

# HOLD YOUR HORSES! UNDERSTANDING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN STRATEGIC CHANGE AND JOB BURNOUT AMONG LECTURERS IN MALAYSIAN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

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**Abstract:** *In recent years, Malaysia's higher education landscape has undergone significant transformations. Higher education institutions have enhanced their strategic planning with new initiatives to respond to these changes and maintain competitiveness to remain viable and significant. Although these changes are anticipated to align with future requirements, the impact of such a strategic change should be evaluated holistically on every conceivable metric to eliminate the possibility of harm. Numerous studies indicate that such a transformation can negatively affect academics' wellbeing, particularly job burnout. This study aims to conceptually investigate the factors that contribute to job burnout among lecturers within the context of strategic transformation initiatives in higher education institutions in Malaysia. The study was conducted by reviewing secondary data sources from academic publications identified through word searches on "strategic change", "job burnout", and "higher education institutions". The identified articles were subsequently screened for appropriate titles, abstracts, keywords, and frameworks. The relevance of previous studies and the authors' credentials have become this study's selection criteria. A conceptual model was developed based on the criteria outlined for a conceptual paper. Findings indicated that teaching-*

*research conflict, humour and workload could influence job burnout among lecturers. Future research should be conducted based on the proposed instruments to validate the conceptual framework.*

**Keywords:** *Strategic Change, Job Burnout, Teaching-Research Conflict, Humour, Workload*

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## Introduction

The ever-changing wind of change has brought tremendous influence globally, affecting all, including the education sector. In recent years, higher education institutions are experiencing significant changes, such as rising student expectations, shifting human capital demand, the need to embrace new technologies, working on ranking and recognition, etc. For instance, In Malaysia, there is significant pressure on academic staff to enhance their international reputation, secure funding, and meet key performance indicators in order to elevate the quality of education to an international level. (Nasuiton et al., 2022). Higher education institutions worldwide face numerous challenges in the 21st century, including increasing competition, declining resources, and the need to embrace new technologies to meet the demands of a changing workforce. Additionally, universities are expected to boost their ranking to remain attractive and competitive to the stakeholders. For instance, Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) ranking was introduced in 2004 to provide indicators of universities' academic reputation, faculty/student ratio, citations per faculty, employer reputation, international student ratio, and international staff ratio (Laura, 2023).

To adapt to these changes and remain competitive, higher education institutions have bolstered new initiatives in their strategic planning to remain viable and significant. The higher education landscape in Malaysia has undergone significant changes in recent years. According to the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015-2025, the country aims to increase its higher education enrollment rate to 50% by 2025, driven by a growing demand for higher education and a need for a skilled workforce in a knowledge-based economy (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015). In response to these changes, many institutions have implemented strategic change initiatives, such as restructuring, revamping curricula, and investing in technology, to remain competitive and meet the needs of stakeholders.

Though these changes are expected to align with future needs, the effect of such strategic change should be assessed holistically on every parameter possible to negate the potential of harm. Much research points out that such change can cause negative effects on academicians well-being, especially job burnout (Maseri et al., 2022; Lei et al., 2021; Mohammed et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020). These studies found dissimilar associations of factors yet led to the common outcome of job burnout that can be seen from changes in educational institutions. In Malaysia, the lecturer turnover rate in public and private universities was reported to be 5.6% and 6.5%, respectively (Ministry of Higher Education, 2021; Malaysian Qualifications Agency, 2020). Though a careful extrapolation on the issue is needed, the rate could be costly to the universities through the loss of expertise, decreased institutional performance and affecting the good image. Therefore, understanding the relationship between strategic change and lecturer burnout is thus critical for Malaysian higher education institutions to develop effective strategies to support their lecturers and maintain the quality of education they provide. This research is set to explore the factors contributing to lecturer burnout in the context of strategic change initiatives in higher education institutions in Malaysia. It is hopeful that higher education institutions can identify

areas where they can improve their support for lecturers and mitigate the negative effects of these changes.

## Literature Review

The literature review will focus on the two subheadings below; strategic change and job burnout.

### Strategic Change

Strategic change introduces significant and deliberate changes to an organization's overall strategy to achieve its objectives. Strategic change has become increasingly relevant in today's rapidly changing business environment, where organizations need to adapt to changing market conditions, technologies, and customer demands. As such, strategic change has become an essential aspect of organizational management. According to Beer and Nohria (2000), strategic change is a complex and multifaceted process that involves various stages, including recognizing the need for change, defining the desired outcome, and implementing the change. Strategic change can take many forms, such as mergers and acquisitions, restructuring, downsizing, or introducing new technologies or products.

One of the critical factors in successful strategic change is the organization's ability to manage the change effectively. According to Luecke and Hall (2006), effective change management involves ensuring all stakeholders are engaged and informed throughout the process, providing employee training and support, and creating a culture of openness and communication. Furthermore, Kotter and Schlesinger (2008) identify several potential sources of resistance to strategic change, including fear of the unknown, lack of trust, and loss of power or status. Successful management of these sources of resistance is crucial to ensuring the success of strategic change initiatives. Overall, strategic change is a critical concept in organizational management, and understanding its various components is essential for organizations seeking to achieve their objectives and remain competitive in today's rapidly changing business environment.

### Job Burnout

Job burnout is a psychological syndrome that occurs when an individual experiences emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment due to prolonged exposure to job stressors (Maslach et al., 2001). In the context of higher learning institutions, job burnout has been found to be a common phenomenon among faculty members, including lecturers, due to various job demands, such as heavy workload, role ambiguity, and lack of support (Chang et al., 2014; Demir & Kilic, 2018).

According to a study by Li et al. (2020), job burnout among university faculty members in China is prevalent, with 40.8% of respondents experiencing high levels of emotional exhaustion, 33.7% experiencing high levels of depersonalization, and 34.7% experiencing low levels of personal accomplishment. Another study conducted by Maslach and Leiter (2016) found that faculty members in North America and Europe also experience high levels of burnout due to organizational factors, such as work overload, lack of control, and inadequate rewards. Several studies have also found that job burnout among faculty members can have negative effects on their job performance, such as reduced job satisfaction (Demir & Kilic, 2018), decreased teaching effectiveness (Chang et al., 2014), and increased absenteeism (Gibson et al., 2019). Moreover, job burnout can also lead to negative outcomes for the institution, such as high turnover rates and decreased organizational commitment (Bakker et al., 2014).

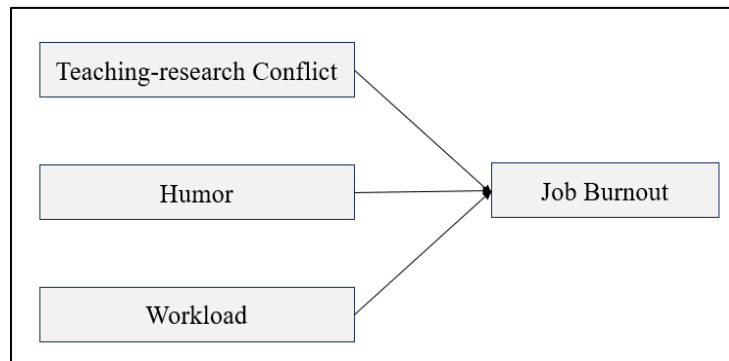
Various interventions have been proposed to prevent and mitigate job burnout among faculty members, including increasing social support, improving communication, providing professional development opportunities, and promoting work-life balance (Demir & Kilic, 2018; Li et al., 2020). Creating a supportive work environment and fostering a positive organizational culture can also help prevent job burnout among faculty members (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Overall, job burnout is a common problem among faculty members in higher learning institutions and can have negative consequences for both the individual and the organization. Therefore, it is important for institutions to implement strategies to prevent and mitigate job burnout among faculty members.

### Methodology

The current study was conducted through a review of secondary data sources from academic journals identified through word searches on “strategic change”, “job burnout” and “higher education institutions”. The articles identified were then screened for suitable titles, abstracts, keywords, and frameworks. The relevancy of previous studies and the authors' credentials have become this study's selection criteria. The criteria for selecting articles for a concept paper, as described in your statement, are based on the recommendations by Gilson and Goldberg (2015). According to their recommendations, a concept paper should include integrated pieces of literature, a framework for the concept, relationships among the concepts, bridging of theories, expanding the scope of thinking, and logical arguments to compensate for the absence of empirical data. Additionally, these criteria echoed the conceptual paper's criteria by Watts (2011) and Balkin (2009).

### Discussion

Though many relatable theories explain job burnout, this study utilized the person-environment (PE) Fit Theory. It supported demands-resources (JD-R) model as the underlying framework, which is widely recognized in the field of job-stress and burnout research (Naidoo-Chetty & du Plessis, 2020; Bakker & Demerouti, 2018; Kokkinos, 2007). The JD-R model has also garnered considerable attention in occupational health psychology research. A meta-analytic review has revealed that this model provides a suitable theoretical framework for examining employee wellbeing across diverse organizations (Lesener et al., 2019). Person-environment fit refers to the degree of alignment between an individual's characteristics and the characteristics of their environment (Meyer & Dale, 2010). According to the PE Fit theory and the JD-R model, the interaction between an individual and their environment determines whether a situation becomes stressful for that person. These frameworks propose that both personal factors and environmental factors influence human behaviour, and an individual's vocational satisfaction, stability, and achievement are contingent upon the congruence or fit between their personality and work environment (Herr et al., 2004; Kokkinos, 2007; Salami, 2006).



**Figure 1: The Conceptual Framework**

Source: Authors

This study formulated a new conceptual framework by reviewing and synthesizing the literature between strategic change and job burnout in higher education institutions. The conceptual framework is illustrated in Figure 1.0. The variables' relationships are also outlined to show the potential hypotheses.

### Teaching-research Conflict and Job Burnout

Teaching-research conflict can be better represented by role conflict. Though there is limited empirical research regarding teaching-research conflict and job burnout, especially in Malaysia, research on role conflict and job burnout has been extensively studied (Wilkerson & Bellini, 2006). Drawing from past research, role conflict is a prevalent workplace stressor that emerges from excessive job demands requiring employees to juggle multiple roles simultaneously (Mulki et al., 2008; Onyemah, 2008). These roles are often challenging and demand significant resources, leaving employees with limited time and energy to perform them effectively. Consequently, prioritizing one role often leads to neglecting others to some extent (Kemery, 2006), resulting in negative emotions such as pressure, anxiety, and worry. If left unresolved over an extended period, this persistent conflict can ultimately contribute to the development of job burnout. Additionally, the relationship can be effectively explained by job demands-resources (JD-R) model, which highlights that job characteristics encompass two dimensions: job demands and job resources. Job demands refer to aspects of work that require energy, such as workload, task complexity, and role conflicts (Bakker & Demerouti, 2018). It is important to note that role conflicts are considered hindrances to job demands, which negatively affect performance (LePine et al., 2005). Recent research has provided some insight that teaching-research conflict was positively linked to job burnout among academicians in China (Lei et al., 2020; Xu, 2019). Thereby, this research posited:

H1: There is a significant relationship between teaching-research conflict on job burnout among lecturers in Malaysian Higher Education Institutions.

### Humour and Job Burnout

The study of humour and job burnout is uncommon in academic settings. Previous studies, however, consistently reported that humour can negatively influence job burnout. For instance, Ebrahimabad et al. (2021) found that humor mediates organizational commitment and job burnout among teachers. Martin and Lefcourt (1983) proposed that humor has the potential to counteract negative life events and emotions, as well as alleviate highlighting the impact of stress. Furthermore, Kuiper et al. (1992) conducted a study highlighting the stress-reducing effects of humor, which can ultimately improve individuals' quality of life. As a result, the



positive effects of humor have spurred an expanding body of research that explores the use of humor as a therapeutic approach in psychological consultations (Franzini, 2001; Goldin & Bordan, 1999; Lewis, 1997). Nonetheless, the past evidence can posit a different angle on humor and job burnout if a lack of humor exists in a job setting. Research by Tremblay (2017) found that offensive humor climates negatively affected employee inclusion and weakened individual performance. Therefore, this research posited that:

H2: There is a significant relationship between humor on job burnout among lecturers in Malaysian Higher Education Institutions.

### **Workload and Job Burnout**

High workloads, excessive administrative tasks, and demanding teaching schedules can contribute to feelings of exhaustion and overwhelm among lecturers. When lecturers are constantly under pressure to meet deadlines and manage numerous responsibilities, they are at a higher risk of experiencing burnout. Several studies have examined the relationship between various factors and job burnout among university teachers. Research by Pestonjee and Azeem (2001) highlighted a significant connection between organizational role stress and job burnout, particularly among lecturers who experienced higher role stress than readers and professors. Salami (2011) demonstrated that job stress, personality dimensions, and social support collectively and individually forecasted different aspects of burnout in the college of education lecturers. Van Droogenbroeck et al. (2014) also established that teaching-related and non-teaching-related workloads were associated with emotional exhaustion among senior teachers. Current research also points out that high workload, including work demand in research and teaching, student interaction, and administrative-related tasks, influences the burnout level among lecturers (Osfilia, 2020; Taylor, 2022; Maseri, 2022). Therefore, this research posited that:

H3: There is a significant relationship between workload and job burnout.

Though the discussion only provided a framework built upon the past evidence, future research should be conducted empirically to validate and explore more on understanding the variables mentioned; teaching-research conflict, humour and workload on job burnout among lecturers in higher education in Malaysia. Hence, this research proposes established instruments that can be put into consideration for future research measurements. First, job burnout can be measured with the Maslach Burnout Inventory, which comprises three subscales: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment (Maslach et al., 1997). Second, the Teacher-Coach Role Conflict Scale (T/C-RCS), adapted from Ryan (2008), can measure teaching-research conflict. Third, humour can be measured by the Coping Humor Scale (CHS) by Martin and Lefcourt (1983). Lastly, the workload can be assessed through the NASA task-load index (TLX), comprised of 6 multidimensional subscales: mental demand, physical demand, temporal demand, frustration, effort and performance. This index has been used in various settings (Hart, 2006), including those working in private universities (Widiasih & Nuha, 2019).

### **Conclusion and Recommendation**

In summary, this research conceptually explored the relationship between strategy change and job burnout among lecturers in Malaysian higher education institutions, specifically examining the potential variables of workload balance, humour, and teaching-research conflicts. The past findings highlight the crucial importance of the spillover effect of strategic change on job burnout during periods of organisational change. At times, such change can even reduce

employees engagement (Buttigieg et al., 2023), decrease academic achievement (Madigan& Curran, 2021) and undermine job satisfaction (Boamah, 2022) through the effect of job burnout. Furthermore, the integration of humour has emerged as a potentially effective coping strategy, providing individuals with a way to effectively traverse the difficulties associated with strategic change and reduce the negative effects of burnout. Recognising the conflict between the obligations of teaching-research has emerged as a significant contributor to job burnout, underscoring the importance of implementing complete solutions that recognise the significance of both tasks. These interrelated observations emphasise the significance of adopting a comprehensive strategy that encompasses the balance of workload, integration of humour as supportive organizational culture, and resolution of role conflicts to cultivate a more robust and resilient faculty workforce within the ever-changing context of Malaysian higher education institutions. It is critical not to overlook the resource limitations and the capacity of the lecturers. The quality of certain key areas may have to be diluted or need to be forgone since the target is different as per the strategic change. In the pursuit of educational strategic transformation, as the race to excellence in ranking accelerates, it is imperative to remember that the university's essence and visionary aspirations must never be relegated to a secondary position.

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