

**Why are academics leaving? Proposing and examining the framework for Iraqi university student brain drain**Sara Mohammed Abdulrazzaq<sup>1</sup>, Rabaa mazhair<sup>2</sup>, Nour Raheem Neamah<sup>3</sup>, Israa Abed Jawad<sup>4</sup>, Toman Alkhafagy<sup>5</sup>, Sarah Hassan Jalil<sup>6</sup>, Mohammed Yousif Oudah Al- Muttar<sup>7</sup>, Mohamed amer alseidi<sup>8</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

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**Purpose:** The primary objective of the present study is to examine the effects of employee branding and career progression possibilities on the retention of teaching personnel at Iraqi universities. Furthermore, this study has also investigated the mediating function of employee engagement in the relationship between employee branding, career progression prospects, and the retention of teaching staff at Iraqi universities. The present study has formulated and analyzed a conceptual framework in order to elucidate the phenomenon of brain drain among teaching faculty in Iraqi institutions.**Methodology:** The study employed a survey-based methodology, which involved collecting data through the use of a survey questionnaire that was either produced by the authors or adapted from previous research. The data for this study was collected through the utilization of a questionnaire, with university teachers selected as the sample population for the study. The researchers issued a total of 500 questionnaires, out of which 320 were utilized for the purpose of analysis. Therefore, the study's response rate is 64 percent. The present study employed the Structural Equation Modeling-Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS) technique for data analysis. SEM-PLS is a statistical tool commonly utilised to examine the associations between numerous variables. **Results:** Results suggest that there is a significant and favorable relationship between employee branding, career progression, employee engagement, and employee retention. The findings suggest that there is a mediating role of employee engagement in the association between career progression and employee retention, as well as between employee branding and employee retention. **Novelty:** This paper represents a pioneering effort in proposing and examining<sup>1</sup> English Department, Al-Noor University College, Nineveh, Iraq. Email: [sara.mohammed@alnoor.edu.iq](mailto:sara.mohammed@alnoor.edu.iq)ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9602-1161><sup>2</sup> English Department, college of education/ Al-Farahidi University/ Baghdad Iraq. Email: [mizherrabaa4@gmail.com](mailto:mizherrabaa4@gmail.com)ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7583-1835><sup>3</sup> English Department, Al-Manara College for Medical Sciences, Amarah, Iraq. Email: [nourraheem1@uomanara.edu.iq](mailto:nourraheem1@uomanara.edu.iq)ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7408-4564><sup>4</sup> Department of education/ Al-Nisour University College/Iraq. Email: [israaabedjawad@nuc.edu.iq](mailto:israaabedjawad@nuc.edu.iq)ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2156-2929><sup>5</sup> college of media/ the Islamic university in Najaf/ Iraq. Email: [toman.alkhafagy@gmail.com](mailto:toman.alkhafagy@gmail.com)ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-1486-9789><sup>6</sup> College of Pharmacy/ National University of Science and Technology, Dhi Qar, Iraq. Email: [Sarah.Alokaily@nust.edu.iq](mailto:Sarah.Alokaily@nust.edu.iq)ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2081-965X><sup>7</sup> Scientific Research Center, Al-Ayen University, Thi-Qar, Iraq. Email: [mohd.yousif@alayen.edu.iq](mailto:mohd.yousif@alayen.edu.iq)ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-1572-8575><sup>8</sup> Al-Hadi University College, Baghdad,10011, Iraq. Email: [dr.mohamed.alseidi@huc.edu.iq](mailto:dr.mohamed.alseidi@huc.edu.iq)ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2485-9755>

a paradigm for analysing the phenomenon of brain drain from institutions in Iraq. **Implications:** This study aims to provide a comprehensive policy framework for researchers and policymakers to enhance their understanding of the multifaceted difficulties associated with the phenomenon of brain drain from universities in Iraq.

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## Background

The academic sector plays a key role in the advancement and expansion of nations. It functions as a fundamental basis for the progression of knowledge. The academic sector plays a crucial role in cultivating critical thinking abilities, which are important for stimulating economic growth, through means of education and research. The academic community has a substantial role in fostering cultural and socioeconomic advancement. Education provides individuals with the necessary knowledge and abilities to actively contribute to their communities and engage in informed decision-making. The cultivation of critical, creative, and analytical thinking skills among students is vital for the progression and refinement of society and culture.

The preservation of academic talent is of utmost importance for the achievement and prosperity of the academic domain. The insufficiency of well-educated instructors can have detrimental effects on the overall quality of teaching, research capabilities, and program options within higher education institutions. Traditional career practices are prevalent in the work environment of Iraqi institutions. Human capital is a fundamental element of any prosperous organization, and education is no exemption. The concept incorporates the collective knowledge, abilities, and experience possessed by the entire workforce, hence facilitating the advancement of innovation, flexibility, and sustainability in the future (Alfawaire & Atan, 2021). Several influential variables, including the evolution of leadership norms, the emergence of innovative tools, the prevalence of a knowledge-based economy, and the expansion of the global marketplace, have exerted significant impacts on the academic workforce (Ullah et al., 2022). As a result of the dynamic nature of higher education, there has been a heightened emphasis placed on staff retention by business leaders and human resources professionals. This poses a challenge due to the typically heightened competitiveness, elevated wage levels, and superior benefits associated with the private sector. The presence of ineffective leadership and management has the potential to worsen staff turnover, resulting in significant financial implications for an organization. Organizations that allocate substantial financial resources towards employee retention endeavors can effectively preserve their institutional knowledge and intellectual capital, hence mitigating the expenses associated with the recruitment and onboarding of new personnel. Additionally, such companies stand to gain from the valuable expertise and innovative insights offered by their existing workforce. It is imperative for academic institutions to actively foster an inclusive and supportive atmosphere that promotes a sense of worth and motivation among all staff members, encouraging them to provide their utmost efforts. Implementing a compensation package that is commensurate with industry standards, providing comprehensive benefits, promoting a harmonious equilibrium

between professional obligations and personal well-being, and fostering opportunities for professional advancement are all effective strategies for attracting and retaining highly skilled individuals. Managers and leaders bear the responsibility of cultivating a sense of purpose among their teams. This objective can be achieved by the implementation of regular feedback and communication mechanisms for employees, coupled with the acknowledgment and incentivization of their endeavors.

Since its establishment by consultants from McKinsey in 1997, the concept of "the war for talent" has garnered significant attention and scrutiny from both scholars and practitioners in several fields. The term "talent" encompasses a wide range of attributes, including both innate and acquired ability, as well as one's perspective, discernment, personality, and drive. [Hendri \(2019\)](#) claims that talent can be conceptualized as the amalgamation of three distinct attributes, namely skill, initiative, and dedication. An individual's competency is assessed based on their proficiency, their commitment to organizational longevity, and their capacity to make meaningful contributions towards the achievement of organizational objectives.

It is essential to sustain a competitive advantage in the international market and involves the implementation of strategic human resource management (HRM), a critical factor for colleges. Strategic human resource management places significant focus on the retention of employees, specifically. Multiple studies have established a connection between successful strategies aimed at retaining university employees and the subsequent improvement in operational performance, asset returns, and capital returns ([Alfawaire & Atan, 2021](#); [Cherian et al., 2019](#); [Pham et al., 2021](#); [Ryan et al., 2022](#)). This underscores the importance of employee retention in facilitating colleges in attaining their objectives. The phenomenon of employee turnover within universities can lead to significant financial burdens and negative outcomes. The departure of skilled individuals can adversely affect the financial performance of the organization, owing to the valuable knowledge and skills they contribute to the organization. Universities may allocate a substantial amount of resources, both in terms of time and financial investment, towards the recruitment of new faculty members. The departure of employees who possess expertise might potentially have adverse consequences for operational efficiency, staff morale, and the general productivity of the university. Furthermore, the departure of highly skilled personnel from academic institutions to alternative organizations might have a negative impact on the reputation of those institutions. Negative opinions may be formed by students, prospective workers, and other individuals who are impacted by the university. In order to address the adverse consequences associated with elevated staff turnover rates, it is imperative for universities to adopt and execute efficacious employee retention initiatives.

Universities encounter substantial challenges when confronted with personnel turnover, necessitating the implementation of comprehensive strategies to enhance staff retention. According to recent research conducted by [De-la-Calle-Durán and Rodríguez-Sánchez \(2021\)](#), it is advisable for employers to prioritise the retention of their workforce by proactively addressing many factors such as workplace climate, career progression prospects, salary, and job security. The achievement of employee retention is contingent upon the implementation of proficient human resource management strategies, such as talent management, employee engagement, and succession planning ([Desarno et al., 2021](#)).

Furthermore, via the implementation of an employer branding plan, companies have the ability to both attract and retain high-caliber employees. The implementation of this method has the potential to provide several favorable results, including the attraction and retention of highly skilled individuals, enhanced employee performance, cost reduction, and the acquisition of a competitive advantage (Barauskaite & Streimikiene, 2021; Kryscynski, Coff, & Campbell, 2021). Research has shown that an enhanced employer brand has favorable outcomes in terms of attracting and retaining highly skilled personnel, as well as bolstering the organization's public image. It is recommended that universities give priority to the implementation of excellent human resource management practices and the adoption of an employer branding strategy in order to improve organizational performance and competitiveness.

Career development opportunities encompass an individual's capacity to acquire further proficiencies and assume greater responsibilities within their existing professional role. The term "career" comprises the entirety of an individual's work-related endeavors, while "career growth" specifically refers to their capacity for advancement and professional enhancement within their own organization. Although an individual's career covers all of their work-related endeavors, it is possible for them to pursue multiple careers simultaneously (Weiss et al., 2022). Research has been conducted on the subject of self-management of one's career and early job experiences as potential variables for career advancement. In order to effectively enhance employee retention, it is important for an organization to prioritize the establishment and cultivation of connections with its workforce. The establishment of these ties is of paramount importance for the progression and professional development of personnel. This undertaking is more probable to achieve success in workplaces that prioritize the well-being of their personnel and offer abundant opportunities for career progression. Organizations that prioritize the enhancement of their employee's professional growth and implement proficient personnel management strategies are more inclined to retain their most skilled individuals.

In recent years, there has been a growing emphasis on employee engagement within the field of human resource management (Agarwal, 2021). This phenomenon can be attributed to the recognition by employers that a workforce characterised by high levels of engagement tends to exhibit a higher propensity for employee retention. Research has shown that the level of employee loyalty significantly influences an employee's choice to continue their employment with their present organisation. The cultivation of an engaged workforce is of utmost importance due to the positive correlation between employee engagement and individuals' actions, beliefs, and future intentions. The primary focus of academic study has been on the identification of attributes exhibited by workers who demonstrate high levels of engagement. Nevertheless, current scholarly investigations have predominantly focused on the implementation of talent management practices as a means to enhance employee retention and foster higher levels of commitment. The aforementioned transition can be attributed to increasing recognition of the crucial role played by efficient talent management strategies in maintaining a contented and high-performing staff. An effective talent management plan encompasses the processes of acquiring, nurturing, and retaining personnel possessing critical competencies and capabilities. The use of talent management strategies that cultivate a work environment that promotes employee engagement,

productivity, and job satisfaction has the potential to decrease employee turnover. Furthermore, enterprises that allocate resources towards talent management are more likely to enhance employee retention rates, so affording them a distinct competitive edge inside the market. In order to enhance employee engagement and retention, organizations should prioritize the implementation of talent management practises, since these have the potential to foster growth, employee development, and job satisfaction. This can assist organizations in enhancing employee engagement. The practices discussed herein pertain to the creation of a supportive and constructive work environment, as well as the recognition of employee success and the provision of possibilities for progression within the workplace. Organizations can potentially attain a competitive edge and enhance productivity through the allocation of resources towards fostering employee commitment to the company's mission and the attainment of its objectives. The phenomenon of brain drain among university academics in Iraq is a critical topic within the country's educational sector. In recent decades, Iraq has made substantial investments in its higher education system, with a focus on cultivating a knowledge-based economy and enhancing its human resources. Furthermore, notwithstanding the aforementioned endeavors, the nation is currently grappling with the emigration of its skilled academics to foreign countries, mostly driven by enhanced employment prospects, elevated living standards, and more lucrative remuneration. In the country of Iraq, One of the main factors contributing to the phenomenon of brain drain among university academics is the constrained prospects for professional advancement and career development within the country. Despite the government's endeavors to foster academic research and innovation, institutions in Iraq continue to encounter obstacles in establishing a conducive academic milieu. Consequently, a significant number of scholars actively pursue international opportunities, as they offer enhanced career prospects and exposure to a wide range of research settings.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that in Iraq, the brain drain situation is made worse by the inadequate remuneration and perks provided to academics. In Iraq, numerous scholars receive enticing employment propositions from foreign colleges, which present them with elevated remuneration packages, superior research infrastructure, and enhanced prospects for advancing their professional careers. This phenomenon is prevalent among early-career scholars who are striving to establish their professional trajectories. The phenomenon of brain drain in Iraq has experienced a significant increase, reaching a rate of 6.4 by the year 2021.

The phenomenon of brain drain among university academics in Iraq has substantial ramifications for the higher education system. The departure of highly skilled and seasoned scholars significantly diminishes the caliber of education, rendering it challenging for institutions to maintain competitiveness on both domestic and global scales. In order to retain highly skilled academics in Iraq, it is imperative for the government and institutions to prioritize the establishment of an environment conducive to academic growth. Additionally, offering competitive pay would serve as a catalyst for fostering a creative research culture. The term "brain drain" refers to the phenomenon wherein individuals with advanced education and/or significant expertise choose to emigrate from their nation of origin in pursuit of more favorable prospects in foreign lands. This situation has arisen as a significant challenge confronting educational institutions, namely universities, throughout the country.

The scarcity of job prospects for individuals possessing advanced degrees and specialized knowledge is a significant determinant of the brain drain phenomenon observed in colleges within the Kingdom of Iraq. Based on the tenets of the Social Exchange Theory, it can be posited that organizations that offer their workforce avenues for professional growth and foster favorable brand perceptions are inclined to establish a favorable reciprocal association with their employees. Consequently, this association is anticipated to yield enhanced levels of job contentment, heightened employee involvement, and increased employee retention rates. Organizations have the potential to establish a robust brand that effectively appeals to and keeps highly skilled personnel through the cultivation of a favorable organizational culture that is congruent with the values of their employees. Additionally, providing substantial avenues for career advancement and personal development can further contribute to this objective. Thus, based on issues broached in the background, the study has planned to achieve the following research objectives:

- To examine the impact of employee branding on the employee retention of universities in Iraq.
- To examine the impact of career growth opportunities on the employee retention of universities in Iraq.
- To examine the mediating role of employee engagement in the relationship between the career growth opportunities, employee branding and employee retention of universities in Iraq.

## Literature Review

### *Employer Branding Employee Retention*

Ambler and Barrow (1996) are credited with being early proponents of the concept of employee branding. The research was conducted to establish a connection between brand management and workplace attractiveness. In this study, employees were seen as customers and were given the same level of importance as customers are to enterprises. Employee branding is a critical factor in attracting the necessary personnel, enhancing job engagement, fostering employee satisfaction, and is also essential for achieving organizational success. According to Pattnaik and Jena (2020), the central factor contributing to organizational performance is employee happiness. They further stated that the implementation of employee branding strategies aids in the retention of employees within an organization. Although extensive research has been conducted to investigate the factors and outcomes of employee branding in relation to employee retention and subsequent brain drain, the majority of these studies have primarily concentrated on private-sector enterprises. Unfortunately, there has been limited or no attention given to exploring the brain drain phenomenon specifically among academics in Iraq. Given the significance of universities and their pivotal role in shaping society, as well as their endeavors to attract and retain highly skilled academics, it is essential to examine the concept of employee branding within the context of public and private sector universities in Iraq. Understanding how these institutions are perceived as employers can be instrumental in mitigating the loss of talented academics, commonly referred to as the brain drain, in Iraq.

Varshney (2020) argued that promoting the belief in the importance of being an exemplary employer, cultivating a favorable work environment, and implementing employee branding is crucial for a university to both retain its existing staff and recruit prospective talent. The proponents also asserted that the promotion of academic excellence, the cultivation of academic and research partnerships, and the facilitation of professional growth are among the initiatives undertaken in the realm of employee branding. In conjunction with fostering a favorable work environment and effectively conveying positive principles to the public, academic institutions across nations have the capacity to cultivate and advance a robust employer brand that garners the interest and loyalty of exceptional personnel. Numerous experts contend that the establishment and cultivation of a robust employer brand not only augment the standing of the school but also potentially result in improved student outcomes and heightened research output. Therefore, it is becoming increasingly imperative and desirable for academic institutions in Iraq to allocate resources toward employer branding efforts. This strategic approach aims to attract and retain highly skilled academics who can make significant contributions to the advancement of many disciplines inside the country.

According to Lim (2022) and Low et al. (2020), it is commonly observed that organizations typically adhere to a hierarchical structure of goals, beginning with the sale of products, progressing to product branding, and culminating in employee branding. This suggests that once a business has successfully established itself and its products as a brand, the primary challenge it faces lies in employee branding and its subsequent impact on employee retention. However, when an organization prioritizes marketing goals without first comprehending the needs and concerns that are significant to prospective employees, it often leads to confusion among potential employees when considering joining the organization. Additionally, this can make it challenging for organizations to retain their current employees as well. Numerous previous research has provided evidence supporting the assertion that employee branding exerts a substantial and favorable influence on employee retention. The study's findings indicate that in the current business landscape characterized by postmodernism and intense competition, a robust employer brand plays a significant role in attracting and retaining talent. Given the anticipated dynamics of the contemporary labor market, this holds great significance. In their influential study, McKinley (2022) provided empirical evidence to support the notion that the employer value proposition (EVP) in conjunction with human resources (HR) strategy plays a crucial role in building an organization's employer brand. Furthermore, the authors contend that human resources' employer branding initiatives play a significant role in enhancing employee retention. This is achieved through the emphasis on maintaining consistency in employee branding, effectively communicating the employer brand, and implementing appropriate measuring strategies. Thus, in light of the literature the study proposed the following hypothesis

**H1:** Employee branding has significant impact on the employee retention in universities.

Career growth refers to an individual's perception of professional development, financial incentives, promotion opportunities, increased social status, and overall well-being associated with the series of jobs, roles, or professional assignments they have undertaken over a specific time period. This encompasses their career trajectory within a



particular organization or industry. In their study, [Xiao, Cooke, and Chen \(2022\)](#) conducted research on a sample of Chinese managers to examine the relationship between career advancement opportunities and employee retention within a certain organization. The literature in the field of human resources suggests that career growth opportunities might serve as a precursor to employee retention. The authors further asserted that as employees develop a perception that their individual needs are being fulfilled and their psychological agreements are being honored, they tend to develop a strong emotional attachment to their respective organizations, hence reducing the likelihood of job turnover.

According to a study conducted by [Ewers et al. \(2022\)](#), academic institutions in Iraq (IRAQI) are currently confronted with a distinct obstacle pertaining to the retention of employees, particularly highly skilled graduates from globally renowned and highly ranked colleges. These individuals are opting to pursue alternative opportunities outside of IRAQI. In a study conducted by [Al Doghan \(2022\)](#), the objective was to investigate the correlation between career advancement and the retention of academic personnel in Saudi universities. The study's findings indicate that career growth plays a crucial role in staff retention. The recommendations suggest that academic institutions in Iraq should offer possibilities for career progression and professional development in order to retain skilled academics. In a recent study conducted by [Alblihed and Alzghaibi \(2022\)](#), the objective was to investigate the factors that contribute to job satisfaction and turnover intention among academic staff in Iraq. The research findings indicated that the presence of career advancement prospects, such as opportunities for promotion and professional progress, had a noteworthy positive influence on individuals' contentment with their jobs, while concurrently exerting a negative effect on their desire to leave the organization. The findings of [Nemteanu and Dabija \(2021\)](#) align with the research conducted by [Alblihed and Alzghaibi \(2022\)](#), indicating that professional progression opportunities, such as promotions, training, and mentorship, have a favorable influence on employee retention inside academic institutions. In summary, the existing body of literature pertaining to career advancement and employee retention within the academic community presents inconclusive or conflicting findings. It indicates that the availability of professional growth prospects significantly influences the retention of academic personnel in Iraqi universities. The existing body of literature additionally proposed that Academic institutions have the potential to effectively retain bright academics through the provision of various possibilities such as career promotion, professional development, and mentoring. These endeavors have the potential to promote employee happiness, decrease turnover intention, and ultimately improve the functioning of academic institutions in Iraq. Hence, it is imperative for academic institutions to allocate resources towards fostering career advancement possibilities in order to retain highly skilled academics, who possess the potential to make significant contributions to the advancement of numerous disciplines within the nation. Thus, based upon the literature reviewed we have postulated following hypothesis:

**H2:** Career growth has significant impact on the employee retention in universities.

Organizational commitment refers to the extent of an employee's motivation, emotional attachment, and dedication toward their work and the organization, including its objective. According to reports, when people are actively involved in their job, they experience a



heightened feeling of connection and purpose. This state of engagement has been associated with increased productivity, innovation, and commitment toward the organization's objectives. Additionally, it has been seen that staff turnover rates decrease and employee retention rates improve as a result of such engagement. Therefore, the significance of employee engagement in comprehending the impact of employee branding on employee retention is underscored. Sahi, Roy, and Singh (2022) assert that the level of employee engagement with an organization, as well as their dedication to its values and objectives, serves as an indicator of their job interest and contributes to the overall morale and longevity of employees. Employee engagement plays a vital role in the performance and overall success of a corporation due to its ability to motivate employees and foster their organizational citizenship behaviors. Dhir and Dutta (2020) posited that employees who derive satisfaction from their work within an organization have a strong sense of engagement, demonstrate a favorable inclination towards the firm's brand, and actively promote the adoption of its principles. Several recent studies (Lee, 2020; Miao, Rhee, & Jun, 2020; Wang et al., 2020) have identified a noteworthy association between employee engagement levels and employee retention. Additionally, a separate body of research (Akkermans, Richardson, & Kraimer, 2020; Alshaikh, Maynard, & Ahmad, 2021; Wingfield & Chavez, 2020) has posited that individuals who demonstrate a genuine interest in their work are more inclined to actively seek out and capitalize on promotional opportunities. When this phenomenon occurs, employees experience a heightened sense of connection to the organization and a stronger identification with their respective positions. Consequently, in line with the aforementioned reasoning, the present study has formulated the following hypotheses:

**H3:** Employee engagement has also significant impact on the employee retention

As previously stated, employee branding is a strategic approach aimed at cultivating a favorable corporate image and fostering a more robust perception of the organization among both existing and prospective employees. According to Kyu Kim et al. (2021), the promotion of a company's values, culture, and benefits through advertising is a strategic approach aimed at fostering employee motivation and increasing their level of involvement. The authors further posited that in the current competitive environment, organizations must actively pursue increased levels of employee engagement. Concurrently, a significant notion associated with this matter is the preservation and retention of the most proficient personnel within an organization, hence maintaining their productivity as valuable resources. The maintenance of high employee tenure, followed by a corresponding decrease in employee turnover, is crucial for the sustained growth and success of an organization. This is because a high turnover rate can impose significant financial burdens on firms, as they incur additional costs associated with recruiting and training new employees, as well as compensating for the loss of productivity resulting from employee turnover. Hence, organizations are progressively recognizing the imperative of prioritizing the development of strategies and the establishment of action plans aimed at enhancing staff retention rates. Based on the argument broached the current study postulated following hypothesis:

**H4:** Employee branding has significant impact on the employee engagement.

**H5:** Employee engagement mediates the relationship between the employee branding and employee retention.

Many research studies (Newman & Ford, 2021) have posited that when employees perceive that their company places importance on their ongoing professional growth and development, it can significantly augment their level of engagement with the organization. Consequently, this heightened engagement has the potential to contribute to a decrease in employee turnover, thereby increasing the likelihood of employee retention within the company. To substantiate their claim, the authors suggested that when employees see that their contributions would be appreciated, it instills a sense of pride within them. Consequently, this heightened sense of engagement leads to increased employee retention and a drop in turnover rates (Castro-González, Bande, & Vila-Vázquez, 2021). In the context of academia, turnover is often linked to the phenomenon of brain drain, making the decrease of turnover a tough endeavor (Nourani et al., 2022). However, in order to effectively retain employees and enhance their engagement within an organization, employee branding alone is insufficient. Instead, it is imperative for a company to consistently provide employees with opportunities for career growth. This is the key factor that not only keeps employees motivated but also offers them meaningful work and prospects for career advancement. Furthermore, some experts contend that employees who are actively engaged in their work are more inclined to remain with the organization due to their emotional commitment to the company. Hence, it is imperative for universities in Iraq to prioritize the enhancement of their employees' competencies and foster their active engagement within the organizational setting, in order to retain their most valuable personnel. The goal can be effectively accomplished by offering meaningful employment, together with comprehensive training and development initiatives, as well as mentoring prospects. By facilitating the professional growth and advancement of their employees, organizations have the potential to cultivate a sense of loyalty and commitment within their workforce. The outcome is increased job satisfaction among employees, leading to enhanced employee retention rates. Based on the argument broached the current study has postulated following hypothesis:

**H6:** Career growth has significant impact on the employee engagement.

**H7:** Employee engagement mediates the relationship between the career growth and employee retention.

## Methodology

The study employed a survey-based methodology, which involves collecting data through a survey questionnaire produced by the authors or adapted from previous studies (Kankam et al., 2023). The survey-based methodology is utilized to gather data from a selected sample of respondents, who are representative of the larger community. Subsequently, the collected data is subjected to rigorous statistical analysis techniques. The data for this study was collected through the utilization of a questionnaire, with university teachers selected as the sample population for the study. The researchers delivered a total of 500 questionnaires, of which 320 were included in the subsequent study. Therefore, the study's response rate is 64 percent.

### Measurement

The present study has devised a questionnaire and employed measures of variables that have been adapted from prior research. The concept of career advancement is derived from the research conducted by Spagnoli and Weng (2019), while the notion of employee branding is based on the findings of Garas, Mahran, and Mohamed (2018). The measurement of employee engagement utilized in this study is derived from the research conducted by Shuck, Adelson, and Reio Jr (2017). The scale used to measure employee retention in this study is derived from the work of Yamamoto (2011).

### Demographics

The study's demographic analysis indicates that among the final sample of 320 teachers, 192 individuals (representing 60% of the whole sample) are male, while 128 individuals (representing 40% of the total sample) are female. Approximately 70% of the educators have six or more years of teaching experience, while 55% of them hold a doctoral degree.

### Analysis

The study employed the structural equation modeling-partial least squares (SEM-PLS) technique for data analysis. SEM-PLS is a statistical method commonly utilized to examine the associations between various variables (Hair & Alamer, 2022; Jabbar, 2022). This statistical technique is widely employed in the analysis of primary data obtained from questionnaires. It enables researchers to investigate intricate models, conduct hypothesis testing, and ascertain causal correlations between variables. The SEM-PLS methodology consists of two distinct stages, namely the measurement model and the structural model. The measuring model utilized in this work is depicted in Figure 1 below.

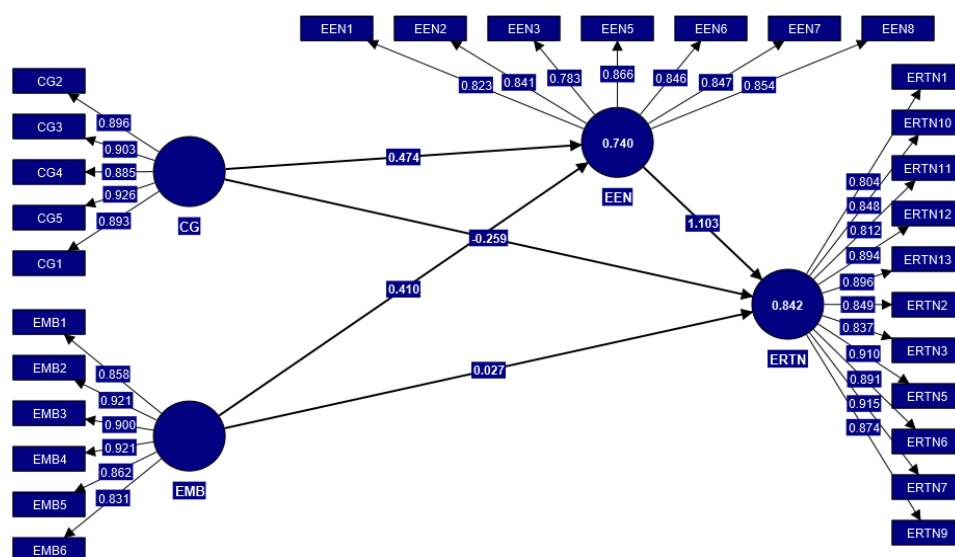


Figure 1: Measurement Model

The algorithmic approach is employed for the analysis of the measurements pertaining to the model, with a predetermined threshold loading value of 0.70. The items EEN4, ERTN4, and ERTN8 have loading values below 0.70.

**Table 1**

*Cross Loadings*

	CG	EEN	EMB	ERTN
CG1	0.893	0.743	0.831	0.612
CG2	0.896	0.769	0.766	0.605
CG3	0.903	0.739	0.820	0.596
CG4	0.885	0.735	0.761	0.605
CG5	0.926	0.797	0.850	0.695
EEN1	0.804	0.823	0.813	0.672
EEN2	0.831	0.841	0.832	0.689
EEN3	0.797	0.783	0.836	0.623
EEN5	0.638	0.866	0.578	0.844
EEN6	0.619	0.846	0.608	0.844
EEN7	0.604	0.847	0.588	0.825
EEN8	0.627	0.854	0.624	0.829
EMB1	0.765	0.684	0.858	0.554
EMB2	0.806	0.769	0.921	0.656
EMB3	0.811	0.739	0.900	0.633
EMB4	0.806	0.770	0.921	0.670
EMB5	0.770	0.759	0.862	0.642
EMB6	0.783	0.687	0.831	0.625
ERTN1	0.582	0.743	0.529	0.804
ERTN10	0.585	0.753	0.643	0.848
ERTN11	0.550	0.712	0.555	0.812
ERTN12	0.607	0.793	0.618	0.894
ERTN13	0.633	0.801	0.643	0.896
ERTN2	0.576	0.788	0.601	0.849
ERTN3	0.551	0.772	0.549	0.837
ERTN5	0.658	0.831	0.683	0.910
ERTN6	0.619	0.841	0.665	0.891
ERTN7	0.654	0.851	0.679	0.915
ERTN9	0.583	0.761	0.640	0.874

The reliability analysis findings are presented in [Table 2](#), indicating that all reliability criteria support the adoption of the current study's model for regression analysis.

**Table 2**

*Reliability Analysis*

	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (rho_a)	Composite reliability (rho_c)	Average variance extracted (AVE)
CG	0.942	0.943	0.955	0.811
EEN	0.929	0.929	0.943	0.701
EMB	0.943	0.945	0.955	0.779
ERTN	0.967	0.968	0.971	0.752

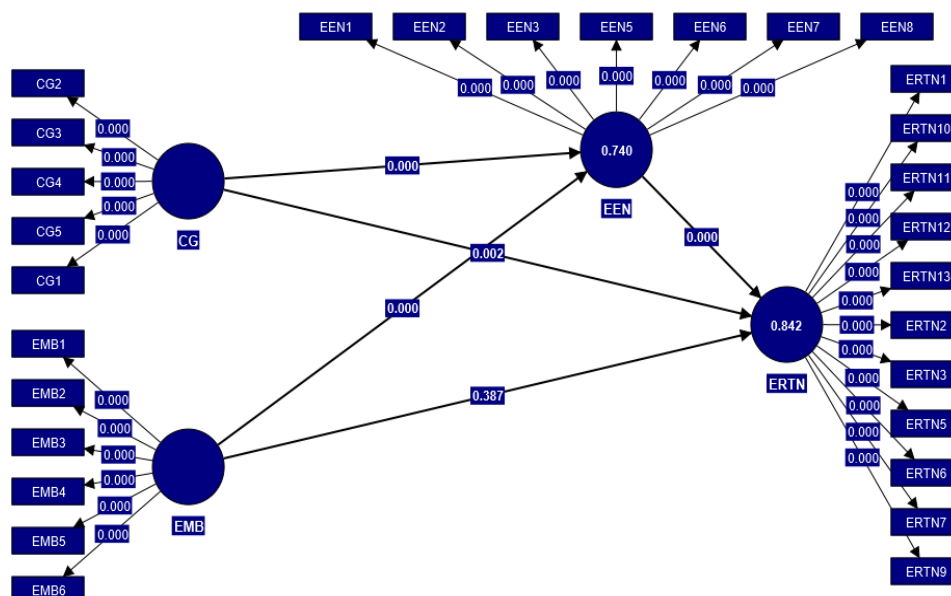
The findings of the validity analysis are presented in Table 3. The findings demonstrate that the diagonal values surpass the lower values, so meeting the criteria and validating the proposed structure of the study.

**Table 3**

*Validity Analysis*

	CG	EEN	EMB	ERTN
CG	0.901			
EEN	0.841	0.838		
EMB	0.895	0.834	0.883	
ERTN	0.693	0.808	0.715	0.867

The next stage in the analysis of Structural Equation Modelling with Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS) involves the estimation of the structural model. The research utilized a bootstrapping approach in order to estimate the structural model. The methodology employed in this study involves the utilization of bootstrapping with a resampling size of 1000. This approach entails drawing a substantial number of resamples from the original dataset, so enabling a more precise estimation of the distribution of sample statistics. The schematic representation of the structural model employed in the present study is depicted in Figure 2.



**Figure 2: Structural Model**

The outcomes of the direct pathways are presented in Table 4. The findings suggest that there is a significant and favorable relationship between employee branding, career progression, employee engagement, and employee retention. Additionally, it is important to note that employee engagement plays a crucial role in determining employee retention.

**Table 4**

*Direct Relations*

	<b>Original sample (O)</b>	<b>Sample mean (M)</b>	<b>Standard deviation (STDEV)</b>	<b>T statistics ( O/STDEV )</b>	<b>P values</b>
CG -> EEN	0.474	0.472	0.072	6.623	0.000
CG -> ERTN	0.264	0.262	0.084	3.149	0.001
EEN -> ERTN	1.103	1.093	0.092	11.989	0.000
EMB -> EEN	0.410	0.412	0.071	5.757	0.000
EMB -> ERTN	0.479	0.483	0.084	5.678	0.000

Table 5 presents the findings of the mediation analysis, which reveal that employee engagement serves as a mediator in both the relationship between career growth and employee retention, as well as between employee branding and employee retention.

**Table 5**

*Mediation Analysis*

	<b>Original sample (O)</b>	<b>Sample mean (M)</b>	<b>Standard deviation (STDEV)</b>	<b>T statistics ( O/STDEV )</b>	<b>P values</b>
CG -> EEN -> ERTN	0.523	0.515	0.089	5.883	0.000
EMB -> EEN -> ERTN	0.452	0.450	0.082	5.512	0.000

**Discussion and Conclusion**

The findings of the research demonstrate that employee branding exerts a substantial influence on both employee engagement and retention among university professors in Iraq. The study's findings indicate that the allocation of resources by universities towards employee branding has the potential to provide good effects on employee engagement and retention, hence mitigating the phenomenon of brain drain. The findings of the study align with the previous research (Ababneh, 2021; Kim & Kim, 2021; Verčič, 2021) and these findings also align with the principles of social exchange theory, which proposes that social interactions entail the exchange of resources among people or groups, and the advantages derived from these exchanges are reciprocated in the long run. The present study suggests that the implementation of Social Exchange Theory (SET) can elucidate how organizations utilize employee branding as a means to provide various resources, including a positive workplace culture, opportunities for career advancement, and job security. Consequently, employees who are affiliated with such organizations tend to exhibit behaviors that support and enhance the overall functioning of the organization.

Secondly, there seems to be a notable correlation between professional progression prospects and the levels of employee engagement and retention among university professors in Iraq. The results indicate that when an employee perceives that their present work will have a positive impact on their personal life, they are more likely to exhibit higher levels of job engagement and increased dedication. The findings of the study align with the theoretical framework of social exchange theory, which posits that the positive association between career progression possibilities and employee engagement and retention can be attributed to the reciprocal social exchanges that take place between the



organization and its employees. Thirdly, the study's results indicate that employee engagement plays a crucial role in determining employee retention. These findings align with prior research, which has consistently demonstrated that engaged employees exhibit lower rates of job turnover. The fourth objective of the present study is to investigate the potential mediating effect of employee engagement on the association between career progression and employee retention. The findings of the mediation analysis, which employed bootstrapped confidence intervals, indicate that employee engagement plays a significant mediating role in the relationship between career progression, employee branding, and employee retention. In a similar vein, employee engagement serves as a mediating factor in the relationship between employee branding and employee retention. This study is a significant contribution to the existing literature by offering useful insights into the determinants of employee retention within the specific context of employee branding and career advancement among university professors in Iraq. It stands out as one of the early and methodologically rigorous investigations in this area.

### ***Practical Implications***

The current study offers several practical implications:

- In order to prevent brain-drain and enhance employee retention, universities in Iraq should prioritize the establishment and cultivation of a robust employer brand. This entails emphasizing their core values, organizational culture, and prospects for professional development to effectively attract and retain highly skilled individuals. Achieving this objective necessitates substantial investment in employee branding initiatives.
- The universities in Iraq ought to develop and facilitate career advancement chances for its teaching staff, while also reevaluating the compensation and benefits packages offered in developed nations. This approach has the potential to enhance employee retention rates in the long run.
- Finally, it is imperative for universities in Iraq to recognize the significance of employee engagement in order to effectively maintain their personnel. Employees that are actively involved and committed to their work are more inclined to remain employed by the organization, exert greater effort in their tasks, and make constructive contributions to the company's financial performance. Hence, it is imperative for organizations to allocate resources toward implementing strategies and activities aimed at enhancing employee engagement. These may include cultivating a favorable work culture, providing competitive remuneration and benefits, and facilitating opportunities for engaging and autonomous work experiences.

In summary, the results of the study indicate that it is advisable for organizations to place emphasis on the development of a robust employer brand, the provision of avenues for career advancement, and the cultivation of employee engagement as a means to enhance rates of employee retention. These aforementioned practises having the potential to aid organizations in the retention of highly skilled individuals, enhance overall organizational performance, and eventually accomplish their commercial objectives.

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