza-Mokhethi. It is available here: <https://ujcontent.uj.ac.za/esploro/outputs/9927205507691>.

### Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

### Authors' contributions

R.R.M. conducted the study on which the article is based. E.N.B. was the primary supervisor of the study and provided

editorial inputs for the article. M.E.M.-M. was the co-supervisor of the study and provided editorial inputs.

## Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

## Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are not openly available due to confidentiality and are available from the corresponding author, E.N.B., upon reasonable request.

## Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

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