How ethical leadership stimulates academics’ retention in universities

The mediating role of job-related affective well-being

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to investigate the relationship between ethical leadership and academics’ retention in universities. It draws on the conservation of resources theory to deepen the understanding of a process underlying this relationship whereby academics are more likely to stay in universities through the practice of ethical leadership. Specifically, it advances academics’ job-related affective well-being as a potential mediating mechanism, fostered by ethical leadership, which lowers their intention to leave.

Design/methodology/approach – This study is conducted through a cross-sectional survey of 303 academics in Australian universities. Univariate, bivariate and multivariate analysis procedures are deployed to analyse academics’ data. The research hypotheses are tested through a bootstrapped regression analysis of academics’ perceived ethical leadership, affective well-being and intention to leave.

Findings – The findings lend support to the hypothesised relations, indicating a significant role of ethical leadership on enhanced intentions of academics to stay in universities by directly conserving their job-related affective well-being.

Research limitations/implications – This paper contributes to knowledge of the relationship between ethical leadership and academics’ retention by identifying job-related affective well-being as an underlying mechanism in the university sector.

Practical implications – This paper has practical implications for higher educational institutes seeking to retain their academic staff. Its findings show that the practice of ethical leadership in universities matters, because it lowers academics’ intentions to leave by nurturing their well-being at work.

Originality/value – This is the first study to examine the impact of ethical leadership on academics’ well-being and intentions to leave in the context of universities in Australia. It is one of the first studies to explore the mediating role of affective well-being in the ethical leadership and leadership and intention to leave relationship.

Keywords Ethical leadership, Academics’ retention, Affective well-being

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Recent conversations in the International Journal of Educational Management highlight that contemporary universities may not be providing an environment conducive for the retention of their academic workforce (e.g. Ahmad et al., 2017; Byrne et al., 2013). Contemporary academic environments pose many challenges to academics, such as higher work pressures (Keashly and Neuman, 2010), lesser availability of research funds (Su and Baird, 2015; Winefield et al., 2003) and increasing exposure to bullying and harassment at work (Ahmad et al., 2017; McKay et al., 2008). Such an environment lessens job satisfaction of academics (Lacy and Sheehan, 1997) and has been associated with increased levels of occupational
stress among academics (Byrne et al., 2013; Gillespie et al., 2001). Research supports the positive association of job dissatisfaction and stress with employee intentions to leave the workplace (Amponsah-Tawiah et al., 2016). Johnsrud and Rosser (2002, p. 518) argue that the extent to which academics “actually act on their discontent and leave their institutions” is an important agenda of inquiry. According to these authors, universities would benefit from understanding what factors contribute to academics’ decisions to leave, because turnover of academics has explicit organisational costs. In this regard, Jo (2008, pp. 565-566) argues as follows:

[...] it has been estimated that turnover costs some universities $68 million annually (William M. Mercer, Inc. 2001). Beyond the direct expenses related to turnover, there are other hidden costs such as lost productivity, skill drain, and poor morale among the remaining employees (Branham, 2000; O’Keefe, 2000; Corporate Leadership Council, 1998). These are all significant problems that could be caused by frequent employee turnover.

Consequently, investigations made to understand the factors that stimulate academics’ retention in universities are vital.

One particular factor that has been consistently linked to the improvement in the quality of work environment and retention of academics is leadership style. Research has shown that leadership influences workforce (Kalshoven and Boon, 2012), shapes work cultures (Schein, 2004) and can directly impact both employee feelings (Van Dierendonck et al., 2004) and retention (Laschinger and Fida, 2014). While destructive leadership styles (e.g. toxic leadership) develop negative affect, lower well-being and increase job dissatisfaction of followers (see e.g. Normore et al., 2016; Skogstad et al., 2014), positive leadership styles (e.g. authentic leadership) have been associated with positive affect, better well-being and lower risk of employee turnover (see, e.g. Laschinger and Fida, 2014). Of the various positive styles of leadership (Yukl, 2012), research has highlighted the significance of ethical leadership practice in particular, specifically for addressing the increased incidence of unethical conduct in organisations (Ahmad, 2018; Brown and Mitchell, 2010; Kalshoven and Boon, 2012; Mayer et al., 2012). This practice involves respecting the rights of others and communicating the significance of such conduct to followers.

It is widely agreed that behaviour of leadership has a direct impact on followers’ ethical or unethical behaviour, because they tend to imitate their leader’s behaviour in organisational settings (Brown and Mitchell, 2010): “If the leader acts ethically, then the employees will act ethically. If the leaders act unethically, employees may assume that the leader is sanctioning unethical behaviour” (Calabrese and Roberts, 2001, p. 268). Brooks and Normore (2010) contend that moral virtuousness of educational leaders can enable them to make ethically responsible decisions for the benefit of school communities and societies alike. Accordingly, Wilson and McCalman (2017, p. 151) have urged that “leadership scholars ought to move away from authenticity and towards ethicality as the subject of study”. However, the notion of ethical leadership is rarely examined in educational settings (see, e.g. Calabrese and Roberts, 2001; for exceptions; Shapiro and Stefkovich, 2016), which are challenged by unethical and other issues (e.g. stress, bullying) and which impact academics’ functioning, feelings and job-related outcomes. Researchers contend that academics play a critical role in developing ethical values of the future organisational workforce by imparting education (McKay et al., 2008; Moosmayer, 2012). Negative feelings amongst academics can potentially “disrupt students’ learning and diminish the quality of intellectual output” in universities (Ahmad et al., 2017, p. 205). The purpose of the present study is, therefore, to address this noted deficiency in the literature by examining how ethical leadership may impact academics’ feelings, well-being and intentions to leave the university. Importantly, this research advances the literature by exploring if job-related affective well-being mediates the ethical leadership and intention to leave relationship in academic work settings.
This paper proceeds as follows. First, it provides a generic overview of the ethical leadership, affective well-being and intention to leave literatures. It then theorises the linkage between these three to formulate hypotheses and presents a research model. The research design, method and results of analysis are then detailed. Finally, a discussion of results is presented, together with their implications, before providing a conclusion.

2. Overview of the literature
2.1 Ethical leadership

Ethical leadership has been conceptualised as “the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making” (Brown et al., 2005, p. 120). Within the leadership literature, ethical leadership is considered a “moral umbrella” that aptly represents the moral dimension of leadership styles, be it “authentic leadership”, “servant leadership” or “value-based leadership” (see also Wright and Quick, 2011). Accordingly, the role of ethical leadership in creating supportive and high-quality work environments through the communication of positive and moral values is much emphasised. Research has shown a direct impact of ethical leadership in developing high-quality work environments, reducing unethical conduct and influencing followers’ affective states and behaviour in organisations (Mayer et al., 2010; Stouten et al., 2010). While it is widely acknowledged that followers’ behaviour is directly influenced by the behaviour of their leaders (Avolio et al., 2009; Calabrese and Roberts, 2001), the relationship between ethical leadership and followers’ affective outcomes in academic work settings is poorly understood. The ethical leadership literature has mainly focussed on its influence on employee performance, trust, pro-social behaviour and followers’ well-being in corporate environments (Kalshoven and Boon, 2012; Miao et al., 2013; Newman et al., 2014; Piccolo et al., 2010). There remains a conspicuous paucity of research on this important leadership style in academic environments. According to Calabrese and Roberts (2002, p. 229), in educational settings:

Leaders with virtuous character provide benefit to their schools and communities. Whereas, leaders with character flaws create harm for themselves as well as their community. The ethical lapses among teachers, principals, and superintendents create an even larger issue when one considers the fiduciary trust placed in educators by the public.

We concur with Calabrese and Roberts (2002) and attempt to address this deficiency through this paper by advancing an understanding of how ethical leadership may influence academics’ feelings through a study of its impact on affective well-being; and intentions to leave in a tertiary work environment context. A brief review of this study’s two examined affective outcomes now follows.

2.2 Affective well-being

Affective well-being is broadly conceptualised as a “hedonic balance; [i.e.] balance between pleasant and unpleasant affect [feelings]” (Arnold et al., 2007, p. 194). Arnold et al. (2007) reviewed the literature of occupational health and argued that affective well-being mainly encompasses the presence of positive affect. The present study is specifically focussed on the job-related affective well-being of academics. Job-related affective well-being has been traditionally measured by capturing the arousal of both positive and negative affect in a work environment context (see also Warr, 1990). The theoretical conceptualisations of affective well-being are reflective of these two feelings. For example, in a widely applied model of affective well-being, Warr (1990) classified the content and intensity of positive and negative job-related feelings on a two-dimensional scale of pleasantness and arousal: essentially, Warr advanced a 12-item measure to tap job-related affective well-being that
comprises six positive affect (i.e. calm, contented, cheerful, relaxed, optimistic and enthusiastic), and six negative affect (i.e. tense, uneasy, worried, depressed, gloomy and miserable). This approach was seen as more practical and psychometrically acceptable, because researchers and research participants tend to get discouraged in instances where well-being is assessed through long questions and lengthy surveys. Warr’s measure remains a popular tool for capturing individual well-being with availability of comparative data from various job contexts (Kalshoven and Boon, 2012; Medina et al., 2005). While this tool has been applied in many occupational settings, the present study explores its application in academia as a response to Warr’s call for testing its validity and usefulness in regard to “behavioural and other objective criteria”. To this end, the present study examines one potential antecedent, “ethical leadership” (explained above) and one potential outcome “intention to leave” (explained next), which are already associated in the literature with academics’ job-related feelings at work.

2.3 Intention to leave
Intention to leave refers to “a conscious and deliberate wilfulness to leave the organization” (Tett and Meyer, 1993, p. 262). Employees’ intentions to leave carry implications for organisations because, if they leave, organisations have to invest in recruitment, selection and training of new staff to overcome the resulting disruption of work in order to achieve their performance targets (Regts and Molleman, 2012). For this reason, intentions to leave continue to receive ample attention in organisational research (see e.g. Kim et al., 2013; McCormack et al., 2009; Regts and Molleman, 2012). However, research on academics’ intentions to leave or stay is rather limited (Johnsrud and Rosser, 2002; Rosser, 2004). Smart (1990) undertook early research to understand factors affecting academic turnover in universities and highlighted the significance of the work environment context for academics’ retention. Yet to date, almost a quarter century later, the impact of leadership, which is a crucial work environment factor, on academics’ intentions to leave or stay remains under-studied in the university context. Therefore, we conducted this research to advance the understanding of how ethical leadership may impact on academics’ intentions to leave or stay at their university. To achieve this goal, the formulation of research hypotheses is next presented, together with a discussion of implications of the perceived practice of ethical leadership for academics’ feelings and job-related well-being.

3. Theoretical development of hypotheses and research model
Leadership is responsible for the creation of a work environment that nourishes followers’ well-being (Arnold and Connelly, 2013). Scholars in the area of occupational health and well-being have long emphasised the influence of leadership style on employee well-being. Sparks et al. (2001) reviewed the literature on employee occupational health and noted that when leaders were supportive, followers were less stressed. By contrast, when leaders engaged in destructive and unethical behaviours, such as abusive supervision and bullying, followers’ stress levels were elevated (Sparks et al., 2001). Similarly, organisational research has associated destructive and unethical leadership, both characterised by low-quality exchange of information from supervisors to subordinates and also bullying of juniors from seniors, with job dissatisfaction, stress and reduced well-being of followers (Brown and Mitchell, 2010; Skogstad et al., 2014; Skogstad et al., 2007; Ünal et al., 2012). In a similar vein, negative social interactions – in particular those between supervisors and subordinates – have been attributed to deteriorating quality of the work environment in universities as well as potential sources of job stress among academics (Ahmad et al., 2017; Zábrodská and Kveton, 2013; Zábrodská et al., 2014). This may imply that the absence of ethical leadership can be a potential cause of a low-quality work environment and work stress in an academic job context.
We, therefore, argue that ethical leadership in university settings is an important determinant of academics’ well-being and intentions to stay, because it can reduce stress and promote a high-quality work environment. To support our argument, we draw on Hobfoll’s (2001) conservation of resources (COR) theory. The past decade has witnessed a wide application of COR theory in investigations of employee well-being in a variety of organisational and occupational settings. This theory suggests that individuals make efforts to conserve and collect valuable resources (e.g. money, good relationships, health) and that any perceived or actual loss of such valued resources can cause stress. The theory also suggests that, if a loss occurs, individuals strive to avoid further loss, and are also motivated to acquire resources to replenish lost resources. Failure in resource acquisition to offset such loss can provoke work withdrawal behaviour and intentions to leave (Halbesleben and Wheeler, 2008). In essence, the theory conveys the notion of resource gain and loss spirals that respectively imply that “those who possess resources are more capable of gain” (Hobfoll, 2001, p. 355) and that “initial loss begets future loss” (Hobfoll, 2001, p. 354). Based on the COR premise, it can be expected that ethical leader’s integrity, consideration and support can directly develop followers’ positive affect, and lower negative affect and stress in academic work settings.

Ethical leadership has been heralded as a style of leaders’ integrity, helpfulness, effective communication and moral inspiration (Kalshoven and Boon, 2012; Mayer et al., 2012; Trevino et al., 2000). Research by Skakon et al. (2010) shows that a leader’s helpful behaviour is positively related to “affective well-being and low-stress levels among employees, whereas the opposite is the case for negative [e.g. unethical] leader behaviours” (p. 119). Key traits that are associated with ethical leadership include honesty, trustworthiness, fairness, conscientiousness and compassion. Given such behavioural traits, ethical leaders “make principled and fair choices and structure work environments justly” (De Hoogh and Den Hartog, 2008, p. 298). Moreover, ethical leadership is the style of transparency in leaders’ actions and promotion of ethical conduct in social interactions (Brown et al., 2005; Mayer et al., 2010). The practice of such leadership has also been associated with a reduction in bullying and other forms of misconduct in the work environment (Ahmad, 2018; Mayer et al., 2010; Stouten et al., 2010). As one example, Stouten et al.’s (2010) research has convincingly portrayed how ethical leadership discourages workplace bullying by cultivating a high-quality work environment. This research conveyed that employees who confront poor working conditions and excessive workloads feel frustrated and often bullied, which means that negative affect and behaviours ensue in low-quality work environments. The authors then demonstrate that ethical leadership, which by definition is concerned with fairness, compassion and open communication, keeps employee workloads within acceptable levels and provides employees with positive work experiences and better working conditions (see Stouten et al., 2010, for details).

Following this reasoning, the practice of ethical leadership in an academic context can be associated with a positive flow of valuable social and work-related resources (e.g. manageable workloads, clear role expectations, the leader’s support) for academics, which may foster positive affect, reduce negative affect and accordingly enhance their affective well-being at work. Thus, conservation of academics’ well-being under the influence of ethical leadership can be predicted as:

H1a. Perceived ethical leadership will enhance academics’ positive affect at work.

H1b. Perceived ethical leadership will lower academics’ negative affect at work.

3.1 Ethical leadership and intention to leave
The influence of ethical leadership on intention to leave in organisational settings has rarely received the attention of researchers. However, based on COR-based logic, the negative association of ethical leadership with intention to leave is implied. Since the theory states
that people are motivated to protect their resources (Hobfoll, 1989), one may speculate that ethical leaders’ support, consideration and helpfulness will be strongly related to intentions to stay, rather than to leave. Hence, it is proposed that:

_H2._ Perceived ethical leadership will reduce academics’ intentions to leave the job.

Following the prediction of direct influences of ethical leadership on academics’ well-being and intentions to leave, we now turn our attention to its indirect influence by advancing job-related affective well-being as an intermediary mechanism in order to fully understand its role in academics’ retention. Again, we explain this mechanism with the help of COR theory because it also advances that individuals are motivated to reinvest their acquired resources. As Hobfoll (2001, p. 349) aptly explains: “people must invest resources in order to protect against resource loss, recover from losses, and gain resources”. In accordance with this, we expect that ethical leadership’s role in nourishing followers’ well-being will encourage them to reinvest their vitality in organisations and thwart potential intentions to leave their workplace. Empirical research on the implications of ethical leadership has demonstrated followers’ engagement in helpful, pro-social and citizenship behaviours at work (see, e.g. Kalshoven and Boon, 2012; Miao et al., 2013). Therefore, a negative relationship between ethical leadership and intention to leave is expected by incorporating the former’s positive influence on enhanced affective well-being at work. Accordingly, we predict that academics’ job-related affective well-being may act as a mediating mechanism in the relationship between ethical leadership and intention to leave. This leads to our final hypothesis, which entails Warr’s (1990) hedonic approach to affective well-being, i.e., positive affect linked to pleasure and evasion of negative and unpleasant affect:

_H3._ Job-related affective well-being mediates the relationship between perceived ethical leadership and academics’ intention to leave.

Figure 1 shows this study’s theoretical framework and hypothesised predictions in the form of a research model.

In sum, this paper attempts to predict the implications of the perceived practice of ethical leadership on academics’ retention in two ways: a direct negative impact on intention to leave; and an indirect effect on intention to leave by fostering academics’ affective well-being at work, evinced through higher positive affect and lower negative affect.

4. Research design and method

The present study extends the literature on academics’ retention by examining ethical leadership and job-related affective well-being as its potential antecedents and advancing an
understanding of a mechanism through which it can be enhanced in universities. This is done by surveying 303 academics in 15 Australian universities between November 2014 and March 2015, using a “volunteer sampling procedure” (Cooksey, 2007). A majority of the participants were females (58.5 per cent) and the median age group of the sample was 33–39 years (29.1 per cent). More than half (56.9 per cent) reported that they had PhD-level qualifications. Most academic designations were represented, with participants working as lecturers (21.6 per cent), senior lecturers (14.1 per cent), associate professors (9.2 per cent), professors (8.2 per cent), teaching associates (7.8 per cent), and research associates (16.3 per cent), with a few “other” (14.7 per cent) and “undisclosed” (8.2 per cent) responses. About two-thirds of participants worked full-time (67.3 per cent), with 47.1 per cent employed on an ongoing basis. Participants came from various academic disciplines: “Business, economics and law” (34.6 per cent), “Arts, design and humanities” (21.9 per cent), “Engineering and Technology” (6.5 per cent), and “Pure and applied sciences” (26.5 per cent).

4.1 Measures
Ethical leadership was measured using the ten-item Ethical Leadership Scale developed by Brown et al. (2005). Participants were asked to rate the ethical behaviour of their head of academic unit on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). An example item is: “My head of department (HoD) has the best interests of employees in mind”. Cronbach’s α coefficient of this measure was 0.94, which indicated its reliability (Nunnally, 1978).

The job-related affective well-being of academics was assessed with the 12 items proposed by Warr (1990) (e.g. calm, worried) as discussed in Section 2.2. Participants responded to the question of how much of the time their job had made them feel each of the listed feelings over the past few weeks. Their responses were recorded on a 12-point scale with categories: 1 (never), 2 (rarely), 3 (sometimes), 4 (often), 5 (most of the time) and 6 (all the time). Cronbach’s α coefficient value of this measure was 0.92, which implied reliability (Nunnally, 1978).

Finally, intention to leave was measured by capturing participants’ responses to items adopted from Meyer et al. (1993) on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). An example item is “I will probably look for a new job next year”. The reliability of this measure was evident from its Cronbach’s α coefficient value of 0.89 (Nunnally, 1978).

5. Results
5.1 Psychometric strength of the measures
To assess the psychometric properties of this study’s measures, we performed the “exploratory factor analysis” procedure with “maximum likelihood estimation “Promax rotation” (see also Hair et al., 2006). The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin measure of sampling adequacy was 0.925 with a significant Bartlett’s test of sphericity (p = 0.000). The resulting factor structure as presented in Table I.

As can be seen from Table I, all measured items loaded onto their specified factors of ethical leadership (Brown et al., 2005) and intention to leave (Meyer et al., 1993). This analysis confirmed the “unidimensionality” of both ethical leadership and intention to leave measures (Hair et al., 2006). The two-dimensional structure of affective well-being measure was also evident from our analysis because items related to positive and negative affects loaded on to two separate factors. This lends support to Warr’s (1990) conceptualisation in our study’s specific context. Importantly, all items loadings were above 0.45. According to Kim and Mueller (1978), items should load onto a specific factor above 0.3. Therefore, all items were retained for subsequent analysis of hypotheses. Moreover, internal consistency was inferred, because items for each scale averaged out to over 0.7, and there were no cross-loadings between the identified factors, and this was
indicative of the validity of this study’s measures (Hair et al., 2006). Overall, the four factors extracted accounted for explaining 66.6 per cent of the total variation in data. In line with their factor structure, this study’s key variables were created by averaging their respective scale items for further analysis.

5.2 Bivariate analysis of study’s variables
Table II presents the means, standard deviations and the bivariate correlations of this study variables.
Consistent with our prediction, Table II shows a significant negative correlation between perceived ethical leadership and intention to leave ($r = -0.375, p < 0.01$), as well as between perceived ethical leadership and negative affect ($r = -0.456, p < 0.01$). It also shows a significant positive correlation between perceived ethical leadership and positive affect ($r = 0.496, p < 0.01$). Moreover, intention to leave significantly negatively correlated with positive affect ($r = -0.486, p < 0.01$) and significantly positively correlated with negative affect ($r = 0.536, p < 0.01$). The results of bivariate correlation analysis align with this study’s theoretical predictions.

5.3 Multivariate analysis for hypotheses testing
We followed Hayes’ (2013) guidelines for hypothesis testing involving mediation and performed multivariate regression analysis with the help of his proposed PROCESS macro script to estimate 5,000 bias-corrected bootstrap 95% confidence intervals (CI).
This analysis controlled for the potentially confounding influence of respondent’s gender, age, job title and contract terms (e.g. ongoing, fixed term). H1a/H1b predicted that perceived ethical leadership is positively/negatively related to academics’ positive/negative affect. The results of our analysis revealed a significant positive relation between ethical leadership and academics’ positive affect ($B = 0.5024$, $p = 0.000$, 95% LLCI $-$0.3839 to 0.622), and a significant negative relation between ethical leadership and academics’ negative affect ($B = -0.4738$, $p = 0.000$, 95% LLCI $-$0.6056 to $-0.3421$). These findings respectively supported H1a and H1b.

H2 proposed that perceived ethical leadership will lower academics’ intention to leave. The results of the direct effect of ethical leadership on intention to leave ($B = -0.1467$, Boot SE $= 0.0818$, $p = 0.0741$, 95% LLCI–ULCI $= -0.3078$ to $-0.0144$) did not lend support to H2. Finally, H3 proposed that job-related affective well-being acts as a mediator in the relationship between perceived ethical leadership and academics’ intention to leave. Following hedonic conceptualisation of affective well-being (Warr, 1990), we found significant indirect effect of perceived ethical leadership on intention to leave, mediated by both (higher) positive affect (effect $= -0.1374$, boot SE $= 0.0481$, 95% boot LLCI–ULCI $= -0.2374$ to $-0.0482$) and (lower) negative affect (effect $= -0.2327$, boot SE $= 0.0471$, 95% boot LLCI–ULCI $= -0.3401$ to $-0.1532$). The results from the normal theory tests further confirmed the significance of indirect effects, given the statistically significant relationships with both positive (effect size $= -0.1374$, $Z = -0.4855$, $p = 0.013$) and negative (effect $= -0.2327$, $Z = -4.1010$, $p = 0.000$) affect. Taken together, these findings not only lend support to H3 but also imply that job-related affective well-being fully mediates the ethical leadership and intention to leave relationship in the Australian academic environment. Full mediation was inferred because the direct effect of ethical leadership on academics’ intention to leave was non-significant, whereas its indirect effect was found significant.

6. Discussion
Universities play a critical role in developing competent workforces by providing education in professional ethics, knowledge and best business practices. Figueroa (2015, p. 86) observes an anomaly in this: “those ideals are often not being put into practice within the same environment where instruction is being held. There are some administrators that remind me of an old expression, ‘Do as I say and not as I do’, which implies that they are absolving themselves from having to apply the principles of good practice”. Calabrese and Roberts (2001) argue that unethical actions of educational leaders have a potential to harm stakeholders in the wider community. One outcome of bad leadership practice in
universities is the turnover of academic staff. In fact, Jo’s (2008) research on academics’ turnover in US universities has revealed that nearly a half their study participants left their job because of dissatisfaction with their immediate leader’s behaviour.

Building on these remarks on educational leaders and the role they can play towards the retention of academics, this paper sheds light on the virtuousness of ethical leadership practice in universities. Specifically, it explores the notion of how ethical leadership in universities may stimulate academics’ retention by examining its direct and indirect (via affective well-being) effects on their intentions to leave the university. Through an exclusive focus on a hedonic approach to a study of academics’ well-being (Warr, 1990), this study found support for $H1a$ and $H1b$ in Australian universities, which provides evidence of the significant influence of ethical leadership in promoting academics’ positive job-related feelings and mitigating negative affect. Given the longstanding recognition of the significance of conservation of employee well-being for the efficient achievement of organisational performance objectives (Franco-Santos and Doherty, 2017; Wright and Cropanzano, 1997), this paper has demonstrated that the presence of ethical leaders may assist universities in realising this goal. While affective well-being has been rarely examined as an outcome of ethical leadership style in educational settings, the common problems faced by academics, such as high workloads, occupational stress and exposure to workplace bullying, have been attributed to poor leadership styles (Ahmad et al., 2017; Calabrese and Roberts, 2001; Keashly and Neuman, 2010; Zábrodská et al., 2014), which may impel academics toward leaving their job (Johnsrud and Rosser, 2002).

$H2$ predicted that the practice of ethical leadership is an approach to reduce academics’ intention to leave the job. Although this study’s data from Australian academics failed to lend support to this prediction, there is a growing emphasis in the leadership literature on understanding the underlying mechanisms that explain the influence of leadership on followers’ intentions and work-related outcomes (see e.g. Laschinger and Fida, 2014; Newman et al., 2014; Yukl, 2012). To this end, $H3$ has predicted job-related affective well-being as a mechanism through which ethical leadership may reduce academics’ intention to leave. This study’s statistically significant finding from Australian universities confirmed this prediction. This shows that the perceived practice of ethical leadership conserves academics’ affective well-being, which stimulates them to stay rather than leave the university. Given the dearth of empirical research conducted in the Australian university sector that unveils the mechanisms linking leadership styles to followers’ work-related outcomes, the present study bridges this important research gap.

6.1 Contribution to theory
This paper drew on COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll, 2001) to frame a research model and made an initial attempt to test this theory in the Australian university sector. Our results provide empirical evidence that is consistent with COR logic, hence supporting the application of this theory in understanding academics’ well-being and intentions to leave or stay at the university. Moreover, we found that leadership style has a non-significant direct effect, but a significant indirect effect on academics’ intention to stay by developing positive affect at work. The cultivation of positive affect or feelings has been reported as one of the strongest factors that develop loyalty and relationship bonding between leaders and their followers (Lin and Liu, 2017), and may lessen followers’ intentions to quit the job. Complementing such findings, Fredrickson’s broaden and build theory of positive emotions demonstrates the significance of positive emotions for enhancing psychological resources, expanding behavioural repertoires, and fuelling psychological resiliency (Fredrickson, 2001). Fredrickson (2001) argues that “positive emotions [essentially] include a component of positive affect” (p. 219); “experiences of positive affect prompt individuals to engage with their environments and partake in [value-creating] activities” (p. 219), rather than intending...
to leave the workplace. Our findings of higher positive affect, as a function of ethical leadership, cogently illuminate the virtuous potential of such practice in educational settings. Hence this paper contributes to knowledge of the relationship between ethical leadership and academics’ retention by identifying job-related affective well-being (i.e. higher positive affect and lower negative affect) as a mediating mechanism.

6.2 Limitations and future research directions
Despite providing understanding and significant evidence of ethical leadership’s indirect influence on academics’ retention, we acknowledge limitations of our research here. First, testing of hypotheses through a cross-sectional survey data is a key limitation of the present research design, because it limits making inferences on causality implied in the relationships. Future research can test the study’s research model and hypotheses by applying longitudinal data collection methods. Second, this research examined academics’ perceptions at an individual level; it will be worthwhile to investigate the notions of ethical leadership, academics’ retention or turnover at an organisational or university level. Third, the respondents came from universities in Australia only. Australia scores higher in world rankings in regard to ethical transparency and individuals’ well-being in comparison to many developing countries (see, e.g. Helliwell et al., 2017; Transparency International, 2015). This may have affected our study’s findings. Therefore, future research may replicate the present study’s research question in developing countries. Similarly, other related areas, such as the impact of ethical leadership on academics’ other individual and work environment factors, such as specific emotions, work structures and culture, remain open for further examination in universities.

6.3 Implications for educational practice
The framework tested in the present study has important practical implications for educational institutes seeking the retention of academic staff. It shows that ethical leadership conserves academics’ job-related affective well-being, and this positive influence on their well-being lowers potential intentions to leave the university. In other words, ethical leadership practice indirectly enhances academics’ retention, as is evinced from the findings of our research conducted in Australian universities. Thus, a key practical implication of our findings is that ethical leadership in universities matters because it can significantly enhance academics’ well-being and intentions to stay.

These findings imply that universities should cultivate ethical leadership practice, because it appears to be an important determinant of academics’ positive affect, well-being and intentions to stay. Further, educational management needs to focus on ethics during leadership selection and appraisal processes. To exemplify, a selection committee can question the potential candidates for senior positions on how they have responded to ethical dilemmas in their past professional experiences. Shapiro and Stefkovich (2016) concur with this approach: they have argued that the resolution of ethical dilemmas is at heart of educational administration. Importantly, the performance of university leaders should be evaluated on the basis of their ethical practice and contributions made to implementing ethical and value-based frameworks and structures.

7. Conclusion
This paper contributes to knowledge about factors that may increase academics’ retention in universities. To date, little has been known about how ethical leadership may contribute toward the enhanced retention of the academic workforce. This study’s framework and findings from Australian universities have addressed this important research void by shedding light on the process that shows the effectiveness of ethical leadership in lowering
academics’ intentions to leave by enhancing their positive job-related feelings. Therefore, educational management policies and practices need to focus on ethical leadership development to reduce academics’ intentions to leave. In our view, studying ethical leadership in universities is thus a vibrant area of educational theory and praxis.

References


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