

# Total rewards and work engagement in higher education institutions

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**Abstract: Orientation:** Rewards are integral to keeping employees happy, efficient and engaged in their work. Thus, the engagement of academic staff within higher education institutions has become a top priority for organisational productivity and competitiveness. **Research purpose:** This study investigated the impact of total rewards on work engagement among the academic staff at a South African higher education institution. **Motivation for the study:** Engagement of academic staff is vital as higher education institutions are influential in the country's development. Literature, however, has shown that most studies on total rewards and work engagement focus on sectors such as financial institutions, the mining industry and others. However, few reports have been on total rewards and work engagement in higher education. **Research design, approach and method:** This study employed a cross-sectional survey design, following a quantitative approach. From a population of 100 academic staff, 74 respondents responded to a self-administered questionnaire. **Main findings:** The results show a positive relationship between two dimensions of total rewards (work-home integration and quality work environment) and work engagement. However, no relationship was found between base pay, benefits, performance and career management, and work engagement. From the five dimensions of total rewards, a quality work environment was the only significant predictor of work engagement. **Contribution:** The study provides theoretical contributions through new literature and possible recommendations. The study may guide management in developing a rewards strategy that can promote staff work engagement.

**Keywords:** academic staff; employee engagement; rewards; total rewards; work engagement

## 1. Introduction

The world has changed radically in recent years. Wood et al. (2020) argued that these changes and shifts could also be seen in the workplace, as seen by the expectations and stress placed on employees. To overcome these demands and stressors, a workforce engaged in their work is necessary, and organisations must appreciate their workforce by providing good human resource management strategies like total rewards. Researchers and human resource professionals have continually cited work engagement as a recommended option for giving businesses a competitive advantage. Still, the levels of work engagement are anything but desirable, necessitating increased efforts to find ways to improve engagement (Hoole and Bonnema, 2015). Work engagement connects to an employee's capacity and desire to contribute significantly to the organisation's progress by investing effort and exhibiting greater excitement for their job (Krén and Juhász, 2024). Krén and Juhász (2024) further argued that a well-rewarded employee is better engaged.

Rewards are essential for employees, and most employers want their staff always to be satisfied. Tsele and Kutin (2013) describe reward as all the resources provided to an employer to retain, empower, and engage workers and includes everything that

workers find beneficial due to their employment relationship. Hoole and Hotz (2016) argued that satisfied employees are generally productive, and happy employees have high workplace morale. Thus, rewards are integral to keeping employees happy, efficient and engaged in their work. A study by Mohammed (2016) in the mining sector in Jordan's southern region also showed that recognised employees are often delighted and perform well. Furthermore, they tend to stay with their organisations longer and have increased work engagement.

Therefore, adequately rewarded employees can perform to their full ability in the workplace and with the enthusiasm and concentration that comes with work engagement (Bakker and Leiter, 2011). Studies have shown that engagement levels worldwide are at an all-time low, and Africa's situation is equally grim (Hewitt, 2015). Currently, South Africa is rated as having the world's most disengaged employees. This clearly shows some issues regarding engaging workers at work here in South Africa. Therefore, it is increasingly necessary for companies to find ways to inspire workers and increase their level of commitment in the current economic context. With this brief explanation, it can be argued that not only do rewards influence work engagement, but they also have a significant influence on organisational performance (Maharaj, 2018).

Furthermore, Mabaso and Dlamini's (2018) study conducted in Gauteng and the Free State among higher education academic staff reveals that improving rewards of academic staff is vital because it will eventually lead to greater employee engagement and improved performance. Therefore, it will enable the sector to promote work engagement while retaining high satisfaction and enhanced performance by identifying total rewards that affect work engagement in higher education institutions. From the above information, one can conclude that academic staff engagement is critical because higher education institutions impact a nation's development. Korir and Kepkebut (2016) also share sentiments by stating that managers should take steps to engage employees through good total rewards management.

This paper can bring new insights by guiding higher education institutions to develop targeted initiatives to enhance employee engagement. By focusing on work-home integration and creating a quality work environment, universities can contribute to the overall satisfaction and commitment of faculty and staff, ultimately fostering a more vibrant and productive academic community.

## **2. The concept of work engagement**

Schaufeli and Salanova (2014) defines engagement as a mixture of job satisfaction, loyalty, and additional task actions whereby an individual can go above his or her job duties. Govender and Bussin (2020) add that an engaged employee will go above and beyond, believing in the organisation's ideals and mission and wanting to contribute to its success. Thus, higher levels of employee engagement can improve organisational performance. Wickham (2020) adds that engaged staff are strongly dedicated to their employer and have less absenteeism. Work engagement has three dimensions: absorption, dedication and vigour (Owoeye et al., 2020; Schaufeli and Bakker, 2010), as discussed next.

## **2.1. Absorption**

Absorption refers to being wholly focused or joyfully involved with one's task, during which time goes fast, and nobody has difficulty removing themselves from work (Hoole and Hotz, 2016). Bakker and Leiter, (2011) hold a similar view and describe absorption as a cognitive form of engagement whereby employees seem happily engaged and experience their job as engrossing such that they can devote their full focus and attention to it.

## **2.2. Dedication**

Dedication is when an individual is genuinely engaged in work and experiences a feeling of purpose, passion, motivation, confidence, and difficulty (Hoole and Hotz, 2016). Dedicated employees view their work as meaningful, important and challenging (Presbitero, 2017). Hence, employees who perceive their pay as fair develop a better mindset and become more dedicated to their jobs (Presbitero, 2017). Therefore, managers should value their employees' contributions by trusting them to take on more significant organisational roles, making them dedicated and engaged in their work.

## **2.3. Vigour**

Vigour refers to elevated concentrations of strength and intellectual endurance, the desire to engage at work, and perseverance in times of adversity (Rothmann and Rothmann, 2010). Owoeye et al. (2020) hold a similar view by describing vigour as one of several attributes of work engagement whereby employees devote time, effort and positive energies to performing their job. According to Schaufeli and Bakker (2010), compensation makes employees vigorously become more engaged and put more effort into their work.

## **3. The concept of total rewards**

Rewards play a critical part when assessing the organisation's significant success, and favourably correlated with the outcomes of employees, such as engagement (Obicci, 2015). This study focussed on two kinds of rewards, namely extrinsic and intrinsic rewards. Extrinsic rewards are employee benefits offered by the organisation to its employees. On the other hand, intrinsic rewards include opportunities for advancement, achievement, reputation, appreciation, fulfilment, consciousness, ambition, flexibility and accountability (Hoole and Hotz, 2016).

Nienaber (2010) identified the dimensions of total rewards: base pay, benefits, performance and career management, quality work environment and work-home integration, and are discussed next.

### **3.1. Base pay**

Base pay is a set sum of cash paid to an employee in exchange for services carried out (Hofmann, 2015). Base pay motivates workers to perform excellent work and work hard (Ndungu, 2017; Taufek et al., 2016). Therefore, managers need to appreciate the impact of a good employee and compensate him/her fairly. This will make employees

more engaged and absorbed in their work (Ndungu, 2017). From the literature, it can be hypothesised that:

H1: There is a significant relationship between base pay and work engagement.

### **3.2. Benefits**

Employee benefits are plans made by employers to boost the well-being of their workers. However, WorldatWork (2015) describes benefits as non-monetary rewards to complement financial compensation earned by workers. Ndungu (2017) claims that employees who are dissatisfied with the organisation's incentives will search for alternative organisations to provide them with better benefits. Thus, benefits are a significant consideration in a total compensation package. Taufek et al. (2016) share the same sentiments by stating that employees become more dedicated and engaged when given the benefits they need and are of value to them. From this literature, the study hypothesises that:

H2: There is a significant relationship between benefits and work engagement.

### **3.3. Performance and career management**

Performance management is a continuous mechanism to define, assess and improve employees' productivity, and align performance with the organisation's objectives (Aguinis, 2013). In addition, Mabaso (2016) also believes that even if employees do not leave the company, they may withdraw and become disengaged. Therefore, performance and career management is valuable and influence work engagement (Rafaqat, 2023). Thus, the study also hypothesises that:

H3: A positive relationship exists between performance, career management, and work engagement.

### **3.4. Quality work environment**

According to Hotz (2014), a quality work environment is all about the person, job, and business that cares about the influence of work on human livelihoods. The quality work environment's central concern is employees' well-being (Markey et al., 2012). However, Nguluvhe (2017) suggests that total rewards include not just bonuses and incentives but also opportunities for career development and a compelling work atmosphere. Therefore, employees are more vigorous when working in a quality environment (Taufek et al., 2016). Thus, the study hypothesises that:

H4: A positive relationship exists between a quality work environment and work engagement.

### **3.5. Work home integration**

Work-home integration is the introduction of workplace rules as well as procedures that enable workers to achieve success and harmony in their professional and personal lives (Hotz, 2014). However, Mabaso (2017) argues that less stressed employees are generally more engaged, have higher morale and are more productive. Therefore, work-life integration enables employees to prioritise and integrate their personal and work lives. Employees with a negative work-home integration experience may find their work less meaningful, leading to lower work engagement

(Rothmann and Baumann, 2014). Based on the previous discussion, we posit the following hypothesis:

H5: A positive relationship between work-home integration and work engagement exists.

#### **4. Total rewards and work engagement**

Research shows that workplace challenges, advancement, and opportunities for appreciation significantly and positively affect work engagement (Kwarteng et al., 2024). Obicci (2015) also revealed a correlation between career opportunity, benefits and work engagement. However, Yahya (2012) indicated that only benefits influenced work engagement. Fernando and Nishanthi (2021) revealed a strong correlation between total rewards and work engagement. Furthermore, Hanaysha (2016) also identified a strong correlation between work environment and engagement. Other studies discovered a relationship between total rewards and work engagement (Hoole and Hotz, 2016; Hulkko-Nyman et al., 2012). Given the above literature, the following assumption is made:

H6: A positive relationship between total rewards and work engagement exists.

#### **5. Problem statement**

Mabaso (2017) argues that rewards and employee engagement are significant university issues. Literature, however, has shown that most studies on total rewards and work engagement focus on different sectors, such as financial institutions (Hoole and Hotz, 2016), the mining industry (Mohammed, 2016) to mention a few. However, few reports have been on total rewards and work engagement in higher education (Dlamini and Mabaso, 2018). Most of the studies done in South Africa were based in Gauteng Province (Hoole and Hotz, 2016) and other provinces (Dlamini and Mabaso, 2018) even outside South Africa. Still, none has been conducted in the Limpopo Province, especially among the academic staff. Therefore, there is a lack of information on the impact of total rewards on employee work engagement of the academic staff at the selected South African higher education public institution.

#### **6. Research objectives**

The primary objective of this study is to investigate the impact of total rewards on work engagement among academic staff at a selected higher education institution.

Specific objectives are as follows:

- To establish the relationship between base pay and work engagement.
- To determine the relationship between benefits and work engagement.
- To investigate the relationship between work-home integration and work engagement.
- Determine the relationship between performance and career management and work engagement.
- To investigate the relationship between quality work environment and work engagement.
- To determine which dimensions of total rewards best predict work engagement.

## **7. Research method**

### **7.1. Research participants**

This study was conducted at a selected public South African higher education institution. The population consisted of both male and female academic staff ( $N = 100$ ), irrespective of their position. Using the Raosoft sample size calculator, 80 self-administered questionnaires were administered to 80 respondents, and 74 responded.

### **7.2. Research design and sampling technique**

The study was quantitative in nature using a cross-sectional research design in collecting data at one point in time. Non-probability sampling using a convenience sampling method was used to select a study sample. The decision was made solely on the accessibility and the willingness of academics to participate since the study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, whereby most of them were working remotely.

### **7.3. Measuring instrument**

A scale by Nienaber (2010) was used to measure total rewards on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly agree (1) to disagree (5) as extremes strongly. The five reward preference dimensions were used, namely, base pay—‘my salary is satisfactory in relation to what I do’, benefits—‘my leave benefit is satisfactory’, performance and career management—‘I am praised regularly for my work’, quality work environment—‘I work in a conducive work environment’ and work-home integration—‘I am able to set boundaries between work and life’. The alpha coefficient from the previous analysis for total rewards dimensions was: base pay, 0.88; benefits, 0.86; performance and career management, 0.88; work-home integration, 0.86 and quality work environment, 0.89; overall total rewards scale was 0.91, which indicates that the instrument is accurate (Hoole and Hotz, 2016).

Work engagement was measured by a 17-item Utrecht work engagement scale (Schaufeli et al., 2006). This scale contains elements such as vigour—‘I feel bursting with energy at my work’, dedication—‘I am enthusiastic about my job’ and absorption—‘I am completely absorbed in my work’. Previous alpha coefficients for the UWES in the South African context was: vigour, 0.78; dedication, 0.89 and absorption, 0.78. When combined, an alpha of 0.93 was found (Hoole and Hotz 2016). Hence, the scale was reliable (Pallant, 2016).

## **8. Research procedure**

The researcher sought permission from the Research and Ethics Committee at the University of Venda to conduct the study. To sought informed consent from the respondents, the researchers discussed the purpose of the survey with the respondents. If one feels like doing so during the research process, assurance was also given of withdrawing from further participation. Respondents were given enough time to complete and return the questionnaires.

## 9. Data analysis

The data were analysed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 28. The captured data was reviewed and readied for analysis by checking incomplete data and irregularities, including bad items using item analysis. Descriptive statistics were utilised to describe the sample profile and explain the means and standard deviation in a summary form. To evaluate the correlation between the independent variable and dependant variable, Pearson product-moment correlation analysis was used. In addition, a multiple regression study was carried out to check which dimension of total rewards best-predicted work engagement.

## 10. Results

### 10.1. Sample profile

The majority of participants were males, 40 (54.1%). Most participants, 26 (35.1%), were in the age category of 31–40 years, and very few participants, 8 (10.8%) were in the age category of 30 years and below. All the participants, 74 (100%) were black. Results show that 43 (58.1%) were married, and the least group, 4 (5.4), were widowed. Most participants, 26 (35.1%), have worked at the institution for 2–5 years; however, only 6 (8.1%) have worked for less than a year.

### 10.2. Relationship between variables

The Pearson product-moment correlation was used to check the relationship between benefits and work engagement. The results in **Table 1** found an insignificant relationship between benefits and work engagement ( $r = 0.024$ ;  $p = 0.837$ ). Furthermore, an insignificant relationship between base pay and work engagement was found ( $r = -0.060$ ;  $p = 0.617$ ). Therefore, hypothesis two is not supported.

Work-home integration and work engagement were found to have a positive link as shown in **Table 1** ( $r = 0.357$ ;  $p = 0.002$ ). Therefore, null hypothesis was rejected and conclude that a relationship exists between the two variables. Similarly, a positive relationship between quality work environment and work engagement was revealed ( $r = 0.472$ ;  $p = 0.000$ ). This result suggests that as the quality of the work environment improves, there is a corresponding increase in employees' work engagement. The higher learning institution, therefore, should prioritise creating and maintaining conducive work environments to enhance employee engagement. Investing in factors such as supportive leadership, clear communication, and employee well-being initiatives may contribute to a more positive work environment, fostering higher levels of engagement among employees. Hence, hypothesis four is confirmed.

An insignificant relationship ( $r = 0.144$ ;  $p = 0.223$ ) between performance and career management, and work engagement. This suggests that there is no statistically significant relationship between the two variables in the studied context. This result implies that improving performance and career management processes alone may not directly impact or contribute significantly to enhancing work engagement among academics at the selected public higher learning institution. The institution should consider exploring other factors or interventions that may substantially influence work engagement. Additionally, understanding the lack of a significant relationship

highlights the need for a nuanced approach in designing strategies to boost work engagement, considering a broader range of factors beyond performance and career management. Thus, hypothesis five is not supported.

Contrary to the previous finding, the results in **Table 1** below revealed a positive relationship ( $r = 0.244$ ;  $p = 0.038$ ) between total rewards and work engagement. This result implies that employees become more engaged as the total rewards the institution offers improve. Therefore, institutions of higher learning should recognise the importance of a comprehensive rewards system, encompassing both monetary and non-monetary incentives, in fostering higher levels of work engagement among their employees. Therefore, hypothesis six is supported.

**Table 1.** Relationship between total rewards, its dimensions and work engagement.

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7
TR	Pearson Correlation	1						
	Sig. (2-tailed)							
Base pay	Pearson Correlation	0.770**	1					
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000						
Benefits	Pearson Correlation	0.697**	0.540**	1				
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000					
PCM	Pearson Correlation	0.884**	0.651**	0.486**	1			
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	0.000				
QWE	Pearson Correlation	0.777**	0.404**	0.447**	0.584**	1		
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000			
WHI	Pearson Correlation	0.825**	0.470**	0.374**	0.698**	0.676**	1	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	0.001	0.000	0.000		
WE	Pearson Correlation	0.244*	-0.060	0.063	0.144	0.472**	0.357**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.038	0.617	0.596	0.223	0.000	0.002	

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed); \* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Key: TR=total rewards; WHI = work home integration; QWE = quality work environment; PCM= performance and career management; WE = work engagement.

### 10.3. Regression analysis

A regression analysis was conducted to determine if total rewards as an independent variable predicts work engagement. Results in **Table 2** show that from the five dimensions of total rewards, only quality work environment predicts work engagement ( $\beta = 0.606$ ;  $t = 3.083$   $p = 0.003$ ). Overall, total rewards were also discovered to be a significant predictor of work engagement ( $\beta = 0.244$ ;  $t = 2.116$ ;  $p = 0.038$ ). From the results, quality work environment was found to be the most predictor of work engagement ( $\beta = 0.606$ ) as compared to total rewards ( $\beta = 0.244$ ).

**Table 2.** Model summary.

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	0.567 <sup>a</sup>	0.322	0.271	9.30415

a. Predictors: (Constant), TR, BENEFITS, BASE PAY, QWE, WHI, PCM.  
Coefficients<sup>a</sup>



**Table 2.** (Continued).

Model	Unstandardised Coefficients		Standardised Coefficients	T	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	29.009	5.080		5.711	0.000
WHI	0.983	0.608	0.408	1.616	0.111
QWE	1.715	0.556	0.606	3.083	0.003
<sup>1</sup> Base pay	-0.344	0.591	-0.132	-0.581	0.563
Benefits	0.270	0.514	0.096	0.525	0.601
PCM	0.284	0.321	0.144	1.228	0.233
TR	0.153	0.072	0.244	2.116	0.038

a. Dependent Variable: WEE

Key: WHI = Work Home Integration; QWE = Quality Work Environment; PCM = Performance and Career Management; TR = Total Rewards.

## 11. Discussions

This study aimed to identify the relationship between total rewards and work engagement among academic staff at a higher education institution. This was important as few studies focus on the impact of total rewards in South African higher education.

The current study reveals that benefits have an insignificant relationship with work engagement. This finding is in contrary to Hewitt’s (2017) study, which found that when workers are granted better benefits, they can be loyal to the organisation. Thus, a lack of benefits may affect employees’ ability to concentrate and work efficiently. This inconsistency implies that the impact of benefits on work engagement may vary across different organisational contexts. Therefore, the study underscores the need for institutions of higher learning to carefully assess the unique factors influencing their employees’ engagement, considering that the significance of benefits in this regard may not be universally applicable.

Similarly, finding an insignificant relationship between base pay and work engagement aligns with Ludviga and Kalvina’s (2016) study on academic staff. This consistency suggests that the relationship between base pay and work engagement might be more complex and context-dependent than previously assumed. It prompts institutions of higher learning to explore other factors beyond monetary compensation, such as job satisfaction, work environment, and professional development opportunities, to address the drivers of work engagement comprehensively.

However, the positive correlation between work-home integration and work engagement, along with the positive link between quality work environment and work engagement, suggests that these factors are key contributors to the overall engagement of academics. The findings align with Hanaysha’s (2016) research, which identified a strong relationship between work environment and work engagement among academics in Northern Malaysia.

This consistency in findings emphasises the importance of creating a workplace that facilitates healthy work-home integration and offers a high-quality work environment. Institutions of higher learning can benefit from recognising the impact

of these factors on employee engagement and implementing strategies to enhance work-home balance and improve the overall quality of the work environment.

In practical terms, institutions of higher learning may consider initiatives such as flexible work arrangements, supportive policies for work-life balance, and investments in creating positive and conducive work environments. These efforts contribute to higher levels of work engagement and promote employee well-being and satisfaction, ultimately fostering a more positive and productive organisational culture. No relationship was found between performance and career management, and work engagement. The results contradict the findings of Khadija (2020), who argued that a relationship between performance and work engagement exists between university academics.

A positive relationship was found between total rewards and work engagement. The findings are in line with those of Maharaj (2018), who also found a positive relationship between total rewards and work engagement among academics in a South African higher education institution. These results underscore the importance of a comprehensive and well-structured total rewards system in fostering higher levels of work engagement among employees. Total rewards include both monetary and non-monetary elements such as salary, benefits, recognition, and career development opportunities. Institutions of higher learning can leverage this understanding to design and optimise their reward programs, ensuring they align with the needs and preferences of their workforce.

## **12. Recommendations**

The sample size was a bit small for the generalisation of results to all university employees. Future studies should use a larger sample to improve accuracy. In addition, more universities should be investigated to better understand the impact of total rewards on the work engagement of academic staff members within the universities.

This study explains the relation between total rewards and work engagement in institutional management. The study recommends that management develop sound strategies for increasing employee work engagement. The management should also improve the working environment of the academic staff as it also affects their level of engagement. To ensure that workers are engaged and motivated, the University must address key aspects that may impact total rewards.

## **13. Conclusion**

This study aimed to investigate the relationship between total rewards and work engagement among academic staff at a South African higher education institution. The hypotheses were tested, and the results revealed that total rewards influence work engagement.

The findings of this study have several general and specific implications for higher education institutions. Firstly, the study highlights the nuanced nature of factors influencing work engagement among academic staff, with benefits and base pay showing an insignificant relationship. This underscores the need for higher education institutions to recognise the unique contextual factors affecting their employees'

engagement levels, acknowledging that a one-size-fits-all approach may not be practical.

Furthermore, the positive correlation between work-home integration and work engagement, as well as the link between a quality work environment and work engagement, emphasises the critical role of these aspects in promoting overall engagement. Institutions can benefit from prioritising initiatives that support work-life balance and create positive work environments. Thus, contributing to a more satisfied and engaged academic workforce.

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