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## The Covid-19 Pandemic and its Effects on Well-being among University Staff in Malaysia

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### Abstract

Well-being among employees at different organizations had been greatly disrupted during the Covid-19 pandemic especially adapting working in a different setting leading to stress, depression, and work exhaustion. Till today there is little empirical studies carried out to determine the level of well-being among university employees. Thus, this study investigated the level of well-being among the university staff attached to a university in Malaysia. The survey instrument was developed using past literature. The final respondents for this study were 947 and it was obtained using the online platform. Overall, the findings showed that the well-being index stood at 74.16 indicating generally the staff are having a moderate well-being working in the university. The study suggests that to further enhance well-being among university staff emphasis should be placed to improve on career development, work load and governance.

**Keywords:** Happiness, Staff, University, Well-Being

### Background

The Covid-19 pandemic has affected many workforce and at the same time employees have to fulfill key performance index and undoubtedly this has resulted more employees facing occupational stress (Ismail, 2021). Of late, the influence of occupational stress is immense especially in agonizing mental ability of individuals besides affecting the thought process towards work and family commitments (Gorgenyi-Hegyes, 2021). Organizations will without any doubt feel the impact if the occupational stress among workers is not contained as it will cause employees to face problems pertaining to emotional health, organization loyalty, productivity, and so on. As a result, organizations need to pay much attention on the well-being of its workers by continuing pursuing innovative methods to motivate employees to enhance both career development as well as fulfilling a balanced family-work relationship (Saks, 2021).

Much has been written on the concepts and ideas on well-being including employee well-being at workplace. Originated from the time of Plato, well-being has been associated with

the notion of feeling happy or despair. Yassin (2014) had investigated much on the concept of community well-being and had stated that well-being could be measured in terms of objective as well as subjective well-being. There were also some thoughts of examining well-being from the two contradictory perspectives of hedonism and eudaimonic. In the hedonism approach optimizing great pleasures in life takes the centre stage. On the other hand, in the eudaimonic approach the focal points are individuals need to possess integrity, honesty, doing things morally right, and undertaking tasks that are worth doing.

University employees face several challenges during the Covid-19 pandemic as the majority of them are involved in teaching-learning using the online platform, administering research with numerous challenges, and contributing to society using novel mechanisms (Zalat et al., 2021). Carrying out these tasks during these challenging moments require great persistence and motivation among employers and employees. Potentially traumatic issues are bound to take place during the pandemic and thus it is timely that university administrators pay meaningful attention to the well-being of staff to ensure everyone is in the right state of mind to contribute to nation and society.

*Previous studies had identified a number of domains that greatly contribute towards well-being among communities including the university context. Generally, this had been categorized in the level of management, department and individual. Cerci and Dumludag (2019) state that it is pertinent for the university management to pay great importance on work-family balance as this is poised to achieve the equilibrium between work commitments and family responsibilities. Besides, university management should also focus on providing good governance to staff as this will expedite the fast-moving working environment required in a university. As we are in the era of a digital society, universities should ensure digitization and this is emphasized for the well-being of the university staff. Markowska and Wiklund (2020) state that since the nature of work in universities require high usage of computer tools, it is pertinent that these facilities are in top-notch conditions at the department levels.*

Career development is another important area of focus for well-being of university as it is believed that this will increase the self-efficacy of staff (Ismayilova & Klassen, 2019). Another important domain is the work load staff endured at the department level as it was identified that work overload negates the performance and well-being of university staff (Janib et al., 2021). Continuous communications among the different levels of a university structure have also an important role to enhance well-being among staff (Facchinetti & Siletti, 2021) as this will allow constant discussion on change and development. Other likely factors that contribute towards holistic well-being are closely related at the individual level and these include work ethics, spirituality, and nature of work (Riley, 2021).

Currently, there are adequate number of studies that examined the level of well-being across different communities such as the marginalized, youth and rural people. However, the study on the level of well-being among university staff is still lacking. Previously studies on university staff focused on the level of happiness (Mohd et al., 2018; Omar et al., 2018), and even if there were any studies on well-being it focused on students. Thus, a study on the level of well-being among university staff is timely since we are also in a period of uncertainty during this pandemic. What will the outcome be on the level of well-being of a public university that is fast-rising and recognized as a research university in a Malaysian setting? This study aims to unveil the level of well-being among university staff in this particular context.

## Methods

The research design for this study applies the quantitative methodology whereby a survey was developed to obtain data from the respondents. The population of this study consists of 6,000 staff working in a reputable university in Malaysia. Despite the minimum number of samples required is 363, the respondents for this study is 947. The research team took around two months to develop the instrument for this study based on previous literature. For the purpose of this article, the staff well-being is measured based on eleven domains, namely, (a) career development, (b) work ethics, (c) work load, (d) spirituality, (e) nature of work, (f) staff welfare, (g) image & reputation, (h) work-family balance, (i) governance, (j) facilities, and (k) communications. A pilot-test was conducted with 20 respondents and all eleven domains scored a Cronbach alpha of greater than .7 and this demonstrates the soundness and reliability of the instrument. An online survey was used as the mechanism for the data collection since during this pandemic most of the staff are working from home. Much helped was obtained from the university's administrators to ease the data collection process. The data was analysed using the SPSS and MS Excel software.

## Results

Table 1 displays the demographic profile of the respondents. The breakdown based on staff type shows that 28.1% of the respondents were academicians, 22.2% non-academicians, and 49.7% were support staff. In terms of gender, majority (60.1%) of the respondents were females and the balance of 39.9% were males. The analysis on the age groups shows 44.4% of the respondents were from the age group between 31-40 years old, 34.7% between 41-50 years old, and 13.1% above 50 years old. Only 7.8% respondents were aged 30 years and below. In terms of work status, 92.3% of the staff were permanent while only 7.7% were contract staff. The majority (43.0%) of the respondents were possessing a work experience between 5-15 years, followed by 38.5% having work experience more than 15 years. On the other hand, 18.5% of the respondents have a work experience of less than 5 years. In terms of health, 37.3% of the staff were diagnosed with at least one non-communicable disease, while 62.7% were free from any diseases.

**Table 1: Demographic factors of University Staff**

	Frequency	Percentage
Staff type		
Academician	266	28.1
Non-Academician	210	22.2
Support Staff	471	49.7
Gender		
Male	378	39.9
Female	569	60.1
Age (years old)		
30 and below	74	7.8
Between 31 – 40	420	44.4
Between 41 to 50	329	34.7
Above 50	124	13.1
Work Status		
Permanent	874	92.3
Contract	73	7.7
Work Experience (years)		
Less than 5	175	18.5
Between 5 to 15	407	43.0
More than 15	365	38.5
Sickness		
None	594	62.7
Non-communicable disease	353	37.3

Table 2 indicates the overall well-being index of university staff during the Covid-19 pandemic season. The current data shows that the score is at 74.6% implying it is at a moderate level. It was further identified that the three top domains were work ethics, work-family balance, and image & reputation. On the contrary, the three bottom domains were career development, work load, and governance.

**Table 2: Overall Well-being Index Score**

<b>Domain</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Score</b>
<b>Career Development</b>	<b>3.56</b>	<b>64.0</b>
<b>Work Ethics</b>	<b>4.61</b>	<b>90.3</b>
<b>Work Load</b>	<b>3.57</b>	<b>64.3</b>
<b>Spirituality</b>	<b>4.16</b>	<b>79.0</b>
<b>Nature of Work</b>	<b>4.00</b>	<b>75.0</b>
<b>Staff Welfare</b>	<b>3.86</b>	<b>71.5</b>
<b>Image &amp; Reputation</b>	<b>4.35</b>	<b>83.8</b>
<b>Work-Family Balance</b>	<b>4.38</b>	<b>84.5</b>
<b>Governance</b>	<b>3.63</b>	<b>65.8</b>
<b>Facilities</b>	<b>3.81</b>	<b>70.3</b>
<b>Communications</b>	<b>3.89</b>	<b>72.3</b>
<b>Overall</b>		<b>74.6</b>

The following analysis touches on the three domains that contributed most to the well-being of university staff. The top contributing domain was work ethics that had five items. Three items that scored the highest for this domain was "I feel my work done now is one of the mandates and responsibilities in my life" (M=4.70; SD=.62), followed by "I believe a well-done task reflects professionalism in work" (M=4.70; SD=.73), and "Honesty, continuous effort and integrity are the key elements to success in my working life" (M=4.68; SD=.85)

**Table 3: Work Ethics**

<b>Item</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>
<b>I feel my work done now is one of the mandates and responsibilities in my life</b>	<b>4.70</b>	<b>0.62</b>
<b>I believe my work provides the source for achieving the perfection in my life</b>	<b>4.42</b>	<b>0.72</b>
<b>Honesty, continuous effort and integrity are the key elements to success in my working life</b>	<b>4.68</b>	<b>0.85</b>
<b>I feel it is important for me to adhere to my daily working hours in line with my salary</b>	<b>4.61</b>	<b>0.64</b>
<b>I am early at work unless faced with emergencies</b>	<b>4.52</b>	<b>0.49</b>
<b>I believe a well-done task reflects professionalism in work</b>	<b>4.70</b>	<b>0.73</b>

The domain work-family balance came out the second top domain that contributed to the well-being index of the university staff. More precisely, it was identified that there were four items in this domain (Table 4) and it is interesting to note that the items "Family-career balance reduces stress and conflict in the workplace" and "A dynamic and sustainable work environment help create a balance between family-careers" had the highest mean scores indicating the importance of balancing career and family commitments to boost staff to attain a higher well-being.



**Table 4: Work-Family Balance**

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

The study also revealed that the image & reputation of a university had a great influence to boost the well-being of the staff. As being depicted in Table 5, in terms of image & reputation, the items that scored the highest mean were “I am proud to work for this university because it is known by the community” (Mean=4.42; SD=.81), and “I am proud to work for this university because it is an innovative university” (Mean=4.38; SD=.86).

**Table 5: Image & Reputation**

<b>Item</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>
<b>I am proud to work for this university because it is an innovative university</b>	<b>4.38</b>	<b>0.86</b>
<b>I am proud to work for this university because it has a good image</b>	<b>4.33</b>	<b>0.81</b>
<b>I am proud to work for this university because it has a brand at the world level</b>	<b>4.36</b>	<b>0.88</b>
<b>I am proud to work for this university because it is known by the community</b>	<b>4.42</b>	<b>0.81</b>
<b>I am proud to work for this university because it has successfully explored new knowledge</b>	<b>4.36</b>	<b>0.79</b>
<b>I am proud to work for this university as it has always improved in the ranking of the world's best universities</b>	<b>4.27</b>	<b>0.64</b>

The following is the results on the three lowest domains of the well-being index among university staff. The domain that attained the lowest score was career development. For this domain, there were seven items (Table 6), and the study showed that the respondents responded the lowest mean scores for the items “I am happy with the promotion system at my university” (M=3.06; SD=.87), “My university provides mentoring programmes to develop staff careers” (M=3.27; SD=.52), and “My university has a systematic career development programme in developing staff skills” (M=3.57; SD=.83).

**Table 6: Career Development**

<b>Item</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>
<b>My university has a systematic career development programme in developing staff skills</b>	<b>3.57</b>	<b>0.83</b>
<b>I am excited about the courses provided for me to be more efficiently in carrying out tasks</b>	<b>3.76</b>	<b>0.94</b>
<b>I am happy with the promotion system at my university</b>	<b>3.06</b>	<b>0.87</b>
<b>I am given the opportunity to achieve my career goals</b>	<b>3.52</b>	<b>0.93</b>
<b>I am satisfied with the current roles and responsibilities at my department</b>	<b>3.86</b>	<b>0.74</b>
<b>My department distributes tasks according to the skills I possess</b>	<b>3.72</b>	<b>0.81</b>
<b>My university provides mentoring programmes to develop staff careers</b>	<b>3.27</b>	<b>0.52</b>

Next, the second lowest domain was work load. 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=3.24; SD=.62). This is not surprising as most employees including university staff are feeling the pressure working from home during this pandemic. Furthermore, the university 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 staff are also impacted by the Key Performance Index score as indicated by the lower mean score for the item “I am satisfied with my department’s Key Performance Index as it does not add additional burden on my workload” (M=3.50; SD=.74)

**Table 7: Work Load**

<b>Item</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>
<b>I am satisfied with the amount of work given to me</b>	<b>3.80</b>	<b>0.88</b>
<b>I am glad that the work I am doing is now in line with my capabilities</b>	<b>3.95</b>	<b>0.95</b>
<b>I am satisfied with the balanced distribution of work given among colleagues</b>	<b>3.53</b>	<b>0.78</b>
<b>I am satisfied that the implementation of the Quality Management System (MS ISO, ISMS, EMS) does not add extra burden in my work</b>	<b>3.38</b>	<b>0.77</b>
<b>I am satisfied with my department’s Key Performance Index as it does not add additional burden on my workload</b>	<b>3.50</b>	<b>0.74</b>
<b>I feel my workload did not increase as a result from working from home</b>	<b>3.24</b>	<b>0.62</b>

The third lowest domain score was governance. For this domain, three items that obtained the lowest scores were “The staff recruitment system is efficient” (M=3.41, SD=.54), “The administrative is conducted in a consultative manner across all levels” (M=3.47; SD=.81), and “The administrative system responds quickly” (M=3.51; SD=.61).



**Table 8: Governance**

<b>Item</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>
<b>The university leadership has successfully explained its' goals and strategies to staff</b>	<b>3.87</b>	<b>0.88</b>
<b>The university's policies and regulations are easy to understand by staff</b>	<b>3.94</b>	<b>0.95</b>
<b>The university leadership is concerned about obtaining input from staff</b>	<b>3.66</b>	<b>0.72</b>
<b>The staff recruitment system is efficient</b>	<b>3.41</b>	<b>0.54</b>
<b>The administrative system responds quickly</b>	<b>3.51</b>	<b>0.61</b>
<b>The administrative is conducted in a consultative manner across all levels</b>	<b>3.47</b>	<b>0.81</b>
<b>Assessment system is fair and just</b>	<b>3.58</b>	<b>0.53</b>
<b>The salary I receive is fair</b>	<b>3.81</b>	<b>0.66</b>

### **Conclusions**

The Covid-19 pandemic had generated huge challenges for the well-being of university staff. Despite these challenges, the results of this study showed that the level of well-being stood at the score of 74.6% indicating 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.

The study had identified that the well-being of university staff is contributed mainly due to work ethics, work-family balance, and image & reputation. Work ethics is important during this time of pandemic as staff recognized the need to display professionalization in work since they are receiving monthly salary. The pandemic has indeed taught the university staff to continue with their work since this is a mandate entrusted to them. This notion is further expounded by Simon (2020) that stated that work ethics and values should be the cornerstone for humankind progress.

Undeniably, work-family balance is among the key factors that contribute to the higher score of well-being among university staff. Similar result was identified in this study whereby work-family balance is the second most contributing factor. Other recent studies also showed similar results whereby Gragnano et al (2020) mentioned that family is the centre for job satisfaction, and Ipsen et al (2021) stated that working from home brought more advantages as it had increased work efficiency.

Image and Reputation had been identified as the third contributing domain toward well-being of university staff. As universities strive to be the world-best based on rankings, this finding is not a surprise as staff believe they will experience a higher well-being if their university has an impact towards global rankings, able to be innovative, and possess the capacity to explore new knowledge.

On the other hand, the study showed that the domain career development had the lowest score in terms of contribution towards the well-being of university staff. Particularly, the results show that universities need to focus on the current practice of promotion system. We are living in this digital era and there are huge opportunities for employees to do other non-related tasks if the organization they are attached to does not have a progressive reward system. Hence, there is a great urgency for the management of the university to focus on developing a more innovative reward and support system to maintain the loyalty of

employees. Based on the expectancy theory, expected performance among employees will rise when organizations have an excellent reward system, and thus the management of universities need to focus on this if they plan to have a better employer retention strategy.

Work load had been identified as the second lowest score for well-being among university staff. During this pandemic, it is only natural for staff to feel some heat working from home. Shankar (2021) mentioned that working from home during this pandemic has caused employees to face mental and physical issues. Thus, it is normal for university staff to state that they perceive they are facing a heavier work load due to working from home. The findings show that the university administrators could reduce not-so important tasks such as complying to the quality management system since the staff have almost no or not much time to be at the university to do these tasks.

Governance is the following factor that could further be enhanced to uplift the level of well-being among university staff. In line with this, the study reveals that the staff recruitment system needs to be improved. Gopinath and Shibu (2014) had mentioned an effective staff recruitment system will ensure job satisfaction among staff. Thus, more effort should take place to ensure the right people are selected to fill up job vacancies. Consequently, this will enhance the well-being of university staff in the near future. There is also a dire need to promote communications between the administrators and staff as identified in this study. Since work is done remotely currently at one's own residence, university staff believe that more discussions should take place through digital platforms to discuss on pressing issues pertaining to work so that the spirit of comradeship could be further boosted. This concurs with what had been stated by Ribeiro et al., (2020) that call for greater psychological support in time of Covid-19 pandemic. If these efforts were taken, then it will have a greater impact to enhance well-being of university staff.

This study had some limitations especially in terms of data collection whereby due to the pandemic the avenue used for data collection is via the Google Forms. Thus, the response from the respondents is very much dependable on the mood of the respondents that was beyond the control of the research team. Moreover, many of these respondents are doing this online survey for the first time and this might have an effect when they answer the items using the online platform.

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