

Beyond Pay: A Qualitative Content Analysis of Employee-Reported Drivers and Challenges of Workplace Well-being in a Malaysian Higher Education Institution

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ABSTRACT

Workplace well-being in higher education is often examined through predefined survey scales, yet employees may define a supportive workplace in ways that are not fully captured by closed-ended measures. This study explores employee-reported drivers and challenges of workplace well-being in a Malaysian higher education institution, with particular attention to the relative role of financial and non-financial conditions. Data were drawn from a cross-sectional survey of 121 academic, professional-administrative and administrative-support employees. Two open-ended questions asked respondents to identify the main factors shaping their workplace well-being and happiness and to describe the principal challenges they faced and how the institution could respond. Qualitative content analysis was conducted on 94 analyzable responses to the first question and 87 to the second. Responses were coded using a multi-label thematic framework because many comments contained more than one idea. Collegial relationships and a positive work culture were the most frequently identified drivers (57.4%), followed by leadership, fairness and management support (36.2%). Workload and work-life balance (21.3%), health and the physical environment (18.1%), financial rewards and job security (17.0%), recognition and development (14.9%), and spirituality and values (7.4%) were also evident. The dominant challenges were leadership, communication, fairness and role clarity (35.6%) and workload, role overload and time pressure (32.2%), followed by psychosocial stress and toxic interpersonal climates (20.7% each). The findings show that employee well-being extends beyond pay: relational quality, managerial fairness, manageable work design and psychological support were more prominent in employees' narratives than financial rewards alone. The study offers employee-centred evidence for designing more responsive higher education workplace policies.

Keywords: workplace well-being, employee voice, qualitative content analysis, higher education, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

Employee well-being has become a central organisational concern because the quality of employees' working lives is linked to motivation, retention, productivity and organisational performance. A large body of research shows that happiness at work is not a single construct and cannot be reduced to job satisfaction or salary alone (Fisher, 2010). Workplaces shape well-being through a combination of material resources, social relationships, job demands, autonomy, recognition, leadership and employees' sense of meaning. The

Job Demands-Resources model similarly proposes that employee functioning depends on the balance between demanding aspects of work and resources that help employees achieve goals, regulate strain and sustain engagement (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).

The economic dimension nevertheless remains important. Happiness economics demonstrates that income and financial security contribute to subjective well-being, although their effects depend on perceived adequacy, expectations and wider life circumstances rather than nominal income alone (Frey & Stutzer, 2002; Clark et al., 2018). Malaysian evidence has also shown that income, employment and satisfaction with household financial circumstances are associated with happiness and life satisfaction (Boo et al., 2016), while more focused evidence indicates that household income, relative income and expected income are relevant to subjective well-being among Malaysian adults (Boo et al., 2020). These findings support the inclusion of economic well-being in workplace research but also indicate that financial conditions should be interpreted within a broader psychosocial context.

Higher education institutions provide a particularly useful setting for examining these issues. Academic and administrative employees work in environments characterised by teaching, student service, research, regulatory compliance, administrative coordination and increasingly complex performance expectations. When demands accumulate without sufficient resources, employees may experience exhaustion and reduced well-being (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). At the same time, supportive relationships, fair leadership, autonomy, recognition and opportunities for development can operate as resources that protect well-being and strengthen engagement. Global evidence also suggests that employment characteristics and workplace conditions are closely connected with happiness (De Neve & Ward, 2017).

Most survey-based studies, however, begin with researcher-defined constructs. This is useful for hypothesis testing, but it may under-represent the issues employees themselves consider most important. Employee voice can reveal whether staff spontaneously prioritise pay, workload, relationships, leadership, psychological support, work-life balance or other conditions when asked to describe their workplace experience in their own words. Qualitative responses therefore complement closed-ended scales by allowing employees to frame well-being using the language of their everyday work environment.

A previous quantitative article from an earlier version of this survey dataset examined demographic differences in workplace well-being, economic happiness and Islamic economic values using 120 responses (Mohamad, 2025). The present study is analytically distinct. It uses the final 121-response dataset and focuses exclusively on the open-ended narrative responses that were not analysed in the previous article. It does not repeat demographic t-tests, ANOVA, chi-square analysis, correlation analysis or regression modelling. Instead, it asks what employees themselves identify as the principal drivers and challenges of well-being.

Accordingly, this study addresses two research questions: (1) What factors do employees identify as the main drivers of workplace well-being and happiness? and (2) What challenges do employees identify as barriers to workplace well-being, and what forms of institutional response do their comments imply? By answering these questions, the study provides an employee-centred perspective on workplace well-being and clarifies the extent to which financial considerations are embedded within a broader set of relational, managerial and work-design conditions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Workplace Well-Being Beyond Financial Compensation

Workplace well-being refers broadly to positive evaluations and experiences associated with one's work role and organisational environment. Fisher (2010) argues that happiness at work encompasses multiple levels, including transient affect, job-level attitudes and broader work-related well-being. This multidimensional view is consistent with the wider subjective well-being literature, which emphasises that individuals' evaluations provide information that objective indicators alone cannot capture (Diener et al., 2018).

Economic resources remain part of this evaluation. Diener and Seligman (2004) argue that economic indicators are imperfect proxies for well-being because people ultimately value the lived outcomes that resources enable. In workplaces, salary, benefits and employment security may reduce financial strain, but they coexist with interpersonal and organisational experiences. Consequently, employees may report acceptable financial conditions yet still experience poor well-being if workload, leadership or workplace relationships are problematic.

Work Demands, Resources and Relational Quality

The Job Demands-Resources framework provides a useful lens for interpreting employee narratives. Job demands such as excessive workload, time pressure, role conflict and emotionally difficult interactions can deplete energy, while resources such as supervisor support, role clarity, autonomy, collegial relationships and development opportunities can buffer strain and motivate employees (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). The framework is especially relevant to higher education because employees frequently operate across overlapping teaching, administrative, service and research responsibilities.

Relational quality is also central. Positive relationships at work can provide emotional support, information, cooperation and a sense of belonging. Conversely, conflict, toxic behaviour, office politics and weak communication can create strain even when formal employment conditions are stable. Large-scale evidence linking employee well-being to productivity and organisational outcomes reinforces the practical importance of these non-financial conditions (Krekel et al., 2019).

Employee Voice in Higher Education

Employee voice is particularly useful when institutions seek to understand the gap between formal policies and lived experience. Closed-ended scales can indicate whether employees are satisfied, but open-ended responses can reveal why. In higher education, this distinction matters because the same policy can be experienced differently across academic, professional and support roles. Staff may interpret well-being through workload distribution, flexibility, fairness, communication, facilities, recognition or the quality of immediate supervisory relationships.

Qualitative content analysis allows recurring ideas in short textual responses to be organised systematically while preserving the substance of employees' own accounts. Conventional content analysis is appropriate when categories are developed from the data rather than imposed entirely in advance (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Thematic approaches similarly emphasise iterative familiarisation, coding and refinement of patterned meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this study, these principles are applied to brief survey comments, with theme frequencies used only to describe prominence rather than to convert qualitative data into causal statistical evidence.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Data Source

The study used a qualitative content-analysis component embedded within a broader cross-sectional employee survey. The survey was administered online to employees working in a Malaysian higher education institution using purposive sampling. A total of 121 valid survey responses were available. The present paper analyses only the open-ended questions and does not reproduce the quantitative models reported or submitted in related work.

Participants

The sample comprised academic, professional-administrative and administrative-support employees. Women represented 51.2% of the sample and men 48.8%. Most respondents were aged 25-44 years, and the workforce included both permanent and non-permanent employees across multiple income and service-

duration categories. These characteristics provided a varied institutional employee perspective rather than a single occupational viewpoint.

Table 1. Selected respondent characteristics (N = 121)

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Gender	Male	59	48.8
	Female	62	51.2
Age	25-34 years	49	40.5
	35-44 years	59	48.8
	45 years and above	13	10.7
Job position	Academic	43	35.5
	Professional administration	30	24.8
	Administrative support	48	39.7
Employment status	Permanent	76	62.8
	Non-permanent/other	45	37.2

Open-Ended Questions

Two questions were analysed. The first asked: “What are the main factors that influence your well-being and happiness at work?” The second asked: “What are the main challenges you face in ensuring well-being at work, and how can the institution help address them?” Of the 121 respondents, 94 provided analyzable narrative responses to the first question and 87 provided analyzable responses to the second after blank or purely symbolic entries were excluded.

Qualitative Content Analysis

Responses were read iteratively and coded according to recurring concepts. Because many respondents listed several factors in a single answer, a multi-label coding approach was used: one response could contribute to more than one theme. The initial codes were consolidated into broader categories reflecting relational climate, leadership and fairness, work design, financial conditions, health and physical environment, recognition and development, and spirituality or values. For the challenge question, additional categories captured role clarity, staffing and facilities, psychosocial strain and toxic interpersonal conditions. Theme counts and percentages were calculated to indicate how often each theme appeared among analyzable responses. Because coding was multi-label, percentages are not expected to sum to 100%. Short comments were translated into English for illustration while preserving their original meaning.

The analysis emphasised manifest content - what respondents explicitly stated - rather than attempting to infer hidden psychological meanings. Frequency was used as a descriptive aid, not as a measure of causal importance. Themes were reviewed for overlap and conceptually similar codes were merged so that categories were sufficiently distinct for interpretation.

Related-Work Distinctiveness

To avoid duplication, the present article does not report the demographic-difference analyses previously published from an earlier 120-response version of the survey (Mohamad, 2025). It also does not reproduce closed-ended predictor analyses from the same broader research programme. Its empirical contribution is restricted to the previously unreported open-ended employee narratives and their thematic organisation.

Ethical Considerations

Formal ethics committee review was not obtained for this minimal-risk, non-interventional online questionnaire study. Before responding, participants were informed of the study purpose, that participation was voluntary, and that information provided would be treated confidentially and used for academic research. No personally identifying information is reported in this article. The qualitative comments are presented only in short anonymised excerpts.

RESULTS

Drivers of Workplace Well-Being and Happiness

The responses show that employees defined workplace well-being primarily through relational and organisational conditions rather than financial rewards alone. Seven recurring themes were identified. Collegial relationships and a positive work culture were the most common theme, appearing in 54 of 94 analyzable responses (57.4%). Leadership, fairness and management support appeared in 34 responses (36.2%). Workload, work-life balance and flexibility were mentioned in 20 responses (21.3%). Health, safety and the physical environment appeared in 17 responses (18.1%), while financial rewards, benefits and job security were identified in 16 responses (17.0%). Recognition, development and meaningful work appeared in 14 responses (14.9%), and spirituality, values and purpose appeared in 7 responses (7.4%).

Table 2. Employee-reported drivers of workplace well-being (n = 94 analyzable responses)

Theme	Mentions	% of responses
Collegial relationships and positive work culture	54	57.4
Leadership, fairness and management support	34	36.2
Workload, work-life balance and flexibility	20	21.3
Health, safety and physical environment	17	18.1
Financial rewards, benefits and job security	16	17.0
Recognition, growth and meaningful work	14	14.9
Spirituality, values and purpose	7	7.4

Note: Responses could be assigned to more than one theme; percentages therefore exceed 100% when summed.

Collegial relationships and positive work culture

The strongest theme concerned relationships with colleagues, teamwork, mutual respect, supportive communication and a non-toxic working environment. Employees repeatedly referred to “good colleagues,” “teamwork,” “support systems,” harmony and mutual help. One respondent described the key factor simply as “good relationships with colleagues and flexible working hours,” while another emphasised “a positive workplace and colleagues who support each other.” These comments indicate that everyday interpersonal exchanges are experienced as a core resource rather than a peripheral social benefit.

Several respondents also defined well-being negatively by the absence of toxicity, bias or interpersonal disrespect. This suggests that relational quality includes both positive support and psychological safety. Employees appeared to value environments in which colleagues cooperate across sections, communicate professionally and respect one another's responsibilities.

Leadership, Fairness and Management Support

Leadership was the second most prominent driver. Respondents referred to fair management, empathetic supervisors, transparent decisions, staff welfare and leaders who listen. A concise response stated that well-being depends on “fair management and staff welfare being protected.” Another described good leadership as fair, empathetic and supportive, particularly when managers listen to problems and recognise contributions.

The prominence of fairness is important because it connects managerial behaviour with employees' perceptions of dignity and trust. Respondents did not describe leadership only in strategic terms; they evaluated it through routine decisions about workload, recognition, communication and equal treatment.

Work Design, Financial Conditions and Other Resources

Workload, work-life balance and flexibility formed the third theme. Employees valued reasonable workloads, flexible schedules, the ability to complete core responsibilities and respect for non-working time. Some explicitly rejected work extending into late nights or weekends. These comments position time autonomy and workload control as important resources for sustaining well-being.

Financial conditions were meaningful but not dominant. Respondents mentioned adequate salary, fair rewards, benefits, incentives, staff welfare and job security. The fact that financial themes appeared less often than relational and leadership themes does not imply that pay is unimportant. Rather, it suggests that employees experience economic well-being together with the social and managerial quality of work. Recognition, career opportunities and meaningful work were also mentioned, indicating that employees value both material reward and evidence that their contribution is noticed and can lead to development.

Health, safety and the physical environment included mental-health support, clean and comfortable workspaces, facilities and a sense of safety. A smaller group explicitly framed work through spiritual meaning, Islamic values, honesty, purpose and religious orientation. These responses show that for some employees well-being also contains a moral or spiritual dimension.

Challenges to Workplace Well-Being

The challenge responses mirrored the positive drivers but made organisational weaknesses more explicit. Leadership, fairness, communication and role clarity formed the most frequent challenge category, appearing in 31 of 87 analyzable responses (35.6%). Workload, role overload and time pressure followed closely with 28 mentions (32.2%). Mental-health strain and psychosocial support needs appeared in 18 responses (20.7%), as did interpersonal conflict and toxic workplace conditions (20.7%). Work-life balance and flexibility, and staffing/resources/facilities, each appeared in 13 responses (14.9%). Career development, recognition and rewards appeared in 8 responses (9.2%), while ethics, spirituality and integrity appeared in 7 responses (8.0%). Nine responses (10.3%) indicated no major challenge or provided no substantive comment.

Table 3. Employee-reported challenges to workplace well-being (n = 87 analyzable responses)

Theme	Mentions	% of responses
Leadership, fairness, communication and role clarity	31	35.6
Workload, role overload and time pressure	28	32.2
Mental health, stress and psychosocial support	18	20.7
Interpersonal climate and toxic workplace	18	20.7
Work-life balance and flexibility	13	14.9
Staffing, resources, facilities and systems	13	14.9

No major challenge / no substantive comment	9	10.3
Career development, recognition and rewards	8	9.2
Ethics, spirituality and integrity	7	8.0

Note: Responses could be assigned to more than one theme; percentages therefore exceed 100% when summed.

Leadership, Communication and Role Clarity As Barriers

Many challenge responses concerned unclear instructions, inconsistent decisions, bureaucracy, weak communication, perceived unfairness, office politics and tasks that did not align with formal roles. Respondents asked for clearer policies, better communication channels, fairer allocation of work and managers who understand the actual functions of different departments. These comments suggest that role ambiguity itself can operate as a job demand by increasing uncertainty and creating avoidable conflict.

Some respondents also raised issues of transparency, opportunities to express views and the need to hear staff before action is taken. This indicates that employee well-being is affected not only by what decisions are made but also by whether procedures are perceived as understandable and fair.

Workload, Time Pressure and Staffing Constraints

Workload was the second dominant challenge. Employees described excessive tasks, short deadlines, overlapping teaching and programme commitments, ad hoc duties and work outside their core scope. One respondent noted that “many tasks within a short period can cause stress and fatigue” and suggested systematic workload planning and additional manpower. Another described imbalance across teaching, research and administration and called for fairer task distribution and more flexible work arrangements.

Staff shortages, inadequate facilities and unstable support systems appeared as linked structural problems. Respondents mentioned insufficient support staff, unreliable internet or equipment, limited facilities and the need for integrated systems. These comments show that workload pressure is not always an individual time-management problem; it can arise from staffing and infrastructure constraints.

Psychosocial Strain and Toxic Climate

Mental-health strain was frequently linked to workload, work-life imbalance and unsupportive environments. Respondents referred to stress, emotional pressure, burnout and the need for counselling, mental-health programmes and more flexible work arrangements. Several comments also described toxic culture, interpersonal conflict, disrespect or workplace politics as barriers to well-being.

The combination of psychosocial strain and interpersonal problems suggests that employee well-being interventions should not be limited to individual resilience training. Respondents were also asking for changes in workload, leadership practice, communication and workplace culture.

Integrated Pattern across Drivers and Challenges

A clear mirror pattern emerged across the two questions. Positive collegial relationships were the most prominent driver, while toxic interpersonal climates appeared as a major challenge. Fair and supportive leadership was a key driver, while unclear communication and unfair or inconsistent management were the most common challenge. Work-life balance and manageable workload supported well-being, while overload and time pressure undermined it. This symmetry strengthens the interpretation that employees were identifying coherent organisational conditions rather than isolated personal preferences.

DISCUSSION

The central finding is that employees defined workplace well-being as a relational and organisational experience that extends beyond pay. Financial rewards and job security were clearly present, but they were not the most frequently volunteered factors. Instead, employees most often described supportive colleagues, positive culture, fair leadership and manageable work design. This pattern is consistent with multidimensional models of happiness at work, which treat well-being as the product of affective, relational and organisational experiences rather than a single economic outcome (Fisher, 2010).

The prominence of collegial relationships supports the view that social resources are central to the workplace experience. In the JD-R framework, colleagues and supervisors can provide instrumental and emotional resources that help employees manage demands (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). In the present data, employees described teamwork, mutual help and respectful communication as direct sources of happiness. Conversely, toxic behaviour, conflict and office politics were described as challenges. These paired findings suggest that relational climate is an actionable organisational resource.

Leadership and fairness were similarly prominent on both sides of the analysis. Employees associated well-being with leaders who listen, communicate clearly, distribute work fairly and protect staff welfare. Their challenge narratives highlighted unclear decisions, role ambiguity, bureaucracy and perceived unfairness. This indicates that managerial fairness operates through everyday processes, not only formal policies. For higher education institutions, leadership development should therefore include communication quality, procedural fairness, role clarity and responsiveness to staff concerns.

Workload and time pressure formed another major pattern. Respondents valued work-life balance, flexibility and reasonable workloads, but described overload, overlapping duties, short deadlines and out-of-scope tasks as persistent barriers. This is consistent with occupational stress research showing that chronic demands can contribute to exhaustion and burnout when adequate resources are absent (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Importantly, respondents linked workload to staffing and infrastructure, suggesting that institutions should avoid framing overload solely as an individual coping issue.

The finding that financial themes were less frequent than relational and managerial themes requires careful interpretation. It does not mean that salary and benefits are unimportant. Malaysian happiness research indicates that income and financial satisfaction remain relevant to subjective well-being (Boo et al., 2016; Boo et al., 2020). Rather, the open-ended responses show that employees evaluate financial adequacy within a wider workplace ecosystem. Pay may provide economic security, but fair treatment, supportive relationships, recognition and manageable demands shape whether employment is experienced positively.

This result also complements wider evidence that employee well-being has organisational consequences. Meta-analytic evidence links employee well-being with productivity, customer loyalty, staff retention and profitability (Krekel et al., 2019). For higher education, the practical implication is that employee well-being should be treated as part of institutional capability. Policies aimed at staff welfare may support not only individual quality of life but also the sustainability of teaching, administration and service delivery.

A smaller but distinctive set of responses referred to spirituality, Islamic values, honesty and meaningful work. These comments indicate that some employees interpret well-being through moral purpose in addition to material and psychological conditions. The theme was not dominant, but it illustrates the value of open-ended data: dimensions that may be overlooked in conventional workplace models can emerge when employees are allowed to define well-being in their own terms.

Practical Implications

First, institutions should prioritise relational climate. Team-based problem solving, respectful cross-departmental communication and early intervention in toxic behaviour may have broad well-being benefits because collegial relationships were the most frequently identified positive factor.

Second, leadership development should emphasise fairness, clarity and listening. Employees' comments suggest that managerial support is experienced through routine decisions about workload, role expectations, recognition and access to information. Transparent processes and clear channels for staff voice can therefore function as well-being resources.

Third, workload interventions should address structural causes. Institutions should review task allocation, role overlap, staffing sufficiency, timetable conflicts and expectations for after-hours work. Flexible work arrangements may help, but flexibility should complement rather than substitute for appropriate staffing and realistic workload design.

Fourth, psychosocial support should be integrated with organisational change. Counselling, mental-health awareness and wellness programmes are useful, but respondents' comments indicate that stress is also generated by work design, communication and workplace culture. Effective interventions should therefore combine individual support with improvements in organisational conditions.

Finally, financial welfare remains relevant. Transparent remuneration, fair recognition, benefits and career progression should be maintained as part of a wider well-being strategy rather than treated as the only mechanism for employee satisfaction.

Limitations And Future Research

The study has several limitations. First, the data come from a single institutional context and purposive sampling, so the prominence of themes should not be generalised to all Malaysian higher education employees. Second, open-ended survey comments are generally shorter than interview data and therefore provide less opportunity to probe meanings or contradictions. Third, theme frequencies indicate how often issues were mentioned, not the intensity or causal importance of each issue.

Future studies could conduct interviews or focus groups across multiple institutions to examine how workplace well-being differs by occupational role and institutional type. Qualitative findings could also be integrated with quantitative measures in a sequential mixed-method design. For example, the present themes could be used to develop targeted measures of role clarity, collegial support, workload fairness and staff voice and then test their association with well-being outcomes in larger samples.

CONCLUSION

This study examined employees' own accounts of what supports and undermines workplace well-being in a Malaysian higher education institution. The findings show that workplace happiness is not primarily a pay question. Financial rewards and security matter, but employees more often emphasised relationships, leadership fairness, supportive culture, manageable workload, flexibility and psychological safety. The challenge narratives reinforced the same pattern: unclear management, excessive workload, stress, toxic interpersonal conditions and insufficient resources were the most common barriers. These findings support a multidimensional approach to employee well-being in which economic, relational and organisational resources operate together. For higher education institutions, a credible well-being strategy therefore requires more than welfare programmes or salary adjustments; it requires fair leadership, coherent work design, supportive relationships, staff voice and adequate organisational resources.

Data Availability

The qualitative response data are not publicly available because respondents were assured confidentiality. De-identified extracts may be considered for legitimate academic verification subject to the author's institutional requirements and protection of participant confidentiality.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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