

Psychosocial Hazards of Job Content among Academics at Malaysian Private Research Focused Universities: Qualitative Study

Haniza Abdul Khalid¹, Ahmad Shahrul Nizam Isha², Marlia Puteh³, Al-Baraa Abdulrahman Al-Mekhlafi⁴

¹Department of Management and Humanities Universiti Teknologi PETRONAS Seri Iskandar, Perak, 32610, Malaysia, ²Department of Management and Humanities Universiti Teknologi PETRONAS Seri Iskandar, Perak, 32610, Malaysia, ³Fakulti Sains Sosial Dan Kemanusiaan Jalan Sultan Yahya Petra, 54100 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, ⁴Faculty of Leadership and Management, Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM), Nilai, Malaysia
Email: hanizarahmank@gmail.com, shahrul.nizam@utp.edu.my, marlia.kl@utm.my, albaraa901@gmail.com

To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBS/v14-i11/21214> DOI:10.6007/IJARBS/v14-i11/21214

Published Date: 08 November 2024

Abstract

Psychosocial hazards are negative experiences that people face when dealing with any possible factors that could risk their psychological, physiological, or social well-being, which might detrimentally affect their performance at work. As one of the growing countries that emphasises the development of its education, the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) has underlined its focus on research activities and set this as a quality standard. MOHE has also set the target that by 2025, Malaysian Higher Learning Institutes (HLIs) must rank their standard against the international rankings. To maintain the universities' performance against the set targets and standards, it has been identified that academics have been facing a lot of possible psychosocial hazards. Thus, this study explores the psychosocial hazards experienced by academics at Malaysian private research-focused universities when dealing with their job content. This study was established on the qualitative paradigm, garnering responses from seventeen academics employed by leading private research-focused universities in Malaysia using the interview. Data were analysed using the thematic analysis software Atlas.ti version 23 employing the main framework of psychosocial hazards of Cox & Griffith (2005). Based on the findings, five psychosocial hazards of work content were determined, including two identified as new emerging themes: workload & work pace, task design and work schedule, KPI requirements and research and consultancy. It was also revealed that the academics in this research did not experience stress when dealing with work equipment and facilities. Therefore, this study provided essential management implications for university governing bodies, policymakers, academics, and other societies in similar contexts.

Keywords: Psychosocial Hazards Experience, Academics Job Content, Private Research-Focused Universities, Qualitative Research

Introduction

Psychosocial hazards are factors in the workplace that can cause stress among employees, according to the International Labour Office (ILO, 2016), which could cause psychological or physical harm (Cox & Griffiths, 2005). Employees may be exposed to workplace emotional and mental health risks that could pose a significant threat to their psychological, physiological, and social well-being and negatively impact their work performance. According to ILO, psychosocial hazards are the workplace factors that can lead to stress. ILO and the World Health Organisation (WHO) defined psychosocial hazards as the employees' perception and experience based on their relationships between and among the work environment, job content, organisational setting, and workers' potential, needs, culture, personal extra-job factors that may, influence their health, work performance and job satisfaction (ILO, 1986, 2016). This manifests the understanding that a dynamic relationship exists between the work environment and human factors. This means that negative relationships between occupational conditions and human factors could cause emotional disturbances, behavioural problems, mental breakdown, or physical illness. Inversely, if the employees' working conditions and the human factors are balanced, they will feel more confident, motivated, competent, satisfied, and physically and mentally fit (Iavicoli et al., 2015; ILO, 2016; IPIECA, 2013; Kinman & Court, 2010; Leka et al., 2008; Lovelock, 2019a, 2019b; Werner & Springer, 2018; Wray & Kinman, 2020).

Numerous experts and studies have shown that exposure to psychosocial hazards can contribute to work-related Stress (Jacobs & Winslow, 2004; Kinman et al., 2006; WHO, 2003)), which may further harm an employee's psychological health (Lovelock, 2019a). Psychosocial hazards are the emotional and mental health risks that can arise in the workplace due to a variety of factors, including task design, workload, work pace, work schedule, latitude control, environment and equipment, organisational culture and function, interpersonal relationships at work, role in organisation, career development, and home-work (Cox & Griffiths, 2005; Leka et al., 2011; WHO, 2003). Therefore, there is a need to address this issue to reduce psychosocial risks and enhance the mental health of employees.

The Malaysian Education Blueprint (2015-2025) (Malaysia Ministry of Education, 2015) aims to improve access, quality, equity, and efficacy for Malaysia to attain global recognition and a higher international ranking. The Malaysian Ministry of Education (MoHE) focuses on the quality of graduates, institutions, and the overall education system to attain quality and advance towards international recognition. To meet its quality goals, Malaysia must also achieve a certain level of success in international university rankings (Malaysia Ministry of Education, 2015). Most of these rankings are determined by research output, specifically the number of articles published in high-impact journals and citations per faculty member. The greater the number of times other researchers cite an article, the higher the article's score will be, contributing to the academic's and institution's high-ranking performance. To be highly ranked internationally, all Malaysian universities must be research-driven and incorporate research aspirations into their primary agenda (Altbach, 2015; Komoo et al., 2007; Malaysia Ministry of Education, 2015; Sheriff, 2017). So, all these international requirements stress the academic staff in these universities.

The Ministry encourages participation in international rankings such as the Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) Ranking, the World University Ranking (WUR), and the Times Higher Education World University Ranking to ensure the quality objective is met. It is necessary to prove that a university fulfils a particular international standard to obtain a high position in these ranking systems. Most of Malaysia's public and private universities have positioned themselves to achieve the Ministry's goals by placing the university's direction and translating it further into the academics' Key Performance Index. All Malaysian universities focusing on research have performance requirements that reflect these objectives. All research-focused universities in Malaysia are required to lead innovation efforts, establish research outcomes of the highest calibre, contribute to influential and vital research publications, educate top students, and foster a productive and functional research environment (Malaysia Ministry of Education, 2015). These objectives are also part of private institutions' efforts to be internationally recognised and held to a high standard. Consequently, these private universities focusing on research have been highly active in research engagements and innovation initiatives.

Psychosocial hazards can have a substantial effect on academic performance in research universities. According to (the Malaysian Ministry of Health, 2017, 2019), psychosocial hazard is a significant problem among employees in Malaysia. Academics have been found to experience higher levels of psychological distress than employees in other fields (Kinman et al., 2006). Psychosocial hazards can adversely affect employee behaviours and organisational outcomes, including engagement, absenteeism, turnover, productivity, team cohesiveness, and team performance. These results can include both physical and mental health effects. Psychosocial risks have also been acknowledged to affect the outcomes of return to work by delaying healing from work-related illnesses and injuries. Task design, workload and work pace, work schedule, latitude control, environment and equipment, organisational culture and function, interpersonal relationships at work, role in organisation, career development, and home-work interface are considered psychosocial hazards (Cox & Griffiths, 2005; EU-OSHA, 2012; Kortum et al., 2011; WHO, 2003; OHS Australia, 2012) that could lead to adverse psychological, physical and social outcomes such as work-related stress, depression or burnout (Leka et al., 2008). In Malaysia, psychosocial hazards have also been reported to cause psychological, physiological, and social health risks to academics at Malaysian universities (Alias et al., 2020; Azlan et al., 2017; Isa & Palpanadan, 2020; Ismail & Arma, 2016; Janib et al., 2021; Kasinathan & Arokiasamy, 2019; M. Arbae et al., 2019; Ming et al., 2020; Mustapha & Zakaria, 2020; Ramli et al., 2018; Yeoh et al., 2017; Zulkifly et al., 2021). Still, the academic experience at private research-focused universities in Malaysia has not been thoroughly investigated. So, this qualitative study aims to comprehend and investigate the psychosocial hazards encountered by academics at two of Malaysia's leading private universities whose main direction and focus is research. Consequently, this aims to explore the severe issue of psychosocial hazards of job content among academics at Malaysian private research-focused universities. Therefore, this study aimed to investigate the following research question: What are the psychosocial hazards and experiences faced by academics dealing with their job content?

Research Framework

This study is based on the psychosocial hazard framework (Cox & Griffiths, 2005), which states that psychosocial hazards are aspects of the work environment that can potentially negatively impact an individual's psychological and social well-being. These hazards can arise from

various sources at work, whether from the content or context of the work. This framework contains ten psychosocial hazards, which can be divided into two main categories: job context psychosocial hazards in the organisation of work and labour relations (Cox, 1993; Cox & Griffiths, 2005), and job content (psychosocial hazards related to working conditions and work organisation) which include many dimensions such as workload & work pace, task design, work schedule, and environment & equipment. Therefore, to understand academics' unique challenges and issues of work content, this study explored their psychosocial hazards experiences when dealing with their job content at the university.

Motivation for this Study

This study is motivated by a profound recognition of the substantial impact psychosocial hazards exert on the well-being and performance of academic staff within Malaysia's research-focused universities, particularly in light of the standards set forth by the Malaysian Ministry of Education in the 2025 Malaysian Education Blueprint. These standards, which set the trajectory for public universities, notably public research universities (RU), underscore the imperative for academic institutions to meet rigorous benchmarks in research productivity and international recognition. Consequently, the pressure to achieve these standards places considerable strain on academics within private research-focused universities, exacerbating the prevalence of psychosocial hazards. This study fills a critical research gap by delving into the psychosocial hazards confronting academics in these institutions, offering valuable insights to bolster their well-being and optimise performance within this distinctive academic milieu.

Methods

Research Design

This study utilised qualitative research because it is inductive and enables the researcher to explore the meanings and insights of a specific scenario (MacFarlane & O'Reilly-De Brún, 2012). In this context, it is the meanings and insights of the academics' psychosocial hazards experience dealing with task design, workload, and work pace. This qualitative study employed a case-study approach with multiple cases because multiple data sources could provide detailed, empirical descriptions of the problem studied. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the psychosocial hazards faced by academics from two private research-focused universities in Malaysia.

Research Participants

This research identified two of the top twenty private universities in Malaysia that have been actively engaged in research activities and engagements as private research-focused universities, as seen in their world-ranking performance. In the Times Higher Education Ranking 2023 and the QS Ranking 2023, both universities were positioned below 1000, and these two universities have been actively participating in the Times Higher Education World Ranking and QS Ranking assessments since 2018. They are both classified as universities that regard research and research initiatives and aspirations as central to the university performance requirements established by the administrations of these two private universities to reflect the Malaysian Ministry of Education's (MoHE) standards. This report labels these universities as University A and University B.

This study chose academics from these two institutions using criterion and snowball sampling techniques. To ensure diversity of perspectives, avoid bias, increase validity, and enhance the generalisability of this research, samples were drawn from a wide range of participants to provide a more nuanced understanding of their experience with psychosocial hazards. For this study, all research samples were assigned pseudonyms to safeguard the identity of study participants by using a fictitious name or label instead of their real name in research reports and publications. This ensures that participants cannot be identified or linked to the information they provide, protecting their privacy and anonymity. The profile of the participants is detailed in Table 1.

Table 1

NO	PSEUDONYM	GENDE R	ACADEMIC DESIGNATIO N	FACULTY	MANAGERI AL POST	UNIVERSI TY	NO. OF YEARS AS ACADEMI C AT THE UNIVERSI TY	AGE
1	Taufiq	Male	Senior Lecturer	Engineering	NO	A	10-15	40-49
2	Alex	Male	Assoc. Prof.	Computer, IT	YES	A	20-25	40-49
3	Shukri	Male	Lecturer	Computer, IT	NO	A	15-20	40-49
4	Kay	Female	Lecturer	Social Sci, Applied Sci	YES	A	15-20	40-49
5	Rose	Female	Assoc. Prof.	Engineering	YES	A	20-25	40-49
6	Naimah	Female	Lecturer	Social Sci, Applied Sci	NO	A	less than 10	30-39
7	Patrick	Male	Senior Lecturer	Engineering	NO	A	less than 10	40-49
8	Imran	Male	Assoc. Prof.	Engineering	YES	A	20-25	50-59
9	Sophie	Female	Lecturer	Engineering	NO	A	less than 10	30-39
10	Mimi	Female	Senior Lecturer	Engineering	NO	A	less than 10	30-39
11	Jess	Female	Assoc. Prof.	Engineering	YES	B	20-25	40-49
12	Latifah	Female	Senior Lecturer	Computer, IT	NO	B	10-15	30-39
13	Chee	Female	Assoc. Prof.	Engineering	YES	B	15-20	40-49
14	Kelly	Female	Lecturer	Engineering	NO	B	15-20	30-39
15	Reen	Female	Senior Lecturer	Computer, IT	YES	B	20-25	40-49
16	Dave	Male	Senior Lecturer	Computer, IT	YES	B	20-25	40-49
17	Mia	Female	Senior Lecturer	Social Sci, Applied Sci	YES	B	15-20	40-49

MANAGERIAL POST: DEAN/ DEPUTY DEAN/ HEAD OF DEPARTMENT/ DIRECTOR/ COORDINATOR

Participants’ Demographic Profile

The criterion sampling techniques selected the participants predetermined specific inclusion and exclusion criteria (Ames et al., 2019; Suri, 2011). By having specific criteria set in determining the participants, this technique enabled the researchers to gather a comprehensive understanding of the investigated phenomenon (Suri, 2011), which, in this

case, was the experience of psychosocial hazards among academics. The inclusion criteria when choosing the samples are specified in Table 2.

Table 2

Inclusion Criteria of the Participants

No.	Inclusion Criteria
1	Participants must be affiliated with specifically identified research-focused universities: University A and University B.
2	Participants must have a minimum tenure of three consecutive years at their respective universities.
3	Participants must have undergone at least two performance appraisals during their tenure at the current university.

Semi-Structured Interview

To explore the academics' psychosocial hazards experience, the researchers employed in-depth, standardised, open-ended interviews to collect the data from the academic sample (Dudwick et al., 2006). This type of interview was engaged to avoid bias, as (Gall et al., 2003) suggested, and to allow participants to provide comprehensive viewpoints and information. During the session, the researchers also had the opportunity to ask probing questions and share comments as a way of following up. This research carried out a pilot test that involved two participants from one of the universities in this study. An interview protocol was prepared and verified by three experts from the fields of psychology, education, and organisational behaviour before the pilot test and first interview session took place. In this research, 17 email interview invitations were sent to potential respondents from University A and University B. From all 17 participants, three were interviewed physically face-to-face, and the other 14 were interviewed via the Microsoft Teams platform. All interview sessions were recorded. Each interview session took one to two hours, and all the audiovisual recordings were systematically stored in the researchers' safekeeping using the Atlas.ti software.

Before the data collection phase, a pilot test was conducted in January 2022 with two samples. This preliminary step was crucial to refine the interview techniques and questions, ensuring they were clear, effective, and capable of eliciting the necessary information. The pilot test allowed the researchers to test the technical aspects of the interviews, thus preparing the research for the actual data collection phase, which took place in March 2022 with the first sample (Taufiq), marking the beginning of an extensive and informative journey of data collection of this research. The final interview (Sample 17) was conducted in October 2022, concluding this research phase. This timeline illustrates the extensive period over which the data was gathered, reflecting the depth and breadth of the research conducted.

Ethical Issues

Psychosocial hazards have always been a sensitive issue to be shared and discussed publicly, especially if employees are asked to share their experiences at the workplace. The researchers anticipated that the participants involved in this study may have reservations about divulging such sensitive information related to their workplace. To protect the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants, their names and identities were not disclosed throughout the process of data collection, analysis, and reporting of the study

findings (Mohd Arifin, 2018). This research also maintained a high level of data and confidentiality protection by obtaining ethical approval from the participants before the interview (Fleming & Zegwaard, 2018). According to Mohd Arifin (2018), this is important because participants must be comfortable and believe their identity is protected. Therefore, it is paramount for the researchers to obtain informed consent (Resnik, 1998) from the participants before the interview session takes place. All participants were given an Explanatory Statement and an Informed Consent form to verify their agreement to participate in the research.

The researchers meticulously carried out the process of obtaining informed consent for the research. Each participant, totalling 17 in number, was individually approached through personalised email communications. This approach was designed to ensure that each participant was fully aware of and comfortable with the research details and their involvement. Initially, an explanatory statement was provided to all participants. This document comprehensively outlined the nature and scope of the research, ensuring transparency and clarity. It aimed to equip the participants with all the necessary information to make an informed decision about their participation. Following this, a consent form was presented to the participants. This form was a crucial element of the process, serving as a formal acknowledgement of their willingness to be part of the study. It detailed the participant's rights, the voluntary nature of their involvement, and the confidentiality measures to protect their privacy. Participants had the convenience of submitting the consent form through two digital means: either via email or through a Google Form link provided by the researcher. This dual-channel approach was adopted to accommodate the participants' preferences and ease of access. Upon agreeing to be interviewed, all participants promptly completed and returned the consent form using one of the provided methods. This unanimous response indicated a collective willingness to contribute to the research, with each participant actively and knowingly participating in the study. The researcher ensured that all ethical standards were rigorously followed throughout this process, prioritising the participants' autonomy and understanding at every stage. In this research, each participant was given a pseudonym to protect privacy and confidentiality and maintain the integrity of the study. This pseudonym was also used to label the transcription and other documents linked to each participant when transcribing the data. To avoid breaching confidentiality, a master list of each sample name and the pseudonym assigned to them was kept discreetly only for the researcher's reference (Stuckey, 2014). The sample's name and other identifiable variables such as workplace, place of birth, profession, or any name used in the document were also removed to ensure anonymity in the transcript (MacLean et al., 2004). This study was conducted according to the ethical committee guidelines of Universiti Teknologi PETRONAS, Department of Management and Humanities (number: YUTP-015LC0-358).

Data Management and Analysis Tool

All the data collected from academicians were analysed and interpreted according to identified themes or codes (Creswell et al., 2007). The themes or the codes comprised prevalent and consistent phrases, expressions, or ideas gathered from the interviews (Kvale, 2007). Before the data were analysed, the interview transcripts were sent to each participant for member checking so they could attest to the data's validity and accuracy.

The data were then uploaded to a qualitative data analysis software program, ATLAS.ti V23.0.1. The related codes based on the psychosocial hazards framework (Cox & Griffiths, 2005) were gathered and grouped in a structured and systematic way accordingly. The stressful experiences based on psychosocial hazards other than the ones stipulated in the (Cox & Griffiths, 2005) framework were labelled as new emerging themes.

Results

According to the framework of Cox & Griffiths (2005), there are four potential psychosocial hazards of job content that could cause stress among employees, namely:

1. Workload & Work Pace
2. Task Design
3. Work Equipment & Facilities
4. Work Schedule

Based on the results of this research, the academics from these two universities experienced only three psychosocial hazards of job content from this framework. These academics did not perceive work equipment and facilities as psychosocial hazards to them (see Figure 1). This shows that the participants from both private universities did not experience stress when dealing with work equipment and facilities at their universities. The following section will detail the findings according to each psychosocial hazard.

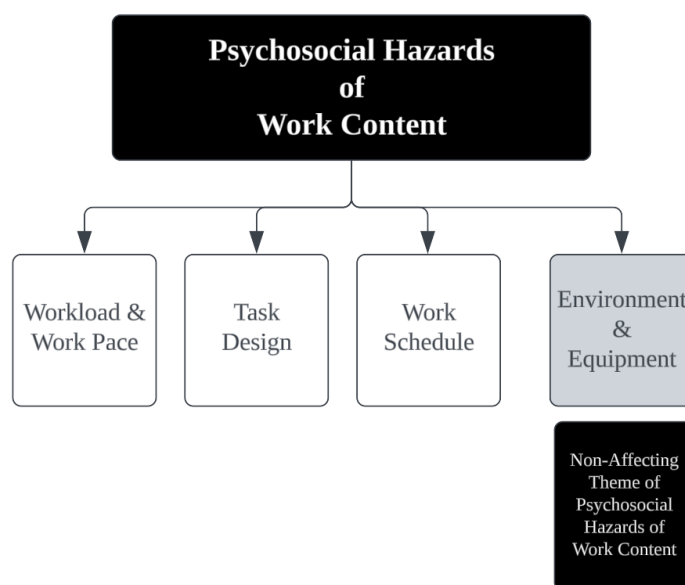


Figure 1: Psychosocial Hazards of Work Content

Theme 1: Workload & Work Pace

Workload and work pace were some of the gravest psychosocial hazards that the academics from University A and University B experienced when dealing with job content. The participants agreed that their workload and work pace were overwhelming, and sometimes, it was difficult for them to prioritise the work entrusted to them. Taufiq was very disappointed with how his university managed the workload calculation in research, publication, consultancy and teaching. Taufiq shared such overwhelming responsibilities in his quote below:

“If you want to teach, it becomes harder. If you want to do research, it becomes harder. If you want to do publication, it becomes harder, and if you want to do consultation, too. For consultancy, maybe this university facilitates, but in other areas, things have become very tedious. Like teaching, it’s the most tedious and challenging of all. My department has too many documents to prepare and a lot of documentation to be done. There are too many things to fulfil as an academic here, and things come one after another. It’s so overwhelming. When we are about to do one thing, another instruction comes in for us to fulfil. It is unfortunate for the academics; we could not even take a breather.”

Rose also felt the weight of an excessive amount of work piling up. Rose’s daily workload as an academic and director of one of the university’s research institutes was too demanding.

The workload is too heavy, with continuous academic work and a lot of administration work simultaneously, plus the teaching workload, the research requirements, and the research centre KPI. This is so tiring because we have to teach and fulfil other academic responsibilities, and at the same time, we struggle to teach every semester. When the workload is increased, I feel stressed. But if we are still like this, with many workloads, stress! Stress! Stress! It’s too much work and a heavy workload. With this heavy workload, I cannot focus on my work.

Rose elaborated that her workload continued to increase. She also believed that some of the assigned tasks were unnecessary and, at times, redundant, which occupied a great deal of her time when she could have fulfilled her responsibilities as a researcher. She elaborated on her disappointment below:

For example, in a master’s programme, we are asked to create SIM (Self-Instructional Materials) so that the master’s students don’t rely 100% on academics. Yes, we do have graduate students to assist us. Still, I think the management could always declare our materials on our existing postgraduate Moodle platform as SIM because all materials have been prepared for that purpose, too (teaching-learning); just convert whatever that we have on our Moodle platform to SIM and academics can put their efforts into improving their Moodle platforms from time to time for example, perhaps making it more interactive, adding up more materials. That, to me, is sufficient. Why do we need the additional SIM? As academics, we must do a lot of research, reading, and all.

Theme 2: Task Design

As one of the Heads of the Department, Fina believed that some academics were not appropriately positioned within the organisation and that their talents and strengths were not being fully utilised. According to Fina, this could hinder academic career advancement and affect talent development at the university.

It’s common for a university governed by a parent company where sometimes instructions from the top come ad hoc, and they want us to fulfil and complete the tasks immediately (they gave us today; they want it to be completed by today). Talent management at this university is not well managed, such as placing academics in non-academic departments (HR, finance, etc.). We would be asked to hold managerial positions unrelated to academia, burdening the lecturers because they must also fulfil the academics’ KPI. To me, this is a waste of talent, and it leads to a different career pathway. We worry that this might be unjust to the

lecturer (aniaya). Sometimes, consultancy work needed certain areas of expertise, which happened in the area of some lecturers who held managerial posts in a non-academic department, and I could not get them on board because they were also busy with their work. If we could properly manage this issue, it could suit the organisation and that particular person.

Some academics felt they had to do meaningless work, and their expertise and skills were not fully realised. Mimi termed this a ridiculous task and was fumingly mad when she said this:

At this university, the lecturers like me will be asked to do ridiculous tasks.

When dealing with deadlines, Patrick encountered unclear instructions and ambiguous responsibilities. He was stressed to keep up with the deadlines.

I have mixed feelings about this, though it's challenging for me. I have to create something for the students, but I feel stressed and nervous because I have deadlines to complete sometimes when I receive messages or emails giving me deadlines, especially if they send it today and want it back by tomorrow.

Theme 3: Work Schedule

A work schedule specifies the hours and days of the week an employee must perform. Rose occasionally felt that her work hours extended beyond the typical Monday-Friday, MCO-period weekday. Such an irregular work schedule is now an ongoing norm at her university. She reported that her superiors occasionally ordered her to complete specific weekend assignments.

Working here is too much, and I even received emails during the weekend asking us to fulfil specific tasks, especially during the MCO period, when there was no boundary. This kind of environment continues till now (after MCO). I had to understand why the other staff members had to contact us during the weekend because it was also urgent for them to fulfil the task there and then.

Fina echoed that she occasionally worked nights and weekends to complete her duties. Occasionally, numerous tasks could not be completed during regular office hours, or ad hoc tasks required her immediate attention. She sacrificed her evenings and weekends to complete the task when this occurred.

Our time is so packed, full of a lot of things to be done. Sometimes, we had to complete ad hoc tasks at night or during the weekend, and we still had to open our laptops and do our work to get things done. So, as an academic here, I don't think it's an 8-5 job. In general, working 8-5 is what we will try to observe to maintain work-life balance, but during peak time, working 8-5 alone cannot be done if we have to complete the tasks given to us (nights, weekends).

This research also identified two emerging themes of psychosocial hazards of work content faced by academics from private research-focused universities in Malaysia: KPI requirements and research and consultancy (Figure 2):

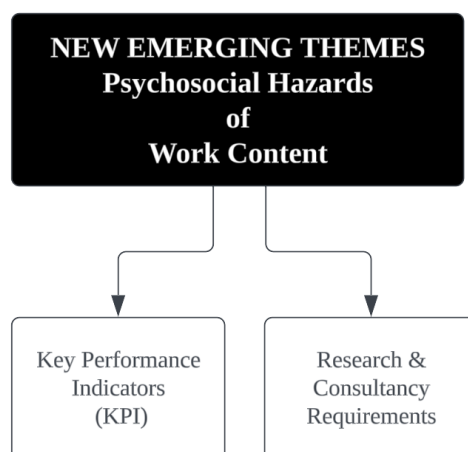


Figure 2: New Emerging Themes of Psychosocial Hazards of Work Content

Theme 4: Key Performance Index (KPI) Requirements

The academics' grievances dealing with the university's KPI requirements are shared in the following narratives:

During our interview, Taufiq revealed that his university's Key Performance Indicator (KPI) requirements were exceedingly demanding, challenging, and ultimately unachievable. He expressed his concerns about the high expectations placed upon him and his colleagues, which he believed were unrealistic given the resources and time available. Because to him:
... all the components in the KPI are demanding and challenging. Some are unachievable.

Even Alex expressed the same concern over this, as he clearly said:

Some parts of KPI are overwhelming at this university, and some are still conceivable. If you look at it, 70% of it has always been there in our KPI - business as usual. However, it has become more intense when they push too much on the research side. Our KPI is too much now, especially with the net contribution that we have to make.

Theme 5: Research and Consultancy

During our interview, Alex revealed a perceived unfairness and bias in the requirements placed upon academics, specifically favouring the Engineering and Technology streams. Alex expressed concerns that the expectations and standards set for performance evaluation appeared skewed in favour of these disciplines, potentially creating an imbalance and disadvantage for academics from the social science and humanity department. This perceived inequity in requirements could potentially impact opportunities for career advancement, research funding, and overall professional recognition, leading to frustration and a sense of inequality among academics in diverse disciplines.

They blanket everything; they make everybody's requirements the same. To me, they cannot make it the same for all the staff because when we do a consultancy job, we will get different kinds of values for other departments. For example, RM1000 for engineering is like RM1, but for the Social Science and humanities department, the value of RM1000 is like RM10,000 - so

they cannot blanket this requirement. The management cannot benchmark this value according to the engineering scale; if you do this, those from the Social Science & Humanities department will die.

On the other hand, Chee expressed frustration regarding the process and expectations surrounding consultancy work. She highlighted that while there were instances where other faculty members sought out her expertise, there were also times when she needed to search for opportunities actively. Most of the time, when there were opportunities, it was challenging to find time to do it.

Sometimes, there were opportunities for consultancy work, but we did not have time to do them.

All in all, there are five psychosocial hazard themes of work content revealed from this research: workload & work pace, task design and work schedule, KPI requirements and research and consultancy.

Discussion

Using a semi-structured interview, this study explored the psychological experience of academics from research-focused universities in Malaysia. Our findings summarised five themes under psychosocial hazards when dealing with job content: workload and work pace, task design and work schedule, KPI requirements and research and consultancy. The sections below discuss the findings based on the respective themes.

Workload & Work Pace

The findings from academics at Universities A and B, as well as the findings of (Houston et al., 2006; Janib et al., 2021), highlight a significant issue in the academic environment: the impact of excessive workloads and unreasonable deadlines on motivation, well-being, and the ability to manage and prioritise tasks effectively. Academics at Universities A and B experience feeling overwhelmed and having difficulty prioritising tasks, which is a common issue in high-pressure environments like academia. When faced with multiple responsibilities and tight deadlines, it becomes challenging to discern which tasks are most critical, leading to increased stress and decreased efficiency. Houston et al (2006), observed that a challenging workload can lead to a loss of motivation among academicians. When the workload is perceived as excessive or unreasonable, it can lead to overburdening feelings, diminishing an individual's motivation. This loss of motivation is not just about the quantity of work but also about the perceived lack of control and the inability to meet expectations, which can be demoralising. Janib et al. (2021) and The UCU Workload Survey Full Report (2016), pointed out that employees, including academics, could not be overburdened with work. There is a limit to the pace and intensity of work individuals can handle without adverse effects. Overburdening employees can lead to reduced performance, increased errors, and health issues. This is particularly concerning in academia as it can impact the quality of teaching and research.

Task Design

The Mentally Healthy Workplace Alliance (2022), reported the importance of smart task design in the workplace, which is highly relevant in any context. The contrast between the ideal situation proposed by The Mentally Healthy Workplace Alliance (2022), and the

experiences of the academics highlights several critical issues in task design and management.

Relevance of Tasks: The study shows that academics were burdened with tasks and responsibilities irrelevant to their primary roles. This misalignment can lead to decreased job satisfaction and a sense of injustice, as individuals feel their skills and expertise are underutilised or misused. In contrast, smart task design, as proposed by (Mentally Healthy Workplace Alliance, 2022), implies assigning tasks aligned with an individual's role, expertise, and career objectives. Academics experience fragmented assignments, which can be disruptive and hinder productivity. Intelligent task design emphasises a cohesive and integrated approach to task allocation, ensuring that each assignment aligns with a carefully constructed plan that advances the department's or organisation's overarching objectives.

Work Schedule

The role of work schedules in job design is a critical aspect that significantly influences various dimensions of an employee's life, including health, job satisfaction, and performance. The studies by Cox & Griffiths (2005), Golden & Wiens-Tuers (2005), and Hammer et al (2018), along with the observations about academics' work patterns, offer valuable insights into the impact of work schedules on employees. Golden & Wiens-Tuers (2005), found that employees who have greater control over their work schedules tend to report higher job satisfaction, which the academics in this research did not have. This control can manifest in flexible working hours, the ability to work remotely, or the freedom to adjust work times to suit personal needs. When employees feel they have control over their time, it often leads to a better work-life balance and improved mental health. Hammer et al (2018), also noted that greater control over work schedules correlated with higher work engagement and job performance levels. When rigid schedules do not overburden employees and have the autonomy to manage their time, they will likely be more engaged in their work. This autonomy can lead to a sense of ownership and responsibility, positively influencing performance. The reference to academics working longer total hours, including weekends and holidays, highlights the issue of work intensity and tension. This situation is particularly relevant in academic settings where the boundaries between work and personal time are often blurred. Such patterns can lead to increased stress and a feeling of being constantly 'on call', which can negatively impact mental health and overall well-being.

Key Performance Index (KPI) Requirements

These rigorous demands created immense pressure and burdens, impacting their well-being, work-life balance, and job satisfaction. For instance, Taufiq and Alex voiced their concern over the unrealistic expectations associated with the KPIs, specifically the emphasis on research activities. They contended that these strenuous demands were exerting significant stress and potentially contributed to burnout, aligning with existing research that associates with psychological strain (Kairuz et al., 2016). That study further illustrated that Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and research obligations imposed on academics in Higher Education foster a competitive environment.

Research and Consultancy

According to Chee, the annual targets for consultancy were steadily increasing, making it challenging to meet these goals consistently. Some years, the targets were achievable, while

others were excessively high. Moreover, being in the management role, she couldn't commit her time to getting involved in consultancy projects. Balancing her dual roles as an academic and deputy dean already posed significant challenges for Chee. However, the relentless pressure to achieve continuously rising targets magnified these challenges. To dedicate her time to meet the escalating demand in the consultancy became a pressing concern. This constant race against time and her other faculty obligations became a primary source of Chee's mounting frustrations, making her question her ability to fulfil her commitments and attain her desired achievements. This resonates with the findings of Chen et al (2022), and van Tienoven et al (2023), which revealed that time pressure in meeting academic tasks or research demands impacts individuals' well-being adversely.

Conclusion

This research provides a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the psychosocial hazards encountered by academics from University A and University B when dealing with job content, and their experiences were investigated using a qualitative methodology. The data were acquired through a semi-structured interview using the theory of (Cox & Griffiths, 2005). The findings revealed that academics at these two private research-focused universities experienced stressful events when dealing with job content related to three psychosocial hazard themes: workload and work pace, task design, and work schedule. It was also confirmed that the academics from both universities did not perceive that equipment and facilities could cause stress to them. This research will later investigate these academics' possible psychosocial hazards when dealing with their job context: organisational culture & function, role in the organisation, decision latitude, interpersonal relationships and home interface. This research will further investigate potential psychosocial hazards emerging themes of work context experienced by academics, their coping strategies and possible risks posed by their psychosocial hazard experiences. Ultimately, a mitigation strategy will be proposed for these academics to manage their psychosocial hazards in the workplace.

Contribution

This study contributes significantly to the existing body of knowledge by providing a comprehensive understanding of the psychosocial hazards faced by academics in Malaysian private research-focused universities. It introduces two new emerging themes—workload & work pace, task design and work schedule, KPI requirements, and research and consultancy—that have not been extensively explored in the context of Malaysian academics. These findings are particularly relevant given the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education's (MOHE) emphasis on research activities and the need for Malaysian Higher Learning Institutes (HLIs) to align with international standards by 2025. By identifying these psychosocial hazards, this research offers valuable insights into the factors that could potentially impact the performance and well-being of academics, thereby playing a crucial role in shaping policies and practices aimed at enhancing the working conditions and overall quality of life for academics in Malaysia. Furthermore, the study's findings have broader implications for other educational institutions and societies that face similar challenges, as it highlights the importance of addressing psychosocial hazards in the workplace to ensure the mental and physical health of employees. This research not only contributes to the theoretical understanding of psychosocial hazards but also provides practical implications for improving the work environment and performance of academics, thereby playing a pivotal role in the context of Malaysia's higher education sector and beyond.

Acknowledgement

This study and its publication were funded by the Murata Japan Foundation, with the support of Universiti Teknologi PETRONAS.

References

- Alias, A. N., Karuppiah, K., How, V., & Perumal, V. (2020). A systematic review for musculoskeletal disorders (MSDS) among school teachers in Malaysia. In *Research Journal of Recent Sciences ISSN* (Vol. 9, Issue 3). www.isca.me
- Altbach, P. G. (2015). What Counts for Academic Productivity in Research Universities? *International Higher Education*, 79, 6–7. <https://doi.org/10.6017/ihe.2015.79.5837>
- Ames, H., Glenton, C., & Lewin, S. (2019). Purposive sampling in a qualitative evidence synthesis: A worked example from a synthesis on parental perceptions of vaccination communication. *BMC Medical Research Methodology*, 19(1), 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12874-019-0665-4>
- Azlan, S., Rosnah, I., & Am, M. R. (2017). Systematic Review of Organization Stressors As Predictors for Job Stress and Burnout Among University Academicians in Malaysia. *International Journal of Public Health and Clinical Sciences*, 4(3), 35–46.
- Chen, Z., Lee, T., Yue, X., & Wang, J. (2022). How Time Pressure Matter University Faculty's Job Stress and Well-Being? The Perspective of the Job Demand Theory. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.902951>
- Cox, T. (1993). *Stress Research & Stress Management (HSE Report)*.
- Cox, T., & Griffiths, A. (2005). The nature and measurement of work-related stress: theory and practice. *Evaluation of Human Work*, 3rd Edition, 553–571. <http://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/9931/>
- Creswell, J. W., Hanson, W. E., Clark Plano, V. L., & Morales, A. (2007). Qualitative Research Designs: Selection and Implementation. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 35(2), 236–264. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011000006287390>
- Dudwick, N., Kuehnast, K., Jones, V. N., & Woolcock, M. (2006). Analyzing social capital in context: A guide to using qualitative methods and data. *The International Bank of Reconstruction and Development/ The World Bank*, May, 52.
- EU-OSHA. (2012). Annual Report 2012, China. In *Amnesty International*. <https://doi.org/10.2802/52513>
- Fleming, J., & Zegwaard, K. E. (2018). Methodologies, methods and ethical considerations for conducting research in work-integrated learning. *International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning*, 19(3), 205–213.
- Gall, M. D., Gall, J. P., & Borg, W. R. (2003). *Educational Research: An Introduction*. Allyn and Bacon. <https://books.google.com.my/books?id=E9DhnQEACAAJ>
- Golden, L., & Wiens-Tuers, B. (2005). Mandatory Overtime Work in the United States: Who, Where, and What? In *LABOR STUDIES JOURNAL* (Vol. 30, Issue 1).
- Hammer, J. H., Parent, M. C., & Spiker, D. A. (2018). Mental help seeking attitudes scale (MHSAS): Development, reliability, validity, and comparison with the ATSPPH-SF and IASMHS-PO. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 65(1), 74–85. <https://doi.org/10.1037/cou0000248>
- Houston, D., Meyer, L. H., & Paewai, S. (2006). Academic staff workloads and job satisfaction: Expectations and values in academe. In *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management* (Vol. 28, Issue 1, pp. 17–30). <https://doi.org/10.1080/13600800500283734>

- Iavicoli, S., Cesana, G., Dollard, M., Leka, S., & Sauter, S. L. (2015). Psychosocial Factors and Workers' Health and Safety. *BioMed Research International*, 2015. <https://doi.org/10.1155/2015/628749>
- ILO. (1986). *International Labour Organisation (ILO)*.
- ILO. (2016). Psychosocial risks, stress and violence. *Psychosocial Risks, Stress and Violence in the World of Work*, 8(1–2), 1–127.
- IPIECA. (2013). *Managing Psychosocial Risks on Expatriation in the Oil and Gas Industry*.
- Isa, K., & Palpanadan, S. T. (2020). Prevalence causes of stress and coping strategies among Malaysian university lecturers. *International Journal of Higher Education*, 9(5), 312–321. <https://doi.org/10.5430/ijhe.v9n5p312>
- Ismail, N. H., & Arma, N. (2016). Occupational Stress and Its Associated Factors Among Academician in a Research University, Malaysia. *Malaysian Journal of Public Health Medicine*, 16(1), 81–91. [http://www.mjphm.org.my/mjphm/journals/2016 - Volume 16 \(1\)/OCCUPATIONAL STRESS AND ITS ASSOCIATED FACTORS AMONG ACADEMICIAN IN A RESEARCH UNIVERSITY, MALAYSIA.pdf%0Ahttps://www.mjphm.org.my/mjphm/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&id=107&Itemid=1](http://www.mjphm.org.my/mjphm/journals/2016 - Volume 16 (1)/OCCUPATIONAL STRESS AND ITS ASSOCIATED FACTORS AMONG ACADEMICIAN IN A RESEARCH UNIVERSITY, MALAYSIA.pdf%0Ahttps://www.mjphm.org.my/mjphm/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&id=107&Itemid=1)
- Jacobs, J. A., & Winslow, S. E. (2004). Overworked faculty: Job stresses and family demands. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 596, 104–129. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716204268185>
- Janib, J., Rasdi, R. M., Omar, Z., Alias, S. N., Zaremohzzabieh, Z., & Ahrari, S. (2021). The Relationship between Workload and Performance of Research University Academics in Malaysia: The Mediating Effects of Career Commitment and Job Satisfaction. *Asian Journal of University Education*, 17(2), 85–99. <https://doi.org/10.24191/AJUE.V17I2.13394>
- Kairuz, T., Andriés, L., Nickloes, T., & Truter, I. (2016). Consequences of KPIs and performance management in higher education. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 30(6), 881–893. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJEM-05-2015-0067>
- Kasinathan, J. P., & Arokiasamy, L. (2019). A Study on Academicians' Well-Being in Malaysian Universities: A Conceptual Paper. *Global Business and Management Research*, 11(1), 446–454. <https://search.proquest.com/docview/2236126320?accountid=10978%0Ahttp://vu.on.worldcat.org/atoztitles/link?sid=ProQ:&issn=&volume=11&issue=1&title=Global+Business+and+Management+Research&spage=446&date=2019-01-01&atitle=A+Study+on+Academicians%27+Well-Bei>
- Kinman, G., & Court, S. (2010). Psychosocial Hazards in UK Universities: Adopting a Risk Assessment Approach. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 64(4), 413–428. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2273.2009.00447.x>
- Kinman, G., Jones, F., & Kinman, R. (2006). The well-being of the UK academy, 1998–2004. *Quality in Higher Education*, 12(1), 15–27. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13538320600685081>
- Komoo, I., Azman, N., & Aziz, Y. F. A. (2007). Malaysian Research Universities and their Performance Indicators. *Bulletin of Higher Education Research*, 5–7.
- Kortum, E., Leka, S., & Cox, T. (2011). Perceptions of psychosocial hazards, work-related stress and workplace priority risks in developing countries. *Journal of Occupational Health*, 53(2), 144–155. <https://doi.org/10.1539/joh.O10016>

- Leka, S., Cox, T., & Zwetsloot, G. (2008). The European Framework for Psychosocial Risk Management (PRIMA-EF). *The European Framework for Psychosocial Risk Management (PRIMA-EF)*, 1–16.
- Leka, S., Jain, A., Iavicoli, S., Vartia, M., & Ertel, M. (2011). The role of policy for the management of psychosocial risks at the workplace in the European Union. *Safety Science*, 49(4), 558–564. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssci.2010.02.002>
- Lovelock, K. (2019a). *Psychosocial Hazards in Work Environments and Effective Approaches for Managing Them* (Issue April). <https://worksafe.govt.nz/data-and-research/research/psychosocial-hazards-in-work-environments-and-effective-approaches-for-managing-them/>
- Lovelock, K. (2019b). *Psychosocial hazards in work environments and effective approaches for managing them* AUTHORSHIP.
- MacFarlane, A., & O'Reilly-De Brún, M. (2012). Using a theory-driven conceptual framework in qualitative health research. *Qualitative Health Research*, 22(5), 607–618. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732311431898>
- MacLean, L. M., Meyer, M., & Estable, A. (2004). Improving Accuracy of Transcripts in Qualitative Research. *Qualitative Health Research*, 14(1), 113–123. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732303259804>
- Malaysia Ministry of Education. (2015). Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015-2025. *Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2025*, 1–40. <http://medcontent.metapress.com/index/A65RM03P4874243N.pdf>
- Malaysian Ministry of Health. (2017). NATIONAL HEALTH AND MORBIDITY SURVEY (NHMS) 2017. 2.
- Malaysian Ministry of Health. (2019). *The National Health and Morbidity Survey 2019: Non-Communicable Diseases: Risk Factors and other Health Problems*.
- Mentally Healthy Workplace Alliance. (2022). *Mental illness is one of the leading causes of sickness absence and long-term work incapacity in Australia*.
- Ming, N. Y., Kiong, P. V. S., & Maakip, I. (2020). Predictors of Musculoskeletal Disorders Among Teachers: An Exploratory Investigation in Malaysia. *Asian Social Science*, 16(7), 67. <https://doi.org/10.5539/ass.v16n7p67>
- Mohd Arifin, S. R. (2018). Ethical Considerations in Qualitative Research. *International Journal of Care Scholars* 2018;1(2), 10(2), 150–162. <https://doi.org/10.1177/019394598801000204>
- Mustapha, N., & Zakaria, Z. C. (2020). *Measuring Job Satisfaction from the Perspective of Interpersonal Relationship and Faculty Workload among Academic Staff at Public Universities in Kelantan, Malaysia*.
- Ramli, N. H. H., Alavi, M., Mehrinezhad, S. A., & Ahmadi, A. (2018). Academic stress and self-regulation among university students in Malaysia: Mediator role of mindfulness. *Behavioral Sciences*, 8(1). <https://doi.org/10.3390/bs8010012>
- Resnik, D. B. (1998). The ethics of HIV research in developing nations. *Bioethics*, 12(4), 286–306. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8519.00118>
- Sheriff, N. M. (2017). Research Universities in Malaysia: What Beholds? *Asian Journal of University Education*, 13(2), 35–50.
- Stuckey, H. (2014). The first step in Data Analysis: Transcribing and managing qualitative research data. *Journal of Social Health and Diabetes*, 02(01), 006–008. <https://doi.org/10.4103/2321-0656.120254>

- Suri, H. (2011). Purposeful sampling in qualitative research synthesis. *Qualitative Research Journal*, 11(2), 63–75. <https://doi.org/10.3316/QRJ1102063> *UCU Workload Survey Full Report*. (2016).
- Tienoven, T. P., Glorieux, A., Minnen, J., & Spruyt, B. (2023). Caught between academic calling and academic pressure? Working time characteristics, time pressure and time sovereignty predict PhD students' research engagement. *Higher Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-023-01096-8>
- Werner, I., & Springer, A. (2018). Occupational stress among academics: Relationships with psychosocial risk and subjective health assessment. *27th International Scientific Conference on Economic and Social Development, March*, 546–555. <http://www.esd-conference.com>
- WHO. (2003). Work organisation and Stress. In *Protecting Workers Health* (Issue 3).
- Wray, S., & Kinman, G. (2020). The psychosocial hazards of academic work: an analysis of trends. *Studies in Higher Education*, 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2020.1793934>
- Yeoh, S. H., Tam, C. L., Wong, C. P., & Bonn, G. (2017). Examining depressive symptoms and their predictors in Malaysia: Stress, locus of control, and occupation. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 8(AUG), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.01411>
- Zulkifly, N. A., Ismail, I. A., Asimiran, S., Alias, S. N., & Ismail, M. (2021). Working together as equals: collegiality expectations of academics at a public university in Malaysia. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2021.1969037>