

A CONCEPTUAL REPORT ON MEANINGFUL WORK, PERCEIVED ORGANIZATIONAL SUPPORT AND WORK ENGAGEMENT AMONG ACADEMIC STAFF

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Abstract: *Academic staff are not only looking for stable employment for their job but also looking for work that can provide meanings and align with their values and how it can benefits others. Recent research has examined the influence of meaningful work and how it leads to higher motivation and engagement, improved retention and other positives work outcomes. Higher learning institutions around the world operate within different educational systems, each of their own are shaped by own policies, economic conditions and contextual relevance. These differences play a major role in shaping the factors that influence academic staff work engagement. This report utilizes the Job Demand-Resources (JD-R) model, which is a critical model for describing how demands and resources interact and forecasting important organisational outcomes. Perceived organizational support (POS) is examined in relation to meaningful work and academic staff's work engagement. It is proposed that these relationships reflect motivational processes of the JD-R model. This study will construct a viable research agenda based on the review, which will include opportunities for theoretical and empirical findings. As a result, both institutions and scholars may benefit from fostering meaningful work and POS in order to improve work engagement among academic staff.*

Keywords: *Meaningful Work, Work engagement, Perceived Organizational Support, JD-R Model, Academic Staff*

Introduction

Higher education institutions' strategic success and functionality depend heavily on their skilled workforce, which is a vital source of competitive advantage (Whitfield, 2019). Viewing this, academic staff role is undeniably important. Academic staff play an important role in higher education and they are academically qualified individuals and associates who are actively involved in the execution of study programs at institutions. This is mainly because academic staff members' knowledge, skills, competences, talents, attitudes and work ethics are the foundation of high-quality higher education (Malaysian Qualifications Agency, 2014). Academic staff members nowadays are under pressure to meet the expectations of a global society, and their duties are no longer limited to teaching and learning. Differences in job specifications across institutions, and among academic staff within the same institution, continually create challenges and raise equity concerns (Yaacob et al., 2018). In such circumstances, perceived organizational support (POS) is very crucial. Ideally, when academic staff believe that their institution recognizes their contributions and offers enough support, they are more likely to maintain a sense of meaningfulness despite increased work demands. Low levels of POS on the other hand, may reduce the perceived meaning of academic work because academic staff may believe that their contributions are taken for granted or are not adequately appreciated (Atalay, Birincioğlu & Acuner, 2022). The decline of meaningful work can lead to decreased work engagement, as seen by reduced levels of enthusiasm, dedication and absorption in academic duties (Fouché, Rothmann & Vyver, 2017).

It is critical for university administrators and the government to give the necessary attention to the motivation of academic staff in order to raise their work performance and foster excellent outcomes (Akiki, 2024). In addition, recent higher education reforms that place greater emphasis on accountability and performance measures can affect motivation in different ways, depending on how these changes are carried out and how they are viewed by academic staff (Hiếu, 2026).

Literature Review

Meaningful Work

Under the field of human resource management, meaningful work is a concept that an individual's personal motivations shape their work behaviour, which is driven both by the pursuit of personal fulfilment and the desire to make a positive impact on society (Rosso et al., 2010). In support, Steger et al., (2012) noted that meaningful work is the perception that the individual's work is valuable and significant which include aspects such as finding personal meaning, purpose and contributing to a broader societal impact. In addition, meaningful work is considered a personal resource because it reflects an individual's sense of the significance and value of their work which help employees see the broader purpose of their daily tasks and focus more attention on their work activities (Meng, et al., 2023).

Meaningful work goes beyond than simply finding tasks meaningful or aligning work with one's life purpose. Instead, it refers to the experience of seeing one's work as personally or socially worthwhile and purposeful which arise from the fulfilment of basic needs such as autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Cnossen & Nikolova, 2025). Meaningful work is viewed as a basic human need that supports well-being, motivation and performance (Fürstenberg, Alfes, & Shantz, 2021), where in contrary, the lack of meaningfulness at work may lead to disengagement and a sense of disconnection (Lysova, Allan, Dik, Duffy, & Steger, 2019).

In the context of academic staff, meaningful work is often experienced more frequently because of the direct and impactful nature of their roles, especially when academic staff feel their work contributes to something greater and worthwhile. Among academics, a sense of meaningfulness often centres on the work itself, their contribution to others, their sense of self and the ability to maintain work–life balance (Balci, Akar, & Öztürk, 2019). Academic staff may remain highly engaged even when their level of job satisfaction is only moderate, because they often see their work as a vocation or meaningful (Mather & Bam, 2025).

Perceived Organizational Support (POS)

The POS concept was first presented by Eisenberger et al. (1986) which refers to an individual's perception of the extent to which their organization cares and values about their well-being and career development. POS is an important concept related to both the organization and its workforce as it plays a significant role in shaping different aspects of employees' work performance. It refers to how employees see the extent to which their organization values their contributions, cares about their well-being and provides the support and resources needed for their professional growth (Zheng, et al., 2024). This means that when an organization shows support and attention to its employees, it sends a message that they are valued (Makumbe, 2025). In addition, it has been identified as an important factor in strengthening employees' self-esteem, building their emotional commitment to their profession and workplace and helping them carry out their professional responsibilities effectively (Khatooni, et al., 2026). This can help support encourages academic staff to use their full potential in delivering high-quality teaching, conducting meaningful research and providing effective guidance and support to their students.

Utomo et al. (2023) noted that when employees perceive strong organizational support, they tend to show more positive behaviours at work; including better performance, more favourable outcomes, and more positive feelings toward their organization. In a similar vein, Park and Kim (2024) found that higher levels of perceived organizational support are associated to greater work engagement among employees. Chen and Eyoun (2021) reported that organizational support helps reduce emotional exhaustion, while Li et al. (2022) showed that it strengthens engagement and work adaptability, which in turn lowers the employees' intentions to leave.

Work Engagement

Work engagement mainly refers to how an individual relates to and feels about their specific job or role within the organization. Work engagement has become an important topic in many organisations because it is closely linked to employee well-being and performance. Work engagement is highly valuable for organizations because it supports employee satisfaction, improves retention, and contributes to overall organizational success. Work engagement refers to a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption (Schaufeli, Salanova, González-Romá, & Bakker, 2002). Vigor refers to having high levels of energy and mental resilience at work, which allow employees to keep putting in effort without becoming burnout. Dedication refers to a strong sense of enthusiasm, pride, and commitment toward one's work. This motivates individuals to overcome challenges and achieve their goals. Absorption refers to a state of deep concentration and full involvement in a task, where time seems to pass quickly and distractions are hard to notice (Schaufeli, Salanova, González-Romá, & Bakker, 2002). Taken together, these elements support a more fulfilling and productive work experience (Vuong, 2026).

According to Wan, Zhou, Zhou, Li, & Shi (2023), when employees are deeply invested and energetic in their work, it will then translate into measurable gains in both their attitude and their workplace behaviour. When employees are highly engaged, they demonstrate a level of vigor and dedication that allows them to become fully immersed in their work. According to Matsumoto, Nagaya, Ito, & Honda (2026), although engagement is often seen as a healthy type of work motivation, its connection to well-being and working hours may differ from those of workaholism.

While academic staffs' energy and engagement are essential, these qualities are deeply influenced by how much they feel respected and supported by their institution's leadership as well. Faskhodi and Siyyari (2018) noted that work engagement acts as a critical buffer against burnout. Evidently in the teaching field, where high levels of engagement reflect a teacher's deep commitment to their profession (Minghui et al., 2018). Engagement is facilitated when personal expectations and workplace realities are effectively aligned (Bakker, 2022).

Job Demand-Resources Model (JD-R Model)

In the literature, Job Demand-Resources (JD-R) model has been used to explain employee well-being in various working conditions (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Demerouti et al., 2001). Job demands refer to "physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects of the job that require sustained physical and/or psychological (cognitive and emotional) effort or skills and are therefore associated with certain physiological and/or psychological costs" (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007, p. 312). Job demands require employees to put in sustained effort at work, in which can drain their physical and mental energy and may also resulting to physical strain, mental exhaustion and fatigue. That is because job demands use up employees' energy and can trigger a strain process that eventually will lead to exhaustion. On the other hand, job resources are motivating in nature and buffer the negative effects of job demands on burnout (Kaiser et., al 2020), and job resources also are crucial when demands are high because they boost work engagement (Bakker, 2015). When they are available, job resources can help employees to reach their work goals, to grow personally and fulfil their basic psychological needs. Job resources therefore support both employees' external and internal motivation. As a result, they are expected to promote better well-being and higher levels of work engagement among employees (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).

Considering this, it is in the interest of the organizations and the employees to keep job demands low and to provide employees with enough resources to do their work (Kaiser et., al 2020). For academic staff for instance, job demands may comprise of teaching, research and publication requirements, administrative duties, supervision and etc. Reflecting to the JD-R model, these demands can cause fatigues and burnout if supports are not sufficient. At the same time, working in academic also offers important job resources, for instance autonomy in teaching and research, opportunity for research funding, professional development and recognition for achievements. Viewing from the JD-R model, these resources can be motivating to academic staff and buffer the negative impact of heavy demands. The main difference can lie on whether or not the meaningful resources are available to balance the demands of academic life. Understanding this model matters because it is widely used to understand and predict work engagement and provides a crucial framework for reducing burnout.

Hypothesis Development

Meaningful Work and Work Engagement

The linkage between meaningful work and work engagement have been supported by many past studies which suggests that when employees find their work meaningful, they are more likely to be engaged. Tan and Yeap (2021) for example, has examined the impact work engagement as a mediator between meaningful work and job burnout, in which this study found that meaningful work mitigates burnout among social workers, and lead to work engagement. Similarly, Jiang et al., (2022) has conducted study among tobacco retailers on the effects of job demands and resources on work engagement, which it found meaningful work evidently enhanced work engagement significantly. Additionally, it is noted that meaningful work acts as critical psychological state in the JD-R model that directly enhance work engagement (Albrecht et al., 2021).

In the light of JD-R model, acting as a catalyst, meaningful work contributes positively to work engagement. This gives employees more energy and helps them cope better with the limits created by job demands (Alexias et al., 2024). Pinho et al., (2023) for example, shows that meaningful work strengthens employees' psychological capital, which then increases their work engagement. The JD-R model posits that every job has its demands and resources. Job demands are the aspects of work that require sustained effort and are typically associated with negative consequences, such as stress and burnout. On the contrary job resources are those that help employees achieve work goals, reduce job demands or stimulate personal growth and development (Hasan et al., 2022). Under this notion, work engagement is driven by job resources, such as organizational support, autonomy and meaningful work (Alexias et al., 2024). As such, meaningful work helps academic staff see purpose and meaningful value in their work; for example in teaching, research and service roles. Academic staff will likely invest their energy, dedication and commitment when their work seems worthwhile. And this is how the work engagement is facilitated. Based on the above discussion, this study hypothesized the following:

Hypothesis 1: Meaningful work positively affects work engagement.

Perceived Organizational Support as a Moderator

This paper posits POS as a potential moderator to the relationship between meaningful work and work engagement. Earlier discussion has provided that POS reflects the extent to which employees believe their organization values their contributions and cares for their well-being, in which consider as a significant job resource. As such, this study proposed the moderation mechanism of POS within the JD-R model, particularly its role in the relationship between meaningful work and work engagement. This is because POS fits within this JD-R framework as an important resource that can strengthen work engagement by offering support that linked to the intrinsic aspects of their work, such as meaningful work (Atom et al., 2023). Subsequently, POS can help reduce the negative impact of job demands by strengthening employees' intrinsic motivation which is coming from meaningful work. When employees feel well supported by their organization, they are feel more likely to feel that their contributions are valued, which can increase their sense of meaningfulness at work (Han & Zhang, 2025).

Ramaci et al. (2024) and Niu el., (2022) for examples have found POS to moderate the effects of job demands on outcomes like job satisfaction and burnout. Ramaci et al. (2024) especially has investigated the JD-R model's applicability among Italian oncology nurses. Their findings

illustrated that higher levels of POS significantly reduced the negative impact of job demands on both job satisfaction and burnout. This supports the idea that POS is an important resource that can soften negative effects by helping employees stay resilient in high-pressure work environments. Additionally, Niu et al. (2022) examined the effects of job demands and job resources on unsafe behaviour among miners, the same application of the JD-R model while also highlighting a sense of calling as a mediating variable. Their study demonstrated that POS functioned as a moderating factor, which mitigate the relationship between job demands and unsafe behaviours. In different study by Bhatnagar & Aggarwal (2020), POS can strengthen the positive link between meaningful work and work engagement, which in turn is associated with better employee outcomes such as greater involvement in eco-initiatives and stronger psychological capital (Bhatnagar & Aggarwal, 2020). As such, it can be inferred that POS can boost the effect of meaningful work on academic staff work engagement. When staff feel their university value and support them, the purpose they find in their work will make them to be motivated more and help them to stay committed and fully involved in their job tasks.

Based on the discussion above, this study expands on this idea by looking at how POS affects meaningful work and work engagement. As such, the following is hypothesised:

Hypothesis 2: POS moderates the relationship between meaningful work and work engagement.

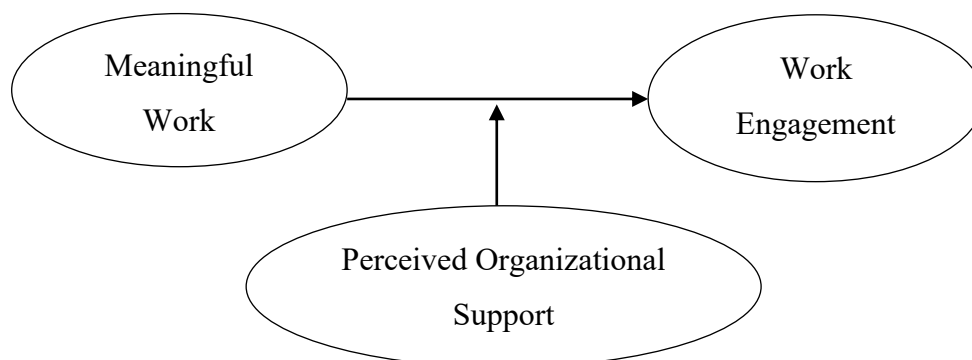


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Discussion and Conclusion

Using JD-R model as a ground foundation, this study focuses on the role of meaningful work and POS as crucial job resources that further promotes work engagement among academic staff (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). Although this study at this stage is a conceptual, the earlier discussions have emphasized that when academic staff view their work as meaningful and that they received organizational support through institution's care and recognition, they will have strong tendency to have invest energy, dedication and absorption towards their job. Taken together, these resources are expected to improve work engagement, which is seen as important elements to sustain enthusiasm in teaching and research especially in academic setting in higher learning institutions.

In term of implications for higher institutions, this study can offer both managerial and developmental aspects. Higher learning institution leaders should pay close attention to how academic roles are designed and supported in the institutional settings. Meaningful work can be nurtured through aligning academic responsibilities with individual staff strengths, recognising their scholarly contributions and also strengthening the broader social value of

teaching and research. At the same time, POS can be reinforced through fair and sound institutional policies, transparent communication and sufficient resources provided for academic work. Finally, according to Wang (2024), by promoting an environment where academics feel valued and supported, institutions can encourage higher engagement, which in turn may contribute to higher institutional performance including study quality, research productivity and institutional ranking.

In term of scholarly aspect, this study extends the application of the JD–R model to the academic setting by placing meaningful work and POS as key resources within this study context. As such, it may provide a basis for conducting future empirical research to examine the proposed relationships and to explore potential mediating or moderating. Moving forward, higher learning institutions will continue to face challenges such as increasing demands, performance expectations and changing expectation; and to understand how to sustain work engagement among its academic staff would become extremely important. This is with the evident that academic staff is among the core foundation of institutional success. Future studies may also suggest comparison between different institutional types to determine whether these relationships hold consistently across settings, thereby can further enrich the literature on work engagement in academic settings.

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