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Retaining Teaching Capacity in African Universities : Problems and Prospects

Issues

The past decade has witnessed remarkable changes within the African university community. However, much of the available information on the university staffing situation in Africa is country-specific, discipline-specific, anecdotal, or outdated. *Staff Loss and Retention at Selected African Universities: A Synthesis Report* addresses these shortcomings.

Enrollments have risen sharply, many new universities have been created, and proportions of expatriate teaching staff have declined in response to the increase in national graduates. Perhaps the most notable change, however, has been a severe decrease in funding for universities resulting from extended economic stagnation on the continent. Overall, the average budget share of education dropped from 16.6 percent of government budgets in 1980 to 15.2 percent in 1990. As the education budget was shrinking, average allocations for higher education were also contracting from an average 19.1 percent of education budgets in 1980-84 to an average 17.6 percent in 1985-88. During the same period, real wages in the region fell by 30 percent.

Declining academic salaries, when coupled with more frequent university closures linked to increasing student unrest and government intervention on a number of campuses, have prompted numerous university staff to forsake their academic calling. The World Bank notes that some 23,000 qualified academic staff are emigrating from Africa each year in search of better working conditions. It is estimated that 10,000 Nigerians are now employed in the United States alone. More often, however, it is a neighboring country which beckons. South Africa attracts staff from Malawi and Zambia, and the universities of Botswana and Swaziland attract Zimbabweans.

The staffing problem varies from university to university, and from department to department within

universities. Staff retention problems are compounded by weak institutional management capacity in the area of personnel. Although most African universities enjoy substantial autonomy in the operation of their academic programs, they generally possess very little in the area of personnel management. The absence of job descriptions and accountability mechanisms often results in the under-utilization or mis-utilization of staff time. One study in Nigeria revealed that academic staff spent 48 percent of their time on administration, but only 29 percent on teaching. In the absence of effective monitoring and accounting for staff time, professional discipline and commitment may also weaken. The erosion of salaries and purchasing power prompts many faculty members to give minimal time to university work and seek one or more income-generating activities (e.g., private tutoring, taxi driving) to supplement their academic salaries. In effect, full-time staff function as part-time staff. The consequence for university teaching and administration is a loss of quality.

The Response

Believing that nearly all universities in Africa were experiencing a rapid loss of skilled staff to more attractive opportunities, either within their own countries or abroad, the Working Group on Higher Education constituted under the Donors to African Education (DAE) commissioned this study in early 1993. The World Bank serves as lead agency in coordinating the Working Group, which comprises 15 donor agencies and a roughly equal, but rotating number of African university leaders and government officials. The goal was to secure some hard data on the trends and patterns, with a view to identifying areas which may be suitable for policy intervention to improve academic staff retention. The objectives of the study were:

- To obtain information on academic staff-in-post and on academic staff losses over the period 1987-1991;
- To quantify the extent of and identify the trends of academic staff losses (vacancy rates);
- To analyze the various categories of staff-in-post and, where possible, the staff who have departed;
- To determine the factors which shape a decision by an academic staff member to leave an institution, and to assess the relative importance of these factors; and
- To compare these factors to the internal and external conditions prevailing in the institutions participating in the study with those in places where departing staff go, in order to identify variables amenable to policy intervention for improved staff retention.

The Study

This study was undertaken through case studies of seven universities in various parts of Africa. These were: the National University of Benin, the University of Botswana, the University of Ghana, the University of Ibadan in Nigeria, Makerere University in Uganda, the University of Zambia, and the University of Zimbabwe. It was conducted entirely through various questionnaire surveys which gathered information on academic staff statistics, salaries and conditions of service, and the views of current and former staff, of institutional leaders, and of heads of departments on secondary income earning activities. The study also attempted to survey African academic staff working in tertiary institutions of South Africa in an effort to determine the extent to which South Africa was drawing in academics from other African countries.

This may be the most comprehensive study of the topic undertaken to date. Its findings tend to contradict several commonly held perceptions about staffing in African universities. It is also evident from the responses that the study has provoked a considerable amount of thought within these

institutions, and suggested new ways of looking at the management of academic staff in African universities. This is encouraging, as it is evident that many universities do not routinely collect and analyze data on staffing trends. It appears that much of the data requested by this survey were difficult to obtain from existing management records, and that its collation and presentation as requested by the survey was new to most institutions.

Results

The results show a variable picture.

- The generally pessimistic view of African universities is reinforced by data showing that staff are dissatisfied with remuneration packages which are very low, with deteriorating university facilities, and with what are perceived as poor relationships between the universities and their governments.
- Staff are engaged in a wide range of secondary income earning activities and are often absent on extended periods of leave.
- University leaders regard academic staff turnover as a significant problem, believe that quality is deteriorating, and report that recruitment is difficult, especially at senior levels.
- Several departments in each institution are very poorly staffed.

However, other aspects of the data revealed a more optimistic scenario.

- In all the universities, except Zambia, staff numbers have been maintained or increased during the period 1988 to 1992.
- Staff to student ratios have also been maintained, or have increased only marginally. Staff are much better qualified and more experienced than was expected, and are strongly committed to academia, with firm academic priorities.
- Of the staff in post, 53% intend remaining in their current universities.
- Secondary income earnings form a significant proportion of salary and are a major factor in inducing staff to remain in post, but Heads of Department feel that, on balance, such activities have a neutral effect on Departmental activities and facilities.
- The collegial atmosphere and ability to determine one's own career path is valued highly, and 75% of former staff would return to their previous university if the remuneration package and conditions could be improved.
- Conditions of service in most of the universities are apposite, well structured, and meet staff requirements, at least in theory.

Recommendations

The study provides detailed analysis and comment on the data, and makes suggestions and recommendations for improvement and policy interventions. The essential factors for improved staff retention are identified as follows.

- Economic growth and revival;
- Greater autonomy for universities;
- The development of diversified sources of funding so as to remove the total dependence of universities on governments for financing;
- A wide range of staffing policy options are suggested, with the only viable way forward possibly being a "trade-off" between high, competitive salaries, or maintaining existing

- conditions which provide good leave and travel benefits (in practice as well as in theory), a relaxed working environment, and a general lack of accountability;
- Strong leadership is essential, and reinforced and restructured university personnel offices and programs are crucial;
 - The research environment is vital for viable academic staff recruitment and retention, particularly at the more senior levels, and a number of policy options for the achievement of an improved research environment are proposed;
 - Other areas requiring attention for successful staff retention, in addition to salaries, are a means to obtain housing and suitable transport, and an urgent improvement in university facilities.

In conclusion, this study confirms a number of the negative perceptions of universities in Africa. It has demonstrated that remuneration packages are generally poor and non-competitive, and their lack of purchasing power is the major source of academic staff dissatisfaction. However, much of the information is positive, showing the case study universities to be survivors under very difficult circumstances. The ability of most of the universities to maintain or increase their staff complements over the study period, and to hold increases in staff to student ratios to reasonable levels, is nothing short of remarkable.

The commitment of academic staff in an adverse environment is a major positive feature of the African university world, and a credit to the staff and university leaders. The universities are hardy, vibrant institutions, with academic staff committed to a relatively selfless cause. Given the opportunity to operate without constraints in a market-related environment, and with full responsibility and accountability for their service and development, they could serve national development requirements far more effectively than is possible in the current circumstances.

Robert Blair and Josephine Jordan. 1994. *Staff Loss and Retention at Selected African Universities: A Synthesis Report*. AFTHR Technical Note No. 18. Human Resources and Poverty Division, Technical Department, Africa Region. Washington, D.C.: World Bank.

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