

# **Employee Engagement Among the Academic Workforce Within Private Higher Education Institutions in Malaysia**

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## **Abstract**

Employee Engagement has been part of management research for the past decades, but within the private higher education industry in Malaysia, there is a limited degree of academic research on this subject. The growing trend of research in employee engagement has expanded within countries such as Nigeria, Philippines, Indonesia, and India. Malaysia has in the past been seen as an education hub within the Asia Pacific region but the relatively high level of labour turnover, absenteeism and low level of commitment among the academics, justifies the need to focus attention towards studies on employee engagement, as a means to retaining its current position as the educational hub for the region. This conceptual paper discusses some determinants of employee engagement such as benchmark practices, the role of human resource management (HRM) function, faculty support strategies, individual attributes and strategic partnerships. The discussion hopes to propose a further empirical study to be conducted among private universities within Malaysia.

**Key words:** Employee engagement, private universities, academics, individual attributes, benchmarking practices, faculty

support strategies. strategic partnership, human resource management

## **1. Introduction**

Within the organizational domain, there is the growing consensus on the strategic importance of the workforce, not just as the strongest supporters of their employers but also the most vocal critics, if internal policies do not meet their expectations (Waters, 2013). The same view holds in relation to the private higher educational institutions, where an energetic, enthusiastic and dedicated workforce is needed (Chen, 2017; Bakker, 2008). As such, having employees who deliver a higher level of engagement at work may offer better contribution to organizational success and competitiveness (Al Mehrzi, 2016; Gruman, 2011). They are more inclined to greater passion towards their work and deep connection with their company's goals. (Bal, 2013).

The Malaysian government has focused on enabling the growth of private higher education to make Malaysia a technical and educational hub for the Asia-Pacific region (Mok, 2008). As such, foreign campuses have been set up for the majority of local and some international students (Ariokasamy, 2010). Some private higher educational institutions (PHEIs) have been quick to expand their sphere influence, resulting in their growth within the past decade (Malaysia, 2019). In a developing nation like Malaysia, tertiary education is seen as a cornerstone for national development.

Over the last few decades, the PHEIs have undergone ample reform processes to meet the new challenges they are facing. Globalisation, the knowledge society, innovation, the development of technologies and a growing emphasis on market forces are among the key-factors which influence the PHEIs' mission, organisation and profile, the mode of operation and delivery of private higher education.

Under these circumstances, the PHEIs industry has become more competitive to access potential student population, both local and international. PHEIs, therefore need to demonstrate features in their products and service offering that are unique and non-substitutable, (Barney, 2019) The contribution of the academic workforce is therefore seen as critical to ensure the success and sustainability of PHEIs within the Malaysian education sectors. Employee engagement therefore becomes an important component towards the contribution of the academics towards enhanced effectiveness of PHEIs, and in meeting institutional challenges currently faced.

According to the Eleventh Malaysian Plan, (Unit,2020) the Malaysian government allocated RM16,600,000 billion for the services sector including private higher education. During the 2011-2015 Tenth Malaysian Plan (10MP), services section rose from 6.3 percent to 6.9 percent.

Sector/ % p.a.	10MP, 2011-2015	11MP, 2016-2020
	Achievement	Target
Agriculture	2.4	3.5
Mining	0.9	1.3
Construction	11.1	10.3
Manufacturing	4.8	5.1
Services	6.3	6.9
<b>GDP</b>	<b>5.3</b>	<b>5.0-6.0</b>



Figure1 - Eleventh Malaysian Plan for 2016-2020.

However, despite the budget allocation, these PHEIs have failed to make into the list of the world’s 100 most prestigious higher educational institutions (Zahid, 2016). In other words, Malaysian PHEIs never reached the levels of top ranking higher academic institutions, globally (Shukry, 2020).

The World Economic Forum (WEF) outlines the importance of the 4C elements of Critical Thinking & Problem Solving, Communication, Collaboration and Creativity at all levels of its student studies (Ahmad, 2017). Technological advancements have shaped the evolution of skills and competencies of people operating within the industry. With the advent of IR 4.0, the human resources within organizations need to acquire the five essential components of critical thinking and problem solving, communication, collaboration creativity and emotional well-being within their job functions (Makhbul, 2019; Burgess, 2016). In consequence, academics should be more up to date with the current involvement of technology within their lectures and other job functions.

## **2. Problem Statement**

The private higher education sector around the world is experiencing the advent of rapidly advancing digital technology and new delivery models (Selwyn, 2016). This phenomenon is accompanied by the emergence of new forms of provision and delivery of higher education and prospective students have a range of study program and delivery options offered to them, both regionally and globally (Abubakar, 2018)

Rahman (2012) mentions the work-related issues faced by most lecturers, such as job security, supervisor support, compensation satisfaction, job autonomy, key performance indicators (KPI) achievability, and job satisfaction. Khalid (2014) and Pamu (2011) suggested that issues like class size, administrative support, teaching hours, availability of teaching material and benefits were seen as elements attributing to turnover intentions. Sirat (2013) suggested that turnover intention issues may be influenced by personal development opportunities provided by the institution.

In the light of the issues highlighted above, Jolton (2018) proposed engaged employees as contributing to higher workplace safety, performance, quality, satisfaction, and financial growth. Thus within the PHEI, there is a need to critically view the issues pertaining to employee engagement (Othman, 2015).

Numerous researchers have undertaken the exploring of employee engagement and have identified a significant relationship between employee engagement and its outcomes

(Saks, 2006; Sonnentag, 2003; Cole, 2012). However, within the private higher education sector, studies on employee engagement are limited (Daniels, 2016). Earlier studies in this context have focused on faculty and administrator job satisfaction (Smerek, 2007), staff morale (Rosser, 2004) and faculty turnover and intention to leave (Johnsrud, 2002). These related studies advocate a lack of engagement within academia. The engagement of academic faculty is considered to have a great impact on student success and is suggested to be important for the attainment of educational goals (González-Rico, 2016). As such, a limited access to studies in this area can be counter-productive to organizations that significantly rely on their employees' service, as in the case of the labour intensive PHIEs. Raina (2015) proposed the need for a study on the psychological integration of employees toward their work, within higher education setting.

The aim of this paper is therefore to discuss the antecedents of employees' engagement in such settings.

### **3. Employee engagement**

Employee engagement is defined in general as the level of commitment and involvement an employee has towards their organisation and its values. Engagement at work was first conceptualised by Kahn (1990) as the “harnessing of organizational members’ selves to their work roles”. He added that in engagement “people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances”. Kahn (1990, p. 694) Kahn also added that three psychological engagement conditions are necessary for an

employee to be effectively engaged: meaningfulness (work elements), safety (social elements, including management style, process, and organisational norms) and availability (individual distractions).

Employee engagement has frequently been considered as the key to an organization's success and competitiveness (Gruman and Saks, 2011; Baumruk, 2004; Richman, 2006; Kular et al., 2008; Shuck & Wollard, 2010) identified employee engagement as the key driver of individual attitude, behaviours and performance. Furthermore, researchers have found employee engagement positively affects financial performance (Xanthopoulou et al., 2009), return on assets and profitability (Macey et al., 2009), employees' job performance (Bakker & Bal, 2010) and client satisfaction (Salanova et al., 2005). In other words, engaged employees are critical for organizations because of their contributions to add to the organization's profitability (Demerouti & Cropanzano, 2010). Organizations need to incorporate organizational practices, initiatives, and strategies to enhance the competence of employees towards the success of the company (Dalal et al., 2012).

Literature has identified the variables discussed below as important antecedents of employee engagement, that provide a holistic theoretical model of engagement.

### ***3.1 Antecedents of Employee Engagement***

Following the discussion on the meaning and relevance of employee engagement, this paper now aims to review literature

on probable antecedents whose presence may usher the building of employee engagement within the workplace.

#### **a) Benchmarking Practices**

Benchmarking is generally defined as the search for best practices that will lead to superior performance. It is a continuous process of comparing an organization's processes against best practices anywhere in the world to gain information which will help an organization to improve its processes, (Lema, 2009). While the informal sharing of good practices and learning from each other has been in practice since long in PHEIs, interest is growing in growing in the formalization and developing systematic approaches to the use of benchmarking, (Lund, 2018). Benchmarking in PHEIs can be integrated with other performance improvement initiatives, including performance indicators (PIs) and standards for performance excellence. (Nedwek, 2008).

#### **b) Role of Human Resource Management**

According to (Buck, 2017), HR is a set of practices that businesses incorporate to ensure that they have an effective workforce in place to meet operational needs. Therefore, the significant functions of HR in PHEIs are managing the employee-employer relationship, compensation and benefits provisions, staff retention, performance appraisal, development of new and evolving staff roles, ageing academics, and changes in industrial relations with staff. Dealing with such issues are essential for enhancing the skills and competencies of the academics.



The HRM function will also need to address academic job and role characteristics, career mobility, job challenges, role conflict, role ambiguity, and level of autonomy and working hours (Strasser, 2018)

It also needs to shape the nature of values and attitudes held by the staff (Ezejiofor, 2016). An effective HRM function enables employees to contribute effectively and productively to the overall direction of the organization's goal and objectives, (Susan, 2017).

### ***3.2 Faculty Support Strategies***

Bligh (2017) places the onus of responsibility on the Dean or Head of Department to address the needs of lecturers. This involves analyzing overall operations of the faculty, identification of any unforeseen problems and evaluation of the entire program needs. Information Communication Technology (ICT) is another support strategy that must be offered to enhance the lecturing sessions held in the classroom, with requisite funds allocated for that purpose (Colaric, 2019). Such provisions cover web base internet through the faculty portals and computer based-instruction learning. Allocating enough tools such as the projector, speaker, microphone, and widespread capacity of internet connection in a lab or classroom will provide positive assistance to the lecturer and students (Zhu, 2019).

Several literature sources have highlighted a shift in the role of faculty head from that of an academic specialist to that of an administrative expert, who provides the leadership role in

building a learning community that facilitates quality learning for students. (Christie, 2000). However, such initiatives may encounter challenges stemming from the ‘corporate managerialism’ approach, associated with growing student numbers, academic work intensification and industrializing the learning environment, thus creating difficulties for lecturers in meeting work and personal demands (Saunderson, Edwards, Van Laar & Easton, 2009).

### ***3.3 Individual Attribute***

Patrick and Smart (1998) suggested that “perhaps the whole domain of effective teaching could be captured by the inclusion of the innate qualities of the teacher, thereby contributing to a clearer understanding of teacher effectiveness” (p. 168). In the general pedagogical literature, there have been frequent attempts to identify the attributes of an effective lecturer. Ramsden (1992), in his seminal work, identified enthusiasm, communication skills, ability to develop rapport and well-structured content as key constructs that contribute to students’ attitudes towards learning. Likewise, Lacoss (2000) found that communication skills, use of appropriate examples, availability of the lecturer, and rapport developed between the student and the lecturer, helped to enhance student learning. As can be seen from both studies above, the importance of the personal attributes of the lecturer tend to outweigh the subject-specific attributes in determining student learning.

As personal attributes are part of the key variables examined, this paper refers to the attribution theory. Attribution is the way in which one person makes inferences about the

motives underlying the behavior of others (Kelly & Michela, 1980): It is also a cognitive process people used to assign an underlying explanation or cause to an observation made (Kelly, 1967). Theorists in this arena specify the way people interact with their social environment (Freedman, 1984). Consequently, a review of the literature was undertaken to isolate the key personal attributes that contribute to student learning. Four main individual or personal constructs were identified in the educational literature - dynamic delivery, rapport, applied knowledge and clear communication – and these are considered in turn.

Dynamic delivery is the ability to motivate students through being enthusiastic and entertaining, for example the use of humour (Pozo-Munoz *et al.*, 2000). The second characteristic of an effective lecturer related to the rapport developed with students. Two definitions of rapport are “the ability to maintain harmonious relationships based on affinity for others” (Faranda & Clarke, 2004, p. 274) and “a close harmonious relationship founded on mutual trust” (Weitz *et al.*, 2007, p. 225).

Another important construct identified is a lecturer’s overall subject knowledge (Stringer & Irwing, 1998), with strong emphasis on “real world knowledge”, in other words an ability to integrate the theory with stimulating situations and relevant examples from the business world. Specifically, this construct relates to the lecturer’s knowledge, expertise, and real-world perspective. Whilst this variable would seem critical in the attributes of an effective lecturer, it has received limited attention in the literature. This is illustrated in the following: “Teachers

should have knowledge of their subject and be able to communicate it clearly to their students” (Voss & Gruber, 2006, p. 230).

### **34 Strategic Partnership**

Strategic Partnership are becoming more and more prominent in the global economy. Peter Drucker, who has been known as a father of modern management theory states: “*the greatest change in corporate culture, and the way business is conducted, may be the accelerating growth of relationships based not on ownership, but on partnership*” (Drucker, 1996). A strategic partnership is “an agreement between firms to do business together in ways that go beyond normal company-to-company dealings but fall short of a merger or a full partnership” (Wheelen, 2010). The last 40 years have witnessed a clear and growing pattern in strategic partnership formation among corporations (Glaister, 2016).

As a result of the challenge brought about by global competition and the changing emphasis on research and development (R&D), private higher education institution has become important part of a cooperative agreement to tackle complex, fundamental industrial problems of major business or societal significance (Glaister, 2016). Therefore, strategic partnerships within PHEIs has become a common practice through collaboration, with other institutions, for reasons of resource sharing, curriculum innovation, and reputation enhancement.

Strategic partnerships in PHEIs have become a common practice PHEIs (Barnett, 2016). Forming a partnership between two institutions may gain a variety of benefits. In addition to those benefits like cost containment, resource reallocation and innovation, such partnership practice allows institutions to reduce service duplication, improve efficiency and accountability, promoting institution's reputation, and increasing student enrolment. Hall (1987) stated that members of strategic partnerships can learn from each other although the structure and content of the partnership can change over time. Therefore, a new and innovative form of partnership can be developed in the future.

According to (Santoro, 2017), there were four broad areas to classify strategic partnership in PHEIs: *(1) research support, (2) cooperative research, (3) knowledge transfer and (4) technology transfer.*

- i. Research support: Under research support mechanism, members of the corporate community make contributions in the form of both money and equipment to PHEIs. Such contribution is extremely valuable for academia, since the private education institution has much more leverage in using these funds or provision of fellowships of lecturer, professor, and researcher assistance, or granting seed money for initiating new projects (Santoro, 2017).
- ii. Cooperative research: Under this mechanism, close interaction is established between two organizations through institutional agreements and formal group arrangements.

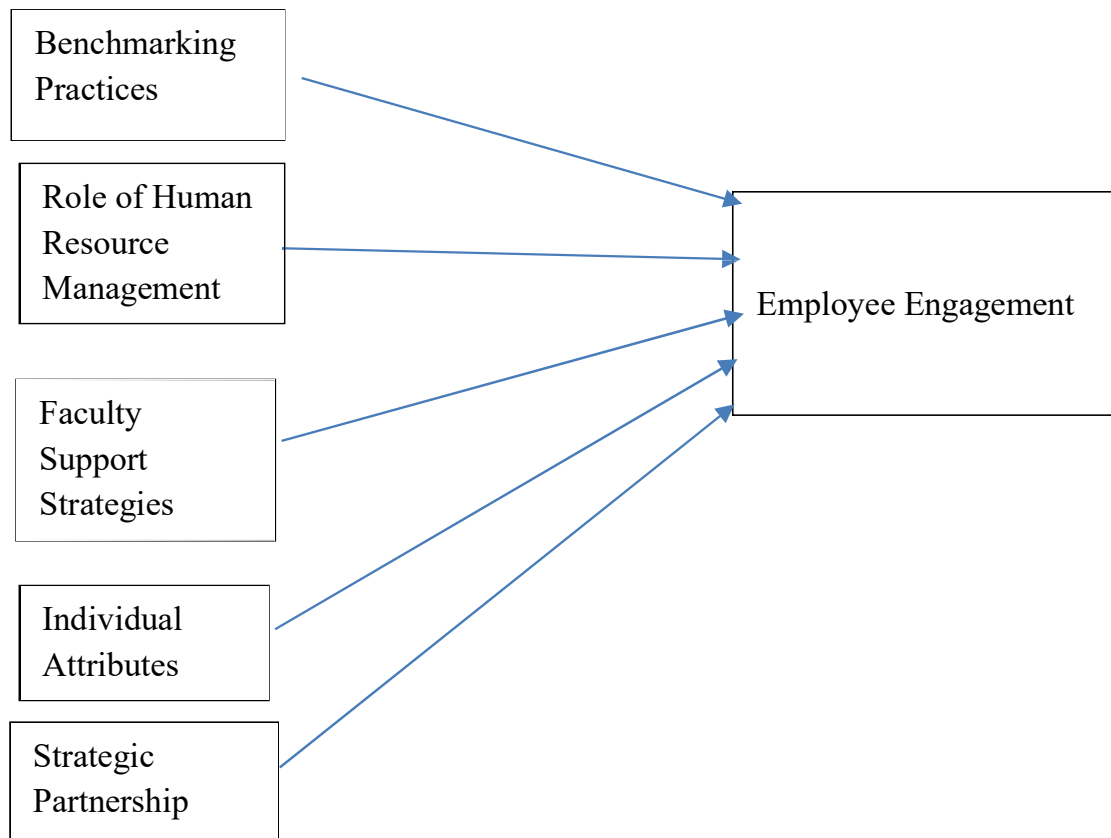
These arrangements allow faculty members to work with individual firms on a specific research project, to deal with an immediate industrial firm problem. Group arrangements include special purpose link programs and research consortia, which put emphasis on contact between the member organizations and the PHEI's faculty department, lecturers, professor's, staff, and students. The use of institutional facilities, and informal communications are also part of this arrangement (Santoro, 2017).

- iii. Knowledge transfer: This mechanism involves various practices mainly focusing on personal interactions, interactive education, and personnel exchanges. Knowledge transfer activities provide a platform for invigorating larger scale cooperative PHEIs–industry research collaborations. Knowledge transfer can also occur through institutional programs and interactive education systems, which are designed to promote information, exchanges between academia and industries (Santoro, 2000).
- iv. Technology transfer: Technology transfer programs capitalize on joint industry–university research and aim at integrating university-driven research into applied initiatives for the development and commercialization of new technologies. More specifically, technology transfer usually includes several key activities such as addressing specific research problems, providing technical expertise to companies seeking to develop new products and providing technology patent or licensing services (Santoro, 2017).

#### 4. Conceptual Framework

The abovementioned review of literature enabled the development of the conceptual framework that considered five independent variables that influence the development of the dependent variable of employee engagement

**FIGURE 1**



#### 5. Conclusion

This conceptual paper discussed factors which influence employee engagement, focusing on academic staff in private universities. Five main factors, namely benchmark practices, the role of human resource management function, faculty support strategies, individual attributes and strategic partnerships were

found to have an influence on employee engagement. An empirical research is proposed to examine to what extent these factors significantly affect employee engagement among academics in the private universities in Malaysia. The findings will contribute to the body of knowledge on the workplace especially among academics as employee engagement, can enhance the academic structure and improve the quality of academics and individuals as teachers of the young generation, both local and international.

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