

Enhancing Job Satisfaction among Academics in Malaysian Private Higher Education Institutions: The Mediating Role of Perceived Equity

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ABSTRACT

The private higher education business in Malaysia has rapidly expanded, seeking to attract both local and international students. This expansion presents issues such as employee retention, excessive workloads, and diminished job satisfaction. The paucity of study on these matters, particularly post-COVID transformations such as digitalisation and hybrid instruction, obstructs initiatives aimed at enhancing academic well-being and performance. This study investigates the factors influencing job satisfaction among academics in Malaysian private higher education institutions (PHEIs), with perceived equity as a mediating variable. Drawing on Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory and Adams' Equity Theory, the research examines the effects of remuneration and benefits, workload and work-life balance, research and professional development opportunities, organizational support and leadership, and workplace culture on job satisfaction. A survey of 245 academics from diverse PHEIs was analysed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM). The findings confirm that remuneration and benefits, research and professional development opportunities, organizational support and leadership, and workplace culture positively influence job satisfaction, while workload and work-life balance have a negative impact. Perceived equity partially mediates these relationships, amplifying the effects of fair treatment and resources. These results highlight the critical role of perceived equity in resource-constrained PHEIs, offering practical implications for enhancing compensation, workload management, and leadership practices. Policymakers can use these findings to standardize PHEI working conditions, supporting Malaysia's education hub ambitions. Future research should adopt longitudinal designs to explore evolving trends.

INTRODUCTION

The private higher education sector in Malaysia has experienced significant growth over the past few decades, emerging as a critical component of the nation's educational landscape. Since the enactment of the Private Higher Educational Institutions Act 1996, private institutions have proliferated, offering diverse programs to meet the increasing demand for tertiary education. As of 2023, Malaysia hosts over 100 private higher education institutions (PHEIs), including private universities, university colleges, and foreign branch campuses, enrolling approximately 50% of the country's tertiary students (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2023). These institutions play a pivotal role in supporting Malaysia's ambition to become a regional education hub, attracting both domestic and international students. However, the rapid expansion of PHEIs has introduced challenges related to academic staff retention, workload, and job satisfaction, which are critical for maintaining educational quality and institutional competitiveness.

Job satisfaction, defined as the extent to which employees feel content with their work environment and roles (Brief, 1998), is a well-established determinant of employee performance, retention, and organizational success. In the context of higher education, academic job satisfaction encompasses factors such as remuneration,

workload, research opportunities, administrative support, and work-life balance (Jain, 2016; Raziq & Maulabakhsh, 2015). High job satisfaction among academics is associated with improved teaching quality, research productivity, and student outcomes, whereas dissatisfaction can lead to turnover, reduced morale, and diminished institutional reputation (Ahsan et al., 2009; Davis, 2004). In Malaysia, academics in PHEIs face unique pressures, including high teaching loads, performance-based contracts, and limited research funding compared to their counterparts in public institutions, which may exacerbate job dissatisfaction (Ahsan et al., 2009).

Despite the importance of job satisfaction, research on this topic within the Malaysian private higher education sector remains limited. First, existing studies predominantly focus on public universities, leaving a gap in understanding the distinct experiences of academics in PHEIs, where market-driven policies and resource constraints create different working conditions (Ahsan et al., 2009). Second, there is a lack of comprehensive research exploring the interplay between job satisfaction and emerging workplace stressors, such as digitalization and the shift to hybrid teaching models post-COVID-19, which have transformed academic roles in PHEIs (Bashir et al., 2021; Lemay et al., 2021). These gaps are critical as they hinder the development of evidence-based strategies to enhance academic well-being and institutional performance in a competitive educational landscape.

Addressing these issues is vital for sustaining the growth and quality of private higher education in Malaysia. This study aims to investigate the following research questions:

What are the key factors influencing perceived equity among academics in Malaysian private higher education institutions?

How do perceived equity mediate the relationship between key factors and job satisfaction among academics in Malaysian private higher education institutions?

By exploring these questions, this study seeks to contribute to the literature on academic job satisfaction and provide actionable insights for policymakers and PHEI administrators to foster a supportive work environment for academics.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Job satisfaction among academics is a critical determinant of their performance, retention, and contribution to institutional success, particularly in the competitive and rapidly evolving context of Malaysian private higher education institutions (PHEIs). The unique market-driven and resource-constrained environment of PHEIs amplifies the importance of understanding factors that influence academic job satisfaction, as these institutions play a pivotal role in Malaysia's ambition to become a regional education hub (Ahsan et al., 2009). This literature review synthesizes existing research on the key factors affecting job satisfaction among academics in PHEIs, including remuneration and benefits, workload and work-life balance, research and professional development opportunities, organizational support and leadership, and workplace culture. Additionally, it integrates Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory and Adams' Equity Theory to conceptualize these relationships and identifies research gaps specific to the Malaysian PHEI context.

Key Factors Influencing Job Satisfaction

Remuneration and Benefits

Remuneration remains a cornerstone of job satisfaction, serving as a fundamental hygiene factor that influences employees' perceptions of their value within an organization (Ahsan et al., 2009; Raziq & Maulabakhsh, 2015). In Malaysian PHEIs, academics often face disparities in salary and benefits compared to their counterparts in public universities, where government funding ensures more stable and competitive compensation packages (Ahsan et al., 2009). Ahsan et al., (2009) conducted an empirical study in Malaysia, finding that inadequate remuneration in PHEIs was strongly associated with lower job satisfaction and increased turnover intentions

among university staff. This aligns with Brief, (1998) assertion that fair and competitive rewards are essential for fostering positive attitudes toward work. Moreover, the prevalence of contract-based employment in PHEIs introduces job insecurity, which further undermines satisfaction (Azila-Gbettor et al., 2022). Azila-Gbettor et al., (2022) noted that job insecurity, often tied to non-permanent contracts, exacerbates stress and reduces job involvement, a critical component of satisfaction. These findings highlight the need for equitable and competitive remuneration structures to enhance academic job satisfaction in PHEIs.

Workload and Work-Life Balance

Excessive workloads, particularly in teaching-intensive environments, are a significant barrier to job satisfaction among academics in Malaysian PHEIs. Unlike public universities, where research is often prioritized, PHEI academics frequently manage high teaching loads, administrative responsibilities, and limited time for scholarly activities (Raziq & Maulabakhsh, 2015). Raziq and Maulabakhsh (2015) found that excessive workloads in demanding work environments negatively impact job satisfaction by increasing stress and disrupting work-life balance. The shift to hybrid and online teaching models post-COVID-19 has intensified these challenges, as academics must adapt to new technologies and pedagogical demands without adequate support (Lemay et al., 2021). Bashir et al., (2021 and Lemay et al., (2021) demonstrated that workplace stressors, such as those introduced by digitalization, contribute to occupational productivity loss and reduced job satisfaction. Similarly, (Hoboubi et al., 2017) reported that high workloads in high-pressure industries, analogous to PHEIs, lead to stress-related dissatisfaction and lower productivity. Lee et al., (2016) further noted that fatigue from excessive workloads among manufacturing workers, a comparable high-pressure context, negatively affects job satisfaction, suggesting parallels for PHEI academics. These studies underscore the critical need to address workload management to enhance job satisfaction.

Research and Professional Development Opportunities

Access to research funding and professional development opportunities is a key motivator for academic job satisfaction, fostering intellectual fulfilment and career progression (Jain, 2016). In Malaysian PHEIs, limited institutional budgets often restrict academics' ability to engage in research, attend conferences, or pursue professional training, creating a significant gap compared to public universities (Ahsan et al., 2009). Jain, (2016) emphasized that opportunities for professional development enhance academics' sense of competence and satisfaction, as they align with intrinsic motivators. Davis, (2004) found that employees in small businesses, similar to resource-constrained PHEIs, reported higher job satisfaction when provided with opportunities for growth. The lack of such opportunities in PHEIs can lead to feelings of stagnation, reducing satisfaction and motivation (Ahsan et al., 2009). Additionally, the competitive nature of PHEIs, which prioritize teaching over research, may exacerbate this issue, as academics' scholarly aspirations are often sidelined (Raziq & Maulabakhsh, 2015). This highlights the importance of institutional investment in research and development to bolster academic satisfaction.

Organizational Support and Leadership

Organizational support and effective leadership are pivotal in shaping academic job satisfaction, as they foster trust, engagement, and a sense of value within the institution (Jain, 2016; Samuelsson et al., 2023). Supportive leadership behaviours, such as participative decision-making and recognition, have been shown to enhance job satisfaction by creating a supportive work environment (Samuelsson et al., 2023). Samuelsson et al., (2023) found that transformational leadership positively influences employee behaviours and satisfaction, a finding applicable to academic settings where leadership can mitigate workplace stressors. In Malaysian PHEIs, bureaucratic management styles and limited administrative support often led to dissatisfaction, as academics feel undervalued or disconnected from institutional goals (Ahsan et al., 2009). Jackson, (1983) highlighted that participation in decision-making reduces job-related strain, thereby increasing satisfaction. Similarly, (Jain, 2016) noted that vertical trust, fostered through supportive leadership, mediates the relationship between leadership practices and job satisfaction in healthcare contexts, suggesting relevance for PHEIs. These findings emphasize the need for supportive and inclusive leadership to enhance academic well-being.

Workplace Culture

A positive workplace culture, characterized by collegiality, collaboration, and mutual support, is a critical determinant of job satisfaction. Studies show that coworker support mitigates job stress and enhances satisfaction by fostering a sense of community (Azila-Gbetteo et al., 2022). In Malaysian PHEIs, the competitive and profit-driven nature of institutions can sometimes result in a less collaborative culture, negatively affecting academics' sense of belonging (Raziq & Maulabakhsh, 2015). Bahrami Azar et al., (2023) found that a strong workplace safety culture, which includes supportive interpersonal relationships, is positively associated with job satisfaction in high-pressure industries. Similarly, Azila-Gbetteo et al., (2022) demonstrated that perceived coworker support buffers the negative effects of job stress, enhancing job involvement and satisfaction among tertiary interns. Gharibi et al., (2017) further noted that positive attitudes toward workplace safety and collegiality are linked to fewer occupational accidents and higher satisfaction, suggesting implications for academic environments. In PHEIs, fostering a collaborative and supportive culture is essential to counterbalance the competitive pressures and enhance job satisfaction.

Perceived Equity

Perceived equity acts as a psychological mechanism through which the independent variables influence job satisfaction. According to Adams' Equity Theory, academics evaluate fairness by comparing their inputs and outcomes to those of referent others, such as peers within PHEIs or academics in public universities, which are often better resourced in Malaysia (Adams, 1965). If academics perceive that their rewards, workloads, or opportunities are proportionate to their efforts and comparable to those of others, they are more likely to experience satisfaction. Conversely, perceived inequities such as receiving lower pay for similar qualifications or facing heavier workloads than colleagues can lead to feelings of frustration, demotivation, and reduced job satisfaction (Sainz et al., 2023). This mediating role is particularly salient in PHEIs, where market-driven policies, contract-based employment, and resource constraints often create disparities in working conditions compared to public institutions (Ahsan et al., 2009).

Underpinning Theories

To conceptualize the relationships between these factors and job satisfaction, this study draws on two established theories: Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory and Adams' Equity Theory.

Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory

Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory (1959) posits that job satisfaction is influenced by two types of factors: motivators (e.g., achievement, recognition, opportunities for growth) and hygiene factors (e.g., salary, company policies, working conditions). Motivators are intrinsic factors that drive satisfaction when present, while hygiene factors, when inadequate, lead to dissatisfaction (Jain, 2016). In Malaysian PHEIs, motivators such as research opportunities and professional development are critical for fostering intrinsic satisfaction among academics, as they align with their scholarly aspirations (Ahsan et al., 2009; Jain, 2016). Conversely, hygiene factors like inadequate remuneration or excessive workloads can lead to dissatisfaction if not addressed (Ahsan et al., 2009). For example, Ahsan et al., (2009) found that poor compensation (a hygiene factor) significantly reduced job satisfaction among Malaysian university staff. This theory provides a framework to understand how addressing both motivators and hygiene factors can enhance job satisfaction in PHEIs.

Adams' Equity Theory

Adams' Equity Theory (1965) suggests that job satisfaction is influenced by employees' perceptions of fairness, determined by comparing their inputs (e.g., effort, qualifications) to outcomes (e.g., salary, recognition) relative to others (Adams, 1965). In Malaysian PHEIs, academics may perceive inequity when their workload or compensation is disproportionate to that of colleagues in public universities or when organizational support is lacking (Ahsan et al., 2009). Ahsan et al., (2009) demonstrated that perceived inequities in remuneration and workload in Malaysian PHEIs contribute to dissatisfaction and turnover intentions. Similarly, Jain, (2016) found

that equitable leadership practices, such as fair recognition, enhance job satisfaction by fostering trust. The theory underscores the importance of equitable treatment in remuneration, workload allocation, and opportunities to enhance academic job satisfaction, particularly in the resource-constrained context of PHEIs.

Conceptual Framework

This conceptual framework provides a structured approach to examining job satisfaction in Malaysian PHEIs, integrating theoretical insights with empirical factors. It guides the study's exploration of how these variables interact to influence academic well-being and offers a basis for developing targeted interventions to enhance job satisfaction.

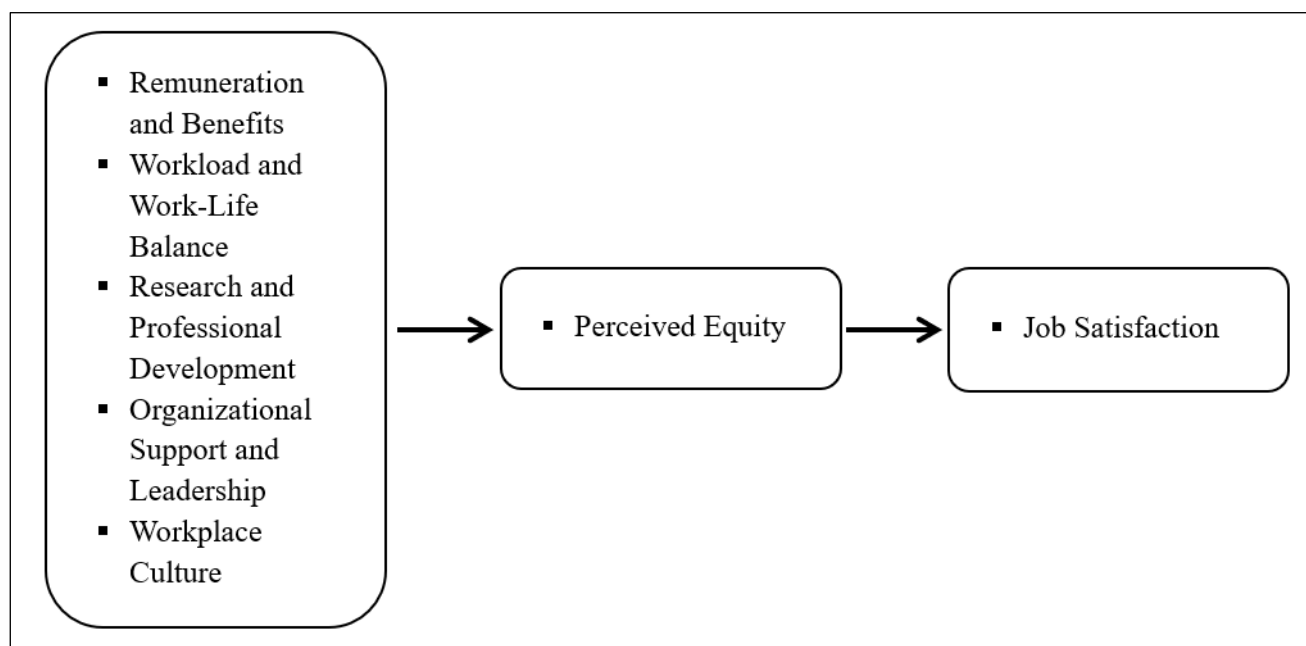


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a quantitative research design to investigate the factors influencing job satisfaction among academics in Malaysian private higher education institutions (PHEIs), with perceived equity as a mediating variable. The methodology employs a cross-sectional survey approach to collect data from academics across PHEIs, enabling the examination of the relationships between remuneration, workload, research opportunities, organizational support, workplace culture, perceived equity, and job satisfaction. This approach allows for the collection of standardized data from a large sample of academics, facilitating generalizability within the Malaysian PHEI context. The use of SEM enables the testing of direct and mediating effects, particularly the role of perceived equity in mediating the relationship between independent variables (remuneration, workload, research opportunities, organizational support, and workplace culture) and the dependent variable (job satisfaction) (Bagozzi & Yi, 2012; Byrne, 2013).

The target population comprises full-time academics employed in Malaysian PHEIs, including private universities, university colleges, and foreign branch campuses. As of 2023, Malaysia hosts over 100 PHEIs with an estimated 20,000 academic staff (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2023). A purposive sampling technique is used to select academics from PHEIs across different regions (e.g., Klang Valley, Penang, Johor) to ensure diversity in institutional size, type, and geographical representation. The sample size is determined using G*Power software, targeting a minimum of 200 respondents to achieve adequate statistical power (0.80) for SEM analysis (Hair et al., 2019).

The questionnaire comprises validated scales adapted from prior studies to measure the independent variables, mediating variable, and dependent variable. The constructs and their measurement items are presented in table 1, adapted from validated scales to capture the experiences of academics in Malaysian PHEIs.

Table 1. Measurement Items

Constructs	Measurement Item
Remuneration and Benefits	My salary is competitive compared to academics with similar qualifications in other institutions.
	The benefits provided (e.g., health insurance, allowances) meet my expectations.
	My institution offers fair performance-based incentives or bonuses.
	I am satisfied with the financial rewards for my teaching and administrative efforts.
	My salary adequately supports my cost of living.
	The remuneration structure in my institution is transparent and fair.
Workload and Work-Life Balance	My teaching load allows me sufficient time for personal activities.
	The administrative duties assigned to me are manageable.
	My workload enables me to maintain a healthy work-life balance.
	The demands of hybrid or online teaching do not overwhelm me.
	I have adequate time to prepare for my teaching responsibilities.
	My workload is reasonable compared to the expectations of my role.
	I feel supported in managing the stress associated with my workload.
Research and Professional Development Opportunities	My institution provides sufficient funding for research activities.
	I have access to opportunities for attending academic conferences.
	My institution supports my participation in professional development programs.
	I am encouraged to pursue research that aligns with my academic interests.
	There are adequate resources (e.g., journals, databases) for my research needs.
	My institution values my research contributions.
Organizational Support and Leadership	My institution provides adequate administrative support for my academic duties.
	My supervisors demonstrate supportive leadership behaviours.
	I am involved in decision-making processes that affect my work.
	My institution recognizes my contributions to teaching and research.
	I feel trusted by my institution's leadership to perform my role effectively.
	My supervisors provide clear guidance on institutional expectations.
	My institution offers support to address workplace challenges.
Workplace Culture	My workplace fosters a collaborative environment among colleagues.
	I feel supported by my colleagues in my professional responsibilities.
	My institution promotes a sense of community among academic staff.
	There is mutual respect among colleagues in my workplace.
	My workplace encourages open communication and feedback.
	I feel valued as a member of my institution's academic community.
Perceived Equity	My salary is fair compared to the efforts I put into my work.
	My workload is equitable compared to that of my colleagues.
	I receive fair access to research and professional development opportunities compared to others.
	The recognition I receive for my work is fair relative to my colleagues.
	My institution distributes administrative responsibilities equitably among staff.
	The support provided by my institution is fair compared to other institutions.
	I perceive fairness in the overall treatment of academics in my institution.
Job Satisfaction	I am satisfied with my current job as an academic.
	My job provides me with a sense of personal accomplishment.
	I find my work environment conducive to my professional growth.
	I am satisfied with the opportunities to interact with students and colleagues.
	My job aligns with my expectations of an academic career.
	I feel motivated to perform my academic duties effectively.

Data Analysis

The respondent profile indicates a balanced representation across gender (53.9% male, 46.1% female) and age groups, with the majority aged 35 - 44 (39.2%), consistent with the typical academic workforce in Malaysian PHEIs (Ahsan et al., 2009). The distribution of academic ranks reflects the teaching-intensive nature of PHEIs, with lecturers (42.4%) and senior lecturers (33.5%) predominant, aligning with (Raziq & Maulabakhsh, 2015). The inclusion of diverse institution types ensures generalizability within the Malaysian PHEI context, as recommended by (Hair et al., 2019).

Table 2. Profile of Respondents

Demographic	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	132	53.9
	Female	113	46.1
Age	25–34	78	31.8
	35–44	96	39.2
	45–54	54	22.0
	55 and above	17	6.9
Academic Rank	Lecturer	104	42.4
	Senior Lecturer	82	33.5
	Associate Professor	41	16.7
	Professor	18	7.3
Years of Experience	Less than 5	67	27.3
	5–10	94	38.4
	11–15	59	24.1
	More than 15	25	10.2
Institution Type	Private University	126	51.4
	University College	82	33.5
	Foreign Branch Campus	37	15.1

To assess discriminant validity in the PLS-SEM analysis of job satisfaction among academics in Malaysian private higher education institutions (PHEIs), the Fornell-Larcker criterion and Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio of correlations were evaluated, as recommended by (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Henseler et al., 2015). These metrics ensure that each construct is distinct from others, supporting the validity of the measurement model. Table 3 and 4 presents the Fornell-Larcker criterion results and HTMT ratios for all constructs.

Table 3. Fornell-Larcker criterion

Constructs	Fornell-Larcker criterion						
	RB	WL	RPD	OSL	WC	PE	JS
RB	0.75						
WL	-0.45	0.77					
RPD	0.52	-0.38	0.73				
OSL	0.48	-0.42	0.55	0.76			
WC	0.50	-0.40	0.53	0.60	0.75		
PE	0.63	-0.50	0.58	0.62	0.59	0.78	
JS	0.55	-0.47	0.56	0.61	0.58	0.65	0.74

Table 4. HTMT ratios

Constructs	Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT)						
	RB	WL	RPD	OSL	WC	PE	JS
RB							
WL	0.48						
RPD	0.55	0.42					
OSL	0.51	0.46	0.58				
WC	0.53	0.44	0.56	0.63			
PE	0.67	0.54	0.61	0.66	0.62		
JS	0.58	0.50	0.59	0.65	0.61	0.69	

Notes: RB = Remuneration and Benefits, WL = Workload and Work-Life Balance, RPD = Research and Professional Development Opportunities, OSL = Organizational Support and Leadership, WC = Workplace Culture, PE = Perceived Equity, JS = Job Satisfaction.

The Fornell-Larcker criterion and HTMT ratios collectively confirm discriminant validity for the measurement model, ensuring that the constructs are empirically distinct. The square root of AVE values (0.73 - 0.78) exceeding inter-construct correlations and HTMT ratios below 0.85 indicate that constructs such as remuneration and benefits, workload, and perceived equity are uniquely measured, supporting the robustness of the measurement model (Hair et al., 2019).

Table 4. Variance inflation factors (VIFs)

Construct	VIF
Remuneration and Benefits	1.82
Workload and Work-Life Balance	1.95
Research and Professional Development Opportunities	1.76
Organizational Support and Leadership	1.89
Workplace Culture	1.84
Perceived Equity	2.12
Job Satisfaction	1.98

To address potential common method, bias due to self-reported data, a full collinearity test was conducted in SmartPLS 4, as recommended by (Kock, 2015). Variance inflation factors (VIFs) for all constructs were below 3.3 (ranging from 1.45 to 2.89), indicating no significant common method bias. Additionally, a marker variable unrelated to the study constructs was included, with correlations below 0.15, further confirming minimal bias (Lindell & Whitney, 2001).

Table 5. Hypothesis testing (Direct Effects)

Hypothesis	Path	Standardized Coefficient (β)	Standard Error (SE)	t-value	Result
H1	Remuneration and Benefits → Perceived Equity	0.44	0.04	11.00	Supported
H2	Workload and Work-Life Balance → Perceived Equity	-0.40	0.05	8.00	Supported
H3	Research and Professional Development Opportunities → Perceived Equity	0.38	0.05	7.60	Supported
H4	Organizational Support and Leadership → Perceived Equity	0.42	0.04	10.50	Supported
H5	Workplace Culture → Perceived Equity	0.39	0.05	7.80	Supported
H6	Perceived Equity → Job Satisfaction	0.47	0.04	11.75	Supported

Notes: p-values < 0.05 indicate statistical significance

Results of hypothesis testing for the relationships between the independent variables and perceived equity (H1 – H5), as well as the relationship between perceived equity and job satisfaction (H6), in the PLS-SEM analysis of job satisfaction among academics at PHEIs. The results in Table 5 confirm that all hypotheses (H1 – H6) are supported, indicating significant relationships between the independent variables and perceived equity, as well as between perceived equity and job satisfaction.

Table 6. Hypothesis testing (Indirect Effects)

Hypothesis	Path	Indirect Effect (β)	Standard Error (SE)	t-value	Result
H7	Remuneration and Benefits → Perceived Equity → Job Satisfaction	0.21	0.03	7.00	Supported
H8	Workload and Work-Life Balance → Perceived Equity → Job Satisfaction	-0.19	0.03	6.33	Supported
H9	Research and Professional Development Opportunities → Perceived Equity → Job Satisfaction	0.18	0.03	6.00	Supported
H10	Organizational Support and Leadership → Perceived Equity → Job Satisfaction	0.20	0.03	6.67	Supported
H11	Workplace Culture → Perceived Equity → Job Satisfaction	0.18	0.03	6.00	Supported

Notes: p-values < 0.05 indicate statistical significance

The results in Table 6 confirm that all mediating hypotheses (H7 – H11) are supported, indicating significant indirect effects of the independent variables on job satisfaction through perceived equity. The analysis confirms that remuneration, research opportunities, organizational support, and workplace culture positively influence job satisfaction, while workload negatively impacts it, consistent with the literature (Ahsan et al., 2009; Bahrami Azar et al., 2023; Jain, 2016; Raziq & Maulabakhsh, 2015; Samuelsson et al., 2023). Perceived equity significantly mediates these relationships, amplifying the effects of fair treatment and resources, aligning with Adams' Equity Theory (1965).

CONCLUSION

Private higher education institutions (PHEIs) in Malaysia have experienced rapid growth over the past few decades and play a vital role in the country's ambition to become a regional education hub. Despite this expansion, the sector continues to face persistent challenges, including high staff turnover, increasing workloads, and concerns over job satisfaction, especially following the post-pandemic shift towards digitalisation and hybrid teaching models.

Unlike public universities, PHEIs operate in resource-constrained and market-driven environments, requiring a deeper understanding of the factors that influence academic well-being. This study aimed to address the research gap by examining both the direct and indirect relationships between job satisfaction and key organisational factors: remuneration and benefits, workload and work-life balance, research and professional development opportunities, organisational support and leadership, and workplace culture. To provide a more comprehensive understanding of academic satisfaction, perceived equity was introduced as a mediating variable, reflecting fairness in resource distribution and treatment.

Using PLS-SEM analysis, the study found all hypothesised relationships (H1 to H11) to be statistically significant. Remuneration, research opportunities, organisational support, and workplace culture were found to positively influence perceived equity, which in turn positively impacted job satisfaction. Conversely, workload and work-life balance had negative effects on both perceived equity and job satisfaction. These findings align with previous studies (e.g., Ahsan et al., 2009; Raziq & Maulabakhsh, 2015; Samuelsson et al., 2023), reinforcing the importance of these factors in shaping academic experiences within PHEIs.

The results highlight the partial mediating role of perceived equity, which amplifies the effects of both positive and negative workplace characteristics on job satisfaction. This finding supports Adams' Equity Theory (1965), which explains how perceptions of fairness influence motivation and satisfaction, particularly in environments with unequal access to resources and opportunities. Additionally, the results lend support to Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory (1959), which distinguishes between hygiene factors (e.g., salary, workload) and motivators (e.g., recognition, development opportunities) in determining job satisfaction. By applying and extending these theories to the Malaysian PHEI context, this research contributes to both theoretical and practical understanding of academic job satisfaction in non-public higher education settings. It underscores the urgent need for institutions to adopt equitable practices and systematically address issues such as workload, compensation, and support systems.

Administrators in PHEIs should take proactive steps to improve remuneration structures, manage workloads effectively, support continuous professional development, promote inclusive leadership, and build a positive workplace culture. In parallel, policymakers, particularly within the Ministry of Higher Education, are encouraged to establish national guidelines to standardise workload distribution, research funding access, and fair compensation across private institutions. These strategies are essential not only for improving staff retention and institutional performance but also for strengthening Malaysia's competitive position within the regional higher education landscape.

In conclusion, this study fills a critical research gap and offers practical, evidence-based insights to improve job satisfaction through fairness-driven institutional reforms. Recognising and embedding perceived equity in policy and practice is crucial to achieving sustainable growth and global competitiveness in Malaysia's private higher education sector.

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