Exploration of Psychosocial Hazards of Job Context Among Academics at Malaysian Private Research-Focused Universities - Case Study

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Abstract
This study delves into the psychosocial hazards encountered by academics in renowned private research-focused universities in Malaysia. The demanding requirements set forth by the Malaysian Ministry of Education (MoHE) for international recognition, rankings, and quality, coupled with the Key Performance Indicator (KPI) expectations, have been observed to induce stress among academics. This research highlights job context as a critical domain encompassing various factors and conditions surrounding academic work. Through a qualitative approach employing the case-study method, data were gathered from seventeen participants via standardised open-ended interviews and analysed thematically using Atlas. ti version 23 analysis software. The findings revealed six significant stress themes within the job context: organisational culture & function, role in the organisation, career development, decision latitude, interpersonal relationships at work, and home interface. Four emerging themes were identified: leadership, performance appraisal exercise, passion & interest, and administration support. These insights shed light on academic challenges within the job context, emphasising the importance of promoting well-being to optimise organisational practices and academic performance and ensure a sustainable career path in academia.
Keywords: Psychosocial Hazards, Workplace Stress, Job Context, Academics, Qualitative Method, Case Study

Introduction
Psychosocial hazards encompass workplace elements that can induce employee stress (ILO, 2016b), leading to potential psychological or physical damage (Cox & Griffiths, 2005). Within the work environment, individuals may encounter emotional and mental health risks, which

have the potential to jeopardise their psychological, physiological, and social welfare significantly, ultimately impairing their professional productivity. According to the International Labour Office (ILO, 2016a), "stress" is frequently mischaracterised as a psychosocial hazard when it is an outcome or result of hazards. Within the field of occupational safety and health (OSH), a hazard refers to any factors, processes, or circumstances (which may encompass work environment, work organisation, or work practices leading to unfavourable organisational consequences) that lead to harm or adverse health effects among individuals in a work setting.

Based on organisations like the ILO, WHO and European Commission definitions, psychosocial hazards refer to various aspects of work organisation, design, and management that possess the capacity to negatively impact individual health and safety, including aspects that lead to unfavourable outcomes within the organisation, such as increased sickness absence, they have decreased productivity or human error. Psychosocial hazards have been termed as any potential factors that could lead to stress, also referred to as employees' negative perception of stressors (Leka, 2016), workplace issues which could adversely affect workers' psychological and physical well-being.

The Malaysian Ministry of Education (MoHE) requirements for international recognition, rankings and quality, and the Key Performance Index (KPI) of research-focused universities have been perceived as very demanding and have been causing stress among academics (Singh et al., 2014; Rathakrishnan et al., 2016). This shows that the intense race towards international recognition and demanding university KPI are considered psychosocial hazards to academics. Psychosocial hazards among Malaysian academics have been commonly reported, and due to that, many have claimed to have suffered from some manifestations of psychosocial hazards. A study by Arbae et al (2019) on Malaysian academics at higher learning institutions indicated that most academics experienced stress. They identified that the stress experienced by these academic staff was mainly attributed to work demands, interpersonal relationships and roles in the organisation. According to Panatik et al (2012), many academics felt that they did not have a sense of job satisfaction and that they had a strong urge to quit their job due to their feelings of frustration towards their workload & work pace, control latitude, interpersonal relationships at work, role in organisation and organisational culture which related explicitly to managerial support (Panatik et al., 2012).

Similarly, Idris (2011) reported that Malaysian public university academics experienced strain due to role overload and ambiguity. It was further corroborated that these academics experienced more strain in dealing with role ambiguity. On the other hand, Ismail & Arma (2016) reported that academics at a Malaysian research university experienced a significant stress level due to career development, teaching workload and rigorous research demands stipulated in their performance requirements set by the university. The academics agreed that they felt the stress even more because the university has set the policy that career promotion is correlated with research publication demands. Even though it is essential to address this critical issue, there are still efforts to explore it among Malaysian academics using the qualitative method to get their complete perspective about their psychosocial hazard experience in the job context.
According to Cox & Griffiths (2005), employees are exposed to psychosocial hazards in terms of job context, including organisational culture and function, role in the organisation, and

career development: decision latitude and interpersonal relationships at work and home interface. Consequently, this study aims to explore the psychosocial hazards of job context among academics at Malaysian private research-focused universities. Thus, this study will investigate the following research question: What psychosocial hazards are experienced by academics when dealing with their job context?

Motivation for this Study
The escalating demands and expectations in the academic realm, particularly within Malaysian private research-focused universities, have led to a significant increase in psychosocial hazards among academics. These hazards, which include the pressure to meet international recognition standards, achieve high rankings, and fulfill stringent Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) set by the Malaysian Ministry of Education (MoHE), have been identified as major contributors to stress among academics. This study is driven by the urgent need to understand and address these psychosocial hazards, which not only affect the well-being and productivity of academics but also have broader implications for the academic community and the Malaysian education system as a whole.

The study aims to contribute to the existing body of knowledge by providing a comprehensive analysis of the psychosocial hazards faced by academics in Malaysia, focusing on the job context. By employing a qualitative approach through standardized open-ended interviews and thematic analysis using Atlas.ti version 23, this research seeks to uncover the underlying factors contributing to stress among academics. The findings from this study are expected to offer valuable insights into the specific challenges faced by academics in their job context, including aspects such as organizational culture, role ambiguity, career development opportunities, decision latitude, interpersonal relationships, and work-life balance.

This research is particularly timely given the increasing recognition of the importance of mental health and well-being in the academic community. By shedding light on the psychosocial hazards that academics encounter, this study aims to inform policy and practice, promoting a more supportive and sustainable academic environment. The insights gained from this study will not only help in addressing the immediate challenges faced by academics but also contribute to the broader discourse on academic well-being and career development in Malaysia.

In summary, this study is motivated by the need to understand and mitigate the psychosocial hazards that academics face in Malaysian private research-focused universities. By doing so, it seeks to contribute to the academic community's efforts to create a supportive and sustainable environment for academic work, ultimately enhancing the well-being and productivity of academics.

Method
Research Tool
This qualitative research engaged in a case-study method with multiple cases because data from many instances carry rich, empirical descriptions of a researched issue Yin (1994), and it could show differences in perspective of an issue, especially since this research involves a psychology area (Creswell et al., 2007; Johnson & Stake, 1996). Therefore, to understand the phenomenon of psychosocial hazards experiences among academics at private research-

focused universities in Malaysia, this research investigated two cases involving two universities, University X and University Y. To identify the academics" psychosocial hazards experience, the researcher conducted in-depth interviews, employing standardised open-ended interviews to collect the data (Dudwick et al., 2006) among the academics. This method provides a trusted platform between the researcher and participants where they feel at ease to share their thoughts, feelings and beliefs about the issue(s) being discussed, even if the issues are sensitive and personal (Dejonckheere & Vaughn, 2019).

Research Participants
This study chose academics from these two universities using criterion and snowball sampling techniques. Pseudonyms were assigned to all participants in order to protect their anonymity and privacy. The criterion sampling technique used predetermined specific inclusion and exclusion criteria (Ames et al., 2019; Suri, 2011). The inclusion criteria in this study include academics that:
1. are from University X & University Y only
2. have been working at University X or University Y for at least three consecutive years
3. have experienced at least two performance appraisals at their current serving university

All in all, seventeen participants were involved in this study. Fourteen participants agreed to be interviewed via the Microsoft Teams platform, and the other three were interviewed physically and face-to-face. All interviews were recorded, and the recording files were labelled using pseudonyms. They were kept discreetly and were only accessible to the lead researcher (Stuckey, 2014).

Ethical Issues
Stringent measures were implemented to uphold the privacy and confidentiality of the participants. Throughout the data collection, analysis, and reporting of the study's findings, participants" names and identities were safeguarded and undisclosed (Arifin, 2018). Pseudonyms were consistently employed in all documents and records to ensure anonymity and protect sensitive information. Informed consent was obtained from the participants before the interview session to sustain data and confidentiality protection (Fleming & Zegwaard, 2018). This research also ensured that all participants were given an Explanatory Statement and an Informed Consent form before participating in this research.

Data Management and Analysis Tool
The data obtained from the participants were analysed and interpreted based on pre-established Cox & Griffith'ss (2005) themes and Creswell et al (2007) using a qualitative data analysis software programme, ATLAS.ti v23. The corresponding codes, derived from the psychosocial hazards framework developed by Griffith and Cox (2005), were collected and systematically organised in a structured manner. Any stressful experiences that fell outside the defined psychosocial hazards in Cox and Griffith's (2005) framework were labelled as newly emerging themes.

Results and Discussion
This category has ten identified psychosocial hazards, as presented in Figure 1.0. Six of these ten hazards are consistent with the Cox and Griffiths (2005) framework. The six potential psychosocial hazards of job context that could cause stress among employees are

organisational culture & function, role in the organisation, career development, decision latitude, interpersonal relationships at work, and home interface. The other four were identified as emerging themes: leadership, performance appraisal exercise, passion & interest, and administration support.
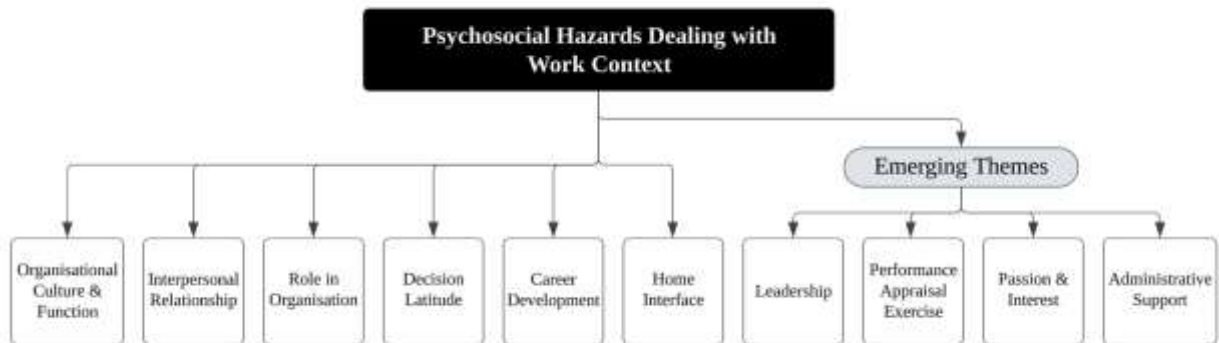

Figure 1.0 Psychosocial Hazards Dealing with Work Context

Theme 1: Organisational Culture & Function
In this research, the organisational culture and function theme was one of the gravest psychosocial hazards that the academics from both University X and University Y experienced. Some felt that the university did not have a strategic direction since many policies and strategies were unclear and kept changing.

> *From what I can see, every year, there are always new things that need to be implemented at this university. It is constantly introducing new things again and again every year, (and they) never want to settle down. Here, there's no culture. Everything depends on individuals, for example, the mentoring system here - there's no such thing as mentoring unless it's of an individual effort like one professor that I know here, who really does the mentoring, and probably a few others that I do not know. Still, the mentoring system is generally only a "talk" (sembang only).*
> Taufiq

Taufiq could not depend on his university as an organisation with a positive and empowering system because, as a university with a powerful brand, his university still could not perform as an organisation with an organisational system and values. To him, the university created one policy, such as the mentoring system, which failed to be executed and administered thoroughly across the board. He further said that:

> *If we were to compare with other IPTS (public universities), their teaching component would have settled down (stabilised). It's business as usual for them, BAU, and it's no big deal for them anymore. Because of that, they (other IPTS) could concentrate on other things, such as research or consultancy. Besides that, there are always inconsistencies in instructions. The management keeps changing directions.*

Patrick shared the same sentiment about the university's direction:
Continuous changes in the system at this university make me nervous; for example, we keep on changing the system in the middle of it, sometimes one part of the system and sometimes the whole system, and I don't know why.

According to ILO, a positive organisational culture and function is an important aspect that can enhance productivity, reduce turnover rates, and boost employee engagement and satisfaction. This aspect is considered an essential determinant of employees" well-being, and they are imperative and necessary for creating a safe, healthy, and productive work environment (ILO, 2019). Organisational culture is a system of shared assumptions, values, and beliefs of acceptable and unacceptable behaviours that are shared by members of an organisation Chatman & Cha (2003); Kerr & Slocum (2005) and in this context, it is the university's rules, values, attitudes, beliefs, and philosophy which dictate the academics" direction and behaviour. These values significantly impact both employees" behaviour and organisational effectiveness. According to Cox & Griffiths (2005), an organisation's organisational culture and function refers to communication, support for problem-solving, personal development and agreement on organisational objectives. According to the academics, this was not achieved. To them, the universities" direction kept changing, and some systems were still not stable and unreliable even though these universities were considered established organisations.

Theme 2: Interpersonal Relationship

Positive interpersonal relationships in the workplace are vital because they can help foster better communication between colleagues. When people feel comfortable with each other, they are more likely to communicate openly, honestly, and respectfully. This can lead to fewer misunderstandings and conflicts and better collaboration overall. However, Mimi did not feel the positivity of some of the people in the management department at her university. To her, these people practised prejudice and discrimination and that has marginalised her ability to progress and perform.

Labelling is being practised here. Suppose any members of the management are against one person in this university, and you happen to be in that person's circle. In that case, it doesn't matter, even if your research projects or areas of expertise were the same as those of this person they did not like; you would also be considered doomed, and the whole team would be in their black book. I was in the research group of one professor who was not a management favourite, and we happened to have the same research areas. But, later, because of many obstacles in her group, this research group was closed because our movement became difficult.

She also mentioned that some colleagues there were not helpful.
I tried to call and email the ones involved to ask about it directly, but nobody supported anything. Everybody only minded his/herself. The culture and environment here is that if you care or want to help, you will do it yourself, so you might as well be indifferent about it in the first place. I feel that people around me are not helpful.

Sophie shared the same sentiment about her colleagues being hostile towards her.
Even though some colleagues are judgemental, they still side with management. If my colleagues show me a lovely face, it's enough for me. I did not ask for more but did not get this from my colleagues.

Positive interpersonal relationships are critical for creating a healthy and productive work environment because employees can have improved communication among colleagues, which is very important in getting work done. Trust among colleagues will also be increased when people have positive interpersonal relationships because they are more likely to trust each other. This can lead to a more cohesive team working towards shared goals. When people feel part of a positive workplace culture, they are more likely to enjoy coming to work each day. This can lead to higher levels of job satisfaction and lower turnover rates. Positive interpersonal relationships can also improve performance because when people work well together, they are more likely to be productive, innovative, and efficient. Ultimately, they can have a positive impact on one's mental health. When people feel supported and connected to their colleagues, they are less likely to experience feelings of loneliness, anxiety, or depression. If academics experience positive interpersonal relationships at work, they would have job satisfaction Mustapha & Zakaria (2020) and thus could boost their work performance.

Theme 3: Role in Organisation

Employees must receive clear role descriptions and instructions from their organisation for effective functioning. This is crucial to avoid confusion and duplication of effort, improve efficiency, increase accountability, encourage teamwork and collaboration, and foster job satisfaction. Jess stated that she had to assume a role she did not like. As an academic, she loved to be involved in research activities more than being a Head because she needed to do a lot of administrative work that limited her time to get involved in research engagements.
We have no choice but to accept the tasks, whether we like them or not; when I took up this post, I would have to sacrifice my research, which upsets me. I love to do research simulations.

Fina, who holds the post of Head at her university, said that holding a managerial post was stressful because she had to fulfil many responsibilities that consumed her time. She also disagreed about academics assuming other non-academic related roles at the university.
To me, it is stressful when we are holding a post. To me, as long as work delegation is done fairly, it's ok, like marketing for the university. Sometimes, we also notice that one person needs to do many things even though that is not the person's KPI.

She further elaborated that academics, in general, should not be forced to take other non-academic roles at the university.
Other than an academic's core role (teaching, supervision, research, etc.), like marketing, don't force them to do it. Some lecturers like to do marketing, but not all.

Clarity of roles is an essential aspect of organisational effectiveness. It refers to clearly defining job responsibilities and expectations for individuals within an organisation. When roles are clearly defined, employees know what they are responsible for, their boundaries, and what is expected of them. In this context, academics should be given roles deemed suitable for their skills and expertise. Some academics felt dissatisfied and unhappy with the conflicting and ambiguous roles they were assigned, which affected their feeling of satisfaction towards their work (Schulz, 2013). In short, role clarity is essential for the smooth functioning of an organisation. It helps to improve job satisfaction, increase productivity, reduce conflicts, facilitate teamwork, and enable effective delegation.

Theme 4: Career Development

This research revealed that some academics felt that they did not get a fair chance to be promoted. Fina and Shukri experienced this. They felt that academics were not given a fair chance to be promoted compared to their non-academic colleagues. This, to Fina and Shukri, was not fair because academics also had to do the administrative job, which, by nature of the job scope, should be covered by the non-academics.

When we are asked to hold this kind of post, we are not being promoted because our academic posts remain the same; if senior lecturers are still senior lecturers, we are taking on more responsibilities and burdens. So, it's a bit weird at this university, unlike in the corporate line, where the career path is clear - execs, senior exec, manager, etc- this clear career pathway will motivate the staff.

Fina

Shukri also felt the same when he said academics were not promoted accordingly, whereby academics had to fulfil both job scopes, as an academic and an administrator.

The ones who were supposed to do it did not, but they were promoted from executives to senior directors. How much have they contributed to being promoted? As lecturers, we teach simultaneously; we do all sorts of things and only get peanuts.

Shukri

On the other hand, Patrick and Imran felt it was challenging to get promoted or at least to be considered in a career promotion exercise. This conflicts with the findings reported by Abuhashesh & Aldmour (2019) and Kok Sau Yee (2015), who found that career promotion was an essential factor that boosted employee job satisfaction. This, however, was not felt by Patrick and Imran, who had been working at the university for seven and twenty-three years, respectively. Both of them experienced difficulties in getting promoted at their university.

The promotion at this university is getting tough. Seven years ago, I joined this university as a senior lecturer. However, after seven years, I am still a senior lecturer, and the promotion requirements are getting tougher. Before this, when I wanted to apply for promotion, the university froze the promotion exercise; when it reopened, they increased the promotion criteria, which got more demanding.

Patrick

I even have always achieved good scores in the annual appraisal exercises. I have consistently obtained above-average scores for the years I have been here. When I first joined this university as a senior lecturer, I progressed well to AP and passed all the assessments for the senior AP ranking. But now, I do feel some disappointment; I felt slightly disappointed when I wanted to apply for a professorship, but I did not receive any response from the university.

Imran

Career development opportunities are essential for an employee as they provide opportunities for personal growth and development, career advancement, job security, higher earnings potential, and fulfilment. Employers should provide opportunities and resources for career development to help employees reach their full potential and achieve their career goals. For employers to retain their employees, the management must play a significant role by enforcing a mix of on-the-job workplace development opportunities (Martini & Cavenago, 2017). By doing this, an organisation will continuously give opportunities for their employees

to enhance their career success, which is perceived as necessary. Al Balushi et al. (2022) also identified that potential career growth was a motivating element that was crucial to encouraging retention and reducing the intention to leave among employees.

Theme 5: Decision Latitude

In this research, some samples felt they were not given total empowerment in managing their teaching course and did not have complete autonomy as a lecturer. She experienced micromanaging by her immediate superior when she was working on her class activities. Mimi clearly expressed this:

I love my students. So, when they asked me to camp with my first-year students, I believed the activity should be done outside the classroom. It should be impactful so that the students would cherish the memories forever. Indirectly, students would also love the management, the lecturers, and the department because we were doing something meaningful for them. We wanted to take them out, but later, I was told that the idea was not approved because of the budget and some other trivial bureaucracy (which this university is known for), so I just followed what the Head wanted. When you have empowered the lecturers to organise an activity, Heads should trust us to deliver the activity. The Head micromanaged the situation. I think some things here were just being made difficult for lecturers to give - a lot of bureaucracy.

Taufiq and Rose all felt they could not rely on their immediate Heads when making decisions for them. To them, their Heads did not have the say to decide.
I discussed this with the Head, but what can he do?

Taufiq
I share my concerns and predicaments with my bosses but to no avail. They even know all these things because they go through the exact requirements. My academic Head would try his best to minimise the academic workload among staff, but it is actually beyond his control.

Rose
For Alex, it was a bit different; as the dean of a faculty, some suggestions he made did not have any value because, in the end, the management would still be the ones who controlled the decision and results of any suggestions.
I argued this with the management, but because I was alone in proposing this to the management, I did not win. My concern is not heard.

Based on the Karasek Job Demands Control Model Kain & Jex (2010); Karasek et al (1998), employees need to have some degree of decision latitude or control over their work to enhance employees' job satisfaction (Kain & Jex, 2010). This includes employees' control over their work and the ability to make decisions at work. According to (Cox, 1993), employees should have some degree of control over their work tasks because this can help them feel a sense of ownership and engagement. Having to fulfil one's responsibilities as an academic is already a challenge, but interference with bureaucratic university practices could create a negative perception of work-related well-being among academics (Pace et al., 2021). If a leader lacks decision-making control, it can lead to delays and inefficiencies as team members, in this context, the academics, must wait for decisions to be made. This can impact the productivity and overall success of the entire department. Ultimately, these academics became frustrated and demotivated when they felt their Head lacked decision-making

control. This has led to decreased morale and job satisfaction, ultimately impacting the quality of work produced, as Taufiq and Rose felt.

Theme 6: Home Interface

The home-work interface poses a significant psychosocial hazard for academics, blurring personal and professional life boundaries. This phenomenon, characterised by integrating work tasks into the home environment, can lead to heightened stress levels, decreased work-life balance, and increased risk of burnout among academic professionals. This study explored the multifaceted impacts of the home-work interface on academics' psychological and social well-being, highlighting its implications for organisational dynamics and individual health. Kelly shared that she struggled to juggle work and caring for her child alone. She shared:
Then, when I go home, I have my son to look after; I am a single mother now, and I have to take care of my son alone.

Mimi also faced a home-work conflict since she had a special kid at home. Earlier, the husband was working in a different state and due to his frequent travelling, he met twice near-death road accidents. When they decided that the husband quit his job partly because of those incidents and mainly to attend to their special kid and home, Mimi ended up being the family's breadwinner. It was difficult for her to juggle her husband and daughter's situations, emotions, and busy life as an academic. She narrated her grievances as follows:
At home, my firstborn is a special child. So many things happened, and her life has had many stressful events. As parents, it was not easy too. All 3 of us had to go to a psychiatric specialist for therapy. This was not easy for us, but she's improving now. When my daughter was down feeling depressed, it also slowly affected my husband. He felt the pressure and did not know how to express himself. From the outside, we did not realise it at first, but this situation actually affected him mentally. This was also one of the reasons why I think the pressure from my work at this university should not add more to the pressure I have from home.

Mimi

Liu et al (2020) reported that employees leave their organisations when they face work-life conflict. The academics who described that they did not have a work-life balance reported being less healthy, less satisfied with their jobs and had the great possibility to quit teaching (Kinman, 2008). This research highlighted that as academics, especially female academics, it was challenging to juggle workplace and home responsibilities, especially if they were family breadwinners (Naseem et al., 2020). Based on research done Kinman (2008) on academics from many countries concluded that these academics felt that they could not have an ideal work-life balance if they were struggling between work and home. Research done on academics at public universities in Malaysia reported that most academics agreed that they could not get job satisfaction if they could not achieve a work-life balance, where support from home contributed to that (Khairunneezam et al., 2017).

Emerging Themes

This study discovered four critical themes related to academics' challenges in their work environment. These themes are specific to academics in Malaysian private research-focused universities, shedding light on their unique experiences.

Emerging Theme 1: Leadership

The traditional view often treats the organisation as the guiding force that directs the whole institution. In contrast, this study suggests that the individual leader's characteristics are crucial for effective leadership. Although leadership is a critical component of organisational culture, this research identifies leadership as a distinct theme of a newly emerged psychosocial hazard among academics. The gravity of this specific issue is underscored by the findings, with most academics participating in the research expressing concerns related to leadership. The impact of leadership on the well-being, job satisfaction, and overall experiences of academics cannot be understated. The emergence of leadership as a distinct theme underscores its significant role and distinct impact on academics' psychosocial well-being. Some felt that the university did not have a strategic direction since some policies were ambiguous and kept changing. Taufiq expressed his frustrations below:

From what I can see, every year, there are always new things that need to be implemented at this university. It is constantly introducing new things again and again every year, (and they) never want to settle down.

Jess's disappointment with leadership at her university is palpable. She feels the people in charge prioritise their needs and tasks without considering others. This lack of empathy and understanding from the management leaves Jess disillusioned and unsupported. She expressed her disappointment as below:

They only think about themselves and must complete their tasks without thinking about others. It seems that the management does not understand.

Piwowar-Sulej & Siyal (2023) confirmed that the key to any organisation's success relies on leaders and managers who can effectively inspire and stimulate their teams towards goal attainment. Jess's description of leaders not understanding the challenges academics face today also echoes a disconnect between leadership and the actual workforce experiences. This lack of understanding could worsen the feelings of not being heard or valued, leading to increased work-related stress. The World Health Organisation (WHO) identifies such a disconnect as a potential source of job stress, as workers may feel unsupported and misunderstood.

Emerging Theme 2: Performance Appraisal Exercise

The unique challenges and experiences associated with the appraisal process in such environments necessitate a comprehensive, individualised examination to fully understand its impact and implications. This specific emphasis would allow this research to thoroughly probe into the issue more, illuminating the nuanced ways it shaped the experiences and perceptions of academics. Shukri revealed that the appraisal exercise as injustice, not fair and not objective when he clearly expressed that:

When we do appraisals, we have a certain percentage for all the criteria stipulated in our KPI. But, when the appraisal results were finalised, the Head would see the area we lacked. They focused solely on that and penalised the whole percentage that we have obtained, disregarding everything else that we have achieved and concentrated on the area(s) that we failed and penalised us on that last year's appraisal; they took it all away this is not an objective way of appraising-it's just that the appraisal exercise was done just for the sake of doing it might as well not do the appraisal in the first place.

Shukri believed that he was not rated objectively; instead, he was rated entirely based on the area in which he did not score. He continued by saying:

Whatever we score, if you show them what we have achieved, even though we have achieved quite a number based on the items stipulated in the KPI, it will not positively affect our appraisal results; my strengths are not being acknowledged in the appraisal process. The bad appraisal experience is not only felt by me; many of us have been feeling the same.

The investigation has brought to light profound issues within the academic community at universities X and Y, as the performance appraisal exercise has resulted in widespread distress, dissatisfaction, frustration, and demotivation, amounting to a significant psychosocial hazard. Leka et al (2011) emphasised the importance of recognition at work, indicating that its absence could constitute a significant psychosocial hazard that could negatively affect employees' mental health and well-being (Leka et al., 2011).

Emerging Theme 3: Passion & Interest
In this study, the absence of passion and interest is recognised as a psychosocial hazard among academics. This hazard was identified as one of the emerging themes, shedding light on its significance in influencing academics' motivation and engagement in the workplace. By aligning our careers with our interests, work becomes a source of fulfilment and not just a source of income. Jess did not have these feelings when she expressed her feelings about a recent change in her professional responsibilities. She was reassigned from an academic department to a non-academic department at her university, and she had taken on the role of the department Head. She expressed dissatisfaction with this change because it forced her to give up her research work, which she genuinely enjoyed. This is clear when Jess said:

I will have to sacrifice my research, and that actually upsets me. I love to do research simulations.

On the other hand, Naimah struggled with her current situation, feeling a lack of passion for her lecturing role. Her true interest was coding, where she enjoyed manipulating numbers and seeing the results, which she could spend hours doing. She contemplated moving to the industry but had not yet had the courage to change. Her narrative is shared below:

Truthfully, I don't have passion in this work. I know I can do better, but not in this field. I do not like doing all the work here, obtaining research grants and publishing papers. I don't see the point; it's the same thing every day, just a routine. I want to do something more challenging but I don't dare to do it now. I always thought of going into the industry and not staying here doing all the routine jobs of a lecturer. I like seeing people working in the industry. I want to use and apply my knowledge in the industry to benefit people outside.

The role of passion and interest in work satisfaction and engagement is a well-documented phenomenon in organisational psychology. This study identified it as one of the psychosocial hazards experienced by academics. A growing body of literature illustrates the importance of aligning one's career with personal interests, leading to increased job satisfaction, improved work performance, and reduced job stress (Lent et al., 1994; Bakker et al., 2008).

Emerging Theme 4: Administrative Support
Academic work demands the management of diverse roles and responsibilities, underscoring the importance of strong administrative support. Nonetheless, this study highlights the

prevalence of inadequate administrative support as a significant psychosocial hazard within the academic environment. Latifah expressed her frustration about the lack of support from the administrative staff in her department. She cited instances where she and her colleagues had to handle tasks such as releasing funds, which were typically administrative duties. When they requested help from the admin staff, they were told to complete the tasks themselves. Her frustration is affirmed below

Most of the time, we did not receive the support or help that we were supposed to get from the admin staff from these departments. I did not receive the support we should get from the admin people.

Reen also expressed her dismay at her stress dealing with administrative support:
But everywhere I go at this university, the admin staff are not up to the standard. Many are laid back, with no drive to do things around. They have always been like this. They always rely on academics to do the administrative work – the same thing I experienced at the research centre.

These findings align with research by Garrido et al (2019), who reported that efficient administrative support in universities was crucial. They emphasised that leaders of research groups consider strong institutional backing for administrative tasks as one of their most pressing needs. Their findings suggest that providing competent administrative assistance within faculties can significantly enhance the scientific productivity of these units. Such support contributes to creating a more streamlined and effective work setting. By efficiently handling administrative tasks, it frees academics to focus primarily on their scientific pursuits, thereby enhancing the overall productivity and effectiveness of academic work within the university. These cases indicate the crucial role that administrative staff play in shaping the work environment and the well-being of academic staff.

Conclusion
Using a qualitative approach, this study delves deep into the psychosocial hazards experienced by academics at University X and University Y concerning their job context. It aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of their experiences in this regard. Data for this study was obtained through semi-structured interviews. They were managed and analysed based on thematic analysis against Cox and Griffith's psychosocial hazards theoretical framework 2005. The results uncovered that academics from these two private research-oriented universities encountered stressful situations in relation to job context, which was categorised into six distinct psychosocial hazard themes against Cox & Griffith's framework: organisational culture & function, role in organisation, career development, decision latitude, interpersonal relationships at work and home interface. This study further identified four emerging themes of work context: leadership, performance appraisal exercise, passion & interest and administrative support. Subsequently, this study also seeks to explore their coping strategies and the potential adverse effects of these experiences. In conclusion, this research will put forward a plan for mitigating the psychosocial hazards faced by academics, providing them with practical tools and approaches to manage and address these challenges within their work environment.

Even though this study provided several practical and theoretical implications, there are other limitations that future researchers may address. First, the data in this study were collected through semi-structured interviews, which future research could incorporate into additional data sources, such as observations or surveys, to corroborate and validate the findings. Second, the qualitative approach is valuable for exploring in-depth experiences and future research. Finally, this study employed a cross-sectional design, capturing a snapshot of participants' experiences at a specific point in time. Longitudinal research could provide insights into how psychosocial hazards change over time and their long-term effects on academics.

Contributions

This research contributes significantly to the understanding of psychosocial hazards within the academic environment, particularly in Malaysian private research-focused universities. By employing a qualitative approach and focusing on the job context, it provides a detailed exploration of the stressors that academics face, including organisational culture, role ambiguity, career development opportunities, decision latitude, interpersonal relationships, and home-interface. The study's findings, which reveal six significant themes and four emerging psychosocial hazards themes of work context, offer valuable insights into the specific challenges academics encounter in the workplace. This research not only contributes to the academic field by shedding light on the psychosocial hazards that academics face but also emphasises the importance of promoting well-being to optimise organisational practices and academic performance. Furthermore, it highlights the need for sustainable career paths in academia, thereby informing policy and practice to create a more supportive and sustainable academic environment.

Declarations

- Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate: Before the interview session, participants were provided with informed consent, ensuring data protection and confidentiality. Each participant received an Explanatory Statement and an Informed Consent Form prior to their involvement in the research.
- Consent for Publication: We confirm consent for the publication of this research.
- Availability of Data and Materials: The data and materials are readily available upon request
- Competing Interests and Funding: No competing interests or funding sources are associated with this work.
- Authors' Contributions: All authors contributed equally to this work.
- Acknowledgement: We extend our gratitude to all academics from Universities X & Y for their valuable contributions.

Acknowledgement

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