

**Attracting and Retaining Academic staff in a challenging economic  
climate:  
The University of Technology, Jamaica experience**

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**Abstract**

Attracting and retaining high caliber academic staff pose a serious challenge to many young tertiary institutions all over the world. Due to global competition for staff, it is often difficult for Universities in developing countries to retain indigenous staff with special skills and academic experience. It is even more difficult recruiting and retaining overseas staff of the skills experience and qualifications required..

At our University, The University of Technology, Jamaica sixty (60) members of staff were recruited from overseas countries over the seven (7) years period from 1995 – 2002. The major countries from which staff were recruited were United States, 17%, Canada 8%, Nigeria 20%, United Kingdom 10%. Cuba 8%, and other Caribbean Countries 17%. The average retention period for overseas staff was two (2) years but five (5) years for locally recruited staff.

Important incentives for attracting and retaining staff include a tax-free salary for an initial 2-years for foreign staff from countries with which the Government of Jamaica has double taxation treaty, housing benefits, health coverage, insurance, education for children, a citizenship option after 5 years continuous service and a 25% gratuity. In spite of these, only 10 members (17%) of foreign recruits remained in service at the end of the 2002. Of the local staff, retention rate was higher being (86%). Some of the reasons adduced for resignation among the foreign recruits included lack of job satisfaction (5%), home-sickness and cultural alienation (10%), fear of crime and violence (30%), a weakening exchange rate for the Jamaican dollar (55%) better job opportunities elsewhere (10%), family commitment (15%).

Although fiscal restraints have put a cap on salary increases, some of the non-monetary incentives considered included promotion prospects, provision of job opportunities for spouses, a conducive and friendly atmosphere, overseas attendance at conferences, participating in the university's community outreach services and academic promotional opportunities.

In this paper, I examine the efficacy of these retention tools and discuss the implications of high academic staff turnover for young institutions.

### **Literature Review**

In order to understand the organization's current position it requires ready access to a range of statistics that should include, as a minimum, staff turnover levels, number of vacancies, levels of interest from different forms of advertising, and generic recruitment activity. An assessment of potential major threats is vital, for example the possibility of losing

large numbers of staff from one academic area to a more highly-ranked research department, or loss of staff in an economic upturn. Once a serious threat is identified, its potential impact plus a defensive or pro-active response must be generated. The HR strategy must also address staff retention and motivation, particularly if statistical

evidence suggests that staff turnover is high. High staff turnover has many negative effects, not only in terms of the costs of the recruitment process and the loss of experience and expertise but also, potentially, to an institution's reputation as an employer.

As an organisation, the university or college is in a race for the best people and the institutions that can act quickly, effectively and flexibly are more likely to emerge victorious.

Institutions should review their recruitment systems regularly to check that candidates can make contact easily, that they receive a speedy and appropriate response and will be kept informed about their progress through the system. A web-centric approach to allow candidates to apply on line, and also to view their position via a PIN on the organizational candidate management system, would not only save resources and paperwork but will also offer an efficient service. Social demographics are a major concern to the recruitment process. As the population ages and fewer young people are available for positions, it will become increasingly critical to both 'ends' of the candidate population. (Extracted from Strategy Matters; Autumn, 2003).

Academic salaries have always been a contentious issue, especially when persuading talented graduates and postgraduates to opt for a higher education career rather than the private sector. In Jamaica salaries have fallen behind. The rest to the public sector has had adjustments to their compensation to eight percent of the market. Market in this context refers to the private sector.

Salary levels for non-academic staff have an impact, particularly during economic upturns when jobs and remuneration in the private sector are more competitive.

Institutions are finding it increasingly difficult to recruit academic and, technical staff. According to a survey commissioned by the Universities and Colleges Employers' Association, a fifth of all universities and higher education colleges experienced difficulties "most of the time" when recruiting academic staff in 2001, three times worse than in 1998. The subject areas most affected were computing/ Information Technology, accountancy, law, engineering, biological sciences, professions allied to medicine and education. Low starting salaries are deterring people from entering academic careers, vice-chancellors are arguing. And in an effort to put pressure on the Treasury as the comprehensive spending review is fought out this summer in Whitehall they point out that shortages will become worse as the "bulge" of aging lecturers retire and an estimated 17,000 extra staff are needed to deliver the government's target of 50% participation in higher education. "Unless effective remedial action is taken it seems likely the problems will get worse," said Philip Love, vice-chancellor of Liverpool University and chairman of UCEA. The system was already creaking, he added. "The government's 50% target will then be a challenge, if not unachievable. If the government does not provide

additional funds then the volume and/or quality of university teaching and research will suffer."

The problem is not confined to the UK - the US, Canada and Australia faced similar difficulties in recruiting to their universities, added Professor Floud. "So we cannot rely on recruiting from across the world. Indeed Canada is putting very large sums of money into recruiting academic staff to enhance their position. It is a global problem and Britain is in severe danger of falling behind the world market." (Adopted from Education Guardian Co. UK, Friday May 10, 2002)

#### Staff Retention Ideas

1. Reward performance with bonuses;
2. Use mentoring to help retain staff;
3. Focus on keeping current staff happy to increase the return rate;
4. Provide valuable training;
5. Maintain year -round contact with counselors

#### **The case for the University of Technology, Jamaica**

It has been recognized that the University would not be able to compete with the private sector. The economy has been stagnant for the past ten (10) years as shown in Table 1. (Source: Statistical Institute of Jamaica)

Over this same period the rate of exchange of the Jamaican Dollar to the United States Dollar has moved from J\$25.00 to US\$1.00 to J\$61.00 to US\$1.00. The compensation of a senior academic at the professional level now totals J\$4.6 million inclusive of salary, fully maintained motor car, fully furnished housing, end of contract gratuity of 25% of salary and education grant. This figure does not include the cost of air fare, children's education and shipment of personal belongings. At the current rate of exchange of J\$61 to US\$1 this compensation level translates to US\$75,410.00. On the international scheme, this is not very attractive.

Table 1 also shows the Human Resource challenges posed to the country. There has been no growth in constant per capita income, which implies that the work force has not achieved any greater level of skills relative to the international labour rate.

Real GDP has remained flat implying that growth has been driven by inflation and not increased output. Significant numbers of the population remain low skilled and there is attrition in enrolment at the various education levels.

It is therefore a major challenge for institutions such as the University of Technology, Jamaica to meet the challenges of assisting to educate the Jamaican work force to meet globalization and to have a highly skilled and experienced academic staff.

### **Meeting the Challenges**

Some of the approaches being taken are:

- a. Implement an incentive and or performance based pay based on:
  - Teaching
  - Research
  - Service to the University
  - Service to the Community
  - Achievement of set objectives
- b. Joint research and consultancy with Government agencies and the private sector so as to allow for additional earnings to the University and Faculty
- c. Secondment of Faculty to the University from other Universities with which there are strategic alliances;
- d. Assistance from organizations such as CESO International Services and the FulBright Organization;
- e. Academic upgrading and bonding through assistance from the European Union, Fulbright and the Canadian Development Agency.
- f. Secondment from industries both locally and internationally;
- g. Use of the retired the academics database.

**Summary**

The ability to secure high-level academics in the future will continue to pose a major challenge. University of Technology, Jamaica will continue to pursue the strategies outlined above and develop linkages in the international academic community.



## POPULATION, LABOUR AND EDUCATION STATISTICS

	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002
Size of population ('000)	2,553.2	2,567.1	2,581.8	2,597.1	2,612.5	2,624.7
Labour Force ('000)	1,133.8	1,128.6	1,119.1	1,105.3	1,104.8	1,124.5
Labour force as % of population	44.41%	43.96%	43.35%	42.56%	42.29%	42.84%
Total employment	946.8	953.6	943.9	933.5	939.4	954.3
Total employment%	37.08%	37.15%	36.56%	35.94%	35.96%	36.36%
Avg. Wkly earnings of all employees (1990 J\$)	\$5,177.20	\$5,881.90	\$6,869.10	\$7,256.00	\$7,843.00	\$8,469.00
Income per capital at constant prices (J\$'000)	7.5	7.4	7.3	7.4	7.7	7.7
Income per capita at current prices (J\$'000)	93.2	95.9	103.5	114.6	128.5	139.4
GDP at 1986 prices – J\$B	19.62	19.6	19.5	19.6	19.9	20.1
Real GDP growth (1986) -%	-1.70%	-0.30%	-0.40%	0.70%	1.70%	1.00%
Enrolment in institutions ('000)						
Primary institutions	306.2	318.2	318.6	325.3	334.7	332.9
Secondary institutions	219.3	227.2	228.5	226.4	227.7	226.5
Tertiary institutions	4.1	10.9	12.7	12.5	12.1	12.5
Enrolment in institutions as % of populations)						
Primary institutions	11.99%	12.40%	12.34%	12.53%	12.81%	12.68%
Secondary institutions	8.59%	8.85%	8.85%	8.72%	8.71%	8.63%
Tertiary institutions	0.16%	0.42%	0.42%	0.48%	0.46%	0.48%

Source: [www.satinja.com/stats.html](http://www.satinja.com/stats.html) as published in the Financial Gleaner, Friday December 12, 2003



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