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RETENTION OF ADMINISTRATIVE STAFF IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN KAZAKHSTAN

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ABSTRACT. This study examined the key factors influencing the retention of administrative staff in Kazakhstani higher education institutions (HEIs), a workforce whose turnover has received little dedicated research attention despite its cost to institutional stability and service quality. Methodology – A qualitative research design was adopted, using semi-structured interviews with ten administrative staff (seven women, three men; 1–13 years of experience) purposively sampled from one private and one autonomous university in Astana and Almaty. Data were analysed using inductive thematic analysis, guided by Herzberg's two-factor theory. Originality/value – Administrative staff retention in Kazakhstan remains an under-researched area; the study contributes context-specific, practice-oriented evidence to a thin regional literature base and tests the applicability of Herzberg's framework in a non-Western higher education setting. Findings – Retention was shaped by salary, workload, career opportunities, corporate culture, leadership style, team relationships, benefits, professional development, and job stability. Career growth emerged as the strongest driver, consistent with Herzberg's motivators, while salary functioned as both a hygiene factor and, at times, a direct motivator — a nuance not fully captured by the original theory. Younger staff prioritised pay and career growth; more experienced staff prioritised comfort and stability. The autonomous university offered stronger formal benefits but a more bureaucratic culture; the private university offered flexibility and informal relationships but weaker structured support. The findings suggest that retention strategies in Kazakhstani HEIs should be tailored by career stage and institution type, with HR departments taking a more continuous, proactive role across the employee lifecycle rather than engaging mainly at recruitment and exit.

KEYWORDS: administrative staff; staff retention; turnover intention; higher education institutions; Kazakhstan; Herzberg's two-factor theory; qualitative research

Қазақстанның жоғары оқу орындарындағы әкімшілік персоналды сақтап қалу мәселесі

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АҢДАТПА. Зерттеудің мақсаты – Қазақстанның жоғары оқу орындарындағы (ЖОО) әкімшілік персоналды сақтап қалуға әсер ететін негізгі факторларды анықтау болды; бұл персонал санатының кадр ауысымдылығы оның институционалдық тұрақтылық пен қызмет сапасына тигізетін маңызына қарамастан осы уақытқа дейін жеткілікті зерттелмеген. Әдіснамасы – сапалық зерттеу дизайны қолданылды: Астана мен Алматыдағы бір жеке және бір автономды университеттен мақсатты іріктеу әдісімен таңдалған он әкімшілік қызметкермен (жеті әйел, үш ер адам; жұмыс өтілі 1-13 жыл) жартылай құрылымдалған сұхбат жүргізілді. Деректер Херцбергтің екі факторлы теориясына сүйене отырып, индуктивті тақырыптық талдау әдісімен өңделді. Зерттеудің бірегейлігі/құндылығы – Қазақстандағы әкімшілік персоналды сақтап қалу тақырыбы әлі де жеткілікті зерттелмеген; зерттеу аймақтық әдебиетке контекстке сай, практикаға бағытталған деректер қосады, сондай-ақ Херцберг теориясының батыстық емес жоғары білім беру контекстінде қолданылу мүмкіндігін тексереді. Зерттеу нәтижелері – қызметкерлерді сақтап қалуға жалақы, жұмыс жүктемесі, мансаптық мүмкіндіктер, корпоративтік мәдениет, басшылық стилі, ұжымдағы қарым-қатынас, жеңілдіктер, кәсіби даму және жұмыс тұрақтылығы әсер етті. Ең маңызды фактор ретінде мансаптық өсу анықталды, бұл Херцбергтің мотиваторлар туралы тұжырымымен сәйкес келеді, ал жалақы кейбір жағдайларда гигиеналық фактор да, тікелей мотиватор да қызметін атқарды, бұл бастапқы теорияға толық сыймайды. Жас қызметкерлер жалақы мен мансаптық өсуге басымдық берсе, тәжірибелі қызметкерлер жайлылық пен тұрақтылыққа басымдық берді. Автономды университет неғұрлым дамыған ресми жеңілдіктер пакетін ұсынғанымен, бюрократиялық мәдениетке ие болды; жеке университет икемділік пен бейресми қарым-қатынасты ұсынғанымен, құрылымдық қолдауы әлсіз болды. Нәтижелер Қазақстан ЖОО-ларындағы персоналды сақтап қалу стратегиялары қызметкердің мансаптық кезеңі мен оқу орнының түрін ескеруі қажет екенін, ал персоналды басқару қызметі тек қабылдау мен жұмыстан босату кезеңдерімен шектелмей, еңбек қатынастарының барлық кезеңінде тұрақты әрі проактивті рөл атқаруы тиіс екенін көрсетеді.

ТҮЙІН СӨЗДЕР: әкімшілік персонал; персоналды сақтап қалу; кадр ауысымдылығы; жоғары оқу орындары; Қазақстан; Херцбергтің екі факторлы теориясы; сапалық зерттеу

Удержание административного персонала в высших учебных заведениях Казахстана

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АННОТАЦИЯ. Цель исследования – выявить ключевые факторы, влияющие на удержание административного персонала в высших учебных заведениях (вузах) Казахстана — категории персонала, текучесть которой до настоящего времени практически не изучалась, несмотря на её значение для институциональной стабильности и качества услуг. Методология – применён качественный дизайн исследования: проведены полуструктурированные интервью с десятью представителями административного персонала (семь женщин, трое мужчин; стаж от 1 до 13 лет), отобранными методом целевой выборки в одном частном и одном автономном университете Астаны и Алматы. Данные проанализированы методом индуктивного тематического анализа с опорой на двухфакторную теорию Херцберга. Оригинальность/ценность исследования – удержание административного персонала в Казахстане остаётся малоизученной темой; исследование вносит вклад в немногочисленную региональную литературу, предлагая контекстно-специфичные, практико-ориентированные данные, а также проверяет применимость теории Херцберга в незападном контексте высшего образования. Результаты исследования – на удержание персонала влияли заработная плата, рабочая нагрузка, карьерные возможности, корпоративная культура, стиль руководства, отношения в коллективе, льготы, профессиональное развитие и стабильность занятости. Наиболее значимым фактором оказался карьерный рост, что согласуется с трактовкой мотиваторов у Херцберга, тогда как заработная плата выступала одновременно и гигиеническим фактором, и — в ряде случаев — прямым мотиватором, что не в полной мере укладывается в исходную теорию. Молодые сотрудники в первую очередь ориентированы на оплату труда и карьерный рост, тогда как более опытные — на комфорт и стабильность. Автономный университет предлагал более развитый формальный пакет льгот, но более бюрократичную культуру; частный университет — гибкость и неформальные отношения, но менее структурированную поддержку. Результаты показывают, что стратегии удержания персонала в вузах Казахстана должны учитывать этап карьеры сотрудника и тип учебного заведения, а служба управления персоналом должна играть более постоянную и проактивную роль на всех этапах трудовых отношений, а не ограничиваться наймом и увольнением.

КЛЮЧЕВЫЕ СЛОВА: административный персонал; удержание персонала; текучесть кадров; высшие учебные заведения; Казахстан; двухфакторная теория Херцберга; качественное исследование

INTRODUCTION. Higher education institutions (HEIs) rely on administrative staff to function, yet high turnover among this group has become common practice in many organisations, disrupting operations and raising costs (Figueroa, 2015). In Kazakhstan, HEIs have modernised significantly since independence, but progress has been constrained by regulatory limits, restricted institutional autonomy, and bureaucratic practices. Staff turnover generates high direct and indirect financial costs, reduced productivity and service quality, loss of institutional knowledge, disrupted informal communication channels, and lower morale among remaining staff (Ng'ethe, 2013; Pienaar & Bester, 2008).

Administrative staff turnover in Kazakhstani HEIs has received little dedicated research attention, despite being linked in adjacent studies to poor working conditions and delayed wages (Moreira & Machado, 2022), rigid, hierarchical organisational culture (Zharkeshova et al., 2017), and pressure from poorly supported key performance indicators (Mukasheva, 2022). Heckert and Farabee (2006) similarly identified salary as an important predictor of turnover intentions in higher education generally. Because staff turnover threatens the stability and quality of education at Kazakhstani HEIs, this study aimed to fill a gap in the literature by generating context-specific evidence and practical recommendations for staff retention.

Staff retention has been defined as aligning an institution's needs with employees' needs for professional and personal growth (Todorovski & Atanasoska, 2013), while recognising administrative staff as valued internal clients — rather than purely support functions — supports well-being and motivation (Pitman, 2000; Koonkongsatian, 2017). Job satisfaction is consistently linked to turnover intentions: Heckert and Farabee (2006) found that satisfaction with pay, the job itself, and workload collectively explained 26% of variance in turnover intentions, while Akosile and Ekemen (2022) showed that core self-evaluations mediate the relationship between job satisfaction and turnover intention through both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Guyo (2023), drawing on Herzberg and an analogy with Maslow's hierarchy, argued that salary alone cannot raise satisfaction because it addresses a basic need, but a competitive salary can prevent dissatisfaction, while recognition and achievement raise satisfaction further; Liu et al. (2012) demonstrated that job satisfaction tends to decline over time absent intervention, and Ng'ethe (2013) showed that leadership style, staff training, career growth, and reward shaped faculty retention in Kenyan public universities.

Poor working conditions and insufficient organisational support are recurrent themes in the retention literature. The OECD's (2018) TALIS report linked higher job satisfaction to autonomy in decision-making, professional development opportunities, and structured induction; Ohunakin (2015) found that the top drivers of voluntary turnover among administrative staff were poor remuneration, poor fringe benefits, and inconsistent promotion; and Bala and Jayavardhini (2021) identified career growth as the most influential retention factor in Indian HEIs, a finding echoed by Tnay et al. (2013). Zamri (2023) identified inadequate management support as a key driver of dissatisfaction, and Erasmus et al. (2015) found that a quarter of staff intending to leave at a South African HEI cited leadership or management relationships as the reason. Research specific to Kazakhstan remains scarce, limiting practical, context-sensitive guidance for HEI leaders.

This study used Herzberg's (1966) two-factor theory as its theoretical basis. The theory distinguishes hygiene factors (e.g., salary, working conditions) that prevent dissatisfaction from motivators (e.g., recognition, growth) that build genuine satisfaction and long-term commitment (Herzberg, 1966; Wall & Stephenson, 1970); because it is not tied to a specific national context, it is well suited to this study, and Sachau (2007) and Mitsakis and Galanakis (2022) confirm its continued relevance across diverse organisational settings. The theory is not without critique: Bassett-Jones and Lloyd (2005) questioned whether motivators and hygiene factors are as cleanly separable in practice as Herzberg proposed, noting that factors such as salary can function as both. Guided by this framework, the study explored the key factors influencing administrative staff retention in Kazakhstani HEIs by examining stakeholders' experiences, addressing two research questions: (1) How do working conditions influence turnover patterns among administrative staff in HEIs in Kazakhstan? and (2) What key challenges contribute to turnover among administrative staff in Kazakhstani HEIs? Staff turnover carries substantial costs — Figueroa (2015) estimated turnover-related costs at US$68 million across US universities in a single year — and disrupts institutional knowledge, service quality, and student experience. Findings are intended to benefit university leaders and HR departments seeking evidence-based retention strategies (Moreira & Machado, 2022), students who depend on consistent administrative support (Verma & Kaur, 2024), and policymakers addressing workforce development, contributing context-specific evidence to a thin literature base (Zharkeshova et al., 2017).

MATERIAL AND METHODS OF RESEARCH. This study adopted a qualitative research design (Creswell, 2007) to explore, in depth, the experiences and perceptions of administrative staff regarding retention in Kazakhstani HEIs. A qualitative approach was chosen because understanding the nature and detail of a complex, context-dependent problem required giving participants the opportunity to speak in their own words — insight that quantitative methods alone could not easily capture. Semi-structured interviews were selected as the primary data collection tool for their flexibility in surfacing new topics as they emerged.

Ten participants — seven women and three men, with between 1 and 13 years of administrative experience — were recruited using purposive sampling (Creswell, 2007; Campbell et al., 2020) from two Kazakhstani universities, one private and one autonomous (five participants from each), based in Astana and Almaty. Purposive sampling was chosen to improve the fit between the sample and the study's aims, strengthening rigour and trustworthiness (Campbell et al., 2020). Eligibility required at least one year in an administrative role in Kazakhstan and prior experience at another educational institution, allowing participants to draw comparisons across workplaces. Guest et al. (2005) found that around twelve interviews are typically sufficient to reach data saturation in qualitative research (92% of codes identified within the first twelve interviews), supporting the adequacy of a ten-participant sample, consistent with the emphasis Liu et al. (2012) placed on capturing varied job-satisfaction trajectories through participants with different tenures. Selecting one private and one autonomous university across two cities was intended to capture the representational diversity Allmark (2004) considers important in qualitative research, consistent with Creswell's (2007) view that qualitative participants may be drawn from one or several sites provided they share the phenomenon under study.

Data were collected through semi-structured inter-

views (Kallio et al., 2016; Gill et al., 2008; Harris, n.d.) covering job satisfaction, working conditions, corporate culture, relationships with management, salary, wellbeing, and work-life balance, using a guide developed from the literature review. With consent, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim; where recording was declined, notes wre taken instead.

Data were analysed using inductive thematic analysis (Nowell et al., 2017), a method well suited to identifying, organising, and presenting patterns across qualitative datasets, and previously used in similar retention research (King et al., 2018). Transcripts were reviewed and reread before coding began; coding was inductive, without predefined categories, and codes were subsequently grouped into themes and related back to the research questions. NVivo software supported coding and workflow organisation throughout, generating two overarching themes — working conditions of administrative staff, and challenges faced by administrative staff — each with several sub-themes.

Ethical approval was obtained from the NUGSE Ethics Committee prior to data collection (Misra & Tyagi, 2019; Arifin, 2018). All participants received a consent form describing the study's purpose, procedures, and any risks or benefits, and were informed of their right to withdraw at any time. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout: names, positions, and institution names were coded, data were stored in a password-protected folder accessible only to the researcher (Lin, 2009), and interviews were conducted in informal or online settings (e.g., Zoom, Google Meet) at participants' convenience. Because discussing job dissatisfaction and workplace problems carried some risk of discomfort or concern about job security (Butler et al., 2017), participants could decline any question, and findings were reported in ways designed not to compromise participants' job security or institutional reputation.

RESULTS AND THEIR DISCUSSION. Ten participants — assigned pseudonyms Aisana, Baibek, Kamilla, Zarina, Aslan, Kanat, Lana, Aigul, Diana, and Gaziza — took part, with experience ranging from 1.5 to 13 years across five private-university and five autonomous-university roles (Table 1). Thematic analysis generated two overarching themes — working conditions of administrative staff, and challenges faced by administrative staff — discussed below alongside relevant literature.

Table 1 — Participant characteristics

Pseudonym	Gender	Experience (years)	University type
Aisana	Ж / F	9	Private
Baibek	M / M	4	Private
Kamilla	Ж / F	6	Autonomous
Zarina	Ж / F	2	Private
Aslan	M / M	1.5	Autonomous
Kanat	M / M	5	Autonomous
Lana	Ж / F	13	Autonomous
Aigul	Ж / F	3	Private
Diana	Ж / F	7	Private
Gaziza	Ж / F	4	Autonomous

Working conditions, benefits, and leadership**.** Participants described varied administrative roles — from student support, dormitory allocation, and event organisation, to HR recruitment and library management — and were generally drawn to their roles by the academic environment, opportunities for personal growth, or institutional reputation. Working conditions were viewed positively overall: Aisana praised salary transparency ("The grading system is very good"), and autonomous-university participants praised health insurance and premiums ("the company offers a lot of different opportunities for their workers" — Kamilla) alongside convenient schedules (Gaziza). Several participants described favourable team relationships ("the atmosphere within the team is important ... we are all friendly, all respectful" — Diana), though views on decision-making autonomy were mixed, with Kanat and Lana describing considerable independence and Aisana and Aigul noting that decisions typically required approval from multiple management levels.

Leadership style and corporate culture strongly affected retention, consistent with Ng'ethe (2013): supportive, feedback-driven leadership increased satisfaction (Kanat: "the local leadership is kind and supportive ... gives me a sense of my importance"), while overly critical or authoritarian management increased stress (Aigul: "it leads to excessive stress at work"), consistent with Samakao and Mulenga's (2023) findings on micromanagement. Formal recognition was inconsistently applied — Aisana and Baibek both described an absence of open praise ("if you do your job well, everyone stays silent" — Baibek) — partly aligning with Heckert and Farabee (2006): lack of recognition was noted by half the sample but rarely drove intent to leave when other job aspects were satisfactory, suggesting it operates more as a hygiene factor than a primary motivator in this context. Private-university staff frequently cited informal, trust-based culture and team-building investment (Lana: "we have money allocated to team building"), while autonomous-university staff described more formal, bureaucratic communication that could slow the resolution of urgent issues (Zarina), echoing the trade-off Erasmus et al. (2015) identified between formal structure and flexibility.

Career growth and Herzberg's theory**.** Career growth emerged as the most influential factor in staying or leaving, aligning with Tnay et al. (2013) and Bala and Jayavardhini (2021) and consistent with Herzberg's framing of career advancement as a motivator: even where salaries were competitive, the absence of growth opportunities left employees dissatisfied. This pattern was strongest among younger participants, several of whom indicated they would leave if promotion prospects stalled, echoing Said et al.'s (2018) finding that excessive workload without career progression drives turnover intentions. However, findings diverged from Herzberg's theory in one respect: salary functioned for some participants as both a hygiene factor and a direct motivator. Zarina and Gaziza both cited salary as a top-of-mind factor, and Gaziza stressed that "salary is more important than workload," while Aisana, more experienced, was willing to accept lower pay for reduced stress ("I lost in salary when I joined a private university, but I got comfort and less stress") — a distinction that tracked broadly with career stage and is not fully captured by Herzberg's original dichotomy, though consistent with more recent applications of the theory (Mitsakis & Galanakis, 2022). Kamilla noted that working at a prestigious university "gives you both perspectives" despite some perceived bias among colleagues, illustrating that institutional prestige itself can function as a non-monetary motivator.

Work challenges, turnover factors, and conflict resolution. Commute time (Aisana: "it takes us an average of three hours a day to get to work"), unclear task ownership between departments (Baibek), monotonous repetitive student queries (Zarina), and unclear or unpaid additional KPI-linked projects (Gaziza) were commonly raised. Notably, uncertainty in the KPI system did not translate into dissatisfaction, in contrast to Mukasheva's

(2022) mining-sector findings that unclear KPIs increase stress; administrative staff in this study appeared motivated primarily by potential rewards rather than burdened by unclear expectations, possibly because failure to meet KPIs carried no direct negative consequence. The abrupt cancellation of a KPI-linked bonus scheme described by Gaziza ("Weekly 10") illustrates how quickly a well-intentioned incentive system can undermine trust if changed without explanation, suggesting that transparency about why a system changes may matter as much as its design, consistent with Wagner's (2006) emphasis on ongoing engagement over one-off satisfaction measurement.

The two institutions differed sharply in how they detected and responded to dissatisfaction. The autonomous university used satisfaction surveys and structured exit interviews to identify recurring reasons for leaving — chiefly salary, then personal circumstances and career change (Lana) — while the private university's management took a more hands-off approach (Baibek: "the university is explicitly and openly saying that if you don't like it, get out of here"). Where dissatisfaction was addressed directly, outcomes could still be positive: Aigul was reassigned to a different department after raising concerns and was promoted a year later, and Lana described a case in which an unsatisfied employee was retained after receiving additional responsibilities and a salary increase. Conversely, Aisana recounted a case in which a qualified employee's request for a modest salary increase to cover rent was refused under the private university's uniform salary policy, and the employee left; she concluded that "private university does not practice a retention policy ... they make it very easy for employees to quit." Several participants also described emotional strain rather than purely financial motives for considering departure: Lana, an HR director, noted that "working as the human resource department director involves a lot of responsibility. I often burn out and wonder why I keep doing this," while Baibek described declining higher-paying offers elsewhere because "the emotional burden was heavier."

Practical implications**.** Taken together, these findings suggest that a single, uniform retention policy is unlikely to work well across institution types or career stages. Benefit disparities between institution types mirrored Ohunakin's (2015) finding that inadequate benefits and inconsistent promotion are top drivers of voluntary turnover, with the private university's limited social package and the autonomous university's more bureaucratic culture representing two distinct, institution-specific retention risks. For HR practice, career development conversations and structured promotion pathways matter most for retaining younger staff, while preserving a comfortable, low-conflict working environment and offering meaningful, non-monetary support matters most for retaining experienced staff. Although this study did not set out to examine gender specifically, the predominantly female sample (seven of ten participants) is consistent with Jo's (2008) observation that women are heavily represented in university administrative roles, and future Kazakhstan-specific research could usefully examine whether retention drivers differ by gender within this workforce.

CONCLUSION. This study examined factors influencing administrative staff retention in two Kazakhstani HEIs through ten semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis. Retention was shaped by salary, workload, career opportunities, corporate culture, leadership, team relationships, benefits, professional development, and job stability. While working conditions were broadly satisfactory at both institutions, insufficient career growth and, at the private university, limited benefits were the clearest sources of dissatisfaction. The autonomous university offered stronger benefits but a more bureaucratic culture; the private university offered flexibility and informal, trust-based relationships but weaker structured support and retention effort. Younger staff prioritised growth and pay; experienced staff prioritised comfort and stability, indicating that retention strategies should be tailored by career stage as well as by institution type.

The decision to stay or leave was ultimately personal, shaped by individual circumstances layered on top of common institutional factors. Notably, comprehensive bonus and insurance packages at the autonomous university were not, on their own, sufficient to offset dissatisfaction linked to limited career growth and a comparatively passive HR function that tended to react only after an employee had already decided to leave, underscoring that sustained engagement across the employee lifecycle — recruitment, evaluation, development planning, and exit — is likely more effective than benefits alone at building trust and preventing premature departures.

Institutions should develop individualised career development plans, including annual performance reviews and clear internal promotion pathways, so employees can see a future within the organisation. HR departments should be more actively and continuously involved across the employee lifecycle — through regular check-ins, satisfaction surveys, and training-needs assessments — rather than engaging mainly at recruitment and exit. KPI and reward systems should be made transparent and consistently linked to achievable goals to reduce uncertainty and increase engagement. Finally, particularly for the private university, introducing structured benefits such as medical coverage would complement its already-valued flexible, informal culture.

Beyond the immediate participating institutions, these findings offer a starting evidence base for HEI leaders elsewhere in Kazakhstan who face similar administrative-staff turnover pressures but currently have little local research to draw on. Because the private and autonomous university models represent two common institutional forms in the Kazakhstani higher education sector, the contrasting retention profiles identified here — flexible but under-benefited versus well-benefited but bureaucratic — may plausibly generalise to other institutions of the same type. This study was limited to two universities and ten participants; while sufficient for rich qualitative insight, a larger, mixed-methods study across multiple Kazakhstani HEIs would help establish how widely these patterns generalise, and longitudinal research would help assess whether the recommendations proposed here produce lasting improvements in retention.

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