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Determinants of Sustainable Talent Management Within a South African University

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Abstract:

Sustainable talent management has become a strategic imperative for higher education institutions operating in increasingly complex and competitive environments. Within the context of a South African university, talent management is shaped by unique structural, socio-economic, and legislative dynamics, including transformation imperatives, resource constraints, and global competition for academic and professional expertise. This study examines the determinants of sustainable talent management within a South African university setting, with particular attention to leadership practices, organizational culture, institutional strategy alignment, employment equity compliance, performance management systems, and staff development initiatives. The study employed a quantitative research design. A purposive sample of n=400 was used to execute the data. Data was analysed using descriptive statistics and the principal component analysis (PCA) was also used. Findings suggest that strategy, talent review process, staffing, talent acquisition, talent development, talent deployment, performance management and talent retention are the key determinants of talent management within the university context. The study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on talent management in higher education within emerging economies and provides practical recommendations for strengthening institutional capacity and long-term sustainability in South African universities.

Keywords:

Determinants, Talent Management, Sustainability, University, South Africa

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Introduction

Talent management in contemporary higher education has become a strategic imperative for universities seeking to sustain institutional excellence, improve competitive positioning and respond to rapid changes in both national and global labour markets. Defined broadly, talent management comprises the systematic attraction, development, engagement, retention and deployment of individuals whose skills and capabilities are critical to organisational success (Silzer & Dowell, 2010; as discussed in Musakuro & De Klerk, 2021). Within the South African university context, sustainable talent management is particularly salient given ongoing challenges such as funding constraints, skills shortages, academic turnover and the need to transform historically inequitable institutional structures (Musakuro & De Klerk, 2021; Saurombe, 2025).

The determinants of sustainable talent management refer to the multiple contextual and organisational factors that influence how talent is identified, nurtured and retained in a university setting. These determinants span strategic alignment with institutional goals, human resource practices, workforce planning and culture, remuneration and competitive reward systems, and career development opportunities, each of which interacts with South Africa's unique higher education landscape. Research has highlighted that universities with cohesive and fully integrated talent management approaches—where recruitment, performance appraisal, succession planning and professional development are aligned with strategic priorities are better positioned to build sustainable talent pools capable of meeting institutional objectives (Mukwawaya, 2025).

Strategic alignment and workforce planning emerge as foundational determinants. When universities embed talent management into strategic planning, they can more effectively forecast critical skill needs, reduce time-to-hire, and ensure equitable workforce representation in line with national employment equity imperatives (Mukwawaya, 2025). Conversely, poor workforce planning has been linked to extended vacancy durations, difficulty attracting younger academics, and organisational cultures that are seen as inflexible or uninspiring to potential applicants.

Compensation, rewards and employment branding are also pivotal determinants. South African universities operate in a competitive labour market where academic talent is sought by both private sector employers and international institutions offering more attractive remuneration packages. As a result, many public universities struggle to retain high-performing academics, contributing to turnover and the loss of institutional knowledge (Musakuro & De Klerk, 2021). Sustainable talent management thus requires not only competitive compensation, but also a strong employer brand that communicates an institution's value proposition to current and prospective talent (Saurombe, 2025).

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Training, development and performance management systems further determine the sustainability of talent strategies. Research indicates that where professional development opportunities are limited, and performance management is inconsistent or poorly implemented, academic staff report lower job satisfaction and engagement, reducing institutional commitment and career longevity (Musawenkosi et al., 2022). Conversely, formalised performance and development frameworks that support career pathways and recognise achievement can enhance motivation, innovation and institutional loyalty.

Finally, succession planning and retention practices are central to ensuring continuity in academic leadership and expertise. Succession planning not adequately institutionalised within South African universities often results in knowledge gaps when senior staff depart and frustrates long-term strategic continuity. Integrated talent management frameworks that prioritise internal mobility and leadership development are therefore seen as critical enablers of sustained institutional performance. Taken together, these determinants underscore that sustainable talent management in a South African university context is not the product of isolated HR activities, but rather of holistic, strategic and contextually grounded systems that respond to institutional needs, competitive pressures, and the lived realities of academic professionals. In light of the above, the aim of the study is to:

- determine the key determinants of sustainable talent management within the South African university.

Literature Review

Despite the importance and growing popularity of the notion of talent management, theoretical foundation and the clearness of definition of the conception is still lacking (Ariss, Cascio & Paauwe 2014; Festing & Schafer, 2014). The research seeks to fill the knowledge gap and provide key determinants of sustainable talent management and practical conception of talent management with the university context in South Africa. Literature demonstrates that there is no uniformity in the definition of the concept “talent management” or its aims and scope, as there are continuing debates on whether talent management should concentrate on all employees or it is concerned about the aptitudes of great-potential and performing employees (Ariss et al., 2014).

Talent management is perceived as the organised use of personnel initiatives to entice, identify, develop and maintain employees who are regarded to be “talented”. Collings and Mellahi (2009) defined talent management as activities and processes that involve the systematic identification of key positions that differentially contribute to the organisation’s competitive advantage, the development of a talent pool of high-potential and high performing incumbents, and to facilitate filling these positions with competent incumbents, and to ensure their continued commitment to the organisation. Organisations like universities ought to have exceptionally talented employees for them to prosper in the competition and

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progressively multifaceted economy. Globalisation has ensured that organisations gain a competitive advantage by employing highly qualified, talented and committed employees, and universities are no exception. Academics in universities as they are popularly known apply theoretical, analytical and expert knowledge that is acquired through formal education in developing new services and products (Joo, 2010).

Higher Education South Africa (2011) reported that tertiary education institutions are facing an enormous task in enticing and retaining key university staff. This implies that key university employees are a challenge to attract and retain due to the nature of their uncompetitive salaries and conditions of service (Musakuro, 2021; Mukwawaya, 2025). There are various reasons that have been provided to account for the great university staff exodus from their employers; chief among them, uncompetitive salary packages and benefits, unfair promotion policies, poor state funding and increasing student enrolment that is causing heavier workload to academics. Literature shows that high academic turnover is often related with costs of recruitment, lecture disruptions, disruptions in departmental and student planning and loss of experienced mentors and advisors (Theron, Barkhuizen & du Plessis, 2014).

Sustainable talent management (TM) in higher education refers to intentional practices for attracting, developing, retaining and engaging academics and professional staff in ways that support long-term institutional sustainability and competitiveness. Within the South African context, universities face critical challenges related to talent scarcity, workforce ageing, and high turnover, making TM a strategic priority (Musakuro, 2022; Abiwu & Martins, 2024). Recent studies highlight that TM in universities extends beyond basic recruitment and retention to include integrated processes that align with strategic goals. Mukwawaya, Proches and Green (2025) argue that TM should encompass staffing, engagement, development, performance management, and review processes, yet these are often applied inconsistently in South African universities, leading to deficiencies in achieving sustainability.

Similarly, Mukwawaya, Proches & Green (2025) provide a conceptual framework for academic TM that incorporates professional development, succession planning, onboarding, talent acquisition, performance management and retention tactics suggesting that both structural and human-centred practices are necessary for sustainable talent pipelines. Musakuro (2022) identifies workforce planning as a significant determinant of TM effectiveness. Inadequate strategic focus on planning leads to gaps in recruitment and succession protocols that undermine institutional capability to attract and retain high-quality academics. This study observed seven key determinants including workforce planning, recruitment, performance management, compensation and rewards, succession planning, training and development, and retention which require a coordinated strategic approach to support sustainability (Musakuro, 2022).

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Abiwu & Martins (2024) emphasise that integrated TM practices (such as attraction, development and retention) significantly contribute to sustainable competitive advantage in universities. Abiwu & Martins (2024) posit that talent attraction practices highlights recruitment and selection, job analysis, and employer branding as important predictors of competitive advantage. In the South African higher education context, this suggests that proactive talent attraction mechanisms are key determinants of TM sustainability, facilitating access to a broader pool of capable academics. Abiwu & Martins (2022) investigated how talent development impacts sustainability during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Their findings indicate that training and career development practices are positively associated with institutional sustainability underpinning the importance of continuous professional development as a talent management determinant in higher education (Abiwu & Martins, 2022). In light of the above, the aim of this study is to:

- Identify the key determinants of sustainable talent management within a South African university.

Methods and Data

Research Design

This study follows a descriptive and analytical research design, combining quantitative demographic analysis with interpretive insights. The dataset consisted of n = 400 employees who represent academic, administrative, and support categories. Demographic variables analyzed are age, educational qualification, gender and position within the organization under study.

Data Analysis

The data were coded and analyzed using descriptive statistics to determine frequency distributions and percentage representations. The Principal Component Analysis (PCA) was further employed to identify the key determinants of Talent management within the university context.

Ethical Considerations

The study ensured anonymity, confidentiality, and ethical compliance with institutional research standards. No identifiable personal data were used; the dataset reflects aggregated organizational-level information.

Results

The results of the study are presented below:

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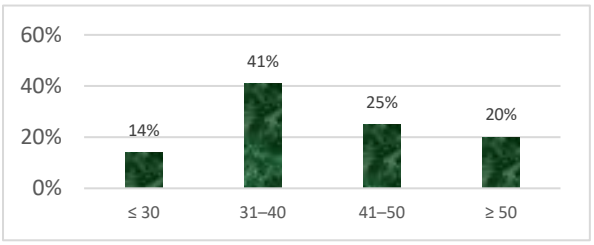
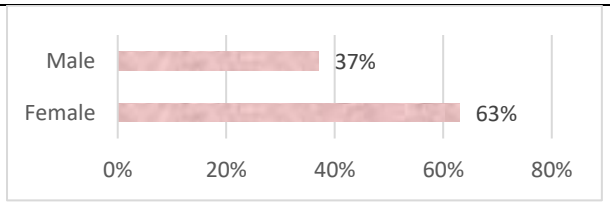
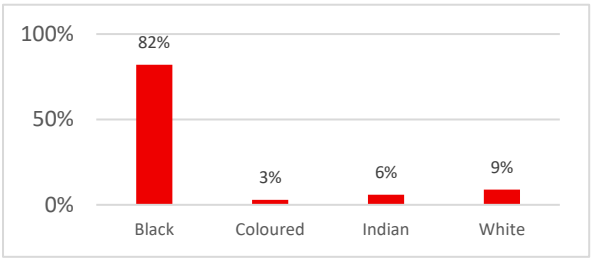
Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age (in years)	≤ 30	56	
	31–40	164	
	41–50	100	
	≥ 50	80	
Gender	Male	148	
	Female	252	
Race	Black	328	
	Coloured	12	
	Indian	24	
	White	36	

Table 1: Demographic details of respondents

The workforce of the HEI, which is located adjacent to a Black residential area, is predominantly Black and female. This reflects post-apartheid transformation cheerful progress in which a dominant race is also dominant in the HEI employ. However, the small proportion (14%) of younger employees (<30 years) indicates an aging workforce and limited entry-level recruitment. The highest proportion in age is 41% of those between 31–40 years, signifying a mature workforce. The tiny proportion of Coloured employees (3%) is a concern when recalling this group as being among the previously disadvantaged populations.

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Qualification	Frequency	Percentage
Cert,/Other	32	
Diploma	96	
Degree	48	
Honours	56	
Master's	128	
PhD	40	

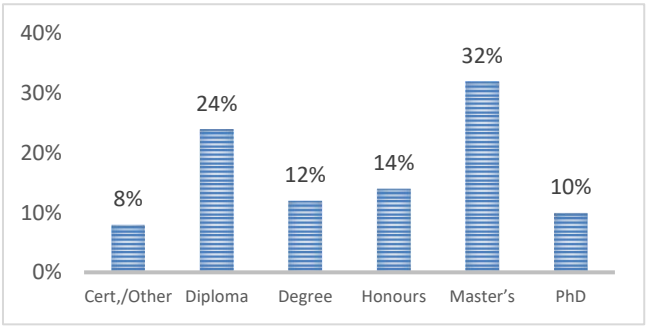

Table 2: Qualifications of Respondents

No single respondent indicates to be completely without a qualification, which convinces that this HEI hires people with some level of education. A substantial share (42%) possesses postgraduate qualifications (master's or PhD). This may be misleading as the master's degrees are dominant and are modal at PhD holders at n = 128 (32%) and PhD holder at a mere 10%, second lowest among all the qualifications. This displays a strong academic base. However, administrative personnel predominantly hold diplomas. Due to the nature of HEI that demands plentiful support staff such as clerks, personal assistants and secretaries who hold qualifications that are offered mostly at diploma levels, the high 24% proportion of diploma holders could be thought to be due to this fact. The bulk of other employees in the lower qualification levels may be an indication of limited opportunities for further study.

Job category	Frequency	Percentage
Administrative	88	
Academic (Lecs, Profs)	184	
Management (Mid & Sen)	56	
Support/Technical/Grounds	72	

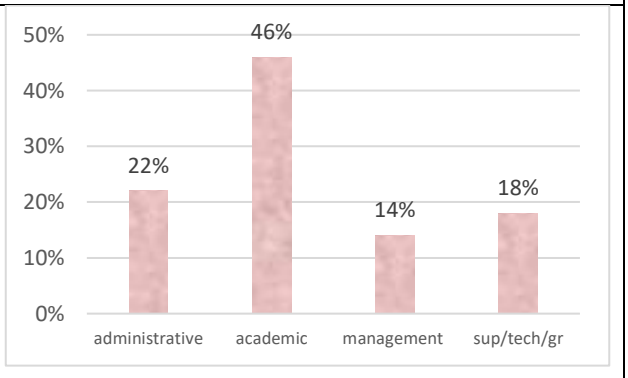

Table 3: Distribution of job categories

Academic staff constitute nearly half the workforce, which is a positive aspect as the core business of HEI is academic work. However, within this academic group, only a small fraction occupy senior

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academic ranks (Senior Lecturer, Associate Professor, or Professor). After the descriptive analysis were presented, the study further presented the Principal Component Analysis (PCA) which summaried the key determinants of talent management as follows:

Rotated Component Matrix[a]		
	Component	
	1	2
1. The organisation's business strategy and human capital strategy are aligned	**.947**	-.035
2. The organisation's reward and recognition programs are aligned with strategy	.927	.070
3. The organisation is very good at implementing and executing strategy	.876	.051
4. Strategic goals are effectively communicated to all employees	.274	**.906**
5. The company's mission and values recognise the importance of talent to achieving business objectives	-.577	.694
Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser normalisation		
a. Rotation converged in 3 iteration		

Table 4: Rotated Component Matrix for "Strategy"

Using Varimax with Kaiser normalisation, the study found that the variables that were critically important were: The organisation's business strategy and human capital strategy are aligned and Strategic goals are effectively communicated to all employees (see Table 4).

Rotated Component Matrix[a]		
	Component	
	1	2
1. The organisation knows who the best performers are	.931	.125
2. Talent is segmented based on performance, value and potential	.349	-.822

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3. Rewards and opportunities are provided to talent based on their contribution	**.935**	-.094
4. Succession plans provide for two qualified candidates for key positions	.287	**.835**
5. The majority of talent is developed internally as opposed to externally hired	-.860	.053
Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser normalisation		
a. Rotation converged in 3 iteration		

Table 5: Rotated Component Matrix for “Talent Review Process”

Using Varimax with Kaiser normalisation, the study found that the variables that were critically important were: Rewards and opportunities are provided to talent based on their contribution and Succession plans provide for two qualified candidates for key positions (see Table 5).

Component Matrix[a]	
	Component
	1
1. The organisation is staffed at the right levels	.926
2. The compensation levels are competitive	**.938**
3. The company’s workforce is diverse and includes people from different backgrounds, perspectives and experiences	.676
4. Diversity is properly represented in senior management and executive levels	.856
5. “All Jobs” (Most critical jobs) are given priority in terms of bench strength and hiring practices	.914
Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis	
a. One Component extracted	

Table 6: Component Matrix[a] for Staffing

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Using Varimax with Kaiser normalisation, the study found that the variable that was critically important was: The compensation levels are competitive (see Table 6).

Rotated Component Matrix[a]		
	Component	
	1	2
1. The organisation can attract top talent	**.956**	-.056
2. The employment brand is strong and compelling among prospective employees	.836	.355
3. Newly hired employees get off to a fast and productive start	.834	-.452
4. Internal employee referral programs are widely used to bring in new employees	-.0.18	**.971**
5. The hiring process is efficient, effective and focuses on “quality of hire”	.693	.534
Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser normalisation		
a. Rotation converged in 3 iterations		

Table 7: Rotated Component Matrix for “Talent Acquisition”

Using Varimax with Kaiser normalisation, the study found that the variables that were critically important were: The organisation can attract top talent and Internal employee referral programs are widely used to bring in new employees (see Table 7).

Rotated Component Matrix[a]		
	Component	
	1	2
1. The majority of employees are fully engaged and committed to the company	.809	.343
2. Engagement levels are tracked across different talent levels, jobs, departments and location	.949	.179

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3. The company is featured on "Best Places to Work" lists that are highly respected	**.958**	.175
4. Innovative products and services are being developed in the company	.112	**.950**
5. The organisation participates in activities that are vital to the community and the well-being of others	.394	.877
Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser normalisation		
a. Rotation Converged in 3 iterations		

Table 8: Rotated Component Matrix for "Talent Engagement"

Using Varimax with Kaiser normalisation, the study found that the variables that were critically important were: The Company is featured on "Best Places to Work" lists that are highly respected and Innovative products and services are being developed in the company (see Table 8).

Component Matrix[a]	
	Component
	1
1. Top performers are challenged to improve skills and take the next steps in their careers	.892
2. Coaching, mentoring and challenging assignments are primary development approaches	.849
3. Communication to employees is frequent, meaningful and two-way	**.972**
4. Individual development plans are in place for all employees	.954
5. Managers are held accountable for the development of their employees	.570
Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis	
a. One component extracted	

Table 9: Component Matrix[a] for "Talent Development"

Using Varimax with Kaiser normalisation, the study found that the variable that was critically important was: Communication to employees is frequent, meaningful and two-way (see Table 9).

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Component Matrix[a]	
	Component
	1
1. The best people are focused on the most important jobs	.750
2. There is a strong match between an employee's competencies and job requirements	.722
3. Employees are given the opportunity to do what they do best	**.963**
4. Technology is used to assist in the effective deployment of talent	.676
5. The transition from job to job within a company goes smoothly	.930
Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis	
a. One component extracted	

Table 10: Component Matrix[a] for "Talent Deployment"

Using Varimax with Kaiser Normalisation, the study found that the variable that was critically important was: Employees are given the opportunity to do what they do best (see Table 10).

Rotated Component Matrix[a]		
	Component	
	1	2
1. There is a "line of sight" between employees jobs and the company's strategic goals	.519	.799
2. Coaching and feedback discussions with managers are on-going, frequent and candid	.953	.267
3. The company provide a range of interesting and challenging assignments, jobs, rotations and team activities	.934	.289
4. Top performers are paid more for the value they provide	.045	**.976**
5. Non-financial rewards are effectively used to reinforce excellent performance	**.966**	.055
Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis		

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Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser normalisation
a. Rotation converged in 3 iterations

Table 11: Rotated Component Matrix for “Performance Management”

Using Varimax with Kaiser normalisation, the study found that the variables that were critically important were: Top performers are paid more for the value they provide and Non-financial rewards are effectively used to reinforce excellent performance (see Table 11).

Component Matrix[a]	
	Component
	1
1. The organisation can retain our best performers	.925
2. Turnover is tracked across divisions, locations, talent levels and managers	.957
3. The reasons people leave, especially top performers, are recorded and addressed	.958
4. Managers hold retention conversations with employees frequently	**.986**
5. Managers are held accountable for losing top performers	.984
Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis	
a. One component extracted	

Table 12: Component Matrix[a] for “Talent Retention”

Using Varimax with Kaiser normalisation, the study found that the variable that was critically important was: Managers hold retention conversations with employees frequently (see Table 12). In summary, the major determinants of talent managment with a university context in South Africa are as follows:

Determinats of TM	**Variable**
	Strategy
	Talent Review Process
	Staffing
	Talent Acquisition

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	Talent Engagement
	Talent Development
	Talent Deployment
	Performance Management
	Talent Retention

Table 13: Summary of Key Determinants of TM in the University Context

Discussion

Sustainable talent management (TM) in universities refers to the strategic, integrated processes that attract, develop, retain and deploy academic and professional staff in such a way that institutions maintain long-term competitiveness, institutional knowledge, and performance (Musakuro, 2022; Abiwu & Martins, 2024). South African higher education faces a unique blend of talent shortages, competition for academic staff, transformation imperatives, and resource constraints, making sustainable talent management not just desirable but essential for institutional survival and success (Musakuro, 2022; Mukwawaya et al., 2025). The determinants of sustainable TM encompass organisational, contextual and human-resource-specific factors that influence how talent is managed effectively over time.

Talent management in higher education extends beyond operational HR functions; it is a strategic imperative that harmonises individual career development with institutional goals (Mukwawaya, Proches & Green, 2025). Integrated TM frameworks assert that sustainable TM comprises key dimensions such as talent attraction, engagement, development, retention, performance management and succession planning (Mukwawaya, 2025; Musakuro, 2022). These components are not standalone activities but interlinked processes that together drive sustainability of human capital.

Determinants of Sustainable Talent Management

Strategic Human Resource Planning

Literature shows that workforce planning is one of the key determinants of sustanaible talent management because it provides a foundational determinant for sustainability, enabling universities to forecast staffing needs, address future academic retirements, and plan for emergent competencies (Musakuro, 2022). The finding of this particular study is inconsisitent with the finding of literature. Literature further posists that without long-term HR planning aligned with institutional strategy, universities tend to adopt ad hoc recruitment and retention, undermining sustainability. South African

universities report shortages of academic staff due to poor forecasting and an ageing faculty profile, highlighting strategic planning as a key TM determinant (Musakuro, 2022).

Recruitment and Talent Acquisition

The findings of this particular study suggests that talent acquisition is one of the key deteminants of sustainable talent management. In light of this, litearure shows that attracting high-quality talent is a precursor to sustainable TM. Determinants here include employer reputation, competitive compensation, recruitment processes, and institutional culture. TM practice research indicates that competitive attraction strategies are central to acquiring the right talent pool (Mukwawaya, Proches & Green, 2025). In a context where universities compete globally and domestically for scarce skills, institutional reputation and value propositions matter greatly.

Performance Management Systems

The findings of this particular study suggests that performance management is one of the key deteminants of sustainable talent management. In light of this, litearure shows that performance management is both a TM practice and a determinant of sustainability because it influences employee engagement, productivity, and career progression. Effective performance systems that integrate feedback, reward mechanisms and development goals promote retention and organisational commitment. Conversely, ineffective systems are linked with low morale and turnover, impeding sustainability (Musakuro, 2022).

Learning, Development and Career Pathways

The findings of this particular study suggests that talent development is one of the key deteminants of sustainable talent management. In light of this, litearure shows that sustainable TM requires ongoing talent development training, mentorship, and career advancement opportunities that align with staff needs and institutional goals. Research has demonstrated that investment in development not only enhances talent capabilities but also builds resilience and adaptability within the institution (Abiwu & Martins, 2022). During the COVID-19 pandemic, continuous development correlated with organisational sustainability in South African HEIs, underpinning the determinant role of development initiatives (Abiwu & Martins, 2022).

Retention and Engagement Strategies

The findings of this particular study suggests that talent retention is one of the key deteminants of sustainable talent management. In light of this, litearure shows that retention emerges as a critical determinant of sustainability. Talent is retained when employees experience meaningful work, fair compensation, supportive leadership, and opportunities for advancement. Staff engagement correlates

with reduced turnover and stronger institutional loyalty. High rates of turnover, as noted in public sector research, are linked to leadership deficits, lack of recognition and inadequate development factors equally relevant in the university sector (Gandi & Saurombe, 2025).

Organisational Culture and Leadership

Literature also shows that culture and leadership are underlying determinants that shape all elements of TM. This finding is inconsistent with the findings of this particular study. A culture that values diversity, inclusivity, learning, and recognition fosters an environment where talent can flourish sustainably. Leadership styles that promote participation, feedback and empowerment signal organisational commitment to its staff. Weak leadership correlates with poor TM outcomes and higher turnover (Gandi & Saurombe, 2025).

External Environment Factors

Literature also shows that external environmental factors are underlying determinants that shape all elements of TM. This finding is inconsistent with the findings of this particular study External determinants, such as national labour market conditions, funding pressures, transformation policies, and competitive academic markets, profoundly influence how universities manage talent. South African universities operate within a constrained fiscal environment, making innovative and sustainable TM strategies essential to buffer external shocks and retain institutional knowledge (Musakuro, 2022; Mukwawaya et al., 2025).

Implications for South African Universities

Understanding these determinants offers practical and policy implications:

- Policy formulation: Institutional HR policies must embed TM determinants into strategic plans to ensure long-term sustainability.
- Capacity building: Training and development investments strengthen faculty competencies, critical for research output and teaching quality.
- Leadership development: Building leadership capacities can improve engagement and organisational responsiveness to talent needs.

Conclusion

Sustainable talent management within South African universities is determined by a constellation of strategic planning, recruitment, performance management, development, retention, cultural and contextual factors. The alignment of these determinants within an integrated TM strategy fosters institutional resilience, competitive advantage and organisational sustainability. As the higher education

landscape intensifies in competition for talent, universities that prioritise these determinants will better navigate staffing challenges and enhance institutional outcomes.

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