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Level of work engagement of employees of a private university in the northern Philippines during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract
The COVID-19 pandemic has brought economic changes to countries around the world. Educational institutions are affected by the alterations of activities necessary to sustain the teaching-learning process. The study explored the level of engagement of the employees of a higher education institution. Only 79.7% of the targeted population voluntarily participated in the survey. Results showed that employees are engaged in their work. There is no significant difference in the employees' level of engagement in terms of gender, position, and department they belong. A difference in engagement is found in terms of age and years of service, showing a positive correlation that the older and the longer the employee stayed with the University, the higher the level of engagement. Since the study used a self-assessment survey, it is recommended that work engagement be evaluated using a standard assessment tool by the human resource manager for a greater validity of results.

Keywords: alterations of activities, higher education institution, level of engagement, teaching and non-teaching, work engagement

1. Introduction
The COVID-19 pandemic has brought radical changes in the daily lives of people around the world. Employment has come to a standstill as nations attempt to control the spread of the disease. The global action to minimize the effects of the pandemic has given rise to pressing economic, social, and health issues. Governments have undertaken several measures to limit the devastating consequences of COVID-19 on the economies of nations. Organizations are developing strategies to evolve into more effective and more productive institutions in these times (Chanana & Sangeeta, 2020; Osborne & Mannoud, 2017) [21M]. One of the most important strategies institutions implement is improving employee engagement through various organizational support and engagement endeavors to maintain pre-CoVID-19 performance, reduce layoffs, and limit company losses (Budriene & Diskiene, 2020) [5].
Employee engagement is a psychological status that indicates meaningfulness, safety, and availability (Bakker, 2011, Harter *et al*., 2002) [3, 11]. It is manifested in how an employee cares about his job, how his company fares in the competitive world, and how his performance matters (Smith, 2020) [32]. There are six elements of employee engagement: 1.) Leadership; 2.) Organizational culture, values, and mission-vision; 3.) Corporate social responsibility; 4.) Accountability and responsibility; 5.) Communication; and, 6.) Rewards and recognition (Parameswaran, 2019; Patton, 2019; Quantum Workplace, 2012) [22, 23, 29]. Nurturing these elements leads to the motivation of employees to be more engaged with their work (Patro, 2013) [24]. All these elements are embedded in the three important characteristics of engagement: vigor, dedication, and absorption. Different types of people, depending on their physiological and psychological needs, interpret engagement differently and thus exhibit different engagement behaviors (Chandani *et al*., 2016) [6].
According to the Quantum Benchmark Report and Analysis (2021), the rise in unemployment in the United States coincided with the sudden rise in employee engagement in March 2020. A comparison between 2019 and 2020 unemployment and employee engagement showed that employee engagement is impacted by the economy and labor demands. Areas of communication, leadership, and compensation and benefits showed the

most changes during the pandemic, with administrators being more willing to inform their employees on the status of the company while employees showed a better understanding of fair wages and benefits during the economic recession brought by the COVID-19 crisis. One of the areas greatly affected by the pandemic is every country's educational system. One of the Human Resource Managers' strategies to cope with the changes brought by the pandemic is flexible working arrangements (Fazlurrahman *et al*., 2020) [10]. The flexible working arrangement has both positive and negative effects on work engagement. However, there is a negative effect on work engagement when a change of working hours/days is perceived to be having a detrimental effect on the health of the employees (Ivanauskaite, 2015; Ugargol & Patrick, 2018) [13]. The transition from face-to-face teacher-student interaction to virtual and internet-based learning has become a challenge to all educational institutions. Despite this uneasy transition, academic institutions, although unprepared, have tackled the situation head-on and continued to provide their services.

Educational organizations are different in many aspects from purely business companies. Academe employs both teaching and non-teaching individuals to carry on the day-to-day operations of the Institution. There has been a different set-up for faculty and non-teaching staff with teachers on 'work from home through the internet while the other category of employees must report to work daily or on an alternate day basis to do their jobs and responsibilities not possible through the virtual setting.

"Work from home" is a type of flexible working arrangement that gives employees the liberty to decide when and how to perform their assigned jobs and responsibilities in the comforts of their homes (Hill *et al*., 2008) [12]. Challenges most commonly encountered by employees on 'work from home arrangements are online connectivity, self-confidence, and efficacy to do the work on their own and work-life balance because of house/daily home chores that often interfere with work which in turn affects the employee's work engagement (Chanana & Sangeeta, 2020; Chaudhary *et al*., 2012) [8].

On the other hand, working daily on shortened hours or an alternate day basis requires the employee to report to work at the office because their jobs and responsibilities are impossible to perform online/or virtually. This type of arrangement poses health risks to the employees who had bravely mingled with other people during the pandemic (Casey & Grzywacz, 2008) [7]. Employees in this arrangement were forced to report for work because the fear of job loss is greater than the fear of contracting the disease (Ojo, Fawehinmi & Yusliza, 2021) [20]. This attitude is known as resilience. Employee resilience is defined as the capacity to move forward and deal with stress and unexpected events, often resulting from social support/pressure from family and the work organization to which the individual belongs (Bardoel, Pettit, DeCheiri & Mcmillan, 2014; Liu, Cooper & Tarba, 2016) [4, 16]. Resilience is an employee characteristic equated with engagement, but many researchers say that it is more than engagement that keeps people doing unexpected things (Ojo, Fawehinmi & Yusliza, 2021) [20]. The high variations of engagement in different areas and types of jobs, as shown by many studies, led to this investigation because the findings might shed light on the uniqueness of employees of tertiary educational institutions concerning work engagement, especially those in the rural areas of developing countries. In addition, research on how demographic characteristics are lacking (Li, 2018) so the present study dealt with the issue. In this regard, this study answered the following questions:

1. What is the level of work engagement between the teaching (faculty) and non-teaching employees of a tertiary academic institution in terms of:
2. leadership
3. organizational culture, values, mission-vision
4. corporate social responsibility
5. Accountability and responsibility
6. Communication
7. Recognition and rewards
8. Is there a difference in the level of engagement between the teaching and non-teaching employees in terms of the six components of engagement?
9. Is there a difference in the level of engagement of the teaching and non-teaching employees when grouped according to their profile of age, gender, position, the department they belong to, and years of service?

The research hypotheses are:

a.) H1: There is no significant difference in the level of engagement between the teaching and the non-teaching employees in terms of the six components of engagement.

b.) H2: There is no significant difference in the level of engagement between the teaching and non-teaching employees when grouped according to their age, gender, position, department, and years of service.

The study's findings are relevant to determine the uniqueness of the employees of academic institutions, especially those in the tertiary levels. It would motivate the human resource managers and the quality assurance system of the organization to take action based on the study's findings to overcome any challenges posed by the CoVID-19 pandemic on the people responsible for the teaching-learning process – the service expected from academic institutions.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Sample

Purposive sampling was done targeting all of the 143 employees of the University for the Second Semester of the school year 2020-2021. Only 114 employees voluntarily participated in the study, comprising 79.7% of the targeted population. Although the Administration encouraged all employees to participate, there was no mandate to join the survey. Confidentiality of all information given was strictly observed in the conduct of the study.

2.2 Data Collection Method

The proponents used the survey questionnaire based on the Employee Engagement Index of the European Commission, the Utrecht Work Engagement Survey, and the 2019 Statewide Employee Engagement Survey Questionnaire by Qualtricsxm. The study questionnaire is a modified version of the three (3) online surveys. The modifications were made to meet the study's needs and keep abreast with the cultural characteristics of the respondents. The questionnaire was composed of two (2) parts: part 1 – demographic profile, and part 2 – on work engagement on the six (6)

elements. The second part comprised 40 questions answerable by 5- a point scale, ranging from 1=strongly disagree to 5= strongly agree. The mean is computed from the given answers. There were five items in leadership, three items in communication, eight items in rewards and recognition, eight items in accountability and responsibilities, eight items in organizational culture, and mission vision, and 5 in corporate social responsibility. The descriptive interpretation given is also on a 5-point scale with 1-highly disengaged, 2- disengaged, 3-not engaged, 4-engaged, and 5-highly engaged. The data collection method was done primarily through an online survey using Google Forms and low internet connectivity through a printed survey form.

Before the conduct of the study, permission from the President of the University was sought upon the recommendations of the Vice-president for Administration and Vice-president for Academics. All employees were given prior notice to participate in the survey/study. Although participation was encouraged by the Administration, participants were allowed to decline to participate in the study. The researchers strictly observed data privacy.

2.3 Data Analysis Procedure

Descriptive and inferential statistics were done using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software. Descriptive statistics made use of frequency, percentage, mean and standard deviation. Inferential statistics used the One-way ANOVA, Independent Sample t-test, and Pearson Product Moment Correlation.

3. Results

The following are the salient findings of the study:

Table 1: Profile of the Respondents

Variable		Faculty (n=88)		Non-teaching (n=26)	
Age		f	%	f	%
	20-28	44	50.0	7	26.9
	29-37	12	13.6	2	7.7
	38-46	15	17.0	6	23.1
	47-55	12	13.6	6	23.1
	56-64	5	5.7	5	19.2
Gender					
	Male	36	40.9	12	43.2
	Female	52	59.1	14	53.8
Department					
	CASTE	17	19.3	-	-
	CBE	12	13.6	-	-
	CEA	20	22.7	-	-
	CIT	5	5.7	-	-
	CMAMP	16	18.2	-	-
	CNPHM	7	8.0	-	-
	COA	7	8.0	-	-
	COC	3	2.6	-	-
	GS	1	1.1	-	-
Position					
	Dean/Head	8	9.1	8	30.8
	Coordinator	8	9.1	-	-
	Faculty	70	79.5	-	-
	Staff	2	2.3	18	69.2
Years of Service					
	< 5 years	52	59.1	7	26.9
	5-9 years	15	17.0	3	11.5
	10-14 years	4	4.5	2	7.7
	> 14 years	17	19.3	14	53.8

The above table shows the demographic profile of the respondents. The mean age of the respondents is 36.6 years, with a minimum of 20 years and a maximum of 63 years of age. There are more females (57.9%) than males (42.1%). There were two categories of respondents of teaching and non-teaching. The teaching employees belong to the different colleges where they were assigned. Most of the employees have stayed with the University for less than five years, with the mean duration of service of 5-9 years.

Table 2: Level of Engagement of the Employees

Variables	Respondents	M	SD	Interpretation
Leadership				
	Teaching	3.76	0.40	Engaged
	Non-Teaching	3.92	0.50	Engaged
Communication				
	Teaching	4.08	0.53	Engaged
	Non-teaching	4.13	0.52	Engaged
Rewards & Recognition (Rew/Reg)				
	Teaching	4.12	0.49	Engaged
	Non-teaching	4.21	0.51	Highly engaged
Accountability & Responsibility (AC &RES)				
	Teaching	4.21	0.48	Highly engaged
	Non-teaching	4.27	0.46	Highly engaged
Organizational culture, mission-vision (OCMV)				
	Teaching	4.42	0.38	Highly engaged
	Non-teaching	4.42	0.43	Highly engaged
Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)				
	Teaching	4.01	0.35	Engaged
	Non-teaching	4.09	0.44	Engaged
Overall engagement				
	Teaching	4.10	0.44	Engaged
	Non-teaching	4.17	0.48	Engaged

Table 2 shows the comparison between the levels of engagement of the two categories of respondents. There are high engagements of teaching and non-teaching employees on accountability and responsibility and organizational culture, and mission vision. While respondents have similar engagements are leadership, communication, and corporate social responsibility. The respondents differ in their level of engagement in the rewards and recognition area.

Table 3: Comparison between the respondent's levels of engagement in the six elements

Variables	Respondents	N	M	SD	t	df	p-value
Leadership	Teaching	88	3.76	0.40	1.75	112	0.084
	Non-teaching	26	3.92	0.50			
Communication	Teaching	88	4.08	0.53	0.42	112	0.679
	Non-teaching	26	4.13	0.52			
Rew/recog	Teaching	88	4.12	0.49	0.80	112	0.424
	Non-teaching	26	4.21	0.51			
AC & RES	Teaching	88	4.21	0.48	0.53	112	0.596
	Non-teaching	26	4.27	0.46			
OCMV	Teaching	88	4.42	0.38	0.02	112	0.986
	Non-teaching	26	4.42	0.43			
CSR	Teaching	88	4.01	0.35	0.92	112	0.357
	Non-teaching	26	4.09	0.44			

An independent sample t-test was done to compare the teaching and non-teaching employees' level of engagement in the six areas. Results show that both groups have the same level of engagement in all areas, accepting the null

hypothesis at a 0.05 level of significance.

To test hypothesis 2 (H2), an independent sample t-test was also done to compare the level of engagement when grouped according to gender which showed that there is no significant difference in the level of engagement in all areas of the two groups of respondents: leadership (t(112)=0.79, p=0.432); communication (t(112)=0.25, p=0.802); rewards/recognition (t(112)=0.1.06, p=0.293); AC & RES (t(112) = 0.93, p=0.356); OCMV (t(112)=0.04, p=0.966); and CSR (t(112)=1.17, p=2.44) at 0.05 level of significance.

One-way ANOVA was used to find the differences in engagements in terms of position and department they belong to. There was no significant difference in the level of engagement when respondents were grouped according to their position and the department they belong to, at a 0.05 level of significance. However, there is a significant difference in engagement level in terms of age and years of service in the leadership element of engagement. The difference is shown in Table 4 below:

Table 4: Differences in the level of engagement in the six elements with age and years of service

Elements of Engagement	Age				Years of Service			
	df	F	p-value	Tukey HSD	df	F	p-value	Tukey HSD
Leadership	4/109	3.04	0.020	G1 &G4	3/110	3.36	0.021	G1 & G4
Communication	4/109	0.51	0.725	-	3/110	2.17	0.095	-
REW/REg	4/109	1.32	0.265	-	3/110	0.84	0.477	-
AC &RES	4/109	0.49	0.740	-	3/110	0.74	0.531	-
OCMV	4/109	0.31	0.873	-	3/110	1.71	0.170	-
CSR	4/109	1.29	0.278	-	3/110	0.51	0.675	-

One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to determine whether there are statistically significant differences between age groups and years of service in each element of engagement. The respondents' age was divided into five groups: G1 (20-28 years old), G2 (29-37 years old), G3 (38-46 years old), G4 (47-55 years old), and G5 (56-64 years olds). The test results revealed that on leadership, the level of engagement of G1 (M=3.55, SD=0.36) is significantly lower than G4 (M=4.02, SD=0.61) (F (4/109) = 3.04, p=0.020). There is the same level of engagement in the five groups in other elements of engagement at 0.05 level of significance.

The same analysis was used to determine the differences in years of service in terms of the six elements. The respondents were divided into four groups, G1 (less than five years), G2 (5-9 years), G3 (10-14 years), and G4 (14 and above years). Results showed that the level of engagement in the leadership element is significantly lower than G4 (M=3.97, SD=048) (F (3/110) = 3.36, p=0.21). There is the same level of engagement of the four groups in other elements of engagement at 0.05 level of significance.

Table 5: Relationship between age, years of service, and level of engagement in the six areas

Variables	Age		Years of Service	
	r	p-value	r	p-value
Leadership	0.30	0.001	0.28	0.002
Communication	0.16	0.092	0.06	0.504
REw/REg	0.26	0.005	0.12	0.201
AC&RES	0.25	0.008	0.18	0.061
OCMV	0.24	0.010	0.22	0.019
CSR	0.26	0.005	0.16	0.087

The relationship between age, years of service, and the employees' level of engagement was determined using the Pearson product-moment correlation to find out the relationship and how strong age and years of service are associated with the leadership element, as can be gleaned from Table 5. Results showed a positive relationship which means that as one grows older the higher the level of engagement in all areas of engagement: leadership (r=0.30, p<0.001); communication (r=0.16, p<0.092; REw/reg (r=0.26, p<0.005); AC&RES (r=0.25, p<0.008); OCMV (r=0.24, p<0.01); and CSR (r=0.26, p<0.005). The test showed that the longer the length of service, the higher the level of engagement in areas of leadership (r=0.28, p=0.002) and OCMV (r=0.22, p=0.019).

4. Discussions

Successful organizational outcomes depend on employee performance, which results from their engagement (Allen, 2017; Patro, 2013; Osborne & Hammoud, 2017) [1, 21, 24]. Employee engagement is a dynamic phenomenon that changes with the changes in work scenarios of global economic conditions (Mishra, Boynton & Mishra, 2014) [17]. Challenges of organizational management in dealing with employee performance and institutional productivity have been heightened by the COVID-19 pandemic (Ojo *et al*., 2021) [20]. The pandemic's current economic condition has made organizations look into strategies to boost the performance of their employees – most of which looked into the engagement of their personnel (Chanana & Sangeeta, 2020; Quantum Workplace, 2012) [29].

Leadership is the most important element of work engagement. Leadership makes or breaks employee engagement in their jobs (Quantum Workplace, 2012) [29]. Because superiors and leaders are responsible for giving directionality, empowerment, reward, and recognition for a job well done, managing the work environment, and making evaluations and feedback through effective positive communication (Sarangi & Nayak, 2016) [30]. All other engagement elements result from good leadership practices (Popli & Rizvi, 2016) [26]. Effective communication nurtures the employees' meaningful interaction, promoting full support, learning, inclusive decision-making, and building trust and loyalty. "Work from home" lessens this interaction, so the leaders are challenged to maintain effective communication to continue productive and meaningful relationships with the employees (Fazlurrahman *et al*., 2020) [10]. The engagement was expected to decrease during this COVID-19 pandemic (Chanana & Sangeeta, 2020, Risley, 2020) [27], but the present study shows otherwise. Employees can still be engaged when there is an organizational expression of caring, support, and constant communication with their employees (Budriene & Diskiene, 2020) [5].

Differences in employee characteristics are defined by the demographic profiles of the employees (Osborne & Hammoud, 2017) [21]. The physical, physiological, mental, cognitive, and social aspects of their being affect their level of engagement concerning work-life conditions (Juneja, 2015) [14]. Leaders of the organization must consider these variables and translate them into strategies for 'individualized' interaction with employees because demographics also affect the understanding of work engagement (Ojo *et al*., 2021) [20].

Age is a strong predictor of work engagement because it determines the experiences and development of coping mechanisms to work stresses (Mostert & Els, 2013; Roberts, 2020) [18, 28]. Similarly, work experience has a positive correlation with work engagement. Years of service may not be equated with experience, but conclusively, those employees who have spent more time with the Institution would have gained more competencies and proficiencies regarding their job (Sharma *et al*., 2017) [31]. Other demographic factors such as gender, civil status, position, the department they belong to, educational attainment, and tenure showed no significant correlation with work engagement (Li Sun, 2019; Persson, 2010) [15, 25]. Leadership qualities improve as age increases due to experience, gained expertise, and competencies, as shown by the results of this study which are also the findings of many research (Nicholas & Erakovich, 2013; Osborne & Hammoud, 2017; Popli & Rizvi, 2016) [19, 21, 26].

5. Limitations

The study had been conducted on one of the Universities in Northern Philippines, with only 79.7% of its employees participating voluntarily in the survey. Although the number of participants can be considered representative of the intended population, it might not reflect the employees' sentiments about engagement. It is thus recommended that work engagement of other higher education institutions be studied and correlated with the results of this study to make generalizations. Employee engagement assessment from the human resource manager and not a self-assessment approach be used to make triangulation to increase the validity of the results of future studies.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

It can be inferred from the findings of the study that work engagement can be similar in the teaching and non-teaching employees as a consequence of organizational caring and support given to the employees. Leadership is the main source of engagement motivation, with age and years of service having a positive correlation with leadership. The level of engagement is similar across other demographic characteristics of the respondents. Leadership is the expression of how management and Administration look into their employees to maintain motivation and drive them into optimum performance for more productive outcomes despite crises like the COVID-19 pandemic.

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