



Social Sciences Spectrum

A Double-Blind, Peer-Reviewed, HEC recognized [Y-category](#) Research Journal

E-ISSN: [3006-0427](#) P-ISSN: [3006-0419](#)

Volume 03, Issue 04, 2024

Web link: <https://sss.org.pk/index.php/sss>

Talent retention in Higher Education Institutes of Pakistan: Challenges and strategies

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Article Information

Received

November 02, 2024

Revised

November 19, 2024

Published

December 12, 2024

Citation (APA):

Kamal, M. B., Yousafzai, G. N., Kayani, A. S. & Bajwa, J. M. (2024). Talent retention in Higher Education Institutes of Pakistan: Challenges and strategies. *Social Sciences Spectrum*, 3(4), 206-217.

Abstract

Talent retention is very important in enhancing the quality of education and research in higher education institutions (HEIs). This research explores the challenges faced by academic professionals in Pakistan's HEIs and proposes strategies to mitigate them. This research study emphasized the critical role of educationists (university teachers and researchers) in developing highly skilled professionals. Through qualitative analysis that is based on semi-structured interviews with educationists at HEIs in Islamabad, key issues such as inadequate resources, low salaries, limited growth opportunities, and the glass ceiling effect stand out. Findings included lack of adequate compensation, limitations in research infrastructure, scarce career growth opportunities, and the unstructured policies that contribute to faculty dissatisfaction and brain drain. The challenges are supposed to be overcome by employing competitive salaries, upgrading research facilities, having clear promotion criteria, and ensuring a work-friendly culture. Providing performance-based incentives, international collaborations, expatriates, and ensuring the creation of inclusive campuses that balance work and personal life as well as establishing better mentorship programs will help with retaining faculty members.

Keywords: Talent retention, HEC, Educationist, Brain-gain, Challenges, Strategies.



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Introduction

Pakistan has a high number of talented professionals in all fields, including medicine, engineering, banking, and academia. However, such success is based on the strong foundation of education that, in turn, is dependent on the capabilities of qualified and experienced educators. Teachers are the backbone for the formation of future professionals, but their retention is a great challenge for the higher education sector of the country.

In recent years, Pakistani HEIs have recruited highly qualified faculty members with advanced degrees, international exposure, and extensive research backgrounds. These individuals have the potential to change educational standards by introducing innovative strategies and techniques. However, retaining such talent requires addressing their professional needs and challenges, including access to cutting-edge research facilities, competitive salaries, and conducive working environments.

The influence of brain drain on higher education is multi-faceted, both challenging and potentially beneficial. The loss of academic staff in universities undermines the quality of education and research. This decline of human capital, especially in developing countries, is often associated with reduced funding and strained relations between government and educational institutions. For example, in Kenya, fast expansion in university enrollment without a proportionate increase in academic staff has worsened the staff-to-student ratio and related inadequate development of staff resources.

On the other hand, it is observed that that skilled migration can lead to a "brain gain" for the home country through remittances and the return of expertise. Remittances sent back home can be directed toward educational and health needs, which, although not guaranteed to stimulate economic development, may contribute to poverty reduction and long-term societal benefits. The prospect of increased investments from the diaspora, particularly in education, presents a potential upside to the brain drain phenomenon.

Therefore, while the brain drain is a threat to the development of the higher education sector because it drains skilled personnel, there are also opportunities created through remittances, expertise exchange, and potential return flows of human capital. The benefits are realized to that extent through policies and mechanisms put in place to harness the advantages of migration while mitigating its negative impacts.

The research explored the challenges related to talent retention of the educationists in the country's higher education sector in Pakistan and developed recommendations on strategies for sustaining and attracting skilled professionals for ensuring ongoing improvement in teaching and research quality.

Research Objectives

1. Analyze educationists' perspectives on talent sustainability and retention in HEIs.
2. Identify challenges faced by educationists in Pakistani universities.
3. Explore strategies to retain and attract talented professionals to HEIs.

Literature Review

Retaining good faculty is important for quality education and research, which are basic necessities of national development. Many studies revealed that faculty satisfaction directly influences student performance, research output, and institutional performance.

Factors that affect talent retention, identified by researchers in various academic institutions comprises of multiple factors. One of the critical elements that drive talent retention is job satisfaction. Employees tend to stay with the organization if they are satisfied with their jobs, responsibilities, and work environment. Shah et al. (2024), Theron et al. (2014), and Supian et al. (2018) studies have established that job satisfaction is one of the factors that staff wish to stay for; therefore, this variable plays a mediating role between HR practices and retention.

Another major area in the retaining of talent is organizational support which encompasses all aspects including the resources available, management, and also good culture. Workers will easily stay where they are respected by others in their society and top managers. Institutional supports and leaders play a vital role in shaping the retention through friendly environment. This was illustrated by various researchers, namely Musakuro (2022), Theron et al. (2014), and Ng'ethe (2014). The importance of a supportive work culture and leadership practices underlines how these factors increase employee commitment.

Another factor that is extremely important for retaining talent is providing career development opportunities. Individuals want to know the pathway for growth and, therefore, need education, promotions, and personal development. Shah et al. (2024), Theron et al. (2014), and Thapa (2023) supported the fact that employees prefer to stay in their present job when they feel the institution provides them with pathways for career advancement.

A positive work environment that includes collaboration, flexibility, and work-life balance is very important for retaining employees. Researches such as those conducted by Xinhua and Marimuthu (2024), Supian et al. (2018), and Ng'ethe (2014) have proven that a supportive and flexible environment plays a defining role in retaining talent. Employees require a healthy and encouraging workplace, which is directly linked to retention.

Talent retention also has in the middle benefits packages and pay. Competitive salaries and fringe benefits help the employees feel appraised and valued. Indeed, a good number of studies- for instance, Shah et al. (2024), Ng'ethe (2014), and Supian et al. (2018) - have indicated that compensation, especially fair or competitive pay, is a prominent determinant of employees' preference to stay in an organization.

Another important deciding factor of retention is psychological empowerment, which involves providing liberty and decision-making power to employees. Studies like Shahzad et al. (2024) and Musakuro (2022) have highlighted that job satisfaction and work engagement by enhanced by psychological empowerment, which in turn promotes retention.

Lastly, work-life balance is always referred to as the most important factor in retaining employees. Academic staff experience more stress levels, and the retention of talent is relatively higher in such institutions that provide policies for work-life balance. According to the studies of Theron et al. (2014) and Ng'ethe (2014), effective policies that allow employees to balance their professional and personal lives lead to increased job satisfaction and commitment.

In table given below are summary of findings from the articles related to talent retention and management in higher education institutions.

Year	Authors	Findings
2014	Ng'ethe, J. M.	Identified key factors influencing retention including work environment, career growth opportunities, and remuneration.
2014	Theron, M., Barkhuizen, N., & Du Plessis, Y.	Highlighted academic turnover issues and the critical role of institutional support and career development.

2016	Bradley, A. P.	Discussed strategies for aligning talent management practices with institutional goals in Australian universities.
2016	Njanjobea, I. L.	Found that HR practices significantly impact retention, emphasizing mentorship and clear career pathways.
2017	Kissoonduth, K.	Explored the need for robust talent management policies and competitive compensation packages.
2018	Gandy, R., Harrison, P., & Gold, J.	Emphasized the importance of addressing turnover through tailored talent retention strategies.
2018	Matongolo, A., Kasekende, F., & Mafabi, S.	Found that strong employer branding positively influences talent retention.
2018	Supian, S. R., Ismail, I. A., Sidi, F., & Omar, Z.	Highlighted the role of HR practices like training and recognition in talent retention.
2019	Sinniah, S., Mohamed, R. K. M. H., et al.	Identified job satisfaction and organizational culture as critical to retention.
2020	Barkhuizen, N., Lesenyeho, D., & Schutte, N.	Investigated challenges and proposed strategies for retaining academic staff in South Africa.
2020	Chimwene, M. L.	Highlighted the importance of leadership and working conditions in retention strategies.
2020	Do, T. D., Le, L. C., & Phan, T. T.	Found that professional growth opportunities and work-life balance are key to retention.
2022	Gerhardt, T., & Karsan, S.	Identified effective talent management strategies such as flexible work arrangements and recognition programs.
2022	Liu, H. H., & Chen, Y. C.	Examined compensation systems in U.S. universities and their applicability in other contexts.
2022	Musakuro, R. N.	Proposed a comprehensive framework for talent management focusing on sustainability.
2022	Shahzad, M. F., Martins, J. M., et al.	Found psychological empowerment to be a key moderator in retention outcomes.
2022	Král, P., Richterová, M., & Králová, V.	Identified dissatisfaction with career development opportunities as a major reason for turnover.
2023	Ile, N. M., Otti, J. O., & Mbah, P. C.	Highlighted the link between talent management practices and improved organizational performance.
2023	Martin, L., Dabic, M., & Lord, G.	Discussed the challenges of talent retention during COVID-19 and the need for adaptive strategies.
2023	Thapa, M.	Explored the impact of leadership support and employee engagement on retention.
2023	Urme, U. N.	Found that structured career development programs enhance retention.

2024	Leontes, N. I.	Discussed evolving strategies to retain talent amidst dynamic higher education challenges.
2024	Marozva, R. R., Barkhuizen, E. N., et al.	Focused on the unique needs of millennial academics and the importance of career growth opportunities.
2024	Shah, N., Bano, S., et al.	Identified employee satisfaction as a mediator in the relationship between talent management and performance.
2024	Xinhua, Z., & Marimuthu, A.	Found that job security and supportive leadership are strong predictors of retention.

In conclusion, researchers consistently influencing talent retention factors in higher education included job satisfaction, career opportunities, work environment, support from the organization, psychological empowerment, compensation, and a balance between work and life. Among these, these elements were constantly appearing as key determinants in studies across diverse regions and different types of academic institutions.

Methodology

The methodology used in this study was qualitative, descriptive research design to explore the challenges that academic professionals face in higher education institutions (HEIs) in Islamabad, Pakistan. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather in-depth insights into participants' perceptions and experiences. A purposive sampling method was used to identify participants who could provide rich and relevant data based on their qualifications, professional experiences, and the nature of their roles in the selected HEIs. This non-probability sampling approach was considered appropriate for the study, as it would allow for the selection of participants with specific expertise and experiences relevant to the research objectives. The participants of the study were doctorate and post-doctorate foreign-qualified individuals who are presently working as professors, assistant professors and Lecturers in HEIs. Five universities in Islamabad were selected to ensure representation from diverse institutional structures:

1. Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU): A distance learning institution.
2. COMSATS University Islamabad: A private-funded regular institute.
3. National University of Sciences and Technology (NUST): A semi-government institute.
4. Quaid-e-Azam University (QAU): A government-funded public sector university.
5. Hamdard University (HU): A private-funded regular institute.

Data Collection and Analysis:

Data was collected by conducting face-to-face interviews with the respondents using a semi-structured interviews. The interview protocol was the open-ended questionnaire that would allow participants to express their views freely, ensuring that there was consistency across the interviews. Such an approach encouraged an all-around exploration of challenges facing educationists in their professional environment and the suggestions they may have towards improvement. The data gathered were analyzed by thematic analysis-qualitative research used for the identification, analysis, and interpretation of patterns and themes in data. This thematic analysis was started with the development of familiarity where multiple reviews of the transcription are made for developing an informal understanding of the content. Significant segments of the text have been coded systematically in capturing relevant information. These recurring codes were then categorized into overarching themes that reflected the challenges of the participants and proposed solutions. Finally, the identified themes were interpreted to derive meaningful insights, ensuring alignment

with the study's objectives. This systematic approach ensured that the findings were grounded in the participants' perspectives while addressing the study's research questions comprehensively.

Results and Discussion:

a) Work Environment and Job Satisfaction

It was observed that positive work environment is important for job satisfaction, but the participants found it challenging in this area. The faculty members described being undervalued and unsupported, especially when their efforts were not recognized. One participant stated, "There is little acknowledgment or reward for our hard work, which makes us feel underappreciated." This lack of recognition contributes to a demotivating workplace culture. A lack of job security and political interference were also major concerns. Faculty members stated that unclear terms of employment and unstable contracts create anxiety and reduce their commitment to their institutions. A participant shared, "Uncertainty about job security affects our ability to focus on teaching and research."

b) Academic and Research Resources

The majority of participants indicated they were worried about a lack of proper academic and research-based facilities. A large majority of faculty members felt discouraged about libraries, laboratories not maintained properly, and lacking global research database access. One participant shared, "It is difficult to achieve global standards when our laboratories lack modern equipment and basic research tools." These shortcomings directly prevent innovative research and decrease opportunities for students to engage in hands-on learning. Participants emphasized that they cannot produce impactful research or implement innovative teaching methodologies without sufficient resources. This limitation not only limits the performance of faculty members but also the ranking of Pakistani Higher Education Institutes worldwide and their reputation.

Furthermore, underfunding of research initiatives has resulted in a scarcity of quality research outputs. The faculty members also claimed that they have had less exposure to the latest trends in their respective fields. One of them said, "Availability of research journals is limited, which makes it difficult for us to keep ourselves abreast of the progress in the international academic circles." They claimed that strengthening these resources would not only enable the teachers but also create an intellectually challenging environment for the students.

c) Career Advancement and Professional Development

The most critical issue that was voiced by the participants was unclear and slow career progression pathways. Most of the faculty members considered the promotion processes in the HEIs as unstructured and not transparent. "Promotion criteria are not transparent, which makes career advancement uncertain and discouraging." This uncertainty in the pathway of career growth brings stagnation to the mind of the faculty.

Finally, they mentioned the hindrance in staying abreast of competition within their disciplines from limited availability of professional and technical up-gradation events. There is a significant demand from the faculty about regular workshops, training sessions, and international fellowships. Unless these happenings take place, they may not feel equipped enough for new methods of teaching, nor conduct research on international standards. Gender inequalities were also noticed in the study while female respondents complained of inequalities at workplace and inadequate resources for a work-life balance.

The participants proposed clear, performance-based promotion pathways and professional grooming programs as the solutions to these problems. They opined that the faculty could be encouraged to stay with their institutions if opportunities to grow and excel were provided.

d) Compensation and Incentives

All participants voiced that they are not satisfied with their pay scales and also stated that the remunerations they receive are inappropriate for their qualifications, efforts, or contributions. Low salaries were pointed out as a major reason by the majority of faculty members against joining or remaining in academic careers. As one of them said, *"We deliver world-class research and education, but our salary packages do not match our qualification or the efforts we provide."*

Performance-based incentives, such as rewards for publishing in high-impact journals or mentoring outstanding students, are also lacking. Housing allowances, travel grants to attend international conferences, and bonuses tied to research achievements are some of the incentives that faculty members need. Without competitive salaries and incentives, they argue, it is difficult to retain talented individuals, and there is a growing brain drain.

Participants suggested that the pay scales should be updated according to international standards and benefits should be provided for recognizing faculty contribution. This, they thought, would not only retain existing talent but also assist in attracting highly skilled professionals to HEIs in Pakistan.

e) Administrative Support and Institutional Policies

The level of administrative support available in HEIs was perceived by participants to be ineffective and not responsive. Most members remembered cases of bureaucratic delay when obtaining research funds or project approvals. According to one respondent,

"Administrative obstacles consume more time than the real work on research or teaching." This inefficiency aside, it makes faculty members despondent.

Administrative priorities and faculty needs further aggravate the problem. For example, they are not consulted in decisions over policies that directly affect them; therefore, there is a sense of alienation. Frequent and uncommunicated changes in policies cause confusion and hinder their ability to make effective plans.

The participants stated that this was possible by *"automating approval process, holding regular dialogue between faculty and administrators, and having a liaison office that answers questions from faculty promptly."*

f) Brain Drain and International Appeal

The theme of brain drain came out very frequently, with respondents talking about the better opportunities that they can get abroad. Faculty members said that the major reasons for their colleagues to leave Pakistan are higher salaries, advanced research facilities, and more secure work environments. One respondent reflected on this: *"Many of us leave because we seek a professional environment that recognizes our efforts, supports our research, and provides a better quality of life."*

They further said that intellectual and professional challenge lacks at the local level, so brilliant students leave and find avenues elsewhere in competitive global spaces. Talent outflow reduces intellectual capital not only at Pakistan but also at education and research standards in Pakistan. The panel members supported these recommendations of brain-drain counteractive strategies. It

was suggesting to prepare research-based roles, present adequate salary scale, and make collaborative with international entities. They emphasized the importance of exposing faculty to the global arena, while keeping them in touch with their local institutions.

To address these issues, participants suggested creating a culture of respect and acknowledgment, offering stable contracts, and establishing grievance redressal mechanisms to address faculty concerns effectively.

Challenges	Category
Academic and Research Resources	✓ Outdated libraries and lack of access to global research databases ✓ Poorly maintained and unequipped laboratories ✓ Insufficient research funding ✓ Limited exposure to recent advancements in respective fields
Compensation and Incentives	✓ Low salaries compared to workload and qualifications ✓ Absence of performance-based rewards or incentives ✓ Lack of benefits such as housing allowances, travel grants, and bonuses
Career Advancement	✓ Inconsistent and opaque promotion processes ✓ Gender disparities and workplace biases ✓ Limited professional development opportunities
Administrative Support	✓ Bureaucratic delays in securing research funding and approvals ✓ Lack of consultation with faculty in policy decisions ✓ Frequent and uncommunicated policy changes
Brain Drain	✓ Attractiveness of higher salaries and better working conditions abroad ✓ Advanced research opportunities and global exposure in developed countries ✓ Secure and competitive environments abroad
Work Environment	✓ Lack of recognition for faculty contributions ✓ Political interference in decision-making ✓ Unstable contracts and lack of job security

Strategies for Talent Retention at Universities

Category	Proposed Strategies	Statements from Participants
Improving Compensation and Incentives	Competitive salaries and benefits to align with international standards. Additional incentives like housing allowances, research grants, and performance bonuses.	<i>"When salaries are significantly lower than those abroad, retaining talented faculty becomes nearly impossible."</i>
Enhancing Research	Investment in modern laboratories, libraries, and equipment.	<i>"We are expected to conduct groundbreaking research but often lack</i>

Infrastructure	Easy access to international academic networks and research collaborations. Simplifying grant processes.	<i>even the basic tools and infrastructure." "Having access to global networks is essential."</i>
Fostering Career Growth	Transparent and merit-based promotion processes. Professional development opportunities like workshops, conferences, and training programs. Leadership roles within the institution.	<i>"Clear and transparent promotion policies provide a clear pathway for career advancement." "Investing in growth through international conferences adds value."</i>
Creating a Conducive Work Environment	Safe and inclusive campuses free from harassment and discrimination. Policies promoting work-life balance and mental well-being. Recognizing faculty achievements.	<i>"A safe and inclusive campus fosters trust and makes faculty feel respected." "Acknowledging our efforts publicly motivates us to contribute more."</i>
Addressing Brain Drain	Retain talent through incentives and career development opportunities. Attract expatriates with competitive packages and flexible roles. Foster global collaborations.	<i>"Many expatriates would return if expertise is respected."</i>
Strengthening Institutional Policies	Aligning institutional policies with faculty goals. Establishing robust feedback mechanisms. Introducing sabbatical programs for research and innovation.	<i>"Policies co-developed with faculty are more likely to be practical and accepted." "Sabbaticals rejuvenate faculty and bring fresh ideas."</i>

Recommendations for Talent Retention in Higher Education Institutes

- ✓ Develop and enforce policies ensuring equitable salaries, career progression, and research funding access.
- ✓ Prioritize faculty well-being through structured grievance redressal systems and support mechanisms.
- ✓ Establish partnerships with global institutions for joint research, faculty exchange, and academic collaboration.
- ✓ Assist faculty in applying for international fellowships and provide grants for global academic pursuits.
- ✓ Encourage government investment in education to enhance facilities, salaries, and research opportunities.
- ✓ Partner with private organizations and industries for sponsorships, funding, and resource sharing.
- ✓ Foster cross-departmental and interdisciplinary collaborations to build a vibrant academic community.
- ✓ Create mentorship programs where senior academics guide junior faculty for professional growth.
- ✓ Recognize and reward innovative teaching methods and research contributions to motivate faculty.

- ✓ Integrate institutional objectives with global ranking criteria to attract and retain talent.
- ✓ Publicize faculty achievements to enhance pride and recognition of their contributions.

Conclusion

Talent retention is at the very core of quality improvement of education and research in HEIs in Pakistan. The study identifies challenges for educationists, which include low rewards, minimal research infrastructure, and few opportunities for career advancement. All these systemic issues bring about faculty dissatisfaction, which would eventually have a bearing on their performance and increase the risk of brain drain. To address these concerns, HEIs must adopt a multi-dimensional strategy that is multi-faceted- competitive salaries, robust research facilities, transparent promotion criteria, and a supportive work environment. Such measures will improve the retention of faculty, besides attracting skilled professionals in domestic and international markets, which could innovate and enhance academic quality. The findings highlight that the needs of educators must be prioritized for the sustainability of HEIs. As one participant insightfully remarked, "When educators feel valued and supported, their commitment to nurturing future generations and advancing knowledge becomes unwavering." Ensuring that HEIs recognize the importance of investing in their faculty is pivotal for creating a thriving academic landscape in Pakistan. As one participant succinctly summarized, "Investing in educators is not just an institutional necessity—it is a national priority."

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