

# Mid-career problems of academics in higher education

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The purpose of this study was to explore and identify typical mid-career problems experienced by academic staff working at a changing institution of higher education in South Africa. Data were obtained by means of the Delphi technique in order to enable respondents to reveal their experiences fully. Respondents had to identify the most prominent career problems that they were experiencing in the work environment. The problems thus identified related, *inter alia*, to performance management and promotion; role overload; financial remuneration; management issues; lack of job security, and discrimination. The implication of these results is that top managements should familiarise themselves with these problems and take the necessary steps to address them in collaboration with academics in the mid-career stage.

## Middelloopbaanprobleme van akademiëci in hoërsonderwys

Die doel van die studie was om die kenmerkende loopbaanprobleme van akademiese personeel gedurende die middelloopbaanfase binne 'n veranderende Suid-Afrikaanse hoërsonderwysinstelling te verken en te identifiseer. Die data is bekom deur middel van die Delphi-tegniek om respondente in staat te stel om vryelik aan te dui wat hulle ervaar. Respondente moes die belangrikste loopbaanprobleme wat hulle tans in hulle werksomgewing ervaar, identifiseer. Die prominente loopbaanprobleme wat geïdentifiseer is behels probleme aangaande prestasiebestuur en bevordering; roloorbelading; finansiële vergoeding; bestuurskwessies; gebrek aan werksekuriteit en diskriminasie. Die implikasie van hierdie bevindinge is dat topbestuur van hierdie probleme moet kennis neem en dat daar in samewerking met akademiëci wat hulle in hierdie loopbaanfase bevind, daadwerklike stappe geneem moet word om die geïdentifiseerde probleme aan te spreek.

According to Mills (2000: 181) and Martin (1999: 100), universities have traditionally accepted the fact that new faculty members require help and guidance in developing their research programmes, in honing their teaching skills and in undertaking a role in the academic administration of the institution. Oosthuizen *et al* (2005: 1) point out that many faculty members at other stages of their academic careers, particularly academics in the mid-career stage, also require help and guidance in order to remain productive and enthusiastic members of the university, which is necessary if they are to continue serving the institution to their full potential. They found that few universities provide such help and guidance and that the quality of the education they provide, of their academic administrative systems and of their research programmes often suffers in consequence.

The capacity and sustainability of South African institutions of higher education are being threatened, since it is becoming increasingly difficult to appoint and retain academics of high standing (Koen 2003: 511, Pretorius 2003: 11). Evidence of this is the fact that between 5% and 18% of academics in South Africa leave higher education institutions annually (Koen 2003: 513). This phenomenon appears to be an international one. In a study of academics in Australian higher education institutions, Anderson *et al* (2002: 86) found that 68% of the respondents wished and intended to leave higher education.

Martin (1999: 100) indicates that more than any other type of organisation, higher education institutions are dependent on the commitment and intellectual capital of their academic personnel. Rowley (1996: 11) affirms this view when stating that academics form the core resource of any higher education institution. According to Simmons (2002: 93), it is difficult to replace the knowledge, skills and experience of expert academic personnel, since these have been acquired over a long period. Oosthuizen *et al* 2005: 1) point out that universities need to implement procedures that will assist faculty members at all stages of their careers to deal with their problems in a successful manner, and in this way to remain productive members of the academic community.

According to Oosthuizen *et al* (2005: 1), the needs and problems of mid-career academics are very often completely ignored by institutions despite the fact that such academics are responsible for most of the teaching in many universities as well as attracting relatively large

amounts of research funding. Randall (2006: 1) points out that the mid-career stage of merits particular attention because it is the longest and typically the most productive stage of an academic career. During this period, many faculty members produce their best and most prolific work in teaching, research and service.

Randall (2006: 1) indicates that, as a result of increased responsibility for teaching, mentoring and committee service, heavy workloads typically constitute a problem for mid-career academics. They may be expected to teach larger classes or more class groups in order to reduce the teaching loads of newly-hired faculty members. Increased workload also stems from the demands made on veteran faculty to serve on departmental, college and university committees. In addition, departments tend to be heavily reliant upon mid-career academics to serve on recruitment and personnel committees. According to the research findings of Gillespie *et al* (2001: 55), academics in New Zealand, the USA and Australia also regard role overload as an important source of job dissatisfaction.

A further problem experienced by mid-career academics is salary compression (Randall 2006: 2), whereby the gap between salaries in the top ranks and those at lower levels is continually being reduced by higher starting salaries. This process has also been compounded by a history of lean budget years with negligible salary increases. Salary compression tends to undermine morale.

Closely linked to salary compression is the issue of inadequate remuneration. Anderson *et al* (2002: 84), Barkhuizen *et al* (2004: 19), Olivier *et al* (2004: 12) and Oshagbemi (1996: 356) identify this as one of the most important issues in higher education institutions, not only in South Africa but world-wide. Potgieter (2002: 22) mentions that many black academics, in particular, leave higher education institutions as a result of poor remuneration. Ball (2004: 22) indicates that the poor remuneration of academics in South Africa is one of the main reasons why higher education institutions cannot recruit and retain high-calibre academics. Oshagbemi & Hickson (2003: 359) state that academics feel particularly disgruntled in view of the difference in remuneration between them and their peers in the private sector who do not have the same academic qualifications. The results of the present study show many similarities with the findings mentioned above.

Mid-career academics also experience a need for ongoing support and recognition of their intellectual creativity and productivity (Randall 2006: 2). Gillespie *et al* (2001: 55) found in Australia and Oshagbemi (1996: 124) in England that a lack of promotion contributes significantly to work dissatisfaction among academics. Olivier *et al* (2004: 9) found that close to 30% of academics at a higher education institution in South Africa identified lack of promotion as one of the most important reasons for their job dissatisfaction. According to Coetzee (1999: 65), Fairbrother & Warn (2003: 15) and Miller (2003: 77), promotion is frequently regarded as a criterion against which to measure growth and development.

McInnes identifies job insecurity as a reality experienced by many mid-career academics (Bellamy *et al* 2003: 21). Increased job insecurity and job dissatisfaction were found to be related to lower levels of psychological well-being, decreased organisational commitment and increased levels of stress.

Brown & Trotman (2005: 1-10) found the majority of mid-career academics to be dissatisfied with their institutions' efforts to increase diversity. The respondents perceived major weaknesses in several areas pertaining to the recruitment and retention of faculty.

The question that arises is how high-calibre academics, particularly those in the mid-career phase, can be recruited and retained. One way of addressing this issue would be to explore why academics want to leave higher education institutions. It is therefore important to identify the career problems with which academics are grappling (Cuthbert 1996: 54; Greenhaus *et al* 2000: 71; Zeffane & Mayo 1994: 33). According to Cuthbert (1996: 56), a study focusing on the characteristic career problems of academics is long overdue.

In the light of these concerns, the research reported on here aimed to investigate the career-related problems of mid-career academic personnel working at a South African institution of higher education.

## 1. Method

Academics in mid-career were selected as this is a very productive phase in which they can make very useful contributions (Randall 2006: 1). Such academics are, however, also confronted by many obstacles that can prevent them from realising their full potential (Mills 2000).

### 1.1 The data collection technique

The Delphi technique, a qualitative approach, was used to obtain the data. According to this technique, key individuals are asked one or more open-ended questions regarding a specific issue or subject (Delbecq *et al* 1975: 103). Respondents are afforded the opportunity of voicing their personal opinions and their own experiences relating to the subject at hand without being affected by the opinions of other respondents. The information thus obtained is then processed, whereafter feedback is provided to all the respondents. They have the opportunity of adding additional perspectives or making alterations. The information is then reprocessed and returned to the respondents for further additions or alterations. This pattern is repeated until no further additions are made (Mullen 2003: 38). According to Jones (1980: 73), the Delphi technique is one of the most important qualitative techniques for obtaining new information on a particular topic.

### 1.2 The composition and selection of the Delphi panels

Academics in the mid-career stage (aged 40 to 55) at a higher education institution were randomly selected for the study. According to Delbecq *et al* (1975: 106), there is no limitation to the size of a Delphi panel. Research has, however, indicated that ten to fifteen individuals suffice when the panel is a homogeneous one and that new ideas are seldom generated in a homogeneous group of more than thirty (Brockhoff 1975: 311).

The top management of the higher education institution granted the request to approach academics in the mid-career phase as respondents. A list containing the names, surnames and dates of birth of staff was obtained. In all, 38 individuals were selected on a random basis from this list. They were divided into four panels according to gender and race. Panel 1 consisted of ten white men, panel 2 of ten white women, panel 3 of ten black men and panel 4 of eight black women.

Of the ten white male academics, one had only a degree; one an honours degree; four master's degrees, and four doctorates. One was a member of the Faculty of the Humanities; one of the Faculty of Health Sciences; four of the Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences, and four of the Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences.

Two of the white female academics had honours degrees; four master's degrees, and four doctorates. Five were members of the Faculty of the Humanities; two of the Faculty of Health Sciences; two of the Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences, and one of the Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences.

Of the ten black male academics, one had a degree; six master's degrees, and three doctorates. Eight were members of the Faculty of the Humanities; one of the Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences, and one of the Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences.

One of the black female academics had only a first degree; five master's degrees, and two doctorates. Two were members of the Faculty of the Humanities; four of the Faculty of Medicine; one of the Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences and one of the Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences.

### 1.3 The gathering of the data

Respondents had to identify the most important career problems they were experiencing in their work environment.

Both the open-ended question and the Delphi guidelines were made available to the panellists in both Afrikaans and English. The target date for the return of the first round of responses was two weeks after the questionnaires had been handed out. All questionnaires were accompanied by pre-paid, addressed envelopes in order to facilitate dispatch. The responses were processed and consolidated by means of content analysis. The results of the first round were then sent back to all the panellists for a second round of possible additions and alterations. The feedback consisted of the various themes representing the career dilemmas identified and the frequency allotted to each. The response rate for the first round was 94%.

The purpose of the second Delphi round was to determine whether or not the panellists wished to add further perspectives. They were invited to respond to the feedback by making adjustments or adding further perspectives on the career dilemmas (themes) identified during round one. A target date was set by which the second round of information had to be returned. The first-round procedure was repeated for the second round. The response rate for the second round was, once again, 94%.

In the event, no additional information was generated during the second round, and a third round could thus be dispensed with.

## 2. Results

The aim of the study was to determine the typical problems experienced in the work-place by mid-career academics. The results of this investigation are reflected in Table 1.

Table 1: Career problems of academics in the mid-career stage

Career problems	Total	White men	White women	Black men	Black women
Performance management and promotion	31	10	4	7	10
Role overload	28	9	10	7	2
Management issues	11	-	3	3	5
Remuneration	9	5	1	1	2
Job insecurity	6	-	3	1	2
Discrimination	3	-	-	2	1
Support with regard to research and teaching	1	-	-	1	-

It is evident from Table 1 that mid-career academics identified issues relating to performance management, promotion and role overload as their major problems. Remuneration, management issues, and job insecurity were also identified as problems, but featured less prominently than the aforementioned issues.

## 3. Discussion of the results

From Table 1, the most important career problems experienced by academics during the mid-career stage would seem to be performance management, promotion and role overload.

### 3.1 Performance management and promotion

All except the white female panel identified aspects associated with performance management and promotion as the most important career issues. Aspects which were emphasised included limited promotion opportunities as well as inconsistencies and double standards in the application of promotion criteria within and between departments and/or faculties. According to the female panellists, no clear promotion policy guidelines were available. Another aspect they mentioned was that too much emphasis was placed on qualifications and research outputs for promotion, while other academic activities did not carry the same weight.

These results were in agreement with what Gillespie *et al* (2001: 55) found among academics in Australia and Oshagbemi (1996: 124) in England: that a lack of promotion contributed significantly to work dissatisfaction. So, too, in a study by Olivier *et al* (2004: 9), almost 30% of the academics at a higher education institution in South Africa indicated a lack of promotion as one of the most important reasons for their job dissatisfaction.

According to Coetzee (1999: 65), Fairbrother & Warn (2003: 15) and Miller (2003: 77), promotion is frequently regarded as a criterion against which growth and development are measured. Promotion usually leads to greater job satisfaction. It follows that if individuals feel that opportunities for promotion are restricted, both their job satisfaction and their productivity may be negatively influenced.

### 3.2 Role overload

Role overload is a very prominent career issue for academics: white and black, male and female. Respondents reported that they were struggling to cope with the broad range of activities which they had to perform simultaneously: parallel teaching, research, community service, personnel development, and administrative services to departments and faculties.

According to the research findings of Gillespie *et al* (2001: 55), academics in New Zealand, the USA and Australia also regard role overload as an important source of job dissatisfaction.

### 3.3 Management issues

All except the white male academic panel regarded management issues as a less important career problem. The issues raised included inadequate guidance, lack of recognition and feedback from management, and ineffective management of departments. The respondents expressed frustration at the autocratic management style of some heads of departments and their own lack of input in decision-making. The absence of job descriptions was also identified as a particular problem. These findings agree with the research results of Barkhuizen *et al* (2004: 18) and of Olivier *et al* (2004: 11), who studied academics in other South African higher education institutions.

### 3.4 Financial remuneration

Some of the white male academics, in particular, identified insufficient remuneration as an important issue; it was also identified, though to a lesser extent, by members of the other panels. Panellists indicated that their remuneration packages compared poorly with those offered at other tertiary institutions and in the private sector. They felt that their packages did not match the quality or the number of their work inputs. This finding is supported by the research results of Oshagbemi (1996: 356), Potgieter (2002: 22), Anderson *et al* (2002: 84), Oshagbemi & Hickson (2003: 359), Ball (2004: 22), Barkhuizen *et al* (2004: 19), and Olivier *et al* (2004: 12).

### 3.5 Job insecurity

Female academics in particular, both white and black, regarded job insecurity as a career issue. According to their responses, the possibility of further rationalisation, unstable external working environments, and contract appointments were factors exacerbating their job insecurity.

McInnes (Bellamy *et al* 2003: 21) conducted an investigation involving 2609 academics in fifteen higher education institutions in Australia, which found increased job insecurity and job dissatisfaction to be related to lower levels of psychological wellness, decreased organisational commitment, and increased levels of stress.

### 3.6 Discrimination

Some black panelists, both male and female, regarded discrimination as a career issue. They felt that they were victims of stereotyping, and thus being isolated in their departments. One of the black female academics indicated that managerial positions appeared to be reserved mainly for males — more specifically, white males.

Gutierrez *et al* (1994: 117) are of the opinion that members of a minority group within a specific population are most often the victims of discrimination and marginalisation — as was experienced by the black academic personnel in this study. According to Newman & Newman (1991: 81), the members of a minority group need to establish a productive and healthy interpersonal relationship with colleagues of the minority group. In addition, they are very sensitive about the quality of this relationship.

## 4. Conclusion

From the results of the investigation it became apparent that the most important problems experienced by academics in the mid-career stage related to performance management and promotion, role overload, management issues, remuneration, job insecurity, and — to a lesser extent and only for some of the black academic personnel — discrimination. Since mid-career academics make a substantial contribution to universities (Randall 2006: 1), it is essential that these problems be addressed. They impact directly or indirectly on important aspects of higher education institutions and on the functioning of South African higher education as a whole.

## 5. Recommendations

In order to address the problems identified above by mid-career academics, the following actions may be considered:

- It is essential that an effective, equitable, all-encompassing, transparent performance management system be implemented. Such a performance management system should make provision for a reasonable workload for academic personnel, with an equitable, transparent workload model; distinct criteria for performance measure-

ment with accompanying performance standards; suitable training to address developmental areas, and alternative career paths.

- Departmental heads should be equipped with a thorough knowledge of, and skills concerning the various facets of management, particularly human resource management. Additional management tasks may lead to further work overload for these individuals, since they also have to play an academic leadership role. The role of departmental heads should therefore be reconsidered.
- In order to recruit and retain competent academics, institutions should provide competitive, market-related and remuneration packages.
- Job insecurity, diversity, and cultural sensitisation should be managed on a continuous basis.

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