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Antecedents and Consequences of Employee Engagement in Higher Education: A Multilevel Job Demands–Resources Conceptual Framework

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Abstract. Employee engagement has become a strategic concern in higher education because universities operate under sustained pressure to manage heavier work demands, institutional change, and expectations for consistent staff performance and retention. However, the literature on its antecedents and consequences remains fragmented across staff groups, analytical levels, and outcomes. This conceptual paper integrates what is known about the antecedents, mechanisms, and outcomes of work engagement among academic and non-academic staff in higher education. It applies an integrative literature synthesis to a corpus of 121 records drawn from Scopus (search window 2021 2026, subject areas of economics and psychology, journal research articles and books), anchored in Job Demands Resources (JD-R) theory and complemented by motivational and social exchange perspectives. The synthesis yields a multilevel framework and nine conceptual propositions. Engagement is expected to emerge when institutional context and leadership generate job resources, these resources activate motivational and psychological processes, and job demands remain within manageable limits; engagement is in turn expected to function as a performance-relevant mechanism linked to productivity, extra-role behavior, and retention. The paper specifies four mechanisms through which organizational, team, and individual levels interact, positions the framework against prior single-pathway and single-level models, and sets out a comparative, multilevel, and longitudinal agenda for empirical testing of the propositions.

Keywords: Antecedents and Consequences; Employee Engagement; Higher Education; Job Demands–Resources; Work Engagement.

1. INTRODUCTION

Employee engagement has become a strategic concern in higher education because universities now operate under sustained pressure to manage heavier work demands, institutional change, and expectations for consistent staff performance and retention. Evidence across the sector shows that engagement is shaped by the quality of institutional support and by the conditions of academic work itself (Jaiyeoba & Hazahari, 2024; Prodanova & Kocarev, 2023), while periods of crisis and restructuring can alter engagement at individual, team, and organizational levels (Whitsed et al., 2024) . This issue is sharpened by evidence that academics face burnout, emotional exhaustion, and work-related stress under current university conditions (Isa et al., 2025; Rokadiya & Joshi, 2025; Rusdi et al., 2023) . At the same time, engagement matters because it is linked to faculty productivity (Jaurigue, 2024) and can help explain retention outcomes in universities (Margaretha et al., 2025) . Against this background, this conceptual paper synthesizes a fragmented literature to integrate what is known about the antecedents, mechanisms, and outcomes of engagement among both academic and non-academic staff in higher education.

The urgency of this integration follows from the two bodies of evidence just described. On one side, burnout, emotional exhaustion, work-related stress, and crisis-driven restructuring are documented among university staff (Isa et al., 2025; Rokadiya & Joshi, 2025; Rusdi et al.,

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2023; Whitsed et al., 2024) . On the other side, engagement is associated with productivity, innovative and citizenship behavior, and retention (Jaurigue, 2024; Margaretha et al., 2025; Padilla-Lugo & Hernández, 2026; Zargar et al., 2025) . Universities that must sustain staff performance and continuity under heavier demands therefore need a single account of how engagement is produced and what it yields, rather than separate accounts of its drivers and its payoffs.

Despite this growing evidence, the literature remains fragmented, and this fragmentation constitutes the research gap addressed here. First, studies are frequently situated in a single site or a single staff group, such as academics in Malaysian public universities (Ibrahim et al., 2026) or non-academic staff in Katsina State (Ibrahim & Lawal, 2026), even though stressors, satisfaction, and engagement conditions differ across university roles (Ibrahim & Lawal, 2026; Lumapas & Espina, 2026; Priambada & Wulani, 2025) . Second, engagement is commonly examined in relation to one family of antecedents (for example resources, leadership, climate, or personal resources) or one family of outcomes (for example productivity or retention), whereas the multilevel evidence of Whitsed et al. (2024) shows that engagement develops through linked individual, team, and organizational processes. Third, recent synthesis work in academia identifies fragmentation across psychological safety, work engagement, and psychological capital (Verbal, 2026), and digital transformation and digital HRM introduce engagement contexts that remain conceptually underdeveloped (Habeeb & Yeboah, 2026; Hizam et al., 2023) .

The novelty of this paper lies in the way it closes that gap. Rather than adding another single-antecedent or single-outcome study, it integrates four clusters of antecedents (job resources, job demands and stressors, leadership and organizational context, and personal and psychological resources) with three clusters of outcomes (performance, extra-role behavior, and retention) in one multilevel model. It uses Job Demands Resources theory as the main structural lens, incorporates motivational and social exchange perspectives that JD-R alone does not supply. It treats engagement both as an outcome of work conditions and as a mechanism through which those conditions shape consequential outcomes. It specifies four mechanisms through which organizational, team, and individual levels interact, and it expresses the resulting relationships as nine conceptual propositions that remain to be tested empirically. It covers academic and non-academic staff within the same framework. Section 4.8 sets out how the framework differs from the closest prior models.

Accordingly, this paper has four objectives: (1) to synthesize the antecedents of work engagement among academic and non-academic staff in higher education; (2) to synthesize the consequences of work engagement for performance, extra-role behavior, and retention; (3) to specify, in operational terms, how the organizational, team, and individual levels interact; and (4) to integrate these syntheses into a multilevel conceptual framework, expressed as propositions, and a research agenda. The paper proceeds as follows: Section 2 presents the theoretical review (defining work engagement and the theoretical framing), Section 3 describes the research method, including the data source, selection criteria, and analytical procedure, Section 4 presents the results and discussion (antecedents, the integrative model, outcomes, cross-level mechanisms, the conceptual framework and propositions, positioning against prior frameworks, contributions, limitations, and future research), and Section 5 concludes.

2. THEORETICAL REVIEW

Defining work engagement

Building on this problem setting, the manuscript treats work engagement as a distinct positive work-related state rather than a loose label for satisfaction or commitment. In the established formulation of Schaufeli et al. (2006) , engagement comprises vigor, dedication, and absorption, and the UWES-9 operationalises these three dimensions as the core expression of how employees invest energy, involvement, and focused attention in their work. This definition is useful in higher education because it allows engagement to be analysed in two ways. First, it is an outcome of work conditions and institutional arrangements. Second, it is a mechanism through which those conditions shape consequential outcomes. Recent higher education studies follow this dual treatment. Nurfai et al. (2025) position engagement as a pathway linking transformational leadership to employee performance, while Margaretha et al. (2025) show that engagement mediates the effects of workplace spirituality and person-organization fit on faculty retention outcomes. Likewise, Parveen & Subramanyachary (2026) treat engagement as the intervening process through which retention strategies influence job satisfaction and faculty commitment.

Theoretical framing

This conceptual paper should be organised around a multi-level model that uses Job Demands-Resources theory as its main structural lens while incorporating motivational and social exchange perspectives to explain why engagement varies across higher education settings. Bakker & Demerouti (2017) argue that job demands activate a health impairment process, whereas job resources activate a motivational process and can buffer the harmful

effects of demands. This logic fits higher education evidence showing that resources such as autonomy, recognition, and support strengthen engagement, while demands and strain weaken it (Ansa & Shaharruddin, 2025; Ibrahim et al., 2026; Mehmood et al., 2025). It also accommodates the multilevel character of academic work documented by Whitsed et al., (2024), where crisis conditions altered engagement through individual, team, and organizational dynamics. At the same time, JD-R alone is not enough. Motivation-based evidence suggests that intrinsic and prosocial motives become consequential when organizational support and autonomy are present (Jankelová et al., 2025) , while social exchange arguments explain why psychological contract fulfilment and perceived support strengthen reciprocal engagement (Paul, 2026; Singh et al., 2024).

3. RESEARCH METHOD

Research design

This study is a conceptual paper that uses an integrative (narrative) literature synthesis, which is appropriate when the aim is to integrate a fragmented body of evidence into a theoretical framework rather than to test hypotheses with new data. It is not a systematic review or meta-analysis: no pooled effect sizes are computed, and the output is a framework and a set of conceptual propositions rather than a quantitative estimate.

Data source and search strategy

The literature was retrieved from Scopus. The search covered the period 2021 2026 and was limited to the subject areas of economics and psychology and to two document types, journal research articles and books. The topic was employee engagement in higher education.

Corpus and selection of studies

The search produced a corpus of 121 records. A small number of earlier foundational sources, such as the engagement construct and its measurement (Schaufeli et al., 2006) and (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017) , are also cited for definition and theory. From this corpus, the studies that bear directly on the antecedents, mechanisms, or outcomes of work engagement among higher education staff were used for the synthesis; 46 sources are cited in the paper.

Analytical procedure and development of propositions

The synthesis proceeded in four steps. First, the selected studies were coded thematically into antecedent clusters (job resources, job demands and stressors, leadership and organizational context, and personal and psychological resources) and outcome clusters (performance, extra-role behavior, and retention). Second, each construct was assigned to the organizational, team, or individual level at which the cited study locates it, and the links

between levels were identified. Third, the clusters were organized using JD-R theory as the main structural lens, with motivational and social exchange perspectives added to explain why engagement varies across higher education settings. Fourth, a relationship was formulated as a conceptual proposition when it was supported by at least two of the reviewed studies, and the propositions were integrated into the multilevel framework.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Antecedents of engagement

Across this framework, job resources appear as the most consistent proximal drivers of engagement in higher education. Evidence from academic settings shows that when employees have autonomy in how they organise their work, receive recognition for their contributions, and perceive meaningful support from their institution, they report stronger energy and involvement in their roles. Ansa & Shaharruddin, (2025) identify autonomy and recognition as positive predictors of work engagement among academic staff, alongside self-efficacy as a complementary personal resource. In Malaysian public universities, Ibrahim et al. (2026) similarly show that autonomy, social support, and performance feedback are positively associated with academics' engagement. This pattern is reinforced by Jankelová et al. (2025), who find that perceived organizational support and job autonomy strengthen the link between motivation and engagement among university teachers. More broadly, Prodanova & Kocarev (2023) show that institutional and academic resources shape both satisfaction and engagement. Taken together, these studies suggest that engagement is sustained not by abstract commitment alone, but by day-to-day resource conditions that enable staff to work with discretion, affirmation, and support.

In parallel with the enabling role of resources, the literature shows that job demands and work stressors erode engagement when they become chronic, cumulative, and poorly managed, especially in periods of crisis and work redesign. Whitsed et al. (2024) show that restructuring and crisis conditions affected engagement across individual, team, and organizational levels, while Mehmood et al. (2025) report that stronger job demands increase strain and reduce engagement-related outcomes. In higher education, burnout is one pathway through which this erosion occurs. Studies of university academics link emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and wider burnout pressures to weaker engagement (Osmanović et al., 2023; Rokadiya & Joshi, 2025; Rusdi et al., 2023). Work-life balance is a related but distinct pathway. Under hybrid and changing work arrangements, engagement depends not only on the intensity of work but also on whether employees can

sustain workable boundaries between professional and personal roles (Batool & Asif, 2026). Similar evidence from non-academic staff shows that workload, work environment, and interpersonal strain also depress engagement when stress accumulates (Ibrahim & Lawal, 2026). Priambada & Wulani (2025) further suggest that career conditions and work-life balance shape engagement together, indicating that universities must manage demands structurally, not simply expect individual resilience.

Leadership and organizational context shape engagement because they determine whether employees experience their institution as a source of support, fairness, and developmental opportunity or as a source of strain and depletion. Positive leadership appears to build engagement by generating resources. Transformational leadership strengthens work engagement directly and through self-efficacy and professional development (Ukaj et al., 2026), while leader emotional intelligence supports faculty engagement through relationship management and emotionally responsive leadership (Asmamaw & Semela, 2023). At the organizational level, this influence is carried through climate. Leadership practices and organizational climate jointly explain faculty engagement across multinational higher education settings (Deroncele-Acosta et al., 2026), and separate studies likewise connect organizational climate to engagement among university employees (Amelia & Saragih, 2026; Cainday et al., 2023). Justice is another transmission mechanism, as perceptions of organizational justice are associated with both stronger engagement and higher productivity (Jaurigue, 2024). The contrast is clear in evidence on toxic leadership, which is linked to lower academics' engagement (Acuña & Male, 2022) . Engagement therefore depends not only on individual leaders, but on the wider organizational conditions leaders create and legitimize.

Personal and psychological resources also explain why some higher education employees remain engaged even when institutional pressures are high. Self-efficacy is especially important because it helps employees interpret demanding conditions as manageable rather than depleting, and it is positively associated with engagement among academic staff (Ansa & Shaharruddin, 2025). This role is reinforced by evidence that self-efficacy mediates the effect of transformational leadership on engagement (Procházka et al., 2017; Ukaj et al., 2026). Motivation matters in similar ways. Among university teachers, both intrinsic and prosocial motivation strengthen engagement, particularly when work is supported by autonomy and organizational support (Jankelová et al., 2025). Other psychological resources widen this pattern. Psychological empowerment is linked to stronger engagement and lower intention to leave (Chompukum & Vanichbuncha, 2025),

while recent synthesis work in academia connects psychological capital and psychological safety to engagement (Verbal, 2026). Mindfulness also appears relevant because it is associated with engagement and quality of work life among academicians (Chatterjee et al., 2025). Finally, relational resources such as workplace spirituality and person-organization fit help explain why employees stay invested in university work by strengthening engagement and, through it, retention (Margaretha et al., 2025).

Integration of antecedents into a conceptual model

Taken together, the antecedent literature supports a conceptual model in which engagement in higher education emerges when institutional context and leadership generate job resources, these resources activate motivational and psychological processes, and job demands remain within manageable limits. In JD-R terms, resources do more than motivate directly. They also buffer the strain associated with demanding work conditions (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017) . This is especially relevant in universities, where engagement is shaped across levels rather than within isolated jobs. Whitsed et al., (2024) show that crisis conditions altered engagement through individual, team, and organizational processes, and Deroncele-Acosta et al. (2026) likewise indicate that leadership practices and organizational climate are linked to faculty engagement through organizational pathways. At the employee level, job resources and personal resources appear to work together. Autonomy, support, feedback, motivation, and self-efficacy combine in shaping engagement (Ansa & Shaharruddin, 2025; Ibrahim et al., 2026; Jankelová et al., 2025). Support mechanisms may also condition indirect effects between adverse conditions and withdrawal, as shown in work linking HRM practices, bullying, engagement, and turnover intention (Paul, 2026) . The model therefore needs cross-level interactions at its centre, because resources at one level can offset strain generated at another.

Outcomes and performance

Extending this integrative model to outcomes, work engagement should be treated in higher education as a performance-relevant mechanism rather than only as an indicator of employee well-being. Evidence from university settings consistently links stronger engagement with stronger individual contribution. Jaurigue (2024) associates faculty engagement with productivity in state universities and colleges, while Cabanilla et al. (2026) report a positive relationship between work engagement and self-reported productivity among faculty. Other studies clarify the process through which this occurs. Nurfai et al. (2025) show that work engagement mediates the effect of transformational leadership on employee performance in a higher education institution, and Liana et al. (2026) similarly

position engagement as the pathway linking strategic human capital to faculty performance effectiveness. At the job level, work autonomy and engagement are also associated with better employee performance in academia (Nasir et al., 2026). The implication is direct. When university employees are vigorous, dedicated, and absorbed in their work, engagement translates institutional and managerial inputs into stronger productivity, more effective role performance, and wider service contributions.

Outcomes and extra-role behavior

In addition to core performance, work engagement appears to support the extra-role and innovative behaviors that universities increasingly need under conditions of digital transformation and service change. Evidence in higher education suggests that engagement is not merely an outcome of supportive conditions but a mechanism through which those conditions are converted into discretionary contribution. Among university teachers, work engagement mediates pathways to innovative work behavior (Zargar et al., 2025), and JD-R based evidence from HEIs likewise links job resources, engagement, and proactive behavior while showing that heavier demands weaken this process (Mehmood et al., 2025) . The same logic extends to organizational citizenship behavior. Work engagement has been shown to affect citizenship behavior among university teachers (Padilla-Lugo & Hernández, 2026), and engagement combined with OCB is associated with stronger team performance in universities (Amin et al., 2025). Related evidence from public universities further indicates that innovative and proactive behavior mediate the engagement-performance relationship (Junusi et al., 2023). For higher education institutions, the implication is that engagement helps translate available resources into initiative, collaboration, and constructive effort beyond formal role requirements.

Outcomes and retention

Universities concerned with staff continuity should treat work engagement as part of retention strategy rather than as a private employee attitude. Across higher education studies, engagement appears to reduce withdrawal and strengthen attachment by converting supportive conditions into reasons to stay. Margaretha et al. (2025) show that engagement mediates the effects of workplace spirituality and person-organization fit on faculty retention outcomes, indicating that value alignment and meaningful work matter partly because they sustain employees' energetic connection to the institution. A similar pattern appears in broader employment conditions. Chompukum & Vanichbuncha (2025) find that stronger engagement is associated with lower intention to leave among academic and non-academic staff, while Paul (2026) links HRM practices, workplace bullying, perceived

support, engagement, and turnover intention among academic staff in Nigerian public universities. Retention-oriented interventions also work through engagement. Parveen & Subramanyachary (2026) report that engagement mediates the effects of retention strategies on job satisfaction and faculty commitment, and Yuwono et al. (2024) similarly position engagement as a mechanism improving job embeddedness in private higher education institutions. Engagement is therefore best understood as an institutional retention pathway.

Cross-level mechanisms of the multilevel model

To make the multilevel character of the model operational, the constructs in the reviewed studies are assigned to three levels, and four mechanisms are specified through which the levels interact. At the organizational level, the reviewed studies locate leadership practices and organizational climate (Amelia & Saragih, 2026; Cainday et al., 2023; Deroncele-Acosta et al., 2026) , organizational justice (Jaurigue, 2024) , HRM practices and retention strategies (Parveen & Subramanyachary, 2026; Paul, 2026) , institutional and academic resources (Prodanova & Kocarev, 2023), work arrangements (Batool & Asif, 2026), and crisis and restructuring conditions (Whitsed et al., 2024). At the team level the evidence is thinner: Whitsed et al. (2024) show that crisis conditions altered engagement through team dynamics, and Amin et al. (2025) associate engagement combined with organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) with stronger team performance. At the individual level, the reviewed studies locate job resources such as autonomy, recognition, social support, and feedback (Ansa & Shaharruddin, 2025; Ibrahim & Lawal, 2026; Jankelová et al., 2025), personal and psychological resources such as self-efficacy, motivation, and empowerment (Chompukum & Vanichbuncha, 2025; Ukaj et al., 2026), strain in the form of burnout and work-related stress (Rokadiya & Joshi, 2025; Rusdi et al., 2023), and engagement itself together with individual performance and withdrawal outcomes.

The first mechanism (M1) is top-down resource transmission. Leadership and climate at the organizational level generate job resources and self-efficacy at the individual level, and these in turn sustain engagement: transformational leadership strengthens engagement directly and through self-efficacy and professional development (Procházka et al., 2017; Ukaj et al., 2026) , perceived organizational support and autonomy strengthen the link between motivation and engagement (Jankelová et al., 2025), and perceived justice is associated with stronger engagement (Jaurigue, 2024). The second mechanism (M2) is top-down demand transmission. Restructuring, crisis, and work redesign at the organizational level raise demands and strain at the team and individual levels and weaken engagement

(Mehmood et al., 2025; Whitsed et al., 2024) , and under hybrid arrangements the boundary between professional and personal roles becomes part of this transmission (Batool & Asif, 2026). (Priambada & Wulani, 2025) indicate that such demands must be managed structurally, not left to individual resilience.

The third mechanism (M3) is cross-level buffering. Because resources buffer the harmful effects of demands (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017), a resource located at one level can offset strain generated at another, for example organizational support and climate offsetting individual-level demands, or self-efficacy helping employees interpret demanding conditions as manageable (Ansa & Shaharruddin, 2025). Support mechanisms also condition the indirect effects of adverse conditions on withdrawal (Paul, 2026). Empirically, M3 is a moderation relationship in which a resource measured at one level moderates the association between a demand measured at another level and engagement. The fourth mechanism (M4) is bottom-up conversion. Engagement is the point at which individual energy is converted into discretionary contribution and attachment that become visible at the team and organizational levels, such as team performance (Amin et al., 2025), faculty productivity (Jaurigue, 2024), and retention (Chompukum & Vanichbuncha, 2025; Margaretha et al., 2025) .

These mechanisms call for designs in which employees are nested in teams and institutions, resources and demands are measured at the level where they originate, and engagement is measured repeatedly over time. They also show where the evidence is weakest: the team level is the least developed in the reviewed studies, which is why it is treated as a priority in the research agenda (Section 4.11).

Conceptual framework and propositions

Figure 1 summarizes the antecedents and consequences discussed above in a single framework. Read from left to right, it follows the structure of the integrative model: leadership and organizational context generate job resources (M1); job resources and personal and psychological resources activate engagement, understood as vigor, dedication, and absorption (Schaufeli et al., 2006); and engagement converts these inputs into performance and productivity, extra-role behavior, and retention (M4). Job demands and stressors, including workload, burnout, work-related stress, and crisis and restructuring conditions, sit on the opposite side of the process (M2). In JD-R terms, they activate the health impairment process and weaken engagement, while resources buffer their harmful effects (M3) (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017) . The band at the bottom of the figure represents the multilevel character of the model, in which resources at one level can offset strain

generated at another (Whitsed et al., 2024). The relationships in the figure are stated as the following conceptual propositions.

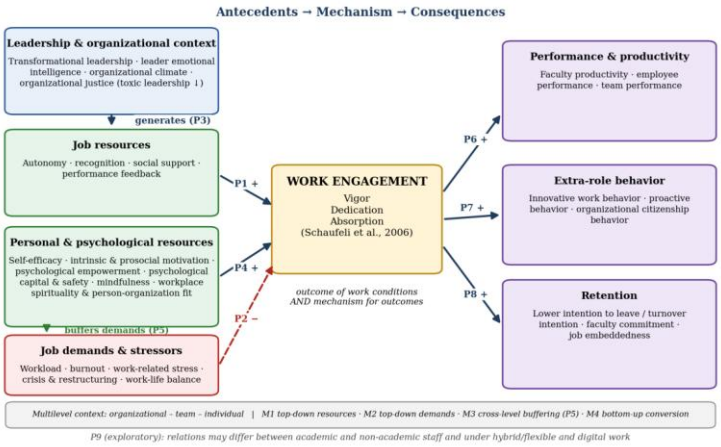


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of the Antecedents and Consequences of Work Engagement in Higher Education

Source: Authors' synthesis based on the literature reviewed in this paper

P1. Job resources (autonomy, recognition, social support, and performance feedback) are positively related to work engagement among higher education staff (Ansa & Shaharruddin, 2025; Ibrahim et al., 2026; Jankelová et al., 2025; Prodanova & Kocarev, 2023).

P2. Job demands and stressors (workload, burnout-related strain, work-related stress, and crisis and restructuring conditions) are negatively related to work engagement, with burnout as one pathway through which this erosion occurs, and work-life balance conditions shape engagement alongside demands (Batool & Asif, 2026; Ibrahim & Lawal, 2026; Mehmood et al., 2025; Osmanović et al., 2023; Priambada & Wulani, 2025; Rokadiya & Joshi, 2025; Rusdi et al., 2023; Whitsed et al., 2024).

P3. Leadership and organizational context (transformational leadership, leader emotional intelligence, organizational climate, and organizational justice) are positively related to work engagement, and this relationship is carried in part through job resources and self-efficacy, whereas toxic leadership is related to lower engagement (Acuña & Male, 2022; Amelia & Saragih, 2026; Asmamaw & Semela, 2023; Cainday et al., 2023; Deroncele-Acosta et al., 2026; Jaurigue, 2024; Ukaj et al., 2026).

P4. Personal and psychological resources (self-efficacy, intrinsic and prosocial motivation, psychological empowerment, psychological capital and safety, mindfulness, workplace spirituality, and person-organization fit) are positively related to work engagement and operate together with job resources (Ansa & Shaharruddin, 2025; Chatterjee et al., 2025; Chompukum & Vanichbuncha, 2025; Jankelová et al., 2025; Margaretha et al., 2025; Verbal, 2026).

P5. Resources located at the individual, team, or organizational level weaken the negative relationship between demands originating at a different level and work engagement (cross-level buffering) (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Paul, 2026; Whitsed et al., 2024) .

P6. Work engagement is positively related to individual performance and productivity and mediates the relationship between institutional and managerial inputs and performance (Cabanilla et al., 2026; Jaurigue, 2024; Liana et al., 2026; Nasir et al., 2026; Nurfai et al., 2025).

P7. Work engagement is positively related to extra-role behavior (innovative work behavior, proactive behavior, and organizational citizenship behavior) and mediates the relationship between job resources and these behaviors (Amin et al., 2025; Junusi et al., 2023; Mehmood et al., 2025; Padilla-Lugo & Hernández, 2026; Zargar et al., 2025).

P8. Work engagement is negatively related to intention to leave and positively related to retention-related attachment (faculty commitment and job embeddedness), and mediates the effects of retention-oriented conditions and strategies (Chompukum & Vanichbuncha, 2025; Margaretha et al., 2025; Parveen & Subramanyachary, 2026; Paul, 2026; Yuwono et al., 2024).

P9. The strength of the relationships in P1 to P8 may differ between academic and non-academic staff and across hybrid, flexible, and digital work arrangements (an exploratory proposition) (Batool & Asif, 2026; Habeeb & Yeboah, 2026; Hizam et al., 2023; Ibrahim & Lawal, 2026; Li et al., 2025; Lumapas & Espina, 2026; Priambada & Wulani, 2025; Shepard & Mcnaughtan, 2024) .

These propositions are conceptual statements derived from the reviewed evidence. They have not been tested in this paper, several of them (notably P5 and P9) rest on a limited number of studies, and each relationship should be read as a statement for empirical testing, not as an established effect. The framework also marks hybrid and flexible work, digital transformation, and psychological safety as boundary conditions that the literature identifies as still requiring empirical testing (Batool & Asif, 2026; Habeeb & Yeboah, 2026; Hizam et al., 2023; Verbal, 2026).

Positioning relative to prior frameworks

Four bodies of prior work in the reviewed corpus are closest to the framework proposed here, and the framework differs from each in a specific way. First, JD-R theory in its general form (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017) specifies a health impairment process driven by demands and a motivational process driven by resources. The proposed framework retains this logic as its structural lens but adds leadership and organizational context as generators of resources, motivational and social exchange perspectives, and an explicit set of outcomes in higher education (performance, extra-role behavior, and retention).

Second, many higher education studies test a single pathway in which engagement mediates a specific antecedent-outcome pair: transformational leadership and employee performance (Nurfai et al., 2025), workplace spirituality and person-organization fit and faculty retention (Margaretha et al., 2025), retention strategies and job satisfaction and faculty commitment (Parveen & Subramanyachary, 2026), and HRM practices and workplace bullying and turnover intention (Paul, 2026). The proposed framework treats these pathways as special cases within one model of four antecedent clusters and three outcome clusters.

Third, Whitsed et al. (2024) apply a multilevel JD-R analysis to academic staff engagement in a time of crisis and change. The proposed framework carries the multilevel logic beyond crisis conditions, includes non-academic staff, and specifies four cross-level mechanisms (M1 to M4) and testable propositions. Fourth, recent synthesis and conceptual work centers on psychological safety, psychological capital, and digital HRM (Habeeb & Yeboah, 2026; Verbal, 2026). The proposed framework treats these as personal resources and boundary conditions within a broader antecedents-engagement-consequences model, rather than as the organizing construct. These statements of difference are limited to the corpus reviewed here and do not claim that no other framework exists.

Theoretical contributions

The paper makes four theoretical contributions. First, it integrates a fragmented antecedent and outcome literature into one antecedents engagement consequences model for higher education, so that the drivers and payoffs of engagement are read within a single account, rather than as separate single-pathway models. Second, it positions Job Demands Resources theory (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017) as the structural lens while incorporating motivational perspectives (Jankelová et al., 2025) and social exchange arguments (Paul, 2026; Singh et al., 2024), thereby accounting for variation in engagement that JD-R alone does not explain. Third, it places cross-level interactions at the center of the model, building on the multilevel evidence of Whitsed et al. (2024), and makes them operational through four mechanisms (M1 to M4) that can be specified in multilevel designs. Fourth, it expresses the model as nine conceptual propositions and extends its scope to both academic and non-academic staff, which gives future empirical work a defined set of relationships to test.

Practical contributions

The framework also has practical implications for higher education people management, each of which follows from the evidence synthesized above. Universities should manage demands structurally, not simply expect individual resilience (Priambada &

Wulani, 2025). They can strengthen engagement by securing day-to-day resource conditions, namely autonomy, recognition, support, and feedback (Ansa & Shaharruddin, 2025; Ibrahim et al., 2026). Because leadership and climate determine whether the institution is experienced as a source of support or of strain, leadership development and organizational climate deserve attention alongside fairness in organizational practice (Asmamaw & Semela, 2023; Deroncele-Acosta et al., 2026; Jaurigue, 2024; Ukaj et al., 2026) . Work-life boundaries under hybrid and flexible arrangements should be managed as part of engagement policy (Batool & Asif, 2026). Finally, because engagement is linked to retention, universities concerned with staff continuity should treat it as part of retention strategy rather than as a private employee attitude (Margaretha et al., 2025; Parveen & Subramanyachary, 2026). Because the propositions are not yet tested, these implications should be applied as evidence-informed practice and monitored locally, not as proven interventions.

Implications and future research

Future research should move beyond single-site and single-group studies and treat engagement in higher education as a comparative, multilevel, and time-sensitive phenomenon. The multilevel evidence of Whitsed et al. (2024) suggests that engagement develops through linked individual, team, and organizational processes, so designs that capture these levels together are now needed. Comparative work should also include both academic and non-academic employees, since stressors, satisfaction, and engagement conditions differ across university roles (Ibrahim & Lawal, 2026; Lumapas & Espina, 2026; Priambada & Wulani, 2025). Longitudinal research is especially important because emerging work arrangements may be changing the resource-demand balance over time. Hybrid and flexible work are already reshaping how higher education employees experience autonomy, support, and boundaries (Batool & Asif, 2026; Lu et al., 2025; Shepard & Mcnaughtan, 2024). In parallel, digital transformation and digital HRM introduce new engagement contexts that remain conceptually underdeveloped (Habeeb & Yeboah, 2026; Hizam et al., 2023). Reviewers should therefore expect future models to test whether psychological safety and related personal resources clarify these newer conditions, especially given the fragmentation identified by Verbal (2026).

Empirical tests of P1 to P9 should follow the research agenda above in specific ways. P5 and mechanisms M1 to M4 call for multilevel modeling in which employees are nested in teams and institutions, with resources and demands measured at the level where they originate. P6 to P8 call for longitudinal designs that can separate the mediating role of

engagement from its role as an outcome. P9 calls for comparative samples of academic and non-academic staff, including under hybrid, flexible, and digital work arrangements.

5. CONCLUSION

Taken together, the literature supports a clear conceptual claim that employee engagement in higher education is best understood as the product of how universities balance job demands and job resources, and of whether leadership and institutional context convert that balance into sustainable psychological energy. Job Demands-Resources theory provides the core explanation for this pattern (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017), and higher education studies show that autonomy, recognition, support, and feedback strengthen engagement, while excessive demands and crisis conditions weaken it (Ansa & Shaharruddin, 2025; Ibrahim et al., 2026; Whitsed et al., 2024) . This process is further reinforced when leadership, climate, and motivation build self-efficacy, support, and value alignment (Deroncele-Acosta et al., 2026; Jankelová et al., 2025). The consequences are institutionally significant. Engagement is linked to productivity (Jaurigue, 2024), innovative work behavior (Zargar et al., 2025), organizational citizenship behavior (Padilla-Lugo & Hernández, 2026), and retention outcomes (Margaretha et al., 2025). Engagement should therefore be treated not as a peripheral attitudinal variable, but as a central organizing construct for higher education people management and institutional sustainability. The framework is offered as a set of conceptual propositions (P1 to P9) that require empirical testing, and its main practical message is that universities can act on engagement through the resource and demand conditions they control at the organizational, team, and individual levels.

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