

# PERCEPTIONS OF ADMINISTRATIVE STAFF ON CAREER ADVANCEMENT REALITIES AT A SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITY\*

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**Abstract.** *The necessary training and development to equip staff to fill critical positions accounts for a substantial percentage of the annual budget of universities. This article reports on perceptions on career advancement among administrative staff at a South African university. This study extends the existing body of knowledge concerning the barriers to career advancement at universities. Qualitative research approach was adopted, with the sample consisting of 14 middle-ranking members of the administrative staff, who had been identified for possible senior management posts. Empirical results identified barriers which limit career advancement, namely that there has been a shift from a collegial to a managerial governance model; and that a perceived silo mentality has led to increasing politicisation of the workplace. Furthermore, a lack of managerial skill means that training opportunities and departmental goals are not well communicated to staff members; and inadequate career guidance, retention strategies and opportunities for promotion are all responsible for reducing prospects of career advancement. However, the participants indicated that they had not lost hope and would continue to perform to the best of their ability and even go beyond what was expected of them. Managers should, however, not lose sight of the possibility that morale and productivity will suffer, if talented employees become dissatisfied,*

*and that future leaders may resign, with a consequent failure to achieve departmental goals. The results of this study may serve as a wake-up call to university management: strategies aimed at the retention of administrative staff and at promotion policies need to be revised because the staff that make up this cohort perform essential university services.*

**Key words:** *career realities, administrative staff, university managerial model, managerial capacity*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The work environment in the 21st century is characterised by uncertainty and rapid change where job roles are constantly redefined to meet society's evolving needs (Ryerson, 2018). Like all other organisations, universities are susceptible to the factors mentioned above and additional factors such as digitisation, social media, changing societal needs and financial markets (Pucciarellia and Kaplan, 2016). Universities annually invest substantial resources to train and develop employees to be more productive and to realise

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organisational goals (Lagat and Makau, 2018). This investment, however, must benefit the university and the employee. Human resource management practices at universities are crucial to general organisational health and success (Lagat and Makau, 2018) in that they should facilitate talent management development and retention initiatives.

Administrative staff (non-academic staff) at universities are generally classified as technical, clerical, services and professional staff with various job titles such as managers, specialists, researchers and advisers in various functional areas (Gander, 2018). Graham (2009) posits that the impact of administrative staff on the quality and success of work at universities is significant but that they are not taken seriously. Since there has been little research on the careers of professional staff at universities (Regan, Dollard and Banks, 2014), we have limited information on the way career growth is managed in relation to the needs, attitudes and conduct of these staff members (Knapp, Kelly-Reid and Ginder, 2012). Most strategic initiatives at universities ignore administrative staff as a crucial component of the university workforce (Brandenburg 2016; Hunter, 2018). The staff at universities in countries that are members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) are made up of almost equal numbers of academic and non-academic staff. The general (administrative) staff at Australian universities comprise more than 50% of the staff complement (Graham, 2009). In 2017 about 67.9% administrative and services staff were employed at South African universities (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2019) and at the university where this study was conducted the ratio is approximately 70% administrative and 30% academic staff. With administrative staff

forming a significant component of university staff, it is important to learn more about their career advancement realities and possible barriers in this regard.

Poalses and Bezuidenhout (2018) found that administrative staff at a distance education university often experience stress because of a lack of opportunities to grow and develop; have limited promotional opportunities; doubt whether they can attain success and do not have sufficiently varied work experience. The researchers mentioned above found, however, that administrative staff perform optimally when they have clear job descriptions, task clarity and goal directedness. It is also suggested that the university invest in planned talent management strategies for administrative staff to help them grow and develop in their positions (Poalses and Bezuidenhout, 2018). Based on their study focusing on administrative staff at universities in Malaysia, Zainun, Johari and Adnan (2018) propose that management at higher education institutions should be aware of stress factors that could affect the commitment to change among administrative staff, such as role overload and role ambiguity.

This study set out to measure the perceptions and opinions of administrative staff (i.e. all staff members except academic staff) at a university in South Africa about career advancement realities. A sample of 14 middle-level administrative staff members who had been identified as possible future leaders or managers was purposively selected to participate in this study. It is envisaged that the insights gained from this study could contribute to a more in-depth understanding of factors influencing career and talent management initiatives for administrative staff.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review for this study covers a range of topics relating to career advancement, particularly at higher education institutions, including the marketisation and corporatisation of universities, career management, career growth, development and expectations, talent management, succession planning, career plateauing and performance management.

### 2.1. The marketisation and corporatisation of universities

University governance models can vary from political, trusteeship, managerial, new managerial, collegial and bureaucratic to any combination of the above (Fourie, 2009). The political model focuses on aspects such as policy formulation and departs from the belief that governance is about political negotiation, lobbying and coalition formation, in which leaders act as members of state (Fourie, 2009). The trusteeship model focuses more on community-oriented approaches for the long-term benefit of the institution.

However, recently university governance and management have become more corporate in nature, due to economic rationalism as a driving force (Adams, 2006). This reflects the influence of a neo-liberal form of globalisation (Shizha, 2017), with a strong leaning towards managerialism (also seen as the bureaucratic model) at organisational level (Deem, 2017). In the opinion of the supporters of managerialism, organisational efficiency and effectiveness are boosted by financial accountability, quality assurance and performance evaluation. This approach has become increasingly important in the governance model of South African universities. Far greater weight is being attached to accountability at universities than in the past; and in the balance

between accountability and autonomy the scales seem to be tipping towards accountability (Huisman, 2018). Managerialist notions have implications for higher education governance because it is possible that they could severely restrict academic autonomy (collegialism) and freedom in favour of introducing more control measures (Cantwell, Marginson and Smolentseva, 2018). New managerialism ranges in emphasis from 'hard managerialism', which is characterised by hierarchies, performance indicators and measurement of outcomes, to 'soft managerialism', which features distributed leadership, collaboration and negotiation (Deem and Magallanes, 2017). Davis, Jansen van Rensburg and Venter (2014) posit that managerialism could possibly remedy inefficiencies in university systems and processes by reducing complexities in the university management environment. Their research findings, however, have indicated that middle managers at a higher education institution were being hampered by the effects of managerialism. Managerialism has led to disempowered middle managers and a "*bureaucracy that translates into a culture of conform-ance over collegiality, control at the cost of innovation and experimentation, and an over-articulation of strategy which in effect devalues the strategy*" (Davis, et al., 2014: 1480). To deal with the consequences of managerialism, middle managers initiate various initiatives to avoid the bureaucracy to help them support peers and subordinates (Davis, 2017).

As a result of the application of market principles, the human resource functions of universities have had to transform their practices gradually to ensure compliance and this is being reinforced by the shift from a collegial to a managerial approach (Van den Brink, Fruytier and Thunnissen, 2013:180). Currently all human resource

functions, especially in areas like human resource development, career management and the like are being measured using concepts such as 'return on investment', 'maximising outcomes' and 'goal achievement'. There is no doubt that universities need to be able to attract and retain academic and administrative talent if they are to remain viable in the highly competitive higher education market.

### 2.2. Career management

Contemporary career theory views the career from a holistic life design and career construction perspective (Savickas, 2013) and careers have become multi-directional due to the emergence of the 'boundary-less' organisation. Schreuder and Coetzee (2016:94) are of the view that career management is a shared responsibility between employees and the employer and a series of learning cycles across multi-directional career pathways (Hall, 2013). Employees are primarily responsible for taking charge of their own careers, while employers have a facilitating role to play in career planning, training and development. Career management is a process where an individual builds, executes and obtains feedback about career goals and strategies in a variety of employment possibilities (Wärnich, Carrell, Elbert and Hatfield, 2018:286). The aforementioned is an ongoing process based on the pillars of self-knowledge (for example interests and values) and knowledge of employment possibilities (Coetzee 2007; Greenhaus, Collins and Godshalk, 2010).

### 2.3. Career growth, development and expectations

The concept of "career growth" has two components, namely career advancement and career development. Research has shown that opportunities for career growth

are important in determining how employees relate to their employer organisations (Dialoke and Nkechi, 2017). Career development is concerned with developing the organisation's employees in line with both organisational needs and those of its employees (Botha and Du Plessis, 2017). Career development and training are inter-related and both processes leave employees better equipped to help the organisation achieve its mission (Dialoke and Nkechi, 2017) by gaining or expanding their key competencies. An essential requirement in any organisational training and development intervention is the post-course or -programme evaluation. Apart from the different steps in the hierarchy of evaluation, the important last step of the evaluation – return on investment/expectations – is crucial (Kirkpatrick and Kirkpatrick, 2016 and Philips and Philips, 2005). In this regard the questions to be answered are: has the behaviour of participants changed and have organisational productivity and profitability increased? Training and development, career development and organisational development have been identified as the fundamentals of human resource development (De Waal and Goedegebuure, 2017).

Career advancement normally involves rising through the ranks of an organisation in clearly defined stages (Dialoke and Nkechi, 2017). When employees know that everybody has an equal chance of succeeding, it serves as a powerful motivator. Another motivator for employees to work hard is the probability of career advancement (Smit, Vrba and Botha, 2016). However, employees can only stay motivated if their expectations are met. These expectations include job security; the reputation of the organisation they work for; advancement and promotion opportunities; competent and congenial co-workers; adequate and fair pay; competent supervision;

balanced working hours; adequate benefits and safe working conditions (Career Key, 2018; NGen, 2009).

#### 2.4. Talent management

A universally acceptable definition of talent management (TM) has not been agreed on (Lewis and Heckman, 2006; Al, Cascio and Paauwe, 2014). However, the literature mostly explains TM as practices related to life-long careers in organisations; and it can be defined as *“those activities and processes that enable identification of positions and talent pools that are critical to building and sustaining an organisation’s competitive advantage”* (Al et al., 2014:174). The absence of standardised definitions has led to different ways of interpreting TM (Lewis and Heckman, 2006): it offers new terminology to describe human resource practices; to refer to succession planning practices and the management of talented employees. Wu, Nurhadi and Zahro (2016), however, suggest five different methods that can be selected to implement a TM strategy at a university. Firstly, an inclusive approach can be used in which all employees are viewed as part of a TM plan. Secondly, there is the executive talent pool approach focusing on senior management. Thirdly, a future leader group is an approach involving staff at all levels who have been identified as having the potential to be leaders as part of TM. Fourthly, there is the succession planning approach in which the key roles of mostly senior management and other selected posts are identified so that when these positions are vacated, people with the required skills and competency can step in. Lastly, in the blended approach two or more of the approaches mentioned above are used in combination. By identifying the core competencies required by various positions throughout the TM process, middle managers and human resource practitioners

are equipped to assist employees in maximising their potential (Rutledge, Lemire, Hawks and Mowdood, 2016).

#### 2.5. Succession planning, career plateauing and performance management

Career and succession planning are efforts to identify the gap between what is and what should be. Whereas career planning focuses on what the individual’s goals are and what the current competencies for specific roles in the organisation are, succession planning focuses on the present and future needs of the organisation at all levels. Individual interests and organisational needs can be brought together by integrating them. Human resource management must align and integrate individual and organisational goals and this could be achieved through training and development, promotion, job rotations and performance management (Rothwell, Jackson, Ressler, Jones and Brower, 2015).

When the prospects for career advancement in an organisation start to diminish due to irrelevant skills or a low need for upward mobility, among others, career plateauing begins (Greenhaus et al., 2010). Negative outcomes can be associated with career plateauing (Wang and Hsien, 2014), for example, low levels of job involvement, work motivation, self-image, productivity, work performance, career satisfaction and loss of employee morale. Career plateauing could, however, also be positive if career progression is realistic, visible and on merit and if plateaued workers have opportunities to go through a self-assessment process to establish individual strengths and weaknesses and identify their own challenges. Other strategies to mitigate the negative effects of career plateauing include introducing an organisational climate change

programme; revising human resource policies to ensure fairness; changing the organisational climate through education and considering possible organisational restructuring (Greenhaus et al., 2010; Innocent, Felix, Richard and Asah, 2017).

Career advancement, plateauing and succession planning are closely related to some form of individual performance management, whether informal or formal. According to Kinicki, Jacobson, Peterson and Prussia (2013), performance management consists of regulated procedures for describing, encouraging, measuring and developing employee performance. The effects of performance management are felt by both individuals and the organisation. On the basis of empirical evidence, it may be concluded that integrated human resource and performance management policies have a significant influence on employee attitudes and commitment (Kinicki et al., 2013), which, in turn, influence the performance of the organisation.

### 3. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1. Research approach

An exploratory research approach was used to gain insights into the perception of participants about career expectations at the university and a qualitative (focus group) study was undertaken for this purpose. Exploratory research is mainly concerned with largely unexplored areas and problems (Brown, 2006).

#### 3.2. Target population and sampling

Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2012) regard the research population as the pool from which the sample elements are drawn,

and to which the research will ultimately generalise findings. Specifically, the target population refers to a group of people or entities from which information is required, where inferences can be drawn about a particular phenomenon under observation (Patton, 2002). In this study, participants who successfully completed an in-house leadership development programme (LDP) at the university were randomly selected. The main purpose of the LDP was to expose participants to leadership and management practices and to unleash unique talents. Participants, who completed the LDP, are considered possible future leaders and/or managers at the institution. Investing in building the leadership pipeline with talented administrative staff is an imperative to ensure institutional effectiveness and efficiency (Horne, Van der Berg, and Newman, 2015).

Simple random sampling is the most basic and frequently used sampling method in social science research and in fact in scientific research generally (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2009). The biggest advantage of the simple random sample is that every member of the population has an equal chance of being selected. Furthermore, the statistical conclusions drawn from the analysis of the sample are generally more valid. *“One of the most convenient ways of creating a simple random sample is to use a random numbers table”* (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2009:222). These tables are carefully created to ensure that each number is equally probable, so their use yields a satisfactory random sample for valid research outcomes.

This study, conducted in 2018, purposefully engaged the 148 staff members who attended the LDP programme from 2012 to 2017. A computer-generated six-digit random number was accordingly assigned to

each participant and the list ranked from low to high. The lowest 45 numbers were used to construct a list of participants to be used as a sample frame. The first 14 alumni, without replacement, who indicated their willingness to participate on the set dates and times formed part of the focus groups attendees. It is believed that data saturation has been reached. In this regard, Guest, Bunce and Johnson (2006) are of the view that if the objective is to understand shared features within a fairly homogenous group, 12 in-depth interviews should suffice.

### 3.3. Data collection

The conceptualisation of the research included a study of procedures and policies in the university and relevant literature. A review of the academic literature was also conducted to identify the various perspectives on career development that could suggest a context for the research.

Focus group discussions were held using a discussion guide framed on the basis of insights drawn from the academic literature. The discussion guide was structured to address the research purpose; stimulate discussion and explore the following components (Noe, Hollenbeck, Gerhart and Wright, 2017:381):

- an individual self-assessment, for example, the participant's career interests, values, aptitudes, behavioural tendencies and insights from the leadership training;
- a reality check, for example, covering aspects such as career conversations, performance management, promotion possibilities, departmental goal achievements, talent identification, the role of managers and organisational culture;
- goal setting, for example, short and

medium-term departmental and individual goals, development opportunities, promotion and lateral moves;

- actions and recommendations, for example, how to achieve goals and suggestions to line managers to improve outputs.

The focus group discussions provided greater context and understanding of the research environment and topics or focus areas. The reliability of the focus group discussion was strengthened by using a combination of different sources of data to study the same phenomenon. To ensure reliability, the discussion guide was piloted with the aid of identified human resource specialists and line managers, none of whom formed part of the sample group. Digital recordings of the responses were made with the permission of the participants. The recorded discussions were transcribed verbatim and then underwent a thematic analysis. This approach allowed for distilling information into common themes capturing the essence and commonalities emerging from the discussion sessions. Although open coding was used in the analysis of the data, the identified themes helped to provide a foundation for further analysis and interpretation in which themes were studied in conjunction with the insights acquired from phase three of the research. The main themes identified are presented under 'Findings and Discussion'.

### 3.4. Participants' profiles

The majority of participants, namely 10 (71.4%), were female and four (28.6%) were male. With regard to age, most participants, namely six (42.9%), fell into the age group 36-45 years, followed by five (35.7%) in the age group 46-55 years, two in the age group 56-65 years (14.3%) and one (7.1%) in the age group 26-35 years.

### 3.5. Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct the study was obtained from the institution. Furthermore, to ensure that the rights of research entities were protected; the participants were informed about the aims and purposes of the focus group discussions and they were required to give consent for the use of the voice-to-text device prior to the session. All participants were ensured of the confidential treatment of information provided.

## 4. MAIN FINDINGS

This section contains a brief summary of the main findings obtained from the focus group discussions. The following main themes emerged during the focus group discussions: institutional realities, which includes a shift from a collegial to a managerial model and perceptions of unethical labour practices; implementation of TM; performance management and departmental goals and career-related conversations and mentorship/coaching.

### *Theme 1: Institutional realities*

It became evident during the focus group discussion that career advancement and growth opportunities cannot be discussed without recognising the organisational context and realities. Two sub-themes were identified under the theme ‘institutional realities’, namely ‘from a collegial to a managerial model’ and ‘perceptions of unethical labour practices and union demands.

#### *Sub-theme 1.1: From a collegial to a managerial model*

During the discussion, participants shared the view that they observed the manifestation of a more managerialist approach

being displayed at the university and a shift away from the collegial approach. The university has developed new organisational structures, introducing new and strengthened management positions, expanded communication, innovation and technology units to propagate managerialism. The management appointment processes have changed significantly in that the credentials or accomplishments of candidates have become less important than bureaucratic ideals in candidates. One view was:

*There is quite a lot of over-managerialism, as opposed to collegiality.*

The participants also reflected on the development of the relationship between management and staff members where this was seen as an alliance rather than a hierarchical relationship. The idea was to try to develop a more effective working environment by engendering cordial relations in the workplace, with employees seeing themselves as a close-knit team where every staff member plays an important part in the decision-making process. Participants also mentioned several practices, such as staff autonomy, teamwork and self-discipline, that allow staff to carry out their work-related activities in an unsupervised environment and where performance and productivity are not measured but monitored as in a collegial model. Remnants of decision-making based on the principles of collegiality were noticeable in the academic sector, but this did not seem to prevail among staff in professional and support positions. In addition, participants felt that the university as a workplace was politically driven.

From a reality check perspective, it also appears that in a collegial model, there were work values that guided the management activities. Service delivery towards students and the university stakeholders was a core function of employees. However, participants unequivocally mentioned that a silo



mentality had emerged. Consequently, this led to the workplace becoming increasingly politicised and characterised by hidden agendas; a lack of accountability and trust in management; unethical labour practices; staff indifference towards one another and a blurring of the core tuition function of the university; a lack of promotional opportunities; staff disengagement and dissatisfaction. These institutional realities are illustrated in the following extracts:

*I wonder whether this managerialism that you're speaking of, doesn't it also have to do a little bit with the workplace being politicised more?*

*The university is politically driven, which is something that you cannot find in the private companies.*

It was further mentioned that the absence of teamwork and shared responsibilities due to the silo mentality resulted in a lack of service delivery to students and the university stakeholders. The silo mentality clearly had a negative impact on career development and management goal setting by disabling open and honest career conversation and setting mutually beneficial goals and opportunities. One participant said:

*There's quite a lot of silos within the university.*

The participants were of the view that the challenge faced by the university was that middle managers lacked the capabilities to manage their own staff and/or decision-making processes. They perceived middle managers to be inexperienced. As a result, they were micro-managing staff. Others were of the view that middle managers were unable to exercise their function effectively owing to the powers wielded by the unions. The following extract illustrates some of these points:

*There are people who are lacking skills. There are managers who doesn't have the ability to make decisions in the university. Instead they are micro-managing. It's also where these silos came from, that everybody is doing their little part because certain managers prefer their way and their way of thinking is being put into you.*

A university already in a managerial mode was measured against the criteria stipulated by Adams (2006), which include improving organisational efficiency and effectiveness through financial accountability; quality assurance and performance evaluation employed the participants in this study. In addition, accountability replaced autonomy at the university some years previously and this is evident in the many control measures which have been introduced (Huisman, 2018). Within this context, the participants shared their lived experiences about how a managerial approach influenced their work at the university.

In summary some participants were of the view that they were experiencing over-managerialism and were unhappy with restructuring initiatives and the appointment of senior management. They perceived more organisational politics in the managerial model. They reported that collegial practices such as staff autonomy, teamwork and self-discipline allowing staff to carry out their work-related activities in an unsupervised environment had been abandoned in favour of performance and productivity. Certain participants mentioned that a silo mentality had emerged. There was agreement among participants that the silo mentality had a negative impact on career development and management and on goal setting, by disabling open and honest career conversation, and on setting mutually beneficial goals and opportunities. Participants were also of the view that middle managers

were unable to exercise their function effectively owing to the power wielded by the unions. In contrast with this view, Davis (2017) reported that, in a managerial environment, middle managers create their own systems outside bureaucratic institutions and provide more personal support to peers and subordinates. Consensus among all participants could not be found but, given the managerial model that was evidently in place, it seems that the participants do favour collegial model practices, with certain exceptions. One participant responded as follows:

*My view is that managerialism is not a problem, but I think that managers must be equipped with the necessary skills so that they can be able to deal with people.*

### *Sub-theme 1.2: Perceptions of unethical labour practices and union demands*

Participants also alluded to unethical labour practices such as nepotism, bribery and corruption as common occurrences. Remarks were made that unethical labour practices were being instigated during the recruitment processes whereby family members were employed based on their connections with management rather than on their abilities and accomplishments. Another form of unethical labour practice mentioned was the alleged bribery that often takes place between managers and union members. This was interpreted by one of the participants as follows:

*Why do you have unions who are running the university? It's because management also is failing us. How is management failing us? Is because there are things, they are doing that are not ethical.*

Participants raised concerns that as managers they feel unprotected and victimised by middle management and the union

representatives. There was a general perception among participants that management assigned their powers and responsibilities to union organisations by abdicating their responsibilities and adhering to union demands. Hence, even defiant employees felt protected by the unions from the consequences of poor performance and insubordination. Others felt that the union had taken control of the function of the university. One participant responded as follows:

*I think middle management has been sold out and that's why we can't be effective in what we're doing. And delivering the service that we're supposed to be doing. Top management doesn't know what is happening with the middle management, the employees and all.*

In addition, participants suggested that top management is failing to regulate the university's policies and procedures because of silo thinking and union organisations. The participants agreed that unethical labour practices are orchestrated in appointment procedures and that certain managers and unions are complicit in negatively impinging on certain managers' work performance. Whether it is true or not, the perception has been created with the result that distrust is fuelled. Any possible career opportunities in this environment will not be based on merit and will negatively affect work morale and personal ambitions of staff.

### *Theme 2: Implementation of talent management*

When reflecting on how TM has been defined and implemented at the university, participants expressed concern regarding the lack of supporting mechanisms to retain the pool of talented staff that had been identified. It was evident from the discussion that the university does not have a strategy

for attracting and retaining high-calibre individuals. This is illustrated by the comments below:

*TM is all about telling us what are the good intentions of the university in recognising good, but the support mechanisms within the university leave much to be desired.*

*There are no supporting interventions that would support it to say that okay. We have identified talent; these people are in the talent pool.*

*The university does develop its people, yes. It does develop its people. But, no follow-through.*

The general perception was that there are an adequate number of employees at the university with leadership potential who can be developed to be considered for management positions. However, these people are exiting the university. The absence of a proper retention intervention was considered as one of the greatest challenges confronting the university. This is particularly relevant to the identified talent pool from which trained and developed staff ultimately departed because they felt stagnant, demotivated and disengaged.

The participants felt that the inability of university management (at various levels) to nurture staff members who had been trained and developed as future leaders could be ascribed to the fact that management fail to understand the broad dimensions of TM, its proper application and its benefits. The most important challenge mentioned was the lack of opportunities for promotion and the lack of attention to professional human resource practices. One participant explained this problem as follows:

*It's like you're being pushed and being recognised and nothing is being done about*

*you. Because it's not a matter of me growing upwards, I can grow sideways. I need to broaden my skills now. Some of us, when I have been identified as talent, I would like to be exposed. Why not let me cross-transfer. Alternatively, maybe go over to certain departments and grow there. You know, broaden my skills and to be knowledgeable about most of the things that are required out there in the world of work. I think the challenge the university is facing, for people in admin and professional departments, there are no promotional opportunities. And there is also not growth sideways.*

The participants felt despondent about the lack of promotional prospects or growth either upwards or sideways. It appears that most participants had been in the same post grades for a considerable number of years without promotion prospects, despite having attended various training and development programmes. Without the opportunity to implement acquired skills and take responsibility, the participants felt that there is no return on investment because the knowledge and skills acquired are not being utilised effectively to advance the university. There continues to be a mismatch between TM initiatives and how people are being evaluated. One participant shared the following sentiments:

*We have four managerial positions and then a directorate. And below, or underneath those four management positions, we are quite a lot of people – I think something like 36. In all the years that I've worked for the university, I've been also at the same level. There are no promotional possibilities or whatever. So, in a way, and I'm not resentful about it, but I know that I was being rewarded by being sent on the LDP.*

Another participant disclosed high levels of frustration with her current position and felt that the leadership at the university

had thwarted any possible career progression. Participants shared the view that the university ensures that they introduce the process/programmes necessary for creating opportunities for future leadership talent mainly by offering training and development programmes or by offering study incentive schemes.

### *Theme 3: Performance management and departmental goals*

When reflecting on performance management, participants expressed differing views. Some argued that the monetary incentive for good performance should be discarded and be replaced with talent recognition because staff members are already being paid for their services. The whole issue of measurement scores in the performance system was a concern for participants because it is perceived as unfair practice due to managers' lack of knowledge of the people who report to them.

In general, the participants held negative views about the competencies of their managers as far as performance management is concerned:

*Because now, you have performance management – it's not working, honestly speaking. If you look at the performance of the university as a whole, we are not performing. But, when you go down to individuals, as a manager you just give a person 3.2 for that person to get a bonus.*

*How do you sign a contractual agreement with someone who lacks managerial skills? Who can't even maintain a good communication? Someone who like she can't even set any goals for you, she can't be an exemplary to the team? How do you enter into a contract with someone like that?*

Others pointed to the fact that performance appraisal and individual development

plans are the primary means for encouraging employees to seek out leadership challenges. They were of the view that performance management systems do have benefits, for example, providing a score for work done and identifying developmental areas. The bonus system was perceived as fair if the evaluation was done objectively. Participants who were in favour of the performance bonus shared the following sentiments:

*Performance appraisal system is a very good ... that you can use to achieve whatever objective you set for yourself.*

*Performance bonus is motivational for those employees who work hard.*

When prompted to reflect on their awareness of and contribution to departmental goals, the responses were not positive in the sense that staff were unaware of their departmental goals. The groups indicated that they become aware of departmental goals and university council goals once finalised or by chance. There was no discussion of these goals apart from the contractual performance agreement signed early in the year. It was mentioned that the university managers did not have one-on-one conversations with staff members.

*And even if you are doing a good job, how would you know that you are doing a good job because you don't have a plan; you don't have objectives. That is my view.*

*I think in this university is about the performance. They just pick you, say you are going there, then they tick to say I've nominated somebody, the person's going. In terms of having discussion, looking at your career, the expectations, the department, how do you want you to come back and impact positively, there's no such. Even after training, there's no meeting even for two minutes to say how was it, what are the things that you have learned? Nothing. So, it's about nothing.*

One could conclude that certain factors are impeding the successful implementation of the performance management system and alignment with departmental goals. These factors include poor or no communication on training opportunities and/or departmental goals and a lack of proper guidance by middle managers. However, there was also a sense that identifying some staff as future leaders would stifle the very process that allows hidden leaders to emerge. The purpose of performance management is to implement procedures aimed at describing, encouraging, measuring and developing employee performance (Kinicki et al., 2013). Opportunities should also be created to identify training and development opportunities and weaknesses.

*Theme 4: Career-related conversations, mentorship at work*

Career conversations represent the process by which people acquire and use career-related feedback so that employees can plan timeously to avoid potential failure (Greenhaus et al., 2010). This initiative is to the advantage of the employee and the organisation in many ways, leading to improving motivation; satisfying staff needs and staffing from within the organisation (Wärnich et al., 2018: 286). The university introduced career conversations and mentoring programmes as part of an initiative to further develop and assist employees in making informed career choices and obtaining the assistance of mentors in the process.

Structured conversations based on competencies, career pathing and departmental goals that inform personal and professional training development were highlighted as a cause for concern and perceived as non-existent at the university. Few participants mentioned that constant engagement and

encouragement regarding career progression do take place:

*I think I'm one of the luckiest one at the university. Because my boss does not feel threatened by mentioning ... And I always joke to say wow, if she was not a white lady, people will say you two, you have a relationship. She's contributing too much in my development and even whereby I didn't even see. Now I'm completing my MBL and she was like, you have to register that. And I'm like, for what? No, just do it. And I did register. Now it's my final year.*

Mentoring relates primarily to the identification and nurturing of potential for the whole person. The mentor supports the mentee in developing insight and understanding through intrinsic observation. Mentoring could take the form of formal and informal training, where staff members' skills are developed internally or externally to achieve university goals and objectives.

It appears that in certain departments informal mentoring does take place as part of training programmes and/or community engagement where unemployed graduates are informally exposed to the world of work. Other mentorship programmes identified by participants include the common practice of utilising the expertise, knowledge and skills of staff who are nearing retirement to transfer such knowledge and skills to others. Training on the job was also identified as part of mentoring. The concern voiced by participants was that the university lacks an intervention mechanism to retain graduates who have been mentored and identified in the TM pool and who leave the university at the end of the contract. The other concern mentioned was time management and misuse of university resources in conducting training programmes and mentoring others.

### 5. DISCUSSION

The study was aimed at obtaining the views of administrative staff about their career advancement realities at a university. The following main themes emerged: the importance of institutional realities, which include a shift from a collegial to a managerial model and perceptions of unethical labour practices; implementation of TM; performance management and departmental goals; and career-related conversations and mentorship.

Participants were remarkably willing to share their experiences. There was a general understanding of the current shift from a collegial to a managerial model as an evolutionary step in the right direction. However, participants felt that the university is going about it in the wrong way. The current reality at the university is one of constant organisational restructuring initiatives, including new and strengthened management positions and expanded communication channels. The findings reflected a few self-assessment aspects such as staff autonomy, teamwork and self-discipline, allowing staff to carry out their work-related activities. A perceived silo mentality led to the workplace becoming increasingly politically driven, characterised by hidden agendas; a lack of accountability and trust in management; unethical labour practices; staff indifference towards one another and a blurring of the core tuition function of the university. Participants recommended that the current approach to the identification and development of future leadership talent should involve a culture of developing leadership and management. This culture would contribute to staff with leadership potential being retained and recognised intuitively.

There was a general perception that the university is not doing enough to effectively

promote and implement TM. For instance, the current management and leadership training and development programmes are not being implemented in a manner that is both transparent and effective.

Other factors that affected the success of TM are a lack of management commitment, poor communication, inadequate promotional prospects, insufficient retention strategies and the absence of proper or formal systems for identifying and developing a talent pool.

Further factors were poor or absent communication regarding possible training opportunities and/or the achievement of departmental goals. However, there was also a sense that identifying some staff as future leaders would stifle the very process that allows hidden leaders to emerge. It was believed that by sharing the rules of the game, the university could unleash the leadership development potential of its employees.

The absence of a proper retention intervention was considered the greatest challenge confronting the university. In addition, a dearth of follow-up and feedback to discuss and share their experience and learning was also identified by participants as a challenge that brands the TM initiative as a waste of university resources.

Participants felt despondent about the lack of promotional prospects or growth either upwards or sideways, especially among staff in professional and support positions. It appears that most participants had been in the same post grades for a considerable number of years without promotion prospects, despite having undertaken numerous training development programmes. There continues to be a perceived mismatch between TM initiatives and how staff are being evaluated.

From a reality check perspective, it is evident that career conversations, promotion possibilities, departmental goal achievements and talent identification and pools were curtailed by the myopic focus common to a silo mentality. This focus, according to the group, furthermore disables open and honest career conversations and setting of mutually beneficial goals and opportunities. It was evident from the discussion that the university does not have the strategy to attract and retain high-calibre persons.

Two performance management perspectives were identified during the discussions. One involves discarding the bonus policy for high performance and replacing it with talent recognition while the other would like to retain the bonus policy. The issue of measurement scores for performance management was a concern for participants because it is perceived as an unfair practice since managers do not know the people who report to them well.

The participants perceive that career opportunities for administrative staff at the university are not promising. The absence of managerial capacity on the part of appointed managers was reported. This resulted in a lack of proper on-the-job guidance; poor communication regarding training opportunities and failure to achieve departmental goals. A significant shift from a collegial to a managerial model and a perceived silo mentality led to the workplace becoming increasingly politically driven, which is also indicative of the possible emergence of a political governance model. Reported aspects such as hidden agendas; a lack of accountability and trust in management; unethical labour practices; staff indifference towards each other and a blurring of the core tuition function of the university are disruptive and a reflection of the

multiple governance models partly in play. Administrative staff are not acknowledged for the work they do and experience a range of frustrations in their quest to gain lateral job experience and possible promotion.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following high-level considerations emerged from the investigation:

Career advancement realities, as articulated by the participants in this study, can to some extent be understood in the context of a university's governance structures; and associated cultures influenced among other things by leadership quality, stakeholder behaviour and workforce diversity.

Irrespective of the governance model(s) in play, it remains important that employees should be treated fairly; and that the university should be able to attract and retain talented administrative employees. The participants in this study reported on their experience at the university. The reality is that each of the models has, to some extent, had a positive and/or negative impact on career growth opportunities. It also appears that the 'marketisation and corporatisation wave took the university on a different trajectory than expected: a silo mentality developed; politicisation in the workplace increased; the abdicating of responsibility by certain managers occurred and factions pursuing their own agendas seemingly captured the vacuum thus created. There is no doubt that the managerial approach is in operation at the university, but it is advised that a new, softer managerial approach be foregrounded when dealing with staff. Several models could co-exist in the same university without negatively affecting employees. Such an approach would create an environment

where ample career growth opportunities could exist for administrative staff.

TM has been conceived as an important initiative for refreshing and providing impetus in advancing the success of the university. However, its administration and implementation have been hampered by factors such as poor or no communication regarding training opportunities and/or departmental goals and the lack of proper guidance by middle managers. The TM policy at the university places the responsibility to manage and apply it on line management. Depending on the positions to be filled at the university, the five different methods of TM strategy as suggested by Wu et al. (2016) could be considered as well as a separate TM policy for administrative staff, to be developed and approved. This will deal with the concerns as stated by Lewis and Heckman (2006) regarding inconsistent definitions of TM.

It seems that most participants did not participate in formal career conversations and have not been mentored either. This is contrary to the university policies. The responsibility once again fell on line managers to implement these policies and on the human resource department to monitor them. Career discussion makes it possible to discuss any career barriers or opportunities that might exist at the university and to focus on the individual's specific goals and the opportunities for career advancement. Possible implications are that low morale and productivity will result in discontented staff; the potential resignation of future leaders and failure to achieve departmental goals.

This study has contributed by providing further insight into the feelings and lived experiences of administrative staff regarding career realities at the university. The existing barriers to career advancement at

the university such as a lack of career guidance, retention strategies and promotional prospects have been highlighted. This study shows that career growth realities at the university are experienced very negatively and that the LDP participants are not optimistic about career advancement opportunities at the university.

The limitations of this study are that only the perspectives of selected members of staff at one university were obtained. It is suggested that future research include multiple universities and more participants. Although the generalisability of the research is limited, certain key findings could be of value to other universities in South Africa. Most of the universities in South Africa are confronted with similar demands (as reflected above) and aspects such as a growing need from potential students to enrol, a need for professional support systems and a necessity for a professional cohort of administrative staff to support academic activities are vital. The high percentage of administrative staff employed by South African universities is indicative of the importance of the work they do to support and facilitate the academic project. This study has identified a wide range of themes and other universities should take note but a more focused demarcation and more in-depth interviews about talent retention and career growth opportunities are required. The impact of trade unions and collective bargaining processes on career progression and promotion policies indicates the need for further investigation.

It is recommended that a policy on talent management for administrative staff should be considered and that it should include topics such as career management practices; career conversations; training and development practices; promotion



criteria and performance management. The university also needs to consider investigating sources of stress, particularly role overload, role ambiguity and organisational constraints, which could negatively affect administrative staff. In addition, the important role administrative staff play and the contribution they make to university excellence should be acknowledged annually. Strategies to mitigate the negative effects of career plateauing should be considered. These include revising human resource policies to ensure fairness; changing the organisational climate through education and considering possible organisational restructuring. The eradication of unethical behaviour should be a priority and a development programme for managers which focuses on people management skills should be developed.

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### PERCEPCIJE ADMINISTRATIVNOG OSOBLJA O REALNOSTI NAPREDOVANJA U KARIJERI NA JUŽNOAFRIČKOM SVEUČILIŠTU

**Sažetak.** *Potrebna obuka i razvoj, koji omogućavaju osoblju popunjavanje kritičnih pozicija, troši značajan postotak godišnjeg sveučilišnog budžeta. U ovom se radu prezentira percepcija razvoja karijere administrativnog osoblja na južnoafričkom sveučilištu, čime se proširuje postojeće znanje o ograničenjima za napredovanje u karijeri na sveučilištima. Korišten je kvalitativni pristup, s uzorkom od 14 administrativnih zaposlenika, koji su identificirani kao kandidati za moguće popunjavanje viših menadžerskih pozicija. Rezultati empirijskog istraživanja utvrdili su ograničenja napredovanja u karijeri, koja su se odnosili na prelazak s kolegijalnog na menadžerski orijentiran model upravljan, kao i povećanu organizacijsku politiku, uslijed percipiranog mentaliteta zatvaranja u vlastiti odjel. Nadalje, nedostatak menadžerskih vještina znači da se mogućnosti za obuku i odjelni ciljevi ne komuniciraju dobro članovima osoblja, dok su neodgovarajuće savjetovanje o razvoju karijera,*

*strategije zadržavanja zaposlenika i mogućnosti za unapređenje na više pozicije razlozi smanjenja mogućnosti napredovanja u karijeri. Bez obzira na navedeno, sudionici istraživanja su ukazali da ne gube nadu te da će nastaviti, u skladu sa svim svojim mogućnostima, obavljati svoj posao te, čak, pokušati premašiti ono što se od njih očekuje. Menadžeri, pak, ne trebaju smetnuti s uma činjenicu da će moral i produktivnost patiti, ukoliko su talentirani zaposlenici nezadovoljni, što može dovesti i do odustajanja budućih vođa, s posljedicama za postizanje odjelnih ciljeva. Rezultati ovog rada mogu poslužiti kao oblik „otvaranja očiju“ sveučilišnim upravama, kako je potrebno revidirati strategije za zadržavanje administrativnog osoblja i politike napredovanja, s obzirom da oni pružaju ključne usluge na sveučilištu.*

**Ključne riječi:** *realnosti u karijeri, administrativno osoblje, menadžerski model sveučilišta, menadžerske sposobnosti*