

STRIKING A BALANCE: THE INFLUENCE OF WORK-RELATED PRESSURES ON ACADEMICIANS' MENTAL HEALTH IN MALAYSIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Article history

Received date : 12-2-2025

Revised date : 13-2-2025

Accepted date : 20-3-2025

Published date : 25-3-2025

To cite this document:

Sakarji, S. R., Othman, A. K., & Omar, S. N. Z. (2025). Striking a balance: The influence of work-related pressures on academicians' mental health in Malaysian Higher Education. *Journal of islamic, social, economics and development (JISED)*, 10 (71), 352- 364.

Abstract: *This study aims to examine the influence of job demands on the mental health of academicians in Malaysian public higher education institutions. A quantitative research design was employed, with data collected through a structured questionnaire distributed to academicians at public universities. The study specifically investigated the relationship between job demands comprising workload, role conflict, work-family conflict, and family-work conflict and mental health outcomes, including depression, anxiety, and stress. The data were analyzed using multiple regression analysis to identify significant predictors of mental health issues. The findings indicate that workload and work-family conflict are the primary contributors to poor mental health among academicians. These results highlight the urgent need for higher education institutions to address job demands by reducing excessive workloads, providing flexible work arrangements, and promoting a supportive work environment. Additionally, academicians are encouraged to adopt effective stress management techniques to cope with job-related challenges. This study emphasizes the critical role of managing job demands in preserving academicians' mental health and well-being.*

Keywords: *Job demand, workload, role conflict, work-family conflict, family-work conflict, mental health*

Introduction

Public universities worldwide have experienced tremendous transformation in the last few decades, including massification, increased internationalization, a greater focus on the application of academic work, and an increase in the power of university administration. These changes have altered the nature of academic work and workplaces (Mudrak et al., 2018). Mental health among academicians is a crucial exploration into the well-being of scholars in the Malaysian academic landscape. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), mental health is a fundamental human right that enables people to effectively learn and work, manage life's stresses, reach their full potential, and contribute to socioeconomic and communal development (Halat et al., 2023). The pressures inherent in academia, including the demands for research productivity, teaching excellence, and administrative duties, often take a toll on the mental health of academicians (Patel et al., 2018; Sharma & Kumra, 2020; Jayman et al., 2022). This strain is further compounded by the lack of adequate support systems within academic institutions, leaving many scholars feeling overwhelmed and unsupported in navigating their mental health challenges. As a result, issues such as burnout, anxiety, and depression are prevalent among academicians in Malaysia, highlighting the urgent need for intervention and support (Tai et al., 2019; Mohamed et al., 2021; Hussin et al., 2022; Raduan et al., 2022; Zulkefli & Omar, 2023).

According to a study by Mukosolu et al. (2015), academicians were more likely than noneducators (19.8%) to report having stress (23.1%). In Asia, public universities face constant competition to retain their esteemed status as research universities. This is achieved by adhering to the key performance indicators and producing research publications. Because of their demanding work environments, most academicians at tertiary higher education institutions were highly susceptible to burnout (Panatik et al., 2012). The effects of juggling several obligations can result in work-related stress. Aside from that, stress levels among educators were significantly impacted by the dynamic changes in the higher education system and the competitive nature of the academic field among universities (Khir et al., 2022). Unfortunately, not many studies show how online learning influences higher education (Miguel et al., 2021). As a result, by empirically identifying the factors impacting mental health and life satisfaction among Malaysian academics, this study supplements previous research and fills a gap in the literature. Job demand is commonly found to be a strain that reduces employees' health, well-being, productivity, motivation, and job performance among employees. Using the well-known theory Job Demand-Resource Model that postulates a health impairment process and a motivational process, the objective of this study is to examine the influence of three identified job demands: workload, role conflict, work-family conflict, and family-work conflict on mental health among academicians at public universities in Malaysia.

Literature Review

Mental Health among Academicians in Malaysia

Mental health among academicians in tertiary education institutions has attracted attention from those concerned. Studies suggest that job demands, work-life conflict, and lack of support are the main contributors to academicians' mental and emotional health issues (Sáez-Delgado et al., 2023). A study conducted in 2023 aimed to create a theoretical framework that explained the influence of job demands on academics' mental health (Sakarji et al., 2018). The study found that job demands such as workload, role conflict, and work-life imbalance can lead to

burnout, fatigue, and declining health among academicians. Othman et al. (2023) found that work-life conflict and lack of support are the main contributors to academicians' mental and emotional health issues. Arumugam et al. (2024) reported that academicians' well-being and productivity suffer significantly from workplace incivility, negatively impacting physical and mental health, job performance, satisfaction, professional identity, and even the intention to leave the job. Pau et al. (2022) investigated the mental health and well-being of academicians in Malaysia, revealing high levels of burnout and stress among them. Recent studies indicate a troubling trend of declining mental health among tertiary education staff. A UK-wide survey found that over half of respondents (53%) showed signs of probable depression. Additionally, 47% of participants in an online study conducted during the pandemic reported their mental health as "poor" (Jayman et al., 2022). These findings underscore the pressing need for attention and support for mental health within the tertiary education sector. Jerrim et al. (2021) provided evidence on long-term trends in academician mental health in England, suggesting stable levels of mental health over the past two decades. Sáez-Delgado et al. (2023) examined an explanatory model linking emotional intelligence, coping strategies, and mental health among 144 Chilean academicians, highlighting the importance of addressing stress and promoting effective coping mechanisms. While these studies contribute valuable insights into the understanding of mental health challenges faced by academicians, there remains a need for further research to explore additional factors influencing academicians' well-being, such as organisational support, workload management, and the impact of external stressors, to inform targeted interventions and support mechanisms for academicians' mental health.

Job Demands and Academician Mental Health

Workload

The workload is one of the demands of the workplace that is known to affect job burnout (Woranetipo & Chavanovanich, 2021). A study among language academics found that their stress resulted from the quick shift to online delivery, for which many language academics were unprepared but whose consequences appear to persist for years to come, has complicated their workloads that were once thought to be large enough (MacIntyre et al., 2020). They often have two duties simultaneously: teaching and research, which are separate yet related. Academics must engage in teaching and learning activities, conduct academic research, and be involved in innovation since innovation is in great demand in China and other countries in the era of a knowledge-based economy (Li et al., 2020b). The long-term excessive workload can make people exhausted and ineffective, leading to absenteeism, turnover intentions, and tardiness (Woranetipo & Chavanovanich, 2021). Based on the previous considerations and the JD-R model assumptions, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H1: Workload has a significant influence on academics' mental health.

Role Conflict

Role conflict results when the worker is subjected to inconsistent expectations because of conflicting demands from multiple roles (e.g., worker, team leader, parent), incompatible requirements of a single job (e.g., conflict among providing good customer service, sales quota, budget limitations), and incompatibility between what the worker is required to do and his or her values (Karkkola et al., 2019). According to Xu (2019), academicians in higher education institutions are typically burdened with two roles: teaching and research. Thus, they frequently faced conflict in their roles in performing their task. Role conflicts encountered by academicians can lead to uncertainty, stress, and dissatisfaction and may result in burnout. As academicians have limited time and resources, it is challenging to function well in teaching and other roles. In other words, role conflict can reduce a person's commitment to independence. Therefore, they are vulnerable to experiencing role conflict (Lei et al., 2021). Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2: Role conflict has a significant influence on academicians' mental health.

Work-Family Conflict

Most workers are pressured to balance their family and work priorities (Johari et al., 2018). Even though career development is crucial to fulfilling one's life goals, it is sometimes sidelined by daily obligations. Due to the blurred lines between life and work, academicians have increased difficulties finding a balance between the two (Johari et al., 2018). Work-family conflict has been examined in the literature for its possible effects on organisational and individual well-being (Kossek & Ozeki, 1998; Ford et al., 2007). A study by Abdou et al. (2024) emphasised the significance of WFC as a contributing factor to employees' psychological distress. It is in line with other studies stating that work-family conflict reduces employee work satisfaction, which affects job performance and productivity (Johnson et al., 2005). According to Greenhaus and Beutell (1985), it also impacts life satisfaction, psychological distress, and staff turnover. On the other hand, individuals' job performance and mental health increase when the organisational principles encourage work-family balance (Obrenovic et al., 2020). Accordingly, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3: Work-family conflict has a significant influence on academicians' mental health.

Family-Work Conflict

Researchers have explained that focusing on family and work is key because work and family are both significant parts of anyone's life. On the other hand, employees usually face work-life imbalance when the boundaries between their personal and professional lives are fragile (Mohd Isa et al., 2018). Furthermore, due to the advancement of technology, employees will be accessible through WhatsApp, email, computer, or cellular phone when at home. This can lead an individual to experience incompatibility between the pressures of work and family. Much literature has been published in the study related to family-work conflict. Most of the studies reported a positive influence on the employees. Several studies have examined the relationship between work stress and the conflict between work commitment and family disruption to understand how work-related stressors can spill over into individuals' family lives (Abdou et al., 2024). They emphasised that work stressors can spill over into an individual's family life, making it challenging to detach from work-related concerns. For instance, earlier studies (i.e., Mohamad et al., 2016; Rubel et al., 2017; Mohd Isa et al., 2018; Suhartini et al., 2023)

suggested that higher levels of role overload, conflict, and ambiguity are associated with increased work-family conflict. When employees are overwhelmed with work-related responsibilities, they may need help to engage fully with their family members, participate in family activities, or fulfill their caregiving roles (Dodanwala et al., 2022). Moreover, the demands and expectations of balancing work and family responsibilities can create chronic stress. This stress can manifest as feelings of overwhelm, anxiety, and tension, contributing to psychological distress (Poms et al., 2016; Rubab, 2017). Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H4: Family-work conflict has a significant influence on mental health.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework in Figure 1 proposes that job demands may have a direct effect on mental health. This proposed relationship is based on the notion that employees who are under prolonged stress may experience burnout and thus not be able to perform well in their jobs. The assumption is that when employees face mental health issues, they will become demotivated, and this may affect their mental health.

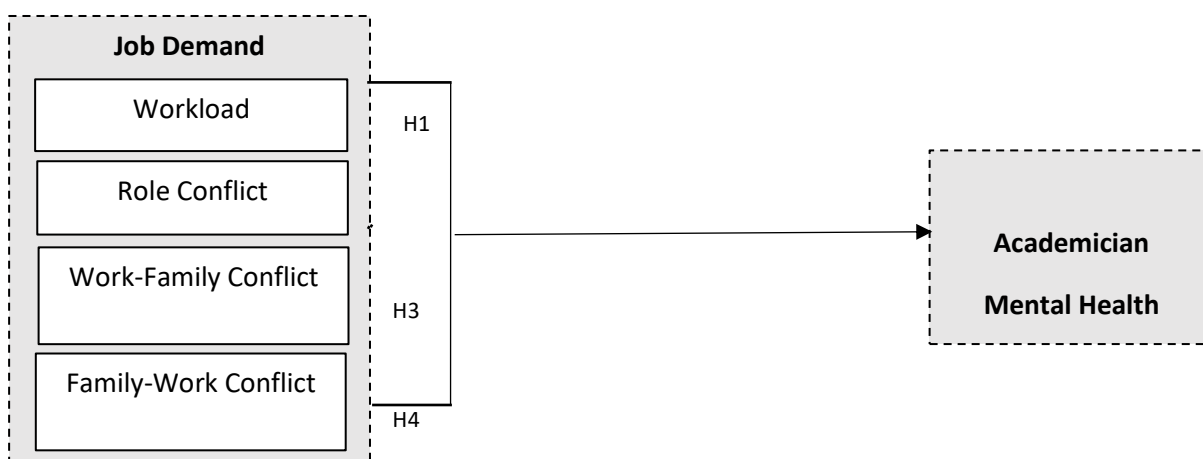


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Methodology

This research used a quantitative approach. The selected academicians are those with specific posts, such as lecturers, senior lecturers, associate professors, and professors with similar workloads and responsibilities. Purposive sampling is used in this study. The sample size was calculated using Raosoft's online sample size calculator. Therefore, 372 is the suitable sample size for each institution to represent the entire population of academicians across the three public higher educational institutions.

The survey questionnaire was adopted from previous studies, which consists of 65 items and uses a five-point Likert-type scale, with five denoting highly agree, four denoting agree, three denoting neutral, two denoting disagree, and one denoting strongly disagree. The three types of validity utilised to assess the measurement questions are content validity, criterion-related validity, and construct validity. However, only 340 were validly matched, and the other is considered unusable due to many omitted questions).

Findings

Correlation Analysis

Table 1 displays the correlation analysis results, which reveal that while some variables have a strong relationship, others do not. The significant relationship between the highly correlated variables suggests that these interactions should be considered when explaining the phenomenon. Most job demands and job resources (workload, role conflict, work-family conflict, and family-work conflict) significantly correlate with one another. The workload is found to be positively correlated with others such as work-family conflict ($r = .379, p < .01$) and family-work conflict ($r = .240, p < .01$). Role conflicts are strongly correlated with work-family conflict ($r = .586, p < .01$) and with family-work conflict ($r = .520, p < .01$). Meanwhile, work-family conflict is strongly correlated with family-work conflict ($r = .662, p < .01$). Overall, the correlation analysis's findings indicate a moderate relationship between workload, role conflict, work-family and family-work conflicts, and mental health (depression, anxiety, and stress). Higher workloads and conflicts are contributing to the increase in mental health disorders (depression, anxiety, and stress).

Table 1: Results of Correlation and Reliability Analysis

No		1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1	Workload	1						
2	Role Conflict	.342**	1					
3	Work-Family Conflict	.379**	.586**	1				
4	Family-Work Conflict	.240**	.520**	.662**	1			
5	Depression	.216**	.380**	.459**	.455**	1		
6	Anxiety	.245**	.458**	.423**	.443**	.571**	1	
7	Stress	.292**	.503**	.535**	.546**	.644**	.690**	1

Regression Analysis

Table 2 shows the result of multiple regression analyses. It was found that R^2 was .310, in which all the independent variables (workload, role conflict, work-family conflict, and family-work conflict) explained 31% of the variance (R square) for mental health (depression), with sig. F value of .001. Plus, Durbin Watson's value was 1.111, which was good as it was in the range of 1.5 to 2.5, indicating the absence of an autocorrelation problem in the regression model. Collinearity statistics indicated that the results met the requirement for multiple regression with the values of $VIF < 10$ and Tolerance < 1 . The analysis revealed that family-work conflict was the significant factor of job demand dimension on the academician mental health (depression ($\beta = .252, p < .01$)). Consecutively, work-family conflict was found to be the second variable that has the most significant influence on academician mental health (depression) with p-value of lesser than 0.01 and β value of 0.176, $p < .01$, followed by role conflict ($\beta = .122, p < .01$). Workload were found not significantly to influence academic mental health (depression). Therefore, it can be concluded that based on this analysis, it was found that job demands significantly contributed and became the most influential variable in predicting academic mental health (depression).

Table 2: Results of Multiple Regression Analysis

Model Variables	Standardized Coefficients Beta	t	Collinearity Statistics	
			Tolerance	VIF
Workload	0.019	0.382	0.824	1.213
Role conflict	0.122*	2.053	0.599	1.670
Work-family conflict	0.176**	2.579	0.454	2.203
Family-work conflict	0.252**	3.954	0.519	1.928
Social support	-0.199**	-3.846	0.787	1.270
Supportive leadership	-0.029	-5.53	0.777	1.286
R Square		0.310		
Adjusted R Square		0.297		
R Square Change		0.310		
F Change		24.460		
Sig. F Change		0.001		
Durbin-Watson		1.111		

Notes: ** significance at the .01 level; * significance at the .05 level

Discussion and Conclusion

This study's initial hypothesis seeks to investigate the influence of job demands, specifically workload, role conflict, work-family conflict, and family-work conflict, on the mental health of academicians at selected public universities in Malaysia. A person experiences conflict when he or she is under stress. When employees' demands, abilities, or resources are not met by the task that needs to be done, stress arises inside the organisation (Isa & Palpanadan, 2020). Because of the high demands of their jobs, people must put in more effort and use proactive coping mechanisms, which may exhaust or drain their energy and lead to burnout (Schaufeli & Baker, 2004). The influence of job demand on academicians is significant, as it critically affects their mental health while they fulfill their obligations and responsibilities.

Indeed, the issue of mental health problems was reported in a brief study by Munusamy et al. (2024), highlighting that the prevalence of depression among academic staff at higher education institutions is roughly 35.4%, which is three times higher than that of the general community. Recent findings in 2023 reveal that a significant number of academicians, approximately one-third, exhibit symptoms aligned with depression, anxiety, and stress (Halat et al., 2023). As posited in previous studies, in comparison to non-academicians (19.8%), academicians had a greater prevalence of stress (23.1%) (Mukosolu et al., 2015). In addition, Kaiser et al. (2021) emphasised that there is comparatively little study on occupational stress and burnout among academicians, despite the possibility that such rising demands may harm academicians' psychological health and well-being. Therefore, this study aimed to identify and synthesise studies regarding mental health and its related issues among educators in Malaysia. However, based on the study, workload was not significantly correlated to academic mental health. However, non-significant results should not be ignored as they possibly indicate that further scrutiny of the data may yield valuable insights (Hewitt et al., 1864; Drotar, 2011). Sedlmeier (1999) claimed that a significant result alone does not provide sufficient evidence to conclude a particular phenomenon, as non-significant results may be obtained due to research context, research questions, and the manner of operationalizing the hypothesis. So, the other possible reason that can explain the contradictory findings is due to the notion that academician's job demands are at odds with one another to some degree depending on their coping strategies and resilience and, to an extent, how the employee manages the mental health problem in their life.

The role conflict faced by academicians will reduce the academicians' commitment toward the organisation, especially their commitment, involvement, and loyalty. The result is consistent with the study conducted by Hassan et al. (2019). The study reported that role conflicts significantly impact the role stress experienced by Malaysian teachers. Contrarily, a study conducted by Ahsan et al. (2009) indicated that role conflict was deemed insignificant concerning job stress among academicians. Yousefi and Abdullah (2019) also found that role conflict is a predictor that negatively affects the job performance of academic staff. While the previous study by Schulz (2013) confirmed that organisational climate is an antecedent to academicians' role conflict and impacts academicians' job satisfaction, this study appeared more complex than that. Role conflict was found to be a contributor to academic mental health that may lead to depression, anxiety, and stress.

The findings of this study are aligned with numerous studies confirmed and emphasise the significant influence between work-family conflict and mental health among academicians (Záborská et al., 2018; Kaiser et al., 2021; Sarwar et al., 2021; Shagirbasha et al., 2024). Work and family occupy a pivotal role in the human experience. The functions and obligations associated with these two domains represent a significant aspect of individuals' existence. Nevertheless, work-family conflict arises from the simultaneous demands of work and family obligations. Work and family conflict emerges when the demands and obligations of work and family domains become incompatible and contradictory. Nonetheless, the average working individual devotes almost 80% of their waking hours to their job (Ibrahim et al., 2022). There will be a conflict between work and personal life if a pleasant environment does not support this scenario and does not burden the individual.

Therefore, organisations must first look at the factors that affect academics' mental health if they hope to implement effective initiatives to stop this occurrence. However, the local educational authorities can use this study's follow-up research findings to improve and expand their current programs. If the proposed predictions are correct, the empirical evidence demonstrating the JD-R model's applicability as a new mental health-specific diagnosis would be strengthened, giving academics greater assurance in identifying and treating mental health issues that can hurt the academic's career. Despite these issues, the study's depth advances the knowledge of academics' mental health and its contributing factors.

Studying teachers' mental health can contribute to the body of knowledge in several ways, such as understanding the sources and consequences of psychological stress among academicians, and how it affects their physical and mental health, their teaching performance, and their relationships with students and colleagues, developing and evaluating effective interventions and strategies to promote teachers' mental health and well-being, such as self-care practices, peer support, professional development, and organisational changes, exploring the links between academicians' mental health and well-being and students' mental health and well-being, and how academicians can foster positive social-emotional learning and resilience among their students and addressing the challenges and opportunities of teaching in different contexts, such as after the COVID-19 pandemic, in high-poverty settings, or diverse and inclusive classrooms.

In conclusion, by integrating well-established theoretical frameworks with empirical data, this study adds to the body of knowledge on job demands and job resources within the education

profession. The impact of job demands and resources on employee mental health could be better understood and used to guide targeted interventions and preventative strategies by conducting additional studies on modifiers or contextual factors. Future research should examine the specific socio-demographic characteristics, maladaptive coping strategies, and mental health and well-being of university academicians concerning occupational stress. This investigation has the potential to facilitate comprehension of the phenomenon of labour. Enhancing the health and well-being of university academicians can subsequently contribute to the satisfaction and productivity of educational institutions.

Acknowledgement

The authors cordially value the support and encouragement from Universiti Teknologi MARA Kelantan, Selangor and Perlis Campus. The authors appreciate team members' dedication and perseverance in ensuring this publication becomes a reality.

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