ISSTM-TEd 2024

https://isstm-ted.uitm.edu.my/

International Symposium on Strategy & Transformation Management For Tertiary Education
Virtual Symposium
14 – 16 Oct 2024

Main Organiser: Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM)
Co-Organiser: East Kazakhstan Technical University (EKTU)

Comparing Happiness at the University using PERMAI Model: An analysis between academic and administrative

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Abstract
Employee happiness is vital for organisational effectiveness in higher education, where staff directly influence student outcomes. This study compares happiness levels between academic and administrative staff at a Malaysian public university using the PERMAI model, covering Positive Emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, Achievement, and Infrastructure. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire administered in four rounds between 15 March and 31 October 2023, involving an average of 8,975 academic and 10,079 administrative staff per round. Findings indicate consistent participation, with slightly higher engagement among administrative staff. In total, 19,053 responses were analysed, providing insights to guide strategies for improving staff well-being.

Keywords: Employee happiness, Higher education, PERMAI Model, Staff well-being

1.0 Introduction
University academic staff and administrators play a vital role in fulfilling the missions of higher education, encompassing education, research, and public service. These two groups function as interconnected cultural entities, continually shaping their relationships through communication and interaction (Kuo, 2009). Happiness is also a critical factor linked to achieving institutional missions, reinforcing each element in a positive feedback loop (Duckworth et al., 2007). Measuring happiness remains one of the most significant challenges in positive psychology (Tsuchiya, 2018). Beyond internal satisfaction, staff happiness has a profound influence on student engagement, research output, and the university's global standing. As universities increasingly compete on international platforms, understanding and promoting staff well-being becomes central to institutional resilience and excellence. Recognising this, university

leadership has begun to treat happiness not as a luxury but as a strategic necessity, integral to retaining talent, reducing burnout, and fostering innovation. In Malaysia, efforts to promote staff well-being continue to evolve. However, existing research predominantly focuses on general employee satisfaction or student well-being rather than comparative happiness between academic and administrative staff. Many studies examine factors such as work-life balance, recognition, and institutional support, yet the differential contributions of internal psychological factors and external structural factors remain understudied. Moreover, there is limited evidence using a comprehensive, locally contextualised model such as PERMAI. To address this gap, the present study compares happiness levels between the two staff groups at a public university in Malaysia using the PERMAI Model. The model includes six elements: Positive Emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, Achievement, and Infrastructure. By analysing these dimensions, the study identifies differences in happiness patterns and highlights factors that influence staff well-being.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Happiness and Staff Relationships
Research indicates that relationship quality significantly influences happiness levels among university staff (Isa et al., 2019). Strong interpersonal bonds, particularly with family and colleagues, contribute significantly to well-being. Work-life balance, organisational climate, and supportive management also play a central role (Arora, 2020). Furthermore, burnout and psychological distress remain concerns, reinforcing the need for targeted mental health interventions (Rahman et al., 2024). Other studies highlight institutional reputation and staff welfare as major contributors to happiness, while infrastructure and networking remain areas requiring improvement (Lawrence D'silva et al., n.d.; Turan, 2022). Governance systems, fair assessment practices, and inclusive workload management further influence staff happiness (Yassin, 2014).

2.2 Selection of Theoretical Frameworks and Model of Happiness
Several psychological models of well-being have been widely examined in the literature, including utilitarian (practical), virtue, hedonic, eudaimonic, hybrid PERMA, and self-determination models (Lambert et al., 2015). Among these, the PERMA framework is particularly distinguished for its comprehensive and multidimensional approach to assessing well-being. Developed by Seligman (2002, 2011), the PERMA model identifies five core dimensions of well-being: Positive Emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Achievement. Building upon this foundation, the PERMAI model was introduced as an advanced and locally contextualised extension by incorporating an additional domain, Infrastructure (I), to account for institutional and environmental factors that influence staff well-being (Mohd et al., 2018). The PERMAI model therefore comprises six domains: Positive Emotions (P), Engagement (E), Relationships (R), Meaning (M), Achievement (A), and Infrastructure (I), providing a more holistic framework that captures both internal psychological experiences and external organisational conditions. This makes PERMAI particularly suitable for examining staff happiness within Malaysian higher education institutions.

2.3 Happiness in the Islamic View
Based on previous research by Sabjan, 2019, from the Islamic perspective, happiness has no ultimate end. One can experience lasting happiness throughout both this temporal life and the hereafter. In the hereafter, believers are promised the Vision of God, representing the ultimate fulfilment of joy. Islam offers a unique and comprehensive path to achieving happiness, addressing outward and inward aspects of a person's behaviour. This path profoundly impacts individuals' lives, guiding them toward sustained happiness and fulfilment. This has also been validated through research conducted by Omais & dos Santos, 2022, which revealed that numerous Qur'anic verses present a concept of happiness encompassing two distinct dimensions: this life and the hereafter. This belief can influence and motivate individuals to adopt more positive attitudes, reactions, expectations, and behaviours toward themselves, their social circles, and their life circumstances, ultimately affecting their happiness.

2.4 Research Gap
Most studies assess happiness holistically without distinguishing staff categories. Additionally, structural determinants and multidimensional culturally adapted tools remain underrepresented. This study fills this void by comparing academic and administrative staff happiness using the PERMAI model.

2.5 Hypotheses
H1: There is a significant difference in overall happiness levels between academic and administrative staff.
H2: Academic staff score higher in Positive Emotions, Relationships, Meaning, and Achievement.
H3: Administrative staff score higher in Infrastructure and Engagement.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Survey Instrument Development
The survey instrument was developed based on the PERMAI framework, which captures six core dimensions of staff happiness: Positive Emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, Achievement, and Infrastructure. Each dimension was operationalised into

specific survey items to measure how academic and administrative staff experience well-being within the university context. Positive Emotions assessed the extent to which staff experienced pleasant feelings such as joy, satisfaction, and optimism in their daily work, focusing on emotional responses to tasks, colleague interactions, and the overall work atmosphere. Engagement examined staff focus, involvement, and enthusiasm in completing work tasks, reflecting how energised and absorbed they felt in their roles. Relationships evaluated the quality of workplace connections, including collegial support, trust, teamwork, and communication. Meaning measured whether staff perceived their work as purposeful and aligned with institutional goals, capturing their sense of fulfilment and belonging. Achievement assessed feelings of accomplishment, recognition, and progress toward career or personal goals, while Infrastructure evaluated the adequacy of physical and digital support systems, such as facilities, services, parking, and ICT resources that enable effective job performance.

The survey then, identified nine subdomains from its six domains: personal, work, job satisfaction, administrative processes, leadership, self-efficacy, individual achievement, infrastructure, and infostructure, resulting in a 37-item survey. The survey employed a Likert Scale-based happiness measure, adapted for this study and validated for reliability and validity [18], with response options ranging from 1 (Very Unhappy) to 5 (Very Happy). An additional "Not Applicable" option was provided for items unrelated to a respondent's experience or feelings. To improve readability, the happiness levels were categorised into simplified score ranges adapted from Hills and Argyle (2002), as shown below:

Table 1. Happiness levels

Happiness Category	Score Range
Very Unhappy	1.0 – < 2.0
Unhappy	2.0 – < 3.0
Neutral	3.0 – < 3.5
Moderately Happy	3.5 – < 4.0
Happy	4.0 – < 4.7
Very Happy	4.7 – 5.0

The instrument's reliability and usability were confirmed through Cronbach's alpha, which measures internal consistency. High Cronbach's alpha values (> 0.7) across all domains validated the survey's effectiveness and reliability in assessing employee happiness.

3.2 Data Collection Procedure
Data were collected in four survey rounds between 15 March and 31 October 2023 to capture variations in staff happiness across key operational phases of the university calendar and to improve data reliability through repeated measures, thereby reducing recall bias. Participants were segmented by facilities, colleges, and responsibility centres to enable a more detailed and contextualised analysis that reflects structural and environmental differences across organisational units, supporting more targeted recommendations. To minimise response fatigue, staff answered 2–3 questions daily before clocking in via a dedicated mobile app, with surveys administered only on weekdays. A total of 11,830 academic staff and 21,853 administrative staff participated. Digital informed consent was obtained, and anonymity and confidentiality were maintained in accordance with university ethical guidelines.

3.3 Data Analysis
Before data analysis, a meticulous data cleaning process was conducted, after which the data were classified into three principal categories: facilities, colleges, and responsibility centres, and further segmented by position (academic and administrative staff). Each participant's happiness level was calculated using the average score of their survey responses, providing an overall measure of well-being. Descriptive statistics were then employed to assess employee happiness across the six PERMAI domains and to generate scores for the entire university and each staff category. To fulfil the study's objectives, additional analyses were undertaken, including comparative analyses (e.g., t-tests or ANOVA) to examine differences between staff groups and organisational units, trend analysis across survey rounds to identify temporal changes, domain-level correlation analysis to explore relationships between factors such as leadership, job satisfaction, and overall happiness, and the identification of priority areas through gap analysis and domain-weighted scoring. These analyses provided a comprehensive understanding of staff happiness and allowed deeper insight into organisational factors influencing well-being. The following section will provide a detailed account of the findings derived from this analysis.

4.0 Findings

4.1 University's Happiness Index by Job Category
The table below presents the Happiness Index across six domains—Positive Emotions (P), Engagement (E), Relationships (R), Meaning (M), Achievement (A), and Infrastructure (I)—for two job categories: Academic and Administrative Staff. The overall average index for each category is also provided.

The findings reveal that academic and administrative staff report an average score of 72 in Positive Emotions (P). This indicates that both groups experience comparable positive emotions in their work. Regarding Engagement (E), academic staff have a slightly

higher average score of 71 compared to 70 for administrative staff. Academic staff may feel marginally more engaged and committed to their roles. For Relationships (R), the academic staff reported an average score of 75, whereas the administrative staff scored 73. Academic staff generally experience better interpersonal relationships and support within their work environment.

Table 2. University's Happiness Index by Job Category

Job Categories	P	E	R	M	A	I	Overall Average Index
Academic Staff	72	71	75	77	73	70	72
Administrative Staff	72	70	73	74	73	72	72
Grand Total	72	71	74	76	73	71	72

For Meaning (M), academic staff have an average score of 77, which exceeds the 74 reported by administrative staff. This suggests that academic staff find their work significantly more meaningful and fulfilling. Regarding Achievement (A), both Academic and Administrative Staff have an identical average score of 73, indicating that both groups perceive similar levels of accomplishment and recognition in their roles. Finally, in the infrastructure (I) domain, administrative staff report a slightly higher average score of 72 compared to 70 for academic staff. This indicates that administrative staff are generally more satisfied with the resources and support provided.

In summary, both job categories exhibit similar overall average indices, indicating a comparable level of job satisfaction. Academic staff score higher in Relationships and Meaning, reflecting stronger interpersonal support and a more profound sense of purpose when executing their roles. Conversely, administrative staff expressed greater satisfaction with the infrastructure, indicating they were more pleased with the available resources and support.

4.2 Findings Based on Gender and Job Categories
The table analyses the happiness index among university staff, categorised by gender and role (academic vs. administrative).

Table 3. University's Happiness Index by Job Category and Gender

	P	E	R	M	A	I	Overall Average Index
Male	74	73	76	77	75	74	74
Academic	75	73	77	80	76	73	75
Administrative	74	73	75	76	75	74	74
Female	70	69	72	74	71	69	70
Academic	71	69	74	76	72	69	71
Administrative	69	67	70	71	70	69	69
Grand Total	72	71	74	76	73	71	72

The results show differences in happiness levels between male and female staff. Male academic staff report a higher average happiness level, scoring 75. This is notably higher than their administrative counterparts, who average a score of 74. This suggests that academic roles may offer more fulfilling experiences in terms of happiness for male staff. Male administrative staff also report higher happiness levels than female administrative staff, with an average score of 74 compared to 69. On the other hand, female academic staff have an average happiness score of 71, which is higher than that of their administrative counterparts, who average 69. This indicates that academic roles provide a more satisfying experience for female staff than administrative roles. Female administrative staff report the lowest average happiness levels, scoring 69. This lower score compared to male administrative staff highlights potential areas for improvement.

4.3 Key Insights by PERMAI Dimension
Positive Emotions: Academic staff, particularly males, report higher levels of positive emotions, likely due to the autonomy and creativity afforded in academic roles. Female administrative staff report the lowest levels, possibly reflecting stress related to rigid routines or workload.

Engagement: Higher engagement among academic staff reflects deeper involvement in teaching, research, and academic governance. Female administrative staff show lower engagement levels, possibly due to less role autonomy or higher external obligations.

Relationships: Academic staff benefit from stronger interpersonal relationships, supported by peer networks, mentoring, and collaborative research. Administrative staff, especially females, may feel isolated or disconnected due to hierarchical workflows or limited peer interaction.

Meaning: Academic staff report the highest scores in this dimension. This suggests that contributing to student success, research innovation, and academic excellence offers a strong sense of purpose. Lower meaning scores among administrative staff may indicate less alignment between their tasks and institutional vision.

Achievement: This domain shows relatively balanced scores between groups, suggesting that both academic and administrative staff feel recognised and accomplished in their respective roles. However, male staff consistently report slightly higher satisfaction with achievement.

Infrastructure: Administrative staff, particularly males, perceive better support in this domain. This could be attributed to the structured nature of administrative roles and better access to logistical and technological support. Female staff across both categories rate this domain lowest, indicating an urgent need to improve facilities such as parking, rest areas, and childcare support.

These findings not only highlight specific areas of strength and improvement but also provide a roadmap for data-driven interventions to enhance staff happiness. The following section provides a domain-wise analysis of the findings based on the PERMAI model.

5.0 Discussion

5.1 Analysis Based on PERMAI Model Dimensions

5.4.1 Positive Emotions
The findings indicate that academic staff, particularly males, experience higher levels of positive emotions compared to administrative staff. This aligns with Arora (2020), who found that academic roles often provide greater intrinsic satisfaction due to intellectual autonomy, creativity, and opportunities for self-expression. Similarly, Isa et al. (2019) reported that emotional well-being among university staff is strongly linked to perceived job significance and recognition, both of which are more prominent in academic roles. Conversely, the lower scores among administrative staff may reflect the routine and procedural nature of their responsibilities, which are often more structured and less emotionally stimulating.

5.4.2 Engagement
Academic staff also demonstrated higher engagement levels, particularly among males. This supports the PERMA framework, where engagement is closely related to deep involvement and flow experiences in meaningful tasks (Seligman, 2011). Yang et al. (2024) similarly found that engagement significantly improves when individuals perceive autonomy and intellectual challenge, commonly associated with teaching and research roles. The comparatively lower engagement among female staff, especially in administrative roles, may reflect competing role demands and work-life pressures, consistent with the findings of Rahman et al. (2024), who highlighted work-family conflict as a contributor to reduced engagement in higher education settings.

5.4.3 Relationships
Academic staff reported stronger workplace relationships than administrative staff. This finding aligns with Kuo (2009), who identified that collaborative academic environments foster stronger collegial bonds through shared research, mentoring, and peer interaction. In contrast, hierarchical administrative workflows may limit relationship-building opportunities, contributing to weaker interpersonal support. Turan (2022) similarly found that strained workplace relations negatively affect staff happiness, reinforcing the importance of relationship-focused organisational strategies.

5.4.4 Meaning
The sense of meaning was significantly higher among academic staff, reflecting the perceived purpose of contributing to student development, knowledge creation, and societal advancement. This echoes Seligman's (2011) assertion that meaningful work enhances long-term well-being. From a cultural perspective, Sabjan (2019) highlighted that spiritual and moral significance, such as serving with sincerity and purpose, strengthens life satisfaction. Programs such as "work as ibadah" therefore resonate well with the Malaysian context, reinforcing the role of spiritual meaning in fostering happiness among university staff.

5.4.5 Achievement
Higher achievement scores among academic staff suggest stronger perceptions of recognition and career progression. This corresponds with findings by Yassin (2014), who identified fair evaluation systems and recognition mechanisms as key contributors to staff happiness. However, the relatively lower achievement perceptions among female staff across both categories highlight the need for targeted career development initiatives, consistent with Rahman et al. (2024), who emphasised inclusive promotion structures to reduce gender disparities in higher education.

5.4.6 Infrastructure
While administrative staff marginally perceived better infrastructure support, females across both groups scored lowest in this dimension, indicating dissatisfaction with physical and logistical facilities. Isa et al. (2019) identified infrastructure and facilities as critical determinants of workplace happiness in Malaysian universities. Inadequate parking, limited rest areas, and insufficient transportation services may disproportionately affect female staff, underscoring the need for infrastructure improvements aligned with the PERMAI model's emphasis on environmental well-being.

6.0 Conclusion & Recommendations
This study offers important insights into staff happiness levels in a university setting and demonstrates the usefulness of the PERMAI Model as an evaluative framework. Although overall happiness scores between academic and administrative staff are relatively similar,

notable differences emerge across specific dimensions—particularly Relationships, Meaning, and Infrastructure. Academic staff generally report higher Engagement and Meaning due to the nature of their roles, while administrative staff show stronger satisfaction with infrastructure support. Gender differences are also evident, with male academic staff scoring the highest and female administrative staff scoring the lowest across multiple domains, highlighting the need for more targeted institutional support.

Based on these findings, several recommendations are proposed. Academic staff should prioritise improvements in Infrastructure satisfaction, while administrative staff may focus on enhancing Relationships and Meaning. Tailored initiatives for female staff—such as flexible work policies, mentorship, career development programmes, and improved childcare support—are crucial. Institution-wide strategies aligned with the PERMAI framework, including gratitude initiatives, digitalisation efforts, and structured recognition programmes, could further strengthen overall well-being. Each initiative should be accompanied by periodic assessments (e.g., pre–post surveys, focus groups, KPI tracking) to evaluate its impact on happiness outcomes.

This study, however, has several limitations. The use of self-reported data may introduce response bias, and the sample—limited to one institution—reduces generalisability. The cross-sectional design also restricts the ability to observe changes over time. Future research should include longitudinal studies to track well-being trends, comparative analyses across multiple universities, and qualitative approaches to better understand the lived experiences behind survey patterns. There is also potential for theoretical advancement, particularly in refining the PERMAI model for institutional and organisational contexts.

Overall, the study highlights the importance of prioritising staff well-being and offers a foundation for data-informed policymaking that supports a healthier, more engaged university workforce.

Acknowledgement

Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study
This study contributes to the literature by providing empirical evidence on university staff happiness using the PERMAI Model, highlighting differences across roles and gender. It identifies areas where academic and administrative staff, especially female employees, may require targeted support. The research offers practical recommendations for institutional policies, such as infrastructure improvements, engagement initiatives, and relationship-building programs. Methodologically, the study introduces multiple survey rounds and unit-based segmentation, capturing dynamic, context-specific well-being data. The findings also suggest refinements to the PERMAI model for higher education contexts and provide a foundation for future longitudinal, comparative, and qualitative research on staff well-being.

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