

Rewarding Happiness: The Impact of Total Rewards and Work Engagement on Academicians' Well-Being

*Nur Fatihah Abdullah Bandar, Zaiton Hassan, Surena Sabil, Agatha Lamentan Muda, Nur Fatihah Mat Yusoff, Lydia Law Hui Ci

Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak

*Corresponding Author Email: abnfatihah@unimas.my

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Abstract

This study examines how total rewards and work engagement contribute to work happiness among academicians in selected public higher learning institutions in Sarawak. As academic work becomes increasingly demanding, understanding the factors that foster happiness is vital for sustaining high performance, job satisfaction, and overall well-being. The study is motivated by the increasing demands on academicians and the need to better understand what sustains their happiness at work. Data were collected from 158 academicians and analysed using Pearson correlation, multiple linear regression, and Hayes PROCESS mediation analysis. Results show that both total rewards and work engagement significantly predict work happiness, with total rewards exerting the stronger influence. Together they explain 72.6% of the variance in work happiness. Mediation analysis further indicates that work engagement partially mediates the relationship between total rewards and work happiness, suggesting that rewards enhance happiness both directly and indirectly by increasing engagement. These findings highlight the need for higher education institutions to develop comprehensive reward systems monetary, material, and non-monetary while simultaneously fostering work engagement. Such strategies can strengthen academic staff well-being, improve retention and productivity, and ultimately support the quality and competitiveness of higher education. Future research should explore additional organizational and psychological factors, such as leadership effectiveness and workplace culture, to broaden understanding of the mechanisms that sustain workplace happiness. It contributes by offering evidence from the Malaysian higher education context and by highlighting the role of engagement in translating rewards into happiness.

Keywords: Work Happiness, Total Rewards, Work Engagement, Public Higher Learning Institutions

Introduction

According to the World Happiness Report (2022), Finland, Denmark, Switzerland, Iceland, and the Netherlands were ranked as the top five happiest countries in the world, while Malaysia was positioned at 79th place. Meanwhile, based on the latest Malaysia Happiness Index report, the Federal Territory of Labuan was identified as the happiest state, followed by the Federal Territories of Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya, as well as the states of Terengganu and Kelantan. Both Johor and Sarawak were ranked eighth in terms of happiness. A study conducted by Aziz et al. (2013) revealed that only 5.1% of academicians in Malaysia experience high levels of happiness, while 23.7% are classified as unhappy, and the remaining 71.2% experience medium levels of happiness. The modern workplace environment often imposes significant burdens on employees, requiring them to handle various job demands, including high stress levels and role ambiguity (Thompson & Bruk-Lee, 2021). These challenges can contribute to high turnover rates, diminished commitment, reduced work performance, and negative workplace behaviors (Thompson & Bruk-Lee, 2021). Prolonged exposure to excessive workloads can further diminish employees' willingness to maintain a high level of happiness. This finding aligns with Gulyani and Sharma's (2018) assertion that ensuring employee happiness fosters productivity and efficiency in the workplace. Higher education encompasses post-secondary, tertiary, and third-level education offered at colleges or universities (Mahalingam, 2018). The happiness of academicians is particularly critical in higher learning institutions, as unhappy academicians may experience reduced motivation, which in turn affects the quality of knowledge delivery and student learning experiences. Thus, achieving work happiness among academicians in higher learning institutions is essential.

Workplace happiness plays a crucial role in employee performance and productivity. To meet organizational goals, employers seek employees who demonstrate high levels of performance and productivity. Consequently, top management often implements initiatives such as employee rewards to sustain motivation and commitment (Arora, 2020). Employees who receive rewards feel valued by their organizations, enhancing their sense of belonging and job satisfaction (Mabaso & Dlamini, 2018). Furthermore, total rewards in the higher education sector contribute to organizational commitment and help maintain high levels of satisfaction and performance (Mabaso & Dlamini, 2018). Rewards, whether monetary (e.g., salary increments) (Oishi et al., 2011), material (e.g., career advancement and welfare benefits), social (e.g., positive work relationships) (Abid et al., 2015), or non-monetary (e.g., constructive feedback, decision-making involvement, job security) (Carpentier & Mageau, 2013), positively influence employees' perceptions of the workplace. This underscores the importance of identifying factors that can maintain happiness at work, especially in academia where staff well-being influences teaching quality and research output.

The organizational rewards model suggests that engagement serves as a key motivator in fostering a positive workplace attitude. High engagement levels help alleviate work-related stress and burnout while enhancing employees' ability to experience happiness upon accomplishing tasks (Gulyani & Sharma, 2018). Thus, sustaining work engagement among academicians is vital, as lower engagement levels are often associated with various concerns, such as reduced lecture quality and poor research productivity. This is consistent with Christensen et al. (2020), who found that highly engaged academicians significantly contribute to research publication and its outcomes. Hence, employees who actively

participate in their work tend to be more productive, and this engagement is closely linked to workplace happiness (Arora, 2020). This study adds to existing research by focusing on Malaysian higher education institutions, examining the combined influence of total rewards and work engagement on work happiness. The findings also provide practical guidance for university management in developing strategies that support staff well-being. This offers important insights for the university management in enhancing the staff well-being through relevant targeted strategies.

Problem Statement

The modern workplace environment places significant burdens on employees as they navigate various job demands, such as high levels of stress and role ambiguity (Thompson & Bruk-Lee, 2021). Sustaining high levels of happiness becomes increasingly challenging when employees are consistently subjected to heavy workloads. Total rewards play a crucial role in fostering workplace happiness, as they create positive emotions and enhance employee well-being (Baker & Demerouti, 2014; Waisu & Adelajo, 2014; Mabaso & Dlamini, 2018). Previous research has explored the relationship between top management support (Vela et al., 2022), work-life support (Chen et al., 2018), and happiness at work. Vela et al. (2022) suggest that future empirical studies should consider rewards as a primary variable in assessing their impact on employee happiness.

To address this research gap, this study categorizes total rewards into three dimensions—monetary, material, and non-monetary rewards and investigates their relationship with work happiness. While past research has extensively examined workplace happiness in Western contexts (Pan & Zhou, 2013; Gulyani & Sharma, 2018), its applicability to the local context remains unclear. Therefore, this study focuses on higher learning institutions in Kota Samarahan, Sarawak, Malaysia. Additionally, although numerous articles offer strategies for employees to enhance their own happiness, limited research provides guidance for organizations to implement structural changes that enhance workplace happiness (Thompson & Bruk-Lee, 2021). The organizational rewards model posits that work engagement acts as a motivator, fostering a positive workplace attitude, reducing stress and burnout, and enhancing overall job satisfaction (Gulyani & Sharma, 2018). Previous studies on total rewards have primarily focused on elder-care organizations (Hulkko-Nyman et al., 2012), technology-based startups (Gulyani & Sharma, 2018), and the banking industry (Rai et al., 2019). This study extends the scope by examining the impact of total rewards in the context of higher learning institutions.

Furthermore, there is limited research investigating work engagement as a framework through which job resources (total rewards) influence employee attitudes, particularly work happiness (Gulyani & Sharma, 2018). By addressing this gap, the research seeks to contribute valuable insights into how total rewards and work engagement influence academicians' happiness at work in selected higher learning institutions.

Research Objectives

This study aims to examine how different dimensions of total rewards influence academicians' work happiness in selected public higher learning institutions and to determine the role of work engagement as a mediator. Specifically, the objectives are:

1. **To investigate the relationships** between monetary, material and non-monetary rewards and work happiness.
2. **To identify which reward dimensions significantly predict** work happiness.
3. **To determine whether work engagement mediates** the relationship between total rewards and work happiness.

Hypothesis

H1: Total rewards (monetary, material, and non-monetary) are each positively associated with work happiness among academicians.

H2: Among the three reward dimensions, non-monetary rewards significantly and most strongly predict work happiness.

H3: Work engagement partially mediates the relationship between total rewards and work hap

Literature Review

Total Rewards and Work Happiness

Past research has shown that total rewards significantly influence employees' happiness at work in various situations. Tremblay et al. (2000) found that material rewards, such as benefits satisfaction, positively impact on employees' attitudes toward work. Specifically, employees who receive opportunities for learning and capability development perceive a competitive advantage, leading to increased job satisfaction and work happiness. Additionally, non-monetary rewards, such as work appreciation and engaging, challenging tasks, enhance employees' enthusiasm for their job roles (Markova & Ford, 2011).

This aligns with the Broaden-and-Build Theory, which suggests that positive emotions, such as excitement and motivation, enable employees to approach workplace challenges with greater confidence. The sense of accomplishment from achieving goals and overcoming difficulties contributes to workplace happiness (Gulyani & Sharma, 2018). Furthermore, Gulyani and Sharma (2018) found that organizations that reward employees as a form of appreciation foster greater happiness and job satisfaction, particularly in new ventures. Similarly, Peluso et al. (2017) discovered that the absence of monetary rewards is associated with job dissatisfaction, reduced affective commitment, and diminished innovative behavior among employees.

Work Engagement as a Mediator

Work engagement plays a crucial role in promoting employee happiness. Intrinsic motivation, a key component of work engagement, leads to a sense of goal achievement and satisfaction, thereby generating positive feelings at work. This intrinsic motivation is essential for fostering work engagement and, consequently, work happiness. Engaged employees often exhibit higher productivity levels, and this engagement is closely linked to their happiness at work. When employees are happy, they are naturally more interested and invested in their tasks, leading to enhanced performance. Leadership plays a pivotal role in enhancing work engagement through recognition and appreciation. Employee recognition is central to a thriving company culture. Meaningful and intentional recognition practices can significantly boost employee engagement and loyalty.

Employers can implement various reward strategies to encourage employees to enhance their concentration and focus at work. Such strategies not only improve performance but also foster a sense of happiness among employees. Fostering work engagement through intrinsic motivation, leadership recognition, and effective reward strategies is essential for promoting employee happiness and productivity.

Methodology

Research Design

In this study, a quantitative approach is employed to collect and analyze data. A structured questionnaire will be distributed to academicians at a selected public higher learning institution in Sarawak. The data collected will be analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 29 to examine the relationships between the variables under study. Simple random sampling is chosen to ensure that every member of the population has an equal chance of selection, which helps to eliminate selection bias and provides a representative sample.

Total rewards will be measured using a modified version of a questionnaire previously used by Hareendrakumar et al. (2021) to assess total rewards satisfaction, consisting of 34 questions. A five-point Likert scale will be used to gauge respondents' feelings. Work engagement will be assessed using the shortened version of the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES) developed by Schaufeli et al. (2002), which captures the three dimensions of work engagement: vigor, dedication, and absorption. This scale employs a six-point rating system ranging from 0 (Never) to 5 (Always/Every day). Work happiness will be measured using the shortened Happiness at Work (HAW) scale developed by Salas-Vallina et al. (2017), consisting of 9 items rated on a five-point scale from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree).

Results

Demographic Profile of Respondents (n=158)

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Survey Respondents (N=158)

Variables	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age		
20-30	11	7.0
31 – 40	6	39.9
41 – 50	77	48.7
51 and above	7	4.4
Gender		
Male	54	34.2
Female	104	65.8
Designation		
Lecturer	113	71.5
Senior lecturer	40	25.3
Associate Professor	4	2.5
Professor	1	0.6
Job Status		
Temporary	1	0.6
Contract	4	2.5

Permanent	153	96.8
Highest Academic Qualification		
PhD. or equivalent	39	24.7
Master or equivalent	79	50.0
Others	40	25.3
Total Employment Experience		
5 years and less	52	32.9
6 – 10 years	15	9.5
11 years and above	91	57.6

Table 1 presents the demographic profile of the respondents, detailing their age, gender, designation, job status, highest academic qualification, and total employment experience. Most respondents were aged between 41 and 50 years (48.7%) and were female (65.8%). In terms of job designation, most held the position of lecturer (71.5%), followed by senior lecturer (25.3%). Regarding job status, a significant majority (96.8%) held permanent positions. Concerning academic qualifications, 24.7% of respondents possessed a Ph.D. or equivalent degree, while 50% held a Master's or equivalent qualification. Additionally, 57.6% of respondents had over 11 years of total employment experience.

Total Rewards (Monetary Rewards, Non-Monetary Rewards, Material Rewards And Work Happiness)

Pearson's correlations show that all study variables are positively and significantly related at the 0.01 level (Table 2).

Table 2

Pearson Correlations Among Work Happiness and Reward Dimensions (n = 158)

Variable	1	2	3	4
1. Work Happiness	—	.648**	.652**	.844**
2. Monetary Rewards		—	.900**	.757**
3. Material Rewards			—	.775**
4. Non-Monetary Rewards				—

Note. Values are Pearson correlation coefficients (two-tailed). ** $p < .01$.

All four variables are positively and significantly correlated at the 0.01 level, indicating that higher rewards whether monetary, material, or non-monetary are associated with higher levels of work happiness. Strongest relationship between Work Happiness and Non-Monetary Rewards ($r = .844$, $p < .001$). This shows that recognition, involvement, and other intangible rewards have the closest link with employees' happiness at work. Moderately strong relationships between Work Happiness with Material Rewards ($r = .652$, $p < .001$) and with Monetary Rewards ($r = .648$, $p < .001$) indicate that both tangible benefits and financial compensation also contribute moderately to happiness.

High intercorrelations among reward types Monetary and Material rewards correlate very strongly ($r = .900$, $p < .001$), and both are strongly related to Non-Monetary rewards ($r = .757$ and $r = .775$, respectively). This suggests that institutions providing one type of reward often provide others, and staff who perceive generous monetary or material rewards also tend to perceive strong non-monetary support. Overall, the results underscore that all reward dimensions especially non-monetary rewards play a vital role in fostering work happiness

among the academicians. This is consistent with Gulyani and Sharma's (2018) research, which found that both monetary and non-monetary rewards positively influence employees' attitudes toward work, leading to increased happiness.

Predictors of Work Happiness among Academicians

A multiple linear regression analysis was performed to examine whether total rewards significantly predict work happiness among the academicians ($n= 158$).

Model Fit

The overall regression model using **stepwise** method was **statistically significant**, $F(1,156) = 387.49$, $p < .001$, indicating that the predictor explains a substantial amount of the variance in work happiness. The model accounted for **71.3% of the variance in Work Happiness** ($R^2 = .713$, **Adjusted $R^2 = .711$**) with a standard error of the estimate of **0.31**. This represents a **very large effect size** in social science research.

Table 3

Regression Coefficients

Predictor	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Constant	1.13	0.13	—	8.73	< .001
Non- Monetary	0.68	0.04	0.84	19.69	< .001

The results show that **non-monetary rewards are a powerful positive predictor of work happiness**. Specifically, about **71% of the variance** in work happiness among the sampled academicians is explained by their perception of non-monetary rewards. This highlights the critical role of intangible incentives such as recognition, involvement in decision making, and opportunities for personal growth in promoting well-being and satisfaction in academic workplaces.

Predicting Work Engagement

The first regression model tested the effect of Total rewards on work engagement. Results showed that Total rewards significantly predicted work engagement, $B = 0.48$, $SE = 0.08$, $t(156) = 6.04$, $p < .001$, with the model explaining 19% of the variance in work engagement ($R^2 = .19$, $F(1,156) = 36.50$, $p < .001$). This indicates that higher perceptions of total rewards are associated with higher levels of work engagement among the academicians (Table 4).

Table 4

Mediation of the Relationship Between Total Rewards and Work Happiness via Work Engagement (PROCESS Model 4)

Predictor	B	SE	t	p	95% CI LL	95% CI UL
Outcome: Work Engagement						
Constant	2.55	0.29	8.76	< .001	1.98	3.13
Total Rewards	0.48	0.08	6.04	< .001	0.33	0.64
<i>Model fit: R = .44, R² = .19, MSE = 0.50, F(1,156) = 36.50, p < .001</i>						
Outcome: Work Happiness						
Constant	0.69	0.15	4.45	< .001	0.38	0.99
Total Reward	0.57	0.04	14.69	< .001	0.49	0.64
Work Engagement	0.22	0.03	6.19	< .001	0.15	0.28
<i>Model fit: R = .85, R² = .73, MSE = 0.09, F(2,155) = 205.63, p < .001</i>						
Direct and Indirect Effects of Total Reward on Work Happiness						
Direct effect	0.57	0.04	14.69	< .001	0.49	0.64
Indirect effect via Work Engagement	0.10	0.03*	—	—	0.05	0.17

Predicting Work Happiness

The second regression model examined the combined effects of Total rewards and work engagement on work happiness. Both predictors were significant with Total Rewards: $B = 0.57$, $SE = 0.04$, $t(155) = 14.69$, $p < .001$ meanwhile Work Engagement: $B = 0.22$, $SE = 0.03$, $t(155) = 6.19$, $p < .001$. The model accounted for 73% of the variance in Work Happiness ($R^2 = .73$, $F(2,155) = 205.63$, $p < .001$), demonstrating strong explanatory power. These results suggest that while both total rewards and work engagement enhance work happiness, total rewards exert the stronger influence.

Mediation Effect of Work Engagement

PROCESS mediation analysis further revealed a significant indirect effect of Total rewards on Work Happiness through Work Engagement, indirect effect = 0.10, bootstrapped $SE = 0.03$, 95% CI [0.05, 0.17]. Because the confidence interval does not include zero, this confirms that part of the positive effect of total rewards on work happiness operates indirectly via work engagement. The direct effect of total rewards on Work happiness remained significant ($B = 0.57$, $SE = 0.04$, $t = 14.69$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.49, 0.64]), indicating partial mediation.

Institutions should not rely solely on financial incentives. While total rewards have a strong direct effect on work happiness, their impact is amplified when employees are highly engaged. Integrated reward engagement strategies through HR policies should combine competitive pay and benefits with initiatives that foster intrinsic motivation such as recognition programs, opportunities for professional growth, and participatory decision-making. Engagement acts as a mechanism that translates rewards into a lasting sense of well-being. Even when budgets limit large salary increments, building an engaging work environment e.g., meaningful tasks, supportive leadership helps sustain staff happiness.

Engaged employees are more resilient to work demands, ensuring that the positive effects of rewards on happiness are not short-lived. University management can use these findings to justify investment in engagement programmes (mentoring, research support, recognition awards) alongside financial rewards. By fostering both rewards and engagement, institutions contribute to academic productivity and retain talented staff, supporting Malaysia's broader agenda of enhancing quality and competitiveness in higher education.

Implications and Conclusions

These findings highlight that total rewards are a key driver of both work engagement and work happiness, and that work engagement partially transmits the effect of rewards on happiness. In other words, when academicians perceive their financial and material rewards to be fair and motivating, they are more engaged in their work, which in turn fosters higher happiness at work. Nevertheless, the strong direct effect shows that rewards themselves also elevate happiness beyond the pathway of engagement. For higher learning institutions, this means that developing comprehensive monetary reward systems while simultaneously nurturing work engagement can maximize academicians' well-being. Strategies could include competitive salary structures, recognition of academic achievements, and opportunities for professional growth to reinforce both the direct and indirect benefits observed.

The relationship between total rewards, work engagement, and work happiness among academicians has significant implications for economic growth. Enhancing these factors can lead to increased productivity, innovation, and overall economic development. Research indicates that a well-structured total rewards system, encompassing monetary, material, and non-monetary components, positively influences employees' perceptions, leading to higher work engagement and happiness. Gulyani and Sharma (2018) found that employees' perceptions of their total rewards significantly impact their work engagement and happiness.

Furthermore, when employees are engaged, they are more likely to experience job satisfaction and contribute effectively to organizational goals. This increased productivity can drive economic growth by enhancing organizational performance and competitiveness. In addition, DiMaria et al. (2020) also confirmed evidence of a positive association between the variables of their study found at the individual and firm level and support the view that promoting subjective well-being that is related to measures of happiness is not only desirable per se, but it is conducive to higher productivity and improved countries' economic performances.

In the context of academia, fostering work engagement and happiness among academicians can lead to higher research output, better teaching quality, and more significant contributions to societal development. These outcomes not only benefit educational institutions but also have broader economic implications, as education and research are critical drivers of innovation and economic progress. By investing in comprehensive reward systems and promoting work engagement, organizations can enhance work happiness among academicians, leading to improved performance and contributing to economic growth.

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