

Work Engagement at A Transforming Tertiary Institution: A Reflection of NUST Academic Staff, Namibia

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Abstract:

Engagement of employees is a concern for most institutions because a lack of engagement can be costly. Employees are regarded as engaged when they have a sense of commitment, exhibit discretionary behaviour, see their organisation as a good place to work and will go the extra mile. The aim of the study was to determine the work engagement levels of the academic staff at NUST, Namibia. To achieve the aims of the study a self-administered questionnaire, The Questionnaire was administered to full-time academic staff members across the six faculties and a total of 201 academic staff members participated in the study. Descriptive analysis was carried out to determine the distribution levels of engagement of academic staff at NUST. Furthermore, inferential analysis such as chi-square and correlation analysis were used to determine the strength of the relationships between engagement and job resources and job demands. Findings indicated that the academic staff at NUST is only moderately engaged on aspects of vigour, dedication and absorption. This implies that most academics perform duties required by their job descriptions and do not go beyond what is expected of them. The results prompted recommendations on measures needed to shift the engagement levels from moderate to high.

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Introduction

Human Capital is the most effective asset in achieving organisational objectives and goals, and extensive research has been carried out on ways to utilise this important asset to its full potential. Work engagement is an important phenomenon in human capital development which has received a lot of attention over the past decade. Bakker and Xanthopoulou (2013) describe work engagement as a constructive, satisfying, work-related experience which includes the following three complementary dimensions, namely vigour (energetic) component, dedication (affective) component and absorption (cognitive) component. Engaged workers are thus extremely energetic, passionate about their work and fully immersed in their tasks. In a period of transformation and change at NUST, where full university status has been accorded to the institution, academic staff are increasingly challenged to perform better regarding issues such as new demands in course design and delivery, innovative teaching techniques, the integration of technology in teaching and learning, and higher research output, amongst others. The study of work engagement amongst academic staff at the institution may, therefore, highlight information about the current engagement levels, which may either promote or hinder full engagement of staff.

Saxena and Srivastava (2015) describe work engagement as a key organisational issue which enjoys huge deliberation by organisations, especially in the current challenging business environment. This is because highly engaged employees reflect the main organisational values and therefore, reinforce overall brand equity. In other words, engaged employees have a sense of desire for their work, feel happy to work and feel enthusiastic to be at the workplace every day (Ramanujam, 2014). Bakker and Demerouti (2008) listed four reasons why engaged employees perform better than unengaged workers, which include the fact that engaged employees have more optimistic feelings towards their jobs, which in turn may increase productivity. In addition, engaged employees are open to work opportunities and are generally more assertive. Engagement is also closely related to employee well-being and lastly, engaged employees have the potential to work more effectively because they have the potential to create their personal resources. Recent research by Takawira, Coetzee, and Schreuder (2014) revealed that academics in a higher education institution who indicated high levels of engagement reported significant lower turnover intentions. Based on the above, it can thus be argued that there are some positive business outcomes associated with work engagement.

Rothmann and Jordaan (2006) stated that work engagement is directly linked to an institution's work environment and can either drive employees towards engagement or push them towards disengagement. The failing of organisation to provide the necessary job resources, employees are more likely to withdraw and disengage themselves, which may eventually result in burnout (Takawira, Coetzee & Schreuder, 2014).

The awareness of higher work engagement amongst academics should be particularly appealing to the higher education system in Namibia. There has been a public outcry for answerability within the higher education system and to ensure the effectiveness of the quality of education. This is critical as institutions currently are faced with pressure to increase student outcomes such as retention, perseverance and achievement (Zepke & Leach, 2005).

Research Problem Statement

Despite this knowledge of the importance of creating work environments that engage workers, the current climate at higher education institutions is rather gloomy. Rothmann and Jordaan (2006) reported on several problems in the South African higher education system, such as inequalities and misrepresentation of the system, poorly-prepared students, and declining government subsidy. Similar challenges are also observed in the Namibian context. Even though the Namibian Government allocates a significant amount of the national budget to education, a lack of transparency about the funding formula for Higher Education Institutions still exists (NCHE, 2010a). Other challenges experienced are high turnover rates by academic staff members and poor infrastructure that does not meet the current needs of Namibian Higher Education Institutions (NCHE, 2010b). These are some of the aspects that may have an influence on the engagement levels of academic staff.

Literature suggests that companies should invest in the concept of work engagement because it is interwoven with vital business results such as employee retention, efficiency, cost-effectiveness, customer loyalty and safety. While engaged individuals are associated with increased performance, in contrast, disengaged employees may be detached from their work and hide their exact feelings during role performances (Coetzee & Schreuder, 2013). The study was prompted by the fact that the engagement levels of academic staff members were not previously investigated at NUST.

Research Questions and Objectives

The leading research question was 'how are NUST academics currently engaged in their work? The main research objective following the research question was to determine the current work engagement levels of NUST academics.

Literature Review

Definition of work engagement

Literature has yielded different definitions of work engagement and up to date, there is no single universal definition of the term. Several scholars have defined it in different ways. The most widely used definition is from Schaufeli and Bakker (2003), who describe work engagement as an optimistic, rewarding, work-related state of mind, which is characterised by vigour, dedication, and absorption. Vigour is characterised by extraordinary levels of energy and mental resilience while working, the inclination to capitalise effort in one's work, and determination even during difficult times. Dedication refers to being intensely immersed in one's work and experiencing a feeling of importance, eagerness, motivation, pride and challenge. Lastly, absorption is characterised by being entirely focused and happily absorbed in one's work, whereby time passes rapidly, and one has difficulty getting disconnected from his/her work.

Coetzee and Schreuder (2013) refer to work engagement as the connecting of employees to their work roles whereby they express themselves physically, cognitively and emotionally. In addition, they argue that disengaged employees become detached from their jobs, and hide their true individuality, opinions and feelings during role performances. Fernandez (as cited by Markos and Sridevi, 2010) alluded to the importance of not confusing work engagement with job satisfaction, arguing that job satisfaction sometimes reveals a rather artificial, transactional connection that is only as good as the company's last round of bonuses and

gratuities. Work engagement, on the other hand, is about passion and commitment, the readiness to invest oneself and increase one's discretionary strength to help businesses succeed, which is beyond simple agreement with the employment arrangement or mere devotion to the employer.

Despite the different definitions of the concept, there are some specific underlying aspects that come through in most definitions, most notably, the fact that engagement relates to a strong positive attitude, commitment and passion for one's work, which fosters motivation and improves overall employee wellness.

Measurement of Work Engagement

Schaufeli and Bakker (2003) developed the Work and Well-Being Survey (UWES). The UWES is a self-report questionnaire which includes the three constituting aspects of work engagement, namely vigour, dedication and absorption. Vigour is assessed by six items referring to high levels of dynamism and resilience, readiness to invest effort, the ability to not be easily exhausted and determination in the face of difficulties. Dedication is measured by five items which refer to a sense of importance from work, feeling passionate and proud about the job, and subsequently feeling motivated and challenged by it. Lastly, absorption is measured by six items which refer to being completely and happily engrossed in one's work, difficulty to disconnect from the work to the degree that one forgets everything else. Engagement can also be measured through the Gallup's engagement survey. This survey is based on twelve questions that measure engagement through various business processes, such as retention, productivity and safety (Botha et al. 2014).

The relevance of work engagement for higher education institutions

Barkhuizen, Rothmann and Vivjer (2014) suggest that the following aspects are important to promote work engagement at academic institutions. Firstly, academics should be equipped with the basic resources to perform their duties effectively. This means the availability of the necessary teaching equipment, engaging in challenging tasks and provision of assistants (tutors). Furthermore, supervisors should play a more prominent role in promoting engagement. This includes aspects such as reward systems, fairness, encouraging personal development, assisting staff members in goal-setting and open communication lines. Lastly, work engagement can be promoted by heightening the self-esteem of academics through capacity building for them to reach new heights in their careers. Van den Berg, Manias and Burger (2008) further state that since lecturers are the driving force of institutions of higher learning, their work engagement is a crucial part of institutional success.

Theoretical framework for work engagement

Many theories and models of work engagement have been developed but the more relevant theories are the following:

Personal Engagement Theory of Kahn

The personal engagement theory of Kahn (as cited by Rothman and Cooper, 2015) postulates that people capitalise their personal energies into role behaviours and express themselves emotionally, cognitively and physically during role performance. Engagement is thus characterised by a physical dimension (high levels of energy), a cognitive dimension (getting

absorbed in work) and an emotional dimension (being dedicated). The theory further emphasises the importance of relationships in the workplace. Relationships shape the significance of work by extending employees' experience of the purpose of their work and enhance their sense of belongingness. Work engagement is a positive, fulfilling work-related state of mind, characterised by vigour, dedication and absorption. Vigour represents a positive affective response to an employee's ongoing interfaces with important work elements and work environment. Dedication is characterised by a sense of meaning from the job, by feeling enthusiastic, proud, inspired and challenged by it. Absorption refers to a feeling of being completely and happily engrossed in the job.

Strategies for Improving Engagement Levels

The literature suggests that employees cannot engage in a highly structured environment with little room for creativity, autonomy, and personal responsibility. Nel, Werner, Haasbroek, Poisat, Sono, and Schultz (2008) describe the key elements of engagement as having the right employees in the right positions, leaders with the right skills, and supportive organisational systems and strategies.

Rama Devi (2009) states that although pay and benefits are motivators to a certain extent, offering higher salaries and more benefits alone are not drivers of engagement. Corporate cultures characterised by teamwork, enjoyable working conditions, the considerate treatment of employees, growth opportunities, skills advancement and ample training opportunities can all contribute to work engagement.

Three levels of interventions are suggested for the improvement of work engagement. Individual-based interventions can include behavioural aspects which address issues such as gratitude, sharing of positive views and acts of kindness. Ram and Prabhakar (2011) suggests that a holistic strategy should be followed for engagement. They recommend that HR departments should develop and use a matrix of engagement predictors including organisational process, values, management, work/life balance, rewards, and work environment, amongst others. Therefore, the extent to which employees relate to company strategies and goals, are acknowledged for work well done and offered an opportunity for learning and development, will eventually increase engagement. Ram and Prabhakar (2011) hence argue that in the absence of a positive workplace environment for engagement, turnover will increase, and efficiency will decrease which, in turn, will lead to decreased customer loyalty and stakeholder value. Therefore, top management should foster positive, effective HR management as well as workplace policies and practises which focus on employee well-being and work/life balance.

Tonette, Carlos and Albonez (2011) agree with the above- mentioned holistic strategy and suggest that the environment (colleagues and supervisors) and the person (individual employee's unique personality characteristics) should interact to create engagement. They also put emphasis on the role of managers in developing engagement, as well as the importance of answerability through linking engagement to the organisation's performance appraisals. Lastly, they emphasise the provision of ample resources to managers to support their subordinates' growth towards engagement.

A recent study on the effect of work engagement on employee performance at a public Malaysian university by Hanaysha (2015) suggests that employers at universities should frequently conduct engagement surveys among employees. These surveys would then enable such institutions to develop suitable strategies for dealing with issues such as the acquisition of talent and help ensure the provision of sufficient financial, physical and other resources

needed to foster engagement. Furthermore, Hanaysha (2015) emphasises that employers should embrace the two-way communication strategy between them and employees, which will allow employees to share ideas about their jobs and aspects which may influence their engagement and productivity.

Altunel, Kocak and Cankir (2015) extended the above-mentioned view by emphasising the impact of job resources which should be reinforced to increase the engagement levels of academic staff specifically. They refer to the importance of more autonomy in terms of academic freedom for lecturing staff, a more supportive social network and coaching of academics by senior lecturers/professors. They further allude to the prominence of opportunities for personal development to improve academicians' talents, awareness and build their human capital. Lastly, Altunel et al. (2015) mention higher task significance awareness, which refers to the ability of academics to identify their tasks as contributing to the wider society or community. This can be achieved by encouraging sturdier community engagement by academics.

Outcomes of Work Engagement

Research indicates that the outcomes of engaged employees will be numerous, and organisations will benefit from having an engaged workforce. There is a general assumption that there is a connection between work engagement as an individual level construct and business results, according to Harter, Schmidt and Hayes (as cited by Ram & Prabhakar, 2011). Bakker and Demerouti, (2008) similarly alluded to reasons why engaged workers outperform non-engaged workers. This is specifically in terms of aspects such as positive feelings which include happiness and enthusiasm, experiencing better health, generating their own job and personal resources and transferring their engagement to others.

Nel et al. (2008) also acknowledge and agree with the idea that high engagement levels will uplift co-worker relationships and foster a deeper connection with customers. Customers, in turn, will see and respond to the enthusiasm of employees and their passion and believe in what they are doing. Rothmann and Jordaan (2006) establishes a positive association between work engagement and organisational commitment. They assert that employees that are highly engaged in their work tend to be more committed to their organisations. About commitment, they describe it as the preparedness of employees to make a greater effort on behalf of their organisations, the strong desire to remain in their organisations, and acceptance of organizational goals and values.

Furthermore, work engagement is closely related to Organisation Citizenship Behaviour (OCB). According to Roberts, Judge, Odendaal & Roodt, (2009), OCB is discretionary behaviour that is not part of an employee's job description, but which promotes the effective functioning of the organisation. They argue that successful organisations need workers who will do more than just their normal duties, those who will provide performance that is beyond expectations.

Bakker and Demerouti (2008) are also of the opinion that engaged workers perform better than non-engaged workers. They argue that engaged workers experience positive emotions, better health, can create their own job and personal resources and may transfer their engagement to others. Furthermore, engaged employees, through their optimism, positive attitudes and pro-active behaviour, will create a positive team climate independent from the resources and demands they are exposed to.

Bakker and Xanthopoulou (2013) postulates that the impact of work engagement on creativity and charisma among female leaders, revealed a positive connection between work

engagement and creative task performance. Further, there is a positive relationship between charismatic leadership and engagement. Their findings suggest that engaged leaders are regarded by their subordinates as charismatic leaders who will take every opportunity to convince their employees to get actively involved with organisational goals. It is thus more possible for leaders to engage their subordinates when they are engaged themselves. Thus, there are several practical reasons why managers and other stakeholders across all industries, including academia, and organisation should be concerned with and invest in employee engagement within the work sphere.

Research Methodology

Newby (2010) stated that a research paradigm ties the way a researcher works, to ideas about what is appropriate to investigate and on what basis should the research output be a truth. Denscombe (2010) alluded to the importance for social researchers to have some basic understanding of the philosophy that underlies the design and implementation of their research. He further suggests that philosophical assumptions constitute the foundations for research because it underpins the perspective that is adopted on the research topic, it shapes the nature of the investigation, specifying what type of things qualifies as worthwhile evidence and it points to the kind of conclusions that can and cannot be drawn based on the investigation. A research paradigm includes assumptions regarding ontology (the nature of reality), epistemology (the relationship between the researcher and the research participant), and axiology (the role a researcher's personal values play in the research process), the rhetorical structure and finally the method to be used (Kotzé, 2011). The study was conducted from a positivistic paradigm. According to Kotzé (2011), this paradigm can be modelled on the natural science approach. It strives to achieve objective knowledge that can in the end be used to ascertain cause-and-effect relationships. The positivistic paradigm was appropriate to the study as it attempts to find a relationship between constructs mentioned for this study and will make use of an objective measurement instrument for the data gathering and analysis procedures. The paradigm was also appropriate because the study made use of a survey design and aimed at quantifying the constructs affecting work engagement levels of academic staff at NUST. The assumptions on which this study was based fell in line with the paradigm the researcher intended to adopt.

This study followed a quantitative approach. The approach holds that research should be based and limited to aspects that can be observed and measured objectively, in other words, aspects which exist independently of the feelings and opinions of individuals (Welman, Kruger & Mitchell, 2012). Furthermore, the study utilised an objective measurement instrument, the JD-R questionnaire, for the data gathering and analysis process and employed the survey design technique. Quantitative research involves looking at amounts, or quantities, of one or more variables of interest. The intent is to establish, confirm, or validate relationships and to develop generalisations that contribute to existing theories. This means that no new concepts were developed for this study, but aspects proposed to be factual in the literature review were tested.

This study employed a descriptive research design. Basic descriptive statistics were used to describe the quantitative data, in terms of deriving conclusions and distributions from the questionnaire. Babbie and Mouton (2011) states that when the descriptive research approach is employed, it is used to systematically describe a problem, situation, phenomenon or attitude towards a specific issue.

A survey research, cross sectional research design. Denscombe (2010) states that surveys are appropriate when dealing with specific issues and when researchers know beforehand which factors are important and the kind of information needed. Survey design is the economy of the design and the fast turnaround in data collection. Cross-sectional studies are quick, easy and relatively cheap to perform and are often based on a questionnaire survey (Sedgwick, 2014). Furthermore, a cross-sectional design is a method that was used to study academic engagement, job demands, and resources had to be made. A self-administered closed-ended questionnaire, namely, the JD-R questionnaire was used in the study.

Target Population and Sampling

Neuman (2011) describes a population as the intangible idea of a big group of numerous cases from which a researcher draws a sample and of which results from the sample are generalised. In this study, the population was the full-time academic staff of NUST. The part-time academics were excluded from the study because they work on a contract basis with different employment conditions. At the time of the study, the number of full-time academic staff members was four hundred and twenty. Participants included staff members from all hierarchical levels ranging from Deans, Deputy Deans, Heads of Departments, Deputy Heads of Departments, Senior Lecturers, Lecturers and Junior Lecturers. All six faculties, namely the Faculty of Computing and Informatics, Faculty of Engineering, Faculty of Health and Applied Sciences, Faculty of Human Sciences, Faculty of Management Sciences and Faculty of Natural Resources and Spatial Sciences, were included in the study.

The study employed a probability specifically simple random sampling technique. A list of all full-time academic staff members which was obtained from the Human Resources Department at NUST was used as a sampling frame for this study. The sample size was determined under the Simple Random Sample (SRS) design. In determining the sample size, the following facts were taken into consideration.

Estimates were to be presented in the form of percentages (proportions)

Estimates were required only at institutional level

Margin of error (E) was to be fixed around 5% for the estimation

Confidence level was to be taken as 95% where the critical value $K = 1.96$

Since the order of the proportions (p) under study were not well known, it was assumed to be 0.5 so that the sample size was maximised for the given precision

The following formula was used for the calculation of sample size under SRS design:

$n = (k^2 pq) / E^2$ where n is the sample size and $q = 1 - p$

$n = (1.96^2)(0.5)(1-0.5)) / 0.069(0.069) = 201$

Therefore, the sample size under SRS was 201. The sample size made an allowance for the non-responding staff members.

The Research Instrument

The engagement section of the Job Demands-Resources Questionnaire developed by Bakker and Schaufeli (2003) was distributed to full-time academic staff members across the six faculties. This is a structured questionnaire developed to measure all the variables included in the JD-R Model of work engagement, the focus for this study was on work engagement.

The first part of the questionnaire covered demographic information on aspects of gender, age, level of education, the name of department, tenure, and supervision, amongst others. The second part of the questionnaire dealt with aspects of work engagement.

Work engagement levels of academic staff were measured by vigorous absorption, and dedication. The items included were: "At my work, I am bursting with energy.", "I get carried away when I am working" and "My job inspires me". The pilot study was conducted with 8 participants from the Human Resources Section. From the responses received, it was clear that respondents understood the questions and no ambiguities were reported. Based on the outcome of the pilot study, no amendments were made to the original questionnaire.

Data Analysis

Descriptive analysis was carried out to determine the distribution levels of engagement of academic staff at NUST. The statistical software, Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) 24 was used for data analysis.

Validity and Reliability

Reliability has to do with the outcomes of the research and relates to the integrity of the findings. It, therefore, refers to the extent to which the findings may be generalised to different measurement occasions or measurements. Validity, on the other hand, refers to the extent to which the findings accurately signify what is really happening in the situation (Welman et al., 2012).

The JD-R scale reported good internal consistency coefficients of .943 for engagement levels. For this study, a pilot study was conducted with 8 participants from the Human Resources Section at NUST. From the responses received, it was clear that respondents understood the questions and no ambiguities were reported. Based on the outcome of the pilot study, no amendments were made to the original questionnaire.

Presentation and Analysis of Data

Hours Worked Per Week

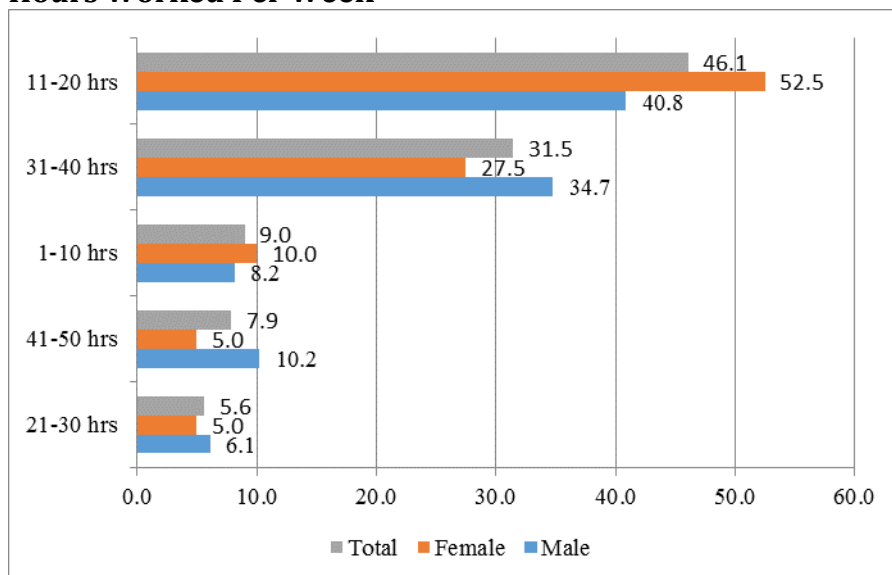


Figure 1: Hours per week worked

Figure 1 depicts the hours per week worked by academics. The findings revealed that most of the respondents (46.1%) worked 11-20 hours per week at the time of this study. About 7% of the respondents indicated that they were working 41-50 hours per week. More females (52.5%) compared to males (40.8%) worked 11-20 hours per week.

Way of Working

Table 1: Your way of working

Way of Working	Almost never	Rarely	Occasionally	Sometimes	Frequently	Usually	Almost always	No response
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Job task good at	4.3	6.5	8.6	15.1	34.4	20.4	10.8	0.0
Strength utilisation	0.0	0.0	3.2	11.8	41.9	22.6	19.4	1.1
Talent utilisation	0.0	1.1	7.5	9.7	30.1	23.7	28.0	0.0
Organisation of strong points	0.0	1.1	5.4	17.2	36.6	24.7	15.1	0.0
Drawing on talents	1.1	2.2	8.6	8.6	36.6	25.8	17.2	0.0
Focus on Strength	0.0	5.4	5.4	20.4	33.3	22.6	11.8	1.1
Make the best of strong points	0.0	0.0	10.8	14.0	28.0	30.1	16.1	1.1
Capitalise on strength	0.0	1.1	4.3	15.1	37.6	28.0	14.0	0.0
Seek opportunities on strength	0.0	0.0	11.8	14.0	28.0	30.1	16.1	0.0

Table 1 describes the academics' way of working. It depicts that more than 61% of the respondents frequently or usually utilise their strength, organise their strong points, draw on their talents and capitalise on their strengths. It also shows that more than 53% of the respondents frequently or usually utilise their talents effectively, are good in executing their tasks, regularly focus and make the best of their strong points and seek opportunities to improve their strengths.

Engagement Levels: Well-Being

Table 2: Wellbeing

Well-being	Never	Almost never	Rarely	Sometim es	Often	Very Often	Always	No respon se
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Bursting with	4.3	7.5	28.0	34.4	12.9	9.7	3.2	0.0

energy								
Strong and vigorous	0.0	8.6	24.7	30.1	23.7	6.5	6.5	0.0
Enthusiasm	0.0	6.5	15.1	19.4	28.0	18.3	12.9	0.0
Inspiration	0.0	3.2	16.1	25.8	15.1	24.7	14.0	1.1
Feel like work	0.0	8.6	18.3	18.3	25.8	16.1	12.9	0.0
Happy in work	0.0	4.3	15.1	22.6	28.0	20.4	9.7	0.0
Work pride	0.0	0.0	8.6	15.1	25.8	19.4	30.1	1.1
Immersed in work	0.0	0.0	12.9	22.6	26.9	23.7	12.9	1.1
Carried away	2.2	3.2	17.2	18.3	30.1	20.4	7.5	1.1

Table 2 depicts the wellbeing of NUST academics. The results indicate that 39.8% of the respondents are rarely, never or almost never bursting with energy at their workplace. About 36% of the respondents indicated that they always, often or very often felt strong and vigorous at work. More than 53% of the respondents reported that they always, often or very often displayed positive feelings in terms of enthusiasm, inspiration, happiness, feeling like work, and getting carried away in their work. More than three quarters (75.3%) of the respondents revealed that they always, often or very often experienced work pride. Lastly, 63.5% of the respondents reported that they immersed themselves in their work.

Engagement Levels: Exhaustion

Table 3: Wellbeing

Well-being exhaustion	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	No response
	%	%	%	%	%
Tired at work	9.7	26.9	37.6	24.7	1.1
More time needed to relax	10.8	28.0	33.3	26.9	1.1
Emotionally drained	14.0	33.3	30.1	21.5	1.1
Worn-out	10.8	24.7	34.4	23.7	6.5

Table 3 displays the exhaustion levels of NUST academic staff. More than 60% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they were tired at work and needed more time to relax. It can also be observed that more than 51% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they always felt emotionally drained and worn out at work.

Discussion of Results

Hanaysha (2015) argues that engagement is a prerequisite for academics because of the positive effect it will have on their commitment and productivity levels. On the contrary, disengaged academics are most likely to spend more time on low priority tasks and fail to show full commitment to their work. The success of educational institutions depends on

highly engaged academics with passion for learning, teaching and continuous research. To increase the outputs from academics, it is important to establish their engagement levels and find ways to increase them. The results of the study revealed that academics are moderately engaged on the aspects of vigour and dedication. This corresponds with the findings of Bezuidenhout and Bezuidenhout (2007) who found similar but moderate engagement levels among female academics at a South African university. The results showed that academics indicated that they were energetic, mentally resilient, involved in their jobs and generally enthusiastic. Similar findings were obtained by Barkhuizen et al. (2014) who investigated engagement levels at six South African Universities and found that academics with doctorate degrees were more engaged than the rest because they belong to a class of knowledge workers which stays engrossed in its work. Additionally, academics in higher academic positions were found to be more engaged in their work than those in junior positions. Older academics also displayed higher engagement levels than their younger colleagues. Yadav (2016) suggested that the possible reasons for moderate engagement levels in academics is lack of gratitude, lack of development, unfair treatment and ignorance of opinions.

Possible explanations for the moderate engagement levels may be the lenient application of the performance management system for NUST academics. This is corroborated by Barkhuizen et al. (2006) who suggest that lack of monitoring and feedback of performance can hinder engagement because it hampers personal development and goal setting. A performance management system that acknowledges and rewards good performance is fair towards individuals. In addition, the latter system discusses problem areas, coach employees by helping them with goals setting to foster work engagement. It should be noted that lack of feedback regarding progress and an absence of recognition of good work can be detrimental to the engagement process (Ngobeni & Bezuidenhout, 2011).

The study also found that the level of work engagement may equally be affected by increasing job demands because a higher output is expected from academics through research output, innovative teaching methods and social responsibility. This is substantiated by Van der Berg et al. (2008) viewpoint that other job-related responsibilities at universities such as high workload, increased home-work interference, amongst others, can result in moderate engagement levels of academics. The transformation of the Polytechnic of Namibia to NUST appeared to have raised expectations about the levels of engagement of the academics since the academics are now required to perform satisfactorily in research, teaching and community engagement for them to be promoted. It is therefore desirable to be concerned about the engagement of the academics because high academic work engagement can be linked to several positive results such as improved commitment, better outcomes, organisational citizenship behaviour and better customer service (Bakker and Demerouti, 2008). Positive results from highly engaged academics are evident at universities such as University of Chicago and British Columbia Institute of Technology because these institutions reported that high engagement among their academics was fostered by an increase in academic freedom, mutual respect, recognition, social networking opportunities and participation in decision-making (Raina & Khatri, 2015). Markos and Sridevi (2010) furthermore alluded to the importance of a two-way communication approach, sound incentive and reward systems, distinctive corporate culture and a strong focus on the recognition of top-performing employees.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study investigated the facet of work engagement of the full-time academic staff at NUST. The findings of the study resulted in the conclusion that interventions are needed to move the current staff engagement levels from moderate to high. The results indicated that NUST academics are only moderately engaged. The implication of these findings is that the institution should find ways to improve the academic staff engagement levels from moderate to high. The study recommends that interventions need to be formulated to foster the awareness and experience of work engagement amongst academic staff. The study also recommends that the Human Resources Department should play an instrumental role in creating awareness of the engagement concept through in-house seminars and discussion forums with academics. In line with this, Ram and Prabhakar (2011) suggests the implementation of a matrix of engagement predictors which will monitor aspects such as organisational processes, values, work/life balance, information, rewards/recognition, work environment and product/services. It is recommended that coaching programmes can be introduced to help academic staff to plan their career growth and provide them with psychological support. This is because the research has indicated that organisations that invest in coaching programmes often have a workforce with higher engagement levels (Sange & Srivasatava, 2012).

Previous studies reported significant differences in the engagement levels of academics in terms of biographical differences such as gender, educational qualifications and tenure (Bezuidenhout and Bezuidenhout, 2007 & Barkhuizen et al., 2014). This study did not investigate these dimensions. As such future research in this regard is recommended. It is furthermore recommended that the part-time and administrative staff of NUST be included in a similar study. Lastly, it is advised that a study on work engagement be extended to other institutions of higher learning in Namibia.

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