

**THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN AUTONOMY AND WORK ENGAGEMENT
AMONG LECTURERS AT KAJANG VOCATIONAL COLLEGE****NURUL NABILA BINTI IBRAHIM**University Selangor
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kumalaevva@gmail.com**Abstract**

Providing employees with more autonomy at work has increased their work engagement. However, past research did not highlight how autonomy can enhance work engagement in the context of vocational college lecturers. It is essential to perform studies in this area because vocational college lecturers are demanded with quality competency to deliver significant practical knowledge. In this investigation, a quantitative research strategy was used. The data was gathered using a series of questionnaires that included the 9-item Work Design Questionnaire (WDQ) scale and the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-9) for the 9-item scale. The study found that when people have more control over their work and can make decisions that match their values, they feel more energized, committed, and focused on their tasks. This sense of control leads to a strong feeling of ownership and responsibility for the results of their work.

Keywords: Autonomy, Work Engagement, Lecturers, Vocational College

INTRODUCTION

Technical and Vocational Education Training (TVET) plays a crucial role in the contemporary day by addressing the need for a proficient workforce and facilitating economic development. Vocational colleges are paramount in equipping students with the necessary skills and knowledge to enter the labour market. The domain of lecturer professional development is characterized by its intricate nature and perpetual evolution. Lecturers are experiencing a growing demand to excel in their roles, as their level of proficiency substantially influences the academic advancement of students. Hence, it is imperative to train and consistently enhance the skills of educators adequately.

The primary objective of this research is to examine the correlation between autonomy and work engagement within the context of teachers at Kajang Vocational College, Malaysia. Malaysia's educational system is always evolving to raise the standard of instruction across the board. Lecturers play a vital role in enabling this transition; yet, they face increasing workloads and elevated stress levels. By giving lecturers the power and liberty to do their work without undue oversight, the idea of autonomy presents a viable remedy.

The presence of autonomy, which refers to the ability to exercise significant decision-making authority in the workplace, is a crucial factor in promoting lecturer well-being and job satisfaction. There exists a positive association between autonomy and psychological well-being, as well as enhanced work outcomes (Oprea et al., 2018; De-Juanas, Á., 2020). On the other hand, a lack of autonomy can result in adverse outcomes such as heightened levels of stress and burnout. The concept of work engagement, which refers to the level of commitment and involvement that employees have toward their work, has been found to yield a multitude of favorable outcomes for both individuals and organizations (Niadianti et al., 2021). The aforementioned factors, including motivation (Van Wingerden et al., 2018), inventiveness (Chaudhary et al., 2019), dedication (Pitaloka et al., 2021), and overall performance (Meyers et al., 2020), are subject to influence. Insufficient work involvement has been found to have adverse consequences, including reduced productivity and increased employee turnover rates (Wicaksono, 2020).

The education system in Malaysia is undergoing a continuous development process to improve the overall quality of education. Lecturers are crucial in facilitating this shift; nonetheless, they encounter escalated workloads and heightened stress levels. The concept of autonomy offers a potential solution by granting lecturers the authority and independence to handle their tasks without excessive supervision. In summary, this study examines the significant correlation between lecturer autonomy and work engagement, offering valuable insights that can improve the overall well-being of lecturers, the quality of teaching, and the outcomes of students within the vocational education sector.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Numerous research conducted in recent years has found a beneficial association between autonomy and work engagement within organizational settings (Lin et al., 2016; Malinowska et al., 2018). The concept of autonomy holds significant importance within the realm of motivation and work design theories, as highlighted by Muecke et al. (2019). The notion of autonomy, which is grounded in the principle of self-determination, has a substantial influence on morale, well-being, and motivation, as evidenced by the research conducted by Muecke et al. (2019). According to Fotiadis et al. (2019), there is a positive correlation between job

autonomy and productivity, particularly in the context of making crucial decisions inside the workplace. The presence of autonomy within the workplace has a significant impact on an individual's psychological well-being, as evidenced by the research conducted by Gardner and Donald (2019). Furthermore, this positive effect is further enhanced with the trait of resilience. The concept of occupational autonomy has been found to have a positive association with favorable outcomes within the hospitality business, as demonstrated by Fotiadis et al. (2019).

Moreover, the issue of work engagement holds considerable importance within the higher education industry (Sheikh et al., 2019). Conte et al. (2019) and Park and Johnson (2019) have identified several factors that have been found to exert an influence on work engagement. These factors include workplace demands, spiritual leadership, and polychronic behavior. Previous research has indicated a significant correlation between employee engagement and performance, as demonstrated by the findings of Wahyuni et al. (2020). The study conducted by Greenier et al. (2021) examines the influence of emotional regulation skills and psychological well-being on job satisfaction among English language lecturers. Seppala et al. (2020) suggest that work engagement is influenced by additional factors such as resilience and psychological competence. The intricate nature of the association between autonomy and work engagement is evident. Several studies have examined the relationship between autonomy and engagement, with some indicating that increased autonomy is associated with higher levels of engagement (Muecke et al., 2019). However, other research emphasizes the significance of maintaining a balance between autonomy and an individual's level of job involvement (Lin et al., 2016). The impact of autonomy on participation can vary depending on various contextual factors (Seppala et al., 2020). Moreover, while autonomy can foster creativity and a sense of ownership in tasks, excessive autonomy without clear guidelines or support structures may lead to feelings of isolation or a lack of direction, potentially affecting overall engagement levels.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) posits that autonomy is a fundamental psychological feature (Desi et al., 2017). It asserts that the presence of autonomy, competence, and relatedness is crucial for achieving optimal development and overall well-being. Autonomy encompasses the ability to regulate one's actions while also adhering to external expectations (Deci et al., 2017). The Utrecht Job Engagement Scale (UWES) assesses work engagement, including vigour, devotion, and absorption. According to Schaufeli et al. (2002), employees engaged in their jobs have qualities such as motivation, enthusiasm, and a strong sense of connection to their tasks. The conceptual framework visually represents the connection between autonomy and work engagement. Autonomy comprises various aspects, including work scheduling, procedures, and decision-making. On the other hand, job engagement encompasses dimensions such as vigour, dedication, and absorption. Prior studies have demonstrated a positive association between these characteristics, namely among instructors in vocational institutions.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a correlational inferential analysis and descriptive research design to examine the relationship between autonomy and work engagement among lecturers at Vocational College Kajang. The primary data collection was conducted utilizing a quantitative research approach, employing a survey instrument in the form of a questionnaire. The primary objective of this study was to examine the association between autonomy and work engagement, with a specific emphasis on the dimensions of vigour, devotion, and absorption. Moreover, the research employed a total sample approach, given that the population of Vocational College Kajang consisted of 89 lecturers, which falls below 100. Hence, the questionnaires were completed by all the lecturers. The process of data gathering involved the utilization of online questionnaires as a means to engage with professors who were unable to partake in face-to-face interactions. The online poll encompassed inquiries pertaining to

autonomy and work engagement. The participants were requested to indicate their preferences regarding job control and involvement. The acquired data underwent processing using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software for the purpose of conducting statistical analysis.

The survey incorporated inquiries concerning the demographic characteristics of the respondents, encompassing their age, gender, race, and length of employment. The research employed two primary instruments to gauge various aspects of the participants' work experiences. First, the Autonomy Sub-Scale of the Work Design Questionnaire (WDQ-9) was administered. This instrument evaluated autonomy across three distinct dimensions: work scheduling, work method, and decision-making, utilizing a 5-point Likert scale. This scale allowed respondents to express their level of agreement or disagreement with statements pertaining to these autonomy facets.

Second, the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-9) was employed to assess work engagement in the participants. This scale appraised work engagement across three dimensions: vigour, dedication, and absorption, using a 7-point Likert scale. Respondents were asked to rate their agreement with statements associated with these dimensions to gauge their level of work engagement. These two instruments were selected for their ability to provide comprehensive insights into the participants' autonomy and work engagement in a structured and measurable manner. The Likert scale responses on both instruments offered a nuanced understanding of the respondents' perceptions and experiences in the workplace, which were essential for the research's objectives.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The objective of this study was to ascertain the correlation between autonomy and work engagement among lecturers at Kajang Vocational College. The findings were presented in two distinct sections. The present study aims to examine the extent of autonomy and work engagement among lecturers at Kajang Vocational College, as well as explore the relationship between autonomy and work engagement in this specific context.

Table 1: Frequency of Gender among Lecturers at Kajang Vocational College

Gender	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Male	27	37%
Female	46	63%
	73	100%

Table 1 presents the gender distribution among lecturers at Kajang Vocational College. The sample consisted of 27 male teachers, accounting for 37% of the total, and 46 female lecturers, representing 63% of the total. Based on the available data, a more significant proportion of women engage in participation compared to men.

Table 2: Frequency of Ethnicity among Lecturers at Kajang Vocational College

Ethnic	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Malay	68	93.1%
Chinese	3	4.1%

Indian	2	2.8%
	73	100%

Table 2 displays the ethnic composition of lecturers at Kajang Vocational College, as observed in this study. The study population comprised 68 participants, 93.1% identified as Malay. The sample comprises three Chinese lecturers, accounting for 4.1% of the total responses, and two Indian lecturers, or 2.8% of the sample. According to the data, Malay emerged as the predominant ethnic group.

Table 3: Frequency of Age among Lecturers at Kajang Vocational College

Age	Frequency	Percentage (%)
25-34 years old	15	20.5%
35-44 years old	22	30.2%
45-54 years old	27	36.9%
55-64 years old	9	12.4%
	73	100%

The distribution of age among lecturers at Kajang Vocational College is presented in Table 3. A significant proportion of lecturers, including 27 respondents (36.9%), were found to fall within the age bracket of 45-54 years. Lecturers aged 35-44 constituted 22 respondents (30.2%), while 15 respondents (20.5%) were 25-34. The age group of 55-64 years had 9 respondents (12.4%). These findings indicate the highest representation of respondents in the 45-54 age range, whereas the lowest representation was observed in the 55-64 age range.

Table 4: Frequency of Duration of Employment among Lecturers at Kajang Vocational College

Duration	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Less than a year	3	4.1%
1 to 5 years	17	23.3%
6 to 12 years	24	32.8%
13 to 20 years	19	26.2%
21 to 30 years	10	13.6%
	73	100%

Table 4 displays the employment duration distribution among Kajang Vocational College lecturers. The highest percentage, 32.8% (24 respondents), had been employed for 6 to 12 years. The second-highest, 26.2% (19 respondents), had a duration of 13 to 20 years. Lecturers with 1 to 5 years of employment constituted 23.3% (17 respondents), while those with 21 to 30 years were 13.6% (10 respondents). A small 4.1% (3 individuals) represented those employed for less than a year. This data reveals that most respondents had 6 to 12 years of employment, with only a few having been employed for less than a year.

The Autonomy Level among Lecturers at Kajang Vocational College

Table 5: Descriptive Analysis of Autonomy Level among Lecturers at Kajang Vocational College

Autonomy Level	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Low	14	19.2%
Moderate	23	31.5%
High	36	49.3%
	73	100%

The descriptive analysis in Table 5 reveals that a substantial 49.3% of Kajang Vocational College lecturers exhibit high autonomy levels, while 19.2% have lower autonomy levels. These findings provide valuable insights into lecturer autonomy at the college, indicating a notable prevalence of high autonomy, particularly the 49.3% majority.

The Work Engagement Level among Lecturers at Kajang Vocational College

Table 6: Descriptive Analysis of Autonomy Level among Lecturers at Kajang Vocational College

Work Engagement Level	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Low	12	16.5%
Moderate	27	36.9%
High	34	46.6%
	73	100%

Table 6 presents the results of a detailed descriptive analysis of work engagement levels among Kajang Vocational College lecturers. Notably, 46.6% exhibited high work engagement, while only 16.5% scored the lowest.

The Relationship between Autonomy and Work Engagement among Lecturers at Kajang Vocational College

Table 7: Spearman's Rank Correlation Analysis between Autonomy and Work Engagement among Lecturers at Kajang Vocational College

	Work Engagement		
	Correlation Coefficient	Sig. (2-tailed)	N
Autonomy	.801	<.001	73

Table 7 presents Spearman's Rank Correlation results, showing a significant correlation ($r = .801$, $p < .01$) between autonomy and work engagement. The study supports the presence of a

positive relationship between autonomy and work engagement among Kajang Vocational College lecturers. In essence, higher autonomy corresponds to greater work engagement.

DISCUSSION

The research aimed to investigate the significance of autonomy in relation to work engagement among lecturers at Kajang Vocational College. Spearman rank correlation analysis established these connections within a well-defined framework. The findings strongly support the idea that increased autonomy positively relates to higher work engagement levels among employees. This research contributes to the existing body of evidence, reinforcing the importance of autonomy in the vocational college setting for enhancing lecturers' work engagement.

The study confirms a significant relationship between autonomy and work engagement among lecturers at Kajang Vocational College, consistent with previous research by Zhang et al. (2021). Given the current employment landscape, addressing work-related challenges, particularly during adversity and uncertainty, is crucial for educators' well-being and productivity (Peng et al., 2022). Furthermore, understanding the nuances of autonomy's impact on various aspects of teaching methodologies could pave the way for tailored strategies, thereby promoting a more fulfilling and effective educational experience for both educators and students alike.

In the context of academia, autonomy is highly relevant and includes elements such as curriculum development, teaching approaches, and control over work schedules (Pattnaik & Sahoo, 2021). The study found that nearly half of the lecturers (49.3%) demonstrated a significant level of autonomy, while 19.2% indicated reduced autonomy. Educators' autonomy allows them to customize their teaching methods, engage in research, and ultimately experience job satisfaction and motivation (Muecke et al., 2019). Furthermore, the research highlighted a correlation between higher levels of autonomy and increased student satisfaction, suggesting a potential link between educator autonomy and overall academic performance.

Conversely, some lecturers may experience diminished autonomy due to external constraints, such as rigid curriculum rules or administrative limitations, leading to dissatisfaction, disengagement, and decreased motivation (Liu & Cohen, 2021; Khan & Khan, 2020). The presence of autonomy empowers lecturers and enhances their engagement and dedication to their roles, ultimately improving the quality of teaching and learning experiences (Fotiadis et al., 2019). This, in turn, cultivates their degree of involvement and dedication to their professional responsibilities. On the contrary, the absence of autonomy has been found to be associated with emotions of dissatisfaction (De Lissovoy, 2018), disengagement (Peng et al., 2022), and diminished motivation (Jiang et al., 2020), which can have detrimental effects on the overall quality of teaching and learning encounters (Johari et al., 2018).

The concept of work engagement, characterized by absorption, energy, and commitment toward job responsibilities, is crucial in educational settings (Schaufeli, 2010). Engaged instructors display high levels of absorption, vigor, and dedication (Pitaloka et al., 2021). Nibbelink et al. (2018) found that engagement leads to additional efforts, professional growth, and positive relationships with students and colleagues. Notably, 46.6% of lecturers showed exceptional commitment, while only 16.5% exhibited minimum job engagement. Autonomy support positively influences employee engagement (Zhang et al., 2021). Hence, according to Tang (2019), granting educators autonomy in curriculum development and teaching methods fosters dedication to the profession.

Job happiness is closely linked to work engagement, with dedication influencing job satisfaction (Obrad et al., 2021). Limited job resources, including job characteristics and support, can hinder engagement (Yao et al., 2022). In situations with high job demands and limited resources, engagement may suffer (Sheikh et al., 2019). The absence of autonomy, such as micromanagement and limited decision-making, can lead to disengagement, frustration, and reduced job satisfaction among lecturers (Lin et al., 2016; Muecke et al., 2019). Understanding these factors, including autonomy, is essential for creating a positive work environment and enhancing educational outcomes.

The results of this study support the hypothesis, suggesting a significant role of autonomy in promoting work engagement. These results are parallel with previous findings by Palumbo (2021), where building on self-determination theory, autonomy is shown to positively impact employees' competence, social connections, and choice-making, leading to increased involvement in various work aspects. Approximately 49.3% of professors at Kajang Vocational College were found to possess a notable degree of autonomy, which correlates with their work engagement. Previous research supports the positive link between autonomy and work engagement (Lin et al., 2016; Muecke et al., 2019; Seppala et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2021; Mangundjaya, 2021). Furthermore, 46.6% of lecturers displayed high job engagement, which can be partly attributed to the autonomy they enjoy in their professional roles. In essence, autonomy, defined as decision-making authority and control over professional responsibilities, leads to heightened ownership, commitment, and work engagement among lecturers.

In summary, this investigation underscores the crucial role of autonomy in enhancing work engagement among lecturers. Autonomy empowers lecturers to take ownership, show commitment, and engage more deeply in their professional responsibilities. Recognizing the significance of autonomy, educational institutions should foster supportive work environments that prioritize autonomy, thereby improving lecturers' work engagement, job satisfaction, and overall well-being. This approach contributes to a dynamic and enriching educational environment benefiting lecturers, students, and the institution as a whole.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the relationship between autonomy and work engagement among Kajang Vocational College lecturers, with its emphasis on the difficulties that educators encounter in managing stress and tiredness. The results offer strong empirical support for the hypothesis that higher levels of work engagement are positively correlated with increased discretion and independence in work contexts. The notion that promoting autonomy can improve lecturers' engagement is supported by the study's thorough analysis of the dynamics between autonomy and work engagement. One of the main factors was found to be autonomy, which gives lecturers the ability to plan their courses, make decisions, and manage their schedules. This contributes to a feeling of empowerment and ownership.

However, the study on autonomy and work engagement among Kajang Vocational College lecturers may have limitations. Firstly, as it concentrated solely on this college, the results might not apply universally due to differing institutional cultures and factors affecting enthusiasm for work. Further research is needed in varied settings to confirm these findings. Secondly, reliance on self-reported measures could introduce bias or measurement errors, underscoring the necessity for improved methodologies in future studies. Moreover, the study predominantly focused on quantitative aspects, neglecting qualitative dimensions and individual differences. Subsequent research could delve into lecturers' qualitative experiences with autonomy, identify influential aspects, and consider moderating factors like personality traits or job tenure.

Additionally, it omitted to investigate potential obstacles to attaining autonomy or institutional influences on its scope, which could enrich the understanding of the autonomy-work engagement relationship. Furthermore, the study's limitations were exacerbated by a smaller participant pool of 42, instead of the intended 53, due to time constraints and participant commitment issues. This reduced sample size might impact the representation of Kajang Vocational College lecturers, affecting generalizability and statistical power. Consequently, findings might be more prone to chance variations and may not wholly capture the genuine relationship between autonomy and work engagement among lecturers. Furthermore, the limited sample restricts diversity and representation within the lecturer population.

To address these challenges, future research should dedicate more resources to participant recruitment and engagement strategies to achieve a larger, more diverse sample. Acknowledging the context at Kajang Vocational College, interpretations of this study should be made, and further research in diverse settings is crucial to validate and expand these findings, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of autonomy and work engagement among lecturers. Moreover, to enhance lecturers' work engagement at Kajang Vocational College, recommendations emerge from this study. First, foster autonomy by cultivating a culture that values lecturer input, allowing decision-making involvement, and promoting independence in curriculum design and scheduling. Second, prioritize professional development programs geared toward enhancing autonomy, decision-making, creativity, and leadership skills. Additionally, support work-life balance through flexible arrangements and self-care initiatives. Foster an inclusive, collaborative environment through open communication, teamwork, and valuing diverse perspectives. Further research exploring lecturers' experiences in various educational contexts, potential moderators, and qualitative methods for deeper insights is advised. Implementing these suggestions can boost lecturer autonomy, leading to improved engagement, job satisfaction, and educational outcomes at vocational colleges.

This study underscores the importance of autonomy in influencing work engagement among Kajang Vocational College lecturers. Prioritizing autonomy in supportive work environments has the potential to enhance work engagement, job satisfaction, and well-being among educators, ultimately creating a positive educational environment benefiting all stakeholders.

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