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Productivity of Institutions of Higher Learning: Institutional Culture, Mental Health, Work-life Balance and Employee Retention: Perspectives from Private Universities in Kenya: A Pragmatic Approach

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ABSTRACT

This study was guided by four key research objectives. The first was to examine the influence of institutional culture on employee retention in private universities in Kenya. The second sought to assess the moderating role of mental health in the relationship between institutional culture and employee retention. The third objective was to establish the moderating role of work-life balance on employee retention. Lastly, the study aimed to examine the joint effect of institutional culture, mental health, and work-life balance on employee retention within these institutions.

Data for the study were collected through both qualitative and quantitative approaches. This study adopted a pragmatic research approach, grounded in the understanding that the value of inquiry lies in its practical outcomes and real-world applicability. Guided by this philosophy, the research did not involve the collection of primary data. Instead, it relied exclusively on secondary data drawn from existing empirical studies, policy documents, scholarly journals, and institutional reports relevant to private universities in Kenya. The focus was on synthesizing evidence related to institutional culture, mental health, work-life balance, and employee retention. These factors were considered as central to understanding productivity in institutions of higher learning.

Secondary sources were systematically identified and reviewed using academic databases and digital libraries, ensuring a diverse range of peer-reviewed materials that offered both theoretical and contextual insights. The data were analyzed through thematic content analysis, enabling the identification of recurring patterns, relationships, and gaps within the literature. These themes were interpreted in light of the research objectives to draw conclusions and formulate evidence-based recommendations. This methodology aligns with the pragmatic paradigm by emphasizing actionable knowledge derived from credible, context-specific sources rather than relying on abstract theorization or direct fieldwork.

The findings revealed that institutional culture had a significant and positive influence on employee retention. Universities with inclusive, transparent, and participatory cultures reported lower turnover intentions among staff. Mental health was found to play a significant moderating role; employees with access to psychological support services and wellness programs were more likely to remain committed and productive, even in institutions with moderate institutional culture ratings. Similarly, work-life balance emerged as a crucial factor, moderating the effects of institutional demands and stressors on retention. Staff who reported flexible schedules and support for family or personal obligations indicated higher job satisfaction and organizational loyalty.



When examined jointly, institutional culture, mental health, and work-life balance accounted for a substantial proportion of the variance in employee retention levels. The analysis suggested that these variables interacted in complex but complementary ways, reinforcing the need for an integrated approach to human resource management in private universities. The study concluded that private universities in Kenya must prioritize employee well-being, organizational inclusivity, and flexible work policies to improve staff retention and, by extension, institutional productivity. It was recommended that university leadership invest in formal mental health programs, foster supportive workplace cultures, and implement work-life policies that reflect the diverse needs of academic and administrative staff. Additionally, future research was encouraged to explore longitudinal impacts of these factors on institutional performance and to expand the scope to public universities for comparative insights.

Key Words:

Institutional Culture; Mental Health; Work-life Balance; Employee Retention; Institutional Productivity

