

The Complexities of Managing a Multigenerational Academic Workforce in the South African Higher Education Sector

Zamandlovu S Makola
sizilemakola@outlook.com
University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

Christopher M Mulaudzi
Tshilmc@unisa.ac.za
University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

<https://doi.org/10.51137/ijarbm.2024.5.1.3>

Abstract – This study examined the human resource management challenges faced by heads of departments in managing a multigenerational academic workforce in the South African higher education sector. A qualitative research approach was followed, and a multiple case study research design was applied. A purposive sampling technique was used to select 16 participants. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, and it was analysed thematically with the aid of Atlas.ti. The study revealed several challenges related to the management of a multigenerational academic workforce, namely, differences in career expectations, skills, and experience among generations; conflict management; implementation of plans and strategies; succession planning; and teamwork. The findings have implications for higher education institutions as different generations have varying expectations for career development. Human resource departments should establish clear and transparent career pathways to meet these expectations. The study also provides supporting evidence for the dimensions outlined in the framework for understanding generational identities in organisations. Exploring generational diversity in workplace relationships and interactions within the education context complements the existing research focused on pedagogical aspects and cultural characteristics in academic settings.

Keywords – Managing Multiple Generations, Higher Education, Generational Differences, Pre-Apartheid Generation, Apartheid Generation, Struggle Generation, Transition Generation, Generation Second Wave

Submitted: 2024-01-24. Revised: 2024-03-01. Accepted: 2024-03-07.

1 Introduction

The South African higher education sector is facing challenges similar to other workplaces, such as an aging workforce and low levels of new entrants. According to the OECD (2012), South African universities, particularly historically white institutions, are experiencing a rising average age of academics over 50 years old. The Higher Education Management Information System (HEMIS) also indicates a growing number of academics aged 55 years and older, from 16% in 2004 to 22% in 2017 (DHET, 2017). On the other hand, the percentage of academics under the age of 35 declined from 23% in 2004 to 20% in 2017. The inclusion of young graduates is crucial for the development of a strong research and innovation system. Retaining experienced academics is a strategic priority in the higher education sector due to the difficulty of replacing their knowledge, skills, and expertise (Makondo, 2014; Simmons, 2002).

Higher education institutions also face competition from industry in retaining skilled young academics who are offered competitive remuneration for their qualifications and expertise (Azman, Sirat & Pang, 2016; Selesho & Naile, 2014). Universities South Africa (2014) acknowledges the challenge of attracting young graduates into academia, resulting in missed opportunities for growth and development. Limited information on Generation Y and Z academics further compounds the issue, impacting staffing and performance in South African universities. The perception that academia is a less attractive career option has extensive costs for the sector and the economy (Badat, 2008; Selesho & Naile, 2014). The need to attract and recruit new talent into academia and establish clear career progression paths to professorship has been highlighted by the Universities South Africa – Association of Commonwealth Universities (USAf-ACU) symposium in 2019 (USAf, 2019).

The aging of academics globally presents challenges such as budgetary pressures, stagnant job opportunities for new faculty members, and potential decreases in productivity or morale among senior employees. However, it also provides opportunities for mentorship, sustained research productivity, and institutional reputation boosts. Institutions need to develop innovative human resources and organizational development policies and practices to address the challenges of attracting, managing, retaining, and developing their human resources (Robyn & du Preez, 2013).

Globally, the higher education sector not only grapples with external drivers of change but the internal dynamics of a multigenerational workforce characterized by heterogeneity in values, attitudes, behaviors, and expectations as well. This study focuses on the challenges of managing a multigenerational academic workforce in the South African higher education sector. The paper will discuss the theoretical framework underpinning the study, describe the different generations within the South African workplace, examine the challenges faced in managing a multigenerational academic workforce, discuss the methodology, and present the findings, discussion, and conclusion.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Generations in the South African Workplace

Literature suggests there are currently six generations in the workplace: Silent Generation/Traditionalists, Baby Boomers, Generation X, Generation Y, and Generation Z/Nexters. These categories are Western constructs and may not apply in other regions (Joshi et al., 2010; Lyons & Kuron, 2014; Ng & Perry, 2016; Parry, 2014; Sandhu et al., 2015; Van Der Walt et al., 2016). Most research on generational differences has been conducted in Western contexts like the United States, leading to a bias in adopting American definitions (Festing & Schäfer, 2014). However, this bias can negatively impact assumptions about non-Western cohorts (Lappeman et al., 2020). Research from non-Western countries has identified differences in generational characteristics due to unique national contexts (Parry, 2014). Thus, future research should move away from simplistic American categorizations by considering the social and historical conditions of the nation under study (Ng & Parry, 2016; Lyons & Kuron, 2014; Kruger & Viljoen, 2022).

Accepting US age segmentation definitions in South Africa is problematic, as there are divergences with local terminology such as Afrilennials and Buppies. Some authors have taken a political stance, defining the "Born-Frees" as those born in 1980 and turned 16 after 1996. Others use "Born-Free" for those born after the first post-apartheid democratic election in 1994 (Lappeman et al., 2020). South Africa's history was predominantly written from a colonial lens, while the US view of generational history is also influenced by colonial conquest. South Africa is making efforts to rewrite its history from an African perspective, addressing historical challenges and promoting a critical and representative approach to indigenous knowledge (Lappeman et al., 2020). This study adopts the generational categorisations proposed by Lappeman et al. (2020, p. 12).

Table 1 presents the slight differences in interpretation of birth years and the impact of historical events, such as apartheid, on shaping the South African societal structure. The age ranges vary based on these events. It is important to consider multiple perspectives, including economic, political, governmental, and societal factors, to understand the composition of each cohort (Kruger & Viljoen, 2022).

Table 1: Generational categorisation

Pew research center (Dimock, 2019)			Lappeman et al. (2020)		
Birth years	Generation name	Age range in 2021 (US categorization)	Birth years	Generation name	Age range in 2021 (SA categorization)
1928-1944	Silent gen	76-93	Pre 1932	Pre-apartheid Gen	89>
1946-1964	Baby Boomer	57-75	1933-1960	Apartheid gen	61-88
1965-1980	Generation X	41-56	1961-1979	Struggle gen	41-60
1981-1996	Generation Y	24-40	1980-1999	Transition gen	22-41
1997<	Generation Z	24<	2000-2020	Second wave gen	21<

Notable differences arise when comparing South African and US generations. In the US, the "great wealth transfer" from Baby Boomers to subsequent generations is a prominent topic. However, in South Africa, Boomers experienced apartheid sanctions, resulting in limited wealth, particularly among the black population. This has necessitated the younger generation to support their elderly family members, known locally as "black tax". These differences challenge the assumption that individuals within the same age group share similar consumption patterns and preferences. Each South African generation brings forth unique values, beliefs, and perspectives to the workplace, making the management of a multigenerational workforce a complex task. The global challenges faced by managers in managing multigenerational academic workforce will now be discussed.

2.2 Challenges of Managing a Multigenerational Academic Workforce

The below discussion details several challenges of managing a multigenerational academic workforce.

1) Career progression

Career progression involves moving to higher positions, strategically working towards set goals, and climbing the corporate ladder (Weerarathna & Hapurugala, 2019). In the academic context, career progression traditionally involves remaining with one institution and achieving tenure, which typically occurs after five to six years of service (Hannay & Fretwell, 2011). However, the increasing age of academics and delayed retirement has created a backlog in the tenure track, limiting opportunities for younger faculty members (Xie & Ali, 2023). This situation leads to the employment of younger qualified academics as adjunct staff without tenure, resulting in departments appearing "older" (Xie & Ali, 2023).

Generation X and Y exhibit a reduced reliance on institutional security and lifelong employment, prioritizing rewards based on capability and contributions rather than tenure (Berk, 2013; Mofokeng, 2017). These generations

value self-advancement through skills development and quick promotions (Berk, 2013). Generation X seeks alternative career development models and recognizes the limitations of the traditional work model (Bickel & Brown, 2005). Studies have shown that junior faculty members from Generation X take a holistic approach to career success and view their career trajectories over a longer term (Lowenstein, Fernandez & Crane, 2007).

2) Communication

Traditionally, university work primarily relied on face-to-face interactions on campus. However, with the advent of distance and electronic learning models and the presence of satellite campuses in multiple locations, institutions are increasingly utilizing digital communication methods such as teleconferences, video conferences, and webinars to include faculty members from different time zones and locations in meetings and seminars (Hannay & Fretwell, 2011). Older staff members tend to prefer phone calls and emails, while younger staff members favor text messaging and instant messaging for immediate responses and feedback (Berk, 2013).

Asynchronous communication platforms like discussion pages, list servers, wikis and online collaboration systems have also emerged, facilitated by selective availability. Traditionalists and Baby Boomers, who are more constantly available and loyal to their organizations, may have a limited understanding of the principle of selective availability (Mohr et al., 2011). Generation X and Y use technology to stay connected with colleagues and friends but prioritize protecting their personal time. They measure their value based on impact and productivity rather than time or accessibility (Mohr et al., 2011).

While all generations are online, differences exist in their use of social media. Traditionalists and Boomers tend to lean towards LinkedIn and to a lesser extent, Facebook. Generation X, Y and Z are active on various platforms but utilise them differently (Berk, 2013). Organisations should strive to maintain a level of personalisation in professional communication, utilising electronic bulletin boards, email, list servers, and other systems intentionally to enhance personal connections and build relationships. The success of an academic department is often dependent on the staff members' relationships rather than solely the efficiency or convenience of the workplace (Mohr et al., 2011).

3) Technology

Generational differences in academia are evident in the familiarity and use of the latest technology and software (Berk, 2013). Students also expect faculty members to utilise digital communication methods (Poblete & Nieto, 2020). Younger faculty members rely on electronic resources and digital storage, whereas senior staff prefer to maintain ownership of their knowledge and utilise personal knowledge repositories (Mohr et al., 2011).

The dominance of digital technology and social media has significantly influenced students' preparedness and classroom engagement (Chun & Evans, 2021). Recent generations of students prefer internet-based and social media resources over printed materials. This technology gap also exists

The Complexities of Managing a Multigenerational Academic Workforce in the South African Higher Education Sector

among faculty members, with senior academics expressing a desire to stay current with technological advancements (Chun & Evans, 2021). Incorporating technology into course designs can be a challenge for older academics, but hybrid learning, combining classroom and online resources, has emerged as an effective method (Chun & Evans, 2021).

Regular technology training should be provided to faculty members, catering to different learning styles and preferences (Hannay & Fretwell, 2011). Partnerships between junior and senior faculty members can facilitate knowledge sharing and mutual learning (Hannay & Fretwell, 2011). Reverse-mentoring has been proposed as a strategy to bridge the technology gap between generations (Cismaru & Iunius, 2020).

4) Work-life balance

The younger generations prioritise work-life balance more than their older counterparts. The early years of an academic career are demanding, with new class preparations, research development, and service engagements (Hannay & Fretwell, 2011). Studies have highlighted the misperceptions between senior and junior staff regarding work commitment (Book et al., 2019). Generation X faculty members tend to define career success holistically and value longer-term career trajectories, indicating a need for part-time work, flexible schedules, and family balance (Lowenstein, Fernandez & Crane, 2007).

Research at the University of California, Davis School of Medicine found that career flexibility policies enhance career satisfaction for staff across generations and genders, with older faculty members considering their potential future needs for such policies (Howell et al., 2012). Addressing work-life conflict through interventions would improve job satisfaction and talent retention (Howell et al., 2012).

Office work hours in higher education institutions vary, with some maintaining traditional 9-5 schedules while others offer more flexibility (Berk, 2013). Universities could consider offering flexible work hours while maintaining performance expectations for promotion and tenure (Berk, 2013; Hannay & Fretwell, 2011). Introducing new business models and workforce structures that accommodate the preferences of all generations can contribute towards the sustainability of the higher education sector (Lundy & Ladd, 2021). Providing choices and options, such as hybrid teaching formats, can increase employee commitment and ensure a better fit between instructors and learning formats (Hannay & Fretwell, 2011). The preferences of Generation X, Y, and Z are influencing the shift away from traditional working hours.

5) Feedback

Tenure-track faculty members should receive regular and detailed feedback. Instead of relying on annual performance reviews, higher education institutions are advised to provide semi-annual performance feedback on research, teaching, and service (Hannay & Fretwell, 2011). New faculty members should be assigned mentors that can offer ongoing feedback and utilise various communication channels (Hannay & Fretwell, 2011).

Generation Y seeks clear goals, requirements, and expectations with outlined plans for feedback (Hannay & Fretwell, 2011). Mentorship can be mutually beneficial, as older faculty members want to share their expertise and feel valued by the younger generation and the organisation (Hannay & Fretwell, 2011). However, Generation X may view mentorship as a right rather than a privilege, which can lead to frustrations among older faculty (Bickel & Brown, 2005). Generation X appreciates frequent face-to-face interactions and immediate responses, considering education and mentorship as entitlements and critiquing their mentors (Mohr et al., 2011). Generation Y is more outspoken in the mentorship relationship, but values focused, personal, positive, and frequent feedback (Mohr et al., 2011).

6) Work environment

Workplace bullying has become a prevalent issue in academia, increasingly targeting black women and subordinates (Berk, 2013). Generation X is found to be the most vulnerable to bullying, while Baby Boomers and Generation Y experience less bullying (Berk, 2013). The issue of appropriate dress code and attire in academia also poses challenges, with academics leaning more towards casual wear, while administrators typically adhere to traditional business attire (Berk, 2013). Professional behaviours in academia should encompass respect, teamwork, emotional intelligence, effective communication, accessibility, integrity, compassion, altruism, and caring. However, these behaviours are often not formally discussed or measured in higher education (Berk, 2013).

7) Teaching and learning

In academia, there can be tension between older and younger generations of professors regarding salary expectations and intellectual focus (Fogg, 2008; Santos, 2016). The shift in focus from behaviourism to cognitive neuroscience has led older scholars to adapt and learn from younger ones (Fogg, 2008). Interdisciplinary studies also present a challenge, as Baby Boomers may be skeptical of non-traditional faculty appointments, while Generation X values the creative freedom and collaboration opportunities offered by interdisciplinary institutes (Fogg, 2008). This creates a conflict when evaluating faculty members based on traditional parameters within a specific discipline (Fogg, 2008).

3 Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by the framework for understanding generational identities in organizations proposed by Joshi et al. (2010). The framework encompasses three key dimensions: generational identity, intergenerational interactions, and the organizational context.

Generational identity involves three aspects within the framework. Firstly, cohort-based identity refers to membership in a collective that shares experiences at the same time, such as starting work at an organization. Secondly, age-based identity relates to membership in an age group that shares

The Complexities of Managing a Multigenerational Academic Workforce in the South African Higher Education Sector

collective memories from formative years. Lastly, incumbency-based identity is defined by an individual's attitudes, skills, experience, and knowledge acquired through holding a specific position for a period, such as being the third CEO of a company referred to as the "third generation".

Intergenerational interactions can be categorized along a continuum from resistive to transitive. At the resistive end, interactions reflect unsuccessful transfer of knowledge, skills, or resources between generations, leading to the accumulation of resources and power by one generation at the expense of another. Transitive interactions, on the other hand, involve successful knowledge, skills, and/or resource transfer, resulting in cooperation and trust between preceding and succeeding generations.

The organizational context is divided into structural and normative contexts. In mechanistic organizations, employees specialize in their roles, relationships are clearly defined, and hierarchy and chain of command are emphasized. Organic organizations have overlapping roles and interdependent responsibilities, with decision-making authority delegated to lower levels based on task demands rather than strict codification. The normative context refers to the shared understanding of organizational policies, practices, procedures, goals, and expectations among all members. A strong normative context fosters trust, empathy, mutual respect, cooperation, altruism, beneficence, and reciprocity, while a weak normative context is characterized by mistrust, bias, negative expectations, conflict, competition, and closure.

The research methodology, findings and discussion are now presented.

4 Research Methodology

A qualitative research approach was followed, and a multiple case study research design was applied to investigate the challenges of managing a multigenerational academic workforce in the South African higher education sector. Three cases were used: Case A consisted of a sample of universities categorized as traditional universities; Case B was comprised a sample of universities categorized as universities of technology; and Case C was made up of a sample of universities categorized as comprehensive universities. Table 2 provides details of the cases.

Table 2: Details of cases sampled

Cases	Number of Institutions	Number of Participants
Case A: Traditional universities	3	4
Case B: Universities of Technology	4	6
Case C: Comprehensive universities	3	6
Total	10	16

Purposive sampling was used to identify participants consisting of chairs/heads of academic departments with three or more years of management experiences in the role. Participants were identified from the infor-

The Complexities of Managing a Multigenerational Academic Workforce in the South African Higher Education Sector

mation listed on the websites of the different universities. The study had 16 participants in total.

The University of South Africa granted ethical approval for the study. Participants were sent a participant information sheet and consent form before the interviews. Semi-structured interviews were conducted online at a date and time convenient for the participants. All interviews were treated anonymously and confidentially. Audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim for further analysis.

Data was analyzed thematically using the framework by Castleberry and Nolen (2018). This included, firstly, transcribing the compiled data into a useable form. Secondly, disassembling which involved dividing the data and generating meaningful groupings. For this step the transcripts were imported into Atlas.ti and labeled according to the three case study groups (Case A, Case B and Case C). The researchers read through the transcripts to identify recurring viewpoints and created a list of codes. The codes were created using a combination of the deductive approach (i.e., based on themes found in the literature) and the inductive approach (i.e., added new descriptors or modified existing ones where appropriate). The coding process was performed by assigning one or more of the pre-defined codes to data segments in each of the transcripts. Extracted segments of text were categorized under specific codes and further reading was done to identify additional codes or modify existing ones. Lastly, reassembling involved putting the coded data and categories together in the form of themes. Data queries were conducted to identify thematic relationships and patterns in the coded data.

5 Results

In this section, the themes that emerged from all the interviews are discussed. Eight themes were extracted from the data, namely, career progression, conflict management, teamwork, succession planning, work-life balance, skills and experience, and planning and strategy implementation. These themes are now discussed.

5.1 Topic 1: Career Progression

Some participants indicated that they had challenges with reconciling the aspirations of the younger academics with opportunities provided by the higher education sector. For example, Participant 1 from Case A said, "The issues that confront head of departments are today multigenerational. It is reconciling the aspirations of those up-and-coming academics and the fact that the academic life is not a kind of rewarding life ... They are therefore reconciling the aspiration of a young up-and-coming academic with a future that they would love to have for themselves is the greatest challenge of them all".

Linked to the challenge of reconciling the career aspirations of your academics, other participants raised the issue of managing the salary expectations of young academics. Participant 2 from Case A remarked that, "Right

The Complexities of Managing a Multigenerational Academic Workforce in the South African Higher Education Sector

now, my sister, people don't want to work in higher education. The salary is very minimal if you do benchmarking, an industry where they can earn more than at a university, an industry where some of them really do work 9 to 5 there's no extra work, not only do they do that, and they have more of those family work–life balance compared to higher education”.

Other participants such as Participant 3 from Case C, raised the reluctance of older academics in sharing their skills with younger academics, “Some of the lecturers that are going on retirement hold back on skills transfer, they're not very open to share the skills and knowledge to the upcoming millennials for some reason. I don't know whether it's a withdrawal because of retirement and they do not want to let go, but yes, they don't want to share, and skills transfer to other employees because they're of the thought that they can come back and part-time lecture in the department, but they fail to realize that they're over 65 and they need to leave room for improvement for the younger generations”. Their reluctance at skills sharing could make younger academics feel like they are unwanted and unable to successfully build their careers in the higher education sector. This exacerbates the challenge faced by managers reconciling the career aspirations of younger academics with the opportunities available in the sector.

5.2 Topic 2: Conflict Management

The participants' perspectives shed light on the challenges encountered in managing conflict among multiple generations of employees. According to Participant 2 from Case A, younger academics hold different views and perspectives that must align with the broader vision and culture of the entire department. The participants stated the following, “They (younger academics) have got different views and perspectives which also must align to the broader vision and culture of the entire department. Those are just some of the main challenges”.

Some participants, such as Participant 4 from Case C and Participant 2 from Case C, highlighted the clash between younger and older employees regarding the flexibility of rules. The younger generation tends to advocate for bending rules to accommodate their agendas, while the older generation maintains a strict and rigid adherence to established protocols. Participant 2 from Case C stated, “The younger guys are often of the opinion that rules can be slightly bent and all that to accommodate their agenda whereas the older guys are very strict and rigid, and they operate within the agenda. And so that's where sometimes conflicts come”.

Participant 4 from Case C also highlighted conflict arising from disagreements over the way things are done. According to this participant, the older generation adheres to established practices that the younger generation may not agree with, leading to tensions within the team. The participant stated the following, “Sometimes there is a conflict. So, for example, there are some from the older generation who say no we have done things, we do things a certain way that younger generation don't agree with”.

5.3 Topic 3: Planning and Strategy Implementation

Some participants such as Participant 1 from Case A and Participant 3 from Case B, highlighted the risk posed by older academics to the attainment of strategic goals as a manager. This is what Participant 3 from Case B said, “Largely they (older academics) pose a risk to my attainment of my strategic goals as a manager. That’s the greatest risk they pose. Secondly, change takes forever in the department, so I will take longer to get the department to operate in a manner that would make me happy as a new manager. Therefore, by the time they are now ready to change I have lost half of probably a year, or I have lost one year in my term to achieve the objectives that are set. So that is the greatest risk they pose. Also, the unity within the staff complement also takes time to achieve because of the risk stands from older cohort of staff”.

Additionally, other participants pointed out that the slow pace of change in the department poses a challenge to strategy implementation. For example, Participant 4 from Case C expressed frustration over the time it takes for the department to adapt to new ways of operating, which can hinder the manager’s ability to achieve objectives within their designated term. The participant remarked that, “It takes a bit more time to implement changes especially if there is a bit of resistance...it’s not just the old generation also younger generation sometimes who are resistant to do things a certain way...you know in a university there is a lot of predetermined processes that sometimes people don’t agree with or will take too long”.

5.4 Topic 4: Skills and Experience

The participants raised the differences in general experience and technological literacy of the different generations. Participant 4 from Case A and Participant 7 from Case B highlighted that the older generation faces difficulties when it comes to adapting to changes, specifically in relation to technology, particularly in the context of the Fourth Industrial Revolution and the constraints imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic. Participant 7 from Case B said, “I think its aspects to do with technology, us being in the 4IR era also being within the pandemic space. My finding is that the older cohort is battling to use technology effectively”.

Furthermore, Participant 2 from Case C mentioned the need to employ specialized individuals to assist the older generation in adapting to technological platforms such as the Blackboard LMS. The participant explained: “I think the older generation battled a bit. I had to employ special people, knowledgeable people in order to assist the older people into getting to work on the blackboard platform and things like that”.

5.5 Topic 5: Succession Planning

Some participants such as Participant 1 from Case A and Participant 3 from Case B described the process of identifying talented students and enticing them into an academic career through associated lecturer contracts

and the opportunity to pursue a PhD. However, the success rate of retaining these young academics was low, as they would either leave after a short period or struggle to complete their PhD due to workload challenges. The participant stated, “We identify bright students and entice them into an academic career, and we fix them contracts, what do you call, associated lecturers. We allow them to register for a PhD and hoping they would come and join the academy once they are done ... And the success rate is so low, either they stick around for a year or two and leave because it’s not something they liked, or they are simply not able to finish because there is a thing called workload as well which is very difficult to allocate and the young up and coming academic would like to be exposed to opportunities where they can do research”

Other participants, for example Participant 3 and Participant 4 from Case A, discussed the potential consequences of not replacing retiring professors at a professorial level. This situation may result in a gap where young academics, with PhDs but possibly not yet ready for promotion, fill the position as lecturers. While the intention is for these individuals to eventually advance to senior lecturers and develop their academic profile, it is crucial to consider the time it takes to reach a professorial level. This is what Participant 4 from Case A said, “What happens is that when that prof retires we do not replace that person at a professorial level because it’s a supernumerary post then we will have a young academic with probably a PhD, they may or may not be ready for promotion, but they will come in obviously as a lecturer but hoping that in the sort of the next year or two year you will end up with a senior lecturer in the department and the person will obviously focus on developing their academic profile, etc. But if you look at the time that it takes to get someone to the prof level, you’ve got to be careful that you don’t have too many of those in gaps in one place when you suddenly end up with an academic department that doesn’t have enough professors and associate professors”.

5.6 Topic 6: Teamwork

This study’s findings revealed the challenges with collaboration between different generations of academic staff members managed by the participants. This was confirmed by Participant 3 from Case A who expressed concern about individuals being hesitant to provide feedback to their colleagues. The participant remarked that, “I have a staff complement that still believes they must stay on their lanes. So, if X sees that Y is doing something wrong, and instead of challenging them, they will rather keep quiet. It’s like if the HOD does not see the problem, others are most likely going to keep quiet and talk about it on the corridors”. This behaviour can lead to a lack of open communication and a reluctance to address problems directly.

Additionally, Participant 4 from Case B, mentioned the difficulty of getting certain groups to volunteer and participate in tasks. This finding points to the presence of reluctance or resistance from specific groups to actively engage in collaborative efforts. The participant stated: “There are some tasks that

require colleagues to take part in...sometimes it is a challenge where you find that certain groups don't even want to volunteer to take part in whatever is happening”.

Furthermore, Participant 5 from Case C highlighted the issue of individuals having a sense of always being correct and being intolerant of others' inputs and perceptions. The participant remarked that “It is the fact that people have the sense of feeling that they are correct always, and not being tolerant of others' input and perceptions and so forth. So, it is not an easy thing to handle, but as a manager, you need to allow the opportunity of all to contribute towards something ... We cannot have a sense of bullying or a sense of controlling or wanting what you feel is right. It may not be right for another or the rest”.

5.7 Topic 7: Work-Life Balances Needs and Expectations

The study participants expressed challenges with the work-life balance needs and expectations between the different generations of academics. Participant 2 from Case A emphasized the importance of managing workloads in academia, particularly for younger academics who are concurrently completing their studies. The participant stated that, “You also need to find how to manage workloads, which is an important thing in academia. Scholars are drowning in teaching, because teaching is important, but the PhD is more important for them (younger academics), so how do we ensure that we are supporting them where the teaching is very structured so it doesn't overwork them or overload them with work, which then sacrifices the PhD agenda and the goal for the department”. This statement highlights the need to strike a balance between teaching responsibilities and the pursuit of a PhD.

Additionally, Participant 4 from Case B, shared their personal policy of not communicating with the team on weekends to establish boundaries between work and personal life. This practice was aimed at creating a work environment where employees were not expected to be constantly available outside of working hours. By setting clear boundaries, it allows for personal time and fosters a healthier work-life balance. The participant said, “I have a thing, a policy that I don't communicate with my team on weekends, so that they're not expected to be sending me emails even during the week after 5 and, so that we understand, we create boundaries around how we're going to separate the work and the personal life, so that also we can have personal lives and also connect without own families”

Furthermore, Participant 5 from Case C emphasized the significance of providing upfront work schedules to help employees better manage their work-life balance. By communicating detailed schedules, employees can plan their responsibilities, including family commitments, thereby facilitating a more balanced integration of work and personal life. The participant remarked that, “I give the schedule upfront, it helps them to plan their work-life balance, when to fetch the kids etc., so for me, communication is vital, as detailed as possible and planning and organizing the department, because if

you can do that, you don't have to control so much. because you don't want to be a micromanager”.

6 Discussion

The current study highlights the challenges arising from different career progression expectations among staff members from various generations. Creating meaningful career pathways and opportunities for growth is necessary to motivate and engage younger generations in academia. Addressing salary expectations and benchmarking salaries to remain competitive is also important (Berk, 2013; Hannay & Fretwell, 2011; Mofokeng, 2017). The existing academic career progression model may not align with the preferences of Gen X and Gen Y, who value talent and contribution recognition over tenure (Berk, 2013; Hannay & Fretwell, 2011; Mofokeng, 2017). Managers are faced with the challenge of balancing the demands, goals, and financial expectations of younger academics (Joshi et al., 2010).

Succession planning is a challenge in managing a multigenerational academic workforce. It requires creating an environment that attracts and supports young academics' professional development and research opportunities to ensure their retention. Strategic succession planning is necessary to balance promotions and maintain a sustainable pool of experienced academics. Knowledge transfer and succession planning are crucial for facilitating a smooth transition and providing growth opportunities for younger generations (CIPD, 2014).

Managing conflict between different generations involves finding a balance in intergenerational perspectives and disagreements on approaches to work. It requires integrating diverse perspectives while maintaining organizational coherence. Understanding and bridging the gap between generational perspectives on work processes and approaches is essential (Fraone et al., 2008; Harris, 2015). Effective conflict resolution and fostering teamwork are necessary in multigenerational workforces, as organizations incur significant costs due to conflict (Dirrler & Podrzensik, 2022). Leaders must adapt their leadership style to mitigate low morale, decreased productivity, job dissatisfaction, and increased turnover (Maier et al., 2015; Mencl & Lester, 2014; Salahuddin, 2010). Mechanistic organizations such as higher education institutions often experience resistive intergenerational interactions due to weak normative contexts, which can lead to conflict, competition, and closure (Joshi et al., 2010).

Technological literacy and skill gaps among different generations pose a challenge in managing the academic workforce. Older academics may struggle to keep up with technological advancements, hindering their effective engagement with new tools and platforms. Targeted interventions, training programs, and resources are necessary to address these challenges and support older generations in utilizing technology. Recognizing and addressing diverse skill sets and experiences across generations is crucial (Berk, 2013; Hannay & Fretwell, 2011; Poblete & Nieto, 2020).

Teamwork is a challenge in fostering collaboration and a sense of collective responsibility among younger generations. Strategies should encourage greater involvement and contribution from younger academics to enhance teamwork and departmental cohesion. Limited training on developing teamwork among team members of different ages may contribute to this challenge (Dokadia et al., 2015; Eberz, 2020).

Work-life balance is a challenge in managing a multigenerational workplace. Providing support, structured teaching arrangements, and respecting personal time are crucial to avoid overworking and overwhelming young academics. Effective communication and organizational support enable employees to navigate their work-life responsibilities (Cennamo & Gardner, 2008; Gursoy et al., 2013).

Managing multigenerational academic staff members may have adverse effects on planning and strategy implementation. Resistance to change from the older generation and potential resistance from the younger generation impact the department's ability to adapt and achieve objectives. Change management is important in addressing these challenges (Maier et al., 2015; Menci & Lester, 2014; Joshi et al., 2010). Resistive intergenerational interactions create difficulties for managers in implementing departmental plans (Joshi et al., 2010).

7 Conclusion

This purpose of this study was to examine the challenges of managing a multigenerational workforce of academics in the South African higher education sector. The study identified eight challenges faced by managers that lead a multigenerational workforce of academics. These were attitudes and values, career progression, conflict management, teamwork, succession planning, work-life balance, skills, and experience, planning and strategy implementation. The challenges, articulated by the participants in this study, were confirmed by existing literature. This shows that the higher education sector is not immune from the challenges that come with a multigenerational workforce.

This study contributes to the literature on multiple generations in higher education by identifying eight challenges faced by heads of departments in managing a multigenerational academic workforce. It validates the proposition that mechanistic organizations with a weak normative context fall within the resistive end of the intergenerational interactions continuum,

characterized by mutual distrust and conflict between generations (Joshi et al., 2010).

The study has the following implications for higher education institutions.

- They should provide ongoing support, training, and resources to bridge the technological gap between generations.
- Clear and transparent career development paths that align with the expectations of different generations should be established. This may involve training, mentorship programs, and advancement opportunities.

The Complexities of Managing a Multigenerational Academic Workforce in the South African Higher Education Sector

- Cross-generational knowledge sharing initiatives should be implemented to encourage collaboration and mentorship.
- Succession planning programs should be comprehensive and consider the skills and experience required for key positions.
- Policies promoting work-life balance should be adopted, along with cultivating a culture that values employees' well-being.

For heads of departments the following implications apply:

- They must encourage teamwork and an inclusive culture.
- Team-building activities and collaborative decision-making processes can promote understanding and cohesion among team members.
- It is important for heads of departments to understand the values, motivations, and communication styles of different generations so that they can better meet their needs and expectations.
- It is also important for department heads to avoid generational stereotypes themselves and to see the strengths each generation possesses.

The findings of the study are based on the experiences of the heads of academic departments with regards to the effective management of a multi-generational academic workforce in the South African public higher education sector. Therefore, the findings are limited to the South African public higher education sector. Additionally, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, face-to-face interviews had to be replaced by virtual interviews to ensure participants and researcher's safety. Thus, the observance of participants' body language cues, behaviour and eye contact was limited and/or practically impossible as the video functionality on MS Teams was not used due to bandwidth challenges. Furthermore, unforeseen interruptions in participants' homes could not be avoided by the researcher. Therefore, the interview process could not be guaranteed to be totally private and interruption-free, thus the responses of participants may have been influenced by these conditions. This study was limited to public higher education institutions in South Africa. Future research could conduct a similar study with private higher education institutions in South Africa or elsewhere. Furthermore, a comparative study could be conducted on the similarities and differences of elements that comprise an integrated framework for the effective management of multigenerational academic staff members in the South African private and public higher education institutions. Similar studies could be conducted in other sectors as well.

8 References

Azman, N., Sirat, M., & Pang, V. (2016). Managing and Mobilising Talent in Malaysia: Issues, Challenges and Policy Implications for Malaysian Universities. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 38(3), 316–332. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2016.1174406>

Badat, S. (2008). Producing, Transforming the Social Composition of, and Retaining a New Generation of Academics: The Rhodes University Pro-

gramme of Accelerated Development.
<https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/145048692.pdf>

Berk, R.A. (2013). Multigenerational Diversity in the academic Workplace: Implications for Practice. *Journal of Higher Education Management*, 28(1), 10–23.

Bickel, J., & Brown, A.J. (2005). Generation X: Implications for Faculty Recruitment and Development in Academic Health Centers: *Academic Medicine*, 80(3), 205–210. <https://doi.org/10.1097/00001888-200503000-00003>

Book, L., Gatling, A., & Kim, J. (Sunny). (2019). The Effects of Leadership Satisfaction on Employee Engagement, Loyalty, and Retention in the Hospitality Industry. *Journal of Human Resources in Hospitality & Tourism*, 18(3), 368–393. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15332845.2019.1599787>

Bryman, A. (2012). *Social Research Methods* (4th edition). Oxford University Press.

Cennamo, L., & Gardner, D. (2008). Generational Differences in Work Values, Outcomes and Person-Organization Values Fit. *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, 23(8), 891–906. <https://doi.org/10.1108/02683940810904385>

Chun, E., & Evans, A. (2021). Best-In-Class Multigenerational Human Resource and Diversity Policies and Programs. In *Leveraging Multigenerational Workforce Strategies in Higher Education*. Routledge.

CIPD. (2014). *Managing an Age Diverse Workforce: Employer and Employee Views*. https://www.cipd.co.uk/Images/managing-an-age-diverse-workforce_2014_tcm18-10838.pdf

Cismaru, L., & Iunius, R. (2020). Bridging the Generational Gap in the Hospitality Industry: Reverse Mentoring—An Innovative Talent Management Practice for Present and Future Generations of Employees. *Sustainability*, 12, 263. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su12010263>

DHET. (2017). Department of Higher Education and Training—Higher Education Management Information System. Directorate: Higher Education Management Information Systems HEMIS Data Reports. [https://www.dhet.gov.za/SitePages/Higher-Education-Management-Information-Sys-](https://www.dhet.gov.za/SitePages/Higher-Education-Management-Information-Sys-tem.aspx?RootFolder=%2FHEMIS%2FStaff%2FStaff%202017&FolderCTID=0x0120001A2C7183BA3E3B44BFA35ECDA2510D0B&View=%7BD5EDEB6C%2D4BFC%2D4717%2D8C3A%2D86010348ADEA%7D)

[tem.aspx?RootFolder=%2FHEMIS%2FStaff%2FStaff%202017&FolderCTID=0x0120001A2C7183BA3E3B44BFA35ECDA2510D0B&View=%7BD5EDEB6C%2D4BFC%2D4717%2D8C3A%2D86010348ADEA%7D](https://www.dhet.gov.za/SitePages/Higher-Education-Management-Information-Sys-tem.aspx?RootFolder=%2FHEMIS%2FStaff%2FStaff%202017&FolderCTID=0x0120001A2C7183BA3E3B44BFA35ECDA2510D0B&View=%7BD5EDEB6C%2D4BFC%2D4717%2D8C3A%2D86010348ADEA%7D)

Dirrler, P., & Podruzsik, S. (2022). Companies can lose time over conflicts: An analysis of internal indirect conflict costs. *Business: Theory and Practice*, 23(2), 288-301.

Dokadia, A., Rai, S., & Chawla, D. (2015). Multigenerational Differences in Work Attributes & Motivation: An Empirical Study. *Indian Journal of Industrial Relations*, 51(1), 81–96.

Eberz, F. (2020). Generational Differences in the Workplace?: Let's Ask the Managers! In B. Christiansen, *Global Applications of Multigenerational Management and Leadership in the Transcultural Era* (pp. 163–195). IGI Global. <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-5225-9906-7.ch006>

Festing, M., & Schäfer, L. (2014). Generational Challenges to Talent Management: A Framework for Talent Retention based on the Psychological-contract Perspective. *Journal of World Business*, 49(2), 262–271. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jwb.2013.11.010>

Fogg, P. (2008). When Generations Collide. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/when-generations-collide/>

Fraone, J.S., Hartmann, D., & McNally, K. (2008). *The Multi-Generational Workforce: Management Implications and Strategies for Collaboration (EXECUTIVE BRIEFING SERIES, pp. 1–8)*. Chestnut Hill, MA. https://www.academia.edu/5459278/The_Multi_Generational_Workforce_Management_Implications_and_Strategies_for_Collaboration_Boston_College_Center_for_Work_and_Family_Executive_Briefing_Series

Gursoy, D., Chi, C.G.-Q., & Karadag, E. (2013). Generational Differences in Work Values and Attitudes among Frontline and Service Contact Employees. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 32, 40–48. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhm.2012.04.002>

Hannay, M., & Fretwell, C. (2011). The Higher Education Workplace: Meeting the Needs of Multiple Generations. *Research in Higher Education Journal*, 10(1), 1–12.

Harris, M. C. (2015). *Exploring Different Generations: A Phenomenological Study on Conflict Management in the Workplace [A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment Of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Philosophy, Capella University]*. In ProQuest Dissertations and Theses. <https://www.proquest.com/docview/1728126657/abstract/6B2C0CFA590B4C6DPQ/1>

Howell, L.P., Beckett, L.A., Nettiksimmons, J., & Villablanca, A.C. (2012). Generational and Gender Perspectives on Career Flexibility: Ensuring the Faculty Workforce of the Future. *The American Journal of Medicine*, 125(7), 719–728. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amjmed.2012.03.013>

Joshi, A., Dencker, J.C., Franz, G., & Martocchio, J.J. (2010). Unpacking Generational Identities in Organizations. *Academy of Management Review*, 35(3), 392–414. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.35.3.zok392>

Kruger, M., & Viljoen, A. (2022). That Old Saying about Wine and Age: Identifying South African Age-cohort Preferences. *International Journal of Wine Business Research*, 34(4), 495–522. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJWBR-06-2021-0033>

Lappeman, J., Egan, P., & Coppin, V. (2020). Time for an Update: Proposing a New Age Segmentation for South Africa. *Management Dynamics*, 29(1), 2–16.

Lowenstein, S.R., Fernandez, G., & Crane, L.A. (2007). Medical School Faculty Discontent: Prevalence and Predictors of Intent to Leave Academic Careers. *BMC Medical Education*, 7(1), 37. <https://doi.org/10.1186/1472-6920-7-37>

Lundy, K., & Ladd, H. (2021). How the Higher Education Sector is Transforming [Ernest and Young]. https://www.ey.com/en_gl/education/how-the-higher-education-sector-is-transforming

Lyons, S., & Kuron, L. (2014). Generational Differences in the Workplace: A Review of the Evidence and Directions for Future Research. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 35(S1), S139–S157. <https://doi.org/10.1002/job.1913>

Mofokeng, M. (2017). The Perceived Impact of Employee Motivation on the Productivity of Millennials (Generation Y) in the Workplace. *The IIE*.

Mohr, N.M., Moreno-Walton, L., Mills, A.M., Brunett, P.H., & Promes, S.B. (2011). Generational Influences in Academic Emergency Medicine: Teaching and Learning, Mentoring, and Technology (Part I). *Academic Emergency Medicine*, 18(2), 190–199. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1553-2712.2010.00985.x>

Ng, E.S., & Parry, E. (2016). Multigenerational Research in Human Resource Management. In *Research in Personnel and Human Resources Management* (Vol. 34, pp. 1–41). Emerald Group Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1108/S0742-730120160000034008>

Ngulube, P. (2022). Theory and Theorising in Information Science Scholarship. In P. Ngulube (Ed.), *Handbook of Research on Connecting Research Methods for Information Science Research* (pp. 568–586). IGI Global. <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-6684-3881-7.ch029>

OECD. (2012). Higher Education in Regional and City Development: The Free State, South Africa 2012. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/higher-education-in-regional-and-city-development-the-free-state-south-africa-2012_9789264169142-en

Parry, E. (2014). *Generational Diversity at Work: New Research Perspectives*. Routledge.

Poblete, P., & Nieto, E. (2020). Does Time Matter? WhatsApp vs Electronic Mail for Dental Education. A Pilot Study. *European Journal of Dental Education*, 24(1), 121–125. <https://doi.org/10.1111/eje.12475>

Robyn, A., & du Preez, R. (2013). Intention to Quit amongst Generation Y Academics in Higher Education. *SA Journal of Industrial Psychology*, 39(1), 1–14.

Sandhu, S., Benson, J., Sastrowardoyo, S., & Scott-Young, C. (2015). Complexity in Multigenerational Organisations: A Socio-political Perspective. In R.J. Burke, C. Cooper, & A.G. Antoniou, *The Multi-generational and Aging Workforce* (pp. 138–160). Edward Elgar Publishing. <https://www.elgaronline.com/display/edcoll/9781783476572/9781783476572.00015.xml>

Santos, G.G. (2016). Career Barriers Influencing Career Success: A Focus on Academics' Perceptions and Experiences. *Career Development International*, 21(1), 60–84. <https://doi.org/10.1108/CDI-03-2015-0035>

Selesho, J.M., & Naile, I. (2014). Academic Staff Retention As A Human Resource Factor: University Perspective. *International Business & Economics Research Journal* (IBER), 13(2), 295. <https://doi.org/10.19030/iber.v13i2.8444>

USAf. (2019, October 4). Symposium on Developing the Capacity of Early Career Researchers, March 2019 | Universities South Africa. <https://www.usaf.ac.za/symposium-on-developing-the-capacity-of-early-career-researchers-march-2019/>

The Complexities of Managing a Multigenerational Academic Workforce in the South African Higher Education Sector

Van Der Walt, F., Jonck, P., & Sobayeni, N.C. (2016). Work Ethics of Different Generational Cohorts in South Africa. *African Journal of Business Ethics*, 10(1). <https://doi.org/10.15249/10-1-101>

Weerathna, R.S., & Hapurugala, S. (2019). The Effect of Gender on Career Progression: A Conceptual Model. *International Journal of Business and Management*, 14(7), 23. <https://doi.org/10.5539/ijbm.v14n7p23>

Xie, J. S., & Ali, M.J. (2023). Academic Retirement: Changing Paradigms from 'When' to 'How'. *Seminars in Ophthalmology*, 38(6), 509–510.