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Transforming Higher Education: A conceptual model for fostering career adaptability and mitigating turnover intention among Early Career Academicians (ECA)

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Abstract

Turnover intention among early-career academicians (ECA) can have detrimental impacts on the sustainability of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Hence, it is essential to investigate why ECA might devise a concrete plan to quit. Career adaptability is a critical determinant in minimising turnover intention as it may influence the ECA decision to remain in the organisation. However, career adaptability serves as two-edged swords as the literature has mixed findings. Drawing on the Conservation of Resource Theory (COR), this paper aims to reconcile the findings and unveil the link between career adaptability towards turnover intention mediated by work engagement.

Keywords: career adaptability; turnover intention; early career academician (ECA); higher education institutions.

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1.0 Introduction

The turnover issues continue to garner significant attention from Human Resource practitioners in Human Resource Management (HRM) and organisational behaviour (OB) despite rigorous research that has been done for centuries. (Hom et al., 2017; Memon et al., 2021; Oruh et al., 2020). A high turnover rate creates a labour-force void, lowering workplace productivity and affecting the company's bottom line. Previous findings by Memon et al. (2021) reported it is estimated to take 42 days and cost six to nine months of the employee's salary in recruiting and training expenses. Previous findings also revealed that economic losses associated with turnover could range from 90% to 200% of annual salary due to recruitment, selection, and training expenses (Reina et al., 2017).

The education industry is among the top five industries with the highest percentage of employees leaving the organisation in the USA. Kusy and Driscoll (2020) reported that about 30% of educators quit the organisation within five years, and another 84% left voluntarily. Compared to other public employees, where 54% work until normal retirement age, only 26% of teachers simultaneously work in the private sector (Kusy & Driscoll, 2020). The same scenario is observed in Malaysia regarding the turnover rate. Regarding Malaysia's Higher Education Institutions, the turnover rate in public universities is 11%; meanwhile, the turnover rate in private universities is over 26%. In line with this, findings by Badiozaman (2021) stated that the turnover rate in private universities was double the rate in public universities. These statistics signify that research should be undertaken to investigate the turnover intention among academicians in Malaysian Higher Education Institutions (HEIs).

Malaysia aspires to be the region's centre of excellence in higher education. The academic faculty plays a significant role in the functioning and success of any educational system. Any educational institution's administration is concerned with retaining competent and qualified academics to compete with other educational institutions. Hence, retaining talented faculty members and staff within Private Higher Education institutions is vital, as outlined in the action plan report of Private Higher Education Institutions: Education as an Industry (2020-2025).

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The higher education (HE) sector is mainly characterised by a dynamic and rapidly evolving landscape, especially in this boundaryless career era. HE is undergoing substantial changes globally in a fast-changing environment and increasingly unstable career trajectories. HE in Malaysia is not immune from undergoing significant transformations in the work context. HE nowadays is gradually experiencing significant changes over the past generations. In this light, organisations must retain competent employees to survive in this rapidly changing environment, especially the early-career academician (ECA), to keep abreast with the multiple work roles. "Beginner" lecturers may also have limited access to resources and may experience job isolation, low job satisfaction, high stress, and produce less research than their more established peers. (Cawyer, Simonds, and Davis, 2002; Paul et al., 2002; Battist et al., 2016). Many organisations believe that increasing career adaptability through training can help early career academicians (ECA) to cope with the challenging environment (Rasheed et al., 2020). Previous studies revealed that a high level of career adaptability might facilitate learning, cope with obstacles, and enable achieving career goals. Therefore, the focal point of this study is to address the role of career adaptability towards turnover intention among ECA.

1.1 Problem statement

Academicians serve as the operational core of higher education institutions. Therefore, universities must play a significant role in retaining this group in response to the changing landscape of higher education. Attracting and retaining bright young teaching staff has progressively become difficult due to changing social, economic, demographic, and psychological trends. According to the Employee Engagement and Retention 2021 report, 52% of employees intend to look for new jobs globally. Meanwhile, the average attrition rate in the UK is around 15%. The national turnover rate in Australia and USA, respectively, is around 18% and 20.1%. This alarming statistic alludes to the global epidemic of turnover. In Malaysia, the average yearly turnover in education was 13.1% in 2013. Nonetheless, this figure rose to 20% in 2017, indicating that the turnover issue in the education industry is very alarming. (Falahat et al., 2019). Hence, retaining employees is one of the pressing issues nowadays.

Junior-educated employees may be involved in many developmental tasks during their early career stage, such as adapting to the organisation, learning the job, and pursuing their career goals. Concurrently, they hold daily responsibilities, such as family commitments for kids and spouses. (Innanen et al., 2014; Fairuz, 2020). Having many concurrent tasks at this stage of one's career puts young workers at risk of leaving the organisation. This finding coincides with the findings by previous scholars where junior academicians can experience isolation at work, less job satisfaction, high stress, and produce less research as compared to their more established peers (Cawyer et al., 2002; Paul et al., 2002; Battist et al., 2016). Junior academicians are also associated with high workloads, high pressure, and less mentoring support. These and other work-related pressure may significantly impact their well-being, job satisfaction, and intent to remain in the organisation.

Considering ECA's challenges and other work-related pressures, an organisation must understand its characteristics and behaviour to retain them. On the other hand, career adaptability enables individuals to perceive opportunities within unforeseen changes, leverage those opportunities, and rebound from unexpected outcomes. A high level of career adaptability might facilitate learning, cope with obstacles, enable attaining career goals, and minimise the intention to leave the organisation. Nevertheless, the extant literature indicates mixed findings between career adaptability and turnover intention. Some researchers suggest that academicians with a high level of career adaptability tend to show greater career satisfaction (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). This outcome is because adaptable employees can solve unpredictable and complex problems; therefore, they are satisfied with their careers and less inclined to leave the organisation. In contrast, findings by Savickas & Porfeli (2012) and Karatepe et al. (2016) suggested that as employees possess substantial career adaptability resources, they tend to go for career exploration and seek other employment alternatives.

Enhancing work engagement can decrease the likelihood of employees leaving the organisation. Similarly, gauging work engagement can become the intervention strategy to reduce turnover intention. Employees with lower levels of career adaptability may vent their frustration of being unable to cope with the changing environment and channel their thoughts of leaving the organisation, ultimately disengaging at work, leading to a high turnover intention. Thus, the objective of this study is three-fold. Firstly, this study examines the relationship between career adaptability mediated by work engagement and turnover intentions. Secondly, it aims to reconcile the mixed findings from the extant literature. Thirdly, it responds to the research calls for a broadened perspective on the outcome of career employability in multi-industry. (Baruch et al; 2022).

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Conservation of Resources Theory (COR)

This theory states that people aspire to acquire, sustain, and protect their existing resources that are valued (conservation) from being depleted. These valuable resources can be divided into four categories: valuable physical objects (house, car); conditions (marriage, employment, relationship, work status); personal resources (self-efficacy, self-esteem, and energies (effort, time, and money) (Hobfoll et al., 2018). They found that social support mechanisms for professional growth, including supervisors, colleagues, groups, spousal, clients, and others, such as conscientiousness, emotional health, and resilience (Kossek & Perrigino, 2016), are reflected as resources in various studies. The theory further contends that employees work to preserve their resources while establishing and acquiring new ones, such as emotional, cognitive, or personal objects that employees utilise to confront stressful life events or achieve any professional and personal objectives. (Hobfoll, 2018). The theory posits that when employees are exposed to a stressful work environment, it results in withdrawal behaviour of turnover intention, hence depleting their resources. COR theory has been widely used in prior research on careers, examining adaptability, sustainability, training behaviour, and disruptions. (Boziones et al., 2020). According to COR theory,

employees intend to leave the workplace when they do not have adequate resources to sustain their appropriate behaviour. (Jung et al., 2021; Lee & Jang, 2020). This study context determines the resources of career adaptability in the COR theory, weakened work engagement, and increased turnover intention. In the present study, career adaptability would represent critical resource replenishments at the workplace. Owing to critical resources, career adaptability is imperative for employees to cope with the changing job demands and adjust their careers. (Chan and Mai, 2015). Accordingly, when employees undergo a threat to resources, they are more likely to have their resources substantially drained. Therefore, the employees detach themselves from the company to minimise further loss. The feeling of loss may be compensated by the resources of work engagement and thus alter the severe influence of loss of resources on employee turnover intention. Likewise, employees with a high level of career adaptability have more sufficient resources and are more likely to engage at work and minimise the intention to leave the company.

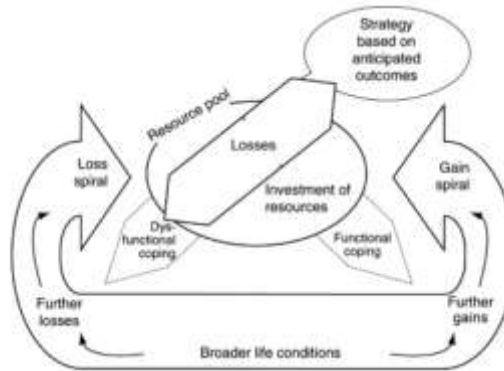


Figure 1 Process of Resources Conservation (Buchwald & Schwarzer, 2010).

2.2 Turnover Intention

Turnover intention is not a new phenomenon among managers and administrators, and for so long, it has certainly been a threat to the organisation in today's contemporary world. Turnover intention is regarded as a predictor of actual turnover and provides information that can assist management in controlling employee avoidance behaviours. If an employee is not taking an interest in his/her work and showing lower productivity, which reflects his/her intention to leave, determining the academic turnover process seems time-consuming and complicated; it is easier to tap on turnover intention. Hence, the current study focuses on turnover intention rather than actual turnover.

Turnover has been defined as a psychological decision process consisting of the following steps: job evaluation, job dissatisfaction, contemplation of quitting, evaluation of the expected utility of search and cost of quitting, intention to search for alternatives, search for alternatives, evaluation of alternatives, comparison of alternatives vs present job, and intention to quit/stay (Mobley, 1982). According to Tett and Meyer (1993), turnover is defined as the termination of an individual's employment with a given company. Several interpretations of intended turnover can be found in literary work. Previous studies describe it as a wilful plan to withdraw from a job permanently and an establishment (Cotton & Tuttle, 1986) and usually measured within a specific time frame (Tett & Meyer, 1992; Hom et al., 2017). Additionally, alternative terminologies for turnover intention include the intention to leave, intent to leave, and propensity to leave, as presented. These definitions are consistent with the previous findings by Mobley (1982) as they have provided four cognitive parts of turnover intent: thinking of quitting, planning to stay or leave, searching for an alternative career, and a desire to leave the current career. Similarly, for this study, turnover intention is defined as the perceived intention or perceived likelihood of an employee leaving their current place of employment, as Cotton & Tuttle (1986) outlined.

2.3 Career Adaptability

Super and Knasel (1981) first conceptualised the career adaptability term as the "readiness to cope with a changing environment. The ability of an employer to successfully manage his or her career development is referred to as career adaptability (Savickas, 2012). In other words, it reflects the individual ability to cope with the changing demand by adjusting their behaviour. Career adaptability has been conceptualised into concern, control, curiosity, and confidence. (Savickas and Porfeli, 2012) These dimensions are also regarded as adaptability resources, allowing people to deal with current or anticipated future changes, and are regarded as self-regulatory strengths. Owing to the Conservation of Resource Theory, people invest resources and quickly adjust to the environment under stressful conditions to avoid adverse outcomes. Likewise, employees that pose high career adaptability may find completing to fit with the work environment better as these people set their proper goals, find better opportunities, and obtain proper personal resources to pursue their career adversity. Career adaptability has become a critical factor in determining career success in today's today's-dynamic environment. The resources individuals require to successfully navigate their careers and manage current and anticipated tasks related to their work are pertinent to their success. Career adaptability is perceived as the determinant of turnover intention; however, it acts as a two-edged sword. A conflicting result has been found in the extant literature. Some studies suggest a positive relationship between career adaptability and turnover intention; however, some studies suggest the other way around. Some researchers suggest that academicians with high career adaptability tend to show greater career satisfaction (Chan & Mai, 2015; Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). This ability reflects that adaptable employees can solve unpredictable and complex problems; therefore, they are satisfied with their careers and less inclined to leave the organisation. In contrast, findings by Savickas & Porfeli (2012) and Karatepe et al. (2016) suggested that as employees possess substantial career adaptability resources, they tend to go for career exploration and seek other employment

alternatives. Therefore, this paper aims to fill the lacuna by linking the bridge of inconsistencies of career adaptability findings among ECA in Malaysia Higher Education (HE).

2.4 Work Engagement

The term work engagement was first conceptualised by William Kahn (1990). It was defined as harnessing employees' selves to their work rules by which they employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances (Kahn, 1990). After Kahn, different approaches to work engagement were proposed, each emphasising a distinct aspect of work engagement (Schaufeli, 2013). The theory primarily used in the research is the approach put forward by Schaufeli et al. within the scope of the burnout antithesis approach. They defined work engagement as "a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind characterised by vigour, dedication, and absorption." (Schaufeli et al., 2013). This view argues that work engagement is not the opposite of burnout; it is a distinct concept with a negative relationship with burnout (Schaufeli, 2013). Also, the energy dimension is best described by having high energy and mental resilience while working, putting forth an extraordinary effort to perform, and persevering at work, even in challenging situations. The dedication dimension refers to having a sense of significance, enthusiasm, inspiration, pride, and challenge. In the final dimension of work engagement, absorption is characterised by total concentration and deep engrossment in work. Accordingly, the employee is so immersed in his/her work that he/she does not understand how the time passes and has difficulty quitting his/her job at the end of the work shift (Schaufeli et al., 2013).

2.5 Conceptual Framework

Drawing on the Conservation of Resource (COR) theory, it is postulated that poor career adaptability intends to leave the organisation when resources (quality of life, well-being, social life, and health) are depleted. A stressful working environment can deplete employees' resources and lead to withdrawal behaviour in an organisation. In other words, the depletion of resources causes the employee to withdraw from their work and disengage in their work role. In contrast, employees with solid career adaptability can avoid potential resource loss and seem valued. Career adaptability is an independent variable, and turnover intention is modelled as the dependent variable in this study context. Work engagement is a mediating variable for the relationship between career adaptability and turnover intention. The framework is depicted in Figure 1.

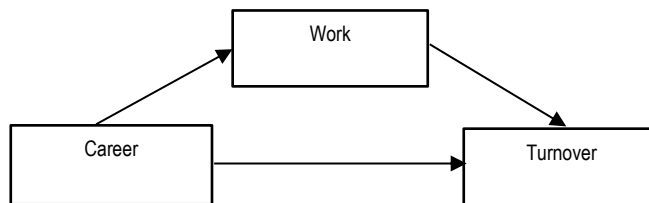


Figure 2: Conceptual framework

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The research approach to this study is positivism, as in a positivist view of the world, science and scientific research are seen to get the truth. The positivist paradigm is centred on theory testing and hypothesis verification. This study seeks to determine the influence of career adaptability, work engagement, and turnover intention with a significant number of previous studies. Thus, a quantitative approach will be employed in this study context. Based on the research philosophies of positivism, this study will employ a deductive approach or quantitative research design. Deductive research explains causal relationships between variables, moves from theory to data, and selects samples to generalise conclusions (Saunders et al., 2019). This study will utilise a cross-sectional study since the objective is to investigate the influence of the independent variable (career adaptability) on the dependent variable (turnover intention) mediated by work engagement at one time.

There are approximately 53 registered private universities in Malaysia, including branch campuses, based on a list from the Ministry of Higher Education. (MOHE, 2019). However, only 36 private universities will be targeted as the population is based in the Klang Valley. Klang Valley will be chosen as the sampling location due to the high concentration of the private education sector within this area. The private education sector in Klang Valley accounted for about 51.46% of the total private education in Malaysia. (DOSM, 2022). The population for this study is ECA from selected private universities in Malaysia. The overall population stood at approximately 3,500 across 36 private institutions based on the Information Book on Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEI). The criteria for the selection of respondents are:

- i. Respondents must be working in Malaysian private education institutions.
- ii. Respondents must be working within five years of employment in academia.

Sampling size is one of the essential elements in sampling design, as it will assist in establishing the representativeness of the sample for generalizability. G power analysis will be used to determine the study's sample size. However, a sample size of 200 will be chosen for this study because, according to Hair et al. (2010), a sample size between 200 and 400 is sufficient for the research study, and the larger the sample size, the more accurately it represents the total population. 200 self-report questionnaires will be distributed

to faculty members via Google Forms using snowball technique. Their email addresses will be obtained from the respective universities' directories. Every respondent will receive an email with a cover letter explaining the study's purpose, providing instructions, and extending an invitation to participate in the survey. The Partial Least Square- Structural Equation Model (PLS-SEM) will be employed to answer the research objectives in the current study. The bootstrapping method will be conducted in PLS-SEM to analyse the reflective, formative, and structural models to answer the research objectives of the present study.

4.0 Findings and Discussions

This study presents a theoretical framework that seeks to reassess the importance of career adaptability concerning turnover intention. Adapting to a dynamic environment is a crucial skill for professional survival (Super & Knasel, 1981). The presence of influential leaders who can effectively manage early career educators can significantly boost their flexibility (Savickas, 2012). Understanding the concept of career flexibility is of great importance, especially for the younger generation, specifically Generation Z, who have the task of adjusting to unknown circumstances. Furthermore, understanding how individuals navigate career pressures and adjust to the workplace environment offers valuable insights into the underlying causes that contribute to the likelihood of young adults opting for voluntary leave. In addition, comprehending how individuals manage career demands and adapt to workplace conditions provides valuable insight into the underlying factors contributing to the propensity of young individuals to choose voluntary departure. As previously said, careers in academia are characterised by high demand levels.

Technological improvements have brought about a significant transformation in the teaching and learning scene. The expectations placed upon students are currently experiencing a process of transformation. Therefore, novice educators must receive significant support from their college or university institution, administrators, and colleagues. How engagement is executed has transformed in parallel with advancements in technology. In addition, an intergenerational workforce poses challenges for the younger generation in adapting to a new workplace. According to the research conducted by William Khan in 1990, each successive generation exhibits distinct variations in their work ideals, which can potentially lead to conflicts. Possessing a mindset characterised by vigour, dedication, and absorption is deemed essential in the literature (Schaufeli et al., 2013). The suggested conceptual framework is timely and essential due to its potential to augment our understanding of ECA's behaviours, specifically regarding their career adaptability and intention to leave their profession. Research on turnover intention has been consistently done since the 1980s, with notable contributions from scholars such as Cotton and Tuttle (1986), Tett and Meyer (1992, 1993), and Hom et al. (2017). The educational sector has experienced substantial changes in the wake of the epidemic, necessitating continued investigation in this field. Hence, it is imperative and relevant to undertake research on the work engagement domain among ECAs. The proposed framework would guide higher education institutions and policymakers.

5.0 Conclusion

The success of any organisation today relies heavily on respect for employee and employer relationships to prevent the exodus of academicians. An organisation must keep its turnover rate at a minimum level for any intellectually driven organisation. It warrants the Human Resource practitioner to provide a good working environment and determine the factors influencing turnover intention. This study's context aims to fill the gap between the previous literature findings pertaining to the influence of career adaptability on turnover intention amongst ECA mediated with work engagement. This current study provides tenets that guide a wide range of researchers, practitioners, and academics.

While this study offers a conceptual framework, it is crucial to acknowledge and discuss certain limitations. The present study may not fully account for any confounding variables impacting the connections between career adaptability, turnover intention, and work engagement. The idea of work engagement is subjective, and the individual's perceptions and interpretations can modify its assessment. Finally, it is essential to note that this study may only partially encompass the long-term consequences or alterations that may transpire outside the confines of the designated research period. The evolution of turnover intentions and career adaptability can occur over time.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

The paper contributes to the field of human resource management and organisational behaviour.

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