# Strategies to enhance employee well-being in an institution of higher learning in South Africa

Estrategias para mejorar el bienestar de los empleados en una institución de educación superior en Sudáfrica

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## ABSTRACT

Employee wellbeing is a crucial challenge in many organisations in South Africa and abroad. Interventions at a management level are vital to ensure that organisations do not lose quality employees due to poor employee well-being. Therefore, the paper assessed the strategies that can be used to enhance the well-being of academics in an institution of higher learning in South Africa. The paper employed a qualitative approach to collect data from the Management Committee (MANCO) at the Durban University of Technology in Durban, South Africa. Purposive sampling was be used to collect data directly from the MANCO. All data are analyzed using Nvivo. Findings from the study revealed that leadership plays a pivotal role in the well-being of employees. The findings

of the paper can assist the management of the university with solutions related to the turnover of academics and will also be a wake-up call to other universities on the subject matter.

**Keywords.** employee well-being, emotional well-being, Strategies, Academics, Institution of Higher Learning

## RESUMEN

El bienestar de los empleados es un desafío crucial en muchas organizaciones en Sudáfrica y en el extranjero. Las intervenciones a nivel de gestión son vitales para garantizar que las organizaciones no pierdan empleados de calidad debido al pobre bienestar laboral. Por lo tanto, el artículo evaluó las estrategias que pueden utilizarse para mejorar el bienestar de los académicos en una institución de educación superior en Sudáfrica. El artículo empleó un enfoque cualitativo para recopilar datos del Comité de Gestión (MANCO) en la Universidad Tecnológica de Durban en Durban, Sudáfrica. Se utilizó un muestreo intencional para recopilar datos directamente del MANCO. Todos los datos se analizaron utilizando Nvivo. Los hallazgos del estudio revelaron que el liderazgo desempeña un papel fundamental en el bienestar de los empleados. Los resultados del artículo pueden ayudar a la gestión de la universidad con soluciones relacionadas con la rotación de académicos y también serán una llamada de atención para otras universidades sobre el tema.

**Palabras clave.** bienestar de los empleados, bienestar emocional, estrategias, académicos, institución de educación superior

## INTRODUCTION

Ever since Bradburn (1969) introduced the emotional well-being concept and its positive as well as negative affect, scholars have continued to examine the concept (Lutz et al., 2020; Yahiaoui, 2023). Awareness of the causes of employee positive affect assist to enhance an inclusive and embracing organisation. Sica, Perkins, Latzman, Caudek, Colpizzi, Bottesi, Caruso, Giulini, Cerea and Patrick (2020) argue that high positive affect was exhibited by individuals with lower stress. On the other hand, Harmon (2019) posited that positive affect could be stimulated and heightened through interventions. Interestingly, Harmon (2019) professed that positive speech suppressed uncertainty amongst role-players. In this regard, scholars demonstrate ways in which positive and negative affect influence role-players such as employees in an organisation. Employees can develop negative emotions to avoid rather than compromise well-being in an organisation. Extending this premise, Lee (2021) found that employees exhibited negative affect in response to organisational injustice. Similarly, Lutz et al. (2020) concluded that pressured work-home availability increased negative affect. In addition, Harmon (2019) found that negative affect could be induced by stronger emotions. Harmon (2019) further argued that affect also depended on the gender of participants. The perceptions of leaders' conduct are likely to influence employees through negative affect of fear and distress in toxic workplaces. Khumalo (2022) reveals that all academics from all levels are experiencing the same low morale in one of the institutions in South Africa. Moreover, in Africa, Mosia and Zakuza (2011) reveal that junior academics were earning higher salaries than senior academics in one South African University. Findings showing that toxic leaders were promoted to higher positions at the expense of employee well-being (Sun, Burke, Chen, Tan, Zhang & Hou, 2021) agree with O'Reilly and Pfeffer's (2021) study. Therefore, workplaces ought to explore strategies for supporting and promoting employees' emotional well-being (Grensing-Pophal, 2020). For instance, after a prominent professor committed suicide following influence to assume an undesired promotion, calls for emotional awareness were raised amongst role-players (Nhlapo, Fikeni, Gobodo-Madikizela & Walaza, 2020).

Whilst scholars have examined employee well-being (Lutz, Schneider & Vorderer, 2020), little is known about strategies for employee emotional well-being during crises like a pandemic. These challenges contribute negatively to the well-being of academics in these institutions of higher learning, which results in employee turnover. Management are still unsure about what to do to enhance academics' well-being in institutions of higher learning in SA. Therefore, the paper seeks to assess the strategies that can be developed to enhance academics' well-being as embedded in institutions of higher learning in South Africa. The solution can assist other institutions of higher learning globally that are experiencing similar challenges, and equip those that are not yet experiencing the challenge with ideas for the future. Organisational commitment is one of the major work-related attitudes that has an impact on the way people work and behave in organisations. Today's organizations find themselves embedded with the problem of low commitment levels of employees, and ignoring this problem causes misuse of human resources (Deshwal, 2015:148; Beheshtifar and Allahyary, 2013:1468). The literature reveals that employees' low level of commitment to their organisation is a worldwide phenomenon that is not restricted to one profession or to a particular country or continent (Awad and Alhashemi, 2012:145; Parveen, 2015; Kasogela, 2019:93; Nwinyokpugi and Ikoromasoma, 2021:1). The quest to sustain employee commitment has become a growing concern for organisations that seek to retain competent employees (Meyer, Morin & Wasti, 2017). Financial costs are incurred, and human burden surfaces when employees lose commitment and leave for better opportunities (McKinsey, 2021). Located in organisational psychology and behaviour within the workplace commitment domain, the conceptualisation of employee commitment purports to bind employees to actions to be taken towards a particular target (Allen, 2016). Moreover, organisations that ignore drivers of employee commitment fail to benefit from employees who remain committed to the organisation (Vance, Jaros, Becker & McKay, 2020). The outcome of the paper can assist leaders and management to review their policies and practice and also assist other universities globally that are experiencing similar challenges,

# LITERATURE REVIEW

### Conceptualising employee emotional well-being

The concept of emotional well-being has been in existence for decades, since Bradburn's (1969) seminal work coined the concept. Emotional well-being is defined as "the degree to which individuals self-report experiences of symptoms of positive and negative affect" (Bradburn, 1969, p.3). Magyar and Keyes (2019) agree with the definition of emotional well-being as encompassing positive as well as negative affect. Diener, Suh, Lucas and Smith (1999) define emotional well-being as affective responses exemplified by moods and emotional interpretations of certain events.

Varied conceptualisations of emotional well-being point to a lack of consensus on interpretation, measurement and operationalisation (Magyar & Keyes, 2019; Ryff, 2019). Despite debates, the study adopts Bradburn's (1969) definition on a deepened understanding of employee emotional well-being within broader subjective well-being scholarship. Subjective well-being is characterised by psychological, affect and social perspectives (Lutz et al., 2020). Respective well-being, subjective well-being and emotional well-being are used interchangeably (Magyar and Keyes, 2019).

**Figure 1.** Employee emotional well-being
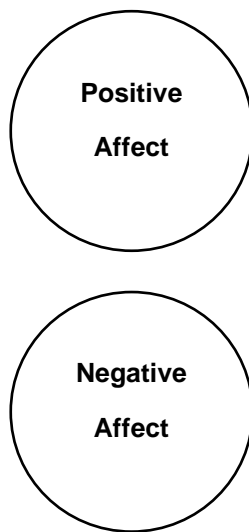
In addition, Magyar and Keyes (2019) and Ryff (2019) point out debates around the dimensionality, intensity and frequency of emotions. Similarly, Harmon (2019) argues that events induce emotional stability. Regardless of the perspectives employed, the study examines possible positive and negative affect from an employee perspective of well-being. More importantly, further research is needed to clarify the emotional well-being of employees in order to contribute to broader well-being scholarship (Lutz et al., 2020).

**Cause of negative employee well-being**

Zheng *et al.* (2016) reveal numerous causes of negative employee well-being in organizations. Obrenovic *et al.* (2020) aver that if the causes of negative employee well-being are not addressed, performance will be hampered in the workplace. Negative well-being of employees, especially in the higher education sector, is caused by the following:

*Heavy workload*

A study conducted in the Spanish education sector by Ozamiz-Etxebarria *et al.* (2021) revealed that during the Covid-19 pandemic, academics faced the challenge of increased workload, which increased the levels of negative well-being of employees. The results from the study were also supported by van Niekerk and van Gent (2021), who confirmed that in the South African higher education sector, academics' workload increased due to the use of blended learning, which negatively affected the well-being of these employees.

*Organizational Change*

Farquharson, Sinha and Clarke (2018) attest that change is inevitable and to remain competitive, organizations need to constantly change their systems and processes. However, employees can resist change, thus leading to negative employee well-being. Vlachopoulos (2021) argues that the higher education sector is being forced to implement change due to increased globalization, uncertain funding and greater competition. Therefore, in implementing change, employees fail to adapt to the new changes, thus leading to negative employee well-being.

*Lack of training and development*

Employees require up-to-date skills in order to perform their duties efficiently and effectively (Sheeba and Christopher, 2020). Consequently, organizations, particularly higher education institutions, need to provide training and development for employees so that they are well

capacitated. Zalat, Hamed and Bolbol (2021) confirmed that in developing countries, the use of technologies during teaching was minimal prior to Covid-19. Therefore, academics had little training on the use of e-learning tools, which led to negative employee well-being amongst academics (Li and Lalani 2020).

**Benefits of employee well-being**

Numerous studies have been conducted to ascertain the benefits of employee well-being, and the results indicated that employee well-being:

### Lowers absenteeism rates

Research conducted by Jeong *et al.* (2020) revealed that employee well-being is beneficial to organizations because it lowers absenteeism rates. Employees who are demotivated and unskilled find ways to abscond from their work. However, if the mental, physical and social well-being of employees is preserved, absenteeism will be minimized. Thus, organizational productivity is improved.

### Lowers mental health challenges

It is crucial to note that during the Covid-19 pandemic, mental health cases escalated in organizations due to the negative wellbeing of employees (van Niekerk and van Gent 2021).Institutions of higher learning in South Africa embarked on an initiative to improve employee wellness to ensure that the wellbeing of employees is enhanced. Therefore, if employee wellbeing is positive, mental health issues are minimized, therefore improving performance levels.

### Improved employee performance

According to Krekel, Ward and De Neve (2019), there is a positive relationship between positive employee well-being and performance. The benefit of employee well-being is that employees perform to the fullest due to motivation and engagement. Consequently, leading to improved employee performance. It is of importance to note that organizations with highly performing employees are successful and competitive within their sectors (Pagán-Castaño, Maseda-Moreno and Santos-Rojo 2020)

## METHODOLOGY

The paper adopted a qualitative research approach. Focus groups were used in collecting data from the MANCO of all the Faculties. There are 62 MANCO members, which includes all the Deans and HODs of the faculties. A purposive sampling method was utilised to directly collect data from the chosen target population. All questions were aligned with the aim of the paper, which afforded the researchers the opportunity to gather more information through follow-up questions. Four focus groups from different faculties were conducted online via MS Teams, and eachtook not more than 45 minutes. The focus groups had a minimum of 5 and a maximum of 8 participants. Thus, a maximum of 32 participants were considered for this study. The researchers adhered to the university ethics policy at all times. The collected data is analysed using Nvivo software. The participants were emailed a letter of informed consent and appended signature when consenting to participate in this study. Email addresses were retrieved from the institution's staff directory. Reliability is the extent to which a measure (such as a focus group) is accurate and replicable. With focus groups, this could concern whether another focus group, of similar but different people, would give similar answers (Morgan, 1997).

Focus groups often have problems with reliability. These can be lessened if the moderator is highly trained and if questions are relatively specific. Therefore, the questions are specific, and the moderator is very experienced. On the other hand, validity is the extent to which a measure measures what it purports to measure. For focus groups, this could mean whether it is reasonably certain that people are talking about what one thinks they are talking about. Focus groups are

usually strong on validity. Participation in this study was voluntary and participants could withdraw at any time if they felt uncomfortable. Data will be stored in a password protected folder on the principal researcher's laptop and will be discarded/ after a period of 5 years. Only the researchers and the statisticians had access to the data. When analyzing the data, no names were mentioned to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. Furthermore, no incentives were offered to the participants. Members of the management committee are included in this study, both male and female, from all the institution's faculties. Other university employees who are not part of the MANCO are excluded from this study.

A technique for looking at and assessing participant views and experiences from a qualitative dataset is called thematic analysis. This makes it possible for the researcher to look for terms or phrases that participants frequently used in order to find themes or patterns in the data (Nowell et al., 2017).

Furthermore, Nowell, Norris, White and Moules (2017) and Stenfors, Kajamaa and Bennett's (2020) critical criteria were employed to assess the research's credibility. Credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and reflexivity are these essential requirements. In order to guarantee qualitative validity and reliability in the current study, the researchers did the following:

• TRIANGULATING and drawing themes from participants' converging multiple perspectives in the focus groups;

• Participant member checking of the final report to ascertain participant perceptions of the accuracy of descriptions and themes;

• transporting readers to the setting through thick, rich descriptions, which allows them to participate in the experience;

• detailing the researchers' bias by acknowledging how their background may have influenced the study and by engaging in self-reflection (reflectivity);

• Presenting information that contradicts the themes, such as outliers or negative disparities. Since this research is qualitative, it recognizes that varying viewpoints are typical in real life. The researchers hope to produce a more genuine and accurate image by showcasing these outliers (Mathews, 2021).

## RESULTS

The study conducted an interpretivist, nomothetic, inductive and cross-sectional research design to interview a focus group of academics in a selected institution of higher education in South Africa. The results showed negative aspects that affected the well-being of academics as the state of well-being, weak leadership, operational resources, and workload. In contrast, the study indicated positive aspects that contributed to the well-being of academics as emotional quotient, culture practice and strong support services.

**Negative affect**

**Table 1.** State of well-being theme

| Category | Respondent quote |
|---|---|
| Exhaustion | *"…but I still feel that, uh it's very unsettling you know, it's a, it's where staff are, are really exhausted. They could just be pushed a bit too far if DUT doesn't offer the support that's necessary. Thank you.."* |
| Stress | *"…support staff members are actually getting sick as well. I mean, I have support staff members that are on medication because with the high stress levels, the tight deadlines and the pace that we work with.  So, um, it's, it's just not only academic staff members.."*. |
| Employee silence | |

| | |
|---|---|
| Labour Turnover | *"….. When I took my pressure, my pressure.  90, um, uh, 1 – 139 over nine, uh, over 82. I'm like, oh my God!  That's like a bloody stroke patient. And I realize the emotional si, the silent, emotional, mental, physical, uh, uh, uh, abuse that's happening here.  We are all subjected to it…."*<br><br>*"….And, and also if you are linking it to staff turnovers, you know we just have a, a staff member right now who actually has resigned from DUT a very young staff member, you know so you're gonna look at all these things I think as well…"* |

The data was analysed to draw themes, categories and codes using Nvivo, as illustrated in Table 1 above. With regards to negative aspects of academic well-being, and the theme of state of well-being, the category of exhaustion emerged from the theme as respondents reported exhaustion instances amongst staff members. Respondents felt overworked and tired mentally, physically and emotionally as one respondent was quoted as saying  *".".…but I still feel that, uh it's very unsettling you know, it's a, it's where staff are, are really exhausted. They could just be pushed a bit too far if DUT doesn't offer the support that's necessary. Thank you.."*

As a result of employee exhaustion, there were high levels of stress which led to employees becoming sick as one respondent stated  *".".…support staff members are actually getting sick as well. I mean, I have support staff members that are on medication because with the high stress levels, the tight deadlines and the pace that we work with.  So, um, it's, it's just not only academic staff members..".* On employee silence, some employees became aware of illness after medical testing. A respondent reported how blood pressure was extremely high to a point of hospitalisation yet they were not aware of it because they were busy fixated on work commitments as depicted in Table1. Furthermore, there was increased labour turnover of staff which can be attributed to the stressful work environment and weak leadership.

**Table 2.**  Weak leadership theme

| Category | Respondent Quote |
|---|---|
| **Cabals** | *"….I hate my job but I love my career and that means some of, somewhat of an unpacking here because my job is, to the cabal to the lack of leadership to the major issues of operations…"* |
| **Victimisation** | *"…..And…. said, those who speak out about it are subjected to be victimized. We are known as disruptors or interference because we are raising legitimate question on a leadership decision.  That makes no sense?…."* |
| **Selection** | *"…A typical example, my department has imploded, but let's pick a leader from the imploding department, management 101, reasonable thinking, rational thinking, including me, I'm part of failing department.  You don't go choose…. because she has a PhD…"* |
| **Interim appointments** | *"….I actually, in in defense of the executives, I also think they have, they under extreme pressure because they've taken the, the, the.  The package of what didn't work from the former person, and now they put in on, on themselves.…"* |
| **Weak management** | *"….Um I, I, I come from a department that has not had a head of department...  You want, you would like to know how we function, we are actually not functioning….So I think you become some sort of resilient but I mean, the resilient fades away with time because there's an emotional mental drive constantly happening and it's falling on deaf ears…."* |
| **Practices** | *"……I think the elements of leadership has been boiling for a while. Um, I think, um, it's start from the top….how many DUT staff members have seeked counselling? And that should answer, uh, uh, uh, your question a lot. And, uh it's, and, and we have an employee* |

| | |
|---|---|
| | *wellness program policy, and I'd like to know what is DUT up to? Just writing these policies endlessly, endlessly, and then in tick boxing….."* |

In relation to the theme of state of well-being, a weak leadership category arose from the focus group dataset. The category of cabals was raised where certain 'cliques' were formed between high-level individuals as shown in Table 2 above. If staff members were aligned to such cliques then they were protected from adverse effects and giving preferential treatment. One respondent was quoted as saying "**"….***I hate my job but I love my career and that means some of, somewhat of an unpacking here because my job is, to the cabal to the lack of leadership to the major issues of operations…".* On the category of victimisation,* employees who challenged the cabals were victimised and isolated. A respondent asserted receiving mistreatment and victimisation after a promotion despite having earned the position.

With regards to selection category shown in Table 2, leadership was sometimes selected based on illogical criteria. Some leaders were chosen primarily on qualifications yet they did not possess the skills and experience to lead. A respondent stated that **"…***A typical example, my department has imploded, but let's pick a leader from the imploding department, management 101, reasonable thinking, rational thinking, including me, I'm part of failing department. You don't go choose…. because she has a PhD…"*

In addition, some leaders were chosen from departments that were already failing rather than appointing an external someone who brings strong leadership skills and direction instead of weak leadership. A respondent was quoted as saying " *"….Um I, I, I come from a department that has not had a head of department... You want, you would like to know how we function, we are actually not functioning….So I think you become some sort of resilient but I mean, the resilient fades away with time because there's an emotional mental drive constantly happening and it's falling on deaf ears…."*

On the interim leadership[ category, there were high levels of 'interim leadership' which was shown to be ineffective. It was difficult for such leadership to make critical decisions and effect positive changes due to temporary appointments. Some departments had no leadership for over a long time which led to poor direction and functioning of the department. Other departments had leadership that ignored staff concerns and needs. Yet, wellness exercises were a leadership tick box exercise which was ineffective in promoting employee wellbeing.

Pertaining to practices category, academic employees were subjected to student feedback on teaching and learning while support managers were not given feedback. In addition academic employees got judged by management through the performance management systems whilst managers were not subjected to judgement leading to inconsistency. Related wellness policies and practices were written for the sake of it rather than for implementation. There seemed to be a lack of accountability by leadership about decisions and actions about operational resources et employees were accountable for tasks based in respondents of the study.

**Table 3.** Operational resources theme

| Category | Quotes |
|---|---|
| **Weak administrative systems** | *"…. and you're running out of excuses to say what is happening on internally when the system is such a failure. And, and that is so stressful. That means it directly actually makes you sick…."* |
| **Limited resources** | *"….And, um, and, and, and, and another, another source of frustration is that, um, you find that when, when you receive a new staff member, There's no office, there's no desk, there's no money for the desk, there's no laptop....."* |

| | |
|---|---|
| **Poor technology skills** | *"….Some of our, our lecturers are having difficulty with technology and they could easily see this while the lectures are on and so on and so forth.  But however, I didn't have the un, unfortunately, I didn't have those interactions to see, um, you know, how they affected and so on, so forth about this…."* |

Administrative delays were the most highly ranked operational challenges. Procurement delays seemed inevitable. This was due to different departments being involved in the process. At times, some employees got travel arrangement finalised and service providers were not paid on time. This would be embarrassing for employees and stressful. Payments for a variety of items would be done timeously. This also included payments of salaries for contract staff. this would lead to added stress for the staff member. All of this compromised operations and processes which eventually took a toll on employees. This caused significant delays on key processes which eventually led to pressure, stress and negative wellbeing of staff.  A respondent was quoted as saying" *"…. and you're running out of excuses to say what is happening on internally when the system is such a failure.  And, and that is so stressful. That means it directly actually makes you sick…."*

The administrative delays had ripple effect on all related processes. Key and critical projects would be delayed due to unprocessed employee requisitions. Staff members would have to use personal resources and finances to compensate for the delay. The department linkage between support  and academic seemed to be problematic as reported by one respondent who said ""*….And, um, and, and, and, and another, another source of frustration is that, um, you find that when, when you receive a new staff member, There's no office, there's no desk, there's no money for the desk, there's no laptop….."*Delays in the support department led to delays in the academic department in certain areas.

These ripple effect even filtered down to student level about poor technology skills as depicted in Table 3. An example given was when fees were not cleared on time, which led to delays in registration even online. This in turn led to accommodation allocation issues. Student would then complain to various authorities at the institution and these compounded problems would eventually land of staff member desks even if they were not directly responsible. Staff members ended up becoming continuously answerable for delays which affected their wellbeing as it made them feel incompetent. The overall resource provision and workload were a key item of stress and negative wellbeing and stress.

**Table 4.** Workload theme

| Category | Quotes |
|---|---|
| **High administration work** | *"…. Uh, academics will say this, you know, why is it that academics are bring registration in the first place?. Academics do not do it, it's done by admin staff and….."* |
| **Student feedback** | *"….And yet, we are being, uh, we are being selected or promotion policies are highly dependent on your last SEQ….And regardless of how many and how much chasing we do, you can't force a student to wanna complete a questionnaire…."* |
| **Work pressure** | *"…But if you talk about staff, I mean I the kind of pace and the deadlines that we are meeting is unbelievable. And I know personally that some of my staff members had to go and seek, uh, go to specialists and specialists and specialists just to get their head in some kind of balance.  And sometimes when they were ill, they had to still sit at their laptop, take their medications, and still worked because there's so few of the staff members, and each one is holding a special portfolio…."* |
| **Teaching and research balance** | *"….Um uh what I would like to add uh on my side um is the issue of, uh, balancing, uh like going to class and, and, and also doing research.  Um, we know that DUT processes they take time and, um, and, and, and, and let lecturers or staff members* |

| | |
|---|---|
| | *sometimes, uh feel overwhelmed when they have to, uh take three or four classes, uh because, uh certain positions have not been, have not been, uh filled…."* |
| Online vs face to face | *"….And I think, uh even during COVID, health sciences had to function that way because there's no other way for us, uh our programs do not lean towards a hundred percent of online, uh, teaching and learning…."* |

The theme of workload emerged from the dataset. Related to workload, high administration work was highlighted by the respondents. Academic employees were overwhelmed by increased workload which led to tiredness, burnout and stress. Academic employees were facing high levels of administrative work such as registration. The administrative work extended stress and burnout levels of employees. Adding to the administration was high levels of student feedback administration. The stressful aspect of student feedback was promotions to next level of study were based on feedback. Students were reluctant to complete the promotions and hence that put pressure on academics from a promotional perspective. Staff members faced many deadlines over and above job descriptions and duties. These deadlines came from top management and some deadlines seemed unrealistic and overwhelming. and put work pressure on academic employees. The work pressure led to staff getting sick due to stress.

There was also an imbalance when it came to teaching and research as tabulated in Table 4. Academic employees had a high teaching workload and were expected to produce research outputs which affected employee well-being. One respondent was quoted as saying " *"….Um uh what I would like to add uh on my side um is the issue of, uh, balancing, uh like going to class and, and, and also doing research. Um, we know that DUT processes they take time and, um, and, and, and, and let lecturers or staff members sometimes, uh feel overwhelmed when they have to, uh take three or four classes, uh because, uh certain positions have not been, have not been, uh filled…."* Furthermore, recent pandemic transition was stressful and currently some department pedagogy methods remain hybrid as whereby being fully online is not possible due the practical nature of the subject as illustrated in Table 4.

## Positive affect

**Table 5.** Employee well-being strategies

| Category | Quotes |
|---|---|
| **Emotional quotient** | *"…..Emotionally, uh, quotient, you know, to have empathy.. Now, the requirements when appointing these, uh, people in, in these high positions, in these leadership positions, because remember, when you take that position, you, you are not there for yourself. Uh, you're not there for part to be part of a cabal. You are there because you are serving the, the people working under you or people working with you. I always say that, I always call it people working with you, your employees working with you…."* <br><br> *"…. Some people are very good researchers. I'm not gonna deny that, some people are very good at teaching and learning, but not everybody can be a leader. You know, it has to come from within…."* |
| **Organisational culture practice** | *"…If, if a person in procurement resigns or is on suspension or is intentionally leave, which is a common, uh, issue in this environ environment that we in, we are not told who is replacing. Do you understand?..."* |
| **Strong support service** | *"….We've become admin support at duty because we are now involved in registration, actually fully involved in registration. And, and that needs to be really reviewed So that's an operational aspect, number one…"* |

| | |
|---|---|
| | *"….They've also had support of the wellness, uh, system as you know, it was still available online. Until it's been taken over by the new private consultancy now, which some of them still reuse and um I think they're slowly getting back into it…."* |
| **Resilience** | *"…..Yes, we are compensating and accommodating for which we should not be doing. By being resilient and strong and adapting to these circumstances, we actually saying it's okay for others to do what they're doing. You understand?..."* |

Based on the dataset and employee well-being strategies, leadership were being hired for intellectual quotient rather than emotional quotient. Leadership positions should have high levels of emotional quotient in order to be empathetic towards employees. Having strong emotional quotient can bring about a strong culture of trust, dignity, integrity and ethics. A respondent was quoted as saying ""*…. Some people are very good researchers. I'm not gonna deny that, some people are very good at teaching and learning, but not everybody can be a leader. You know, it has to come from within…."* Leadership appointment should also be based on skills rather than research portfolios. The number of publication did not equate to leadership skills to deal with pragmatic and operational issues. Ethical leadership Lastly, leadership support is crucial. Staff do look to leadership for guidance, direction and support. Leadership must demonstrate that they are here to help staff as stated by respondents who were part of the focus group.

On the category of organisational culture practice, the culture of the institution required an urgent positive change. There should be a bottom up approach to communication and not only top-down. This allowed for employee views from the ground up. Voices of staff needed to be heard as so their concerns can be addressed when it comes to critical work issues in the institution.

Some support sector department should be reviewed against service quality. The review is happens with academic departments only currently. A respondent was quoted as saying " *"….We've become admin support at duty because we are now involved in registration, actually fully involved in registration. And, and that needs to be really reviewed So that's an operational aspect, number one…"*It is imperative for this to be done with the support sector department for improvement of services as they impact on academic departments and related. The wellness programme should be used effectively and a review of the programme to customised to staff wellbeing needs. Incentives must be considered to promote wellbeing and resilience of employees as a respondent suggested and tabulated in Table 5. Figure 2 summarised the emerging negative and positive affect themes that contribute to employee well-being.

**Figure 2.** Emerging employee well-being strategies
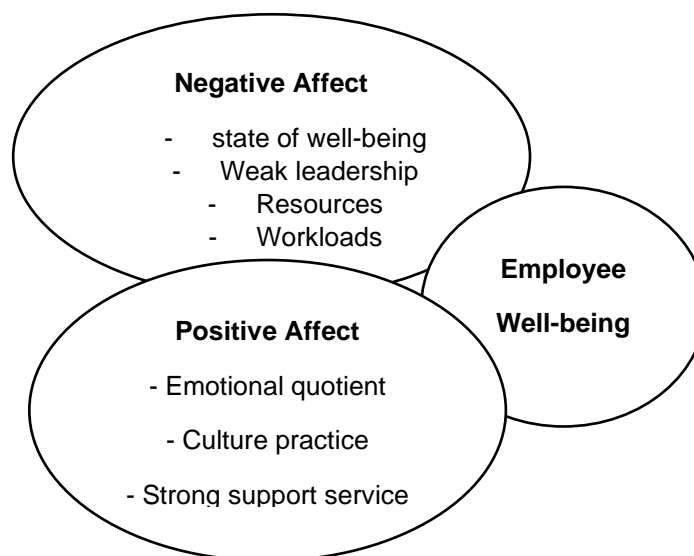
# DISCUSSION

The study set out to find out negative drivers and positive factors that contribute to employee well-being in an organisation. Drivers and factors formed the basis for suggesting strategies to enhance employee well-being.

### State of employee well-being during change

The state of employee well-being demonstrates the extent to which employees feel taken care of or ignoring by the organisation in which they work, particularly during a change process. When organisations undergo change as argued by Vlachopoulos (2021), employee well-being was likely to be affected by the change.

Employees embrace change for their personal well-being, while other employees resist change. Farquharson, Sinha and Clarke (2018) that change was likely to affect employees in a negative way. The state of employee well-being is intertwined with change process of an organisation.

### Weak leadership

Weak leadership constrains employees from undertaking activities which leads to stress and ill-health. Yet, Sica, Perkins, Latzman, Caudek, Colpizzi, Bottesi, Caruso, Giulini, Cerea and Patrick (2020) have argued that high positive affect was demonstrated through lower stress levels. Since weak leadership lacks ethical conduct and makes decisions along cabal, such leadership puts negative pressure on employee well-being.

When employees are under negative pressure, they may choose to be silent rather than challenge weak leadership or even leave the organisation to present personal well-being. In the absence of strong ethical leadership, employees experience difficulty in perform work tasks effectively and exhibiting positive behaviours and conduct. Therefore, weak leaders contribute to negative emotional strain on employee health.

### Resources

Limited access to resources affected employee well-being negatively as employees sort alternative interventions. While organisations face resource constraints, employees were expected to perform duties diligently and efficiently. The lack of resources to support employee work was further exacerbated by a recent extreme condition of a pandemic which placed a strain on employee wellbeing.

In a case where employees navigate resource constraints, van Niekerk and van Gent (2021) points out that employees experiences negative outcomes like stress during to lockdown and limited access to teaching and human resource activities. Academic employees had limited access to teaching and learning resources of devices, data and connectivity. In addition, employees had limited access to well-being services online.

### Workload

Inequitable distribution of workload had negative outcomes for employee well-being, where employees felt stressed and ill. Employees carried workloads for unfilled vacant positions, lack of boundaries online and navigating teaching and research demands. However, some employees carried less workload in an organisation.

Ozamiz-Etxebarria *et al.* (2021) and van Niekerk and van Gent (2021) were in agreement that high workload negatively affected employee emotional well-being. In this regard, the nature of job tasks and distribution played a role in whether employees felt emotionally stable to continue to work for the institution.

**Strategies**

*Leadership emotional quotient*

Leadership that showed empathy and care for employees were viewed as contributing positively towards employee well-being in the workplace. On the contrary, leadership who did not show emotional support for employee needs were perceived as enabling negative employee emotional well-being outcomes.

Leaders tend to focus on the work tasks, deadlines and expectations while ignoring the well-being and wellness of employees. Bradburn (1969) and Harmon (2019) were of the view that emotional quotient was key to provide emotional support for employees. In this regard, it was important for leadership to show better support the emotional status of employees.

*Communication as a culture practice*

Continuous communication from employees to management was essential in promoting employee well-being in the workplace. Even though employees took instructions from management, it was important for management to open avenues to share experience of undertaking instructions while preserving employee well-being.

Organisational culture practices created conditions for employees to be well-informed about expectations for better employee well-being outcomes. As Krekel, Ward and De Neve (2019) and Pagán-Castaño, Maseda-Moreno and Santos-Rojo (2020) point out organisational culture sets the tone for acceptable practices.

*Strong support services*

Collaboration between employees across departments and units was key to supporting work-tasks and positive employee well-being. Lack of integration between interrelated but separate work functions created bottlenecks in work systems which contributed to stress and ill-health.

For instance, poor infrastructural support constrained the ability of employees to perform work which created stress. As Bradburn (1969) and Yoon, Bono, Yang, Lee, Glomb and Duffy (20021) points out, emotional support for employees was key to ensuring that work get done in the workplace.

**Recommendations**

The institution of higher learning should involve employee in the change process in order for their state of wellbeing to be improved and minimise resistance to change.

The implementation of employee wellness programs tailored to the institution's type of employees to address stress caused by the challenging working environment is crucial for the support of employee well-being.

The management should consider implementing policies that promote employee wellbeing.

Leadership development programs should be considered by the institution of higher learning as this will assist in having strong leaders who are capable of making impactful decisions beneficial to the staff.

Equitable distribution of workloads should be facilitated.

The institution of higher learning should provide staff with adequate resources required to carry out their duties effectively and efficiently.

Continuous and top-down communication should be enhanced at the institution of higher learning.

The formulation of strong support systems that encourage interdepartmental collaborations should be considered.

## CONCLUSION

From a management committee's perspective, this article assessed the strategies that can be used to enhance the wellbeing of academics in the institution of higher learning in South Africa. It has been noted that employee wellbeing especially emotional wellbeing are crucial for the staff retention, and it also enhances productivity. The study highlights those strategies such as communication, strong support services, equitable workload and leadership are paramount in enhancing employee wellbeing at the institution of higher learning. The findings of this study provide an insight into theoretical and practical implications with regard to promotion of employee well-being in the context of a higher education environment management play a crucial role in ensuring that employee wellbeing is enhanced as this leads to an improved productivity, organisational loyalty leading to lower staff turnover. The implementation of employee wellness programs tailored to the institution's type of employees to address stress caused by the challenging working environment is crucial for the support of employee well-being. Continuous and top-down communication should be enhanced at the institution of higher learning. This study is also a wake-up call to all institutions of higher learning globally that have a same or similar challenge to review on the strategies discovered by the study.

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## DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTERESTS

The authors declare that this is original work and never been submitted to other journals for publication. There is no financial or any other relationship that may have inappropriately influenced in writing this article and also like to acknowledge all the participants for willing to participate in this research. The author declares no much competing interest.

## CREDIT AUTHOR STATEMENT

All authors have contributed equally to all parts of the work.