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_____ Zamanbekov Darkhan

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_____.

(signature of the student)

Qaswa binte Firdous Wani

(Name and surname of student)

Scientific Supervisor

Academic degree

_____.

(signature of the supervisor)

Dr. Sanat Kozhakhmet

(Name and surname of advisor)

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study tries to understand the role human resource management practices play on employee wellbeing in the context of higher education institutions in Kazakhstan. It mainly focused on two institutions namely SDU university in Almaty, Kazakhstan and Maqsut Narikbayev University in Astana, Kazakhstan. The study attempts to explore the interplay of dynamics between HRM practices and employee well-being, which has not been investigated in this context in the literature. This was done through combining grounded theory (Gioia, 2013) and the Eisenhardt Method (Eisenhardt, 2021) approaches. Significant findings of the research disclose that firstly, emphasis of SDU university is on inclusive and friendly community. The university establishes a welcoming atmosphere by hosting regular social activities and having a culture of acknowledgement. In comparison, the main priority of MNU seems to be employee's autonomy and leadership. The intern empowers staff with independence and trust in managerial and administrative decisions. General challenge that both universities are facing is mainly healthcare and clear communication that is negatively influencing morale and wellbeing of employees.

This study sides with the previous studies that highlight the importance of effective HRM practices for increasing the well-being of employees. While promoting the need for better healthcare, communication and establishment of better work-life balance in the institutions. By taking action regarding these problems, the institutions can improve and increase their already successful organizations. It will result in enhanced culture, employee engagement and positive workplace environment of the organization conducive to sustainable growth and development

Key Words: Human resource management, Job well-being, Life well-being, Psychological well-being, Targeted HR practices, Social exchange theory, social identity theory

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

SDU – SDU University

MNU- Maqsut Narikbayev University

HEI – Higher Education Institution

HRM – Human Resource Management

HR – Human Resource

INTRODUCTION

The relevance of study: In the last few years the concern for the well being of employees has been given more importance (Pawar, 2016; Huang et al., 2019). Employee well-being and productivity have declined as a result of increased workplace pressure to achieve high levels of productivity since the 2008 financial crisis (Guest, 2017). Additionally, according to Carnevale and Hatak (2020), COVID-19 has negatively impacted person-job fit and has disproportionate effects on employees' families, which has decreased employee well-being (Agarwal, P., 2021). Given this historical context, the socio-economic change in recent years has brought great life pressure on people in general, especially workers. It is evident that human resources practices have the capacity to enhance staff wellbeing.

Improvement of employee well-being is a vital human resource practice problem (Huang, 2019). Khoreva and Wechtler, (2018) state in their research that high level of well being is a trait of employees who tend to be more creative, great performers and highly engaged at their workplace compared to the one with low well-being. Therefore, a lot of organizational outcomes like profitability and productivity can be influenced by the well-being of employees (Zhang, 2020) increasing the need for it to be studied. Well-being is a crucial element to the survival and flourishing of organizations round the world (Spreitzer & Porath, 2012). Regardless, there is a lack of reserach on employee wellbeing specifically in a broad sense but rather most of the previous research has focused on job satisfaction, negative affect, work attitude or flow of the work (Zhang, 2020).

A surge in the need for clear answers regarding HRM practices and problems had promoted the need for more research in this field. "Human resource" itself is considerably a broad term creating a major problem in its studies. From a socio-psychological perspective a lot of countries consider it unethical considering people as resources as it is dehumanizing. From an economic standpoint, the word "human resources" is perfectly appropriate and is seen as one of the most important aspects for a successful company.

HR is commonly used with other material and financial tools for a smooth run of any business.

Finally, despite varying viewpoints on the subject of HR, it is a vital resource for any companies' combativeness as it is one of the only resources left that is hard to replicate. Therefore, it ought to be viewed as a crucial asset that enhances sustainable development, economic profit, and social value (Kapiki, 2015).

As Deloitte (2021) believers, "orders should give way to persuasion, and control should be replaced by trust". This change can be implemented through HR practices like: communication, health benefits, social life, adequate leadership, supportive environment and more, which this study is concentrating on.

This study seeks to understand the role of connotation and structure of diverse dimensions of well-being specifically in the context of Kazakhstan sample as there has been very few research done on this sample.

Although there is an awareness of the positive influence of excellent HR practices on employee well-being, further research is needed to understand the link between human resource management practices in the setting of higher education and employee well-being. Furthermore, there is a lack of research in higher education institutions, notably in Kazakhstan. As a result, the purpose of this qualitative study is to fill that void.

Aim of study

The aim of this qualitative research is to explore and understand the role of human resource management (HRM) practices in promoting employee well-being within higher education institutions in Kazakhstan. Therefore, through in-depth interviews with employees from various departments and positions, this study seeks to uncover the specific HRM practices that contribute to the well-being of staff members, identify

challenges and areas for improvement, and provide insights that can inform the development of more effective HRM policies and practices in the academic context.

The aim is to uncover the influence of these practices and their contribution to the supportive work environment and well-being of staff members. The study, with the help of extensive analyses, aims to generate results that can be helpful and used in creating informed HRM practices and policies that are specifically made to improve well-being of employees within academic and administrative contexts. Therefore, following are *the research questions*:

1. What differences in HRM practices can be observed between two higher education institutions?
2. How do HRM practices in higher education institutions in Kazakhstan impact the well-being of employees?
3. What specific HRM practices are perceived as most beneficial for employee well-being by staff members at the two universities studied?

Research methods: in this study a qualitative research method is used. Specifically, a combination of grounded theory approach by Gioia (2013) and process study approach in inductively building theory from a case study called Eisenhardt Method (Eisenhardt, 2021; Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007) is used.

Sample method: sample was selected according to their work experience and expertise in Higher education institutions in Kazakhstan.

The practical significance: the research provides insights that can be used to improve HRM practices in higher education context. These insights can be used to improve and develop policies that improve the well-being of employees. It can also help in strategic

planning and development as the insights from the research can be used by HR for planning future policies that will align institution goals and overall organizational effectiveness. In addition to that, identification of effective HRM practices through this research will contribute to a positive work culture that will increase institutions reputation and promote community and a collaborative workplace.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1 Well being

Well-being is one topic that has been pursued since ancient times. And yet the academic research done on well-being of employees still does not meet the needs of organizations. Nowadays most people's lives revolve around their work, thus influencing greatly on their well-being. Employee well-being at work and general well-being are distinct concepts, as work conditions differ greatly from ordinary living situations (Page & Vella-Brodrick, 2009). Causing a need to study the well-being of employees separately and with more focus. Wellbeing has become a concept that is understood by everyone but defined by no one (Lyubomirs, 2001).

While further looking into the definition of well-being, the lack of consensus among scholars regarding two major philosophical perspectives. First being Hedonism, which defines well-being as subjective experience of happiness (Diener& Ryan, 2011) and the second, eudaimonism which defines wellbeing as the result of self-actualization, personal achievement, or self-positioning (Ryff& Singer, 2008)

This lack of consensus is why this research follows Zheng's (2020) conceptualization as it combines the hedonic and eudaimonic approaches This conceptualization divides well-being into three dimensions: life well-being, job well-being, and psychological well-being.

If further looked into the research done of well-being and HRM practices we can observe that most of them according to exchange norms are based on economical exchange that are financial benefits and employee's reciprocity to it. But in the context of higher education institutions this might not fully apply as in educational settings community is more important than cost benefit. Therefore, the research tries to understand

the interplay of HRM and well-being in the context of practices that are solely focused on improving employee well-being through nonfinancial incentives.

HRM policies and practices can impact employees' job-related well-being, including work conditions, job security, engagement, and training opportunities (Warr, 2002). Research till date has shown two mainstream views to this perspective . One being “mutual gains” and another “conflicting outcomes” perspective. The mutual gain perspective says that both employer and employee can benefit from HRM policies focused on positive job wellbeing like commitment oriented HRM reforms (Edgar, 2015). Creating a win-win situation for everyone.

Contradicting this, conflicting outcomes perspective points out the disparity between the interests of employer and employee. And the possible negative role HRM practices can play on employee job well-being (Edgar et al., 2015; Jensen& Van De Voorde, 2016). Researchers argue that employers’ efforts to increase commitment-oriented wellbeing will not benefit employees (Franco-Santos and Doherty, 2017). But rather there will be a focus on organization performance which increases job demand and may lead to stress, anxiety and job dissatisfaction decreasing well-being of employees (Peccei et al., 2013).

Both of these perspectives are extremes of its kind which can be far from reality. The most realistic situation in the work environment generally had overlapping interest between employer and employee (Guest, 2017). Therefore, hybrid HRM practices are recommended (Xia, J., Zhang, M. M., Zhu, J. C., Fan, D., & Samaratunge, R., 2020)

Life wellbeing covers aspects like work life balance, emotional health, social environment and happiness, personal growth and environmental mastery (Zheng, 2015).

Research on life well-being states positive outcomes like life satisfaction, self-esteem, emotional satisfaction and job satisfaction (Chordiya et al., 2018) are more likely to be seen in individuals who have a sense of determination, belonging and meaning in their social life.

Employee wellbeing is found to have three major aspects: life, work and psychological needs equally in life and work. Scholars of wellbeing highlight that Life well-being consists not only of views and sentiments about employee work happiness. It also entails the life experience and satisfaction level in their personal and professional life.

The American Psychological Association states that a workplace to be considered healthy needs to allow its employees to participate in decision making, offering job autonomy and provide growth and advancement opportunities (Quick et al., 2007).

Research shows that employers can increase their employee's psychological wellbeing if they provide greater autonomy, opportunities for advancement and participation (Hameed, 2022). Scholars like Jeurissen and Nyklicek (2001) anticipated that autonomy as one of the major factors influencing well being of employees.

In line with previous research, Hameed, 2022 proposed that increasing employee communication fosters a good work environment, resulting in improved psychological well-being for employees. A positive corporate climate, which includes promoting involvement and fostering an open and communicative atmosphere, leads to greater mental health for employees.

Employees with high psychological well-being generally turn out to be good decision makers, and display better social behaviors, and high in-role performance (Wright & Cropanzano, 2004). The above justifications argue that employees' psychological well-being is critical to company performance and personal progress of individual employees.

Research has indicated that a high percentage of well-being among employees and positive support from the organization can significantly reduce the likelihood of burnout allowing for increased productivity (Özdevecioğlu, 2013). Additionally, a happy worker who perceives support from their company is more likely to remain with it and is much less likely to leave which lowers turnover rates.

1.2. Human resource management

While taking a look at the historical perspective of HRM functions it can be seen that it started around the 1920's. its main role at the time being nothing more than filing, dealing with staff and record keeping for the organization (Dossova 2013). But, in the last few years the Human resource department has developed into a strategic partner that collaborates with the marketing, finance, and accounting departments by exchanging opinions, thoughts, and resources. (Poór, 2020)

Human resource department is important while studying any organization. Human resource management is defined as a unified management approach that aims to increase employees' dedication to and participation in the organization's purposes and objectives (Guest, 2001).

The need to focus on the human resources of an organization has been increasing as the old methods of financial incentives are not enough to retain the remaining workforce. More research nowadays is showing the benefit of a satisfied workforce. Additionally, in the hyper focused and commercial centered business environment of the 21st century a strong workforce is the only competitive advantage for a company that is tough to imitate. To obtain this advantage, proper and well developed HRM practices are the basic requirement (Deloitte,2021). It is also essential to keep talented employees within the organization through efficient HRM practices. The extent to which companies grow, heavily depends on how well it is utilizing its human assets.

Effective human resources management procedures are anticipated to assist individuals in doing what is inherently right and reaching their full potential at work, indicating an overall state of well-being (Guest, 2011).

According to Agarwal.P. (2021), the relationship between HRM practices and well-being is unresolved Several studies have found a positive relationship between HRM and wellbeing (e.g., Fan, 2014; Huang, 2016), while others have found that the effects of HRM on well-being are depending on the form of the HRM system (Kooij et al., 2013;

Korff et al., 2017). The connection between HRM and wellbeing is further complicated by conflicting theoretical views (Okay-Somerville and Scholarios, 2019).

Human resource management practices address numerous psychological strains that include autonomy, competence, and relatedness which promote wellbeing and psychological growth (Ryan and Deci, 2001). HRM practices that are likely to increase overall wellbeing of employees are usually psychological capitals like self-efficacy, optimism, hope, resilience, and psychological safety (Agarwal and Farndale, 2017). According to Luthans (2010), human resource approaches increase employee well-being by using individuals' motivational and cognitive abilities. HRM policies not only improve workers' employment opportunities, but they also mitigate the effects of work demands (Demerouti 2001) as stated by Agarwal.P (2021)

1.3. Social exchange theory

One method used to learn how and which HRM strategies are effective in promoting employee well-being is to analyze HRM's effect on well-being. Which are studied through social exchange theory in this paper. Reciprocity in a relationship can be described as social exchange according to Blau (1967) and Homans (1958). Suggesting that behaviour of individuals in a relationship (corporate relationship) are dependent upon cost and benefit. The theory serves as a theoretical framework for understanding the dynamics in relationships between employees and businesses. According to social exchange theory, employees customize their behavior according to how they perceive they are being treated by the organization and in accordance with this perception they behave in a way that will be most beneficial to them (Arsawan, 2020).

Social Exchange Theory was used in this research as it is widely recognized as one of the most frequently employed frameworks in the domain of social behavior (Gong,

2021), (Al Halbusi, 2020). Moreover, it stands out as a frequently utilized theory for understanding the relationship between employees and organizations (Abdou, 2022)

Further, according to the principle of the reciprocity norm, someone who receives positive acts from an organization creates a sense of obligation through a reciprocation process (Gouldner, 1960). Cropanzano and Mitchell (2005) argue that social exchange relationships evolve when employers 'take care of employees,' resulting in beneficial outcomes. Mistreatment, on the contrary, negates an employee's responsibility to reciprocate positively and may potentially result in the worker responding negatively (Lan, 2022).

According to W.M. To (2022) a positive employee frame of mind is dependent upon how employees perceive the level of commitment the organization has towards them. Which in the context of communication can be interpreted as: the employees feeling the information that is being provided to them is useful, beneficial and correct, to boost well-being in employees

Studies show, HR practices foster healthy work-related attitudes and behaviors through the reciprocity norms (Guest, 2002). This viewpoint is supported by social exchange (Blau, 1964) and signaling theories (Bowen and Ostroff, 2004), which assert that HR policies impact employees by either supporting them or serving as 'signals' of the company's intentions toward them. The main notion here is that individual workers perceive human resource procedures as an individual commitment to them, an investment in them, and an appreciation for their contribution, which they reciprocate with a favorable attitude toward the organization and positive behavior.

1.4. Social identity theory

Finally, social identity theory by Tajfel and Turner, (1986) is used in this paper. Which theorizes that a positive self-concept of an individual can be associated with their

identification with a particular group. Research has shown that there is a noteworthy positive association of self-esteem with social identification (Phinney et al., 1997). The relationship between HRM and well-being can be explained using this. Example, employees feel delighted to be associated with a recognized organization because it promotes their sense of dignity (Smidts et al., 2001). Individuals who have a feeling of meaning, purposefulness, and affiliation with a certain group are more likely to have positive psychological outcomes.

An organization's fair and respectful treatment makes employees feel valued. This sensation of being appreciated leads to developing a sense of self-worth; enhancing members' self-worth is a crucial driving factor of identification, according to social identity theory.

Studies indicate that organizations are adopting tailored HRM systems to mobilize, coordinate, and incorporate in a complete and organic manner in order to structurally separate exploration and exploitation operations inside and across the corporation (Ferraris, A., 2019).

1.5. Well-being and HRM in Kazakhstan context

In addition to the literature above, the need to study and implement HRM and well-being specifically in regards to HEI is increasing. Modern HEI are societal institutions that use globality, openness, and dynamism to tackle the challenge of turning information into intellectual capital. The solution to this challenge is provided by the lecturers and researchers of the HEI's. Hence, the development of refined human resource management has to become the management's primary foundation in the educational organization (Kudaibergenov, Z., 2021)

As stated by Stangis (2017), it is clear that the human resource is a university's most valuable asset given the features of its primary functional process, which is built on the

educational, pedagogical, and scientific interaction of science and education disciplines. At the same time, the following reliance that is inherent in the development of human resources characterizes universities' primary process. The standard of personal resources and the degree to which they are integrated into the university's human resource, are the two primary determinants of the quality of the human resource.

In conclusion, the HRM literature frequently highlights the value of human capital in enhancing business performance or even creating a competitive advantage. Understanding and addressing the well-being of this human capital is crucial to turning it into a competitive advantage. For this reason, the goal of this study is to better understand what role HRM strategies play on employee well-being in Kazakhstani higher education institutions.

2.RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

2.1. Research type

The purpose of this research was to examine the role HRM practices on employee wellbeing at higher education institutions. The study's goal was to understand the personal perspective of employees at HEI regarding HRM practices like communication, social life, leadership, health facilities, recognition and development etc. Qualitative research approach was used to attain this goal.

Qualitative research method was adopted as the research aim was to use a comparative case study method to understand individual employee experience with HRM practices and what role it plays on their well-being. Employing qualitative research methods ensures an in-depth understanding of the research topic. Ensuring that the subtle and complex details of employees' experience at universities can be observed. The data was analyzed by combining grounded theory approach by Gioia (2013) and process study approach in inductively building theory from a case study called Eisenhardt Method (Eisenhardt, 2021; Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). One of the major strengths of the Eisenhardt method is that it lends to a rich data analysis (Eisenhardt, 2021).

The sample included employees of two universities. Who held both administrative positions in the university and teaching positions (some are employed at both administrative positions and teaching positions).

The research solely focuses on well-being as a non-monetary factor with main focus on Life well-being, Job well-being and psychological well-being. Monetary incentives are put in exclusion criteria as there is a wide variety of research that has already been done on it. And with changes in the social dynamic of the working population, employees are more concerned with their mental health and wellbeing over just financial incentives when looking for long term opportunities. Therefore, need to study well-being is growing

The graphical representation of the data set is done through path goal theory of leadership. The graph shows the major “aid” (positive HR practices) and “obstacles” (problems with HR) that the universities are facing in reaching their goals, which is the well-being of employees. This theory was selected mainly on the basis of its clear and easy depiction of the dataset.

SDU university and MNU university were selected as samples as both universities started around the same time in 1996 and 1994 respectively. Both universities are highly reputable and are considered some of the best universities in the country. Also, their ranking is high compared to other local universities as both universities are among the twenty-one Kazakhstani universities in the QR ranking. Additionally, both universities are privately owned therefore having a similar administration basis. The factors that set the universities apart are their location with one being in Almaty and one in Astana. Another difference is that SDU is known for having a more non bureaucratic system whereas MNU is more bureaucratic.

The data was primarily collected through interviews which were semi structured, meaning there were some main questions with flexibility to add on more questions depending on the answers and flexibility to expand on them. Allowing participants to elaborate on their ideas, experience and insights in detail. Questions of the interview were regarding the experience of the participants concerning the HRM policies of the university. Particularly non-financial in nature like: communication, university leadership and management, healthcare facilities, social events, work life balance etc. at their respective university.

All ethical guidelines were taken into account and given high importance while collecting the data. Consent of the participants was taken, the details about the research given to them and their rights explained. Participants were informed that they could leave the study any moment they feel like and that their participation is fully voluntary. All

ethical guidelines were upheld during the data collection guaranteeing proper data handling.

2.2. Respondents profile and sample size

The interviews were taken among the staff members of SDU university and MNU. The sample were teaching and administrative workers from both universities. The samples were selected on the bases of their work experience in Higher education institutions.

The study included employees from two universities in Kazakhstan that are SDU university and MNU. It was made sure that the sample had at least a year of work experience to ensure quality data collection. Further details of the interviewees are in Table 3.1.(Appendix 3), presenting their profiles.

Table 3.1 in the appendix 3 shows that overall participants that were interviewed were fifteen. With nine of them with a doctorate degree, three with a masters and the rest with a bachelor's degree as their highest education. Majority of the interviewees were from Business schools or School of economics as in some institutions other departments did not have staff that spoke English. Employees from other departments included, education and humanities, multidisciplinary education, school of liberal arts and recruitment department. The interviewed staff consisted of employees with both administrative and teaching staff with some who hold both positions. With total working experience the range goes from as high for some interviews as 28 years, to as low as 1.5 years. And finally, the staff's work exercise in their current university ranges from maximum 15 years to minimum 0.6 years.

3.ANALYSES

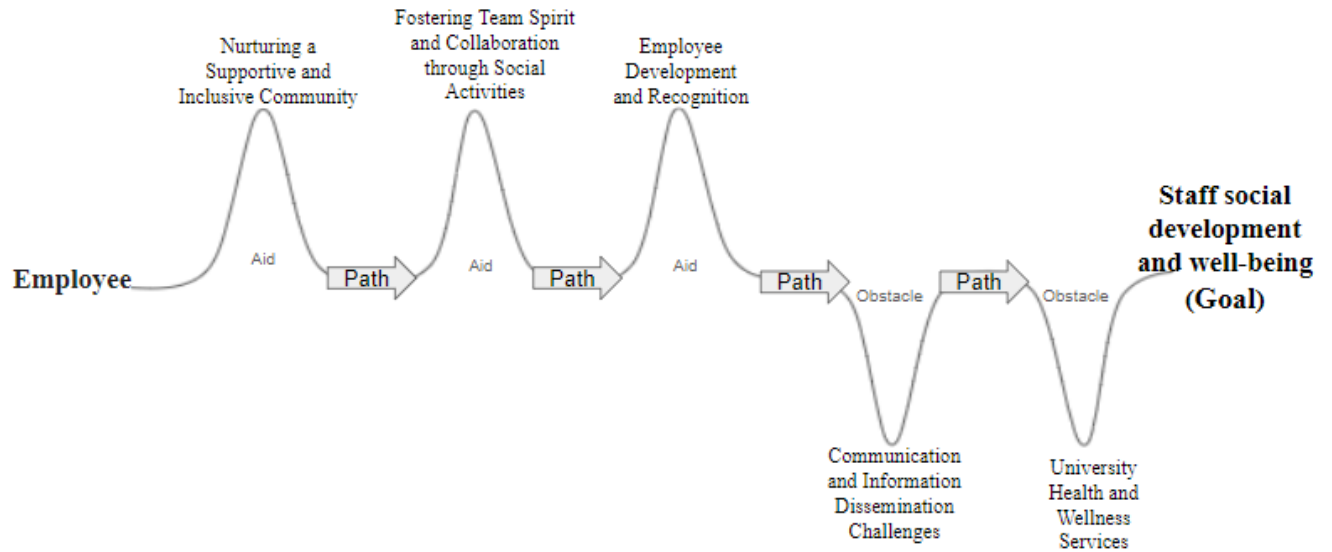
The accurate transcription of the data was achieved by manually sorting it into concepts (1st order concept), themes (2nd order theme) and finally dimensions (3rd order theme) according to the grounded theory approach by Gioia (2013). The data was not analyzed using any software like Atlas.ti or Nvivo to avoid any errors. Interviews were transcribed by listening and re-listening to each conversation, allowing concepts and themes to develop naturally. The themes, codes and dimensions were constantly reviewed to ensure their alignment with the purpose and research questions. A lot of codes and themes were identified while analyzing the data but only a few of them were kept for the final result. The selection of the themes to be kept was based on the frequency of the respondent's agreement with them. That is, the themes that were most repeated were kept in the final analyses. The analyses of final dimensions synthesized from the interview directed to the identification of HRM practices that were playing a significant role in the wellbeing of employees at higher education institutions.

Both the universities are considered to be successful according to their reputation in the country and their rankings too.

The figures represent the overall analyses of the research. It shows the path employee has to face while trying to reach the university "goal" that is development and well-being of employees. The upper curves represent "Aid" that are the HRM practices that help in achieving the set university goal. The downwards curves represent "Obstacle" that are the HRM issues that are making it harder to achieve goals of university, that is social development and wellbeing of employees.

For SDU university its "Aids" are nurturing a supportive and inclusive community, fostering team spirit and collaboration through social activities and employee development and recognition. Whereas, "Obstacle" are communication and information dissemination challenges, and university health and wellness services.

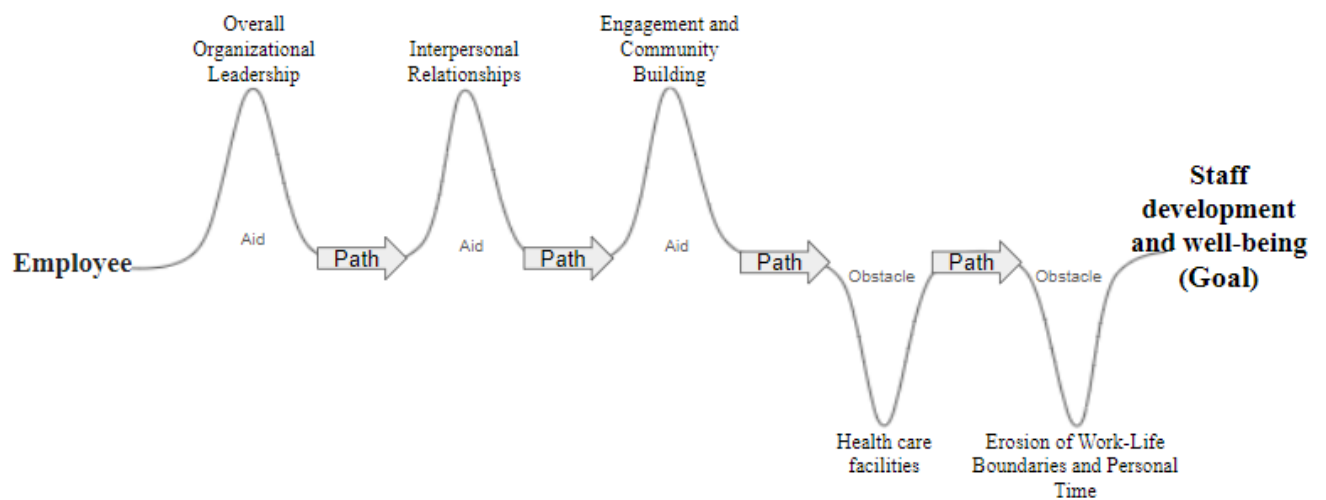
Figure 3.1- Path goal figure of SDU university



Source: created by author

For MNU its “Aids” are overall organizational leadership, interpersonal relationships, and engagement and community building. While, “Obstacle” being healthcare facilities, and erosion of work-life boundaries and personal time.

Figure 3.2- Path goal figure of MNU



Source: compiled according to the data collection by author

4. FINDINGS

4.1.SDU University

Nurturing a Supportive and Inclusive Community

Welcoming and Respectful Culture: The data analyses showed that the most noted HR practices were related to the culture and environment of the university. The university fosters an environment which is very open and respectful. Ensuring that even the newcomers and international staff feel welcomed from day one. “*The environment is very positive, very welcoming*” statements like the above mentioned prove this. Celebrating small days makes the employees feel seen and appreciated. These efforts make employees feel like a part of a community and belong.

Social Coordination and Engagement: “*Social coordinator is there for all social events and gatherings.*” A specific position is created in each department of the university who is responsible for the social events of the department showing the commitment of the university towards employee well-being. Seeing to it that all events and engagement of the employees are organized, friendly, regular and inclusive. Also, a specific budget is allocated for the co-curricular activities, validating the dedication of the university towards creating a sense of community at the university. Ensuring the satisfaction and elevation in the life well-being of employees.

Professionalism and Positive Environment: The university culture and HRM promotes professionalism in employees that contributes and creates a very friendly and positive environment in the university. The general culture of the university is very liked and comfortable as stated in the interview “*SDU university is like a comfort zone*”. Creating a smooth and supportive environment that maintains high life well-being of employees as they feel that their efforts are being reciprocated by the university.

Fostering Team Spirit and Collaboration through Social Activities

Team-Building and Extracurricular Activities: A wide range of activities are organized each year in the university. That includes mountain climbing, sports day, sports tournament, etc. endorsing physical health and collaboration of employees. At the same time giving employees to get to know other university members. Other team building activities like IQ battle, picnics, lunches, breakfasts, new year party promote a more relaxed environment to do the same as above mentioned. HR ensures a wide variety of co-curricular activities ensuring there is something for everyone.

Inclusivity in Social Events: *“Also, a lot of the events welcome employees and their families which is really nice for people who have kids.”* As noted by an employee, this shows the university's effort to include all members of the university. It ensures that all activities are inclusive to be hospitable to all employees and their families. Weekdays and weekend events are organized to consider everyone's schedule and accommodate it.

Enhancing Work Environment through Social Interaction: Frequent events promote collaboration and networking among staff members. Creating good relationships between employees and a unified academic community. Events that promote social engagement are vital for the betterment of an institution. They are highly valued by the employees as they create a supportive and engaging work culture. Statements recorded during interviews that reflect the above mentioned is *“Through different events and get-togethers and celebrations, universities unite staff.”* The efforts to build team spirit and collaboration creates a positive work environment promoting well being

Employee Development and Recognition

Development Opportunities and HR Support: Evidence shows that the university has a lot of opportunities for growth and development. The immediate managers and head are always available to guide subordinates regarding their job. Seminars and training programs are available on a regular basis on a variety of topics to cater to everyone's interest and needs. Training programs are also designed to cater to each department's individual needs. Statements like “*But opportunities are not provided by HR but you have to look for them and take initiative*” leave a gap in communication regarding said opportunities that can be improved.

Recognition and Respectful Work Environment: The research findings show that university has a respectful environment where each member's contribution is appreciated and recognized. Colleges and management together celebrate each staff member's achievements. Employees’ work is timely evaluated and recognition is given to work well done.

Work-Life Balance and Flexible Policies: The balance in employees work and life is greatly considered while distribution of work and responsibilities. Staff members are consulted while creating timetables to ensure the satisfaction and availability to university members convenience. Flexibility regarding working hours and even at time modes of availability like online or offline work can be discussed depending on the reasons for the request. This flexibility promotes staff’s job wellbeing as they feel the university cares about their availability and their personal and professional life.

Communication and Information Dissemination Challenges

Lack of Visibility and Awareness of HR Initiatives: Findings shows that there is a communication gap between HR and the rest of the employees. Statements like “*HR initiatives are not visible and there is lack of information regarding them*” show that the

employees are unaware of the programs done by the HR department. Which causes even the best initiatives by the organization to fail as the employees are not fully informed about them.

Inconsistent and Fragmented Communication Channels: Employees and management in the HEI use multiple communication channels like Gmail, WhatsApp, telegram etc. to distribute important information. The use of multiple channels like this leaves the possibility of staff members missing important notices as everyone does not always check all channels. Causing delays and the communication to be unpredictable and unreliable.

Perception and Support Discrepancy: The initiatives regarding career development are not effectively communicated. The HRM has established a learning and development department which provides initiatives like “talent pool” with the aim to help employees build their skills and rise in the rankings and positions in the university. *“Opportunities are not provided by HR but you have to look for them and take initiative on your own”*. Unfortunately phrases like the above mentioned, recorded during the interview shows that employees are uncertain and anxious about their future in the organization as they are not fully aware of career planning and development options provided by the university. They presume that they are on their own and are not receiving any value from the organization which according to the social exchange theory promotes negative feelings. Thus, causing decline in job well-being.

University Health and Wellness Services

Accessibility and Communication Issues in Health Services: Ineffective health programs and benefits provided by the HR department is something that is an issue for the university. A medical clinic on campus is provided by the HR and for international

staff there is insurance available. In regards to mental health there is a psychology department that all employees can access for six free sessions each semester and more help is provided if required. Multiple of the respondent's state that they were not satisfied with these medical facilities. Few of the respondents did not know that the psychology department can be accessed by both students and staff. Respondents stated that the existing medical facilities are bare minimum and can be improved.

Trust and Professionalism Concerns with Psychological Services: University has a psychology department where employees can go up to six sessions for free each semester. These sessions can be booked online and can be arranged according to the employee's timetable. During the data collection, statements like "*Don't trust the qualification of psychologists in university*" were recorded indicating that even though there are facilities available in the university, HRM has not fully conveyed their reliability. Due to which employees are hesitant to avail these facilities. This hesitation plays an adverse role in the well-being of employees, specifically psychological well-being as they are not confident in the credibility of the services that are being promised to them. Which can also be seen as a lack of effort and insincerity on HRM's part.

Challenges for Foreign Staff: A list of specific clinics is provided that they can avail which are paid by the university for both the staff and their family. In regards to the physical health of the employees, the majority of the international respondents were unaware that there was any form of insurance available for them and they did not know that there was a list of clinics which they could access. Causing uncertainty among the staff members. This worry decreases the well-being of employees, especially their psychological well-being. As the mental stress of the possibility of a future illness with no support of the HR department can be very degrading for both mental and physical health.

4.2. Maqsut Narikbayev University (MNU)

Overall Organizational Leadership

Empowerment and Autonomy: The university provides an independent and autonomous work culture promoting their trust in the leadership as they feel responsible and respected themselves. Employees are given considerable freedom to organize and execute their work till then adhere to the timetable they provide at the beginning of the semester. The management's lack of micromanaging the employees had greatly contributed to their well-being, especially job well being. Also, the lack of pressure from management promotes high psychological well-being too.

Leadership and Accessibility: "MNU has some very rare deans in Kazakhstan who is a top scholar as well" statements like these were recorded during the interview of some professors with a wide range of work experience reflecting on how well the university is doing in terms of its leadership. For a lot of employees, the fact that the leadership of the university is not just specialized in one aspect like administration or teaching but are well versed in admin, teaching and research part of their job, is incredible.

Organizational Efficiency and Constraints: Decisions regarding academic interest are made swiftly will vary little delay embedding the betterment of the quality of education in the university. HRM initiatives are modern and constantly being informed about creating a positive work environment and increasing job well-being.

Interpersonal Relationships

Supportive and Collaborative Work Environment: Work environment at the university fosters a strong sense of community. University aims to be recognized as a research university in a few years, for that collaboration on research projects are promoted. *"Research and analytical center is called "Think and do tank", employees can do joint*

researches there”, said by an interviewee shows HR departments efforts to encourage collaborative work among employees. This promotes employees’ sense of community. Always having someone to consult on any matter being leadership and employees both caters to the psychological needs of the employees too.

Availability and Assistance: Employees trust in the availability of help whenever they need shows the tremendously positive university culture. University has active positions like teaching assistants that can be availed anytime for help. “*Right balance of guidance and freedom*” said by an employee shows the correct balance of constant help on the side of university for their employees and its appreciation by the staff.

Trust and Guidance: “*All my colleague fully trusts my work*” shows the level of trust employees and management have in each other. Showing positive relationships among the staff members. Also, guidance can be availed from advisers, teaching assistants and even management. What makes it worth mentioning is the swiftness and precision of the help provided. The easy shown in statements like “*I know I can always call for assistance and its smoothly provided to me*” gives an idea of how comfortable staff is in asking for help and how easily it is provided. This creates a very trusting culture and helping culture in university. This fashions positive job, life and psychological well-being, as employees take the HR initiatives are reciprocating efforts from university for their efforts, according to social exchange theory.

Engagement and Community Building

Wellness Initiatives: Numerous initiatives are being introduced regularly to promote wellness in employees. Things like nap room are on campus to make sure staff can take breaks and recharge whenever then want. Free coffee is also provided for staff to help them recharge. Also, events like marathon and a massage therapy session were

provided by university to help employees energize and relax. *“Staff really enjoyed this massage service”* these activities are thoroughly enjoyed by the staff members promoting life wellbeing.

Social and Recreational Activities: Activities like yoga classes, training room etc. are constantly being provided to promote wellbeing of employees. Feminine hygiene products are also available in bathrooms for convenience. The university prioritizes holistic wellbeing approaches by incorporating social and wellness programs. Recreational activities cater to employees need for blowing of steam. *“Also, marathon is organized at city level to fund raise for students who need money for special reasons like medical conditions etc.”* the events not only help staff but are used for helping in a social cause too, further increasing satisfaction and trust in the university.

Sense of Community and Belonging: Multiple social events create a community and belonging in the university. Events like new year party, men’s day, women’s day, family friendly events, individual achievement celebrations etc. are celebrated. These regular little events are highly appreciated by employees. MNU excels in fostering a lively and engaging community through a rich collection of recreational and social events. Regular formal and informal social gathering create occasions for employees to connect with each other. These activities not only strengthen social bonds but also create a community that feels like home too. Through the events MNU creates a diverse sense of belonging and overall campus experience. This endorses a welcoming and dynamic work place and increase well-being of employees especially life well-being.

Health care facilities

Need for Institutional Healthcare Reform: The results show that there is a lack of satisfactory health care facilities. *“To be honest I would prefer to have medical*

insurance over free coffee” statements like this show that the lack of medical services is not just a problem itself but it is also decreasing the satisfaction of other HR initiative in the university.

Healthcare Disparity: The other major issue is the provided basic health care facilities provided to employees that is the clinic on campus is not know or availed by many. Showing a lack of correct information about health care facilities provided. There is a disparity between the information regarding the facilities provided for staff and students. There is a misconception that only students can avail the medical clinic and psychology department on campus. Also, there is uncertainty concerning insurance coverage for medical purposes. Employee would like a better medical coverage then what is being provided now. This is causing a great mental pressure on employees as the uncertainty in case of a medical emergency can be stressful, decreasing psychological well-being.

Recognition of Employee Wellbeing Importance: Despite the lack of a medical insurance the university recognizes the importance of having healthcare facilities that are clinic and psychology department that can be availed by staff on campus.

Erosion of Work-Life Boundaries and Personal Time

Expectation of Availability Beyond Work Hours: The expectation to be available online after working hours is becoming a stress factor for employees. This not only extends the work day and blares the boundary between personal and work life, it greatly disrupts work - life balance. Causing a decline in life well-being.

Overwhelming Workload and Staff Disproportion: Concerns for overwhelming work load is being shown among the staff members. *“The work is too overwhelming for*

employees” staff has shown concern regarding the work load multiple times through the interviews.

Impact on Work-Life Balance: The extended work day due to expectation of being available online has created a disturbance to healthy work-life balance. Employee are unable to spend any quality time with family and friends causing burnout. And intern making employees feel not valued and decreasing job and psychological well-being.

5.DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The study portrays findings on the role that HRM practices play on the wellbeing of employees within higher education institutions which is a dynamic research area, examined through qualitative research method. The research explores this within two Kazakhstani universities using ground theory and process study approach to understand distinct insights and their real-life implication in situations.

The *first research question* focuses on finding the differences in the two universities HR practices. The findings show that differences in the practices of the university that are contributing to the success of the higher education institution. And some issues that if address can improve the existing situation of the universities. The HRM practices are deeply rooted in the university culture and operational framework of each university. The HR practices at SDU university are particularly focused on nurturing an inclusive and supportive environment. The welcoming and respectful culture paired with positive and professional environment makes employee feel valued and their efforts are being reciprocated by the university. Increasing well-being especially job and psychological well-being. Specific positions at the university like social coordinator and a specific budget for social events emphasize university's commitment to well-being. Creating a sense of community which according to social identity theory increase psychological well-being of employees. On the other hand, MNU emphasizes on empowering its employee and giving them autonomy over their work. Work culture where employees are given significant freedom is promoted by the university, promoting trust and reduction of stress caused by micromanagement by upper management. MNU's leadership is known for their competence is not just administrative proficiency but teaching and research field too. This enhances staffs trust and respect in the decisions made by such leadership promoting job and psychological wellbeing.

Results in relations to the *second research question* show that there is a weighty impact of HRM on wellbeing. At SDU, the positive environment cultivated through

professionalism and respect significantly increases employees' job well-being. The constant social and team building events enhance life well-being. The university's efforts to balance work and life through flexible policies and considerate timetable scheduling contribute to a high level of job and psychological well-being. However, there are challenges, particularly in communication, and healthcare benefits causing decline in well-being especially psychological and social wellbeing. Results from MNU show the leadership and social relationships are key reasons of employee well-being. The HRM programs like massage therapy sessions and nap rooms are highly valued by the staff. Social and leisure activities that cater to varied interests help in building a strong sense of community and belonging which according to social identity theory positively influences psychological and life well-being. However, the absence healthcare facilities according to the needs of the employees and the work-life boundaries being constantly violated can cause significant challenges psychological and job well-being of employee.

Conclusively, indicating that effective HRM practices play a positive role in increasing well-being of employee. Whereas lack of well-being initiatives cause decline in well-being.

The *third research question* is concerned with identifying the specific HRM practices which were most beneficial to well-being of employees. Both universities have some similar and some differing prominent HRM practices that enhance employee well-being. Practices that most respondents agreed as the best practices were mainly the one which foster collaboration and community stood out. Some other that were worth noting were professional development, and flexibility in work arrangement at SDU university. At MNU autonomy and freedom were considered beneficial. The actability of leadership with their trust in their staff is viewed as most positive well-being practices.

5.1.Challenges and Areas for Improvement

Regardless of the positive aspects of HR practices at both universities, they face some issues that need attention. With SDU there is a gap in communication causing issues. The lack and unawareness of HRM practices case even the best initiatives to not reach their potential.

Despite the strengths in HRM practices at both institutions, several challenges need to be addressed to fully realize their potential in promoting employee well-being. At SDU, the communication gap between HR and employees is a significant issue. The lack of visibility and awareness of HR initiatives can undermine even the best-intentioned programs. Similarly, the use of multiple communication channels leading to missed information, causing uncertainty among employees decreasing their job and life well-being. Additionally poor health facilities cause worry and mental stress among the staff, causing decline in psychological well-being. Because the mental load of figuring out how and where to go in case of medical emergencies can be hectic.

At MNU, the main challenge is the health care facilities and work life balance. There is a lack of health facilities and insurances provided by the university also proper information regarding the existing facilities is not available either. Creating uncertainty among employees causing declining psychological well-being. Furthermore, the expectation to be available online outside work hours and the overwhelming workload that comes with increasing number of students with no additional staff, contribute to a decline in life and psychological well-being too.

6. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

There are some limitations in our current research. Firstly, only a few HRM practices were taken into account during this study like: social environment, health facilities, communication, leadership etc. More diverse range of HR practices can be studied in further research. Secondly, only a qualitative method was used to understand the role of HRM on the well-being of employees. Further research by combining data collection from qualitative and quantitative research can be done to achieve a broader understanding of the role of HRM practices on employee well-being. Thirdly, as the study was done in only a few universities its generalizability is limited, as different HEI have varying culture, HR practices, and politics. Multiple universities or cities or even countries can be studied to understand a more holistic role of HRM and well-being. And finally, the interviews were conducted in English only leaving the perspective and work culture of employees whose primary language is Kazakh and Russian only, out of the research context. Which future researchers can include in their study.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A- Participant Consent Form

Title of Research Study: "Exploring the Role of HRM Practices on Employee Well-Being "

Principal Investigator: Qaswa binte Firdous Wani

Institution: SDU University

Introduction:

You are invited to participate in a research study with the aims to explore the Role of HRM Practices on Employee Well-Being. Before participating in the interview, it is important for you to understand the details of the study. This form contains information regarding your rights and study details . If you have any questions, please feel free to ask before agreeing to participate.

Purpose of the Study:

This study aims to deepen and explore the role of human resource practices on promoting wellbeing of employee, in higher education institutions of Kazakhstan. Qualitative method was implemented in this research to uncover the meticulous dynamic and relationship between wellbeing ad HRM. the aim is to uncover the influence of these practices and their contribution to supportive work environment and well-being of staff members. The study, with the help of extensive analyses aims to generate results that can be helpful and used in creating informed HRM practices and policies that are specifically made to improve well-being of employees within academic and administrative contexts.

Contact Information:

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study, you may contact the principal investigator, Qaswa binte Firdous Wani, at q.wani@sdu.edu.kz or +77754280443.

Consent:

By agreeing to participate in this study, you acknowledge that you have read and understood the information provided in this consent form. You have had the opportunity to ask questions, and all your concerns have been addressed satisfactorily. You voluntarily agree to participate in the study and provide your consent for the research team to proceed with the interview.

Please sign below to indicate your consent to participate:

Participant's Name: _____

Date: _____

Researcher's Name Qaswa binte Firdous Wani

Date: _____

Thank you for considering participation in this research study. Your insights and experiences as a female entrepreneur are valuable and will contribute to our understanding of the motivations behind women's entrepreneurial journeys.

Appendix B- Interview Questions

1. Can you please introduce yourself.
 - a. Position
 - b. How long have you worked in your current university
 - c. How many and which places you have worked at before your current university
2. How would you describe the overall work environment and culture at the university?
3. Can you share any specific well-being initiatives or programs offered by the university that you find particularly beneficial?
4. How does the university foster an inclusive and diverse work environment? Are there specific initiatives aimed at supporting the well-being of employees from different backgrounds?
5. What measures does the university have in place to ensure the health and safety of its employees, both mental and physical?
6. In your opinion, how does the university foster a sense of community and collaboration among its staff?
7. Are there any well-being challenges or areas that need improvement that you think the university should address? (What you dislike about university- like gender, ethnicity, connection, status)
8. How do you view the degree of communication between university employees and management?
9. How do you think your current university is different from other places you have worked previously, in the perspective of we

Appendix C- Tables

Table 3.1. Personal background of interview respondents

No.	ID	Educatio n level	Department	Administrat ion/ Teaching	Total work experience	Years at current university
1	A1	Bachelors	Recruitment	Admin	4 years	2 years
2	B1	Doctorate	Education and humanities	Teaching	10 years	1.6 years
3	C1	Doctorate	Business School	Teaching + Admin	23 years	15 years
4	D1	Bachelors	Business School	Teaching	2 years	2 years
5	E1	Doctorate	Business School	Teaching	17 years	5 Years
6	F1	Masters	Business School	Teaching + Admin	14 years	13 Years
7	G1	Masters	Multidisciplinary Education	Teaching + Admin	17 years	2 years
8	H1	Doctorate	Business School	Teaching	20 years	2 years
9	I1	Doctorate	School of economics	Teaching	7 years	1 year
10	J1	Doctorate	School of economics	Teaching	15 years	9 years
11	K1	Bachelors	School of liberal arts/ School of economics	Teaching + Admin	3 Years	2 years
12	L1	Masters	School of economics	Teaching	1.5 years	2 years

13	M1	Doctorate	School of economics	Teaching	15 years	2 years
14	N1	Doctorate	School of economics	Teaching + Admin	20 years	8 years
15	O1	Doctorate	School of economics	Teaching	28 years	0.6 years

Source: created by author

Table 3.2. Data Structure SDU university

	3rd Order: Dimensions	2st Order: Themes	1st Order: Concept
1	Communication and Information Dissemination Challenges	Lack of Visibility and Awareness of HR Initiatives	Visibility of HR Initiatives
			Communication Channels
		Inconsistent and Fragmented Communication Channels	HR and Department Communication
			Translation Issues
		Perception and Support Discrepancy	Vertical Communication
			Direct Communication with Upper Management
			Survey Feedback

			Historical Information Accessibility
2	University Health and Wellness Services	Accessibility and Communication Issues in Health Services	Trust Issues with Psychology Department
			Accessibility of Medical Services
		Trust and Professionalism Concerns with Psychological Services	Accessibility of Medical Services
			Accessibility of Medical Services
		Challenges for Foreign Staff	Compulsory Health Checkups
			Sports and Physical Health Activities
			Mental Health Initiatives
			Medical Insurance Concerns
			Anonymity and Support for Leave
3	Nurturing a Supportive and Inclusive Community	Welcoming and Respectful Culture	Respectful and Helpful Environment

			Inclusive Atmosphere for Foreigners
		Social Coordination and Engagement	Positive and Welcoming Culture
			Celebration of Events and Appreciation
		Professionalism and Positive Environment	Corporate Culture and Family-like Atmosphere
			Investment in Social Coordination
			Budget for Social and Bonding Activities
			Professionalism and Supportive Environment
			Positive Work Environment
4	Fostering Team Spirit and Collaboration through Social Activities	Team-Building and Extracurricular Activities	Engagement in Extracurricular Activities
			Celebration of Special Occasions
		Inclusivity in Social Events	Celebration of Special Occasions
			Team Building Activities

		Enhancing Work Environment through Social Interaction	Inclusive Social Events
			Voluntary Participation in Activities
			Specialized and Recreational Events
			Family-Inclusive Events
			Budget Allocation for Social Activities
5	Employee Development and Recognition	Development Opportunities and HR Support	Opportunities for Growth
			Availability and Usefulness of Training Programs
		Employee Recognition and Respectful Work Environment	Support from Colleagues and Department Heads
			Valued Contributions and Appreciation
		Work-Life Balance and Flexible Policies	Flexible Work Environment
			Merit-Based Opportunities
			Promotion of Work-Life Balance

			Recognition Programs for New Teachers
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Source: created by author

Table 3.3. Data Structure MNU

	3rd Order: Dimensions	2st Order: Themes	1st Order: Concept
1	Overall Organizational Leadership	Empowerment and Autonomy	Likeable Top Managers
			Sense of Independence
		Leadership and Accessibility	Freedom in Teaching Methods
			Autonomy in Work Organization
		Organizational Efficiency and Constraints	Well-Being Oriented HRM Practices
			Non-Interference Policy
			Open Management
			Connected Leadership
			Fair Mentorship and Evaluation
			Fair Mentorship and Evaluation

2	Interpersonal Relationships	Supportive and Collaborative Work Environment	Trust in Work
			Supportive Environment
		Availability and Assistance	Accessible Assistance
			Ease of Consultation
		Trust and Guidance	Balanced Guidance and Freedom
			Caring and Pleasant Environment
3	Engagement and Community Building	Wellness Initiatives	Wellness Facilities
			Massage Services
		Social and Recreational Activities	Social and Team-Building Events
			Dedicated Social Spaces
		Sense of Community and Belonging	Family-Friendly Environment
			Free Amenities
			Fitness and Recreation
4	Health care facilities	Need for Institutional Healthcare Reform	Campus Medical Center
			Health insurance
		Healthcare Disparity	Psychology Department

			Mental Health Support
		Recognition of Employee Wellbeing Importance	Training for Mental Health
			Emergency Medical Support
5	Erosion of Work-Life Boundaries and Personal Time	Expectation of Availability Beyond Work Hours	Expectation of Availability
			Endless Work Hours
		Overwhelming Workload and Staff Disproportion	Workload Disproportion
			Fair Work Distribution
		Impact on Work-Life Balance	Resource Allocation
			Departmental Workload Variations
			Burden of Online Availability
			Work-Life Balance Concerns

Source: created by author