

Challenges of managing academic staff performance in a Namibian private higher education

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Dates:

Received: 08 Aug. 2024

Accepted: 19 Feb. 2025

Published: 29 May 2025

How to cite this article:

Shimaneni, F. & Kiley, J., 2025, 'Challenges of managing academic staff performance in a Namibian private higher education', *Transformation in Higher Education* 10(0), a442. <https://doi.org/10.4102/the.v10i0.442>

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The rapid growth of private higher education institutions (PHEIs) in Namibia has highlighted significant challenges in managing academic staff performance. This study explores these challenges through a qualitative, phenomenological approach, using semi-structured interviews with 19 participants, including academic staff, human resource (HR) practitioners and management. Grounded in the Ability-Motivation-Opportunity (AMO) theory and utilising thematic data analysis, the study identified key challenges, including job insecurity, resource limitations, technological divides, leadership deficiencies and inadequate performance evaluation systems. These issues contribute to a strained work environment, affecting the motivation and effectiveness of academic staff. The findings underscore the need for tailored human resource management (HRM) strategies, such as competitive compensation packages, enhanced leadership support and improved digital infrastructure. Moreover, the researchers recommend tenured positions, improving performance evaluations and managing resources effectively to mitigate these challenges. The study offers empirical insights into the complexities of academic staff management in PHEIs and provides actionable recommendations to strengthen institutional performance and reputation in Namibia's higher education sector.

Contribution: The study's key contribution is its comprehensive analysis of Namibian PHEI's unique challenges, offering empirical insights in this underexplored area.

Keywords: academic institutions; academic staff performance; higher education; human resource management practices; private higher education institutions.

Introduction

Namibia's higher education landscape is at a critical juncture, shaped by expanding access and growing demand for skilled graduates. While the country's two public universities have historically dominated the sector, private higher education institutions (PHEIs) have emerged as key players in addressing the unmet demand for tertiary education. According to the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE n.d.), Namibia has 2 public universities, 4 private universities and 12 accredited PHEIs. Despite this growth, student enrolment in PHEIs remains relatively low compared to public institutions, raising questions about their capacity to deliver quality education. This disparity arises from public higher education institutions (HEIs) benefiting from government funding, leading to more resources and a broader range of programmes that attract more students. In contrast, PHEIs face limited funding and less recognition, resulting in lower student enrolment.

Like PHEIs elsewhere, Namibia's PHEIs face unique challenges such as financial constraints, resource shortages and a lack of competitive compensation, affecting academic staff performance (Kajawo 2019:56). Compounded by societal misconceptions about their quality of education, these issues create a complex environment for academic staff management. The critical role of human resource management (HRM) in addressing these barriers is often underexplored, leaving significant gaps in understanding how PHEIs can enhance their staff performance.

This study investigates the multifaceted challenges of managing academic staff performance in a Namibian PHEI. Drawing on a phenomenological research design, the article explores the lived experiences of academic staff, human resource (HR) practitioners and management to identify barriers and propose actionable HRM strategies. Focussing on the Namibian context, the study provides empirical insights into a growing body of literature on PHEIs in sub-Saharan Africa. It offers practical recommendations for strengthening the higher education sector in Namibia.

Overview of the Namibia's private higher education institutions

Namibian PHEIs can be traced back to its national independence. In recognition of the importance of education as a driving force for sustainable economic development, Article 20(4) of the Namibian constitution protects the rights of private educators, allowing them to establish and operate legally registered tertiary institutions (Namibia 1990:12).

The entrance of private higher education providers into the education sector has not only helped minimise the pressure of higher education demand but has also created employment, complementing government efforts of skills enhancement, job creation and socio-economic development (Jellenz, Bobek & Horvat 2020:1). In 2020, employment distribution in Namibian HEIs showed that 81% (4759) staff members were in public institutions, whereas 19% (1142) were in PHEIs (NCHE 2020:28), indicating PHEIs involvement in solving challenges of unemployment, poverty and inequality (Chankseliani, Qoraboyev & Gimranova 2021:119).

Although the Namibian government remains the biggest funder of public higher education (Hangula et al. 2017:1), it does not fund PHEI operations. Overall, PHEIs remain heavily dependent on tuition fees to generate revenue. As a result, the cost of education in this sector may be higher than that of its counterparts. However, it is reassuring that the government subsidises PHEIs in terms of student tuition through a funding scheme, the Namibia Student Financial Assistance Fund (NSFAF), which is available to both public and private students (Hangula et al. 2017:2). Although tarnished by maladministration and infighting between board members and executives, NSFAF administers most student loans. However, recovering loans from funded students continues to trouble them (Hangula et al. 2017:2).

With less dependence on public funds, Namibian PHEIs continue to assist the government in providing tertiary higher education. Tuition fees or sponsorships from organisations remain the main sources for financing their operations and activities (Tamrat & Teferra 2020:681). Establishing and maintaining a university are a costly exercise as enough resources are needed to build adequate facilities and acquire sufficient qualified personnel (Kajawo 2019:57). Therefore, Namibian PHEIs' effort to provide higher education despite little or no government funding is commendable. Given the financial limitation of the masses and with finance being the primary factor for entering higher education (Singh & Tustin 2022), it is justifiable for the government to support PHEIs to avoid creating differential access to higher education.

While PHEIs' efforts in providing higher education are commendable, it is equally important to explore the management of academic staff performance in these institutions. Effective management of academic staff is the cornerstone of educational quality, significantly influencing student learning outcomes, curriculum implementation,

institutional reputation and overall institutional effectiveness (Al-Twal 2022:1392; Rudhumbu & Du Plessis 2020). Conversely, given the financial constraints faced by PHEIs, supporting academic staff effectively becomes challenging (Naeem et al. 2019:500), leading to ineffective HRM practices essential for enhancing academic staff performance. Addressing these challenges is, therefore, vital to deliver high-quality education and to contribute to institutional effectiveness.

Challenges in private higher education institutions

Private higher education institutions face unique challenges, including meeting quality standards required by regulatory agencies, which have tainted their image and caused a negative reputation in societies (Lilemba 2022; Nukunah, Bezuidenhout & Furtak 2019:289). Adverse reports concerning the quality of the education they offer are prevalent. Many have complained about their substandard educational services, registration of unqualified students and inadequate physical infrastructure (Kajawo 2020:384). These pressing concerns prevail because of inadequate teaching materials, technology and infrastructure, thus hindering academic staff's ability to deliver high-quality education (Alfagira & Zumrah 2019:27). This study focusses on understanding how HRM practices for academic staff can be optimised, given the resource-constrained environment wherein PHEIs operate. Because academic staff are essential for ensuring educational quality, the study aims to provide tangible insights into enhancing academic staff performance, ultimately improving PHEI's effectiveness.

Besides issues around providing quality education, private providers are limited by insufficient financial resources. Because they typically rely on private funding and tuition fees, this funding formula is unstable and is subject to student enrolment levels and economic conditions (Tamrat & Teferra 2020:685). Inadequate financial resources often cause increased operational challenges, leading to poor academic staff performance (Miller 2019:634). This challenge is further compounded by PHEIs' inability to offer competitive remuneration, which in turn hampers their ability to attract and retain high-quality academic staff (Tamrat & Teferra 2020:685). Given the above-mentioned financial constraints, PHEIs need to adopt effective HRM practices, partner with industry and seek alternative funding sources to enhance academic staff support (Al-Twal 2022:2). Moreover, exploring cost-effective innovations such as leveraging online teaching and learning platforms can supplement limited resources (Fumasoli & Rossi 2021:206).

Private higher education institutions face challenges in retaining academic staff, who are increasingly attracted to better remunerations offered by public institutions or the private sector (Tamrat & Teferra 2020:685). This is further compounded by various factors, including a poor performance appraisal system, low salary packages and limited freedom for academic managers (Khan, Aajiz & Ali 2018:108). While some PHEIs face challenges in employing

unqualified academic staff (Lilemba 2022), most private institutions hire part-time academic staff from public institutions to access experienced professionals. Private higher education institution must, therefore, differentiate themselves by offering unique employee value propositions, such as flexible work arrangements, supportive work environments and growth opportunities (Nukunah et al. 2019:291). However, Ashraf (2019:150) stressed that many PHEIs struggle to create attractive employment packages because of budgetary constraints, administrative challenges and unfavourable academic working conditions. These challenges affect institutional performance and highlight a critical gap in HRM practices tailored to the unique PHE context. This study addresses this gap as it offers recommendations to enhance academic staff performance through targeted HRM practices, thereby contributing to the retention of academic staff.

The impact of human resource management practices on academic staff job performance

The effectiveness and success of educational institutions depend on the quality and performance of their academic staff, as they play an essential role in shaping student outcomes, institutional reputations and overall institutional effectiveness (Al-Twal 2022:1392; Omojola 2019:2). To achieve these outcomes, academic institutions must implement effective HRM practices, which are essential to optimising faculty performance and maintaining institutional competitive advantage (Imran & Atiya 2020:197).

Human resource management practices can be enhanced to address specific challenges PHEIs face, particularly in resource-constrained environments. By examining the impact of HRM practices on employee performance, Khan et al. (2019:78) established that academic job performance could be attributed to HRM practices such as effective recruitment and selection procedures, training opportunities, fair performance appraisal and attractive compensation. On the other hand, Oyewole, Arogundade and Sadiku (2019:54) stressed the role of work environment and instructional facilities as constructs that could enhance academic staff performance. Similarly, institutional subscriptions to international journals positively enhance academic staff performance. Management should, therefore, improve the work environment to enhance job performance.

In contrast to the conventional view, Alshaikhmubarak, Da Camara and Baruch (2020) stressed the importance of providing research skills training and recognising the achievements of faculty members as HRM practices that can boost high research performance in HEIs. Practically, this implies that if universities attempt to increase their research outputs, they must provide ongoing professional development opportunities and incentives to reinforce academic staff research skills. Thus, to increase research outputs, PHEIs should invest in training opportunities to enhance academic staff research-related skills and promote their career success.

Impacts of HRM practices, such as promotional opportunities aimed at improving academic staff performance, have also been recognised (Alfagira & Zumrah 2019:18). Similarly, HRM practices that foster a sense of work recognition can markedly enhance employee performance. When academic staff are appreciated for their scientific work, it boosts their morale and engagement. The research also highlights that administration workload may harm research outputs as it takes time away from research activities. Hence, academic staff should be given sufficient time to practise research projects. This will advance their expertise and bring enriched knowledge into their teaching (Szromek & Wolniak 2020:31).

The multitude of research evidence indicates that there is not only a strong positive linkage between HRM practices and job performance but also other HRM strategies that negatively affect academic staff job performance. For example, excessive teaching and marking workloads, inadequate supervision of students' projects and poor working conditions can create stress and diminish performance (Adebayo 2022:323; Amini-Phillips & Okonmah 2020:111). These challenges underscore the importance of implementing effective HRM practices that balance performance expectations with academic staff's well-being.

Theoretical perspectives

Theoretical frameworks such as the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model and the resource-based view (RBV) primarily inform academic dialogue related to organisational performance. However, the Ability-Motivation-Opportunity (AMO) theory is best suited for this study, positing that employee performance is a function of three key factors: ability, motivation and opportunity. The premise of the AMO theory is the employee's capacity to enhance performance because of possessing the necessary skills, appropriate motivation and the opportunity to participate in key organisational initiatives (Fawehinmi et al. 2020:882). The theory is often associated with HRM practices that enhance employee behaviour for greater job performance (Al-Shahwani 2020:1828).

The JD-R model emphasises the balance between job demands and resources (Bakker & Demorouti 2006), while the RBV focusses on creating organisational resources for competitive advantage (Lubis 2022:588). These frameworks may not fully capture the interactions between individual ability, motivation and institutional opportunities specific to PHEIs. The AMO theory, therefore, underpins this study, which aims to explore how ability, motivation and opportunity collectively influence academic staff performance.

Given the various challenges identified in managing academic staff performance, the AMO theory is particularly suitable for providing a comprehensive framework for understanding and addressing those challenges. The theory

offers an avenue for identifying specific areas where interventions can enhance academic staff performance. For instance, addressing the ability aspect involves offering professional development opportunities. Tackling motivation includes improving compensation and benefits, while enhancing opportunity involves improving leadership support and organisational culture. Applying the AMO theory to this study systematically addresses challenges to improving academic staff performance in PHEIs.

Research methods and design

The qualitative approach was explorative, rooted in the interpretivism philosophy with a phenomenological research design, to investigate the challenges of managing academic staff performance in PHEIs. As Al-Ababneh (2020:80) noted, phenomenology is particularly effective for exploring complex phenomena where participants' meaning is central. Managing academic staff performance involves complex interactions that cannot be easily quantified. These interactions include personal and professional dimensions of academic staff experiences. Hence, phenomenology allowed for an in-depth understanding of these interactions.

Study's participants

Based on the research questions and predetermined criteria, only full-time academic staff employed in a registered PHEI formed part of the study. A total of 19 participants, comprising 11 academic staff, 5 academic leaders (Heads of Departments and Deans), 1 HRM practitioner and 1 representative from both NCHE and the association of PHEIs, participated in the study. Using purposeful sampling, the researcher ensured that each category was represented adequately. The academic staff were included as participants because the researcher aimed to examine the lived experiences and meanings academic staff attached to HRM practices in their institutions towards enhancing academic staff performance.

Academic management staff were included as participants because they directly supervised academics and were responsible for their performance. The research included the HRM practitioner because they are the custodians of HRM functions and policies in institutions. The NCHE was selected as a participant because it is an oversight body responsible not only for registering PHEIs but also for regulating the higher education sector in the country. At the same time, the association of PHEIs, serving as a platform for them to discuss issues on higher education, was also included as a participant. This sampling approach ensured that the study gathered rich, insightful and diverse perspectives on academic staff performance management (Halkias & Neubert 2020:58).

Data collection

Semi-structured and in-depth interviews were employed to gather rich participant data, focussing on their lived

perceptions and experiences. Participants were allowed to choose their preferred face-to-face or virtual interview mode. The interview guide was sent to participants before the sessions to help them prepare for interviews. The interviews lasted for about 50–60 min per session. The following research question guided the study: 'What challenges do PHEIs encounter in implementing HRM practices?'

Data analysis

Data were collected through in-depth interviews and subsequently coded using ATLAS.ti software (23.3.4.28863™). A thematic approach shaped data analysis, allowing for the identification of key themes and patterns within the data. All audio recordings were transcribed verbatim into text using Microsoft Word for transcription. Once all the audios were transcribed, the researcher read through all the transcripts several times to comprehend the content. This helped the researcher to get acquainted with the depth of the data. Thereafter, the coding process commenced by extracting, comparing, exploring and aggregating data and then delineating relationships among derived themes and emerging sub-themes. Thereafter, themes and sub-themes were represented in a qualitative narrative by weaving the themes into a coherent story that reflected participants' perspectives. Direct quotes were extracted to illustrate key points in the narrative.

Appropriate software enables a practical, systematic approach to open coding, followed by axial coding to connect categories and derive insights. This data analysis method allowed for significant interpretations of academic staff performance challenges, ensuring that the findings accurately reflected participants' perspectives.

Ensuring the quality of the study

This study achieved credibility using methodological triangulation, member checking and peer debriefing. With methodological triangulation, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with academics and management. An HRM practitioner, the custodian of HRM practices in the institution, was included in the study to provide insights into the implementation, challenges and successes of HRM practices and a complementary view of the academics' experiences. For instance, during the interview, some participants made statements about the lack of professional development, which were cross-verified with the HRM practitioner and compared with the training schedules provided. Similarly, academic staff shared their perceptions on the lack of staff development funds and publication fees. These, too, were cross-verified with academic management and HRM practitioner who acknowledged these challenges and provided context on the constraints affecting professional development policies and publication funds. Furthermore, to increase the rigour of the current study, research activities such as participants' recruitment, data collection, coding and analysis (audit trail) were recorded.

Ethical consideration

Ethical approval to conduct this study was obtained from Cape Peninsula University of Technology Faculty of Business and Management Sciences (reference no: 2023_FBMSREC_ST06). To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, pseudonyms (e.g., Participant 1, Participant 2, etc.) were used to ensure that participants were not identifiable by the information they provided (Sim & Waterfield 2019:3008). To enhance confidentiality, during the interviews, all identifiable characteristics of participants, such as names or institutional affiliations, were removed at the transcribing stage. Consent was obtained from the study participants before commencing with interviews by asking them to sign consent forms after the purpose of the study had been clearly explained. Furthermore, before beginning the interview, it was emphasised that participants could withdraw from the study at any stage without any consequences (Sobočan, Bertotti & Kim Strom-Gottfried 2019:809). This approach fostered trust and encouraged open conversations during interviews.

Results and discussion

Participants, including academic staff, used a range of attributes to identify and describe challenges encountered in managing academic staff performance. Key findings revealed the following barriers.

Contextual political and cultural concerns

Contextual political and cultural issues can significantly impact job performance in PHEIs. Participants highlighted instances of political concerns. For example, they expressed frustration over the municipality's refusal to approve their institution's developmental plans. In addition, respondents lamented the cultural mindset of people towards PHEIs. The following quotes from the respondents substantiated these claims:

'I remember when we wanted the auditorium room to be built, and we want the sports field to be built, I mean constructed, but then because of these politics, it was an issue of municipality rejecting to approve that requisition.' (Participant 2; lecturer; male)

'One challenge I have observed is the delay caused by the NCRST in our students' work. Traditionally, we used to provide students with ethical clearance letters promptly, allowing them to proceed to the field for data collection and project completion. However, there has been a noticeable change, with students now experiencing delays of approximately 2 or 3 months in obtaining their ethical clearance letters.' (Participant 4; lecturer, male)

'Another issue that, as an institution, we can say is a challenge is a misconception that some public institutions still have over private institutions. Misconception in terms of the quality of programmes that we are offering at the institution.' (Participant 4; lecturer; male)

The study's findings, where participants highlighted the municipality's challenges regarding institution development plan approval, could affect academic staff's job performance.

This means that initiatives such as academic infrastructure and faculty development are sometimes hampered, thus limiting the institution's ability to provide comprehensive student experiences. It is often challenging to navigate and adhere to municipalities' specific guidelines to build infrastructures, therefore hampering the adequate performance of faculty and institutional growth.

Moreover, the importance of institutional reputations in attracting and retaining experienced academic staff cannot be over-emphasised. The negative public perceptions of PHEIs (Lilemba 2022) may discourage potential candidates from joining them and could also influence the motivation and commitment of existing academic staff, potentially affecting their performance. Such a reputation can equally affect student enrolment, as potential students may perceive PHEIs as inferior to their counterparts. When student numbers are low, PHEIs may face budget constraints, thus limiting teaching and research resources. This can sometimes hinder academic staff from delivering quality education.

Technological or digital divide

The technological or digital divide can indeed hamper academic staff job performance. There are several ways in which this divide poses challenges. As indicated by the participants in this study, the challenge of the lack of digital literacy among staff can impede the adoption of new technologies. Those with limited skills may struggle to integrate digital tools into their teaching, research or administrative responsibilities. This difficulty can be seen in the following quote from one of the respondents:

'Not every lecturer is fully versed in integrating technology into teaching and learning. Despite possessing qualifications, some may primarily focus on areas such as curriculum development, and integrating technology can be a challenge. The connectivity issues and other things but the skills also.' (Participant 3; Faculty Officer; female)

In modern education, technology is crucial in offering tools for effective learning. Academic staff who are not proficient in integrating technology into their teaching may deprive students of the full benefits of technology-enhanced education. This gap is detrimental as it limits academic staff's ability to leverage technology to improve teaching and learning for effective student engagement.

Technological challenges have profound implications for academic staff job performance. Given the contemporary higher educational landscape, technology plays a significant role in teaching and learning. Al-Twal (2022:1394) and Nicolas-Agustin, Jimenez-Jimenez and Maeso-Fernandez (2022:398) underscored the transformative potential of technology while simultaneously acknowledging its associated challenges. However, faculty members must be well versed in digital literacy, adapt to new tools and integrate technology into pedagogical practices.

Compensations and benefits

Competitive compensation and benefits are considered positive factors that contribute to job satisfaction and performance. However, it is essential to acknowledge that there may be challenges even when compensation and benefits are favourable. The data from the study revealed a challenge related to the participants' expectations of receiving the same benefits as those offered by public institutions. This assertion is reflected in the following comments:

'And we need to be provided with benefits that are found in public institutions.' (Participant 5; lecturer; female)

'One would have an interest in something, but looking at the private institution you are working for, what you earn, and everything, you might not be able to upgrade yourself, and you remain at the level you are that you cannot even publish.' (Participant 12; Head of Department; female)

The desire to receive benefits similar to those found in public institutions underscores the importance of aligning HRM practices with employee expectations. These findings agree with Mohammadi and Karupiah (2020:1103), who highlighted that financial reward is an essential factor that affects performance in private universities. To compete effectively and attract top talent, PHEIs must address compensation disparity. While it is true that PHEIs are not subsidised by the government and operate with limited financial constraints compared to their counterparts, they still need to explore creative solutions to address this gap.

Meanwhile, the findings indicate that low salaries affect academics' ability to invest in personal and professional development. Attending conferences, obtaining a higher qualification or obtaining a certification requires financial investment. Job performance is compromised if academics cannot engage in these professional development activities. Furthermore, salary disparities and the inability to grow professionally can lead to disengaged and less productive staff (Al-Twal 2022:11; Jacob, Jegede & Musa 2021:234).

Job insecurity

Job insecurity can indeed affect job performance among academic staff in PHEIs. Academic staff experiencing job insecurity may face reduced job satisfaction, affecting their motivation and commitment to their roles:

'[I]s demotivating. Some of us are still young. Now, if you are working on a contract and my years of teaching here, I am seeing people who are being fired just on the spot who are just told today is your last day. So, that leaves you anxious every time you feel like maybe I am the next, I am the next, I am the next.' (Participant 2; lecturer; male)

'I would say that having contracts with staff has been a challenge, and I see it as a prevailing trend among private higher education institutions.' (Participant 4; lecturer; male)

When employers fail to provide job stability, a sense of belonging is compromised, and academic staff may reduce

their contribution to institutional goals. This can further undermine the quality of education provided. On the other hand, job security contributes to better performance, employee well-being, trust and affective commitment (Alfagira & Zumrah 2019:13; Naeem et al. 2019:503).

Leadership support

Leadership support is a critical factor that can significantly influence the job performance of academic staff in PHEIs. Effective leadership enhances motivation, provides a clear direction and supports professional development, thus contributing to a positive and productive work environment. Conversely, inadequate or unsupportive leadership can hinder performance and lead to dissatisfaction among academic staff. The data from the interviews showed that mixed responses emerged from the respondents. Some vehemently denounced the nature of leadership support, as observed in the following direct quote from one of the respondents:

'So, those are the issues that are not good in terms of leadership because there are some who were given leadership, especially the HOD or Dean, but then instead of helping colleagues to do their work, they were like spies of the top management.' (Participant 2; lecturer; male)

However, some respondents indicated the existence of supportive HODs in their institutions. This assertion can be seen in the following declaration:

'But there are some HODs who are also supportive. I must point out that in my first two years, I had one good colleague who, at that time, I was pursuing my PhD, she was my HOD, and she was helpful because, at some point, she would come and ask how you are progressing.' (Participant 2; lecturer; male)

The evidence elicited in the study is also confirmed by the literature highlighting weak leadership in many HEIs. Jacob and Musa (2020:92) observed that HEI leaders sometimes lack sufficient leadership ability and competency to manage HEIs. Quite often, they do not possess the good human relations skills and appropriate leadership styles needed for effective leadership. This perceived lack of leadership support can lead to poor vision execution and low job satisfaction (Alfagira & Zumrah 2019:10; Mondejar & Asio 2022:1631; Obeidat et al. 2019:334). The findings demonstrate that academic leadership support can be attributed to leaders' genuine support for faculty needs. Academic leaders who prioritise professional relationships with their subordinates foster a supportive and inclusive environment among academic staff. Furthermore, leadership support is also influenced by appropriate leadership styles (Al-Twal 2022:2) and institutional culture. Therefore, active support from academic leaders bridges individual and institutional goals, resulting in higher performance levels.

Organisational culture

If the organisational culture does not align with the values and expectations of the staff, it can create a disconnect. This misalignment may lead to reduced motivation and job

satisfaction among staff, thus impacting their overall performance. The study's participants highlighted the demoralising organisational culture in their institutions, seemingly infected with fear of the unknown and jealousy, which tended to prevail in their working environment. These assertions can be seen in the following quotes from the participants:

'Sometimes, it is demoralising. Our culture is kind of demoralising sometimes, but we keep on pushing. Our culture is different from any other institution, really and is kind of demoralising.' (Participant 7; lecturer; male)

'If you are HOD and you are maybe a Masters holder, and I am a lecturer and a PhD holder, sometimes it becomes a fear of the unknown. They would want to kick you out so that there is nobody with PhD on top of them, and that creates also tension. Once one person attains higher qualifications than the HOD or the Dean then it becomes an issue of maybe jealousy or insubordination to feel like why you would get a PhD while I am your Dean, I am still a Masters holder.' (Participant 2; lecturer; male)

A demoralising institutional culture creates a negative environment, which can further erode staff performance (Mohammadi & Karupiah 2020:1093). When academic leaders undermine the contributions of highly qualified staff, that culture decreases staff motivation to perform their roles effectively. Furthermore, the opportunity to perform effectively is compromised when academic staff are inadequately supported when working in areas outside their expertise.

Therefore, appropriate HRM practices that encourage staff to use their skills should be implemented. However, in a demoralising culture such as these examples have shown, these opportunities may be poorly managed.

Performance evaluation challenges

Performance evaluation challenges in PHEIs can significantly impact academic staff job performance. There are several ways these challenges may affect academic staff. In this context, participants expressed dissatisfaction regarding the scope and efficacy of performance evaluation as it relates to staff progression in their institutions. The following comments illustrate this trend:

'I think we have a lot of areas that maybe we do not evaluate because maybe they are very difficult to evaluate visually.' (Participant 11; lecturer; female)

'As a lecturer, I feel the performance evaluation is challenging, lacking clear criteria and expectations. One is not sure how your contribution is measured here.' (Participant 3; Faculty Officer; female)

While performance evaluation is designed to assess and improve performance, failure to implement transparent performance management can lead to staff experiencing ambiguity in understanding the criteria used in performance evaluation. Evidence shows that implementing good performance management is crucial for high-level

performance (Faeq 2020:60). When expectations are clear, it can continuously improve academic staff's job performance.

However, the study's findings point to one common source of dissatisfaction: a lack of transparent evaluation processes. This aligns with Al-Twal's (2022) study that showed that HEIs lack competent evaluation processes for measuring academic staff performance. Instead, the sole evaluation method used by many HEIs is student evaluations, which are not even seriously implemented. Therefore, the lack of a comprehensive performance evaluation system undermines effective HRM in HEIs.

Publication constraints

The participants also indicated the challenges of timeously obtaining publication finance, as can be seen from the following statements:

'But now and then, I found myself and with other colleagues that we have been publishing with, but when it comes to the finance part, it is a challenge.' (Participant 4; lecturer; male)

'So, if you want to acquire something, we have a centralised finance. Everything has to go through there. The HR is also centralised so we might have limited help from the main campus.' (Participant 11; lecturer; female)

In the academic sphere, the quality of research and the number of publications are critical metrics for performance evaluation (Jaskiene & Buciuniene 2021:152; Rehman, Bisschoff & Botha 2019:2; Susanj, Jakopac & Doric 2020:485; Taamneh et al. 2021).

Publications, especially in peer-reviewed journals, are not only viewed as a means of disseminating research findings but are also a determining factor in career progression and securing research funding. Academics' performance in many HEIs is grounded in the prevailing culture of 'publish or perish'. As such, the timely release of publication finance, as highlighted by this study's findings, is crucial for enabling academic staff to participate fully in academic scholarly publications.

Resource constraints

Resource constraints can significantly impact the job performance of academic staff in various ways. The interview data showed participants highlighted resource challenges, such as inadequate textbooks, computers and digital and technological capacity. The following statements reinforce these assertions:

'Sometimes, we design the curriculum then we do not have enough textbooks or facilities to give such training. This is a problem.' (Participant 2; lecturer; male)

'I think more can be done for example: these laptops we are using are personal laptops, you bring your own, you use it for your work. If something happens to it, you fix it, maybe because the institution cannot afford to buy a laptop for everyone; yes, that could be one reason.' (Participant 10; lecturer; female)

Access to appropriate resources is integral to the daily activities of academic staff, and its absence can impede their performance. Adequate resources (physical, digital or financial) are indispensable to the educational process and must be provided. Oyewole et al. (2019:50) gave credence to this observation by emphasising that it is not enough to have appropriate university programmes in place. If there is a lack of resources, academic staff cannot perform, despite how much they are induced to perform.

Resource availability positively correlates with job performance, including research output and teaching quality. As indicated by the participants precedingly, resource constraints may impede curriculum implementation (Rudhumbu & Du Plessis 2020) or the hosting of research days, which are essential for staying abreast of advancements in one's field. However, academics can mitigate this by leveraging creativity and collaboration, such as building networks with other stakeholders outside the university or using open education resources to reduce the need for expensive teaching materials.

Workload

The relationship between workload and job performance is intricate and has significant implications for academic staff in PHEIs. This study provides reports on how workload and job satisfaction can impact the job performance of academic staff in the selected PHEI. Respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the workload they are expected to perform as can be seen from the following quotes from the participants:

'I think a lot of things that I would mention we as faculty are already solving them. We had an issue, when students come from practice or internship, they come with files which lecturers need to mark. And then these lecturers also have their students already that they are marking. These question papers can be 900 that they need to mark and then you have again that. So, taking these files from them can help them a lot, which we are trying to do.' (Participant 5; lecturer; female)

'So, there is that push factor to perform, but I will say workload is too much because sometimes you find yourself in a situation where you cannot attend to both full-time and part-time students. It can also make you stay in the office from morning hours until 9:30 in the evening to also attend to part-time students.' (Participant 3; Faculty Officer; female)

The study's findings related to workload showed that academic workload encompasses teaching or research responsibilities and additional tasks such as assessing the portfolios of students who have completed experiential learning.

This increased workload is often cited in the literature as a primary cause of stress among academic staff (Abdullah et al. 2020:5840; Adebayo 2022:319; Amini-Phillips & Okonmah 2020:112), impairing not only performance but also negatively affecting academics' well-being and job satisfaction (Yousefi & Abdullah 2019:564). On the other hand, excessive assessment workloads may cause a lack of detailed and

personalised feedback to students, which is essential for good learning experiences.

Implications for human resource management practices

Identified challenges significantly impact HRM practices, compelling targeted interventions to support academic staff performance. For example, job insecurity, which necessitates career development – focusses on HRM practices, while technological challenges underscore the need for digital staff training. Similarly, performance evaluation and inadequate compensation call for transparent performance evaluation and competitive pay structures.

In addition, resource constraints and workload imbalances require HRM to advocate for funding, equitable task allocation and flexible scheduling to prevent burnout and improve staff performance. Organisational culture and leadership support underscore the importance of leadership training to cultivate a collaborative work environment that enhances employee engagement.

In line with the AMO theory, each identified challenge influences academic staff's ability, motivation and opportunity. For instance, the technological divide and resource constraints affect staff's ability to use digital tools effectively. In contrast, inadequate remuneration, job insecurity and publication constraints directly impact staff motivation, thus reducing job satisfaction. Furthermore, the lack of leadership support, excessive workload and a demoralising organisational culture put pressure on staff opportunities to grow within the institution. Private higher education institutions can improve academic staff performance across all three AMO components by addressing these challenges through targeted HRM practices.

Limitations

The qualitative study adopted a rigorous approach to establish trustworthiness. However, the phenomenological research design employed is inherently context specific, which tends to limit the result's applicability to other educational settings. Future studies could incorporate a mixed-methods approach, combining individual and key stakeholders' interviews with surveys for a more holistic understanding of the phenomenon explored.

A further limitation lies in the scope of the study, which exclusively focussed on a case study of one PHEI. This restricted scope overlooked the diversity across various academic institutions. However, this case study provides some in-depth insights, which may offer valuable considerations for institutions with similar challenges.

Recommendations

To address the challenges identified, such as the negative reputation of PHEIs, the institution can showcase and celebrate the achievements of both academic staff and students

through participation in institutional websites, conferences and newsletters. It should also advocate for stronger partnerships with local authorities to facilitate infrastructure development. Investing in digital literacy training and ensuring access to technological tools should be prioritised. Reviewing compensations and addressing job insecurity through tenured positions can boost staff performance.

Academic leadership fostering a supportive culture through regular feedback should be promoted. In addition, the institution can implement 360° performance feedback, including supervisors' reviews, student feedback and peer reviews, to uphold academic standards.

Mentorship programmes and writing workshops, alongside increased funding, can be implemented to support the publication efforts of academic staff. Finally, implementing flexible scheduling and leveraging the learning management system is a powerful strategy to alleviate excessive workload.

Conclusion

The main objective of this study was to explore how academic staff experience the implementation of HRM practices within their institution. The focus was not to challenge the management of academic staff in PHEIs. Instead, it sought to draw attention to the increasing importance of implementing effective HRM practices in the academic environment. The study's findings support the growing popularity of adopting contingent HRM practices within HEIs. Through a qualitative analysis, 10 key challenges emerged, shedding light on the complexities of managing academic staff within PHEIs.

The primary challenges identified include job insecurity, leadership support, contextual political and cultural concerns, technological and digital divide and compensation and benefits. These barriers contribute to a challenging work environment, impacting academic staff performance.

In addition, organisational culture, performance evaluation, workload, publication and resource constraints hinder academic staff performance. By implementing effective HRM practices tailored to the specific context of PHEIs, institutions can create an enabling environment for enhanced performance. What is needed is for institutional leaders to double their efforts in improving the management of academic staff, consequently contributing to the overall reputation of PHEIs.

Acknowledgements

This article is partially based on the author's thesis entitled 'Human Resource Practices on Academic Staff Performance in a Private Higher Education Institution in Namibia' towards the degree of Doctor in Human Resource Management in the Department of Business and Management Sciences, Cape Peninsula University of Technology, South Africa on October 2024, with supervisor Dr Jerome Kiley.

Competing interests

The author reported that they received funding from the Namibia University of Science and Technology, which may be affected by the research reported in the enclosed publication. The author has disclosed those interests fully and has implemented an approved plan for managing any potential conflicts arising from their involvement. The terms of these funding arrangements have been reviewed and approved by the affiliated university in accordance with its policy on objectivity in research.

Authors' contributions

F.S. conducted the research, performed the data analysis and wrote the article for publication. J.K. provided guidance and oversight throughout the research project.

Funding information

The first author, F.S., received tuition funding from Namibia University of Science and Technology.

Data availability

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

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