



Foreign academics' well-being experiences: A South African higher education institution case study

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Orientation: Factors negatively influencing foreign academics' well-being in higher education institutions (HEIs) include funding, promotion opportunities, salary disparities, workload and being away from home.

Research purpose: This study aims to provide insight into the well-being experiences of foreign academics at a HEI in South Africa.

Motivation for the study: Foreign academics are attracted to work in other countries with the hope of enhancing their skills, economic status and well-being. Higher education institutions offer these opportunities to increase research outputs, increase student throughput and improve global rankings.

Research approach/design and method: This study adopted an interpretive qualitative research approach and design, in which, through purposive sampling, five academics were interviewed, using semi-structured interviews. Thereafter, the data were analysed using content analysis.

Main findings: Foreign academics seem to predominantly experience a conducive work environment, enjoy student engagement and have career growth opportunities. On the contrary, they submit to being excluded from certain opportunities, benefits and resources, leading to feelings of discrimination and exploitation. Subsequently, numerous coping mechanisms must be applied to overcome their challenges.

Practical/managerial implications: Appointing a dedicated human resource (HR) officer overseeing foreign academic affairs can help facilitate engagement with foreign academics at the institutional level to explore the thwarting and enabling factors that will result in enhanced integration, well-being and job performance.

Contribution/value-add: Foreign academics with positive well-being experiences result in good relations with students and colleagues, increased growth outcomes and provide growth opportunities. Negative well-being is heightened among foreign academics because of restricted unequal opportunities, resentment and lack of career growth.

Keywords: employee well-being; coping mechanisms; work environment; career growth opportunities; foreign academics; higher education institutions.

Introduction

Academics in higher education institutions (HEIs) are faced with several job demands not only at an organisational level but also physically, psychologically and socially, which impact their well-being (Wang et al. 2020). Academics' well-being is further negatively impacted as they have no control over factors such as globalisation, increasing workload, competition for limited resources and growing student numbers wanting to advance through tertiary education. Further factors include increasing incidences of conflict, poor staff morale and widespread unhappiness (Carpenter & Dvorak 2023). As a result, frequent absenteeism, high staff turnover, low productivity and more industrial actions are observed (Shen & Slater 2021).

Increased disengagement among academics seems to have become a new phenomenon, as such academics seem to contemplate resigning more often, or if they remain with the institution, they quietly quit by demonstrating a reduced interest in their work and profession, while their overall well-being is negatively affected (Carpenter & Dvorak 2023). McClure and Hicklin Fryar (2022) note how academics' connection to their HEIs is in tatters, and Shen and Slater (2021) report how

academics in HEIs seem to be more affected by occupational stress compared to employees in other sectors.

Considering the reality of foreign academics in relation to host country nationals (HCNs), it seems the well-being of foreign academics is impacted by more factors than their counterparts need to deal with, increasing the demand for personal and job resources among them (Schartner, Young & Snodin 2022). According to Bastida et al. (2023), in addition to having to deal with emotions of segregation and being alone within a new HEI, foreign academics must also deal with cultural similarities and/or differences among their colleagues, their range of personal resources, personality traits and skills, such as logical thinking and adaptability, as well as possible previous experience working in another country. Bastida et al. (2023) also suggest that a foreign academic's well-being is influenced by relationships with students and colleagues, financial security, socio-economic challenges, integration in the community and work-life balance.

These adjustments include having to learn new HEI systems, and the quality of reception and treatment received from HCN colleagues, superiors and community members, while trying to settle in. Additionally, foreign academics struggle in their early days of arrival with finding secure accommodation, the right schools for their children, employment for their spouses and building friendships (Schartner et al. 2022). All these adjustment challenges lead to feelings of anxiety, stress and confusion, negatively impacting their well-being and ability to perform optimally at the HEI (Mohammed, Suleyman & Taylan 2020).

To date, research has predominantly focused on the adjustment experiences of foreign employees in other sectors and on other continents, such as Asia, America and Europe, and on the adjustment of foreign students (Kinman & Johnson 2019; Mittelmeier et al. 2019; Mohammed et al. 2020; Morley 2024; Shen & Slater 2021). Also, according to Urbina-Garcia (2020:9), only two studies have explored the lived experiences and perceptions of staff from a phenomenological perspective to date. Most studies seem to emphasise exploring the psychological constructs of burnout and stress among academics, while mostly ignoring well-being experiences, thus not giving sufficient attention to or providing a holistic perspective of this significant phenomenon. This necessitates the need to conduct further research among academics to hear from them what their well-being experiences are (Salimzadeh, Saroyan & Hall 2017; Urbina-Garcia 2020).

Considering the lack of research on this topic within the South African context, there is a need to close the gap in knowledge on exploring the well-being experiences of foreign academics at HEIs in South Africa and to make recommendations to HEIs towards facilitating the enhanced well-being of foreign academics as they establish themselves in a foreign country.

Problem statement

Prioritising foreign academics' well-being has numerous benefits, not only for the employee but also for the HEI. In addition to management taking up the ethical responsibility of safeguarding employee well-being, maintaining healthy well-being results in better job performance, high student pass rates, improved research outputs and ensuring a good institutional reputation (Converso et al. 2019). Conversely, if foreign academic well-being is not well understood and managed by effectively monitoring workload, access to resources and financial security, it could result in industrial actions disrupting the teaching and research agenda, resulting in reputational risk for the HEI, poor quality programmes and reduced chances of graduate employability (Ahmed, Ishak & Kamil 2019). Higher education institutions that are not concerned with the well-being of foreign academics face the risk of losing experienced intellectuals who may assist in increasing institutional reputation and possibly attract international learners and research collaborators (Ogunode, Olugbenga & Ezema 2022).

The above clearly outlines the necessity to gain more insight into and answer the following research questions. Ensuring employee well-being will result in improved, globally aligned teaching and research outputs within the HEIs while giving the HEI global status (Jackson & Fransman 2018). Also, continuity will be ensured, as lectures will not be disrupted; research outputs will continue to increase; and employee turnover will be reduced, thus reducing the cost of having to replace and retrain new appointees (Erasmus, Grobler & Van Niekerk 2015). This study aims to contribute to knowledge and literature on this phenomenon by exploring the employee well-being experiences of foreign academics in a South African HEI.

Literature review

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines well-being as a state of positivity among individuals and societies, and influenced by their social, economic and environmental conditions. Holistically, well-being should also be viewed from a physical, mental and social perspective (WHO 2025). Well-being at work is defined as the general quality of how employees experience their work as a joy and have access to all the resources needed to navigate through diverse components of the work (Hasson & Butler 2025). Employee well-being comprises a wide range of experiences, such as positive affective states, low levels of anxiety, good psychological health, strong cognitive ambitions, good decision-making and job satisfaction (Hirschle & Gondim 2020). According to Eurofound (2019), a global study exploring work conditions and employee health, tells a story of how over a 10-year period, an increase in intense, demanding work conditions and employees suffering from emotional exhaustion because of burnout can be observed, negatively impacting employee well-being.

Historically, the HEI context was seen as a minimal stress environment in which academics had lighter workloads, flexible working hours, opportunities to travel overseas while attending and presenting at conferences and simultaneously networking with international colleagues (Barkhuizen & Rothman 2008). Lately, the HEI sector has become a more intricate environment as issues around increased student enrolment numbers, greater pressure to obtain funding, increased workload (i.e. having to produce more with fewer resources), and the pressured measurement of academic teaching and research performance requirements and marketisation have evolved (Morley 2024). As a result, academics experience pressure, resulting in stress, anxiety, discontent and poor staff morale, to name but a few (Kinman & Johnson 2019; Morley 2024). As noted by Barkhuizen, Roodt and Schutte (2014), working in academia is compared to working in a 'stress factory'. Stress results from academics experiencing external demands which they believe to be beyond their ability to cope with (Urbina-Garcia 2020). Thus, in addition to the already heavily loaded academic responsibilities of teaching and learning, research, academic citizenship and community engagement, academics are overall left feeling overwhelmed and burned-out, negatively impacting their well-being (Morley 2024). This is all confirmed in a systematic literature review conducted by Urbina-Garcia (2020). The main factors affecting academic well-being relates to excessive workload, job insecurity, increased working hours, demand to grow professionally, lack of organisational support (i.e. limited opportunity for promotion, lack of research funding support, etc.), inadequate resources, time pressure, lack of social recognition, lack of independence and feelings of powerlessness, and finally, student misbehaviour (Urbina-Garcia 2020:9). This is aligned with the Job Demand-Control model, which indicate employees who occupy work roles known for high demand, low control and support, and isolation, suffer from poor well-being (Lee et al. 2021:2).

Recent research shows most academics are typically more severely affected by occupational stress than employees in other professions and sectors, resulting in persistent absenteeism, high staff turnover, early retirement, industrial actions and lower productivity (Shen & Slater 2021). Global studies conducted in Europe, China and America show higher incidences among academics of cardiovascular disease, anxiety, stress, fatigue and overall mental health issues because of the heavier workload, increased competition, pressure to publish with limited time and resources, as well as pressure to secure grants (Morley 2024; Shen & Slater 2021). Morley (2024) further notes how academics with an HEI for many years and women reported the highest levels of anxiety, more so than their male counterparts or those who joined the sector more recently. Shen and Slater (2021) also emphasise the societal impact, as it places an increased demand on society to support such members both socially and medically to attend to their mental and physical health needs.

Establishing a healthier HEI environment requires good management, governance, communication, frequent

consultation, freedom to make decisions, reasonable workload and access to opportunities and resources (Aboagye et al. 2021). Thus, a conducive working environment, promoting the well-being of academics, is one which empowers the capabilities of academics to conduct research, and attend to teaching and learning, academic citizenship and community engagement (Whitchurch, Marini & Locke 2023).

Academics are regarded as the pillars of HEIs worldwide who are at the centre of creating, exploring, transmitting and translating knowledge (Hasson & Butler 2025; Whitchurch et al. 2023). Thus, while neglected to date, it is time for HEIs to acknowledge the importance of investing in the well-being of academics for the greater gain of the world. In essence, investing in the well-being of academics ensures that they perform at their best possible level and achieve the highest level of outcomes (Ahmed et al. 2019), that is delivery of high-quality graduates and research outputs.

As illustrated in Figure 1, it can therefore be concluded that academic well-being is guided by the elements of positive affective state, low anxiety levels, good psychological health, strong cognitive ambitions, good decision-making and job satisfaction.

Research methods and design

Research approach and strategy

According to Ormston et al. (2014), if one wishes to gain a deeper interpreted understanding of the lived experiences of the participants' subjective reality, adopting a qualitative interpretive approach is best suited. Also, a qualitative case study research strategy was followed as it allowed the researchers to explore various perspectives from the participants within a specific context (Ormston et al. 2014; Yin 2014). For this study, the unit of analysis is individual foreign academics. Five foreign academics at the HEI were interviewed to explore their well-being experiences.

Research setting

The research setting is a recognised HEI in South Africa with various faculties and departments. The HEI often

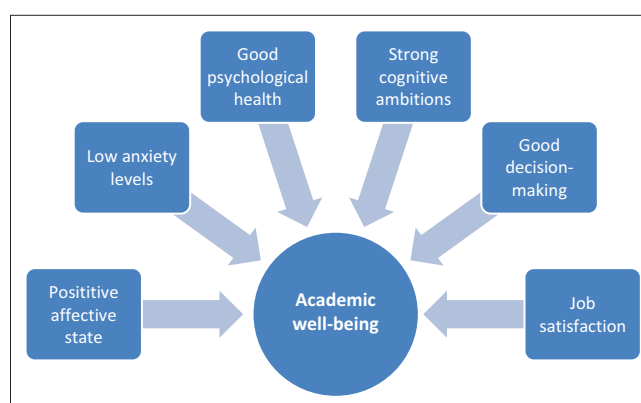


FIGURE 1: Academic well-being in higher education institutions.

advertises vacancies on their official website and in a national newspaper, with the aim of attracting both local and international applicants. The HEI believes appointing foreign academics strengthens the HEI through their applied research and tuition practices, experience and knowledge they bring with them, enabling an enhanced inter-cultural HEI (Antoniadou & Quinlan 2020:71). Also, foreign academics accept these positions as it enables them to move into a HEI environment that offers them better working conditions, career prospects and provides them with economic, social and political stability (Schartner et al. 2022:2).

Sampling and data collection

In this study, the population consisted of approximately 50 potential participants who complied with the inclusion criteria relating to experiences, demographics, behaviours and roles (Ritchie et al. 2014). A purposive sample of four male participants and one female participant was selected, based on the inclusion criteria of them being foreign academics, aged between 18 and 65 years and having worked for more than 1 year at the HEI (Hulley, Newman & Cummings 2013). The researcher applied exclusion criteria where potential participants were excluded if they had worked for less than 1 year and were HCN academics. The sample size was also guided by data saturation, which is when no new themes or sub-themes emerged from the data analysis (Creswell & Creswell 2017).

In accordance with the interpretive paradigm, data were collected using semi-structured interviews, as they enabled insight into the lived employee well-being experiences of foreign academics. Participants were asked to respond to the following questions: (1) How do you describe your well-being experience since you joined this institution? and (2) What recommendations would you make to the institution to improve the well-being of foreign academics during their period of adjustment? The semi-structured methodology enabled asking further probing questions where it was deemed necessary to ensure the collection of rich data (Christensen, Johnson & Turner 2011).

Participants consented to the interviews being voice-recorded. All recordings were stored in a secure, password-protected file to which only the researchers had access. The interviews were transcribed verbatim, which allowed the researcher to stay true to the voices of the participants during the data analysis and reporting phases of the research (Kelly 2014).

Strategies employed to ensure data quality and integrity

To enable transferability of the study to similar contexts, rich and thick descriptions were provided of the research design and methodology applied, as well as verbatim quotes to support the analysis and interpretation of the data, which are the voiced well-being experiences of foreign

academics in the HEI context (Creswell & Creswell 2017; Ravitch & Carl 2016).

Credibility was ensured using verbatim quotes and a review of the literature and pertinent theories to validate the findings (Lewis et al. 2014; Ravitch & Carl 2016). Triangulation was applied to enhance credibility and ensure trustworthiness. The semi-structured interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, then both researchers analysed the data to mitigate potential bias, thus allowing the researchers to ensure the crystallisation of the main themes and sub-themes that emerged from the data. The researchers were conscious of ensuring the meaning of what the participants desired to convey was accurately depicted in the transcription, data analysis, interpretation and reporting (Creswell & Creswell 2017). Dependability was ensured during reporting of the data by means of showing the relationship between the concepts identified and outlining relevant theories during the literature review and the empirical study findings (Van der Riet & Durrheim 2014). Peer debriefing was applied by the second researcher, who fulfilled the role of evaluating the final report against the transcripts and ensuring the research methodology followed is well documented (Creswell & Creswell 2017).

Data analysis

Content analysis was deemed suitable as a data analysis method as it enables the searching of the text and working with the frequency of words and themes (Patton 2015). The six steps of Creswell and Creswell (2017) were applied, and the process followed is described in Table 1.

Reporting

A narrative, qualitative reporting style was adopted with the inclusion of verbatim quotes to ensure rich and thick descriptions of the findings are presented (Patton 2015; Ravitch & Carl 2016). The report was focused and brief, including fewer and the most frequent themes, allowing the researchers to present a balanced, truthful and holistic account of the lived well-being experiences of the foreign academics at the HEI (White et al. 2014).

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the University of South Africa IOP Research Ethics Committee. The ethical clearance number is 2020/CEMS/IOP/003. Participants were informed of the purpose and background of the study and how the findings were to be used. Participants gave written informed consent before commencement of the study.

Findings

This section provides the five themes, which emerged from the voices of five participants interviewed during this study. These themes are (1) overall well-being;

TABLE 1: Content analysis process description.

Steps	Step description	Process followed
1	Organising and preparing the raw data	The recorded interviews were listened to carefully and repeatedly to gain familiarity with the data before further delving into it. The interviews were also transcribed, and the field notes were cleaned.
2	Reading through the data	The transcribed data were read a few times, and as insights or observations emerged about the research context, they were noted in the sidelines. During this process, text was also highlighted that was found to be of interest. Reading through the data a few times enabled the formation of tentative categories and gave guidance on how to further engage with the data.
3	Coding of the data	While analysing the transcriptions and field notes, segments of the data which seemed to have similar meaning were labelled. The focus was on coding key data that answered the research question. Codes emerged from the literature review, interview guide and empirical data of the study. Key codes were first grouped in accordance with how common issues and phrases were repeated in the data. The researcher then analysed the categories created together, comparing them against each other to group them together into more meaningful categories. The coding process allowed the researcher to reflect on what was learned at that time, what is still to be learned and how the codes were related to each other. Themes and sub-themes were then identified from the coded categories, and this enabled bringing events and remarks together.
4	Generating descriptions of context, people or themes	The themes emerging from the coded categories were described with four main themes emerging. These themes contained data that described the context and the participants of the study and were analysed per case. The researcher went through the themes thoroughly to ensure that all important information was categorised and that the information was not overly used.
5	Representing the themes and descriptions	The themes and descriptions were presented in a tabular form (see Table 2) as suggested by Creswell and Creswell (2017), in which a section is allocated for themes and another for sub-themes. This presentation was made to provide clarity on the themes and sub-themes drawn from the analysis process.
6	Interpretation of themes and descriptions	An explanation and understanding of the foreign academics' lived experiences regarding their well-being, adjustment and job performance is provided. Interpreting the findings meant making sense, making inferences and drawing conclusions from the findings. The researcher repeatedly went through the themes derived from the data analysis to ensure that no data were left unaccounted for. The researcher then made conclusions by examining the literature, theoretical framework and the empirical data.

(2) factors impacting well-being; (3) the work environment; (4) missing home and (5) well-being improvement recommendations.

Theme 1: Overall well-being

Overall well-being of foreign academics includes psychological, mental and physical well-being, yet quite interestingly, when participants were asked in the interviews to remark on their overall well-being since joining the HEI, some requested the researcher to provide clarity on what well-being was. Participants C and D asked:

'What do you mean by wellbeing?' (Participant C, foreign national, male)

'What is wellbeing?' (Participant D, foreign national, male)

Participants noted how their overall well-being includes being both mentally and physically happy, but also relates to collegiality, that is, their relationship with colleagues, line managers and students, as well as their general feelings pertaining to the HEI:

'[...] when you are happy mentally you are, that's the best wellbeing you can think of. So I think the mental wellbeing and physical wellbeing as well, I think has been good in general.' (Participant A, foreign national, male)

Then again, some participants reflected on emotional shifts they experience between being happy at times (i.e. interaction with research, students and some colleagues) and unhappy in other instances (i.e. feeling of being unwelcome, an inconvenience, and even feeling discriminated against):

'[...] And then you come across experiences which are not good which make you feel you are not welcome, you are not one of them, you are always the other, a necessary inconvenience. So it's up and down.' (Participant D, foreign national, male)

'So I can say that yes I am happy at the institution where I am now but of course not completely happy [...].' (Participant E, foreign national, male)

Participant B agrees. While initially being happy, resentment from colleagues, being isolated and being discriminated against took away her happiness:

'Initially, when I came I was very happy. Things were very good. There were no elements of discrimination but as time went by I don't know what was going on or is it political or what, elements of looking at foreign nationals were creeping in, viewing them in a certain negative manner.' (Participant B, foreign national, female)

Participant B shares how local colleagues openly express their resentment of foreign academics in meetings, leaving them feeling uncomfortable, demoralised and emotionally or psychologically abused. Participant D agrees and adds that 'you are made to feel redundant until they need you, then you are good enough again to be included':

'Then those from equity section of HR start by saying let's remove all foreigners all of them and you are a foreigner chairing such a meeting [...] So you know when you are a foreigner you feel downtrodden, you feel that psychological or emotional abuse or whatever.' (Participant B, foreign national, female)

Theme 2: Psychological resources impacting well-being

Factors impacting well-being emerged around having support and access to opportunities, and psychological coping and self-control resources.

Support and access to opportunities

Feeling supported and having access to opportunities, such as collaboration opportunities, promotions, remuneration, fair application of labour law policies, research funds and leave, to name a few, played a significant role in the well-being of foreign academics. As noted by Participant C, having gone through an induction programme enables him to expand his network of support, which enables collaboration and making new friends:

'But I would say that induction really helps a lot. Yeah and you meet colleagues from other departments. And then from there, you make friends and connections. Some of them I am still

working with them up to today in terms of collaborations.’ (Participant C, foreign national, male)

Access to opportunities, such as being promoted, seems to be restricted to the academic sphere, should one apply, for example, to become a professor. However, when one aspires to become a manager, director or chairperson, foreign nationals have no prospect as such positions seem to be reserved for HCNs, irrespective of competence and experience. Participants also believe that as a foreign national to become a leader, policy hinders one, and the organisational culture seems to believe you are appointed to teach and not to lead:

‘[B]ut in terms of promotions into these other positions, like you saying to yourself I want to be a director, I want to be a very ambitious person, I want to be a chairperson I think now even in terms of the policies, the policy is discouraging.’ (Participant C, foreign national, male)

‘And there has been actually some talks on the corridors of course those things are not official that usually foreign nationals are employed only to teach not to lead and not to be involved in some leadership kind of positions.’ (Participant E, foreign national, male)

On the contrary, even applying for promotions, for example, from senior lecturer to associate professor, is not straightforward. You might either be denied the promotion because of unfair criteria, or if promoted, engage in a struggle to receive the benefits which accompany such a promotion:

‘So the promotion criteria I think it is not necessarily quite fair when it comes to foreign nationals [...]’ (Participant E, foreign national, male)

‘[...] then I was promoted to associate professor. Then they said [...] just give you a title but no benefits and I didn’t, I was not pleased [...]’ (Participant B, foreign national, female)

Participants also shared a suspicion that foreign academics are paid less than HCNs, as they believe foreign academics are remunerated in line with the bottom end of salary grades. Frustration is also noted as they have no bargaining power and, subsequently, control over improving this situation, predominantly because of a lack of knowledge on what HCNs earn and how policy is implemented, leaving them feeling ‘crushed’:

‘I am not quite sure in terms of what the local guys on my grade are earning but you hear these things on the corridors that most of the locals are earning more than what foreign nationals are earning.’ (Participant E, foreign national, male)

Participants felt inconsistencies apply to gaining access to research funds and benefits, even while they are formally entitled to it, these funds and benefits seem to be more accessible to local academics:

‘We had already identified a collaborator from the US who wanted to work with us but the promised seed fund never came. Only to be surprised that this colleague we started with the same day got it.’ (Participant D, foreign national, male)

It was only Participant E who shared that he does not have funding access complaints. He highlights the importance of

emphasising how the SA University can benefit from such a collaboration, which seems to open possibilities:

‘This funding is mainly for collaborative kind of research amongst SA universities and (a country overseas) universities [...] you indicate that, you demonstrate that you are assisting the locals I think one still stands a chance to get such opportunities.’ (Participant E, foreign national, male)

Participant A highlights how foreign nationals are denied the opportunity for sabbatical leave, and this denies the opportunity for career growth:

‘[...] sabbatical leave, you find that sometimes some opportunities may come and when you want to jump into them you are asked to say are you a South African citizen? [...] You get excluded from some other opportunities which you think you actually qualify and possibly you can also improve [...]’ (Participant A, foreign national, male)

Psychological coping and self-control resources

By using psychological coping and self-control resources, foreign academics note how they manage to reduce challenges that result in increased levels of stress and poor well-being. Participant A shared how exercising self-control and enjoying the support of his supervisor assisted him in mitigating negative behaviour, as he was able to cope with stressful situations:

‘I try to overlook the disadvantages that are there [...] especially in my second coming I find that I spent almost a semester or 3 months without having the university laptop, but well I had another laptop which I was given by a colleague [...]’ (Participant A, foreign national, male)

Participants also allude to adopting other coping mechanisms in dealing with these challenges, such as displaying high levels of self-efficacy and becoming goal-driven, while viewing challenges as stepping stones to development. Others choose not to challenge the system but rather to accept and distance themselves. It is perceived that circumstances will not be changed by adopting a fighting approach, thus they would rather revert to adopting a behavioural style of passivity:

‘I let go. Say as long as it does not affect me, even if I have some good ideas I point them out if I see that people are taking it because at times you put a good idea there, it’s not taken well a local next to you says the same thing then it’s embraced with two hands.’ (Participant B, foreign national, female)

Other participants emphasise the importance of falling back on one’s experience and using it as a resource to be influential. Using experience gained to cope with challenges becomes a coping resource to attempt to enact change and, in doing so, look after your own well-being:

‘[...] so I also gained some international exposure and international experience which I have used it to the benefit of both the department, the school and the faculty itself.’ (Participant A, foreign national, male)

Theme 3: The work environment

Some participants viewed the HEI as favourable and offering a good working environment that enhanced career growth. The working environment is determined by management, colleagues and how foreign academics manage work relationships with colleagues:

'The working environment is convenient, it's not hostile, I could say, and you are also [...] if you can you are also free to explore or to use opportunities some other opportunities that are there if you are a hard worker you are like if you like research you can run around go to some conferences where possible.' (Participant A, foreign national, male)

Participant E highlighted that the working environment provided opportunities for professional growth, particularly in terms of accessible resources for research:

'[...] in terms of doing your own work, your research work, it provides that environment where one can concentrate on trying to progress professionally in terms of your professional growth.' (Participant E, foreign national, male)

Participant C described a positive working environment fostered by amicable relationships with colleagues, facilitating the effective pursuit of goals:

'We just work within that environment to ensure that we deliver the goods. There is no like those things like politics in the department, something like that.' (Participant C, foreign national, male)

The work environment is not viewed by other participants as completely pleasant. Some bad incidents were reported by some participants, which made them feel unwelcome:

'The thing is that with the majority we are working very well, very, very well, you only find a few elements here and there who burst, the other ones I don't know if it will be in their heads and they are not voicing out.' (Participant B, foreign national, female)

'I have adjusted to work with them and they accept me and it's only at times when there, something comes and you realise they now consider you are not one of them.' (Participant D, foreign national, male)

Conflicting standards

According to the participants, the interpretation and implementation of labour laws and policies differ from other institutions in South Africa. They perceive this to be disadvantageous to their well-being in terms of promotions and other opportunities:

'So you find that whilst this institution is telling you about a certain labour law you find that you go to another institution they implement it differently.' (Participant A, foreign national, male)

Resources

The work environment also encompasses the physical workspace and equipment provided. Some participants felt the HEI lacked adequate preparation for new employees. Participants shared the challenges of sharing an office because of the lack of allocated space upon joining:

'I didn't even have an office I had to go into a colleague's office we were sharing that office.' (Participant C, foreign national, male)

'In terms of new equipment in terms of laptop I think it took me a few weeks. [...] Yeah the blinds, I find some old blinds some of them were broken which some of the things you don't necessarily expect if you are given a new working space [...]' (Participant E, foreign national, male)

Happiness for academics is derived from teaching students and assisting them on matters regarding teaching and learning, presenting workshops and attending conferences. Participants expressed being morally enhanced when working with colleagues to improve circumstances and instituting programmes and tasks:

'The students I work with in academic staff development they will be people who appreciate and value our interaction, value what I will be doing with them. We will be enjoying quite a lot so the help you get is solace when you find that your work is going on very well.' (Participant B, foreign national, female)

'Lecturing is something I enjoy. To be with the students, so that one I do it whether I am being paid or I do not.' (Participant D, foreign national, male)

Theme 4: Missing home

Being in a different country can generate feelings of homesickness. Participants shared different feelings regarding missing home. Participant A misses home but has come to accept living in a different environment:

'Just like a married woman sometimes you miss home. But in general, you adapt to where you are and you feel that this is now the life I am in.' (Participant A, foreign national, male)

Participant B misses home sometimes. Her husband and children live in different countries. She explained that before coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) restrictions, she and her family regularly visited each other:

'We wouldn't go for more than a month without visiting. So I was not missing home much that time before COVID-19. But now with COVID, with the borders closed, with the provinces closed that's when I miss them quite a lot. But every day we call each other talk, talk, it helps quite a lot.' (Participant B, foreign national, female)

The hostile socio-economic background of some countries is the reason that other academics do not miss home. Some take time to visit their families, which lessens the feeling of homesickness:

'I used to not anymore. [...] It's a waste of time, it's carrying unnecessary burden you cannot go back because it's not possible. I really no longer miss home. I could forget about it.' (Participant D, foreign national, male)

'I regularly go home so I can't say I miss home per se because now and again I travel home and I see my parents, my relatives and colleagues there, I, so again in terms of the environment back home I can't say I miss home or I wish to go back home at the moment because of the situation there.' (Participant E, foreign national, male)

Theme 5: Well-being improvement recommendations

To improve on foreign academic well-being, participants provided recommendations for the HEI and individual foreign academics within the HEI.

Recommendations to the higher education institution

Engagements between the HEI and foreign academics would be extremely beneficial. Participant B said that foreign academics need support as employees; they need their challenges heard and a forum that enhances interaction. She explains that providing support to foreign academics will make them feel welcome, encourage teamwork and improve productivity:

'Find out their challenges, their happy moments and also what's their experiences so that HR intervenes, just to make them feel welcome, it improves productivity, it improves staff oneness working as a team. Not just letting things just solve themselves like that.' (Participant B, foreign national, female)

Recommendations for foreign academics

Participant A suggests that foreign academics should perform their roles better than the HCN academics so that they will be recognised:

'You may need to put an extra effort that you see that possibly locals you may find that they may not be putting same effort or in your own country you may not be putting similar effort but you may need to put an extra effort so that you are recognised, you are, you also feel at home.' (Participant A, foreign national, male)

Participant B suggests that foreign academics find their own happiness and ways to enjoy work, and if the challenges persist, they should seek a means to overcome them. She added that challenging the system will not produce changes, but rather, foreign academics should contribute in terms of sharing ideas, and once rejected, they should not persist:

'Find your self-happiness. Find ways of enjoying your work. [...] you know when you, the moment you get in a foreign land you are vulnerable. ... If there is something you don't agree with tell them nicely. Show them the way nicely and if they don't take heed look for a way out amicably.' (Participant B, foreign national, female)

Participant D suggests that foreign academics should embrace and appreciate what they are offered. He concurs with Participant B that challenging the system will not yield change:

'It will harm you the HEI will fight you back and you are just a small end and you won't make it so you must just learn to accept this is what is there this is not my country I am fortunate to be here so I must accept what is given to me.' (Participant D, foreign national, male)

Discussion

Practical implications

The HEI should consider employing an human resource (HR) officer who is responsible for administering foreign

academic affairs. Such a person would manage foreign academic affairs, such as induction, preparation of office space and equipment before arriving at the HEI.

The HR management department of the HEI should consider establishing a platform that engages foreign academics to address and find solutions to their challenges, which in turn improves their well-being and job performance. Incorporating a model such as the Job Demands-Resources Model, an expansion on the Job Demand-Control Model, can assist in striking a balance between the strain of job demands can place on an employee, and suitable job resources enabling employees, enhancing their motivation, job satisfaction and job performance (Zeshan et al. 2025).

Limitations

The experiences of foreign academics from other continents were not included in the study. The data were collected only among the foreign academics who originate from countries in Africa to analyse the impact of their well-being on job performance. Although the sample size was a good sample size for a case study, only views from the foreign academics were heard. Limited resources and time did not permit the inclusion of the views of the HEI management. While the demographic profiles of the participants vary in many aspects, such as gender, age, positions held and countries of origin, the findings of this study cannot be generalised. The findings are limited as data were only gathered from a single HEI; thus, generalisation cannot occur from the findings of this study.

Recommendations

The researcher recommends that future studies look into the experiences of foreign academics from other countries outside Africa because the reasons for coming to South Africa may differ. The participants in the study indicated their reasons for being in South Africa are mainly for socio-economic stability, which is not present in their own countries, while foreign academics from developed countries may not come to South Africa for the same reasons and rather come to experience South African culture (Sebola 2015). It is recommended that future studies also consider and incorporate the experiences and perspectives of institutional management to engage in a constructive debate representative of all parties. Such studies allow the point of view of HEI management and HCNs who are colleagues of foreign academics to be expressed regarding their relationship and experiences with foreign academics. The researcher further recommends that future research should be carried out among foreign academics in other HEIs. Such research will provide more understanding of the experiences faced by foreign academics in South African HEIs.

Conclusion

Employee well-being significantly affects job performance. For foreign academics, well-being also impacts student success and research output. By fostering positive well-

being among foreign staff, HEI management enhances its institutional reputation. Research findings reveal varied well-being among foreign academics at the HEI. Some are generally satisfied, citing supportive colleagues and career growth opportunities. Others report mixed feelings, often because of lower salaries than HCNs, exclusion from promotions, and discriminatory treatment. A few who were initially happy now feel marginalised, with one reporting verbal abuse and discrimination from HCNs. Despite challenges, foreign academics find fulfilment in teaching, mentoring students, and participating in workshops and research. Student appreciation serves as a strong source of intrinsic motivation. However, access to benefits like seed research funding is limited for non-South African citizens. Many participants expressed disappointment over being excluded from funding meant for new employees. One participant noted that funding is sometimes available if HCNs are listed as beneficiaries. Leadership roles such as Head of Department or Dean are reportedly reserved for HCNs, with foreign academics excluded from promotion pathways. Some believe they are hired solely for knowledge transmission, not leadership. Promotion criteria for professorship are perceived as stricter for foreign staff, though a few found the process manageable. Salary disparities remain a major concern, with foreign academics placed at the lowest pay grades and lacking bargaining power.

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Competing interests

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Authors' contributions

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Data availability

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article and its listed references.

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