

Retaining Academics in Private Universities in Saudi Arabia – The Effect of Gender and Nationality

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Abstract

Management in higher education worldwide faces formidable challenges in terms of recruiting and retaining foreign talent. In countries such as Saudi Arabia, where there is increased dependence on overseas professors, this challenge is particularly acute. This study examines the effects of gender and nationality on the relationship between job satisfaction and intention to quit among academics in private universities in Saudi Arabia. Using data collected from three universities we find that overall, women and non-Saudi academics are less satisfied than their male and Saudi counterparts respectively. We find differences in the job satisfaction of female and male Saudi academics and their non-Saudi counterparts with women and non-nationals experiencing a strong impact of institutional policies and practices including compensation and benefits. This paper explores the implications of recruitment and retention of foreign born and national academic staff in an Islamic context.

1. Introduction

The recruitment and retention of foreign talent is a challenging issue for management in the higher education sector in Saudi Arabia. Knowledge workers in the university sector are often globally mobile and seek working environments that provide both intrinsic and extrinsic rewards. In the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, there is heavy reliance on overseas professors and yet a strong divide between the terms and conditions of national and non-national employees.¹ Furthermore the institutional and cultural context raises particular challenges for overseas workers both in terms of their rights at work and their wider integration in society and their organisations. For managers, high levels of turnover and a limited national labour market for comparable talent creates challenges in fulfilling organisational goals.

This study aims to examine the effects of gender and nationality on the relationship between job satisfaction and intention to quit among these academics. In-depth interviews were conducted in three private universities with a sample consisting of deans and academics. Prior to the study, ineffective human resource practices and a lack of awareness of the need to develop retention strategies had been identified by the authors. Of particular interest was job satisfaction as a determinant of turnover and possible differences between groups of employees. The potentially challenging environment for employees both inside and outside the organisation means that HRM practices play a key role in promoting the sustainability of academics.

Gender differences also provide an important dimension to work in the Saudi Arabian context. On the one hand, institutional and cultural norms mean that female employees face certain challenges both in their daily and organisational lives whether they are nationals or non-nationals. On the other hand, the increasing popularity of higher education among the female national population is creating a demand for a female academic who are culturally acceptable and thus able to teach in higher education. Thus we also consider the extent to which gender moderates the relationship between job satisfaction and intention to quit within the Saudi context. Given the importance of non-Saudi nationals as labor supply in the education sector, we also examine the extent to

which nationality moderates the relationship between job satisfaction and intention to quit.

This paper is divided into four sections. Following the introduction, the second section explores the evidence for a relationship between job satisfaction and intention to quit with a particular focus on gender and nationality influences and the challenges of the higher education sector. The third section outlines the methodology adopted for the study and the results of the interview data. We go on to explore the implications of recruitment and retention of national and non-national employees in a context where there is heavy reliance on overseas talent and where the labor law practices are highly distinct vis-à-vis other countries. Furthermore the implications of the management of female employees in an Islamic context have been developed.

2) Job Satisfaction differences and Intention to quit

A review of the literature suggests that the consequences of turnover and turnover intentions are costlier for an organization than adapting and implementing policies and practices which may help retain qualified employees. As many researchers have come to conclude, turnover has negative consequences on both the employee and the organization in terms of direct and indirect costs.² Beyond the direct expenses, there are also hidden costs such as lost productivity, skill drain, poor morale and reduced job satisfaction among the remaining employees.³ Although employee turnover is not necessarily negative, high levels of voluntary turnover can be disruptive and costly;⁴ past studies indicate that a combination of individual and organizational variables determine employees' decision to stay or leave.

In the service sector, a high turnover of employees presents a risk for the organization in terms of quality and continuity of service. For example, quality in higher education is dependent on the quality of employees that an organization is able to enlist and retain among its faculties.⁵ It is important to attract top-quality and promising faculty and also retain those currently employed for developing and maintaining quality programs.⁶ Furthermore if a faculty member leaves before start-up costs are recovered, the

organization loses its investment and incurs new search costs.⁷ One university estimated that it can take ten years for a new faculty member in science or engineering to develop enough revenue streams to recoup start-up costs.⁸

Job satisfaction factors are significantly related to turnover and intention to quit.⁹ A study of academic staff in private universities in Malaysia demonstrated that pay, promotion, working conditions and support of research have positive and significant effect on job satisfaction while fringe benefits and support of teaching have negative effect.¹⁰ Another finding was that job satisfaction is not independent in all facets and that satisfaction with one facet might lead to dissatisfaction with another. The literature also shows that other factors with a strong correlation with job satisfaction include: pay, supervision, co-workers, environment, the job itself, advancement, and recognition.¹¹ In addition research reveals that teaching outcomes such as performance, commitment, productivity, and absenteeism depend to a great extent upon job satisfaction which affects in turn the turnover rate.¹² Extrinsic factors impacting upon job satisfaction continue to have an important effect on employees' turnover; yet, intrinsic factors also have a potentially greater effect and may play an even greater role in employees' turnover behavior.¹³

As a sector employing many women, and in the particular context of Saudi Arabia, gender differences provide an important dimension to our study of retention. One study found that work scheduling was found to be related to female faculty, and intention to quit and work-life integration were indicators to leave one's job.¹⁴ Demographic factors have been found to be linked to job satisfaction with some studies supporting a strong relationship between gender and satisfaction.¹⁵ The results of some studies also indicate that females are more satisfied than their counterparts in a higher education setting, particularly with promotion and fringe benefits.¹⁶ However, the relationship between gender, nationality, and job satisfaction suggests that women and non-nationals are less satisfied with their work than men and nationals.¹⁷ The in-depth interviews also indicated that most male faculty members have higher levels of overall job satisfaction than female faculty members, particularly in terms of benefits and salary received.¹⁸

Existing research suggests that there may be differences between men and women regarding the interrelationship between role conflicts, role ambiguity, work family balance and job satisfaction, since they may have different perceptions of their roles. ¹⁹ Roles are socially constructed and in Islamic countries these definitions of gender roles create greater challenges for balancing the demands of work and family life. ²⁰ There are strong cultural and societal expectations on the married and unmarried and mothers and non-mothers. ²¹ They must divide their interests and attention between the working world and their traditional and social roles. ²² Both Islamic culture and the stage of economic development, influence the value systems of people in the direction of democracy and gender equality. Thus, the Muslim world is expected to influence the women's labor market participation positively. ²³ This cultural heritage issue is highly relevant to study women's position as is the exceptional situation created by the substantial oil-production in certain Middle Eastern countries. ²⁴ For example, in Saudi Arabia and until 1960, both school education and higher education were offered exclusively to Saudi males where it was believed that females' education would lead to immorality by corrupting their minds and turning their values and priorities away from their main roles as good wives and mothers. It was feared that the conflict of values brought about by such significant transformation would lead to instability both at home and in society. ²⁵

However cultures and societies are not static and are subject to change. The rapid expansion in the number of women in the Saudi education sector in 1960s represented an attempt to meet the increasing demand; yet according to orthodox interpretation of Islam, girls after the age of nine, must attend segregated classes. ²⁶ Thus, separate buildings and teachers were required for boys and girls putting extra cost on both the public and private schools. Furthermore, despite the general mission of higher education having been historically, to educate students to be future leaders, there is still a shortage of Saudi academics employed in the private colleges and universities and non-Saudi academics are still in great need. ²⁷

Thus the number of non-Saudi academics, who are employed in the private colleges and universities in Saudi Arabia, is assumed to be larger than the number of Saudi academics.²⁸ While there is a body of literature on expatriates there are relatively few studies on the job satisfaction among expatriates, particularly in higher education. Similarly studies of female expatriates tend to show that they can be successful in a cultural environment that may be perceived to be unfriendly to females by western standards.²⁹ However the research examined primarily western expatriates while the perception of Arab Islamic Middle Eastern women may be quite different. Yet, no studies in the past have examined job satisfaction among non-Saudi academics, though the country has special work policies and practices which are not addressed in other countries and a different culture as well.

3) The Study of Academics in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

Our review of the literature draws out the relationship between job satisfaction and intention to quit and the moderating factor of gender and nationality on this relationship. Furthermore in the Saudi context, the importance of retaining qualified academics in the education sector is key where managers are faced with an international labor market for talent and a limited pool of domestically qualified possibilities. Based on this review we might expect that a study of job satisfaction among academics would find the following:

- a positive relationship between job satisfaction and intention to quit.
- intrinsic and extrinsic satisfaction differences among male and female academics
- intrinsic and extrinsic satisfaction differences among Saudi and non-Saudi academics

After a careful examination of the specific research area, we found that the most appropriate research design for the study was a mixed method of semi-structured interviews supplemented by a survey of respondents to assess their job satisfaction. Here we report the results of the first phase of the semi-structured interviews. These provide important qualitative data in order to explore the context get feedback on research questions and help developing relevant questions. Twelve semi structured interviews were carried out with respondents in three private universities and colleges. The respondents that came from various faculties were a mixture of business and non-

business academics as well as from different nationalities, gender, employment tenure and ages.

The first key finding of our study is the strong influence of the Saudi culture and the particularities of the institutional environment on turnover of academics. The sponsorship practice known as the “*kafalah*” has a key impact upon all non-nationals since non-Saudi employees are required to have a “*kafalah*” or sponsorship of a Saudi citizen in order to live and work officially in the Kingdom. The qualitative results underlined how the “*kafalah*” affects the position of non-Saudi employees who are employed in Saudi Arabia, particularly women.

“Actually, the turnover rate among females is higher than it is among males and this is basically because of the (kafalah) policy imposed by the labor law. Most of the private educational institutions employ local females who are accompanied by their husbands or fathers and are not legally allowed to work”. (College Dean,/Saudi Female).

The sponsorship is a complicated procedure that puts burden on both the Saudi citizen and the non-Saudi employee and once awarded, employees may receive alternative job offers.

“having the fact that we lack the needed number of Saudi faculties and that most of the non-Saudi female faculties are employed locally which give them the opportunity to often change their work place running after better offers; causes us high turnover rate among faculties”. (College Dean, Saudi female).

At the organizational level, managerial respondents suggested that policies were not always in place to support effective retention of employees. Higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia experience high turnover rates among faculties compared to other professions and are doing less well than other organizations in managing turnover rates.

Some organizations do not have retention strategies for both Saudi and non-Saudi faculties.

“Regarding retention strategies, we only offer flexibility in working hours and we are now working on offering opportunities to continue studies and write researches where we are almost done with establishing a research center... Most of the private institutions lack proper retention strategies which reflect high turnover rate among employees. Retention strategies are linked to the recruitment process which is mostly ineffective for many reasons such as recruiting faculties based on personal contacts. (College Dean, Saudi female).

Though some schools do use expert help to address recruitment problems:

“We recruit professors through specialized agencies operating in different countries because we are a medical and pharmacology school”. We also attract some Saudi academics employed at governmental universities to join us as part time faculties” (College Dean /Saudi male).

The results of the interviews also reflected the lack of management awareness in terms of HR practices and developing retention strategies which was clear in the following responses:

“It is fine but I don’t find time for continuing my studies because of the teaching load which, sometimes, go up to 18 credit hours; and as a Saudi, I am also not satisfied with opportunities for advancement because I don’t hold PhD”. (Faculty, Saudi female).

“I’m not satisfied with my pay and benefits and I intend to quit working in this institution if I find other opportunity somewhere else”. (faculty, non-Saudi Female).

Non-Saudi male faculty also showed signs of low satisfaction and intention to quit based on a low level of recognition and lower than expected rewards.

"I am overall satisfied as I enjoy teaching and I am here for 8 years now; yet, we all lack motivation and though my qualifications are appreciated well where actually I was head hunted, sometimes we have difficulties in dealing with the management because they treat us as administrative employees in regards to working hours, administrative and paper work because we don't have assistants. We are also not included in decision making". (faculty, non-Saudi male).

"I came all the way from my country expecting better compensation and benefits but I found it is not worth that much where I have to save a huge amount of money every year to pay school fees for my children and I'm really thinking of quitting working in this institution because I found that some other institutions are giving such benefit". (faculty, non-Saudi male)

As expected, for women work life balance pressures played an important role among female faculties. The results indicated the influence of cultural and social pressures on parental responsibilities for women who felt obliged to adapt even at the expense of their jobs:

"I have difficulties in balancing my family life with my work though we are offered flexible working hours; we don't have a daycare in our college and that causes problems for most of us where we are obliged to pay for external daycares and arrange transportation by our own while we are paid low salaries". (faculty, non-Saudi female).

"I'm having hard time in attempting to balance between my family responsibilities and my work where working hours are long (from 8:00 am to 5:00 pm) and teaching responsibilities are too much. I feel guilty leaving my children with the maid for more than 3 hours after they get back from school". (faculty, Saudi female).

“If I continue experiencing the integration between my holiday time and my children school holiday time, I may start thinking of quitting my job”. (faculty, Saudi female).

Nevertheless, and as expected, there was a higher overall reported level of job satisfaction among male academics and Saudi male faculty:

“I am fine with it and I was attracted by the owner, I am here now for 6 years heading an academic department and a member in many committees which were formed to work on the procedure of transferring the college into university”. (faculty, Saudi male).

“I’m satisfied with my job; I retired from [a public] university and start teaching again in this private university” (faculty, Saudi male).

The results indicate that employers need to consider the home culture and gender/national origin of employees while addressing job satisfaction facets to be aware of the potential challenges and opportunities it may create. Doing so will help managers to draw up strategies for retaining the highly qualified employees and reducing the turnover rate by increasing satisfaction and decreasing dissatisfaction.

Job satisfaction among academics in private colleges in Saudi Arabia has not been investigated and studied since the private colleges were permitted in the country only in the year 2000. The particular circumstances in the country create an interesting dynamic between gender and nationality when the retention and turnover of academics is explored. The primary objective of this study was to investigate the extent of gender and national impact on the level of satisfaction and to identify the facets that affect job satisfaction of academics employed in private colleges.

In carrying out the research, the sample focused on a limited number of private colleges to explore the particular challenges faced by institutions relying heavily on foreign nationals. Although cooperation from respondents was generally high, it was difficult to approach male academics, especially those who work in colleges that do not have a female campus.

Initial results indicate that overall, women and non-Saudi academics are less satisfied than their counterparts. Pay and benefits, supervision, advancement, and recognition affect job satisfaction of Saudi academics both males and females positively; whereas pay and benefit, appreciation, supervision and institutional policies and practices have positive effect on job satisfaction of non-Saudi academics both males and females. On the other hand, both men and women; Saudi and non-Saudi are satisfied with their co-worker relationship, and working environment. In-depth interviews results have also indicated a positive relationship between academics' satisfaction and intention to quit working in a specific institution.

4. Managerial Implications

The study highlights the challenges facing management when confronted with a limited supply of qualified labor. In the Saudi context, these challenges are amplified by the institutional and cultural context shaping HR practices and labor supply patterns. These problems are likely to become worse since the Saudi labor market is lacking the required number of qualified academics demanded by the private educational institutions for several reasons such as: 1) lower salaries and less benefits than those offered by the governmental ones. 2) less or fewer opportunities for promotion and advancement. 3) limited participation in decision-making yet academics held responsible for outcomes and 4) longer working hours and 5) lack of recognition and appreciation for their contributions.

This is undoubtedly a challenging environment for HR managers. However given the findings of the factors associated with the positive aspects of employee retention, as well as the negative effects of turnover, managerial practices that promote employees retention and factors that motivate employees to remain in their jobs, need to be addressed.³⁰ A

better understanding of intrinsic and extrinsic factors affecting the level of satisfaction of academics would benefit local managers. Private higher educational institutions have unique responsibilities and as a result, it may be beneficial to identify job satisfaction factors that can help promote a positive environment. Organizational values and norms must support employees' work satisfaction demands by introducing policies and practices and implementing programs that help enhancing satisfaction and resolving work dissatisfaction; hence, reducing turnover intentions and retaining qualified employees. Furthermore investigating intent to quit best predicts employee negative behaviors in terms of measuring turnover and organizations must address the managerial practices that promote employees retention.

The cultural and institutional context dictate against the employment of women yet the same cultural and institutional pressures create a demand for the employment of women. The findings from the female academics in this study suggest that they face similar challenges to women working in other contexts in particularly the challenges of balancing work and family life. Although these challenges may be exaggerated by the Saudi context, organization's need to attract and retain valued employees in a highly competitive market is a strong motivating factor for increasing organizational awareness and action with regard to implementing and managing work family integration strategies.³¹

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