

## Examining Well-being among Non-academic University Staff in Malaysia during Covid-19 Pandemic

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### Abstract

During the Covid-19 pandemic, employee well-being including non-academic university staff had an impact as staff adapted to working with a different setting. Till now there has been very few empirical research to determine the level of well-being among non-academic university personnel even though this group occupies a vast majority of workforce in a university. As a result, this study investigated the status of well-being among non-academic university staff attached to a Malaysian institution of higher learning. The study was quantitative in nature and the survey instrument was developed based on previous research and nominal group technique. The total number of respondents that took part in this study was 1,759, and the data was collected through an online platform. Overall, the findings revealed that the well-being index for non-academic staff at the institution was 77.2%, indicating that they are typically moderately happy at work. Based on the findings, improving the work environment, career growth, and reduction in workload should be prioritised to promote well-being among non-academic university staff.

**Keywords:** Non-academic Staff, University, Well-Being

### Background

Employee well-being appears to be the cornerstone of increased productivity and the most valued asset for successful organizations (Khatri & Gupta, 2019). Several studies have shown that organization productivity will be lacking if organizations fail to give prominent concern on the quality of life of its workforce (Tarigan et al., 2022). In fact, recent studies have shown

organizations will crumble if due attention is not given to safeguard the well-being of employees (Kansheba & Marobhe, 2022). Lately with the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic, rapid changes are occurring in the labor market, and this had resulted in occupational stress, increased workload, and demanding employers pursuing aggressive methods to achieve key performance indicators (Singh et al., 2022). Undoubtedly, well-being of employees needs to be the focus of each organization as it is considered as one of the most lethal weapons to overcome occupational stress (D'Silva et al., 2021). Organizations will feel the effects if workplace stress is not addressed, as it will lead employees to have issues with their mental health, organizational loyalty, productivity, and so on (Shen & Slater, 2021). As a result, organizations must continue to pursue innovative approaches to engage people to boost both career development and a balanced family-work relationship by paying close attention to their well-being (D'Silva et al., 2021).

Much has been published about well-being concepts and ideas, including employee well-being in the workplace in the positive-based management research. Well-being has long been associated with feelings of happiness or despair, dating back to Plato's time. Yassin (2014) conducted extensive research into the concept of communal well-being and concluded that well-being could be measured both objectively and subjectively. There were also some ideas on looking at happiness from the two opposing perspectives of hedonism and eudaimonism. The hedonistic approach prioritizes maximizing tremendous pleasures in life. Individuals must have integrity, honesty, do morally correct things, and undertake tasks that are worth doing in the eudaimonic perspective, on the other side.

A vast majority of university employees are the non-academic staff, and these employees make substantial contribution to a university's performance (Abdullah et al., 2021) and these staff are involved in numerous tasks including administrative, finance, assisting students in critical support and operational services, research, and community engagement projects. Carrying out these obligations especially during the Covid-19 pandemic necessitates a lot of perseverance and motivation on the part of both employers and employees (Qurnain, 2022). During the pandemic, potentially traumatic issues are expected to arise (De Clercq & Pereira, 2022), thus it is critical that university administrators pay close attention to the well-being of non-academic employees to ensure that everyone is in the correct frame of mind to contribute to the nation and society.

The literature on employee well-being has postulated a multitude of domains that play an important role to measure the concept of well-being and this is often categorized from three perspectives, namely, the management level, the departmental level, and the individual level (D'Silva et al., 2021). In the university context, the domain image & reputation has a major role in boosting employee well-being as the degree of loyalty tends to be higher when the perception of image & reputation is positive (Xia et al., 2022). Governance is frequently featured as the domain that contributes vastly to the well-being of public sector employees (Cárcaba et al., 2022) especially in the context of university as this would help to expedite the fast-paced working atmosphere that is essential in a university.

Another important domain to enrich human well-being is ecosystem (Leviston et al., 2018) as the creation of a good work ecosystem as it can drastically impact employees' attitudes, motivations at work, and performance. Effective communication between the management and employees, and across the different organizational structures also play an important position to improve the well-being of employees (Uwandu et al., 2022). Fair and equitable workload is deemed another domain that has a great influence on employee well-being as employees experience better job satisfaction if there is a positive workload balance (Birhanu

et al., 2018). Besides, recognizing the talents and expertise of employees are also important to boost the psychological aspect of employees (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020). Another equally important domain is having great infrastructure facilities for the well-being of employees especially non-academic university staff because many of these staff are employed to safeguard maintenance of university facilities such as computers, machineries, and utilities.

Career development is another essential area of concentration for the university's well-being, as it is thought that this will boost staff self-efficacy (Ismayilova & Klassen, 2019). Organizations need to focus also on staff welfare as it creates efficient, healthy, loyal, and satisfied labor force for the organization (Adeniji et al., 2021). Other possible elements that contribute to holistic well-being are work ethics, spirituality, and the nature of work, which are all closely related at the individual level (Handayani & Kurniawan, 2022; Riley, 2021).

There are currently ample studies that have looked at the level of well-being in various communities, such as the disadvantaged, adolescents, and rural people. However, there is a dire need to enhance studies examining the well-being among non-academic university employees. Previously, studies on university personnel have concentrated on their degree of happiness Mohd et al (2018); Omar et al (2018), and even when there have been studies on well-being, these studies have primarily focused on students. As a result, a study of non-academic university employee well-being is timely, given that we are currently in a moment of uncertainty during this pandemic. What will be the impact on the well-being of a Malaysian public institution that is rapidly growing and acknowledged as a research university? The study aims to unveil the status of well-being among non-academic university staff in this particular context.

## Method

The study employed a quantitative methodology in which a survey was designed as a mechanism to collect data. Based on the evidence provided, the population of this study encompasses around 6,000 non-academic staff from a research university in Malaysia. Using the Raosoft sample size calculator, with a margin error of 5% and the confidence level of 95%, the minimum number of samples required is 362. However, a total of 1,759 respondents took part in this study, and the representation is 29.3% of the total population. Previous literature as well as the nominal group technique among the stakeholders were used to develop the instrument of the study. Eventually, there were 15 domains to measure non-academic staff well-being, namely, (a) governance, (b) career development, (c) work ethics, (d) workload, (e) infrastructure facilities, (f) nature of work, (g) communications, (h) attitude, (i) staff welfare, (j) image & reputation, (k) networking, (l) work ecosystem, (m) expertise, (n) work-family balance, (o) spirituality. Prior to actual data collection, a pilot-test was conducted with 20 respondents and all fifteen domains scored a Cronbach alpha of greater than .7 and this demonstrates the soundness and reliability of the instrument. The data collection technique used was via an online survey with much help being rendered by the university's Registrar's Office. Both SPSS and MS Excel software were used in the process of analysing the data.

## Results

Table 1 shows the demographic profile of the non-academic university staff that participated in this study. Analysis by the type of workforce revealed that 28.5% of respondents belong to the Management & Professional group and 71.5% belong to the Support group. By gender, females accounted for the most at 61.4% and males 38.6%. A breakdown of the age groups displayed that 48.3% of the respondents belong to the age group between 31-40 years old,

24.8% between 41-50 years, 17.3% over 50 years, and 17.3% under 30 years. As for the type of work, 90.8% of workers were regular workers, and only 9.2% were contract workers. For health reasons, 29.8% of employees were diagnosed with one or more non-communicable diseases and 70.2% were disease-free.

Table 1  
*Demographic Profile of University Non-Academic Staff*

	Frequency	Percentage
Staff type		
Management & Professional	502	28.5
Support	1,257	71.5
Gender		
Male	679	38.6
Female	1,080	61.4
Age (years old)		
30 and below	304	17.3
Between 31 – 40	850	48.3
Between 41 to 50	437	24.8
Above 50	168	9.6
Work Status		
Permanent	1,597	90.8
Contract	162	9.2
Sickness		
None	1,234	70.2
Non-communicable disease	525	29.8

Table 2 shows the overall well-being index of non-academic university staff during the COVID-19 pandemic season. Looking at the current data, the score is 77.2%, meaning that it is moderate. In addition, three main domains were identified: work ethics, image and reputation, and work-family balance. On the other hand, the lower three domains were work ecosystem, career development, and workload.

Table 2

*Overall Well-being Index Score for Non-Academic Staff*

Domain	Mean	Score
Work Ethics	4.60	90.0
Image & Reputation	4.49	87.3
Work-Family Balance	4.44	86.0
Spirituality	4.27	81.8
Attitude	4.25	81.2
Expertise	4.21	80.2
Networking	4.09	77.2
Communication	4.07	76.8
Infrastructure Facilities	4.00	75.0
Staff Welfare	3.98	74.5
Governance	3.87	71.8
Nature of Work	3.87	71.8
Workload	3.84	71.0
Career Development	3.74	68.5
Work Ecosystem	3.59	64.8
Overall		77.2

The following analysis focuses on the three domains that have contributed most to the well-being of non-academic university staff. The most important domain was work ethics consisted of five. The top three items for this domain were: “I feel my work done now is one of the mandates and responsibilities in my life” (M=4.68; SD=.53), followed by “I believe a well-done task reflects professionalism in work” (M=4.67; SD=.74), and “Honesty, continuous effort and integrity are the key elements to success in my working life” (M=4.67; SD=.54)

Table 3

*Work Ethics*

Item	Mean	SD
I feel my work done now is one of the mandates and responsibilities in my life	4.6	0.53
I believe a well-done task reflects professionalism in work	4.67	0.54
Honesty, continuous effort and integrity are the key elements to success in my working life	4.67	0.54
I feel it is important for me to adhere to my daily working hours in line with my salary	4.61	0.59
I am early at work unless faced with emergencies	4.55	0.60
I believe my work provides the source for achieving the perfection in my life	4.44	0.67

The domain Image & Reputation was the second-best domain that contributed to the well-being of non-university staff. As shown in Table 4, the three items that had the highest mean for the domain Image & Reputation were “I am proud to work for this university because it is

known by the community" (Mean=4.52; SD=.65), "I am proud to work for this university because it is an innovative university" (Mean=4.51; SD=.6586), and "I am proud to work for this university as it has always improved in the ranking of the world's best universities (Mean=4.49; SD=.67)

Table 4  
*Image & Reputation*

<b>Item</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>
I am proud to work for this university because it is known by the community	4.52	.65
I am proud to work for this university because it is an innovative university	4.51	.65
I am proud to work for this university as it has always improved in the ranking of the world's best universities	4.49	.67
I am proud to work for this university because it has a brand at the world level	4.49	.66
I am proud to work for this university because it has successfully explored new knowledge	4.48	.66
I am proud to work for this university because it has a good image	4.45	.70

The study also found that work-family balance had a significant impact on improving the well-being of non-academic university employees. There was a total of four items for this domain and the majority of the non-academic employees' state that balancing between work and family commitments is pertinent as it plays a major role in reducing stress and conflict in the workplace. The high mean scores obtained for this domain signifies the importance of balancing career and family obligations to level up non-academic staff to achieve higher well-being.

Table 5  
*Work-Family Balance*

<b>Item</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>
I always ensure a balance between family-career	4.37	0.71
Family-career balance reduces stress and conflict in the workplace	4.46	0.69
Employer and colleague support help to balance family-career	4.28	0.86
A dynamic and sustainable work environment help create a balance between family-careers	4.40	0.87

The results of the three lowest domains of the well-being index among non-academic university workers are presented below. Work ecosystem was the domain with the lowest score. There were ten items for this domain. The non-academic personnel scored the lowest on these three items, according to the survey, namely, 'I am surrounded by people who are aggressive when dealing with me" (Mean=2.88; SD=1.06), "I always need to work overtime more than I expected" (Mean=2.93; SD=1.16), and "I always receive sudden tasks that puts me under intense pressure" (Mean=3.10; SD=1.07).

Table 6

*Work Ecosystem*

<b>Item</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>
I can learn new things in my job	4.34	.69
I am very enthusiastic when performing my duties	4.26	.74
My work tasks give me satisfaction	4.14	.78
I can discuss with my supervisor about problems I face in my daily work assignments	4.11	.86
The Management treats me fairly	3.97	.87
There are adequate number of staff in my department for us to complete our daily tasks	3.43	1.12
I must process much information in my daily tasks	3.41	1.02
I always receive sudden tasks that puts me under intense pressure	3.10	1.07
I always need to work overtime more than I expected	2.93	1.16
I am surrounded by people who are aggressive when dealing with me	2.88	1.06

Career development was the domain with the second lowest score. There were eight items in this domain (Table 7), and the study found that the respondents gave the lowest mean scores for these items: “I am happy with the promotion system at my university” (M=3.35; SD=1.07), “My university provides mentoring programmes to develop staff careers” (M=3.51; SD=.98), and “I am given the opportunity to achieve my career goals” (M=3.68; SD=.94).

Table 7

*Career Development*

<b>Item</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>
I am satisfied with the current roles and responsibilities at my department	4.00	.86
I am excited about the courses provided for me to be more efficiently in carrying out tasks	3.95	.84
My department distributes tasks according to the skills I possess	3.91	.87
My university has a systematic career development programme in developing staff skills	3.78	.88
My university provides funding for individual staff training	3.73	.95
I am given the opportunity to achieve my career goals	3.68	.94
My university provides mentoring programmes to develop staff careers	3.51	.98
I am happy with the promotion system in my university	3.35	1.07

The third lowest domain score was workload. Together there were six items to measure this domain and the items that scored the lowest was “I feel my workload did not increase as a result from working from home” (M=3.58; SD=1.12). This is not surprising as most employees including university non-academic staff are feeling the pressure working from home during this pandemic. Furthermore, the university non-academic staff also expressed the difficulties they face implementing the Quality Management System during this pandemic and this is the reason the item “I am satisfied that the implementation of the Quality Management System (MS ISO, ISMS, EMS) does not add extra burden in my work” obtained a lower mean score. University non-academic staff are also impacted by the imbalance of work distribution among colleagues as indicated by the lower mean score for the item “I am satisfied with I am satisfied with the balanced distribution of work given among colleagues” (M=3.77; SD=1.01).

Table 8

*Workload*

<b>Item</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>
I am glad that the work I am doing is now in line with my capabilities	4.11	.84
I am satisfied with the amount of work given to me	4.00	.88
I am satisfied with my department's Key Performance Index as it does not add additional burden on my workload	3.84	.89
I am satisfied with the balanced distribution of work given among colleagues	3.77	1.01
I am satisfied that the implementation of the Quality Management System (MS ISO, ISMS, EMS) does not add extra burden in my work	3.73	.97
I feel my workload did not increase as a result from working from home	3.58	1.12

**Conclusions**

The Covid-19 epidemic had posed great challenges to all spheres of the workforce including the non-academic university employees. Despite these obstacles, the findings revealed that the status of well-being among non-academic employees in this current study was 77.2 percent, which indicates a moderate level. In comparison the Times Higher Education Best University Workplace Survey in 2016 showed a score of 81% among university staff in United Kingdom (Grove, 2016), when there was no pandemic and with a different instrumentation. An interesting finding of this study is that the domains work ethics, image & reputation, and work-family balance all play significant role in the well-being of non-academic university workers. Work ethics probably obtained the highest score as non-academic staff perceive that being professional with the mandate given to them is important as they are receiving their wages even during the pandemic. Adhering to work ethics and values are pertinent for employees as according to (Jeske, 2022), it boosts well-being and productivity.

The second contributing domain to the well-being of non-academic university staff was identified as Image and Reputation. This result is not surprising given that universities seek to be the best in the world based on rankings. Non-academic workers in this study believe they will be happier if their university influences the global rankings, is innovative, and can explore new frontiers.

Work-family balance is undoubtedly one of the core elements attributing to the better well-being score among non-academic university workers. This study observed a substantial outcome, with work-family balance being the third most important contributing factor. Other recent studies have found similar results, with Gragnano et al (2020) stating that job satisfaction is centred on family, and Ipsen et al (2021) noting that working from home has more benefits due to increased work efficiency.

According to the study, the domain work ecosystem had the lowest score in terms of contributing to the well-being of non-academic university employees. The findings imply that when non-academic personnel are surrounded by unfriendly individuals who deal with them, their well-being is jeopardized. Non-academics also suffer from burnout when they are expected to work overtime that exceeds their expectations.

The second lowest-scoring domain was career development. According to the findings, universities should pay close attention to the current promotion system. We live in the digital age, and if an organization with which an employee is linked does not have a progressive



compensation system, there are countless opportunities for employees to perform other non-related tasks. As a result, the university's management must concentrate on developing a more creative reward and support structure to maintain employee loyalty. Employees' expected performance rises when organizations have a successful incentive system (Anwar & Abdullah, 2022). Based on the expectation theory, employers including university administrators should pay attention to providing adequate incentives and reward system to boost well-being among its' employees.

Non-academic university employees ranked workload third lowest in terms of well-being. It is only natural for non-academic employees to feel uneasy about working from home during this pandemic. There could be instances employees experiencing mental and physical problems because of working from home during the pandemic (Kaushik & Guha, 2021). As a result, university staff frequently complain that working from home has doubled their responsibilities. According to the findings, university administrators could be more lenient towards the employees by simplifying workflow procedures so that employees will be at ease to do their tasks.

Due to the outbreak, this study had several limitations, particularly in terms of data collection, which was done utilizing Google Forms. As a result, the respondents' responses are highly influenced by their mood, which is outside the research team's control. Furthermore, many of these participants are taking this online survey for the very first time, which could influence how they react to the items on the platform.

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