

REFRAMING PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF WORK ENGAGEMENT AMONG LECTURERS

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Abstract. In higher education, performance management processes have emerged as an important topic of discussion as universities look for ways to improve accountability, increase academic productivity, bolster institutional competitiveness, and improve educational quality. Although structured appraisal systems and key performance indicators have been introduced, universities still face issues in terms of lecturer motivation, participation in appraisal, and their responsiveness to the performance processes in the university. Previous research indicates that psychological and behavioural aspects of organisation have also been found to have an impact on the effectiveness of performance management systems. However, previous studies have largely examined work engagement as an independent outcome, with limited conceptual attention given to its mediating role between organisational factors and performance management practices within higher education institutions. Therefore, this conceptual paper proposed work engagement as a mediator variable between leadership behaviour and work-life balance to university lecturers' performance management practices. The paper draws from three theories: Social Exchange Theory, Job Demands Resources Theory, and Ability Motivation Opportunity Theory, and the work life balance of lecturers and supportive leadership behaviour of employers are argued as organisational resources to increase the vigour, dedication and absorption of the lecturers in relation to their work. The paper's contribution to the higher education management literature is the incorporation of an organisational and psychological approach to academic performance management. The proposed framework also provides practical implications for university administrators in strengthening supportive academic environments that encourage lecturer engagement and institutional effectiveness. Future empirical studies are recommended to validate the proposed framework using quantitative approaches within Malaysian higher education institutions.

Keywords: *work engagement, leadership behaviour, work-life balance, performance management practices, higher education*

Introduction

Performance management practices (PMP) have become an important strategic mechanism within higher education institutions. According to Hart et al. (2024), higher education institutions face increasing pressure to strengthen institutional performance while balancing academic excellence, service quality, research productivity, and government accountability. Consequently, universities are expected to achieve multiple performance objectives related to teaching quality, research excellence, innovation, community engagement, and institutional sustainability. Moreover, Armstrong (2014) contended that many institutions have implemented formal appraisal systems, key performance indicators and performance evaluation frameworks to align lecturers' performance with institutional objectives. Despite the implementation of these structured systems, higher education institutions continue to encounter challenges associated with lecturers' motivation, commitment, and participation in performance management activities. Existing studies indicated that the effectiveness of performance

management systems extends beyond administrative procedures and is significantly influenced by employees' psychological attachment, attitudes, and perceptions towards their work environment (Saks, 2022). This shows that, in academic settings, lecturers who experience low levels of engagement may participate minimally in appraisal activities, show resistance towards performance evaluation processes, and demonstrate weaker commitment towards institutional expectations.

In earlier studies, work engagement has emerged as an important psychological construct influencing organisational behaviour and employee performance. According to Schaufeli et al. (2006), work engagement refers to a positive and fulfilling work-related psychological state characterized by vigour, dedication, and absorption. Aboramadan (2021) on the other hand explained that engaged employees are more likely to demonstrate enthusiasm, persistence, and proactive involvement in organisational activities. Within higher education institutions, engaged lecturers tend to contribute more effectively towards institutional goals, participate actively in performance-related initiatives, and respond positively towards organisational expectations. Additionally, organisational factors such as leadership behaviour and work-life balance have been identified as important antecedents influencing employee engagement. This is supported by Bakker and Demerouti (2023) where they contended that supportive leadership behaviours create positive work environments that encourage motivation, trust, and professional commitment, while effective work-life balance reduces occupational stress and enhances employee well-being. These organisational resources may therefore strengthen lecturers' engagement and indirectly influence the effectiveness of performance management practices.

Although previous studies have extensively examined leadership behaviour, work-life balance, work engagement, and performance management independently, relatively limited conceptual research has integrated these constructs within a single explanatory framework in higher education. Existing studies primarily examine work engagement as an outcome variable, while its potential mediating role in linking organizational resources to performance management practices remains underexplored. Addressing this gap is important because understanding the psychological mechanisms underlying performance management may assist universities in developing more effective and sustainable performance systems. Therefore, this paper proposes a conceptual framework positioning work engagement as a mediating mechanism between leadership behaviour, work life balance, and performance management practices among university lecturers.

Review of literature

Performance management practices in higher education

Performance management practices (PMP) are systematic activities that are organized within the organization to evaluate, monitor, and improve employee performance through goal setting, performance appraisal, feedback and continuous professional development. Waleed A. Almulaiki (2023) notes that performance management systems are very crucial organisational tools employed to enhance the effectiveness of employees and that of the organisation through structured evaluation and developmental procedures. In the context of higher education institutions, performance management systems are an important part in ensuring the quality of academic education, the accountability of the institution and the effectiveness of the

organisation. Structured appraisal frameworks and key performance indicators (KPIs) are increasingly used to evaluate lecturers' outputs in relation to their roles as teachers, researchers, and supervisors of students, as well as their provision of consultancy services, innovative contributions, and involvement in the community. The focus on institutional competitiveness and accountability has been increasing on the part of universities, and their implementation of performance evaluation systems has become more intense.

In contrast, the practice of performance management in higher education institutions is much more complicated because of the multidimensionality of academic responsibilities. Lecturers are expected to simultaneously meet expectations related to teaching, research, administration and institutional service, and often in the face of a competitive and demanding academic environment. Mukhtara et al. (2025) argued that the growing importance of institutional rankings, accountability, and academic performance has exacerbated the demands placed on academic personnel in universities. Besides, a number of scholars have also pointed to several problems with academic performance management systems such as dissatisfaction with appraisal procedures, perceptions of unfairness, excessive workload, lack of clarity regarding performance expectations and resistance towards evaluation mechanism. These problems can have a negative impact on the effectiveness of the institutional assessment system and may affect lecturers' positive attitude towards assessment activities. Likewise, Kakkar et al. (2020) suggested that effective performance management systems enhance employee work engagement, leading to increased job satisfaction and reduced turnover intentions.

In addition, poor or too rigid performance management systems could have a detrimental impact on lecturers' motivation, emotional state and institutional motivation. Lecturers might show fewer interactions in development activities and decreased responsiveness to organisational expectations when appraisal is perceived as unsupportive, unfair or too bureaucratic. Hence, the psychological and behavioural mechanisms which underpin the involvement of lecturers in performance management practices are critical to the institutional strengthening of higher education institutions in boosting the effectiveness of these institutions and in fostering positive academic climate.

Work engagement in higher education

As per Schaufeli et al. (2006), Work engagement is a positive psychological state that is defined by vigour, dedication, and absorption. Vigour is defined as high levels of energy and resilience at work, dedication is defined as high levels of involvement and enthusiasm towards work responsibilities, and absorption is defined as high levels of concentration and immersion in work activities. Work engagement is important in relation to professional effectiveness and organisational commitment of lecturers in higher education institutions. Mohammad Aboramadan (2021) indicated that engaged lecturers are more likely to be committed in teaching quality, research productivity and institutional participation. Also, highly engaged faculty members are more likely to actively pursue organizational objectives and to meet institutional expectations. Numerous studies have been conducted that have shown positive correlations between work engagement and employee performance, organisational commitment, job satisfaction, and innovative behavior (Saks, 2022). In the academic context, high engagement is associated with higher integration and role into University activities and goals for lecturers.

Leadership behaviour and work engagement

Leadership behaviour is the way that leaders behave, communicate and manage employees to influence them to meet organisational goals. Northouse (2022) stated that leadership behavior is crucial to influence employees' attitude, motivation and work performance in the workplace. The leadership behaviour has a huge impact on emotional well-being, organisational attachment, and motivation of lecturers in higher education institutions. Supportive leadership behaviours such as effective communication, recognition, empowerment, and constructive feedback may strengthen lecturers' psychological attachment towards their work. Blau (1964) developed Social Exchange Theory, which states that employees will return in kind organizational support and positive treatment of the leader by increasing their commitment and engagement. Additionally, Karatepe et al. (2021) found that supportive and transformational leadership behaviours are positive predictors of employee engagement and organisational commitment in empirical research. Academic leaders who offer professional support, autonomy and development opportunities could then increase lecturers engagement and increase their participation in institutional performance management processes.

Work life balance and work engagement

Work life balance is about how an employee can cope with their work roles, personal life without undue role conflict and occupational stress. Teachers in academic settings often struggle with competing demands for teaching, research, publication and personal lives. Organisational resources, including work–life balance, act as protective factors that improve employee well-being and engagement, according to Job Demands–Resources Theory (Bakker and Demerouti, 2023). Healthy work–life balance among employees is correlated with their emotional stability, job satisfaction and work motivation. Additionally, Wang (2024) noted that lack of work–life balance can lead to academic staff's stress, burnout and disengagement. On the other hand, organizational environment practices that support flexibility and wellbeing of employees can enhance lecturers' vitality, commitment, and engagement with work-related activities.

Work engagement as a mediating mechanism

Work engagement is an important mechanism in between organisational resources and employee behaviour. Ability Motivation Opportunity (AMO) Theory states that employee performance depends on the interaction between the ability, motivation, and opportunity of employees to contribute to the organisation's goals. In this context, work engagement is taken as the motivational aspect that drives lecturers' active involvement in the activities of performance management in the institution. The role of the lecturer and work–life balance can also improve lecturers' engagement, thereby affecting their responsiveness towards appraisal systems, feedback acceptance, and performance-related initiatives. From a theoretical perspective, work engagement represents a psychological mechanism through which organisational resources influence employee behaviour. Leadership behaviour and work life balance do not directly improve performance management practices unless they first create conditions that encourage lecturers to become psychologically invested in their work. Engaged lecturers are more willing to participate in appraisal activities, respond constructively to developmental

feedback, and align their performance with institutional expectations. Consequently, work engagement is conceptualised as a mediating mechanism rather than merely an organisational outcome. Therefore, work engagement is conceptualised as a mediating mechanism rather than merely an employee outcome because it explains how organisational resources are converted into effective performance management practices within higher education institutions. This indicates that work engagement acts as an important mediator between organisational support and performance management practices. Even with a good performance management system, if there is no psychological involvement, they may not reach the desired results.

Theoretical foundation

The proposed conceptual model is underpinned by three complementary theories: Social Exchange Theory (SET), Job Demands Resources (JD-R) Theory, and Ability Motivation Opportunity (AMO) Theory. Although each theory explains different aspects of employee behaviour, together they provide a comprehensive theoretical foundation for understanding how organisational factors influence performance management practices through work engagement. Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964) explains that employees tend to reciprocate favourable organisational treatment through positive attitudes and behaviours. Within higher education institutions, supportive leadership behaviour encourages lecturers to develop trust, commitment, and stronger psychological attachment to their work, thereby increasing their willingness to participate in institutional performance management activities. Job Demands–Resources Theory (Bakker and Demerouti, 2023) further explains that organisational resources, such as supportive leadership and work–life balance, enhance employee well-being and work engagement while reducing the negative effects of excessive job demands. In academic settings, these resources enable lecturers to remain motivated, resilient, and committed despite increasing workload and performance expectations.

Ability Motivation Opportunity (AMO) Theory complements these perspectives by proposing that employee performance is influenced by the interaction of employees' abilities, motivation, and opportunities to contribute effectively. Within this study, work engagement represents the motivational mechanism through which organisational resources are translated into positive performance-related behaviours. Collectively, these three theories provide complementary explanations for the proposed conceptual model. Social Exchange Theory explains how supportive leadership encourages reciprocal employee attitudes and behaviours. Job Demands Resources Theory explains how organisational resources such as work life balance promote employee engagement by reducing strain and enhancing motivation. Ability Motivation Opportunity Theory further explains how motivated and engaged employees are more likely to translate organisational resources into improved performance-related behaviours. Together, these theories provide a comprehensive theoretical foundation for understanding how leadership behaviour and work life balance influence performance management practices through work engagement.

Conceptual framework

The proposed framework indicates that leadership behaviour and work-life balance are organisational resources that impact on the work engagement of University

lecturers. Then, work engagement acts as a mediator between these organisational factors and performance management practices.

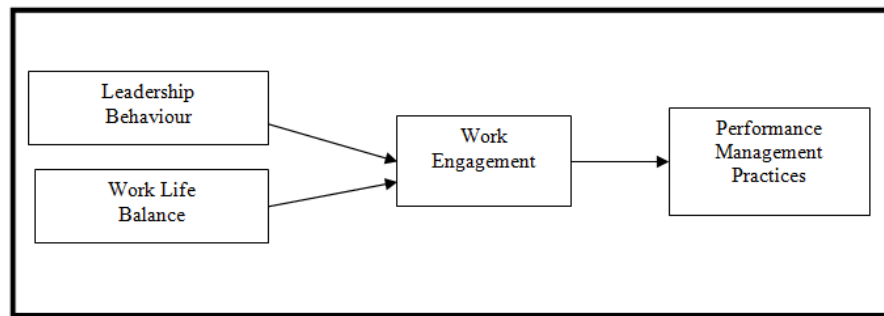


Figure 1. *Conceptual framework of work engagement as a mediating mechanism in performance management practices among university lecturers.*

Proposed hypotheses

H1: Leadership behaviour positively influences work engagement among university lecturers; H2: Work–life balance positively influences work engagement among university lecturers; H3: Work engagement positively influences performance management practices among university lecturers; H4: Leadership behaviour positively influences performance management practices among university lecturers; H5: Work engagement mediates the relationships between leadership behaviour, work–life balance, and performance management practices among university lecturers.

Materials and Methods

This study adopted a conceptual research design based on a comprehensive review of literature related to performance management practices, leadership behaviour, work–life balance, and work engagement in higher education. Relevant literature was identified through searches of Scopus, Web of Science (WoS), and Google Scholar using keywords including performance management practices, leadership behaviour, work engagement, work–life balance, and higher education. Priority was given to peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2020 and 2025, while seminal theories, namely Social Exchange Theory, Job Demands Resources (JD-R) Theory, and Ability Motivation Opportunity (AMO) Theory, were retained to establish the theoretical foundation of the proposed framework. The selected literature was analysed using a narrative synthesis and thematic comparison approach to identify key concepts, theoretical perspectives, empirical findings, and research gaps. Based on this synthesis, a conceptual framework was developed to explain the mediating role of work engagement in the relationship between leadership behaviour, work–life balance, and performance management practices. The proposed framework provides a foundation for future empirical validation using Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) within the context of Malaysian higher education institutions.

Results and Discussion

The proposed framework proposed that work engagement is an important factor that affects the effectiveness of performance management systems among university lecturers. This means that institutional performance systems are not enough to improve organizational outcomes unless lecturers are psychologically involved with their work. Supportive leadership behaviour and effective work-life balance can act as key organisational resources to boost lecturers' vigour, commitment and engagement with their jobs. Engaged lecturers are more likely to be involved in appraisal activities, respond to developmental feedback and be constructive in contributing towards institutional goals. Higher engagement among lecturers is also linked to their performance being more congruent with institutional expectations and their engagement in performance-related programs. However, low engagement can impact lecturers' motivation, organisational commitment, and willingness to be involved in institutional performance processes, making performance management systems less effective in universities. Social Exchange Theory, Job Demands Resources Theory, and Ability Motivation Opportunity Theory together create a wider picture regarding the role of organisational support in the performance-related behaviour through psychological engagement. All of these theoretical perspectives suggest that supportive academic environments influence lecturers to be more active in organizational activities and performance management systems. On a practical level, universities need to focus on supportive leadership practices, employee welfare programs, and flexible work options to enhance lecturer engagement and institutional efficiency. In addition, academic administrators need to ensure that performance management systems are implemented fairly, transparently, and supportively and thereby foster more lecturer participation. However, the proposed framework should be further explored via empirical research to confirm the strength of the proposed relationships between university lecturers and to validate the proposed framework.

Conclusion

This paper proposes a conceptual framework positioning work engagement as a mediating mechanism linking leadership behaviour and work life balance to performance management practices among university lecturers. The study highlights that the effectiveness of performance management systems depends not only on formal organisational structures and evaluation procedures but also on lecturers' psychological engagement with their work. The study contributes to the higher education management literature and provides a foundation for future empirical research examining work engagement within academic environments. The findings further suggest that universities should strengthen supportive organisational practices that enhance lecturers' vigour, dedication, and absorption in order to improve participation in performance management activities and enhance institutional effectiveness.

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Conflict of interest

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest involve with any parties in this research study.

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