# Exploring The Mediating Role Of Work Engagement In The Relationship Between Psychosocial Factors And Workforce Agility Among Academicians

[1]Karthika S, [2]Dr. S.Balamurugan,

[1]Ph.D. Research Scholar, [2]Assistant Professor

[1,2]Department of Management Studies, Periyar University, Salem, India

***Abstract:*** The contemporary higher education landscape is characterized by unprecedented volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA), demanding a shift from traditional, rigid academic structures toward more agile and responsive institutions. At the heart of this transformation are academicians, whose ability to adapt, learn, and proactively respond to change—termed Workforce Agility (WA)—is critical. While antecedents of agility, such as leadership and human resource practices, have been explored, the intrinsic psychological mechanisms that enable agility are less understood. This conceptual paper posits that Work Engagement (WE), a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption, plays a pivotal mediating role in cultivating workforce agility. Through a comprehensive review and synthesis of recent literature, this article develops a model proposing that key psychosocial factors—specifically, perceived organizational support (POS), transformational leadership (TL), and job resources (JR)—foster work engagement. This heightened state of engagement, in turn, serves as the primary psychological engine driving the cognitive, behavioral, and motivational dimensions of workforce agility. The study delineates the theoretical foundations of work engagement and workforce agility, explores their interrelationship, and argues for work engagement as a critical mediator. The paper concludes with practical and managerial implications for higher education institutions (HEIs), suggesting that targeted interventions to boost work engagement are not merely beneficial for well-being but are strategic imperatives for building an agile, resilient, and high-performing academic workforce capable of thriving in the 21st-century knowledge economy.

***Index Terms -*** Workforce agility, Work engagement, Academicians, higher education, organizational support, transformational leadership and job resources.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The global higher education sector is in a state of profound flux. Driven by rapid technological advancements, shifting student demographics, economic pressures, international competition, and most recently, disruptive events like the COVID-19 pandemic, universities and colleges worldwide operate in a quintessentially VUCA environment (Bess & Dee, 2014; Shattock, 2019). This new reality demands a fundamental re-evaluation of institutional strategies, structures, and, most critically, the capabilities of their human capital. Academicians, comprising faculty members, lecturers, and researchers, are the primary agents of the core missions of HEIs: teaching, research, and knowledge exchange. Their effectiveness, therefore, directly determines an institution's ability to navigate change, innovate, and sustain competitive advantage.

In this context, the concept of **workforce agility (WA)** has emerged as a crucial organizational capability. Originating in the manufacturing and IT sectors, agility refers to an organization's capacity to rapidly sense and respond to environmental changes (Dyer & Shafer, 2003). When applied at the individual level, workforce agility is defined as an employee's ability to adapt, learn, and proactively manage job demands and changes (Sherehiy & Karwowski, 2014). For academicians, this translates into the ability to pivot to new teaching modalities (e.g., hybrid and online learning), continuously update curricula to reflect new knowledge and industry needs, engage in interdisciplinary research, and contribute to administrative and governance reforms. An agile academic workforce is, therefore, not a luxury but a necessity for institutional survival and excellence.

Concurrently, the literature on employee well-being and performance has highlighted the significance of work engagement (WE). Defined by Schaufeli and Bakker (2004) as a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind characterized by vigor (high energy and resilience), dedication (a sense of significance and enthusiasm), and absorption (full concentration and immersion in one's work), work engagement is a powerful predictor of individual and organizational outcomes. In the demanding academic profession, characterized by high workloads, pressure to publish, and emotional labor, fostering engagement is a key challenge for HEI management.

While research has independently established the importance of both work engagement and workforce agility, the precise nature of their relationship, particularly within the academic context, remains underexplored. It is plausible that engaged academicians are more likely to be agile; however, a mere correlational link is insufficient for a deep understanding. This paper argues that work engagement is not just a correlate but a central *mediating mechanism* that explains *how* certain organizational and job factors translate into enhanced workforce agility. Engaged employees, brimming with energy and commitment, are psychologically more available and motivated to invest the cognitive and emotional resources required for adaptability, collaboration, and proactive problem-solving—the hallmarks of agility.

Therefore, this conceptual research article aims to bridge this gap by systematically exploring the mediating role of work engagement in the development of workforce agility among academicians. It will synthesize existing literature to build a compelling argument that work engagement is the vital psychological conduit through which supportive work environments empower academicians to become agile contributors to their institutions.

## Workforce engagement

Workforce engagement is a fundamental idea within positive psychology that shifts the emphasis from negative states like burnout to positive well-being. Defined by Schaufeli and Bakker (2004), it reflects a lasting, widespread affective-cognitive state, different from temporary experiences such as flow. It is characterized by three main aspects: vigor, which involves high energy, mental resilience, and a willingness to put in effort and persevere through challenges; dedication, meaning a strong engagement with work accompanied by feelings of significance, enthusiasm, inspiration, and challenge; and absorption, characterized by being fully focused and happily immersed in work, so much so that time seems to fly and detachment is hard. In academia, an engaged professional exemplifies this by persistently seeking research funding and mentoring students despite obstacles (vigor), strongly believing in the importance of their scholarly work (dedication), and becoming so absorbed in activities like course design or data analysis that they lose track of time (absorption).

The primary theoretical framework for understanding work engagement is the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). The model posits that every job characteristic can be categorized as either a job demand or a job resource. Job demands are aspects of the job that require sustained physical or psychological effort and are therefore associated with physiological and psychological costs (e.g., high workload, emotional demands, role ambiguity). Job resources are those aspects that are functional in achieving work goals, reduce job demands and the associated physiological and psychological costs, and stimulate personal growth and development (e.g., performance feedback, social support, autonomy, opportunities for professional development).

According to the JD-R model, job resources are the primary antecedents of work engagement. They fulfill basic human needs for autonomy, relatedness, and competence, as outlined in Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), thereby fostering an intrinsic motivation to invest oneself fully in one's work. For academicians, key job resources include autonomy in research and teaching, supportive relationships with colleagues and department heads, constructive feedback, and access to research funds and development opportunities (Bakker & Sanz-Vergel, 2021).

## WORKFORCE AGILITY

Workforce agility is a multi-dimensional construct that has evolved from organizational-level agility concepts, representing the capacity of employees to be flexible, adaptable, and proactive in the face of change. Sherehiy and Karwowski (2014) synthesized various perspectives to identify core components of individual-level agility, which in the academic context manifest as **proactivity**, such as initiating new interdisciplinary programs or anticipating research trends; **adaptability**, seen in adjusting teaching methods or learning new software; **resilience**, which is crucial for recovering from manuscript rejections or heavy workloads; and **collaboration and learning**, involving effective teamwork and continuous skill development central to interdisciplinary inquiry. For academicians, this agility is not merely about survival but about thriving and leading change, enabling them to seamlessly transition between teaching, research, and service roles, embrace digital tools, contribute to strategic pivots, and maintain productivity in a rapidly evolving landscape. While the antecedents of workforce agility are often categorized into organizational-level factors, such as supportive cultures, and individual-level factors, like personal competencies, this paper focuses on the psychological bridge—work engagement—that connects organizational support to the manifestation of this vital individual agility.

## STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) nature of higher education makes workforce agility—the capacity of academicians to be proactive, adaptable, resilient, and collaborative—essential for institutional success. While factors like organizational support, leadership, and job resources are known to influence agility, a critical gap exists in understanding the psychological mechanism that translates these supports into agile behaviors. The core problem is the lack of a clear model explaining *how* these factors functionally empower academicians. This study posits that work engagement is the crucial missing link—the psychological engine that mediates this relationship. Furthermore, the potential for a bidirectional, reinforcing cycle between agility and engagement remains unexplored, limiting the development of sustainable strategies. This research is therefore necessary to theorize the mediating role of work engagement and explore its dynamic relationship with agility, without which institutional efforts to foster a responsive academic workforce may be superficial and ineffective.

## OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To synthesize the theoretical foundations of work engagement and workforce agility within the unique pressures of the contemporary academic environment.
2. To propose a conceptual model that positions work engagement as the central psychological conduit linking organizational enablers to the manifestation of agility.
3. To analyze the dynamic interplay and potential for a reciprocal gain spiral between work engagement and workforce agility.
4. To formulate strategic imperatives for cultivating a resilient and adaptive academic workforce in higher education institutions.

## SCOPE OF THE STUDY

This conceptual paper delimits its scope by focusing exclusively on academicians within the global higher education sector, theorizing the relationships between key psychosocial antecedents—Perceived Organizational Support, Transformational Leadership, and Job Resources—and workforce agility, with work engagement posited as the central mediating mechanism. The inquiry is bounded to these core constructs to enable a deep theoretical exploration of the psychological processes that underpin agility, specifically within the volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) context that defines contemporary academia. As a non-empirical study, its primary contribution lies in synthesizing existing literature to construct a novel conceptual framework; consequently, it does not provide primary data but instead establishes a foundational model and propositions to be validated through future quantitative and qualitative research.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### Work Engagement in Academia

Research on work engagement in academia has grown substantially, highlighting both its drivers and consequences. A study by Darini et al. (2023) found that perceived organizational support was a strong positive predictor of work engagement among university lecturers in Malaysia, which in turn reduced their turnover intentions. Similarly, Li et al. (2022) demonstrated that transformational leadership in Chinese universities significantly boosted faculty work engagement by fostering a sense of meaning and psychological empowerment. The JD-R model has been consistently validated in this context. For instance, a longitudinal study by Lesener et al. (2020) confirmed that job resources like social support and autonomy were key drivers of engagement, while excessive job demands (e.g., work-family conflict) led to burnout. The consequences of faculty engagement are profound, linking to higher teaching performance, increased research productivity, and greater organizational citizenship behavior (Bakker & Sanz-Vergel, 2021).

### Workforce Agility in Academia

The application of agility concepts to the academic workforce is a more recent but rapidly expanding area of inquiry. Research by Alavi et al. (2021) developed and validated a scale for workforce agility in knowledge-intensive organizations, including universities, identifying factors like change adaptability and learning proactivity as critical. Their findings suggest that in such contexts, agility is less about physical speed and more about cognitive and social flexibility. A study by Pereira et al. (2022) highlighted that agile academic staff were better equipped to handle the sudden shift to remote teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic, demonstrating higher levels of technological adoption and pedagogical innovation. The antecedents identified often include a supportive organizational culture, leadership that encourages experimentation, and access to continuous learning opportunities (Sherehiy & Karwowski, 2014).

### The Link Between Work Engagement and Workforce Agility

While direct studies linking WE and WA in academia are still emerging, robust indirect evidence exists from related fields. Engaged employees typically exhibit higher levels of personal initiative, proactive behavior, and adaptability—all core components of agility (Bakker, 2022). For example, Salas-Vallina et al. (2021) found that engaged healthcare professionals showed greater resilience and adaptability during organizational changes. Applying this to academia, it is logical to infer that an engaged academician, full of vigor and dedication, is more likely to proactively learn new skills (e.g., data science), adapt their research direction in response to global challenges, and collaborate across disciplines. They are psychologically "ready" for agility. This engaged state provides the motivational fuel for the cognitively and emotionally demanding tasks associated with being agile.

### THE MEDIATING ROLE OF WORK ENGAGEMENT

This paper posits that work engagement is not merely a parallel outcome but a critical *mediating variable* that explains the psychological process through which organizational and leadership factors enhance workforce agility. A mediating variable explains the relationship between an independent variable (X) and a dependent variable (Y). In this case, the argument is that POS, TL, and JR (X) lead to higher Work Engagement (M), which in turn leads to greater Workforce Agility (Y).

### The mediating role of work engagement can be understood through the following pathways:

1. **From Perceived Organizational Support (POS) to Agility via Engagement:** When academicians feel that their organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being (Eisenberger et al., 2020), they reciprocate with greater emotional commitment and engagement (vigor, dedication, absorption). This heightened engagement creates a "resource caravan" (Hobfoll, 2011) where the academician feels psychologically safe and resource-rich. This safety and resourcefulness empower them to take risks, experiment with new teaching methods, and propose innovative ideas without a paralyzing fear of failure, thereby manifesting proactivity and adaptability—key facets of agility.

2. **From Transformational Leadership (TL) to Agility via Engagement**: Transformational leaders inspire and motivate their followers (academicians) by articulating a compelling vision, providing intellectual stimulation, and offering individualized consideration (Bass & Riggio, 2006). As shown by Li et al. (2022), such leadership fosters a sense of meaning and purpose in followers' work, which is a core element of dedication. An academician who finds deep meaning in their work, inspired by their leader, is more likely to be absorbed in their tasks and vigorously pursue goals. This state of engagement provides the motivational

foundation to go beyond the prescribed job description, to be proactive in seeking collaborations, and to resiliently adapt to challenges in pursuit of the shared vision, thus demonstrating agility.

3. **From Job Resources (JR) to Agility via Engagement:** According to the JD-R model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017), job resources like autonomy, feedback, and development opportunities are primary drivers of work engagement. An academician with high autonomy (a key job resource) feels a sense of ownership and control, fueling dedication. When this engaged state is achieved, the autonomy is not just a structural condition but a psychological catalyst. The engaged academician uses their autonomy not for complacency but for proactive exploration and adaptation. They use constructive feedback (another resource) not as criticism but as a learning opportunity to improve and adapt, further enhancing their agility.

In essence, work engagement transforms external enablers (support, leadership, resources) into internalized motivation and cognitive readiness, which are the direct precursors of agile behaviors. Without this engagement, these organizational factors may lead to compliance but not to the proactive, enthusiastic, and resilient adaptability that defines true workforce agility.

**Conceptual Framework: The Reciprocal Gain Spiral Between Work Engagement and Workforce Agility**

This framework illustrates the dynamic, reciprocal relationship between work engagement and workforce agility, moving beyond a simple linear mediation to depict a virtuous cycle that fosters sustainable performance and well-being.

**Theoretical Anchor:** This model is grounded in the "gain spirals" principle of the Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory (Hobfoll, 2011), which posits that resource gains (e.g., skills, achievements, recognition) lead to further resource gains, creating a positive feedback loop.
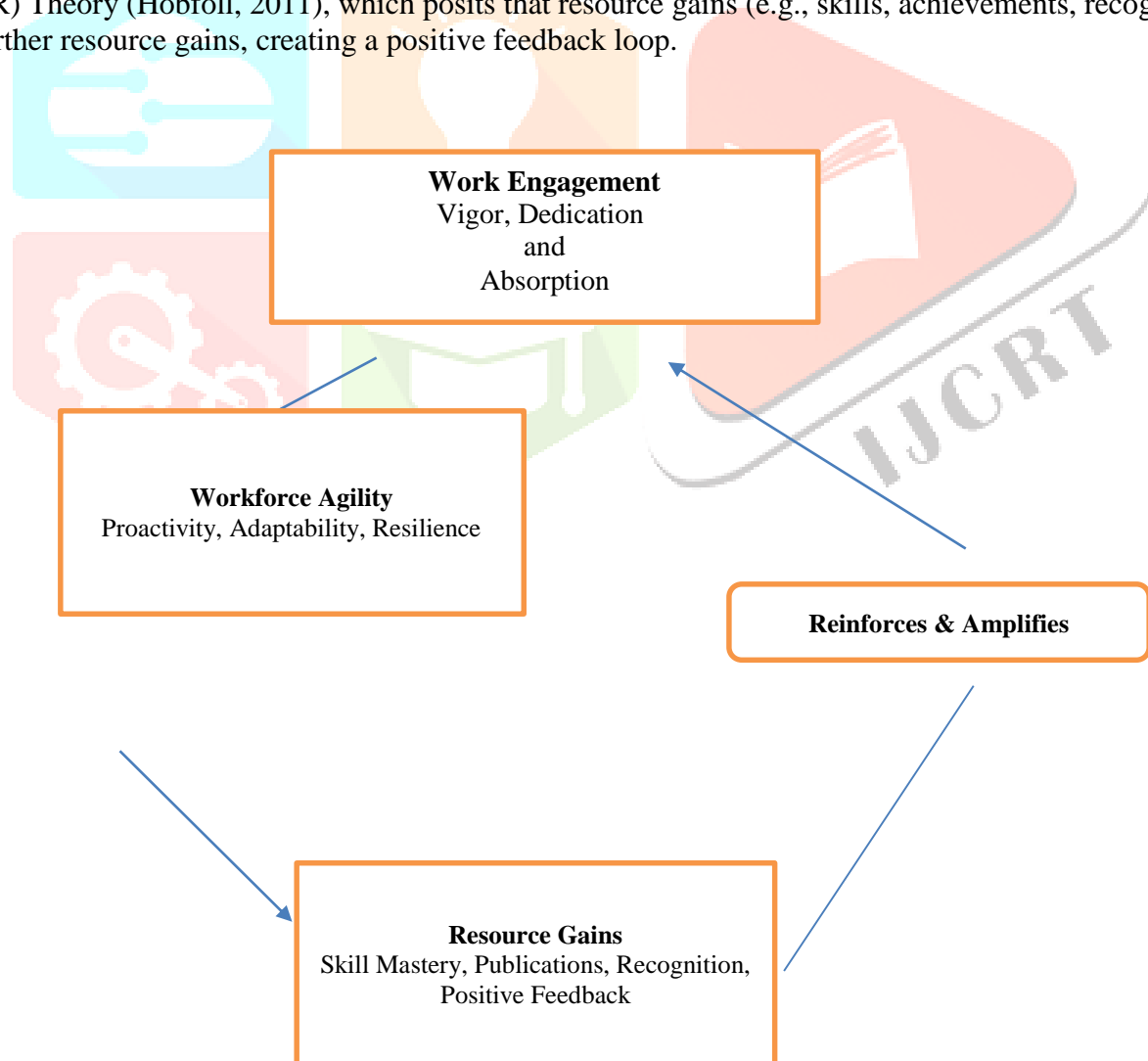
This framework outlines a dynamic cycle wherein high **Work Engagement**—manifested as vigor, dedication, and absorption—provides the essential psychological energy that initiates **Workforce Agility**, motivating proactive and adaptive behaviors; the successful enactment of this agility then generates tangible and intangible **Resource Gains**—such as new skills, recognition, and publications—which, upon being internalized by the academician, subsequently reinforce and amplify the initial work engagement, thereby creating a self-perpetuating virtuous cycle.

## Practical Implications for Higher Education Institutions

To cultivate an agile academic workforce, institutions should: develop transformational leaders through targeted training; enhance organizational support via fair promotion policies, recognition of diverse contributions, and robust mental health resources; optimize job resources by protecting autonomy, implementing developmental feedback, funding professional development, and creating collaborative platforms; and systematically monitor engagement and agility through institutional surveys to guide strategic improvements.

## Managerial Implications for Academic Leaders

Department chairs and deans should: adopt a coaching role through regular developmental conversations; establish psychological safety by normalizing intelligent experimentation; empower faculty through delegated authority and avoided micromanagement; and consistently connect daily work to institutional and societal purpose to strengthen dedication and initiative.

## Conclusion

In an era of perpetual transformation, the ability of higher education institutions to adapt and excel hinges on the capabilities of their academic workforce. This paper has argued that fostering **workforce agility** is imperative, but that a direct, mechanical approach to building agility may be suboptimal. Instead, we have proposed that **work engagement**—the positive state of vigor, dedication, and absorption—serves as the critical psychological mediator between a supportive work environment and the manifestation of agile behaviors.

By synthesizing recent literature, we have developed a conceptual model wherein perceived organizational support, transformational leadership, and job resources foster a high level of work engagement. This engaged state, in turn, provides the motivational energy, cognitive openness, and emotional resilience required for academicians to be proactive, adaptable, resilient, and collaborative. Furthermore, we acknowledged the potential for a reciprocal relationship, where successful agility reinforces engagement, creating a virtuous cycle of performance and well-being.

The practical and managerial implications are clear: to build an agile university, leaders must first and foremost build an engaged university. This requires a strategic, sustained investment in the psychosocial well-being of academic staff through supportive leadership, meaningful resources, and a culture of psychological safety. Future empirical research should test the proposed model through longitudinal and cross-sectional studies across diverse cultural and institutional contexts. By placing work engagement at the heart of the agility discourse, this paper offers a human-centric and sustainable pathway for academic institutions to navigate the complexities of the 21st century.

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