Original Article

Strategies for Retaining Academic Staff in Faith-Based Higher Education Institutions

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ABSTRACT

This study explored academic staff retention strategies in Church-founded higher education institutions (CFHEIs) in Uganda, recognizing the importance of sustaining human capital for institutional performance. Employing a qualitative case study design, data were collected from 48 academic staff- professors, lecturers, and teaching assistants—through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis. The findings revealed that CFHEIs utilize a multidimensional retention framework grounded in intrinsic and extrinsic motivators. Key strategies include clear career paths and transparent promotion criteria, which motivate staff by fostering merit-based advancement and recognition. Competitive salary structures and comprehensive benefits, such as housing allowances, pension schemes, and health insurance, were recognized as essential hygiene factors that prevent dissatisfaction and enhance institutional loyalty. Additionally, performance-based incentives, including bonuses for research output and grants, were highlighted as effective motivators reinforcing a culture of excellence and achievement. The study also identified the value of financial and institutional support for advanced studies, such as partial scholarships, sabbatical leave, and flexible work arrangements, in strengthening staff commitment. Furthermore, continuous learning and specialized training programs, particularly those tailored to departmental needs and delivered by external experts, were found to significantly enhance professional development and retention. Despite these positive practices, participants reported challenges of equity, transparency, and implementation consistency, especially in the distribution of scholarships, the responsiveness of salary adjustments to inflation, and the inclusiveness of incentive systems across disciplines. The study concludes that CFHEIs have developed a robust and context-sensitive approach to academic staff retention. However, to maximize impact, it is recommended that institutions improve equitable access to professional development and financial support, enhance transparency in promotion and recognition, and ensure the alignment of incentive structures with staff needs. Future research should examine

leadership roles in policy execution and compare retention practices across institutional types.

INTRODUCTION

In the pursuit of sustainable institutional performance, higher education institutions (HEIs) are increasingly recognizing the strategic importance of attracting, developing, and retaining highly skilled academic staff. Human capital, particularly in the form of talented faculty, is a central resource that underpins institutional success, innovation, and competitiveness. When effectively harnessed, it contributes to reduced turnover, enhanced productivity, and minimized recruitment costs, making it a distinctive source of sustainable advantage (Popescu & Verma, 2025). However, sustainability in academic institutions is not solely determined by the presence of skilled personnel but also by the strategic implementation of retention mechanisms that align with staff motivations and institutional goals (Singh *et al*., 2024). In many developing countries, especially across sub-Saharan Africa, the proliferation of private universities has introduced new dynamics to academic labour markets. While this expansion addresses the growing demand for higher education, it has simultaneously intensified competition for qualified academic staff, leading to elevated turnover rates, regulatory pressures, and staffing shortages (Tolossa, 2024). Uganda, like other countries in the region, has witnessed significant growth in the number of private institutions, particularly those founded by religious organizations.

Despite their historical legacy and contributions to the education sector, these institutions face critical challenges in retaining experienced faculty, which undermines the delivery of quality education and institutional stability (Mugo & Siagi, 2024). Globally, academic staff retention is a growing concern. For instance, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported millions of resignations across professional sectors, including education, reflecting a broader crisis of institutional loyalty and workforce stability. Within academia, high attrition rates disrupt teaching continuity, compromise curriculum delivery, and diminish organizational morale (Baidoo *et al*., 2023). The academic environment in Africa is no exception, as universities confront global pressures such as brain drain, mobility of highly skilled professionals, and competition from international institutions (AlQudah *et al.,* 2023). These trends have particularly impacted church-founded higher education institutions (CFHEIs), which must navigate the dual imperative of mission-driven education and market-driven competition.

Retention strategies, therefore, are essential to institutional sustainability, demanding comprehensive policies that address the expectations, motivations, and career aspirations of academic staff. Previous studies have emphasized the importance of nurturing supportive work environments, offering competitive remuneration, fostering academic growth opportunities, and promoting participatory governance to mitigate turnover intentions (Popescu & Verma, 2025; Singh et al., 2024). Furthermore, understanding academic staff perceptions of existing retention approaches provides a valuable lens through which institutions can evaluate and recalibrate their human resource strategies for greater efficacy (Mugo & Siagi, 2024). insights that can inform policy interventions and strengthen institutional capacity in HEIs across Uganda and similar contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory

Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory of motivation provides a foundational perspective for understanding academic staff retention as a function of job satisfaction. The theory posits that job satisfaction and dissatisfaction arise from two distinct categories of workplace factors: **motivators** and **hygiene factors**. According to Herzberg, motivators such as achievement, recognition, responsibility, and opportunities for advancement contribute to genuine job satisfaction and are internal to the work itself. Hygiene factors, on the other hand, such as salary, job security, working conditions, and organizational policies, are extrinsic and, when inadequate, lead to dissatisfaction but do not necessarily foster satisfaction when improved (Herzberg *et al.,* 1959; Jaffar *et al.*, 2024; Mitsakis & Galanski, 2022).

Empirical studies affirm the connection between motivator-driven satisfaction and employee retention. Ybañez (2024) illustrates that in the financial sector, organizations that enhance motivational elements such as career growth and task significance report lower attrition rates. Similarly, Siddiqui (2024) highlights that the presence of enriching work experiences rather than financial rewards alone is a stronger predictor of employee retention. In academic settings, where intrinsic motivation is often central to professional identity, Herzberg's insights are particularly salient (Naz, 2022; Mustafa *et al.*, 2022).

Social Exchange Theory

Social Exchange Theory (SET), initially conceptualized by Homans (1958) and further developed by Blau (1964), posits that human relationships are governed by reciprocal exchanges of resources—both tangible and intangible—within a framework of mutual benefit and perceived fairness. Blau's contribution emphasized that social exchange is foundational to the structure and functioning of organizations, wherein individuals engage in behaviours shaped by anticipated returns (Yamao, 2024). These exchanges transcend mere economic transactions, encompassing trust, commitment, support, and recognition, which together form the bedrock of enduring professional relationships (Kumar & Shailaja, 2024).

SET has gained widespread recognition as a foundational lens for understanding employee attitudes and behaviours, especially in contexts involving organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and retention (Colquitt & Zipay, 2015). Within this framework, employer investments in staff, such as training, mentorship, fair treatment, and growth opportunities, are perceived by employees as indicators of organizational support and trustworthiness. In response, employees reciprocate through positive behaviours such as increased engagement, performance, and loyalty (Zeb *et al.*, 2022; Xuecheng *et al.,* 2022).

This reciprocity principle is central to the application of SET in academic staff retention. Kaur (2024) underscores that when higher education

institutions cultivate a human resource climate built on trust, fairness, and recognition, academic staff are more likely to develop a psychological bond with the institution, leading to reduced turnover intentions. Similarly, Snyman & Ferreira (2023) highlight that the psychological contract, an unwritten understanding of mutual obligations, plays a pivotal role in shaping staff perceptions of equity and influencing their retention decisions. When this psychological contract is perceived as fulfilled, academic staff feel valued and committed, fostering long-term institutional loyalty.

In the academic context, SET provides an apt lens to examine how retention strategies such as professional development, equitable promotion practices, and inclusive leadership can cultivate a culture of reciprocity. Akpey-Mensah (2023) draws attention to the embeddedness of social capital in academic institutions, asserting that when institutions demonstrate care and investment in academic staff's well-being and growth, a strong sense of moral obligation and institutional loyalty develops. This is particularly salient in environments like Church-founded higher education institutions (CFHEIs), where institutional identity and values may deepen the emotional dimension of social exchange, further reinforcing retention outcomes (Xuecheng *et al.,* 2022; Zeb *et al.,* 2022). In conclusion, Social Exchange Theory frames academic staff retention not simply as a function of institutional policies but as a dynamic relational process driven by perceptions of mutual investment, fairness, and trust.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study adopted a qualitative case study design to explore the lived experiences and perceptions of academic staff in two church-founded higher education institutions in Central. These institutions were not only among the earliest private universities in the country to be accredited by the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) but also among the first to receive a Charter, signifying their longstanding institutional maturity and influence in

Uganda's private higher education sector. The research was situated within naturalistic institutional settings to allow for rich, in-depth insights into contextual dynamics, aligning with the interpretivist tradition that values complexity and authenticity in educational research (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2023; Masagazi, 2022; Dzogovic & Bajrami, 2023; Magnone & Yezierski, 2024). Asrifan *et al*. (2024).

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to recruit 48 academic staff, including professors, senior lecturers, lecturers, and teaching assistants. This method enabled the deliberate selection of participants based on their knowledge, roles, and relevance to the research focus an approach widely recommended in qualitative inquiry for its ability to enhance the relevance and richness of collected data (Memon *et al*., 2024; Nyimbili & Nyimbili, 2024; Plisiecki & Kwiatkowska (2024).

Data collection was conducted through standardized, open-ended questions, allowing participants to articulate their views while enabling the researcher to maintain consistency across cases. This format facilitated the development of detailed case-specific narratives and the emergence of cross-cutting thematic patterns (Bozalek & Zembylas, 2024; Hirose & Creswell, 2023). The case study approach, thus, not only allowed for contextual immersion but also supported analytical generalizations by highlighting structural and cultural factors shaping academic staff perspectives within church-founded institutions.

Data Quality and Error Control

To ensure the trustworthiness of qualitative data, this study adopted a rigorous framework grounded in the seminal criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, as initially articulated by Guba & Lincoln (1985) and further validated in contemporary methodological literature (Enworo, 2023; Kakar *et al*., 2023). Credibility was reinforced through a combination of prolonged engagement with participants, data triangulation, all

of which served to validate emergent patterns and reduce interpretive bias (Morgan, 2024; Cloutier & Ravasi, 2021; Saber's, 2024). Transferability was addressed by offering thick, rich descriptions of the study's context (Subedi, 2023; Ahmed, 2024; Kocaman, 2024). Dependability was assured by maintaining a detailed audit trail that recorded methodological decisions, coding logic, and analytic reflections (Marlina *et al.*, 2024). Confirmability was pursued by systematically separating researcher subjectivity from the data narrative through the use of reflective memos, audit logs, and transparent documentation of analytic steps, resonating with Kyngäs *et al*. (2020) Ultimately, this study conceptualized trust as a procedural benchmark and relational and iterative construct (Milacci *et al.* (2024).

Data Collection and Analysis

This study adopted a multi-method qualitative approach, employing individual and focus group interviews complemented by document analysis (de Souza *et al.,* 2024; Wong *et al.* 2023). The interviews were guided by in-depth semi-structured protocols designed to elicit rich, nuanced responses while allowing flexibility for emergent themes (Tomoaia-Cotisel *et al.,* 2024; Bloom *et al.,* 2024). Both individual interviews and focus group discussions offered distinct yet complementary insights, with individual sessions facilitating deeper personal reflection and focus groups providing interactive spaces where collective meaning-making could occur (Fastenrath & Marx, 2025; Geampana & Perrotta, 2025; Kanygin & Koretckaia, 2021; Sharma *et al*., 2024). Verbatim quotations were strategically included in the findings to preserve the authenticity of participants' voices and provide an emic perspective on the issues under investigation (Masagazi *et al*., 2024; Naeem *et al.,* 2024).

Ethical Considerations

Given the direct involvement of academic staff from church-founded higher education institutions as human participants, the study adhered to rigorous ethical standards to safeguard their rights and welfare. Formal ethical clearance was obtained from both the Uganda Christian University Research Ethics Committee (UCUREC) and the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology (UNCST), reflecting compliance with national and institutional protocols for research involving human subjects. Beyond institutional approvals, the study also secured access permissions from institutional gatekeepers, affirming respect for organizational hierarchies and local governance structures within the academic environment.

Critically, informed consent was obtained from each participant, ensuring that engagement in the study was entirely voluntary, with full awareness of the research purpose, procedures, and potential implications. This aligns with Gaisie *et al*. (2025); Masagazi (2022) emphasizes the ethical imperative of voluntary participation and echoes broader ethical frameworks that underscore transparency, autonomy, and respect for persons (Corpuz *et al*., 2025; Ratti *et al.,* 2025).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

a) Clear Career Path and Promotion Opportunities

One participant expressed the benefits of the transparent promotion policy, noting how clearly outlined criteria had positively impacted their career**.** *SLEX 2* stated:

> *"The institution has a transparent promotion policy, where criteria for promotion are clearly outlined. Staff members are aware of the benchmarks required for promotion to higher academic ranks, such as Lecturer to senior lecturer or professor. I have personally benefited from this policy, having been promoted to senior lecturer last year based on my academic output and service."*

This aligns closely with **Herzberg's motivator factors,** particularly recognition and advancement. A communicated and merit-based promotion system fulfils academic staff's need for achievement and career progression, which are crucial for sustaining motivation and reducing turnover (Jaffar *et al.,* 2024; Mustafa *et al.,* 2022). Moreover, the perception of a structured, meritocratic process reinforces trust in institutional leadership, a central tenet of **Social Exchange Theory,** where reciprocal recognition builds employee commitment (Kaur, 2024).

Conversely, another participant, *SLEY 4,* shared concerns about the practical challenges of the promotion process, highlighting delays that could lead to staff demotivation. They remarked:

"The promotion policy, while transparent in theory, can be slow and cumbersome in practice. For example, the process for promotion involves multiple layers of approval and can take years, even for deserving candidates. I know colleagues who have been waiting for promotions for over three years, which has led to demotivation and a feeling that their contributions are not being adequately recognized on time."

This reflection illustrates a disconnect between policy and practice. While transparency is a motivator, inefficiency in execution becomes a **hygiene factor failure** under Herzberg's framework, undermining satisfaction and breeding frustration. Similarly, from a **SET perspective,** delayed reciprocation (i.e., untimely recognition through promotion) disrupts the exchange balance, leading to perceptions of neglect and potential disengagement (Snyman & Ferreira, 2023).

Another perspective was offered by a participant, *LEY2,* who emphasized the motivational impact of a well-defined promotion process. He noted that:

"Having a clear and transparent career path with well-defined promotion criteria has been highly effective in retaining staff. Staff members know what is required to advance to higher academic ranks, and promotions are based on merit, which motivates us to work harder. I was promoted to Senior Lecturer after meeting the research and teaching criteria, which was a significant milestone in my career and reinforced my commitment to the institution."

This observation reinforces the **instrumentality** of promotion in driving performance. Herzberg's theory suggests that structured advancement acts as a motivating force when aligned with clear benchmarks and institutional support. Similarly, research by Neethling & Pelser (2024) affirms that transparent leadership systems where academic contributions lead to tangible outcomes encourage academic excellence and retention.

Additionally, one participant highlighted the importance of regular communication and clarity in the promotion criteria, which helped them set achievable goals. Participant *SLEX1* stated:

"The establishment of a transparent and streamlined promotion process with clear criteria has been particularly effective. The university's policy of regularly reviewing promotion criteria and communicating them clearly to all staff ensures that everyone knows what is expected for career advancement. For example, after attending a workshop on the promotion process, I knew exactly what was required to advance to the next level, which motivated me to achieve those goals. This clarity and fairness in promotion encourage staff to stay and grow with the institution."

This reflects the importance of institutional communication and procedural clarity in cultivating a **growth-oriented workplace culture**. As highlighted by Vincent (2024), organizations that communicate career pathways foster stronger engagement. Within the **SET framework**, this practice fosters a sense of equity and predictability,

two vital components of trust and long-term organizational commitment (Yamao, 2024).

Lastly, another participant, *SLEY 3,* reinforced the positive impact of the promotion process on staff retention, sharing their own successful experience. The participant said:

> *"The university's clear and transparent promotion process has been particularly effective in retaining staff. For example, I was recently promoted to Senior Lecturer after meeting the specific criteria for research, teaching, and service. The process was straightforward and based on merit, which made me feel that my hard work was recognized."*

Such testimonies exemplify Herzberg's core proposition: that recognition, career advancement, and achievement directly stimulate intrinsic motivation. Promotions based on merit not only validate effort but also serve as institutional reinforcement of professional value. According to Alli & Lisakafu (2024), recognition systems, especially when tied to clear benchmarks, significantly enhance retention in higher education institutions by cultivating fairness and reinforcing meritocracy.

b) Competitive Salary and Benefits Package

TAY8 and *TAY1* highlighted the significance of competitive salaries in attracting and retaining academic staff. These participants emphasized that the university's salary structure aligned with market rates, providing a decent standard of living for employees.

> *"The university offers health benefits, pension schemes, and housing allowances. These financial incentives make the institution an attractive place to work and stay long-term."* TAY8

> *"The competitive salaries offered by this University have been a major factor in my decision to stay. They align with the market rate and provide a decent standard of living."*

These findings align closely with **Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory,** wherein salary and benefits constitute hygiene factors—critical for preventing job dissatisfaction (Jaffar *et al.,* 2024). While competitive compensation may not independently motivate employees, its absence often leads to discontent and attrition. Furthermore, from a **Social Exchange Theory** perspective, these financial incentives reflect a tangible institutional investment in staff welfare, which employees may reciprocate with loyalty and continued service (Yamao, 2024; Kaur, 2024).

LEY4 further underscored the importance of a comprehensive benefits package, including health insurance, annual bonuses, and housing allowances. These perks were seen as significant contributors to job satisfaction and overall employee well-being;

> *"Our benefits package is quite attractive. It includes health insurance, annual bonus contributions, and a housing allowance. These perks significantly enhance job satisfaction."*

Such comprehensive benefits extend beyond monetary compensation and signal institutional care, reinforcing the **reciprocal relationship** posited by SET. Staff who perceive that their needs and well-being are actively addressed are more likely to develop a psychological bond with the institution (Rounak & Misra, 2022). This is particularly effective in retaining academic personnel, as affirmed by Suriati *et al.* (2024), who highlight the motivational power of non-monetary incentives like security and trust.

In a contrasting perspective, though with a similar thought, participant *TAX 4* noted that while the university aimed to provide competitive salaries, the adjustments often did not keep pace with inflation or rising living costs. This led to dissatisfaction among colleagues who felt their compensation was

not commensurate with their workload or economic realities.

> *"Although the university strives to offer a competitive salary, the increments and adjustments do not always keep pace with inflation or the rising cost of living. For example, while salaries are reviewed periodically, the adjustments are often minimal and do not adequately reflect market conditions. This has been a common grievance among my colleagues, who feel that their compensation is not commensurate with their workload or the economic realities they face".*

This response illustrates a key **hygiene gap** in Herzberg's theory. Inconsistent salary reviews or inadequate adjustments can turn what should be a neutral or satisfying factor into a source of dissatisfaction. In terms of **SET,** when staff perceive the cost-benefit exchange as imbalanced—particularly when financial expectations are unmet—organizational commitment is weakened (Snyman & Ferreira, 2023).

Other participants who strengthened this ideology included *LEY 2* and *LEX 5;* accordingly, both emphasized the crucial role of regular salary reviews and adjustments in retaining staff. By ensuring that compensation remains competitive, the university demonstrates its commitment to fair treatment and financial security for its employees.

> *"Offering a competitive salary and comprehensive benefits package has been crucial for retaining staff. Regular salary reviews and adjustments help ensure that our compensation remains competitive with other institutions. Additionally, benefits such as health insurance, pension schemes, and housing allowances provide a sense of financial security. Knowing that the university is committed to maintaining fair compensation has been a significant factor in my decision to stay."*

Similarly, Participant *SLEY 5* argued that:

> *"The provision of comprehensive health insurance, including coverage for family members, has been particularly effective in retaining staff. This benefit provides peace of mind, knowing that both staff and their families are protected. For example, when my spouse needed medical care, the insurance coverage provided by the university was invaluable, saving us from a significant financial burden. This comprehensive approach to employee welfare greatly enhances job satisfaction and loyalty."*

Here, the role of **family-inclusive benefits** is particularly powerful in building long-term commitment. From a **SET lens**, such care-oriented policies signal a deeper institutional concern for staff well-being, which often leads to emotional investment and reciprocal loyalty (Akpey-Mensah, 2023). This is consistent with findings from Saufi *et al. (*2023), who confirm that institutions addressing both professional and personal needs of staff experience higher retention rates.

Then, *LEX 5* highlighted a recent salary adjustment to match inflation and market rates, noting that the salary review contributed significantly to the retention of staff who felt their financial needs were being addressed.

> *"A notable example of a successful retention approach is the university's regular review and adjustment of salaries to remain competitive with other institutions. Recently, the university implemented a salary increase across all levels of academic staff to match inflation and market rates. This adjustment was well-received, and I observed that several colleagues who were considering leaving decided to stay because they felt that their financial needs were being taken seriously. This commitment to fair compensation has been key in retaining staff."*

These views underscore the importance of **institutional responsiveness,** a recurring theme in both the Herzberg and SET frameworks. As Vincent (2024) and Alli & Lisakafu (2024) suggest, reward systems that reflect staff realities, especially economic, are crucial in maintaining retention and organizational stability.

c) Performance-Based Incentives

In addressing the approaches for retaining academic staff at the university, participant *LEY 6* expressed how the university's performance-based bonuses, particularly those linked to obtaining research grants, motivated academic staff to increase their research output.

> *"To encourage productivity, the institution provides performance-based bonuses and incentives. For example, lecturers who obtain research grants receive additional financial rewards that come with the grants. This strategy has encouraged me to focus on my research output."*

This observation aligns with **Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory,** where financial rewards tied to achievement and recognition function as motivators. While salary on its own is considered a hygiene factor, performance-based bonuses that reward concrete accomplishments foster intrinsic motivation, especially when linked to professional success and recognition (Jaffar *et al.*, 2024; Cui, 2024). These rewards acknowledge effort, reinforce institutional appreciation, and promote job satisfaction, which is critical for long-term retention.

To further support this understanding, *LEY 1* pointed out that while performance-based incentives are beneficial, they tend to disproportionately favour staff in certain disciplines, leading to feelings of inequality among those whose fields do not receive similar recognition.

> *"The incentives, such as research grants, tend to favour those in specific disciplines or with particular skills. For example, staff in departments with fewer opportunities for external funding, like the humanities, often feel left out of these incentives. I have colleagues in the arts who feel undervalued because their contributions, which may not result in tangible research outputs, are not equally rewarded. This approach can inadvertently create divisions and feelings of inequality among staff."*

This concern reflects a **hygiene gap** in Herzberg's framework and underscores a **reciprocity imbalance** in **Social Exchange Theory.** When staff perceive the reward system as inequitable, particularly across disciplinary lines, feelings of exclusion and demotivation may arise (Kaur, 2024). Institutions must, therefore, ensure fairness and inclusivity in incentive structures to maintain cohesion and morale (Snyman & Ferreira, 2023).

Participant *PROY 1* in a related argument shared how performance-based bonuses tied to research output, such as publications in high-impact journals, effectively motivated staff by directly rewarding their achievements and fostering a culture of excellence.

> *"Performance-based incentives, such as bonuses for research publications, grants, and teaching excellence, have been instrumental in retaining staff. For example, the additional financial rewards I received for publishing in high-impact journals provided both recognition and financial motivation. These incentives encourage a culture of excellence and make staff feel that their efforts are directly rewarded."*

This finding exemplifies Herzberg's motivator factors: achievement, advancement, and recognition. When academic accomplishments translate into tangible rewards, staff feel validated, leading to enhanced job satisfaction and stronger

commitment. From a **Social Exchange Theory** perspective, the institution's recognition of individual contributions reinforces the psychological contract, encouraging staff to reciprocate through continued loyalty and excellence (Zeb *et al*., 2022; Yamao, 2024).

Participants *PROX 1* and *PROX 4* emphasized the role of performance-based research grants in retaining staff by encouraging continuous academic contributions and recognizing high-performing researchers, which motivates long-term commitment to the university.

> *"The provision of additional research grants for staff who consistently publish in reputable journals has been very effective. This approach not only rewards high-performing staff but also encourages a culture of academic excellence. For example, I received a research grant after publishing in a high-impact journal, which allowed me to further my research and gain recognition in my field. This financial support for research activities reinforces the importance of academic contributions and encourages staff to remain committed to the university." PROX 1*

Similarly, *PROX 4* highlighted how the university's performance-based bonuses for research publications have been a key retention strategy by offering financial rewards for staff who contribute significantly to the institution's research output.

> *"The university's policy of offering performance-based incentives, such as bonuses for research publications and grants, has been a successful retention strategy. For example, after publishing several articles in peer-reviewed journals, I received a financial bonus that recognized my contributions to the university's research output. This recognition motivated me to continue my research efforts and remain with the institution, knowing that my hard work was acknowledged and rewarded."*

These statements underscore the **reciprocal logic of SET**, where institutional investment in academic productivity is met with enhanced faculty commitment. When recognition is linked directly to measurable contributions, such as publications, it not only fosters a performance-driven culture but also reaffirms the institution's value for excellence (Rounak & Misra, 2022; Siddiqui, 2024). The dual benefits of financial motivation and professional acknowledgement position performance-based incentives as an essential mechanism for both performance enhancement and staff retention.

d) Support for Advanced Studies

In the study, participants expressed how financial support for further studies plays a significant role in retaining academic staff. The university's provision of scholarships and flexible arrangements is seen as a key motivator for professional growth and commitment. According to participant *LEY6*;

> *"The university provides partial scholarships for staff members pursuing further studies, such as Master's or PhD. Programs. I, for example, received partial funding for my PhD. Program, which has motivated me to stay with the institution and continue contributing to its academic excellence."*

This observation aligns with **Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory,** where advanced educational opportunities serve as intrinsic motivators by facilitating professional growth and self-actualization (Jaffar *et al.,* 2024; Lim, 2024). By supporting staff through scholarships, institutions fulfil key motivational factors such as achievement and advancement that contribute directly to job satisfaction and organizational loyalty (Mitsakis & Galanski, 2022).

Additionally, the university's support in covering costs for professional development activities, such as attending conferences and workshops, is appreciated as it allows staff to stay updated in their fields.

"This University has been supportive of my professional growth. They have covered the costs of attending a conference recently and workshops previously, which has helped me stay updated in my field." PROX 1

Such gestures illustrate the **reciprocal obligations** central to **Social Exchange Theory (SET)**. When academic staff perceive that the university invests in their development, they often respond with commitment and loyalty, fulfilling the psychological contract between employer and employee (Kaur, 2024; Zeb *et al.,* 2022). These investments create a relationship of trust and mutual benefit, reinforcing staff retention (Yamao, 2024).

However, not all staff members felt equally supported, as some pointed out the limited availability of scholarships and the intense competition for the limited slots, which can lead to frustration and discourage staff from staying. In the words of *LEX 3*;

"While financial support or partial scholarships for further studies are offered, they often come with stringent conditions or limited availability. For example, the number of scholarships provided is very small compared to the demand, and staff members have to compete intensely to qualify. In my case, I applied for funding to pursue a PhD but was turned down due to limited slots. This creates a sense of frustration and discouragement among those who do not receive the support, potentially driving them to seek opportunities elsewhere."

This comment reveals the critical **hygiene factor gap** highlighted in Herzberg's theory—while such support can be motivational, its uneven distribution may lead to dissatisfaction when expectations are unmet. According to Cui (2024), failure to equitably meet professional development needs can undermine institutional trust and foster disengagement.

Despite these challenges, staff members highlighted the effectiveness of partial scholarships in fostering loyalty and reducing financial burdens, which strengthened their connection to the university. Participant *TAX2* revealed that;

"The provision of financial support and partial scholarships for staff pursuing advanced degrees, such as Master's program, has been highly effective. This support demonstrates the institution's investment in our growth. For example, I received a partial scholarship to pursue my master's, which not only alleviated my financial burden but also deepened my commitment to the university. Knowing that the institution values and supports our academic advancement fosters a strong sense of loyalty among staff."

This reflects the SET principle that perceived organizational support contributes to an employee's sense of belonging and commitment. As Rounak & Misra (2022) argue, when institutions actively support personal development goals, employees interpret this as a high-value exchange and are more likely to remain loyal and engaged.

In some cases, participants emphasized the value of sabbatical leave as an additional form of support, allowing them to focus on their studies without the pressure of work, thus fostering a sense of loyalty to the institution.

"The university's provision of sabbatical leave for pursuing advanced studies is especially effective. This approach not only provides financial support but also offers time off to focus on academic growth. For example, I was granted a one-year sabbatical to complete my PhD research, which significantly reduced the stress of balancing work and study commitments. Knowing that the institution supports our academic ambitions in such a tangible way encourages many of us to stay and contribute to its growth." SLEY 3

Sabbaticals, as both a motivational benefit and a relational investment, reinforce the value of **institutional reciprocity.** According to Akpey-Mensah (2023), such support mechanisms, particularly in academic settings, translate into deeper emotional and professional commitment, strengthening the long-term academic bond between staff and institution.

Finally, the combination of partial scholarships and flexible work arrangements was also noted as a significant factor in staff retention, as it enabled academic staff to balance their professional and personal development goals more effectively.

"I have seen several colleagues, including myself, take advantage of the university's support for advanced studies. The institution offers partial scholarships and flexible work schedules to staff pursuing a Master's program. For example, I received a scholarship to help fund my PhD studies, and I was also given the flexibility to adjust my teaching load during crucial periods of my research. This support was instrumental in helping me balance my academic responsibilities and personal development goals, making me more committed to remaining with the university." TAX 6

This balanced approach underscores how both **motivator factors** (from Herzberg's framework) and **relational investments** (from SET) work synergistically to retain staff. Flexible working conditions signal institutional empathy and respect for employee needs, which is vital for sustaining commitment in resource-constrained environments such as higher education (Dube & Ndofirepi, 2023).

e) Continuous Learning and Training Programs

In the study, participants highlighted the importance of continuous learning and training programs as a critical approach to retaining academic staff. Many staff members recognized the university's efforts in organizing regular workshops, seminars, and

conferences, which were considered valuable for professional development.

"This university regularly organizes workshops, seminars, and conferences to help staff enhance their teaching skills and stay updated with the latest developments in their fields. For example, last year, we had a three-day workshop on research methodology, which was highly beneficial to both new and experienced staff members." TAX4

This finding resonates with Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory, which identifies professional development as a key motivator that enhances job satisfaction (Oh *et al.*, 2025). Motivational factors such as opportunities for growth, advancement, and the intrinsic value of meaningful work contribute significantly to retention (Jaffar *et al*., 2024; Cui, 2024). When institutions invest in relevant training, they provide staff with the opportunity for self-actualization and competence development, fulfilling intrinsic psychological needs that foster loyalty and satisfaction (Mitsakis & Galanski, 2022).

However, some participants voiced concerns about the generic nature of certain training programs, which were not always tailored to the specific needs of the faculties or departments, reducing their overall impact.

"Despite the institution's efforts to provide workshops and seminars, these are often poorly tailored to the actual needs of the academic staff. For example, many of the training sessions are generic and do not always align with the specific demands of different faculties or departments. I have attended workshops where the content was repetitive, failing to add value to my professional development. As a result, these programs sometimes feel like a mere formality rather than a genuine investment in our growth." SLEX 4

This concern reflects a limitation within the hygiene component of Herzberg's theory. While training is inherently a motivator, poorly executed or irrelevant programs may fail to reduce dissatisfaction, especially when perceived as tokenistic. As Xuecheng *et al.* (2022) observe, the effectiveness of retention strategies lies not just in the availability of opportunities but in their perceived value and alignment with employee expectations.

Other participants emphasized the role of specialized, targeted training programs in motivating staff and fostering retention, particularly when aligned with department-specific needs.

"Our university's commitment to continuous learning and training programs has been one of the most effective retention approaches. Regular workshops, seminars, and training sessions tailored to the specific needs of different departments help keep staff engaged and updated with the latest teaching and research practices. For example, the university recently hosted a specialized training program on digital pedagogy, which equipped us with new tools for online teaching. This initiative was particularly timely and useful, enhancing our skills and keeping us motivated to remain with the institution." LEX6

In light of Social Exchange Theory, such department-specific training initiatives exemplify reciprocal investment by the institution. When faculty perceive these opportunities as intentional and relevant, they are likely to develop a sense of obligation and organizational commitment (Kaur, 2024; Zeb *et al.*, 2022). Institutions that demonstrate understanding and responsiveness to staff needs reinforce mutual trust and satisfaction, which ultimately fosters retention (Yamao, 2024).

Similarly, specialized workshops were praised for their practical value, particularly when they provided faculty members with innovative and applicable teaching techniques, which directly contributed to their professional satisfaction and job

retention, as indicated in one of the participants' responses.

"The targeted workshops and specialized training programs offered by the university are highly effective in retaining staff. These programs are designed to meet the unique needs of different departments, ensuring relevance and practical value. For example, the tailored training sessions on innovative teaching methods for the Faculty of Education last semester were highly effective. They provided us with new pedagogical techniques that we could immediately apply in our classrooms, which enhanced both our teaching skills and job satisfaction. The practical nature of these programs makes them particularly impactful." TAY 3

This aligns with Herzberg's motivator factors, particularly the nature of the work and achievement, which, when enriched through context-specific training, strengthen job satisfaction and contribute to retention. Moreover, staff who see immediate utility in what they learn are more likely to experience a sense of professional accomplishment, reinforcing their commitment to the institution (Siddiqui, 2024; Mustafa *et al*., 2022).

Finally, several participants highlighted how the university's investment in specialized training programs created a sense of professional growth, especially when these programs were facilitated by external experts, leading to increased motivation and a greater sense of value among the academic staff. This was expressed by one of the participants;

"I have personally benefited from the university's investment in continuous learning through regular workshops and training sessions. Last year, the university organized a series of workshops on advanced research methodologies tailored for the Faculty of Social Sciences. The workshops were facilitated by renowned international scholars, who provided us with new insights and skills directly

applicable to our research work. This initiative not only enhanced our research capacity but also created a sense of professional growth and development. Many of my colleagues and I felt more valued and motivated to stay with the institution because of these opportunities for continuous improvement." TAY 5

This participant's testimony illustrates the dual effect of motivation and reciprocity emphasized in Herzberg's and Social Exchange Theory frameworks. High-value initiatives like expert-led training signal the institution's investment in staff, leading to a deeper sense of being valued thereby invoking a reciprocal commitment to remain and contribute positively (Sagar, 2025; Kumar & Shailaja, 2024; Snyman & Ferreira, 2023). As noted by Rounak & Misra (2022), when employees perceive value in institutional support, they are more inclined to sustain their affiliation, viewing such gestures as fulfilling an implicit social contract.

CONCLUSIONS

This study examined academic staff retention strategies in Church-founded higher education institutions (CFHEIs) in Uganda and found that while these institutions implement a wide range of initiatives including professional development programs, financial support for further studies, leadership training, recognition schemes, flexible working arrangements, and family-friendly policies their effectiveness is moderated by issues of equity, transparency, and accessibility. The findings underscore that retention is a dynamic, multidimensional process shaped by both institutional practices and individual staff needs. Although the presence of structured promotion pathways, wellness programs, and supportive work environments fosters motivation and loyalty, inconsistencies in implementation and limited inclusivity, particularly in spiritual support and income-generating opportunities, reveal areas for improvement. To strengthen long-term retention and institutional sustainability, CFHEIs must institutionalize equitable policies, regularly assess staff needs, and adapt to changing academic and socio-economic contexts. Future research should examine how institutional leaders design and evaluate retention policies and explore comparative perspectives across faith-based and public universities to inform a more comprehensive national retention framework in higher education.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Approval for ethics and consent to participate

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