



# Leadership unleashed: Fuelling or failing at retaining women in higher education



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**Orientation:** Higher education institutions face significant challenges in retaining women's services as they navigate the challenges of a career. One of the factors critical in retaining the services concerns leadership behaviour displayed by managers.

**Research purpose:** The aim of the study was to explore the relationship between leadership behaviour, and the retention of women in the higher education sector.

**Motivation for the study:** To determine how leadership behaviour impacts the retention of women.

**Research approach/design and method:** A quantitative research approach was employed with descriptive, correlation and multiple regression analysis. The population consisted of 2732 females. A sample of 311 females from different ages, races, marital statuses, staff categories and educational levels across a higher education institution in South Africa was drawn.

**Main findings:** The results indicated that leadership factors such as relationship orientation, integrity, involvement and task orientation are significantly related to women's retention in terms of unique needs, growth, recognition, work conditions, work relationships and support. The most significant retention factor is leaders' work relationship with female employees.

**Practical/managerial implications:** Exploring the role of leadership in enhancing women's retention is noteworthy for the higher education sector. The high drop-out rate by women from academic careers and gender inequity necessitate a review of factors such as leadership behaviour to prevent women in academia from abandoning their careers.

**Contribution/value-add:** This study outlined leadership behaviour critical to the retention of women.

**Keywords:** higher education leadership; retention of women; leader involvement; support; recognition; work conditions; unique needs.

## Introduction

Recent changes in the landscape of higher education have fuelled inequities in the advancement of women in academia. Factors such as the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic and technological developments caused a complete turnaround in how education is facilitated. Overnight, the education system had to transform to online learning, implement new assessment practices, find new ways of managing employees working from home and implement advanced technology (McLean & Warren, 2022). The shift to digital learning forced academics to become e-instructors. Additionally, shifts in household chores, childcare, eldercare and remote working have complicated the work-life balance of employees, especially female employees, as they bear the greater burden of changes in the educational environment (Malisch et al., 2020).

Women are traditionally seen as the primary caregivers at home and carry a greater share of household responsibilities than their male counterparts (Kapareliotis & Miliopoulou, 2019). The question then arises whether women can perform well in both work and family roles. For many women, the stress caused by these dual roles often forces them to resign (Wakabi, 2016). Ramohai (2019) concluded that dysfunctional organisational practices towards women (hostile institutional practices, dominance, poor growth opportunities, power dynamics, abuse and maltreatment, etc.) on the one hand, and employee frustration and burnout on the other hand, could result from an attempt to reconcile the various role conflicts.

Research shows that educational institutions fail to retain female talent due to the 'leaky pipeline' phenomenon. Factors that lead to the high drop-out rates by women from academic careers include unrealistic workload expectations, limited growth opportunities and perceiving women as less competent (Greska, 2023). Stevenson et al. (2021) identified a pervasive male-dominated culture as the main reason for the lack of recognition of female employees' worth. Domingo et al. (2020) identified three institutional barriers to the career advancement of women in academia: inequitable expectations of academic citizenship, not recognising academic citizenship, and a lack of clarity and consistency on how academic citizenship influences retention and promotion processes. These authors emphasised the negative effects harassment, discrimination and biases have on the retention of women in academia. Women associate professors spend more time on academic citizenship activities, which are less valued, compared to their male colleagues.

One of the main reasons people leave their organisations is the poor relationships employees have with their managers (Halliday et al., 2022). Lipman (2015) stated that people do not quit their organisations but rather quit their leaders. When employees were asked what they wanted most in uncertain times, they identified the following: information, communication, appropriate leadership style and support (Powers & Diaz, 2023). The working relationship between managers and employees thus plays a critical role in an employee's inclination to remain with the organisation (Wiles, 2022).

To avoid the negative consequences of women leaving organisations and, in particular, academia, one of the actions institutions can take includes scrutinising leadership behaviour and implementing systems that support women in the workplace (Frantz et al., 2020).

## Research aim

The aim of this study was to explore the relationship between leadership behaviour and the retention of women in higher education. Although the focus is not on the various leadership styles, the leadership styles are discussed briefly to provide context for the retention of women. The findings could assist educational institutions in retaining female employees through strategies involving leadership behaviour.

## Literature review

Leaders of higher education institutions face many challenges in accommodating the needs of various stakeholders, including the government, students and employees (Nebiyu & Kassahun, 2021). Leadership is one of the variables in mapping an institution's success or failure. The recent COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated that (1) the work and non-work spheres are inextricably linked and (2) how leaders organise work influences employee well-being on

and off the job, thus resulting in the continued blurring of work-non-work boundaries (Kossek et al., 2021). Leaders thus greatly influence workplace behaviours, attitudes and retention of employees (Hauer et al., 2021).

Social connections are inherently part of human life. Moser and McKim (2020) reported the prevalence of quality interactions as the most important variable in determining employee retention. These interactions are based on the Relational Theory of Working. According to this theory, working is embedded in external and internal relational contexts. Caesens et al. (2017) supported the role of various stakeholders in establishing connections at work and emphasised the role played by the organisation, supervisor and colleagues.

Leadership styles reflect the historical evolution of leadership from a focus on 'who leaders are' (traits) to 'what leaders do' (behaviour). Different styles affect women differently. Each woman's unique circumstances, such as marital status, age and number of children, will play a role in how leadership behaviour is experienced. Nebiyu and Kassahun (2021) outline adaptive leadership's role in assisting employees in coping with challenges and changes in the workplace. Hauer et al. (2021) highlighted the importance of the transformational leadership style in developing relationships. Khan and Hafeez (2024) supported the importance of relationships and identified three pillars of ethical leadership: morality, integrity and relationships. All leadership theories emphasise the importance of communication and relationships between leaders and followers.

The most appropriate leadership style for a particular situation will determine whether or not a leader is successful. Leaders should thus be emotionally intelligent to connect with their employees and modify their leadership style to promote performance and retain the services of good performers (Nickel, 2020). According to Hauer et al. (2021), emotional intelligence is separated into two key areas: personal and social competence. Personal competence involves self-management and self-awareness, whereas social competence involves social awareness and the ability to manage situations and relationships.

Ethics is at the heart of leadership, and therefore, leaders should act consistently with general expectations and consider and respect the rights, ethical values and beliefs of others (Khan & Hafeez, 2024). Katuramu et al. (2016) identified six ethical leadership domains: power sharing, fairness, integrity, role clarification, people-oriented behaviour, and ethical guidance. According to Divleli and Ergun (2022), servant leadership is directly related to trust in leadership and ethical climate. A study conducted in the hotel industry indicated that servant leadership was significantly related to staff retention (Ming et al., 2021). The role of leadership in retention is supported by Kanu et al. (2022), who confirmed that transformational

leadership creates a pathway for employees to become more engaged. Frantz et al. (2020) and Wakabi (2016) emphasise the need for adaptive leadership appropriate to varying situations. Although directive leadership is often unsuccessful in decreasing turnover, it seems suitable in the hotel industry. This confirms the notion that a particular situation influences the effectiveness of a leadership style. Contrary to this belief, Kanu et al. (2022) state that leadership varies according to circumstances and the social interaction between leaders and employees. The *laissez-faire* approach maintains a hands-off stance and often causes conflict over duties and responsibilities. However, this approach is effective for highly skilled and motivated employees with a proven track record of excellence and teams of experienced individuals (Ming et al., 2021).

Effective leadership in higher education involves leaders having a relationship and task orientation, acting with integrity, and being involved in daily activities and decisions (Moosa, 2016). Frantz et al. (2020) reported on a study in which academic leaders highlighted four factors critical to leadership in educational institutions: ethical leadership, leadership building and empowering others, ownership, and adaptability. Leadership thus involves more than just a personality or action but includes a leader's values. The social dimension of leadership facilitates engagement and empowerment. By taking ownership, the leader is interested in the institution's success and ensures sustainability. The complexity of leadership necessitates adaptability as a one-size-fits-all approach is no longer suitable for the changing work environment. The key to leadership in higher education, and in any context, is to have multiple leadership approaches.

A study by Nickel (2020) within the higher education sector highlighted the need for leaders to develop and articulate a vision, gain commitment, empower employees and deliver success by implementing strategies and actions necessary to meet goals. According to Nickel (2020), leaders in higher education are often derailed by excessive ego, failure to communicate and collaborate and poor relationships. The lack of transparency, follow-through on actions and making changes too fast or slow lead to a loss of trust, goodwill and confidence in the leader.

Retention is defined by Vu and Nwachukwu (2020) as a deliberate effort to create a conducive work environment where employees are persuaded to remain working in their institutions. Under any circumstances, employee turnover harms organisations, and organisations should endeavour to retain the services of employees, especially high performers. Apart from the huge costs related to recruitment and selection, turnover leads to a disruption of work processes, interference with communication and social paradigms, loss of employees to competitive organisations, decreased employee morale, and subsequently, a decline in the performance of the organisation (Huffman et al., 2014; Katuramu et al. 2016).

Much research has focused on what makes female employees leave organisations, and poor relationships with leaders have been identified as one of the major factors (Halliday et al., 2022). This means that leaders should intentionally create a conducive work environment that caters to female employees' unique needs.

Recognition is equally important in persuading female employees to remain with an organisation. According to Montani et al. (2020), recognition involves assigning non-monetary rewards such as approval, interest and appreciation for individual efforts. Neeraja et al. (2021) identified the 3 R's regarding women empowerment and retention: Respect, Recognition and Remuneration. According to Greska (2023), women in academia receive less credit for their work than their male counterparts and are often overlooked when it comes to receiving good peer reviews, research funding or being assigned projects of significant value.

Tirta and Enrika (2020) focused on the role of work-life balance in supporting employees. According to Conrad et al. (2021), one of the top challenges experienced by women is difficulty in finding work and work-life balance (69.6%). In academia, women spend more time on house chores and childcare than men. While both parents may decrease their work hours, men often protect their research time, which is important for career advancement (Morgan et al., 2021).

## Research design

The population for the study was female employees at a higher education institution in South Africa. The total population consisted of permanent female employees working at the university and constituted approximately  $N = 2732$ . The population comprised women only and included women of different races, ages, marital statuses, educational levels and staff categories. A simple random sample of  $n = 2000$  permanent female employees was drawn. The representability of the sample was analysed in terms of age and race. A 10-year interval was used for the age groups; they were all more or less equally represented. Regarding race, the sample consisted mainly of white people (50.2%) followed by black people (36.3%). A total of 311 questionnaires were received (response rate of 15.6%). According to Mellahi and Harris (2016), there is no minimum response rate. As a rule of thumb, the number of questionnaire items multiplied by 5 should yield sufficient data for statistical analysis to determine the acceptability of a response rate. This study's questionnaire consisted of 40 items, and hence the required number of responses (200) was achieved. Anticipating a response rate of 20%, a sample size of 2000 was used. This sample size was deemed suitable considering the desired statistical power, effect size, significance criterion of the study, and estimated measurement variability (Singh & Masuku, 2014).

Participants completed a self-developed Leadership Retention questionnaire that made use of a 6-point Likert scale of (1) strongly disagree, (2) disagree, (3) slightly disagree,

(4) slightly agree, (5) agree and (6) strongly agree. The questionnaire consisted of three sections: socio-demographic information, leadership, and retention. Existing questionnaires on leadership and retention did not address leadership and retention specifically related to an academic institution and women in particular; hence, the decision to develop a Leadership Retention questionnaire. The development of items was based on extensive literature research on leadership and retention and the unique circumstances at the academic institution.

Exploratory factor analysis revealed four leadership subscales: relationship orientation (18 items, Cronbach 0.97), integrity (3 items, Cronbach 0.84), involvement (6 items, Cronbach 0.81), and task orientation (4 items, Cronbach 0.66). The results indicated that the alpha coefficients were all above 0.6 and regarded as reliable.

The retention section included questions on retention and personal viewpoints on retention. Exploratory factor analysis revealed that the retention scale comprised six subscales: unique needs (8 items, Cronbach 0.79), growth (2 items, Cronbach 0.82), recognition (2 items, Cronbach 0.88), work conditions (8 items, Cronbach 0.70), relationships (4 items, Cronbach 0.77), and support (3 items, Cronbach 0.83). All the alpha coefficients were above 0.6 and regarded as reliable.

After obtaining ethical clearance for the study, the email addresses of permanent female employees were provided to a gatekeeper by the Human Resources department at the higher education institution where the study was conducted. An email with information about the study and a survey link was sent to all the sample employees. Employees were informed of the confidential and voluntary nature of the study. After participants provided informed consent by clicking on the survey link, they were directed to the LimeSurvey online platform.

## Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the University of South Africa Research Ethics Committee (No. 2015\_RPSC\_092).

## Results

### Demographic data

Demographic data included age, race, marital status, staff category, educational level and supervisor's details. The race and age of the sample were key elements in determining the representability of the population. The age distribution was considered representative of the population. However, the sample was slightly biased regarding race due to the lower number of black respondents (36.3%) and the higher number of white respondents (50.2%). These figures are almost reversed in the population. Academics comprised 44% of the sample, with administrative employees (40%). Moreover, 27.7% of the respondents held a Master's degree, and 19% had a doctoral degree. Supervisors were

predominantly black (55.3%), female (50.5%), and between the ages of 46 years and 55 years (35.4%).

## Leadership and retention

The questionnaire assessed how participants viewed their current leaders' behaviour in terms of retention. The means, standard deviations, skewness and kurtosis values are presented in Table 1.

According to the mean scores, integrity scored the highest (mean [M] = 4.36, standard deviation [SD] = 1.21), and involvement scored the lowest (M = 3.04, SD = 1.19). Viewpoints on retention showed that growth opportunities (M = 4.28, SD = 1.18) and recognition (M = 4.28, SD = 1.13) had the highest mean scores, while unique needs obtained a lower mean of M = 3.87 and an SD = 1.07. Concerning participants' personal views of retention, support had the highest mean score (M = 3.53, SD = 1.37), while relationships had the lowest score (M = 2.84, SD = 1.17).

The normal distribution of data requires skewness values that fall within the range of -1 to +1. The skewness of all the factors ranged from -0.95 to 0.54, which met the criteria for normality (Moosa, 2016). The kurtosis values for all sections were also normal, ranging between -0.98 and 0.81.

Pearson product-moment correlation analysis was done to determine the strength and direction of the relationship between the leadership and retention variables. The results are indicated in Table 2.

High correlations ( $r = 0.50 \leq 1.0$ ) exist between the retention of female employees (need for sound work relationships) and leaders' relationship orientation, integrity and involvement. A leader's behaviour in terms of work relationships, integrity and involvement is directly linked to female employees' need for sound work relationships. The task orientation of leaders is of no significance when female employees consider leaving an organisation. Most correlations between leadership and retention indicate a practically significant medium effect.

**TABLE 1:** Means, standard deviations, skewness and kurtosis.

Construct	Mean	Standard deviation	Skewness	Kurtosis
<b>Leadership of manager</b>				
Relationship orientation	3.96	1.30	-0.62	-0.65
Integrity	4.36	1.21	-0.87	0.15
Involvement	3.04	1.19	-0.37	-0.58
Task orientation	3.74	1.10	-0.48	-0.07
<b>Retention in the workplace</b>				
Unique needs	3.87	1.07	-0.34	-0.56
Growth	4.28	1.18	-0.95	0.62
Recognition	4.28	1.13	-0.91	0.81
<b>Personal view of retention</b>				
Work conditions	3.29	0.97	0.25	-0.43
Relationships	2.84	1.17	0.54	-0.37
Support	3.53	1.37	0.12	-0.97

Source: Moosa, M. (2016). *The retention of women in higher education from a leadership perspective*. Master's dissertation. University of South Africa, South Africa. Retrieved from [https://uir.unisa.ac.za/bitstream/handle/10500/23144/dissertation\\_moosa\\_m.pdf?sequence=1](https://uir.unisa.ac.za/bitstream/handle/10500/23144/dissertation_moosa_m.pdf?sequence=1)

### Most significant leadership factors influencing retention

Multiple regression analyses were conducted to determine which leadership factors have the most significant influence on retention. A standard multiple regression model was calculated for the six retention variables. The results are shown in Table 3.

#### Unique needs

The influence of the leadership variables on the unique needs retention variable produced a statistically significant result ( $F = 12.40; p \leq 0.01$ ), accounting for 13% (adjusted  $R^2 = 0.13$ ; moderate practical effect) of the variance in the unique needs variable. The relationship orientation ( $\beta = 0.50; p = 0.00$ ) and integrity ( $\beta = 0.21; p = 0.03$ ) of leaders had a statistically significant influence on meeting employees' unique needs (Moosa, 2016).

#### Growth

The influence of the leadership variables on growth opportunities as a retention variable produced a statistically significant result ( $F = 12.85; p \leq 0.01$ ), accounting for 13% (adjusted  $R^2 = 0.13$ ; moderate practical effect) of the variance in the growth opportunities variable (Moosa, 2016). Only the relationship orientation of a leader ( $\beta = 0.42; p = 0.00$ ) had a statistically significant influence on employees' growth opportunities.

### Recognition

The influence of the leadership variables on recognition as a retention variable produced a statistically significant result ( $F = 14.53; p \leq 0.01$ ), accounting for 15% (adjusted  $R^2 = 0.15$ ; moderate practical effect) of the variance in the recognition variable (Moosa, 2016). Only the relationship orientation of a leader indicated a statistically significant relationship ( $\beta = 0.32; p = 0.00$ ) with recognition.

### Work conditions

The influence of the leadership variables on work conditions as a retention variable produced a statistically significant result ( $F = 19.78; p \leq 0.01$ ), accounting for 20% (adjusted  $R^2 = 0.20$ ; moderate practical effect) of the variance in the work conditions variable. A leader's relationship orientation ( $\beta = -0.48; p = 0.00$ ) and task orientation ( $\beta = 0.14; p = 0.04$ ) showed a statistically significant relationship with work conditions (Moosa, 2016). Relationship orientation indicates a negative relationship with work conditions, indicating that the better the relationships, the fewer work conditions will play a role in women quitting their jobs.

### Relationships

The influence of the leadership variables on relationships as a retention variable produced a statistically significant result ( $F = 3.75; p \leq 0.01$ ), accounting for 61% (adjusted

**TABLE 2:** Bivariate correlations between leadership and retention ( $N = 311$ ).

Variables	Leadership				Retention					
	Relationship orientation	Integrity	Involvement	Task orientation	Unique needs	Growth	Recognition	Work conditions	Relationships	Support
<b>Leadership</b>										
Relationship orientation	1.00	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Integrity	0.83**	1.00	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Involvement	-0.62**	-0.56**	1.00	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Task orientation	0.58**	0.57**	-0.32**	1.00	-	-	-	-	-	-
<b>Retention</b>										
Unique needs	0.36**	0.23**	-0.23**	0.19**	1.00	-	-	-	-	-
Growth	0.37**	0.31**	-0.16**	0.22**	0.59**	1.00	-	-	-	-
Recognition	0.39**	0.34**	-0.28**	0.27**	0.65**	0.64**	1.00	-	-	-
Work conditions	-0.43**	-0.33**	0.34**	-0.15**	-0.47**	-0.46**	-0.44**	1.00	-	-
Relationships	<b>-0.76**</b>	<b>-0.62**</b>	<b>0.60**</b>	-0.36**	-0.43**	-0.35**	-0.40**	0.56**	1.00	-
Support	-0.15**	-0.11	0.18**	0.01	-0.35	-0.15**	-0.18	0.36**	0.29**	1.00

Source: Moosa, M. (2016). *The retention of women in higher education from a leadership perspective*. Master's dissertation. University of South Africa, South Africa. Retrieved from [https://uir.unisa.ac.za/bitstream/handle/10500/23144/dissertation\\_moosa\\_m.pdf?sequence=1](https://uir.unisa.ac.za/bitstream/handle/10500/23144/dissertation_moosa_m.pdf?sequence=1)

$r = .10 \leq 0.29$  are practically significant (small effect).  $r \geq 0.30 \leq 0.49$  are practically significant (medium effect).  $r = 0.50 \leq 1.0$  are practically significant (large effect).

\*,  $p \leq 0.05$ ; \*\*,  $p \leq 0.01$ .

**TABLE 3:** Multiple regression results for leadership and retention.

Independent variables (Leadership styles)	Dependent variables (Retention)					
	Unique needs	Growth	Recognition	Work conditions	Relationships	Support
Relationship orientation	0.50**	0.42**	0.32**	-0.48**	-0.71**	-0.16
Integrity	0.21**	0.02	0.01	0.06	0.02	0.02
Involvement	-0.04	0.11	-0.06	0.12	0.21**	0.14
Task orientation	-0.00	-0.01	0.06	0.14*	0.12*	0.14*
Adjusted $R^2$	0.13++	0.13++	0.15++	0.20++	0.61+++	0.03+
$F (p\text{-value})$	12.40 (.00)	12.85 (.00)	14.53 (.00)	19.78 (.00)	121.53 (.00)	3.75 (.01)

Source: Moosa, M. (2016). *The retention of women in higher education from a leadership perspective*. Master's dissertation. University of South Africa, South Africa. Retrieved from [https://uir.unisa.ac.za/bitstream/handle/10500/23144/dissertation\\_moosa\\_m.pdf?sequence=1](https://uir.unisa.ac.za/bitstream/handle/10500/23144/dissertation_moosa_m.pdf?sequence=1)

Note: Standardised Beta coefficients are presented.

\*,  $p \leq 0.05$ ; \*\*,  $p \leq 0.01$ .

+,  $R^2 \leq 0.12$  (small practical effect size); ++,  $R^2 \geq 0.13 \leq 0.25$  (moderate practical effect size); +++,  $R^2 \geq 0.26$  (large practical effect size).

$R^2 = 0.61$ ; large practical effect) of the variance in the relationships variable. The relationship orientation ( $\beta = -0.71$ ;  $p = 0.00$ ), involvement ( $\beta = 0.21$ ;  $p = 0.00$ ) and task orientation ( $\beta = 0.12$ ;  $p = 0.01$ ) of leaders indicated a statistically significant relationship with retention, with the relationship orientation of a leader being the strongest significant influencer of retention (Moosa, 2016).

### Support

The influence of the leadership variables on support as a retention variable produced a statistically significant result ( $F = 3.75$ ;  $p \leq 0.01$ ), accounting for 3% ( $R^2 = 0.03$ ; small practical effect) of the variance in the support variable. A leader's task orientation ( $\beta = 0.14$ ;  $p = 0.05$ ) plays a significant role in supporting employees and thus influences retention (Moosa, 2016).

## Discussion

In higher education, leaders occupy positions such as departmental heads, directors and deans. The leader's teaching excellence and ability to apply, engage and disseminate research and scholarship speak to a leader's academic credibility (Cheng & Zhu, 2021). All these tasks need to be carried out by managers displaying appropriate leadership behaviour that ensures the commitment and loyalty of employees.

The study explored the relationship between leadership behaviour and the retention of women in the higher education sector. The link between leadership behaviour and retention is outlined to confirm the practical implications of leadership behaviour on women's decision to remain with an institution.

### Relationship between leadership and retention

Table 2 indicates that a leader's relationship orientation significantly influences retention (unique needs, growth, recognition, work conditions, relationships and support), and the practical effect is large. The strongest predictor of retention is the relationship orientation of a leader. This finding illustrates that leaders who prioritise relationships will be attentive to the unique needs of women, recognise their contributions and efforts and provide them with growth opportunities. A negative relationship was identified between a leader's relationship orientation and work conditions. When work conditions are less than ideal, employees are prepared to tolerate the circumstances provided they have sound relationships with their leader. According to Ciulla (2014), leadership in any form depends on some relationship with followers. A vast number of leadership theories refer to relationship orientation as a dimension of leadership, such as the Leader/Member Exchange Theory, the relationship orientation found in the Situational Leadership Model (Quick & Nelson, 2013), the employee-oriented leadership style identified in the Michigan Leadership Studies (Cutler, 2014; Quick & Nelson, 2013), the consideration category of leadership

identified in the Ohio State Studies (Holbeche, 2013; Yukl, 2013), the Country Club Manager identified in Blake and Mouton's Leadership Grid (Kane, 2015; Roe, 2014), the democratic leadership style identified in the Lewin Studies (Cutler, 2014; Quick & Nelson, 2013) and the Fiedler's Contingency Theory (Newstrom, 2015). According to Miner et al. (2019), interpersonal climate plays a critical role in the well-being of women academics. A 'chilly' climate continues to be a major reason for the poor retention of women in academia. A study by Yousuf et al. (2014) also outlined the role of supervisors in creating a conducive work environment in terms of friendly and supportive behaviour from colleagues.

Leaders who maintain good relationships fall into the participative and democratic category of leaders. These leaders encourage input and involve their employees in decision-making. Participation and democratic processes promote skills development and motivate employees by making them feel part of the organisation (Bhatti et al., 2012). Relationship orientation is closely related to the person-centred approach to leadership. A transformational leadership style acknowledges the importance of people and focuses on aligning the needs of employees with those of the organisation (Tyssen et al., 2014).

A leader's integrity is significantly related to the retention variables – unique needs, growth, recognition, work conditions and relationships. There was, however, no significant relationship between integrity and support. These findings support the findings by Yaghi and Yaghi (2021) regarding toxic leadership as one of the most pervasive forms of unethical behaviour and influencing turnover. The unique needs of women are considered by leaders with high ethical and moral values. Authentic leaders will strive to act in everyone's best interest, share decision-making responsibility and encourage input from others (Wang et al., 2014). Zarghamifard and Danaeefard (2020) confirm the importance of leader integrity in reducing employees' intent to quit.

Integrity is closely aligned with authentic leadership. Authentic leaders stay true to their intrinsic nature and always strive to maintain their best qualities, regardless of the situation or circumstances (Cutler, 2014; Roe, 2014). Interestingly, women identified integrity as an important leadership factor. This emphasises that women value ethical practices and moral values in their leaders.

*Involvement* was significantly related to all of the retention variables. However, the direction of the relationship differed across the variables. According to Kariuki et al. (2022), an involved manager mentors employees, assists and focuses on the individual needs of employees. The less involved a manager is, the more work conditions would become intolerable, relationships would be strained, perceptions of poor support would emerge, and the organisation would fail to support women sufficiently.

Managers' lack of involvement could be mistaken for the laissez-faire leadership style. The laissez-faire leadership style allows autonomy among employees, with leaders playing a support role only. The critical difference between non-involvement and laissez-faire leaders is that the lack of involvement refers to leaders who purposefully dodge their responsibilities. Such leaders focus on their advancement within the organisation. Unlike the uninvolved leader, laissez-faire leaders delegate work and encourage their employees to succeed and advance. Laissez-faire leaders remain in the background to provide employees with an opportunity to prove themselves capable (Cutler, 2014; Quick & Nelson, 2013). The difference lies in the intention behind not being actively involved.

The *task orientation* of a manager had no significant relationship with retention. Focusing on the task and getting the job done does not affect women's well-being, hence not impacting retention. Task-oriented leaders do not prioritise relationships or people, but focus on the task. Such leaders usually provide little autonomy and rule by the book. Task orientation is characteristic of leaders who are transactional in nature or autocratic. Transactional leaders focus on completing tasks, with a reciprocal relationship between the manager and an employee based on the exchange concept (Roe, 2014). A manager's primary role is to assist employees in carrying out tasks. Autocratic leaders stick to the procedures and rules when completing tasks, allowing little room for participation and discussions (Cutler, 2014; Quick & Nelson, 2013).

### Multiple regression: Leadership and retention

The *multiple regression analyses* revealed the following on the relationship between leadership and retention:

#### Unique needs

A leader's relationship orientation and integrity significantly influenced how women perceived their unique needs being fulfilled. Women value relationships highly and regard the leader's support as extremely important. Casad et al. (2020) outlined women's need for non-stereotyping, career advancement opportunities, access to support networks, welcoming and non-threatening academic climate and eliminating inequities for women in the academic realm.

#### Growth

A leader's relationship orientation is key to meeting women's growth needs. When leaders are involved in and support women's career goals and ambitions, leaders are likely to provide growth opportunities and assist the organisation in retaining their services. According to Hauer et al. (2021), the lack of career progression opportunities has been a major reason for turnover. Malisch et al. (2020) outlined the lack of research opportunities for women as a major obstacle to women's growth. Women in academia must be 2.5 times more productive to be judged as equally competent, and they are expected to carry the bulk of the workload regarding tuition and services, which provides less time for research (Malisch et al., 2020).

### Recognition

A leader's relationship orientation also plays a key role in recognising women in the workplace. Leaders recognise the role and importance of women by recognising their efforts and skills and showing appreciation. When leaders engage in meaningful work relationships with female employees, it signals recognition and, in turn, positively affects retention. Ortiz-Martinez et al. (2023) refer to women's marginalisation and lack of validation in academia as contributing factors to women turnover. The importance of recognition is confirmed by the 3 R's of women empowerment, namely Respect, Recognition and Remuneration (Neeraja et al., 2021).

### Relationships

Sound relationships as a retention factor emphasised the importance of the leader's work relationships, involvement and task orientation. Leaders who maintain sound relationships are keenly interested in employees' development and well-being. These leaders will invest in relationships with their employees and thus enhance women's commitment to staying with the organisation. Leaders who are uninvolved will have poor relationships with employees due to their inattentive and distant nature. Extreme task-oriented leaders struggle to maintain healthy relationships due to an extreme focus on tasks only. Employees thus feel mistreated as human beings. Hauer et al. (2021) emphasised the importance of the transformational leadership style in prioritising relationships.

### Support

Regarding support, women value a leader being task-oriented. Women depend on the leader's competency for assistance and support in successfully executing their tasks. Casad et al. (2020) emphasised the need to support women in academia by providing support networks, removing chilly academic climates, providing access to resources, assigning equitable workloads, facilitating collaboration in research projects, and including women in decision-making.

### Personal views on how the institution advances retention

This discussion provides the personal viewpoints of female employees on how the institution addresses factors related to the retention of women.

*Unique needs:* The retention factors indicated that the institution considers the unique needs of women by providing flexibility and valuing work-life balance. Most respondents agreed that the university recognises the need for working mothers to attend to various responsibilities. This indicates that leaders are on the right path in accommodating women's distinct needs and assisting where possible. The most well-known work-life balance initiatives encompass family-friendly practices (Beauregard & Henry, 2009), flexible work arrangements (Allen et al., 2013) and supportive employee benefits – all linked to retention.

*Growth:* The institution is providing growth opportunities to its employees. Interventions such as stimulating work tasks, training, professional development and promotion are provided and are linked to retention (Das & Baruah, 2013; Munsamy & Bosch Venter, 2009). The university recognises the capabilities of women and is committed to women's advancement within the institution.

*Work conditions:* Employees had to comment on whether the work environment and certain workplace features would influence their decision to remain with the organisation. This included flexibility in working hours, benefits, salary, relationships at work and similar tasks or jobs. This list illustrates the different aspects employees consider when looking for an ideal job. The respondents indicated that flexibility and benefits are significant in their decision to pursue a better job offer. Regarding leaving the organisation for a similar salary or job, the respondents were undecided. Respondents generally indicated they were content with working at the higher education institution. Most indicated they would not actively search for another job and are content to remain with the institution until retirement. According to Morgan et al. (2021) and Greska (2023), women's work conditions in academia are not conducive to retention. Compared to men, women are employed at lower ranks, allocated higher tuition workloads, regarded as less competent, receive fewer opportunities to advance, and are allocated to tasks with low promotability.

*Relationships* involve the nature of the relationship with one's supervisor. Most employees indicated they have a good relationship with their supervisor, but felt that supervisors often fail to provide the necessary support. Possible reasons for not providing the necessary support may include a lack of authority or resources, fear of conflict or misaligned priorities. Greska (2023) recommends providing research and mentoring opportunities, greater recognition of women's contributions, reducing women's academic citizenship activities and providing women with opportunities to perform high-profile tasks. According to Mathieu et al. (2016), supervisors should invest in family-supportive supervision to foster a commitment to the organisation.

*Support:* This factor refers to the support provided to employees in fulfilling their work demands. Most respondents indicated they experienced conflict between their personal lives and work and struggled to manage their work demands. According to Greenhaus et al. (2012), the issue of work-life conflict can be resolved by changing the work environment and conditions so that employees can balance work and life roles.

## Conclusion

The results provided evidence that leadership significantly influences the retention of women.

The study explored the relationship between leadership behaviour and the retention of women in higher education. Female employees outlined six factors critical to their decision to remain with an organisation: unique needs, growth opportunities, the recognition they receive at work, work conditions, work relationships, and support received. Regarding leadership behaviour that influences female employees' retention, female employees indicated that their work relationship with a leader and their leader's integrity and work involvement were instrumental in their decision to remain with the organisation.

Most female employees' requirements to remain with an organisation are linked to leadership behaviour. Specifically, the work relationships leaders have with their female employees. Leaders should thus focus on creating a supportive, inclusive and flexible work environment where a sense of belonging is cultivated. Gender equity, a conducive work environment and work-life balance are critical in retaining female employees.

Although most of these retention factors also apply to men, women face additional obstacles that amplify the importance of these leadership factors. Future research could focus on leaders' perspectives on how they are enabled to address the factors related to the retention of women. To a large extent, it is within the power of leaders to fuel or fail at the retention of women in higher education.

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

## Authors' contributions

M.C. and M.M. worked jointly in the conceptualisation of the research topic, in the design and interpretation of the data and the final report. M.C. and M.M. worked on the draft and finalised the article.

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## Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, M.C. upon reasonable request.

## Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and are the product of professional research. It does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency or that of the publisher. The authors are responsible for this article's results, findings and content.

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