From Emotion to Engagement: The Role of Emotional Intelligence among Academic Staff in Private Higher Education Institutions

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the impact of emotional intelligence (EI) on work engagement (WE) among academic staff in private higher education institutions (HEIs) in Klang Valley, Malaysia. Rising job demands and mental health concerns among lecturers underscore the need to explore psychological factors that support occupational well-being. A quantitative approach was employed, involving 185 academic staff selected via convenience sampling. Data were collected using the Wong and Law Emotional Intelligence Scale (WLEIS) and the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-9), then analyzed using SPSS. Results indicated that most respondents exhibited high levels of both EI and WE. Furthermore, all four EI dimensions-emotional appraisal (SEA), others' emotional appraisal (OEA), use of emotions (UOE), and regulation of emotions (ROE) significantly predicted work engagement, with UOE emerging as the strongest predictor. These findings highlight the role of emotional intelligence in sustaining engagement among academic professionals, suggesting the need for institutional initiatives that foster emotional competencies. Future research should consider mixed method designs and larger, stratified samples to deepen understanding in this area.

Keywords: Emotional Intelligence, Work Engagement, Academic Staff, Private Higher Education, Mental Health, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

In today's demanding academic environment, the mental well-being and engagement of lecturers have become critical areas of concern. Academic staff in Malaysia face increasing workloads, performance expectations, and role conflicts, often leading to stress, burnout, and declining job satisfaction. In this context, emotional intelligence (EI)—the ability to recognize, regulate, and utilize emotions—has emerged as a potential buffer that can sustain work engagement (WE) and improve well-being.

Work engagement, defined as a fulfilling and positive psychological state characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption, is essential for effective teaching, student satisfaction, and institutional success. Research has shown that emotionally intelligent individuals are better equipped to cope with workplace challenges, foster healthy interpersonal relationships, and maintain motivation. However, limited empirical research has explored this relationship within Malaysian higher education, especially in private institutions.

This study seeks to address this gap by examining how emotional intelligence impacts work engagement among academic staff in private higher education institutions in Klang Valley. The findings aim to inform institutional strategies that enhance lecturer well-being and performance.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Emotional intelligence has been associated with positive workplace outcomes such as job performance, psychological resilience, and team collaboration. Mayer and Salovey (2004) conceptualize EI as comprising four core dimensions: self-emotional appraisal (SEA), others' emotional appraisal (OEA), use of emotions (UOE), and regulation of emotions (ROE). In educational settings, these competencies support classroom management, empathy, and decision-making.

Work engagement, according to Schaufeli et al. (2002), encompasses vigor, dedication, and absorption. High engagement correlates with increased productivity, organizational commitment, and reduced turnover. Previous studies have linked EI with WE across various contexts. Obuobisa-Darko et al. (2023) found that emotional regulation significantly enhanced engagement in public service, while Gao et al. (2024) highlighted the role of organizational support and emotional competencies among nurses.

Within academia, challenges such as performance metrics, role overload, and work-life imbalance can impair engagement. Studies suggest that EI serves as a psychological resource that mitigates stress and sustains motivation (Antonella et al., 2020). However, cultural and contextual differences necessitate localized studies, especially in Southeast Asia.

The theoretical basis for this study is the Cognitive-Motivational-Relational Theory of Emotion (Lazarus, 1991 as cited in George et al., 2021), which posits that emotional processing influences goal-oriented behavior and social interaction—key elements in sustaining engagement at work.

METHODOLOGY

A quantitative correlational design was used to explore the relationship between emotional intelligence and work engagement. The study involved 185 academic staff from private higher education institutions in Klang Valley, recruited via convenience sampling. Inclusion criteria included full-time employment in an academic role.

Data were collected using a Google Forms questionnaire, comprising demographic questions, the 16-item Wong and Law Emotional Intelligence Scale (WLEIS), and the 9-item Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-9). The WLEIS assesses four dimensions of EI, while the UWES-9 measures vigor, dedication, and absorption. Responses were recorded on 5-point and 7-point Likert scales, respectively.

Reliability analysis showed high internal consistency by a pilot investigation including 30 individuals, with Cronbach's alphas for EI scale and WE scale is .913 and.934, respectively, and a combined dependability of.944. Data analysis was conducted using SPSS version 26, including descriptive statistics and simple linear regression to examine the predictive influence of each EI construct on work engagement.

RESULT

An overview of the information acquired is described as a data analysis. It involves analyzing and making meaning of gathered data in order to identify patterns, correlations, or other relationships. The researcher's data analysis for the 185 academic staff from private higher education institutions in Klang Valley who responded is covered in this chapter. Researchers conduct reliability, descriptive, and regression analyses of the findings.

Table 1 Demographic Background of the Respondents

Gender	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Male	99	53.5
Female	86	46.5
TOTAL	185	100.0

The main aspects of the dataset are summed up using descriptive analysis (Table 1). This analysis consists of a summary of the respondents' genders, ages, educational background and monthly income. There were 99 female respondents, or 53.5% of the total, according to Table 1. In contrast, 86 (46.5%) of the respondents are female.

Next, the respondents' age for this study ranges from 25 to 40 years old and above. According to Table 4.3, the respondents 25 - 30 years old are 72 (38.9%), respondents in the age range of 31 - 35 years old is 61 (33%). Meanwhile, the respondents in the age range of 36 - 40 years old are 31 (16.8%) and some respondents that are

above 40 years old are 21 (11.4%).

This study also summarizes the educational background of the respondents: the respondents for Degree holders are 95 (51.4%), master's holders are 74 (40%) while for PHD holders are 16 (8.6%).

While, the respondents with monthly income of RM2000 - RM3000 are 17, indicating 9.2% and RM3000 - RM4000 are 81 representing 43.8% of total respondents. Meanwhile, respondents with monthly income of RM4000 - RM5000 are 47 (25.4%) and above RM5000 are 40 respondents (21.6%)

Table 2 The Emotional Intelligence Level

Emotional Intelligence Level	Frequency	Percentage %
Low	-	-
Moderate	25	13.5
High	160	86.5

The distribution of emotional intelligence levels of academic staff in private higher education institutions in Klang Valley seen in Table 2. According to the research, the majority of the respondents (86.5%) indicate high emotional intelligence. Meanwhile 13.5% of the respondents scored moderate in emotional intelligence.

Table 3 The Work Engagement Level

Work Engagement Level	Frequency	Percentage %
Low	5	2.7
Moderate	38	20.5
High	142	76.8

Table 3 presents the descriptive analysis of work engagement levels among academic staff in private higher education institutions in Klang Valley. The majority of participants (76.8%) reported a high level of work engagement, indicating that most of them are enthusiastic, dedicated, and actively involved in their work. Meanwhile, 20.5% of respondents showed a moderate level of engagement, suggesting an average level of commitment and enthusiasm. Only a small percentage (2.7%) reported low work engagement, reflecting minimal involvement or enthusiasm in their professional roles. Overall, the findings suggest a generally high level of work engagement among the respondents.

Table 4 The Impact of Emotional Intelligence Towards Work Engagement

Predictor	B	SE B	β	t	p	R²
SEA	2.448	.211	.651	11.588	.000	.423
OEA	2.451	.251	.585	9.752	.000	.342
UOE	2.749	.207	.700	13.258	.000	.490
ROE	2.069	.172	.665	12.052	.000	.443

Simple linear regression analyses were conducted to examine the predictive effect of each emotional intelligence dimension—Self-Emotional Appraisal (SEA), Others' Emotional Appraisal (OEA), Use of Emotion (UOE), and

Regulation of Emotion (ROE)—on work engagement. All four dimensions were found to be statistically significant predictors ($p < .001$), as shown in Table 4.

Among the four predictors, Use of Emotion (UOE) demonstrated the strongest effect on work engagement ($\beta = 0.700$, $R^2 = 0.490$), followed by Regulation of Emotion (ROE) ($\beta = 0.665$, $R^2 = 0.443$). Self-Emotional Appraisal (SEA) and Others' Emotional Appraisal (OEA) also showed significant positive effects, with β values of 0.651 and 0.585, respectively. These results indicate that emotional intelligence, particularly the ability to utilize and regulate emotions, plays a critical role in enhancing work engagement among academic staff in private higher education institutions.

DISCUSSION

All four dimensions of emotional intelligence—Self-Emotions Appraisal (SEA), Others-Emotions Appraisal (OEA), Use of Emotions (UOE), and Regulation of Emotions (ROE) were significant predictors of work engagement. Among them, UOE emerged as the strongest predictor suggesting that the ability to channel emotional energy toward goal achievement plays a critical role in maintaining engagement. This finding is consistent with Mohammed (2021) and Sharma (2024), who highlighted the influence of emotional utilization on motivation and performance.

ROE also showed a strong predictive effect indicating that the ability to manage emotional responses contributes to consistent engagement despite workplace stressors. This supports findings by Ismail et al. (2020), who noted that emotional regulation helps educators cope with institutional pressures and maintain teaching quality. In addition, SEA was also positively associated with engagement, reflecting the importance of emotional self-awareness in adapting to workplace demands. As reported by Mérida-López et al. (2023), self-awareness is linked to reduced stress and increased engagement among educators.

Although OEA was the weakest predictor, it remained statistically significant. This suggests that while understanding others' emotions supports communication and collaboration, internal emotional regulation and motivation may have a more direct impact on sustained engagement. Hwang (2024) similarly concluded that while OEA enhances interpersonal effectiveness, engagement is more strongly influenced by self-directed emotional competencies.

Despite the strength of findings, this study's reliance on self-report data introduces potential response bias. The sample size, though adequate, limits broader generalization. Future research should explore mediating variables (e.g., organizational culture, leadership) and adopt mixed methods designs for deeper insight.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the significant role of emotional intelligence in enhancing work engagement among academic staff in private HEIs in Klang Valley. All four EI dimensions, particularly the use of emotions, emerged as strong predictors of engagement. These findings have practical implications: institutions should integrate emotional intelligence development into training and support systems to improve lecturer well-being and performance. Broader, multi-institutional studies are recommended to extend these insights and inform national education policy.

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