

Employee Engagement Among Distance Learning Students in Higher Education Institutions: A Role of Job Features, Working Conditions and Perceived Support

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Abstract: Employee engagement has become a significant organizational concern in recent years and remains a top priority for employers in the globalized era. It refers to the level of commitment and participation that an employee has towards their organization and its core values. The challenging economic landscape in Malaysia during the MCO period has led many companies across various sectors to face the repercussions of employee disengagement, highlighting the need for scholarly research to develop strategies for maintaining employee engagement. Employee engagement fosters a positive mindset among staff towards their organization. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the connection between job characteristics, working environment, and perceived support on employee engagement among distance learning students in higher education institutions. A total of 115 students pursuing a bachelor's degree through distance learning at a higher education institution completed online questionnaires. The findings revealed a significant positive relationship between the working conditions and job characteristics as the two independent variables. However, the analysis indicated that organizational support does not exhibit a significant positive relationship with employee engagement in the context of distance learning students. This research underscores the benefits and inspires students, as well as leaders and managers across all industries in Malaysia, to effectively leverage their workforce's capabilities, commitment, and unrecognized talent, ultimately improving business performance in the future.

Keywords: *Employee Engagement, Job Features, Working Conditions, Perceived Support*

1. Introduction and Background

In today's globalized world, employee engagement has emerged as a crucial factor for many organizations. High levels of employee engagement in the workplace propel the organization or company toward accomplishing its mission, vision, and goals. From the viewpoint of employees, engagement with their organization is essential as it correlates with their motivation and productivity, which in turn affects the organization's results.

Employee engagement is about the emotional commitment of the employee to their organization's goals. The employees with a high level of engagement do not attend at workplace or work just to receive the rewards, promotion or paycheck, but this category of employees is working on behalf of the organization's goals as they care feeling and appreciate the way to organization operates. To ensure the organization at the right track in achieving the organizational goals, the engagement between employees and employers needs to be developed from time to time. As noted by Ayob & Nor (2019), numerous organizations are facing difficulties in the current economic environment, and fostering employee engagement is the sole strategy that can provide these organizations with a competitive advantage. Additionally, a decline in employee engagement can have a negative impact on productivity, customer service, and overall performance (Mansor & Hassan, 2023).

By the middle of 2020, a significant number of jobs were impacted by the unforeseen COVID-19 pandemic. Numerous companies faced challenges in retaining staff while enhancing work quality and organizational effectiveness. As noted by Eisenberger, Malanoe & Presson (2021), there has been a growing focus on employee engagement in recent years. Various organizations, businesses, researchers, and others have asserted that strong engagement with employees is a predictor of achieving the goals and objectives set by the organization. High levels of engagement are a key factor in why many employees choose to remain loyal to their organization.

In 2024, the Mercer Engagement Index on employee engagement in Malaysia indicated a drop from the prior year, with engagement levels decreasing to 76%. This figure is among the highest in the Asia Pacific region, which may pose challenges for businesses looking to grow and for overall economic development. Employees who are healthier and happier tend to be more productive, and greater employee engagement often correlates

with increased happiness and health. The Employee Engagement Index score for Malaysia highlights significant opportunities for improvement in how companies engage with their workforce and suggests there are numerous advantages to be gained by valuing human capital properly. The level of employee engagement greatly impacts various sectors. Employee disengagement can adversely affect organizations through increased turnover, decreased motivation, diminished performance, and a negative influence on revenue (Markos & Sridevi, 2020). Organizations incur losses when new hires leave shortly after joining, resulting in wasted resources, including time and money, spent on recruiting and training. Discontent at work is one reason why millennial employees experience strain in balancing work and life, as their expectations often go unmet (McCunn, 2019).

Based on the statement and the findings from earlier research, the researcher asserts that employee engagement is currently one of the significant challenges encountered by various organizations in Malaysia. This involves organizational hierarchy and has the greatest impact on employees as well as employers. As an employee also student in a business program, awareness of the factors affecting employee engagement is needed because from this awareness, employees can support the Human Resource department in ways to develop the greatest engagement between employers and employees. Support to Tyagi (2016), employee engagement is one of the key problems that all organizations try to maintain among their employees put their efforts 100% in their duties. The objectives of this research are outlined as follows: 1) To assess how job characteristics relate to employee engagement among students in distance learning programs. 2) To evaluate the connection between working environments and employee engagement among distance learning students. 3) To investigate the relationship between perceived support and employee engagement among distance learning students.

2. Literature Review

Employee Engagement

Emotional commitment from workers toward their organization in pursuit of its objectives can be termed as employee engagement (Mansoor & Hassan, 2016). When employees are motivated to carry out their tasks and find joy in their work, they are also more likely to persist for the good of the organization. Employee participation is vital for any organization. A study by Ayob & Nor (2019), recognized as one of the most important in the field of employee engagement, supports this notion. Research suggests that early academic investigations into employee engagement shed light on the importance of employee participation, particularly regarding the psychological states of employees who may feel mentally detached during their work (Rubel & Kee, 2023). Employee engagement can also be understood as the attentiveness of workers and their capacity to execute their duties efficiently (Kangure, 2023). Macey & Schneider (2018) identify three work-related aspects—energy, absorption, and commitment that are linked to employee engagement. Rather than concentrating solely on individual resources within the workplace, Khan's definition underscores the vital traits of work involvement, which should consider both job performance and psychological ties. Consistently, prior studies have shown a strong correlation between employee engagement and the success of the organization, affecting various factors such as employee performance, efficiency, productivity, attendance, retention, customer satisfaction, customer loyalty, and profitability (Sharma, 2019). Therefore, employers must learn how to attract and keep millennial employees by acknowledging and valuing their contributions and efforts, ensuring that the organization's values are deeply embedded in all practices, and offering channels for all employees to provide their opinions and feedback on relevant organizational issues.

Recent research emphasizes that employee engagement has gained significant importance in recent years, attracting the interest of many employers. Engagement plays a vital role in the success and growth of an organization. Studies have demonstrated a link between employee engagement and factors such as service quality, safety, retention, sales, profitability, and overall returns for shareholders (Simbolon, Madhakomala & Sentosa, 2020). Higher levels of employee engagement are likely to contribute to increased revenue and greater success for the organization (Mansor & Hassan, 2019). Furthermore, research suggests that when employers engage effectively with millennials and develop a better understanding of them in the workplace, it positively influences multiple organizational outcomes, such as improved productivity, reduced turnover rates, enhanced retention of skilled employees, a more encouraging work culture, strengthened trust between employers and employees, and increased motivation for employees to be present at work. In contrast, poor employee

engagement can have negative repercussions for the organization, including lower employee performance and motivation, higher turnover rates, difficulties in retaining talented personnel, and adverse effects on company revenue (Evelyn, Kilika & Muathe, 2019).

The Relationship Between Job Features and Employee Engagement

Mugo, Wario, and Odhiambo (2024) proposed that jobs with enhanced characteristics enable individuals to invest more of themselves into their work, leading to heightened engagement (Markos, 2020). Furthermore, improved job characteristics foster increased levels of employee commitment and involvement. The research conducted by Nagesh, Kulernur, and Shetty (2019) aimed to investigate the positive effects of job characteristics on employee engagement within State Corporations in Kenya. The results of this study offered valuable insights, demonstrating that certain job characteristics can enhance employee engagement in the workplace. This research analyzed specific sub-variables of job characteristics, including job autonomy, job significance, job performance, and job clarity. The researchers discovered that the components of job characteristics exhibit a positive and significant relationship with employee engagement.

In contrast, Nagesh, Kulenur & Shetty (2019) carried out a study that sought to investigate how job characteristics, organizational climate, job satisfaction, and employee engagement influence the organizational citizenship behavior of teachers in Thailand. Their results indicated that job characteristics directly affect employee engagement, job satisfaction, and organizational citizenship behavior, with a significance level of 0.05. Additionally, the researchers observed that their findings are consistent with those of McCunne & Gifford (2022), who also discovered that job characteristics exert a direct impact on employee engagement, as these characteristics were found to be closely associated with employee engagement within the organization. Thus, it is hypothesized that:

H1: Job features have a significantly positive relationship with employee engagement among distance learning students

The Relationship Between Working Conditions and Employee Engagement

Tyaqi (2019) found that the work environment has the most significant positive impact on employee engagement, followed by rewards and work-life balance. Moreover, many participants feel that the workplace environment is more crucial than having strong employee engagement. Additionally, the work environment should not only be supportive but also enable individuals to contribute their efforts to the organization freely. The study's outcomes confirmed their hypothesis, as all three independent variables (rewards, work-life balance, and work environment) demonstrated a positive and significant relationship with employee engagement in the workplace. Research by Simbolon, Madhakomala & Santoso (2020) focused on employee engagement at PT Taspen (Persero) headquarters in Jakarta, Indonesia, and indicated that the work environment directly and positively impacts employee engagement, concluding that an advantageous work environment elevates employee engagement levels. A study conducted by Nagesh et al. (2019) indicated a positive association between the work environment and employee engagement. The researchers highlighted the importance of improving and maintaining employee engagement by creating an optimal work environment and offering training and development opportunities for all organization members to achieve successful results. In contrast, findings from Sharma (2019) regarding non-academic staff at a university in Nigeria yielded different results. In this research, the work environment was not identified as a factor or predictor that influences employee engagement, as the nature of their roles and the university context did not necessitate a specific emphasis on this matter. Thus, it is hypothesized that:

H2: Working conditions have a significant positive relationship with employee engagement among distance learning students

The Relationship Between Perceived Support and Employee Engagement

Perceived Organizational Support (POS) plays a crucial role in influencing employee engagement (Markos & Sridevi, 2019). Supporting this, Rubel and Kee (2019) found similar results, highlighting a positive relationship and significance with employee engagement. The outcomes from both studies reinforce prior literature, confirming that support from the organization and supervisors is vital for employees to remain engaged in the organization in order to achieve both individual and organizational objectives (Simbolon, Madhakoma & Santosa, 2018).

As a result, Alvi, Abbasi, and Haider (2014) carried out research in the banking sector of Pakistan focusing on perceived organizational support (POS) and employee engagement, indicating that organizational support has a significant impact on employee engagement within the corporate setting. The researchers developed a single hypothesis to investigate the influence of perceived organizational support on employee engagement and suggested that employers in the banking sector should integrate the principle of perceived organizational support into their systems and processes to potentially improve employee engagement levels.

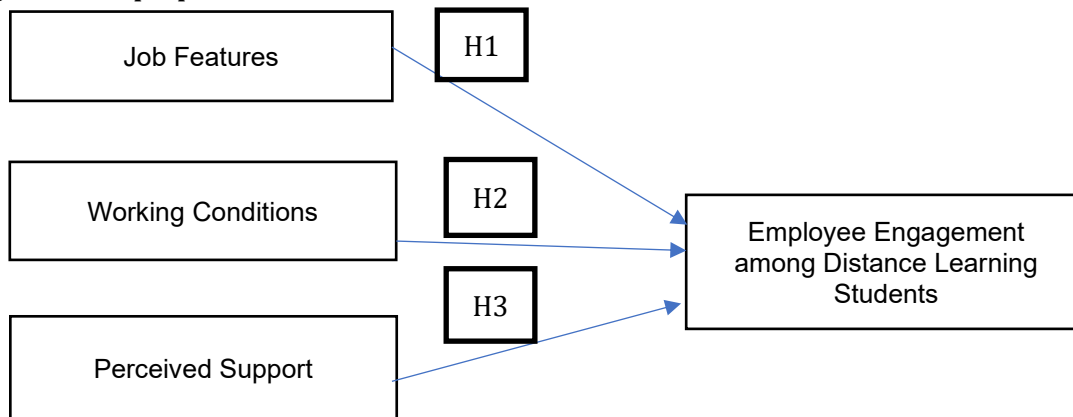
In their study, Dai & Qin (2019) found a strong link between perceived organizational support and employee engagement, contending that when employees perceive support from their organization, it cultivates a sense of belonging and inspires them to pursue the organization's goals. Furthermore, this perception is associated with increased employee engagement. Employees who believe their organization supports them are more inclined to trust that the organization will meet its future obligations, fostering a sense of responsibility to reciprocate by working hard for both tangible and intrinsic rewards, thereby reflecting the tenets of social exchange. Sharma (2019) explored the concept of "Social Exchange Theory," which has consistently served as a theoretical basis for research on organizational support and employee engagement; this theory highlights that social exchange relationships involve one individual offering a favor to another with the expectation of a corresponding return in the future.

H3: Perceived organizational support has a significantly positive relationship with employee engagement among distance learning students

Research Framework

The framework for this study is illustrated in Figure 1. The independent variables in this research consist of Job Features, Working Conditions, and Perceived Organizational Support. The dependent variable in this study is employee engagement. Additionally, the framework indicates the relationships relevant to the hypothesis being tested in the investigation.

Figure 1: The proposed research framework



3. Research Methodology

This study utilized a quantitative research method to investigate the relationship between job characteristics, working conditions, and perceived support concerning employee engagement. The sample included distance learning students in their capacities as employees, classified by their tenure: less than 11 months, 1-3 years, 4-6 years, 7-9 years, and 10 years or more. Following the guidelines established by Krejcie and Morgan (1970), the sample size was determined based on the overall population to make informed decisions about the sample. With a total population of 420 employees, the research sample comprised 115 individuals. Moreover, the instruments used in this study were sourced from reliable and validated resources found in existing literature. To measure employee engagement, the study included 8 items from Sundaray (2021). For assessing job characteristics, 6 items were taken from Baiquni & Lizar (2019). To analyze the work environment, 5 items were adapted from Sharma (2021), while items from McCunn & Gifford (2023) were employed to evaluate perceived organizational support. The questionnaire consisted of five sections, capturing the demographic

information of respondents, employee engagement, job characteristics, work environment, and perceived organizational support. A five-point Likert scale was used to measure participant responses, with ratings ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) for each statement. Additionally, a non-probability sampling design applying the quota sampling technique was utilized in this research. The researchers employed a structured questionnaire, ensuring uniformity in the questions posed to all participants.

4. Results

Table 1: Demographic Profile

VARIABLE	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
GENDER		
Males	30	24.4%
Females	85	69.1%
Total	115	100%
AGE		
20-24	22	17.9%
25-29	57	46.3%
30-34	24	19.5%
35-39	8	6.5%
40 years and above	4	3.3%
Total	115	100%
EDUCATION		
SPM	1	0.8%
Certificate	1	0.8%
STPM/DIPLOMA	69	56.1%
Bachelor Degree	44	35.8%
Total	115	100%
LENGTH OF SERVICES		
Below 11 months	10	8.1%
1-3 years	41	33.3%
4-6 years	28	22.8%
7-9 years	17	13.8%
10 years or more	19	15.4%
Total	115	100%

The total number of participants is 115. According to the results in Table 1, 24.4 percent of the respondents are male, while the remaining 69.1 percent are female. In terms of age, the largest group of respondents falls within the 25-29 years old category, representing 46.3 percent. Regarding educational background, 56.1 percent of respondents hold STPM/Diploma, making this the predominant group. Finally, in terms of length of service, most respondents fall into the category of 1-3 years of service.

Table 2: Reliability Analysis

Variable	No. of Items	Cronbach's Alpha	Results
Employee Engagement	8	0.865	Good
Job Features	6	0.817	Good
Work Environment	5	0.896	Good
Perceived Organizational Support	5	0.925	Excellent

As shown in Table 2, the results from the reliability assessment indicate that all four constructs have acceptable values, all above 0.6. This study conducted several reliability evaluations, including tests for internal

consistency. This evaluation measures the reliability of each variable. Table 2 presents an interpretation of reliability according to Cronbach's alpha, which was computed for 115 participants. The Cronbach's alpha score for employee engagement stands at 0.865, reflecting a good level of reliability. The score for job features is 0.817, which also indicates a positive outcome. The work environment received a Cronbach's alpha of 0.896, showcasing a strong result. Finally, perceived organizational support achieved a Cronbach's alpha of 0.925, signifying an outstanding result.

Table 3: Correlation Analysis

		Employee Engagement	Job Perceived	Work Environment	Perceived Organizational Support
Employee Engagement	Pearson				
	Correlation	1	0.606**	0.619**	0.486**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.000	0	0
	N	115	115	115	115
Job Perceived	Pearson				
	Correlation	0.606**	1	0.622**	0.605**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000		0.000	0
	N	115	115	115	115
Work Environment	Pearson				
	Correlation	0.619**	0.622**	1	0.735**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0	0.000		0
	N	115	115	115	115
Perceived Organizational Support	Pearson				
	Correlation	0.486**	0.605**	0.735**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0	0	0	
	N	115	115	115	115

As illustrated in Table 3, there is a notable moderate positive correlation between job characteristics and employee engagement ($r=0.606$, $p=0.000$, $p<0.05$). This indicates that as job characteristics improve, employee engagement tends to increase. Table 3 also shows a significant moderate positive correlation between the work environment and employee engagement ($r=0.619$, $p=0.000$, $p<0.05$). This suggests that enhancements in the work environment are associated with higher levels of employee engagement. Lastly, Table 3 reveals a significant moderate positive correlation between perceived organizational support and employee engagement ($r=0.486$, $p=0.000$, $p<0.05$).

Table 4: Regression Analysis

	Dependent Variable Usage
Independent variables (β)	
Job Perceived	0.373
Work Environment	0.426
Perceived Organizational Support	-0.054
F value	59.429
R ²	0.464
Adjusted R ²	0.45

According to the information presented in Table 4, the model's R^2 value is 0.46. This suggests that 46% of the differences in employee engagement can be attributed to variations in job perception, work environment, and perceived organizational support, while the remaining 54% is influenced by other factors. The model's F value

stands at 59.429 and is statistically significant ($p < 0.01$), indicating a good fit. Looking at the coefficients table, it is evident that the work environment exerts the greatest influence on employee engagement, accounting for 42.6%, which is significant ($\beta = 0.4261$, 0.000, $P < 0.05$). This finding is consistent with the results of Mohda, Shaha & Zailan (2020), who identified a positive, moderate, and significant link between the work environment and employee engagement, suggesting that enhancing the work environment elevates employee engagement levels. Following that, job perception contributes 37.3% to employee engagement and is also significant ($\beta = 0.373$, 0.000, $P < 0.05$). Research conducted by Mugo, Wano & Odhiambo (2024) demonstrated a positive, moderate, and significant relationship between job perception and employee engagement, implying that a more favorable view of one's job results in higher employee engagement. In contrast, perceived organizational support has a weak negative impact on employee engagement and is not significant ($\beta = -0.054$, $P = 0.617$, $P > 0.05$). Consequently, H3 is not supported. A study by Nagesh & Kulenur (2019) found that the connection between perceived organizational support and employee engagement is insignificant and exhibits a low positive correlation, suggesting that perceived organizational support does not significantly improve employee engagement.

Discussion

The findings of this research successfully achieved the outlined goals and thoroughly examined the research questions. All independent variables were evaluated, showing which ones had the greatest influence on employee engagement. The analysis indicated a positive correlation between job characteristics and employee engagement, with a β value of 0.373 and a significant p-value of 0.000 ($p < 0.05$). This suggests that as job characteristics are enhanced, employee engagement is expected to rise. Moreover, these findings align with studies by Mugo et al. (2024) and Baiquni and Lizar (2019), which highlighted the influence of job characteristics on employee engagement in the workplace. The results demonstrated a positive relationship between the work environment and employee engagement ($\beta 0.426$), supported by a statistically significant p-value ($p=0.000$, $p < 0.05$). This is consistent with research from Dash & Mohanty (2019), Mohda, Shah, and Zailan (2020), and Tyagi (2016), emphasizing the importance of a supportive and favorable work environment for employees. When employees are satisfied with their work environment, they tend to show higher engagement and perform their tasks more effectively. The analysis also uncovered a negative and statistically insignificant association between perceived organizational support and employee engagement ($\beta=-0.054$, $p=0.617$, $p > 0.05$). The study indicated that perceived organizational support does not correlate with employee engagement. Prior research by Ahmad & Hui (2020) indicated that while perceived organizational support did not enhance employee engagement, it did have a positive effect on organizational citizenship behavior. Consequently, many respondents believe they should not depend solely on organizational recognition to enhance engagement; instead, they are more motivated to advance their job performance and skills. According to the Multiple Regression analysis, job characteristics emerged as the variable with the most significant impact on employee engagement, with a β of 0.373 and a significant p-value of 0.000 ($p < 0.05$). This conclusion is reinforced by Bauquni & Lizar (2019), who suggested that meaningful work arises from job characteristics, and improved job characteristics contribute to greater emotional commitment and engagement within the organization.

5. Managerial Implications and Recommendations

The findings from this research are essential and greatly beneficial for students engaged in distance learning. Several pertinent suggestions can be implemented to enhance employee involvement for distance learning students. The initial suggestion is that flexible schedules empower distance learners. Flexible work options, such as remote positions, adjustable hours, or reduced workloads, allow distance learning students to better balance their academic and job responsibilities. This equilibrium results in increased motivation, decreased stress, and enhanced academic outcomes. Furthermore, support from employers, such as study leaves or adaptable scheduling, can bolster student retention, involvement, and long-term achievements in both career and education. Additionally, targeted professional development helps distance learners acquire industry-relevant skills, thereby improving their employability and career advancement. Tailored programs for specific roles or sectors, such as micro-credentials or modular training, ensure learning is practical, flexible, and aligned with real-world needs. This strategy boosts learner motivation, addresses skill gaps, and fortifies the link between academic success and career progress. Finally, providing structured academic and occupational support for distance students can enhance employee engagement among distance learners. Organized support systems like online tutoring, mentoring, time management training, and mental health resources are vital in

assisting distance learners to navigate isolation, stress, and workload difficulties. By addressing both academic and professional requirements, these supports increase learner engagement, improve performance, and raise retention and graduation rates.

Conclusion

To sum up, this research has effectively achieved its objectives by highlighting the significant and positive relationship between job perception and the work environment and their impact on employee engagement among distance learning students. The results suggest that both job perception and the work environment are vital in shaping employee engagement for those in distance learning programs. This indicates that improvements in job perception and the work environment lead to higher levels of engagement felt by distance learning students. The analysis revealed that organizational support was the only factor that did not show a meaningful positive link to employee engagement in this group. Consequently, the work environment stands out as the most influential aspect associated with employee engagement among distance learning students. Future research should investigate additional factors that might affect employee engagement to better understand the strongest and weakest correlations between various elements and engagement levels. Employee engagement is crucial for increasing productivity within organizations moving forward. Elevated levels of employee engagement are anticipated to produce favorable financial outcomes for the entity. Further studies should examine more thoroughly the interactions of existing variables that influence workplace employee engagement. Lastly, it is advisable to use varied methods for measurement, such as conducting interviews and focusing on specific organizations, to enhance study results. Additionally, incorporating moderating or mediating variables into the research design is recommended.

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