

Examining the Work Engagement Among Academics at Private Higher Educational Institutions (PHEIs) in Sabah, Malaysia: A Quantitative Study

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ABSTRACT

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Work engagement at Malaysian higher educational institutions is a dynamic balance between institutional pressures and intrinsic motivation. Academics often face strenuous job demands, including extensive administrative tasks and research targets; nevertheless, their work engagement often improves with robust social support, an empowering organizational culture, and appropriate rewards and recognition. The purpose of this study was to examine the work engagement among academics at private higher educational institutions (PHEIs) in Sabah, Malaysia. The sample comprised 61 academics from four PHEIs in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, who completed the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale on Google Forms. Data were subsequently transferred onto a spreadsheet and analyzed using SPSS 29.0. First, findings indicated that only very low to low-average proportions of PHEI academics tend to very often/always display high work engagement. Mann-Whitney U test revealed nonsignificant gender differences in perceived work engagement among academics at PHEIs in Sabah. Kruskal-Wallis H test indicated nonsignificant differences in perceived work engagement by way of age and job experience. Wilcoxon signed rank test indicated that 14 of the work engagement items were significantly different from the hypothesized median value of 3.5 at $p < .001$, while three of the items were significantly different from the hypothesized median value of 3.5 at $p < .05$. Findings imply that many PHEI academics tend to be disengaged, under-engaged, or unenthused concerning their work or institution. In light of the findings, some

recommendations were made on ways to improve the work engagement among PHEI academics in Sabah.

Contribution/Originality: This study addresses the crucial yet underexplored area of work engagement among academics at private higher educational institutions (PHEIs) in Sabah, Malaysia. It is the first research attempt to examine the cognitive and affective commitment of academics to their roles in the context of private higher education in Sabah. Findings would provide deeper insight into academics' level of vigor, dedication, and absorption in driving institutional success, producing systematic and replicable research, and promoting high academic achievement. Overall, the research would provide a framework for private higher educational institutions to enhance academics' work engagement by emphasizing shared governance, transparency, and a healthy work-life balance, which can be achieved through strong organizational support and leadership, resource availability, and career development opportunities.

1. Introduction

Work engagement is a crucial aspect in any organization, including higher educational institutions (HEIs). Academics with high work engagement are characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption. They are energetic and lively (vigor), committed, and invested in their work (dedication), and immersed and preoccupied in their professional tasks (absorption). The job demands-resources (JD-R) model can be used to explain academics' work engagement; every institution has specific demands (factors requiring sustained physical/mental effort) and resources (variables that help achieve goals or reduce stress). Therefore, HEIs should maintain a balance between demands and resources to increase academics' motivational potential, which inculcates favorable work attitudes, extra-role behavior, professional capability, and work productivity (Bakker, 2015; Bakker & Schaufeli, 2015).

1.1. Characteristics and Factors of Teachers' Work Engagement

According to Raphael (2022), teachers' work engagement is grounded on institutional rules and regulations as well as self-motivation. First, institutional rules and regulations clearly specify what teachers are expected to do and to what extent they can exercise their autonomy. It is mandatory for them to remain officially engaged within the institutional structure and execute their duties. Second, teachers' work engagement is often influenced by self-motivation, which is not regulated by authority or external factors. Their intrinsic engagement and discretionary effort are characterized by a willingness to go beyond obligatory duties, such as volunteering for extracurricular activities, developing new curricula, or mentoring. It is driven by three basic psychological needs within their work setting, namely, autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Teachers are much more likely to adopt innovative pedagogic practices and engage in non-teaching activities out of genuine passion when these intrinsic drivers are present (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Raphael, 2022).

Moreover, teachers with high work engagement are intellectually curious about the implicit aspects of student personalities, and not just their academic performance. They pay close attention to students' preferences, interests, attitudes, special needs, and challenges in their overall development and instinctively respond to them. Their work

engagement depends on several psychosocial factors at the workplace. With autonomy and decision latitude, teachers have control over how and when tasks are completed, giving them a sense of personal ownership and allowing them to use their skills to their full potential. With psychological safety, teachers feel free from harassment, bullying, and fear of negative consequences for speaking up, allowing them to direct their energy into their work rather than self-preservation. With role clarity, they know exactly what needs to be accomplished, allowing them to concentrate deeply on their core responsibilities. With meaningful work and purpose, they can connect daily tasks to the broader mission or significance of the school, making the work personally fulfilling and driving high levels of dedication amongst them (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ferreira, Gomes, & Lopes, 2025; Raphael, 2022).

Besides students' wellbeing, teachers with high work engagement deliberately seek innovative avenues for experimentation and professional development. In this digital era, they are passionate about strengthening and updating their knowledge on a regular basis, paying attention to educational trends, research, and related sciences that redefine their roles. For instance, being intellectually engaged, they acknowledge that student psychology is crucial in deepening their insight and helping them address classroom management issues. Being more pragmatic and digitally-oriented, they adopt innovative strategies that can offer appropriate solutions to challenges of an ever-evolving educational system (Raphael, 2022).

To enhance teachers' work engagement, school leaders should allow them to implement the curriculum through effective teaching strategies and a passion for teaching. Effective school leaders promote a positive environment that is conducive to teacher engagement and academic performance; they are deeply conscious of what authentic work engagement entails. They know that, while teachers who execute the mandatory part of their professional duties do not need to be mentally engaged (motivated) in their profession, those who are authentically and spontaneously engaged are intrinsically motivated (a mental state which originates from within). Since such teachers cannot be compelled by mere rules and regulations, school leaders should be authoritative (instead of authoritarian) to raise their work engagement. To enhance teachers' intellectual engagement, school leaders should provide rational feedback and constructive appraisal to uplift their professional spirit. Further, they should also emphasize equitable treatment (instead of favoritism or discrimination) to instill a collective spirit and goodwill among teachers. Overall, school leaders should identify and create situations that optimize teachers' work engagement at group level, weaving a sense of collaboration into the fabric of team dynamics (Raphael, 2022).

1.2. Statement of the Problem

Previous research showed that academics' work engagement is vital for driving institutional success, elevating teaching quality, and safeguarding educator wellbeing. However, very little research has been conducted on the work engagement at Malaysian private higher educational institutions (PHEIs). Researching this construct offers several advantages for PHEIs, educators, and students. First, highly engaged academics often foster stronger student-teacher relationships, which in turn, drives higher student engagement, motivation, and academic performance. Second, academics who demonstrate high levels of work engagement (vigor, dedication, absorption) tend to be more proactive and innovative in their pedagogical practices, besides being productive in their research endeavors and community services. Third, to be sustainable, PHEIs

need to retain energized, dedicated academics, while preventing chronic burnout and reducing turnover, which is paramount for long-term recognition and operational effectiveness. Fourth, research on Malaysian academics' work engagement would provide empirical data to justify implementing structural changes, such as targeted professional development programs or supportive leadership practices, to help foster a healthy and productive work environment. Lastly, investigating academic's work engagement would enable administrators to understand how they can craft their job to increase their own job satisfaction and alignment with institutional values (Yusof, Ahmed & Said, 2024; Yusof, Panatik, & Shahrin, 2026),

1.3. Significance of the Study

Research on academics' work engagement in Sabah is significant because it directly impacts higher education quality, minimizes talent drain, and aligns with national educational goals. Engaged academics promote better teaching and learning outcomes, boost research performance, and demonstrate innovative work behaviors, which are critical metrics for elevating the global rankings of Malaysian HEIs. Academics' work engagement can significantly affect student outcomes, as their zest and passion for the subject often motivate students and help them determine their career path. When academics strongly engage with their subject matter, students are much more likely to immerse in what they are supposed to be learning. Ultimately, academics' work engagement can enhance the reputation of an HEI, raising its student enrollment and global standing.

The primary purpose of this study was to examine the work engagement among academics at private higher educational institutions (PHEIs) in Sabah, Malaysia. Three research questions are formulated to act as the cornerstone of the study; they are clear, specific, researchable, feasible, and relevant. First, they are unambiguous, easy to understand, and clearly define the scope of the study, including exactly what concept (work engagement) and target population (academics) are being investigated. Second, they are complex (arguable), requiring in-depth analysis, discussion, and have more than one plausible answer. Third, they are researchable and can be answered objectively through the collection and analysis of quantitative data. Fourth, they are feasible and can be answered within the given constraints (time, budget, resource availability, ethical boundaries). Lastly, they are relevant and significant, addressing a meaningful gap in existing knowledge and contribute something novel and valuable to the field of higher education in Sabah. The three research questions are as follows:

- i. Are there any significant differences in perceived work engagement among academics at PHEIs in relation to age, gender, and job experience?
- ii. What are the descriptive statistics for academics' perceived work engagement in Sabah and what do they imply?
- iii. Are any of the perceived work engagement items significantly different from the hypothesized value of 3.5?

2. Review of Literature

The literature review uses strict, transparent, and reproducible methods to identify, select, and critically appraise all relevant research on academics' work engagement, while highlighting an unexplored or under-researched construct in Sabah, Malaysia. It maps the intellectual field, clarifying dominant views, controversies, and agreements

related to work engagement, besides summarizing what is already known about the construct to fit the study into a broader scholarly conversation.

2.1. Job Resources and Job Performance

In their investigation, Hakanen, Bakker, and Schaufeli (2006) examined the influence of job resources and wellbeing on teachers' work engagement and exhaustion. Findings showed that work engagement tends to mediate the influence of job resources on organizational commitment, with exhaustion mediating the impact of scarce job resources on decreased work engagement. Findings imply that high job demands (e.g., time poverty) often lead to exhaustion and burnout, which subsequently cause adverse health effects, besides predicting an intention to leave the profession. On the other hand, job resources (e.g., supervisor support, innovativeness, appreciation) can directly foster work engagement, bolstering organizational commitment and preventing burnout. Ultimately, providing adequate job resources is critical for keeping teachers engaged and retaining them in the educational field.

The impact of weekly job resources on teachers' work engagement was investigated by Bakker and Bal (2010). Findings revealed that autonomy, supervisor exchange, and training opportunities tend to be positively linked to work engagement. They imply that availability of job resources often enhances teachers' work engagement, while high work engagement directly results in improved job performance. Lastly, a gain spiral effect occurs when work engagement yields a favorable, lagged impact on increasing job resources for the subsequent week, demonstrating a continuous motivational loop.

The predictors of work engagement among beginning teachers were determined by Hultell and Gustavsson (2011). Findings showed that job resources, job demands, and spillover between private life and work tend to account for the largest amount of explained variance in work engagement, with unmet expectations and skills mastery having the greatest impact on the construct. Findings imply that beginning teachers who have mastered the fundamental pedagogic skills tend to demonstrate significantly higher levels of work engagement. Further, their work engagement can be enhanced with adequate support (e.g., access to teaching materials, social support). In contrast, high psychological or emotional job demands tend to drain beginning teachers' energy, leading to burnout. Additionally, they often experience a reality shock during their transition into employment, which lowers their work engagement. A gap often occurs between what they have expected or predicted what teaching would be and the real-life classroom. Lastly, they may also experience negative spillover between private life and the heavy school demands, besides social isolation due to the lack of peer or mentor support at the new workplace.

In their study, Roslan et al. (2015) analyzed the impact of job resources and job demands and on teachers' work engagement and burnout. Findings revealed that providing adequate job resources (e.g., peer support, administrative help) tends to significantly increase teachers' work engagement, while a lack of these resources directly results in emotional exhaustion and increased burnout. Findings imply that teachers are affected by two distinct psychological pathways. First, high, unmitigated job demands (heavy workloads, student behavioral issues) often drain teachers' mental and physical energy, leading directly to burnout, which is characterized by exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced professional efficacy. Second, ample job resources (e.g., supervisory backing, organizational support, collaborative social environments) act as

intrinsic and extrinsic motivators, fostering high work engagement, while mitigating the adverse impact of hectic job demands. To enhance teachers' work engagement and reduce burnout, schools should minimize administrative work, while reinforcing appropriate student behavior. They should also boost teacher support by promoting social encouragement, peer collaboration, and greater access to teaching resources, which helps reduce teacher turnover and burnout.

The relationships among job resources, professional community, and self-efficacy among teachers were analyzed by Cai et al. (2022). Findings revealed that self-efficacy tends to partially mediate the impact of professional community on work engagement. They imply that social resources of the professional community (e.g., shared norms, collective responsibility, collaboration, reflective dialogue) can significantly influence teachers' work engagement and self-efficacy. Teachers who engage in regular reflective dialogue and share collective responsibility often cultivate a growth-oriented school culture that boosts intrinsic motivation, which ultimately improves their work engagement. Moreover, reflective dialogue and collective responsibility often increase teachers' belief in their own instructional abilities, boosting self-efficacy that acts as a buffer against daily stressors, while fostering their dedication and commitment. Additionally, shared norms and collaboration enable teachers to establish common values, normalizing help-seeking and the sharing effective pedagogical strategies. Lastly, collective efficacy drives teachers to move beyond individual confidence; believing that they can positively impact teaching and learning outcomes, they tend to raise their own resilience and work engagement.

In their survey, Sheridan et al. (2025) examined the relationship between teachers' personal and job resources (occupational commitment, self-efficacy, collective efficacy, resilience, adaptability) and work engagement. Findings showed that high self-efficacy tends to be related to a high level of work engagement. Findings imply that personal resources can significantly boost teachers' overall work engagement, particularly during high-stress periods. Teachers with high self-efficacy hold a strong belief in their teaching abilities (both individual and collective), which is directly linked to higher levels of day-to-day engagement. Further, those with high resilience and adaptability are able to effectively navigate disruptions, while positively reinforcing their self-efficacy. Lastly, strong personal and job resources directly facilitate higher occupational commitment and vocational satisfaction among teachers.

In their research, Tahir et al. (2025) explored the relationship between the work engagement and job performance among teachers. Findings indicated a significant and strong positive relationship between work engagement and job performance. They imply that teachers' work engagement acts as a significant positive driver of professional performance. Since environmental support often fosters high levels of work engagement, school administrators should inculcate a respectful, inclusive, and empowering culture. They should (1) show genuine appreciation by making teachers feel valued, (2) promote a sense of belonging by encouraging teamwork, celebrating achievements, and including everyone in school activities and decisions, and (3) support teachers with opportunities for professional development, trust their judgment, and give them space to lead and make appropriate choices.

2.2. Personality and Psychological Factors

The relationship between the big five personality traits and work engagement among university teachers was analyzed by Zaidi et al. (2013). Findings revealed that work engagement tends to be significantly and positively related to extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness to experience. Findings imply that extroverted teachers tend to exhibit higher energy, zeal, and excitement, compared to the neurotic ones. Besides, teachers who are warm, cooperative, organized, disciplined, purposeful, imaginative, and receptive to new ideas often display higher levels of engagement. In contrast, teachers with high neuroticism (emotional instability) tend to demonstrate lower work engagement, less motivation, and increased work problems. Lastly, while personality factors significantly predict work engagement, other variables (e.g., workplace resources, personal drive) also play a substantial role in influencing teachers' work engagement.

On the other hand, Rothmann and Hamukang'andu (2013) studied the relationships among calling orientation (perception of work as a purpose for the greater good), work role fit, psychological meaningfulness, and work engagement among teachers. Findings revealed that calling orientation tends to significantly impact psychological meaningfulness and work engagement, implying that teachers who perceive teaching as a calling significantly improve their work engagement. Moreover, the relationship between calling orientation and engagement is heavily bridged by psychological meaningfulness. Teachers who feel that their skills fit their roles often perceive their work as highly meaningful, which drives work engagement. Lastly, calling orientation indirectly impacts teachers' psychological meaningfulness via work-role fit; teachers who feel well-matched to their daily teaching tasks ultimately experience a better sense of calling.

In a study, Ma (2023) examined the predictors of work engagement among teachers, with psychological capital as the mediator between emotion regulation and work engagement. Findings showed that psychological capital tends to act as a vital bridge; teachers who adequately regulate their emotions often develop stronger psychological resources, which directly boosts their overall work engagement. Findings imply that internal resources can support professional wellbeing, with emotion regulation serving as an active resource investment strategy that enables teachers to avoid resource depletion. Further, emotion regulation positively influences psychological capital, which is characterized by hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism. Lastly, work engagement, encompassing vigor, dedication, and absorption, is ultimately elevated by teachers' ability to effectively process emotions first, and subsequently, leverage their resilient mental capital.

Factors determining work engagement at Malaysian PHEIs were determined by Yusof, Ahmed, and Said (2024). Findings showed that job characteristics and skills utilization tend to significantly influence perceived work engagement among academics. Additionally, personal meaning in academic tasks tends to partially mediate the relationship between job design and work engagement. Findings imply that the inherent nature of academic tasks and responsibilities directly influences academics' work engagement; academics who have the opportunity to apply their professional skills often demonstrate higher engagement levels. Lastly, personal meaning in academic tasks tends to partially mediate the relationship between job design and employee engagement. To enhance academics' work engagement, PHEIs should identify

targeted job characteristics, while strategically grouping academics based on their personal inclinations and key performance indicators.

In their investigation, Israel and Cabigas (2026) examined the relationship between work engagement (internal psychological states/personal experiences, work environment, school leadership) and teachers' productivity. Findings revealed that a strong positive relationship tends to exist between teachers' work engagement and productivity, with personal experiences and work environment as significant predictors of productivity. Findings imply teachers' internal psychological states (personal experiences) and external conditions (work environment) are the main drivers of productivity. While personal experiences and environment directly predict output, school leadership indirectly supports teachers' work engagement by actively shaping a collaborative, inspiring, and empowering work culture. To boost teachers' work engagement and, subsequently, organizational productivity, school administrators should foster an environment that augments teachers' work engagement and job satisfaction. They should also provide a clear vision and support by communicating shared goals, providing autonomy, and promoting professional development to increase teachers' work engagement.

2.3. Burnout and Wellbeing

The key predictors of burnout and work engagement among teachers were analyzed by Rajak and Chandra (2017). Findings revealed that teachers tend to balance multiple demands, with work engagement often serving as an important psychological buffer against strenuous occupational challenges, implying that meaningful engagement with students can increase job satisfaction. On the other hand, unnecessary administrative rules, regulations, and poor human resource policies often act as prominent triggers for burnout. Teachers often bear heavy multi-tasking burdens, with responsibilities extending beyond the classroom, which include research, workshops, and placement management. Lastly, schools should offer flexible scheduling and autonomy to boost teachers work engagement, while mitigating their emotional exhaustion.

Similarly, Faskhodi and Siyyari (2018) investigated the relationship between work engagement and teachers' burnout. Findings revealed a significant and negative relationship between work engagement and burnout, with job experience as a significant predictor of work engagement. Vigor, an element of work engagement, tends to significantly reduce feelings of exhaustion. Findings imply that higher levels of work engagement (vigor, dedication, absorption) act as a protective psychological buffer against the emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and low efficacy associated with burnout. Lastly, as teachers' years of job experience increase, their work engagement also tends to rise, while their overall risk of burnout decreases.

The impact of teachers' wellbeing on work engagement and burnout was explored by Salmela-Aro, Hietajärvi, and Lonka (2019). Findings showed that engaged teachers tend to possess more job and personal resources (e.g., sense of control, resilience), while those with an engaged-burnout profile tend to experience more work demands and stress. Findings imply that only 30 percent of teachers are highly engaged, demonstrating high work engagement and low burnout, generally enjoying greater access to stronger personal and job resources, such as control over their work and resilience. In contrast, engaged-burnout teachers, who comprise the majority (70 percent), experience only moderate engagement alongside raised burnout symptoms.

They frequently grapple with high work demands, such as heavy workloads and large class sizes without sufficient resources as buffers.

In their research, Holmström et al. (2023) analyzed the relationships among work engagement, efficacy, interprofessional collaboration, and burnout among teachers. Findings revealed the existence of three profiles, including engaged, engaged-exhausted, and burned-out. Teachers with distinct profiles tend to be significantly different from each other in terms of efficacy and interprofessional collaboration. Findings imply that a strong sense of efficacy and positive interprofessional collaboration can enhance teachers' work engagement, while reducing occupational burnout. By fostering these resources, schools can help teachers build the resilience needed to mitigate stress and stay motivated. Moreover, teachers with strong efficacy often feel confident in their professional abilities, greatly decreasing their emotional exhaustion. Further, working closely with peers, specialists, and administration provides them with vital social support, which operates as a critical job resource to prevent burnout. Lastly, teachers who are highly engaged generally receive greater organizational support and access to team collaboration.

The impact of work engagement on teachers' workplace wellbeing in relation to perceived organizational support and psychological empowerment was probed by Yu et al. (2024). Findings revealed that work engagement tends to positively predict workplace wellbeing, with perceived organizational support and psychological empowerment significantly mediating the relationship between the two variables. Findings imply that work engagement acts as a direct, positive predictor of overall workplace wellbeing. Teachers who receive administrative support and adequate resources for professional development often increase their work engagement and performance motivation. Lastly, organizational support fosters a sense of meaning, autonomy, and impact, which further reinforces their work engagement.

In their study, Telu and Potnuru (2024) explored the relationship between work engagement, wellbeing, and values in relation to positive organizational behavior (POB) among teachers. Findings revealed that benevolence and universalism tend to significantly impact teachers' work engagement. They imply that valuing others' welfare (benevolence) and exhibiting a broad concern for society and nature (universalism) deeply drive teachers' willingness to engage in their profession. In turn, these personal values influence work engagement by instilling positive emotions (e.g., joy, enthusiasm) and life satisfaction, while simultaneously mitigating negative emotions (e.g., stress, burnout). Lastly, values and engagement are strongly reinforced by cultural ethos (a strong sense of duty and service).

2.4. Demographic and Other Factors

The impact of demographic factors on the level of the work engagement among university teachers was scrutinized by Sharma and Rajput (2021). Findings showed that work engagement tends to significantly differ in terms of age, employment status, designation, and marital status. They imply that older or more senior teachers frequently demonstrate higher engagement levels, whereas the younger ones require more targeted support. Further, permanent or tenured faculty typically report different engagement metrics compared to ad-hoc, contractual, or junior-level teachers. Besides, work engagement is also related to job rank, with senior teachers displaying greater variations compared to their assistant peers. Lastly, beyond demographics, workplace

conditions (e.g., growth opportunities, supportive coworkers) are the most critical predictors of work engagement.

In an investigation, Iyer (2016) appraised the impact of demographic factors on teachers' work engagement. Findings revealed significant gender difference in work engagement. Gender differences in teachers' work engagement are also associated with such contextual factors as age, tenure, and organizational hierarchy. Findings imply that exploring the impact of demographic variables on teachers' work engagement can provide crucial insight into staff retention, administrative efficiency, and specific workplace dynamics. While male teachers' work engagement is often tied to clear expectations and workplace friendships, female teachers' work engagement is heavily influenced by the perceptions of being cherished, nurtured, valued, and supported.

On the other hand, Tan (2022), who assessed the factors influencing teachers' work engagement, discovered that teachers' work engagement tends to be significantly affected by (1) salary, (2) professional identity, (3) professional development, and (4) school management. Enhancing these four elements helps create an optimal work environment, which helps mitigate teacher burnout and drive high job commitment. Findings imply that competitive and fair pay directly meets teachers' basic needs, validates their specialized skills, and serves as a primary extrinsic motivator. Additionally, teachers' high professional identity (internal belief in the value of their work and their psychological attachment to the profession) acts as a buffer against emotional exhaustion. Further, access to ongoing training, seminars, and growth opportunities ensures that they feel capable and equipped to handle evolving educational demands. Lastly, school administrators who provide systemic support and appropriate leadership can foster a trusting environment that empowers teachers.

In their investigation, Ljubetić, Maglica, and Ercegovic (2022) analyzed the factors impacting the work engagement among school teachers. Findings indicated significant group differences in teachers' work engagement, with preschool and primary teachers reporting higher absorption and dedication compared to their middle school peers. Besides, quality work with children and parents and job security tend to significantly impact teachers' work engagement. Findings imply that high work engagement is significantly link to job security and a lack of time pressure at work. Additionally, longer working experience is positively related to increased vigor and absorption. Lastly, quality, supportive interactions with children and parents are major drivers of higher work engagement, while job experience is directly tied to higher energy and immersion among teachers.

Lastly, Korsakienė, Stankeviciene, and Nawal (2024) measured the factors impacting the work engagement and individual performance among teachers. Findings showed that work engagement tends to fully mediate the relationships among managerial support, organizational support, control, colleague support, work pressure, and task performance.

Findings imply that (1) managerial support (guidance, professional consultations, feedback) often boosts work engagement and task performance, (2) digital literacy promotes professional development, allowing teachers to adapt to modern, remote, or hybrid environments, (3) work meaningfulness gives teachers a strong purpose and connection to their educational contributions, leading to higher work engagement, and

(4) work pressure should be mitigated by corresponding organizational or technological resources to increase commitment, wellbeing, and work engagement among teachers.

2.5. Efficacy, Resilience, and Other Affective Variables

In their study, Misu et al. (2022) measured pre-university teachers' work engagement, work efficacy, and work performance. Findings showed that teachers with higher seniority tend to exhibit higher levels of work engagement, work efficacy, and work performance, while their level of work engagement tends to directly influence their job performance. Findings imply that years of teaching often build a strong sense of self-efficacy and resilience among teachers, making senior teachers more capable of managing classroom dynamics. Additionally, higher seniority is often tied to perceived organizational support and institutional backing, which sustains high teacher motivation over time. Besides, senior teachers often offer high institutional value; as veterans, they frequently mentor novice staff, develop curricular activities, and manage school discipline. They also experience higher job satisfaction since seniority is often linked to favorable salary scales and increased occupational fulfillment.

The impact of self-efficacy, reflection, and resilience on the work engagement among English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers was scrutinized by Heng and Chu (2023). Findings indicated that self-efficacy, reflection, and resilience tend to significantly predict teachers' work engagement. They imply that a clear psychological pathway exists, which shapes how EFL teachers engage with their profession. As direct predictors, self-efficacy, reflection, and resilience each independently enhances work engagement. Teachers who believe in their instructional abilities, regularly evaluate their teaching practices, and bounce back from setbacks, consistently show higher dedication and vigor. On the other hand, self-efficacy has a dual effect; acting as a foundation, it helps teachers develop better reflective habits and develop stronger resilience, directly influencing their work engagement. Lastly, reflection acts a mediator; teachers who engage in reflection indirectly boost their work engagement, allowing them to effectively process challenges, consequently increasing their resilience.

In a study, Maghfirroh and Sari (2024) investigated the impact of resilience and social support on the work engagement among teachers. Findings revealed that both resilience and external social support tend to be significant predictors of work engagement. They imply that resilience acts as an internal driver; teachers with strong personal competence, effective time management, and tolerance often display higher psychological fulfillment and work engagement. On the other hand, social support acts as an external resource, which helps meet teachers' psychological needs, making them more passionate and enthusiastic about their professional duties. Lastly, a combination of resilience and social support can strongly influence teachers' adaptive capacity, allowing them to remain engaged even in highly demanding classroom settings.

The relationship between teachers' work engagement and their emotions (affective variable) was measured by Burić and Macuka (2018). Findings showed that teachers with higher levels of positive emotions (joy, pride, love) and self-efficacy tend to be more engaged in their work, while those experiencing negative emotions (anger, fatigue, hopelessness) tend to be less engaged. Findings imply that a reciprocal relationship exists between work engagement and emotions; both positive and negative emotions tend to significantly influence, and are influenced by, daily work engagement. Additionally, teachers' confidence in their own capabilities is a crucial antecedent;

higher self-efficacy acts as a strong predictor in boosting positive emotions, while reducing negative emotions, and ultimately, fueling sustained engagement. Lastly, reciprocal effects occur because highly engaged teachers are also more capable of generating and maintaining positive emotions in their classrooms.

In their investigation, Obrad and Circa (2021) assessed the impact of students' motivation (affective variable) and learning engagement and on the work engagement among teachers. Findings showed that student engagement and student motivation tend to significantly impact teachers' work engagement. They imply that teachers' energy, dedication, and vigor are highly dependent on how engaged and motivated the students are. Additionally, teachers' work engagement is influenced by the teleworking environment; in an online environment, where traditional face-to-face feedback is lacking, students' inattentiveness can adversely affect teachers' own professional enthusiasm. Nevertheless, teachers whose students are actively engaged in classroom learning often derive a sense of job satisfaction, which in turn, motivates them to prepare better lesson plans and adopt innovative teaching methods.

A multinational study by Derakhshan, Greenier, and Fathi (2023) explored the impact of loving pedagogy (affective teaching) and creativity teaching on English language teachers' work engagement. Findings revealed that compassionate, supportive educator dispositions, alongside creativity teaching tend to significantly predict teachers' work engagement. While loving pedagogy promotes enthusiastic and energetic attitudes toward teaching, creativity teaching acts as a more powerful predictor of work engagement compared to loving pedagogy. Findings imply that teachers who actively implement loving pedagogy transform their work from mere knowledge delivery into a deeply fulfilling emotional journey that enhances their efficacy. Besides, compassionate teacher-student relationships often raise teachers' belief in their own capabilities, leading to sustained enthusiasm and classroom vitality. Additionally, loving pedagogy nurtures a warm environment, shifting the dynamic from demanding to collaborative, making teachers feel more capable of navigating classroom setbacks due to mutual respect. Lastly, it increases students' responsiveness because it allows teachers to tune into the specific needs of diverse learners, thus making their instructional design more purposeful and their data collection decision-driven.

A study by Coelho et al. (2025) appraised the impact of human values on the work engagement among teachers. Findings showed that interactive values (e.g., affectivity, belonging, support) tend to be significantly related to work engagement. They imply that aligning personal human values with institutional goals (value congruence) strongly predicts increased teachers' work engagement and job enthusiasm. Teachers who share similar motivational values with their schools are more likely to exhibit greater vigor, dedication, and long-term commitment to teaching. Therefore, schools should promote specific values that significantly boost teachers' effort and engagement by providing good economic returns and job security, inculcating a sense of achievement and prestige among teachers, and proactively supporting them through a productive atmosphere, manageable workloads, and lifelong learning.

2.6. Organizational Culture

The impact of organizational culture (workload, supervisor support, coworkers' support) on boarding school teachers' work engagement was determined by Kaiyom, Rahman, and Mustaffa (2021). Findings showed that workload, supervisor support, and

coworkers' support tend to significantly impact teachers' work engagement. They imply that coworkers' support tends to have the strongest impact on work engagement; it is therefore vital for schools to promote a sense of belonging and teamwork. Further, supervisor support significantly enhances engagement and organizational trust, while workload positively influences engagement, indicating that manageable duties and active engagement often align. Lastly, schools should strive to cultivate strong interpersonal and administrative support networks to keep teachers professionally engaged.

In a study, Shibiti (2020) investigated the impact of specific organizational retention factors (e.g., compensation, training, career opportunities) on teachers' work engagement. Findings showed that compensation, training and development opportunities, and career opportunities tend to significantly predict teachers' vigor, dedication, and absorption at work. They imply that engaged teachers often demonstrate higher levels of physical energy, emotional commitment, and cognitive connection to their students and instructional goals. Hence, schools should strive to satisfy teachers' needs in these areas to ensure high levels of work engagement and job embeddedness among them.

The impact of organizational culture, servant leadership, and job satisfaction on teachers' work engagement was analyzed by Hidayat, Maitimo, and Suwu (2020). Findings showed that servant leadership and organizational culture tend to have a positive impact on job satisfaction and work engagement. They imply that servant leadership (where principals prioritize the growth and wellbeing of staff) tends to positively impact both job satisfaction and work engagement. Further, a supportive school culture can directly boost job satisfaction and enhance teachers' work engagement. To maximize teacher engagement, schools should adopt a supportive leadership approach alongside a working environment that is conducive to teaching and learning.

Additionally, Sario and Villocino (2023) investigated the relationship between teamwork and teachers' engagement, with work conditions and professional development as mediators. Findings revealed a significant relationship between teamwork and teacher engagement in relation to work conditions and professional development. They imply that a supportive physical and social work environment often provides teachers with the job resources and stability needed to increase their professional confidence and commitment. Moreover, teachers who are encouraged to further their training and personal growth are better equipped to share knowledge, propagating a more collaborative and productive school environment. Lastly, teamwork helps convert foundational job resources (supportive work conditions, training opportunities) into actual work engagement; teachers who actively collaborate with others often foster mutual support, shared vision, and improved instructional strategies.

Lastly, Sudibjo and Riantini (2023) analyzed the impact of perceived organizational support and servant leadership on teachers' work engagement, with meaningful work as a predictor. Findings revealed that meaningful work tends to be the strongest predictor of work engagement, with perceived organizational support as the strongest predictor of meaningful work. Findings imply that meaningful work acts a significant driver of work engagement; teachers who understand their purpose and see their positive impact on students and the community often increase their dedication, vigor, and focus. On the other hand, perceived organizational support fosters work meaningfulness; teachers

who feel supported by the top administration are more likely to find deeper significance in their profession.

2.7. Leadership

The mediating role of job resources and basic psychological need satisfaction in the relationship between engaging leadership and work engagement was measured by Rahmadani, Schaufeli, and Stouten (2020). Findings indicated that engaging leadership tends to significantly predict work engagement and increase basic psychological need satisfaction among employees. They imply that engaging leadership facilitates, strengthens, connects, and inspires employees, which boosts workplace resources (e.g., person-job fit, skill utilization), resulting in higher intrinsic motivation. Besides, positive leadership and enhanced job resources satisfy employees' needs, sparking greater work engagement. To bridge the gap between effective leadership and sustained work engagement, three foundational needs must be fulfilled. First, employees must feel in control of their tasks and how their work is executed (autonomy). Second, they must feel connected to their colleagues, while being a valued member of their team (relatedness). Third, they must feel capable and equipped to successfully perform their duties (competence).

On the other hand, Schaufeli (2021), who appraised the impact of engaging leadership on work engagement, established that engaging leadership tends to profoundly boost work engagement by satisfying employees' basic psychological needs. Engaging leaders often demonstrate four specific behaviors. Being inspiring, they are enthusiastic, visionary, and able to instill meaning into routine tasks. Being positively reinforcing and supportive (strengthening), they boost employees' confidence by granting them autonomy and challenging tasks. Being connective and relational (connecting), they foster a collaborative, team-oriented, and supportive environment. Being empowering, they provide necessary resources, regular feedback, and opportunities for professional development. Additionally, engaging leaders significantly influence work engagement by being able to fulfill employees' basic need satisfaction (autonomy, competence, relatedness) through inspiring, strengthening, connecting, and empowering. Besides, engaging leaders augment individual resources (e.g., optimism, resiliency) and team resources (e.g., communication, trust in the management), which act as a bridge to higher engagement and team effectiveness. Overall, they ensure that employees have the appropriate balance between job demands and resources, allowing them to remain motivated and productive.

The impact of inclusive leadership and mindfulness on job performance in relation to work engagement among teachers was established by Liang et al. (2024). Findings indicated a strong, positive relationship between work engagement and job performance, while mindfulness and inclusive leadership tend to be significantly related to work engagement. Findings imply that inclusive leaders often create a psychologically safe and supportive environment where teachers feel valued and capable. They foster higher morale by ensuring that teachers feel included, while retaining their individuality. Further, inclusive leaders often increase teachers' work engagement, which subsequently drives better classroom execution and student outcomes. On the other hand, teachers' mindfulness acts as a personal resource and buffer against professional stressors. Therefore, mindful teachers typically report lower levels of emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and turnover intention, while demonstrating better professional efficacy, higher job satisfaction, and improved daily job performance.

To ensure that teachers experience higher engagement, school administrators should combine inclusive management with mindful practices to yield tangible benefits, including innovative teaching approaches, higher job satisfaction, and improved student academic performance.

Lastly, Fatima and Sharma (2025) explored the impact of eight specific positive leadership behaviors on teachers' work engagement. Findings revealed that teachers' work engagement tends to be influenced by (1) leaders' ability to gain teachers' trust, (2) visionary leadership that inspires and aligns teachers with long-term goals, (3) participative management that encourages shared decision-making and inclusivity, (4) teachers' autonomy that allows them to innovate and tailor their teaching methods, (5) professional development that fosters continuous growth and capability, (6) adequate resources that reduce environmental stressors and workload burdens, (7) appreciative feedback that boosts teachers' confidence and teaching efficacy, and (8) targeted rewards and professional recognition that motivate teachers. Findings imply the significance of visionary and participatory leadership styles as primary catalysts for building psychological empowerment and long-term commitment among teachers.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design, Approach, and Location

A quantitative design for this study evaluates how specific workplace factors impact academics' work engagement levels. It relies on a cross-sectional survey using a validated scale, followed by statistical analyses using SPSS 29.0. Highly cost-effective and easy to implement, the research design is appropriate for observing significant demographic differences, percentages of agreement, and significant differences based on a hypothesized median of 3.5 across a small sample at a single point in time. Additionally, it allows the administration of the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale, ensuring that the study captures reliable, measurable, and ordinal data. Besides, the research approach allows the writers to define the target pool (academics at PHEIs in this case) based on convenience sampling for easier accessibility. Lastly, the research location was Kota Kinabalu where most PHEIs are located, making data collection more convenient, cost-effective, and time-efficient.

3.2. Sample and Justification

The sample consisted of 61 academics ($n = 61$) from four PHEIs in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, who have at least a basic degree and teach full-time at their institutions. Initially, administrators of 10 randomly selected PHEIs were invited to participate in the study via email and phone, but eventually, only four agreed to share the survey link with their staff. To get a realistic and contextually relevant sample, voluntary participation and convenient access were emphasized.

The sample encompassed multiethnic groups from an urban environment that is characterized by varied sociocultural backgrounds and multifaceted influences. Subjects are heterogeneous, working in a pluralistic society where distinct ethnic, religious, and racial groups coexist peacefully, while maintaining their unique identities.

The sample size was justified according to the central limit theorem, which states that a minimum of 30 respondents is enough to ensure statistical power and generalizability

for basic survey research (Roscoe, 1975; RUBIKTOP, 2023). Therefore, the current sample size meets the minimum requirement for quantitative research in the social sciences, particularly in terms of academics' work engagement, while ensuring a reasonable margin of error and sufficient power to identify modest effects in the nonparametric tests used to interpret data in the present study.

The sample consisted of 45.9 percent males and 54.1 percent females. Age-wise, 31.1 percent are 24 to 34 years old, 37.7 percent are 35 to 45 years old, 23 percent are 46 to 56 years old, and 8.2 are above 56 years old (see Table 1).

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents ($n = 61$)

Profile	Description	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	28	45.9
	Female	33	54.1
Age (years)	24-34	19	31.1
	35-45	23	37.7
	46-56	14	23
	Above 56	5	8.2
	1-5	13	21.3
Job experience (years)	6-11	8	13.1
	12-17	15	24.6
	Above 17	25	41

3.3. Instrument

The Utrecht Work Engagement Scale designed by Schaufeli and Bakker (2004) was adapted to collect data. It contains 17 statements that defines work engagement as a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind; it measures the construct across three core dimensions (vigor, dedication, and absorption). It uses a 5-point Likert frequency rating scale (1=Rarely, 2= Sometimes, 3=Often, 4=Very Often, and 5=Always).

To determine its suitability for the study, it was pilot-tested on 20 lecturers and SPSS 29.0 was used to calculate its reliability. Results showed that its Cronbach's alpha is 0.911, indicating strong internal consistency among the items. In brief, there is high confidence that the scale will measure perceived work engagement in a succinct, coherent, and credible manner.

3.5. Data Collection and Analysis

PHEI academics were required to complete the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale on Google Forms. Specific steps were taken to protect respondent data by (1) turning off the IP address and email logging in the survey platform, (2) administering the survey using a secure, third-party platform to restrict raw data access, (3) omitting identifiers (names, birth dates, specific personal information), (4) reporting results in general without sharing specific, individual responses, and (5) adopting a threshold by applying a minimum group size before displaying demographic data to prevent deductive identification. Additionally, respondents were explicitly told what data were collected, how they would be utilized, and who would access them. Lastly, they were ascertained

that responding was optional and stopping any time would not result in negative consequences.

Data were transferred onto a spreadsheet and subsequently analyzed using SPSS 29.0. First, percentages of agreement (very often/always) on perceived work engagement were collapsed to gain an overall view of the construct. Second, Kruskal-Wallis H test was conducted to determine if there were any significant differences in relation to age and job experience, while Mann-Whitney U test was run to determine if there were any significant differences in terms of gender. Third, Wilcoxon signed rank test was conducted to determine if any of the items significantly differed from the hypothesized value of 3.5.

4. Findings

4.1. Percentages of Agreement

Findings showed that very low proportions (45.9 to 55.8 percent) of academics tend to very often/always (1) feel like going to work of when they get up in the morning, (2) forget everything else around them when they are working, (3) can continue working for very long periods at a time, (4) feel happy when they are working intensely, (5) get carried away when they are working, (6) find it difficult to detach themselves from their job, (7) feel bursting with energy at their work, and (8) feel strong and vigorous at their job (see Table 2).

Additionally, a below-average proportion (60.6 to 65.6 percent) of academics tend to very often/always (1) find their job inspiring, (2) are immersed in their work, (3) are enthusiastic about their job, and (4) are very mentally resilient at their job (see Table 2).

Lastly, only a low-average proportion (73.7 to 75.4 percent) of academics tend to very often/always (1) persevere, even when things do not go well at their work, (2) are proud of the work that they do, and (3) find their job challenging, (4) find their work full of meaning and purpose, and (5) find that time flies when they are working (see Table 2).

Table 2: Percentages of Agreement on Perceived Work Engagement

Items	1	2	3	4	5	4+5 (collapsed)
At my work, I feel bursting with energy	1.6	1.6	41	32.8	23	55.8
At my job, I feel strong and vigorous	1.6	3.3	39.3	36.1	19.7	55.8
When I get up in the morning, I feel like going to work	3.3	8.2	42.6	24.6	21.3	45.9
I can continue working for very long periods at a time	1.6	8.2	37.7	26.2	26.2	52.4
At my job, I am very resilient, mentally	0	4.9	29.5	41	24.6	65.6
At my work I always persevere, even when things do not go well	0	1.6	24.6	47.5	26.2	73.7
I find the work that I do full of meaning and purpose	1.6	0	23	50.8	24.6	75.4
I am enthusiastic about my job	1.6	1.6	31.1	37.7	27.9	65.6
My job inspires me	1.6	3.4	34.4	29.5	31.1	60.6
I am proud of the work that I do	3.3	1.6	21.3	41	32.8	73.8

To me, my job is challenging	0	0	24.6	42.6	32.8	75.4
Time flies when I'm working	0	0	26.2	41	32.8	73.8
When I am working, I forget everything else around me	1.6	8.2	37.7	31.1	21.3	52.4
I feel happy when I am working intensely	1.6	1.6	42.6	26.2	27.9	54.1
I am immersed in my work	0	0	37.7	34.4	27.9	62.3
I get carried away when I'm working	1.6	6.6	37.7	26.2	27.9	54.1
It is difficult to detach myself from my job	1.6	6.6	34.4	29.5	27.9	57.4

1=Rarely, 2= Sometimes, 3=Often, 4=Very Often, and 5=Always

4.2. Nonsignificant Differences

Mann-Whitney U test revealed nonsignificant gender differences in perceived work engagement among academics at PHEIs in Sabah. Kruskal-Wallis H test indicated nonsignificant differences in perceived work engagement by way of age and job experience. Results imply that any observed variations between men and women (in terms of gender, age, or job experience) are so small that they can be attributed to random chance rather than true, underlying differences. The nature versus nurture debate can also be used to explain the nonsignificant differences in work engagement; any small differences that exist in the construct can be caused by job motivation, organizational pressures, and other variables, rather than hardwired biological differences (see Table 3).

Table 3: Results of Kruskal-Wallis H and Mann-Whitney U Tests

Variables	Nonparametric Tests	p-value
Gender	Mann-Whitney U	0.042
Age (years)	Kruskal-Wallis H	0.937
Job experience (years)	Kruskal-Wallis H	0.693

4.3. Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test Results

Wilcoxon signed rank test indicated that 14 of the work engagement items were significantly different from the hypothesized median value of 3.5 at $p < .001$, while three of the items were significantly different from the hypothesized median value of 3.5 at $p < .05$ (see Table 4).

Table 4: Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test Results on Work Engagement

Items	p-value	Conclusion
At my work, I feel bursting with energy	<0.001**	Median significantly differed from the test value indicating strong disagreement
At my job, I feel strong and vigorous	<0.001**	Median significantly differed from the test value indicating strong disagreement
When I get up in the morning, I feel like going to work	<0.003*	Median significantly differed from the test value indicating strong disagreement
I can continue working for very long periods at a time	<0.001**	Median significantly differed from the test value indicating strong disagreement

At my job, I am very resilient, mentally	<0.001**	Median significantly differed from the test value indicating strong disagreement
At my work I always persevere, even when things do not go well	<0.021*	Median significantly differed from the test value indicating strong disagreement
I find the work that I do full of meaning and purpose	<0.001**	Median significantly differed from the test value indicating strong disagreement
I am enthusiastic about my job	<0.001**	Median significantly differed from the test value indicating strong disagreement
My job inspires me	<0.001**	Median significantly differed from the test value indicating strong disagreement
I am proud of the work that I do	<0.011*	Median significantly differed from the test value indicating strong disagreement
To me, my job is challenging	<0.001**	Median significantly differed from the test value indicating strong disagreement
Time flies when I'm working	<0.001**	Median significantly differed from the test value indicating strong disagreement
When I am working, I forget everything else around me	<0.001**	Median significantly differed from the test value indicating strong disagreement
I feel happy when I am working intensely	<0.001**	Median significantly differed from the test value indicating strong disagreement
I am immersed in my work	<0.001**	Median significantly differed from the test value indicating strong disagreement
I get carried away when I'm working	<0.001**	Median significantly differed from the test value indicating strong disagreement
It is difficult to detach myself from my job	<0.001**	Median significantly differed from the test value indicating strong disagreement

** $p < .001$, * $p < .05$

5. Discussion

This section covers the implications of the study, explaining the broader consequences and real-world significance of the findings, while detailing what the results mean for theory, practice, policy, and Malaysian PHEIs. Theoretical implications show how the findings build upon and refine existing scientific or academic models on work engagement, which affect educational researchers, academics, and students at PHEIs. This section also includes recommendations on ways to enhance work engagement among academics at PHEIs in Sabah, Malaysia. Recommendations on how to improve the research design, data collection method, and analytical techniques are also suggested.

5.1. Implications

Findings imply that very low to low-average proportions of PHEI academics tend to possess high work engagement, which are partially supported by previous research. Individuals who possess very low to low-average levels of work engagement tend to be disengaged, lacking an emotional investment in their work or the organization. Further, they tend to be under-engaged and lukewarm, operating well below their capacity or potential and exerting the bare minimum effort required to survive, besides lacking passion, enthusiasm, or drive for their routine work. Lastly, they tend to be unenthused, exhibiting a lack of excitement, vigor, or dedication to assigned tasks (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2010).

Teoh and Kee (2022), who examined the causes of occupational burnout among academicians at Malaysian universities, found that work engagement, challenge demands, and hindrance demands tend to significantly mediate the relationships between psychosocial safety climate and burnout. The researchers highlighted that contemporary Malaysian academicians at research universities often encounter burnout, mostly due to heavy job demands and limited job resources.

In their investigation, Isa and Kadir (2021) found that academic staff at Malaysian universities tend to be affected by repetitious and mechanical paperwork, a stressful working environment, administration and management issues, and lack of appropriate rewards or appreciation. In their conceptual paper, Khairuddin and Nadzri (2017) reiterated that occupational stress tends to influence the work engagement among academics at Malaysian private universities. Since high stress is theorized to indirectly affect academics' work engagement by diminishing their overall health and organizational commitment, top management and policymakers should develop better strategies addressing staff wellbeing, workload management, and job resources to promote better engagement levels.

On the other hand, Gan and Kee (2024) found that psychosocial safety tends to significantly foster work engagement and job satisfaction among academics at Malaysian research universities. Psychosocial safety mitigates the impact of job demands, implying that higher educational institutions should emphasize psychological safety to minimize the adverse impact of overwhelming job demands.

Lastly, Isa et al. (2025) postulated that work-related stress is a widespread issue that impacts productivity and wellbeing among academic staff at Malaysian public universities, underscoring that academic staff's work engagement can be significantly improved by allocating them with a manageable amount of tasks, followed by more favorable job specifications, supportive leadership, and an appropriate salary scale and compensation.

5.2. Recommendations

Most educational leaders understand that work engagement plays a key role in building strong higher educational communities, while improving teaching and learning outcomes. However, burnout and administrative overload continue to be the top drivers of academic staff turnover. By adopting proven, evidence-based strategies for work engagement, PHEIs can increase staff satisfaction, reduce turnover, and create a more collaborative organizational culture where everyone thrives. To help academics feel

more connected, involved, and committed, PHEIs should embrace transparent communication practices, strengthen educator engagement, promote work engagement, support staff professional growth and collaboration, and increase collective efficacy among staff (Hanover Research, 2026).

5.2.1. Transparent Communication Practices

Effective communication between administrators and teachers is key to improving school and district outcomes (Hanover Research, 2026). PHEI leaders should practice consistent messaging and follow-through to effectively instil trust by valuing academics' voices in a transparent, proactive, and timely manner. First, they should develop effective internal communications rather than sending staff communication messages ad hoc; they should clarify how and when they will share relevant information with staff throughout the academic year, including the audiences, channels, and frequency. To honor staff's hectic schedules, PHEIs should use direct and concise language. Additionally, they should adopt appropriate channels to communicate different types of messages. They should utilize (1) websites to post all non-sensitive communications, public relations news, and attainments, while prominently listing any urgent alerts on the homepage, (2) mobile apps/text alerts to push notifications for emergency alerts, important reminders, and event promotions, (3) email to communicate routine tasks, crucial documentation or forms, project timelines, and earmarked assets, and (4) social media to share campaigns and general updates.

5.2.2. Two-Way Communication Strategies

To promote work engagement, schools should ensure that teachers are heard and encouraged to share ideas (Hanover Research, 2026). To build a more collaborative work culture and bolster academics' sense of agency, PHEI leaders should provide a framework for reciprocal communication, adopting a workplace communication style where management is accessible to all academics for feedback and concerns. For in-person talks and direct dialogues, they should respect academics' time by meeting in their office and conducting open, distraction-free conversations. Moreover, they should have a formal or informal agenda to keep all meetings direct and on course. Lastly, they should offer frequent open-door office hours for academics to make enquiries, publicly share issues, and offer constructive feedback.

5.2.3. Community Engagement

By prioritizing community engagement, schools allow teachers to develop meaningful professional connections by working directly with families and community leaders on various educational initiatives (Hanover Research, 2026). Community engagement increases teachers' work engagement by establishing a vital professional network characterized by adequate organizational and social resources, which enables them to shift from isolated teaching to shared norms and collective responsibility, thus boosting their instructional efficacy. To enhance academics' work engagement, PHEIs should (1) adopt actionable and localized strategies to engage the community and staff, (2) emphasize collaborative problem solving, connect academics with local professionals, NGOs, and businesses for experiential learning and encourage academics to apply theoretical knowledge to community contexts, (3) promote shared decision-making among parents, alumni, and community leaders in their committees, and (4) underscore

community-based resource generation, allowing academics to partner with local organizations or charities to source relevant curricular materials (Cai et al., 2022).

5.2.4. Professional Growth and Collaboration

To increase teachers' work engagement, schools should propagate a collaborative, professional culture that models a growth mindset; a positive professional culture enhances teachers' commitment to engage in lifelong learning (Hanover Research, 2026).

At PHEIs, a strong professional learning culture expands beyond ad-hoc staff seminars, emphasizing structured professional development that includes peer collaboration, coaching, and mentorship. When creating an accessible plan for boosting academics' professional growth, PHEIs should (1) establish professional learning communities (PLCs) to allow academics to share expertise and adapt instruction to varied student needs, guided by instructional coaches, (2) provide actionable tools by offering interactive and experiential support, helping academics shift from theory to real-world application, (3) structure intentional learning by integrating professional development into staff schedules; academics are more likely to participate when offered adequate support and time to complete the required training within their weekday, (3) create vivid career pathways, offering transparent advancement opportunities, leadership training, and credentialing support to empower academics to envision long-term careers within the organization.

5.2.5. Collective Efficacy and Confidence

High self-efficacy allows teachers to believe that they can make a difference in their work, while collective efficacy motivates them to assume joint responsibility for students' wellbeing and academic achievement (Hanover Research, 2026). PHEI leaders should foster collective efficacy by enhancing academics' individual confidence through sustainable engagement initiatives. Academics who feel competent in their professional abilities, while possessing the autonomy to exercise their competence tend to increase their overall job satisfaction. PHEIs can increase academics' collective efficacy by (1) launching structured recognition programs to celebrate their achievements openly through peer-nominated awards, personalized thank-you notes, and public acknowledgments at academic meetings, (2) ensuring balanced resource allocation so that all academics have access to innovative instructional materials and support staff, (3) soliciting staff's perspectives to routinely seek feedback on organizational decisions, signaling that their voices are valued and their feedback honored with actions, and (4) supporting external opportunities to allow academics to represent their faculty at conferences and other speaking events.

5.2.6. Ways to Revive Teachers' Work Engagement

According to Gibbon and Lorenz (2023), educational leaders can revive teachers' engagement by (1) giving them the opportunity to demonstrate their forte every day, (2) letting them know the requirements, responsibilities, or obligations at work, (3) caring about them as individuals, and (4) making them feel that their job is important. First, teachers who maintain that opportunities to regularly demonstrate their expertise have decreased since 2020. Since the pandemic, teachers' responsibilities have evolved in a way that distance them from their students, colleagues, and career, preventing them

to leverage the talents and strengths that they once used in a typical classroom (Gibbon and Lorenz, 2023). PHEIs need to propagate a strengths-based culture that capitalizes on academics' multifarious talents since staff who can harness their strengths tend to be more engaged and are less likely to experience burnout. To reinforce academics' strengths, PHEIs should find more effective ways to incorporate their competencies and aptitude into their regular classroom instruction, besides encouraging them to share success stories with colleagues. Overall, to successfully integrate academics' capacities into the organizational culture, PHEI leaders need to leverage their unique talents and skills.

Second, many teachers only partially know their job requirements, performance expectations, or role responsibilities; in the constantly evolving higher educational landscape, many feel trapped in a monotonous, unfulfilling, or unchanging routine with a lack of progress. During the pandemic, many educators were unsure of what was incumbent upon them; they were unsure whether their classroom was going to meet in person, online, or at all, during any given day of the academic week. Now that schools have seemingly resumed normality, leaders need to reset the anticipations, prospects, or assumptions for future outcomes (Gibbon & Lorenz, 2023). PHEI leaders should re-establish unequivocal expectations in terms of an academic's job within the organization, while acknowledging and appreciating those who are going the extra mile. Since job expectations tend to be complex and require in-depth discussion, PHEI leaders should clarify them to academics, while ascertaining them of their real responsibilities.

Third, teachers' work engagement tends to increase when their supervisor, or someone at work, seems to care about them as individuals. However, the caring factor has decreased because of concerns for personal safety, increased job demands, burnout without increased compensation, and worsened student behavioral issues. Moreover, teachers' roles have changed over the years, and so have their principals' or supervisors'. The way leaders should communicate care for teachers has changed as well (Gibbon & Lorenz, 2023). Caring for others directly correlates with both retention and performance at the workplace; academics who feel that their leaders care about their overall wellbeing are more likely to be engaged, while less likely to be actively looking for a new job. Therefore, PHEI leaders should reflect on how they can authentically show academics that they care for them, while ensuring that their efforts are aligned with the staff's strengths. In a hectic higher educational milieu, PHEI leaders do not need to do anything elaborate to show academics that they care; it does not always have to be an expensive gift or a time-intensive conversation. In many cases, they can demonstrate care by touching base with authenticity and curiosity, celebrating upcoming milestones or personal events, or expressing gratitude for the time and effort that someone has given to an initiative. PHEI leaders can also establish quick, meaningful connections to show academics that they are truly appreciated by showing understanding and appreciation based on their efforts and contributions.

Third, teachers tend to become more engaged when the mission or purpose of their organization makes them feel that their job is important. Many teachers have joined their profession because they believe in the mission and purpose of teaching. Nevertheless, they still want to know that their daily work matters (Gibbon & Lorenz, 2023). However, at many PHEIs, teaching over the past few years has evolved from letting students get ahead to trying to get students to keep pace and stay informed because of varying schedules, attendance, and delivery modes. Since most academics inherently desire to be a part of a community or something bigger than themselves,

PHEIs need to reinforce their belief in a shared objective, while expressing recognition of, and appreciation for, their roles in the broader mission of Malaysian higher education. By acknowledging the various ways that academics are educating youths, PHEI leaders help them see how impactful their work is, amid the ever-evolving higher educational environment. While there is no universal approach to showing recognition, it is essential for PHEIs to acknowledge academics in ways that are fulfilling, individualized, authentic, and equitable.

5.2.7. Leadership Availability, Compelling Future, and Values

Organizational leaders and human resource professionals can improve workforce engagement by increasing leadership availability, creating a compelling future, and linking work to personal values (TMA Performance, n. d.). First, during the pandemic, many organizations actually saw an increase in work engagement due to increased leaders' visibility and authenticity. Since leaders often become more relatable as they navigate the same challenges as their staff, PHEI leaders should underscore the importance of maintaining a high level of accessibility and visibility, asking academics if they feel understood concerning their day-to-day reality and lived experience. Second, academics who have confidence in their organization's future success tend to be more optimistic about its prospects, resulting in higher work engagement amongst them. Each academic's contributions signify achievement, effectiveness, or value, which instills a sense of purpose and pride in his or her work. PHEI leaders should show academics how their efforts contribute to the organization's mission, emphasizing victories whenever feasible and helping academics recognize that they positively impact both the organization and community. Third, PHEI leaders should empower academics to link their work to their personal values, which not only reduces work-related stress, but also enhances job enthusiasm and commitment, ultimately leading to higher work engagement levels. Academics who derive meaning in their work often build a strong bond with the organization and its team, grounded on their routine tasks or on the knowledge that their jobs help create cohesive households and resilient communities.

5.2.8. Continuous Staff Development, Feedback, and Desk-less Empowerment

Organizational leaders and human resource professionals can improve workforce engagement by providing continuous staff development, adopting 360-degree feedback, and empowering the desk-less workforce (TMA Performance, n. d.). First, PHEIs should utilize innovative learning tools, technologies, and conference presentations to enhance academics' expertise, competence, and proficiency, while demonstrating their commitment to academics' professional development. To make academics realize how their affiliation with the organization contributes to their personal development, PHEIs should create individualized development plans for each of them. Second, since feedback serves as a potent tool for enhancing work engagement, PHEIs should ensure that they offer comprehensive, multi-dimensional appraisal of both their leaders and academics, pinpointing discrepancies between desired and exhibited behaviors. Confidential, anonymous feedback on both parties from supervisors, peers, and students can help reduce shortcomings and raise self-awareness, which is a critical characteristic that successful leaders and staff possess. Third, PHEIs that have desk-less staff should address such challenges as limited technology access, Internet problems, and other communication barriers by adopting mobile-friendly technology and digital communication channels to enhance staff's experience, while fostering innovation and boosting work engagement.

5.2.9. *Sense of Belonging*

A sense of belonging is most probably the powerful driver of employee engagement, which can be promoted through (1) inclusive communication and (2) team bonding (TMA Performance, n. d.). First, to promote inclusive communication, PHEI leaders should listen actively, encouraging open dialogue and paying undivided attention to academics, while showing genuine interest in their ideas, concerns, and experiences. Further, they should schedule regular face-to-face meetings with academics, using the sessions to discuss personal aspirations, goals, obstacles, or hurdles. Additionally, they should be transparent about organizational changes, team goals, and performance expectations, which helps foster trust and a sense of shared purpose. Second, to promote team bonding, PHEI leaders should organize social activities designed specifically to increase interpersonal trust, relationships, and morale, besides celebrating important milestones (work anniversaries, birthdays, personal achievements).

Lastly, a sense of belonging can be instilled by (1) acknowledging individual contributions and (2) practicing inclusive rituals (TMA Performance, n. d.). First, PHEI leaders should acknowledge individual contributions through public recognition and personalized appreciation. They can celebrate individual achievements during team meetings or through organization-wide announcements, highlighting how each academic's work contributes to organizational success. They should also tailor their appreciation to each academic's preferences; some may prefer public recognition, while others appreciate a private thank-you note. Second, PHEI leaders should create welcome rituals when new academics join the institution, extending a warm welcome, introducing them to the team, sharing their background, and making them feel included. Lastly, they should establish team traditions, such as weekly lunches, Friday coffee breaks, or monthly team outings to strengthen relationships.

5.2.10. *Regular Assessment, Career Opportunities, Recognition, and Monitoring*

According to Tompkins (2025), employee engagement in higher education can be increased by (1) assessing workloads regularly, (2) mapping out opportunities for career progression, (3) creating opportunities for recognition, and (4) monitoring engagement over time. First, since academics nowadays are vulnerable to burnout, higher education leaders should ensure that workloads are managed appropriately across faculty, staff, and administrative roles. PHEIs should assess workloads frequently to find a more equitable balance across faculty members. By promoting fair workloads and equitable employment, they can remove stressors and improve their academics' mental health, allowing them to actively engage in teaching, research, and community service.

Second, many higher educational institutions are cutting costs, downsizing operations, or reducing their tenure-track positions, leaving many academics feeling untethered (Tompkins, 2025). To improve work engagement, PHEIs should eliminate guesswork by using clear, specific terminology to express an academic's capacity or future possibilities.

They should focus on academics' capacity for future growth, demonstrated intellectual ability, and capacity to learn, which helps translate potential to the higher educational industry. To help academics pivot, PHEIs should identify transferable skills, such as,

research, analysis, and project management. Additionally, they should underscore diversity, equity, and inclusion as they map out opportunities for each academic's career progression. They should be mindful of the systemic factors that influence employee growth opportunities; for example, women often bear the larger burden of caregiving, and are less visible at the workplace. While some diversification in academia has taken place, many of the highest positions are still male-dominated. PHEIs should assign mentors at the highest levels to help advocate for faculty members from historically excluded groups, which can raise awareness of structural barriers, while helping improve the upward path of diversity. Besides mentoring, PHEIs should form cross-functional partnerships, which can help faculty and staff discover where they each feel most engaged; for example, they can offer grant opportunities for faculty-staff research projects or encourage faculty and staff members to serve on student engagement committees together.

Third, salary scales at higher educational institutions are often driven by factors beyond their control (Tompkins, 2025). PHEIs should look for other sustainable ways to acknowledge academics' contributions; for example, they can host regular faculty and staff appreciation events to treat the workforce to an enjoyable, stress-free evening out. Further, crowdsourcing nominations for employee of the month can be effective in improving employee work engagement. Praise and acknowledgment from the top management and peers are highly valued, especially at PHEIs where different departments often compete for funding. Additionally, PHEIs should invest in comprehensive human capital management software to keep academic leaders on task when recognizing and engaging with academics. To promote optimal engagement, PHEI leaders should customize their recognition strategy to fit each individual academic; for example, they can ask academics if they prefer public praise during department meetings or personal gestures of recognition from their colleagues.

Fourth, employee engagement is an ongoing process; higher educational institutions should not make a few changes and expect to resolve all their employee engagement problems (Tompkins, 2025). PHEIs that have implemented these best practices for improving work engagement should adopt appropriate metrics to measure their impact. They can start with an engagement survey to set the baseline (current levels of academics' engagement). As they take steps to improve academics' work engagement, they should survey them annually to evaluate their engagement levels, using anonymous pulse surveys throughout the year to determine which changes are having the most significant impact. By surveying what is effective and what is not, PHEIs can refine their engagement efforts moving forward. For example, if workloads tend to have the most significant impact on work engagement, they should invest more time into deriving the specific solution. Since academics' work engagement does not have a blanket solution, PHEI leaders should listen to them and adjust their engagement strategies accordingly.

5.3. Final Thought

Although this study yields new findings, it might be limited by certain internal validity threats, which are alternative explanations for the results. Due to maturation, respondents might grow tired or get bored, affecting the research outcomes. Further, the lack of random sampling could cause participant traits to be unevenly distributed across groups, resulting in selection bias. Moreover, subject attrition (mortality) might occur during data collection; some participants might drop out of the study, which could alter the composition of the sample. To strengthen the survey design, future research

should focus on minimizing respondent fatigue and eliminating bias, keeping the survey short, ensuring that every question directly aligns to the research purpose, and using clear, neutral language that is free of double-barreled questions.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

This study has strictly adhered to all ethical procedures involving the use of human subjects. Informed consent was obtained from all respondents who were ascertained of their anonymity, with their responses kept strictly private and confidential. They were also informed that the study was of low risk and that they could stop participating any time without any repercussions.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors report no potential conflict of interest regarding this study in terms of the research or publication of this article.

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