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# THE MEDIATING ROLE OF JOB ENGAGEMENT IN THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FLEXIBLE WORK ARRANGEMENTS AND EMPLOYEE EMPOWERMENT

## ABSTRACT

Higher education institutions play a critical role in economic growth by moulding the human capital necessary for driving innovation, change, and transformation. Despite their critical role in contributing to the economy, these institutions are experiencing high labour turnover, which subsequently impacts efficiency and productivity. Thus, the global demand for highly skilled professional employees has significantly contributed to the skills flight from Zimbabwe's institutions of higher learning to other economies. This study evaluated the mediating role of job engagement in the relationship between flexible work arrangements and employee empowerment within the Zimbabwean Higher Education sector.

A quantitative research design was employed to collect data from a convenience sample of 200 respondents in this sector. In addition to being quantitative, the researchers used an explanatory case study and a cross-sectional research design for this investigation. The data were analysed using the Pearson Product-Moment Correlation coefficient via the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The findings reveal robust inter-relationships amongst the variables, emphasising their substantial contributions to explaining the variances in the measured constructs. The findings of this study show a significant relationship between flexible work arrangements, job engagement, and employee empowerment.

The findings suggest that university administrators should develop comprehensive, flexible work strategies to address the challenges faced by their personnel. Furthermore, they should enhance the working conditions of their staff as a means of improving the overall quality of higher education (HE). This study also offers insights for government policies concerning the labour requirements of the higher education sector.

**Keywords:** flexible work arrangements, job engagement, employee empowerment, higher education sector, efficiency, productivity, academics, labour

**JEL Classification:** J22, J28, I23, M52, M54

## INTRODUCTION

Tertiary institutions, including universities, polytechnic colleges, and teachers' training colleges, are the main drivers of economic growth, responsible for developing a professional human resource. Zimbabwean tertiary institutions are, however, under the threat of a brain drain of critical staff. Academics in different institutions contribute to teaching and research with the sole purpose of furthering knowledge and promoting creativity and innovation (Marczewska et al., 2024). However, the morale in the industry has been low, and hence, tertiary institutions are run on skeleton staff. Despite their critical role in contributing to the economy, these institutions are experiencing high labour turnover, which subsequently impacts efficiency and productivity. The efficiency of institutions is crucial for development, as it necessitates research and global cooperation and serves as the foundation for the country's human capital development (Yılmaz, 2025).

In recent times, the higher education sector is confronted with the immense institutional change and reforms taking place at world universities, teacher colleges, and polytechnics due to globalisation and digitalisation (Noja et al., 2024). Therefore, to attract students and well-trained workers, institutions of learning must be competitive and responsive. With shifting workplace trends, an increasing number of workers are seeking the work-life equilibrium offered by flexible working arrangements (FWAs) in addition to higher pay. Especially during and after the COVID-19 pandemic era, work flexibility has been prioritised in the context of human resource management studies (Yilmaz, 2025) as a performance development mechanism.

Nowadays, technology has revolutionized the world of work. According to Prasad and Mishra (2021), flexible working arrangements are being achieved through new technology advancements than ever before. There is ample evidence that workers are more satisfied and achieve greater levels of engagement under FWAs, thus leading to many employers adopting the trend. Hence, this research aims to investigate the mediating role of job engagement in the relationship between flexible work arrangements and employee empowerment in the Zimbabwean higher education sector.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Theoretical Background of the Resource-Based View Theory

Resource-Based View (RBV) is a management theory that seeks to investigate the strategic resources that can be used by an organisation in search of a competitive advantage over the long run (Adama et al., 2024). The theory of RBV assumes that the higher education industry ought to possess internal resources that possess significant value, are rare, not easy to replicate, and well-structured to achieve a competitive advantage. RBV urges managerial attention on the internal assets of the firm, and therefore focuses on capabilities and competencies that are likely to yield greater competitive advantage. The proponents of this school argue that firms should find competitive advantages within the company and not in the external environment (Buranasiri et al., 2024).

The proponents of the Resource-Based View (RBV) argue that it is simpler to utilise external opportunity through altering the resources you possess than learning new skills for every opportunity (Nayak et al., 2023). In the RBV model, resources play a crucial role in enabling organisations to perform better at managing their organisation. Intangible and tangible resources are the major resources in the RBV model. Physical resources include equipment, land, buildings, and machinery (Silvestri et al., 2023). Tangible resources are easy to acquire, so they aren't as valuable in the long term since competitors can easily get the same assets. Intangible assets, however, are items a company may own but without physical presence. Intangible assets include elements such as trademarks, intellectual property, and reputation (Furseth, 2022). Most scholars believe that the most valued resource is human capital or workers. The provision of flexible work arrangements can justify the aforementioned claim. Understanding that employees are a resource that can provide a company with a competitive edge in the long run says it all regarding how much individuals matter towards enhancing organisational performance through the utilisation of such arrangements. From the resource-based view, not all resources can generate a competitive advantage. To this end, they should be of significant value, irreplaceable, and not easy to replicate (Malhotra et al., 2024).

### Flexible work arrangements and employee empowerment

Scholars (Haines et al., 2024) state that providing employees with more autonomy and flexible working arrangements is the foundation for transforming the way an organisation operates, creating satisfied employees, and ultimately making the organisation more productive. Flexible working arrangements encompass policies that allow employees to have more control over where, when, and how they work (Thaufayl et al., 2024). There is no question, however, that flexible work arrangements have numerous advantages. First, flexible arrangements can assist schools in recruiting and retaining the most talented employees by giving them more convenience in balancing work and life. This advantage is particularly significant in academia, where faculty members usually have to juggle teaching, research, and administrative duties. In addition, providing more autonomy to workers to control their working schedules can increase productivity since they can determine the ideal time to work when they are most efficient (Alshemmari, 2023). Thus, providing workers with autonomy to manage time effectively can result in quality output in a field like higher learning, where innovation and research are key.

Kavai (2023) aver that there is a relationship between employee empowerment and flexible work arrangements. Empowering employees in Zimbabwean higher education can make them happier, more committed, and involved at work. Individuals are more enthusiastic about an organization's success if they feel that they can make their ideas count and make decisions. Thus, empowered employees are capable of generating ideas to create innovative and novel solutions for problems that the organisation may encounter. Based on the above discussion, the following is hypothesised:

*H1: Flexible work arrangements are positively associated with employee empowerment.*

### **Flexible Work Arrangements (FWAs) and Job Engagement (JE)**

The research by Weideman and Hofmeyr (2020) analysed how flexible working arrangements (FWAs) affected job engagement. Their results showed a correlation between FWAs and job engagement. The concept of FWAs is still quite new, but it has gotten a lot of attention. Flexible work arrangements (FWAs) enable workers to choose different work hours or locations that help them combine their work and personal lives better. The arrangements might include working from home, having flexible hours, sharing a job, or working fewer hours each week. Studies show that flexible work arrangements are good for both employees and businesses. In Zimbabwe's higher and tertiary education sector, where faculty members have to deal with a lot of stress and heavy workloads (Chatiza et al., 2021), FWAs can help improve engagement at work and overall health. Willett et al. (2024) analysed flexible work arrangements and found that leaders' communicative support for FWAs makes employees more engaged and healthy. The study revealed that stronger management support for FWAs leads to increased job engagement.

Muniz et al. (2024) say that preferred work arrangements have a big effect on how engaged employees are. Their research showed that those who worked from home three to four days a week were the most engaged. The study also revealed that flexible work arrangements make employees more engaged since teams perform better and get more work done when they have the freedom and responsibility to do so. Because of this freedom, teams are encouraged to work faster and produce more. Also, since staff don't have to travel much or at all, they have more time to work and meet deadlines. Shepard and McNaughtan (2024) aver that another big benefit of flexible working is that it lets individuals work when they are most productive, which makes them more efficient. When employers provide flexible work arrangements (FWAs) together with opportunities for career growth, employees are satisfied and more engaged at work, which makes them less inclined to look for jobs elsewhere (Dube & Takawira, 2023). Based on the above discussion, the following is hypothesised:

*H2: Flexible work arrangements are positively associated with Job Engagement.*

### **Job engagement and Employee empowerment**

Nawaz et al. (2024) explored the link between transformational leadership and work engagement. They concluded that employee empowerment was the mediator, whereas work experience and gender were the moderators. The study also revealed a relationship between employee empowerment and job engagement (Arefin et al., 2019). Therefore, it must be noted that preference for work among employees is determined by organisational culture drivers such as providing the employees with more autonomy, work-life balance, and incentive schemes. Both private and public institutions seek to determine what motivates workers to execute their work activities to their maximum potential. Dong et al. (2024) note that the connection between job engagement and employee empowerment is a major predictor of the performance of an organization and employees' well-being.

Job engagement, according to Chada et al. (2022), is when employees are physically, emotionally, and mentally present at work. Hosseini (2024) compared the effects of workplace job engagement by psychological empowerment and burnout. They found that committed employees tend to exert extra effort in the job, leading to better student achievement and organizational success. However, employers need to know that too much workload, insufficiency of resources, and bureaucratic problems can demotivate staff to become less involved in the job. Sanhokwe et al. (2023) found that workers are more engaged, happier, and motivated when they can gain more control over where and when they work through flexible working arrangements (FWAs). This is especially the case within the schools, where employee burnout has become a common problem. Based on the reviewed literature, the following hypothesis is proffered:

*H3: Job engagement is positively associated with Employee Empowerment.*

### **Job Engagement mediates the relationship between Flexible Work Arrangements and Employee Empowerment**

Setiyawami et al. (2024) research explored the correlation between employee empowerment and job engagement and found flexible work arrangements and career growth to be the driving factors. The research set out to establish that employee empowerment and job engagement have a significant relationship. Employees with empowerment and the opportunity to give creative ideas and also involve themselves in decision-making become more committed to the vision and mission of the company (Indrāvati, 2024). Organisations that implement policies and practices supporting work flexibility and career development are likely to increase employee engagement and performance to a large extent. Hence, organisational actions should emphasize bringing about a work setting for employee flexibility and career development.

These can be attained through policies that facilitate remote working, flexible hours, and skills training support (Eshun & Segbenya, 2024).

Akkas (2023) argues that flexible work arrangements can positively affect job engagement and employee empowerment within higher and tertiary educational institutions. Furthermore, when employees have control over when and where they work, they are more inclined to feel empowered to make autonomous decisions and take ownership of their tasks. This sense of empowerment can also maximize job engagement by instilling a sense of purpose, mastery, and autonomy in employees (Kaushik & Tiwari, 2023). By giving room for flexibility in the work of employees on their tasks, higher education institutions can develop a situation that maximizes both job engagement and empowerment to maximize change for the better. Firdaus and Anindita (2024) highlight that many employees find it challenging to manage their responsibilities effectively, leading to an imbalance between their work and personal lives, which ultimately diminishes productivity. Therefore, it is crucial for organisations to devise diverse practices that assist employees in attaining balance, thereby increasing overall productivity and performance. Employees who feel psychologically empowered at work also tend to exhibit high levels of job satisfaction, contributing to the success of higher education institutions. Based on the above discussion, the following is hypothesised:

*H4: Job engagement mediates the relationship between flexible work arrangements and employee empowerment.*

## AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The aim of this study was to analyse the mediating role of job engagement in the relationship between flexible work arrangements and employee empowerment in the Zimbabwean higher education sector. This study was guided by the following specific objectives:

1. To analyse the relationship between flexible work arrangements and job engagement.
2. To explore the relationship between flexible work arrangements and employee empowerment.
3. To evaluate the relationship between job engagement and employee empowerment.
4. To determine the mediating role of job engagement in the relationship between flexible work arrangements and employee empowerment.

## METHODS

A quantitative explanatory research design was adopted in this study. According to Das (2022), quantitative research is the process of gathering and analysing numerical data. By converting facts into numbers, quantitative research aims to identify patterns and averages, generate forecasts, analyse causal relationships, and draw applicable conclusions (Bakken, 2023). In addition to being quantitative, the researchers used an explanatory case study research design for this investigation. An explanatory research design is a way of doing research that tries to explain a problem or event. Researchers often use explanatory case study methods to collect and analyse data to understand quantitative results. It is especially useful when a quantitative study wants to establish the cause of a particular phenomenon.

A convenience sampling technique was used to collect data from 200 respondents at a higher education institution in Manicaland Province in Zimbabwe. According to Mulisa (2022), convenience sampling is choosing participants depending on their availability. Everyone who participated received a questionnaire in person and then sent it back. This method enabled the researchers to follow up with each participant, which led to a high response rate. The questionnaire used the Likert scale and included these rating choices: 1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = neutral; 4 = agree; 5 = strongly agree. Researchers like Newman, Lim, and Pineda (2013) have argued that the 5-point Likert scale is a good way to collect data since it makes it easy to do basic statistical analysis. The questionnaire that was utilised in this study was structured as follows:

**Section A: Demographic Data** - This section presented demographic information, thus highlighting details about each respondent's traits. The section asked respondents their age, gender, marital status, education level, and how long they had worked for their current employer.

**Section B: Flexible Work Arrangements** - This section used the Australian version of Albion's (2005) flexible working arrangement scale. The scale has been used and tested for reliability and validity in previous studies. Thus, it has passed the internal consistency test across many cultures and may be used in many situations. Researchers from many countries

and regions have adapted the scale to fit the local culture. This has led to a more flexible work arrangement measuring scale that is specific to the place. However, for this study, 10 items were adapted since they were deemed to be ideal for the questionnaire. Ongaki (2019) used this adapted scale, and the Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.93, which is acceptable by social science standards.

**Section C: Employee Empowerment-** This section used Menon's (2001) measurement scale to analyse employee empowerment. The scales encompass three dimensions, viz. perceived control (PCO), perceived competence (PC), and goal internalisation (GI). Perceived Control evaluated how much employees think they can change how work is done in their department, have an effect on decisions made in their department, and make decisions. Perceived competence looked at what workers thought about the skills and abilities required to execute their jobs well. Goal internalisation examined how much people care about their company's goals and how motivated they are to work towards them. According to Alathari et al. (2021), the employee empowerment scale is reliable and valid. Gong et al. (2020) found the scale to be a customisable equivalent in 28 nations. Thus, in this study, the Cronbach's alpha for the employee empowerment scale was 0.90.

**Section D: Job Engagement-** This section focused on job engagement, specifically its three dimensions: dedication (D), absorption (A), and vigour (V). The Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES) by Panthee et al. (2014) was adopted in this study. There were six questions on vigour (V) in the first sub-section. The second part was about dedication and had five items in it. The third part was about absorption, which had six questions. The Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES) was established by Schaufeli et al. (2002) to measure how engaged people are at work. According to Nummally and Bernstein, the internal consistency of the nine-item, three-factor UWES Scale was found to be acceptable (0.83). In this study, data were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics in SPSS.

## RESULTS

The section discusses the data that was analysed, specifically, the measures for scale accuracy and the results of the hypothesis tests.

### Reliability analysis of the study variables

Ensuring that the scales used in this study can validly and reliably assess constructs depends on their internal consistency. As such, testing for CA (Cronbach Alpha), CR(Composite Reliability), and AVE(Average Extracted Variance) has been made, as shown in Table 1. Major factors that were used in such scrutiny are Job Engagement (JE), Employee Empowerment (EE), and Flexible Work Arrangements (FWA). The researchers are confident that the measures above ensure that these constructs stand up under scrutiny for investigating a moderating FWA effect on the JE-EE relationship.

Table 1. Reliability results.			
Variables	CA	CR	AVE
A	0.737	0.833	0.557
D	0.752	0.858	0.669
EE	0.705	0.804	0.507
FWA	0.910	0.926	0.614
GI	0.750	0.838	0.564
JE	0.741	0.837	0.566
PC	0.701	0.777	0.540
PCO	0.721	0.824	0.541
V	0.703	0.804	0.508

The internal consistency and reliability of the constructs are demonstrated by the results presented in Table 1. Cronbach's alpha (CA) values range from 0.701 for Perceived Control (PC) to 0.910 for Flexible Work Arrangements (FWA), with all variables meeting the recommended threshold of 0.70 (Hair et al., 2019). Composite Reliability (CR) values span from 0.777 for PC to 0.926 for FWA, confirming strong internal consistency across the constructs. The Average Extracted Variance (AVE) values range from 0.507 for Employee Empowerment (EE) to 0.669 for Dedication (D), indicating adequate

convergent validity as all constructs have AVE values above the 0.50 minimum threshold. These findings validate the reliability and suitability of the instruments for examining the relationships between JE, EE, and FWA. The Fornell-Larcker criterion was applied to ascertain discriminant validity, and the findings are detailed in Table 2.

**Table 2. Fornell-Larcker criterion results.** Note: The number in bold is the square root of AVE.

	<b>A</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>EE</b>	<b>FWA</b>	<b>GI</b>	<b>JE</b>	<b>PC</b>	<b>PCO</b>	<b>V</b>
A	0.747								
D	0.227	0.818							
EE	0.087	0.331	0.712						
FWA	-0.290	0.229	0.238	0.784					
GI	0.234	0.395	0.680	0.139	0.751				
JE	0.261	0.676	0.356	0.193	0.434	0.752			
PC	0.034	0.243	0.563	0.267	0.553	0.285	0.735		
PCO	0.068	0.329	0.854	0.299	0.467	0.331	0.535	0.735	
V	0.481	0.435	0.273	-0.081	0.422	0.484	0.293	0.244	0.713

The results confirm that all constructs fulfil this requirement, indicating that each construct shares more variance with its indicators than with other constructs. For instance, Job Engagement (JE) has a square root of AVE of 0.752, which is higher than its correlations with other constructs, such as 0.676 with Dedication (D) and 0.434 with Goal Internalization (GI). Similarly, Flexible Work Arrangements (FWA) show a solid discriminant validity with a square root of AVE of 0.784, exceeding its highest inter-construct correlation of 0.299 with Perceived Competence (PCO). To further assess discriminant validity, the study also used the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio of Correlations (HTMT) technique, and the results are summarised in Table 3.

**Table 3. HTMT discriminant validity.**

	<b>A</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>EE</b>	<b>FWA</b>	<b>GI</b>	<b>JE</b>	<b>PC</b>	<b>PCO</b>	<b>V</b>
A									
D	0.286								
EE	0.209	0.459							
FWA	0.355	0.265	0.306						
GI	0.342	0.525	0.807	0.163					
JE	0.349	0.276	0.507	0.244	0.598				
PC	0.194	0.370	0.839	0.359	0.796	0.438			
PCO	0.198	0.464	0.151	0.377	0.620	0.457	0.802		
V	0.706	0.601	0.408	0.211	0.597	0.694	0.471	0.378	

The results indicate that all constructs meet this criterion, demonstrating acceptable discriminant validity because all HTMT values are below the threshold of 0.90 (Lim, 2024). The HTMT value between Employee Empowerment (EE) and Perceived Competence (PCO) is 0.151, well below the threshold, and the HTMT value between Job Engagement (JE) and Dedication (D) is 0.276, also within acceptable limits. The highest HTMT value observed is 0.839 between EE and PC, which, while approaching the upper limit, remains within the permissible range, affirming that discriminant validity is maintained across the constructs.

Table 4 outlines the variance inflation factor (VIF) values calculated to assess the potential for multicollinearity in the study. This analysis ensured that the independent variables used in the regression model were not excessively correlated, which could distort the reliability of the model's estimates.

**Table 4. Full collinearity statistics (VIF) results.**

	EE -> GI	EE -> PC	EE -> PCO	FWA -> EE	FWA -> JE	JE -> A	JE -> D	JE -> EE	JE -> V
VIF	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.042	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.047	1.000

The VIF values range from 1.000 to 1.047, indicating that multicollinearity is not an issue in this model. According to Hair et al. (2011), VIF values should be below the threshold of 3.3 to confirm the absence of multicollinearity. The results show that all VIF values are well below this recommended limit, supporting the model's robustness and ensuring that no excessive multicollinearity exists amongst the constructs. Specifically, the highest VIF value observed is 1.047 for Job Engagement (JE), impacting Employee Empowerment (EE), confirming the regression estimates' stability.

### Model diagnostics

To ensure the robustness of the proposed model before testing the hypotheses, various fit indices were used to evaluate its adequacy. Key metrics such as the Normed Fit Index (NFI) and the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) were examined to assess how well the model aligns with the observed data. The NFI measures the comparative fit of the model, with values nearing 1.0 suggesting a strong fit. Simultaneously, the SRMR evaluates the average discrepancy between observed and predicted correlations, with a value below 0.08 generally indicating a good fit (Sathyanarayana & Mohanasundaram, 2024). The results from these indices provide crucial insights into the model's validity and reliability, ensuring that the proposed relationships between Job Engagement (JE), Employee Empowerment (EE), and Flexible Work Arrangements (FWA) are supported by the data before proceeding with hypothesis testing.

**Table 5. Goodness-of-fit results.**

SRMR	NFI
0.075	0.914

Table 5 presents the goodness-of-fit results, including the SRMR and the NFI, which are key indicators of the model's overall fit. The SRMR value of 0.075 is below the recommended threshold of 0.08, indicating that the model has a good fit in terms of residuals between observed and predicted correlations. Additionally, the NFI value of 0.914, closer to 1.0, suggests that the proposed model provides a strong fit compared to the baseline model. These results strongly support the model's adequacy, ensuring that it is a reliable foundation for further hypothesis testing.

### Structural Equation Modelling (SEM)

Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) is a method of causal analysis articulated by Fan et al. (2016), where a model is validated against observed patterns of relationships within the data. The path coefficients, essential indicators of the relationships amongst variables, were analysed. The following hypotheses were examined:

- H1: Job Engagement is positively associated with Employee Empowerment.
- H2: Flexible Work Arrangements are positively associated with Job Engagement.
- H3: Flexible Work Arrangements are positively associated with Employee Empowerment.
- H4: Job engagement mediates the relationship between flexible work arrangements and employee empowerment.

### Direct relationship

At this stage, the analysis tests the direct relationships between the key constructs in the proposed model. These direct relationships are assessed through a Partial Least Squares (PLS) analysis, which calculates path coefficients to evaluate the strength and direction of the associations. The results of these tests are presented in Table 6.

**Table 6. SEM path coefficients.**

Hypothesis	Relationship	Coefficient	T statistic	P-values	Decision
H1	JE → EE	0.322	5.143	0.000	Supported
H2	FWA → JE	0.193	2.392	0.017	Supported
H3	FWA → EE	0.176	2.220	0.027	Supported

Table 6 shows that JE positively impacted EE ( $\beta = 0.322, p < 0.001$ ), suggesting that higher levels of job engagement are strongly associated with increased employee empowerment, reinforcing that engaged employees are more likely to feel empowered in their roles. FWA positively impacted JE ( $\beta = 0.193, p = 0.017$ ), suggesting that when employees have more flexible working conditions, their level of engagement tends to increase. Furthermore, FWA positively impacted EE ( $\beta = 0.176, p = 0.027$ ), indicating that flexible work arrangements directly enhance employees' sense of empowerment.

### Mediating role of job engagement in the relationship between flexible work arrangement and employee empowerment

The fourth hypothesis proposed that job engagement mediates the relationship between flexible work arrangements (FWA) and employee empowerment (EE) (H4). This analysis used SmartPLS, with 5,000 bootstrapping samples and a 95% confidence interval (CI). Mediation analysis was performed, and the outcomes are detailed in Table 7.

Relationship	Coefficient				CI Bias-corrected		Mediation existence
	Beta	SE	T	P-value	95% CI		
FWA→JE → EE	0.042	0.021	2.054	0.041	0.001	0.079	Partial

The findings in Table 7 indicate that the relationship between flexible work arrangements (FWA), job engagement (JE), and employee empowerment (EE) is partially mediated. Specifically, the mediation coefficient is 0.042, with a p-value of 0.041, suggesting significance at the 5% level. The 95% confidence interval (CI) ranges from 0.001 to 0.079, excluding zero, further supporting partial mediation. These results imply that job engagement partially mediates the relationship between flexible work arrangements and employee empowerment, indicating that while flexible work arrangements directly influence employee empowerment, job engagement also plays a key role in strengthening this relationship. Therefore, organisations aiming to boost employee empowerment should implement flexible work arrangements and focus on enhancing job engagement as a vital mediator in the process.

All the results regarding the tested hypotheses indicate that H1, H2, H3, and H4 are supported and demonstrate statistical significance at the 5% level. Figure 1 summarises the fitted model containing coefficients and factor loadings.

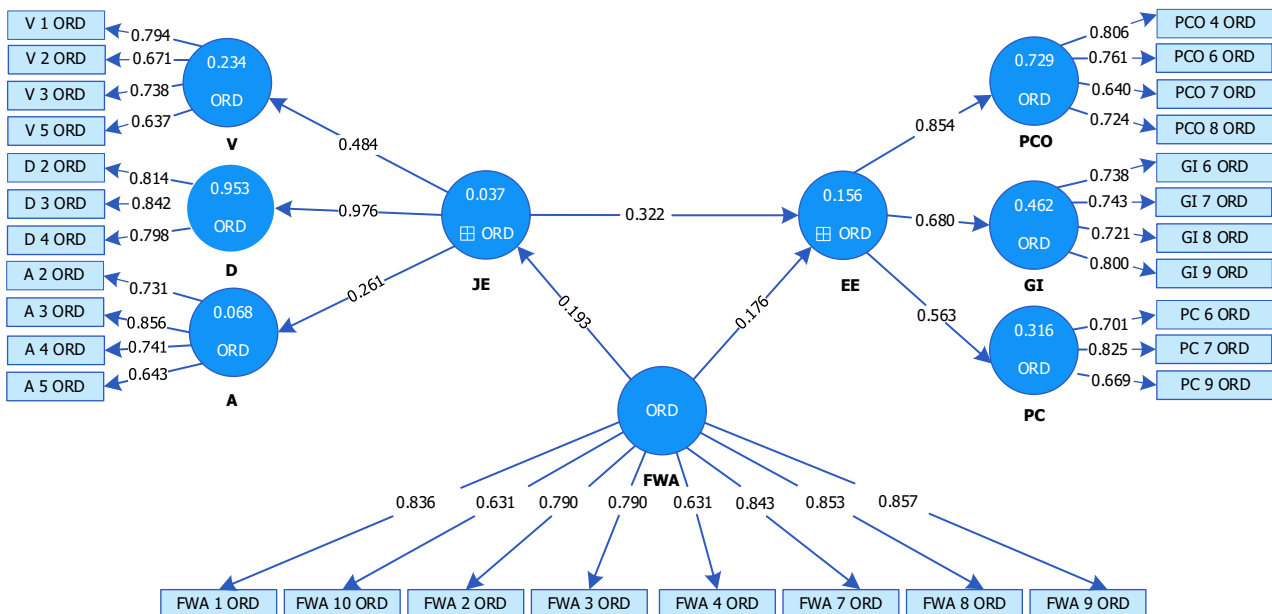


Figure 1. SEM of job engagement (JE), flexible work arrangements (FWA), and employee empowerment (EE).

Figure 1 concisely represents the fitted model, emphasising the coefficients of the direct relationships. The analysis reveals that job engagement (JE) and flexible work arrangements (FWA) together account for 15.6% of the variability in employee

empowerment (EE). This indicates a significant relationship, suggesting that job engagement and flexible work arrangements contribute notably to employee empowerment, although other factors may also influence EE. The path coefficients highlight the strength and direction of these associations, further supporting the proposed model.

## DISCUSSION

The hypothesis (H1), which states that flexible work arrangement is positively associated with employee empowerment, was accepted ( $\beta = 0.176$ ,  $p = 0.027$ ). Since the P-value is below the conventional threshold of 0.05, this finding supports the hypothesis, indicating that flexible work arrangements directly enhance employees' sense of empowerment. The findings agree with Scholars (Haines et al., 2024) who confirm that employee empowerment and flexibility work arrangements policies are key to organisational dynamics conceptualisation, improving employees' satisfaction and ultimately organisational performance. Flexible work arrangements are policies that offer more freedom to employees regarding the work schedule, work location, and method (Thaufayl et al., 2024). Kawai (2023) argues that flexible work arrangements are closely associated with employee empowerment.

Employee empowerment at Zimbabwe's tertiary level has been shown to promote increased involvement, motivation, and job satisfaction. Flexible work arrangements have been shown to be positively associated with employee empowerment and work engagement (Ziderman, 2020). Furthermore, as the employees are able to work when they are at their best, flexible work arrangements can lead to increased productivity (Alshemmari, 2023). Granting employees' autonomy to function efficiently on their schedule can result in better-quality outcomes in such an industry as higher education, where innovation and research are significant factors. The employees will be encouraged towards institutional success when empowered to initiate, select, and contribute. Empowered workers will also solve problems innovatively and creatively (Kyei-Frimpong et al., 2024). Building an empowered culture can help institutions change more successfully and maintain their competitive advantage in a fast-evolving industry like higher education.

### Flexible Work Arrangements (FWA) and Job Engagement (JE)

The hypothesis (H2), which states that flexible work arrangement is positively associated with job engagement, was accepted ( $\beta = 0.193$ ,  $p = 0.017$ ). This finding supports the hypothesis that employees' level of engagement tends to increase when they have more flexible working conditions, as the P-value is below the traditional threshold of 0.05. The findings align with Weideman and Hofmeyr (2020), who believe FWAs are positively related to several employee engagement constructs that were identified in the literature. The most important finding is that FWAs positively contribute to the well-being of employees. There have been various benefits for employees and employers that have been evidenced by flexible work arrangements. FWAs can significantly enhance employment engagement and overall well-being within Zimbabwe's Higher and Tertiary Education sector, where teaching staff face extensive demands and massive workloads (Chatiza et al., 2021).

In a study on flourishing with flexibility, Willett et al. (2024) found that leader communicative support of flexible work arrangements improves employee engagement and well-being. They also found that the practical effect of leader communicative support of FWA on job engagement and flourishing at work is essentially linear, with higher levels of leader communicative support of FWA leading to more engagement and flourishing. Employee engagement is influenced by preferred work arrangements (Muniz et al., 2024). Similarly, another study found that workers who work remotely three or four days a week had the highest levels of engagement. Additionally, offering career advancement opportunities along with FWAs boosts employee engagement and job satisfaction, and devoted workers are less likely to hunt for other opportunities (Dube & Takawira, 2023). Lastly, effective and productive employees are far more committed to their jobs. In essence, FWAs are an increasingly used instrument among those employers wishing to keep their best performers. By offering appealing flexible work arrangements (FWAs) as a response to employee requests for such arrangements, employers can meaningfully reduce employee turnover and increase employee retention (Paulos et al., 2023). Flexible work also enhances work-life balance, and therefore, employees are content.

### Job Engagement and Employee Empowerment

The hypothesis (H3) that job engagement is positively associated with employee empowerment was accepted ( $\beta = 0.322$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). The hypothesis is supported by the P-value, which is less than the traditional cutoff point of 0.05. It indicates that there is a strong correlation between increased job engagement and employee empowerment, highlighting the fact that engaged employees are more likely to feel empowered in their roles. This is consistent with the beliefs of Nawaz et al. (2024) that employee empowerment and job engagement have a multi-faceted and intricate relationship. Person-job

fit is thus an alternative conduit by which empowering leadership can influence employee work engagement (Arefin et al., 2019).

Employee empowerment is vital in the organizational culture of an organization when it comes to creativity, cooperation, and continuous growth. This being the case, it is possible to observe that innovative, motivated, and dedicated workers will be able to attain organisational objectives when they have the authority to make decisions on matters pertaining to their work processes (Arhin & Cobblah, 2024). By empowering employees, it is possible to improve job satisfaction, employee retention, and organisational performance amidst a setup that is marked by hierarchical systems and conventional power dynamics. Dong et al. (2024) argue that the employee empowerment-job engagement relation is one of the key drivers of organisational performance and employees' welfare. While employee empowerment is an issue of granting employees' autonomy and power to make decisions and own the work, job engagement is the level of cognitive and affective affiliation employees have with their work.

### **Job engagement mediates the relationship between flexible work arrangements and employee empowerment**

The hypothesis (H4), which states that job engagement mediates the relationship between flexible work arrangements and employee empowerment, was accepted ( $\beta = 0.042$ ,  $p = 0.041$ ). Since the P-value is below the conventional threshold of 0.05, this finding supports the hypothesis, suggesting that higher perceptions of decent work are associated with lower intentions to quit amongst employees. In particular, the mediation coefficient is 0.042 and has a p-value of 0.041, which is 5% significant. Its 95% CI is between 0.001 and 0.079 and excludes zero again, testifying to partial mediation. These findings suggest that job engagement partially mediates the linkage between flexible work arrangements and employee empowerment in that flexible work arrangements directly affect employee empowerment, while job engagement is also a key to reinforcing the same. Organisations thus wanting to facilitate employee empowerment have to install flexible work arrangements and ensure job engagement as a key mediator in the process.

The results validate the findings by Setiyawami et al. (2024) that employee empowerment and engagement are inextricably linked. Employees will thus feel more part of the company's mission and values when empowered to participate in the decision-making process and contribute innovative ideas. Career development, flexible work arrangements, and employee empowerment positively and significantly increase job engagement (Indrayanti, 2024). Flexible work arrangements in post-secondary and higher levels are capable of producing better job engagement and employee empowerment, according to Akkas (2023). Workers will also most probably feel empowered to do their own work and make their own decisions if they are free to select where and when they work. Through being strengthened with purpose, autonomy, and mastery of work, empowerment is also most likely to generate job engagement (Kaushik & Tiwari, 2023).

## **CONCLUSIONS**

This study sought to explore the mediating role of job engagement in the relationship between flexible work arrangements and employee empowerment in the Zimbabwean Higher Education sector. The results indicated that job engagement mediates the relationship, confirming the assertion that whilst flexible work arrangements bring a direct impact on employee empowerment, work engagement also has a significant role in augmenting such an impact. Consequently, organisations seeking to enhance employee empowerment should consider implementing flexible work arrangements while simultaneously focusing on improving job engagement, which serves as a crucial mediator in the process. Essentially, flexible work arrangements can create more committed employees. Committed employees are more enthusiastic and full of energy, healthier physically, and have lower turnover. Flexible working arrangements allow for a fair work-life balance, therefore ensuring higher job satisfaction. Flexible work hours also decrease stress and enhance productivity. As a result, employees become more engaged in their jobs, which ultimately benefits the organisation in numerous ways.

The study recommends that leaders of higher education institutions embrace flexible work arrangements. They should analyse tasks for potential flexibility in hours and, above all, adopt a team-based approach to flexibility. It is also essential for the institutions to establish clear policies and guidelines. Furthermore, leaders in higher education should maintain and support teamwork through shared hours and constructive interactions. This approach is likely to enhance the recruitment and retention of key staff whilst fostering employee commitment and organisational citizenship behaviour. Empowering employees involves building strong professional relationships based on mutual trust and, importantly, enhancing their problem-solving abilities. Leaders ought to assign dedicated tasks to team members and allow them to take ownership of these responsibilities.

Zimbabwe presents unique socio-economic challenges. Therefore, the findings of this research may not be readily applicable to other countries. This study focused on a single sector, which is the higher education sector, hence future studies may consider focusing on other sectors of the economy such as the health, tourism and the basic education sector.

## ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

### AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors have contributed equally.

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### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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## ПОСЕРЕДНИЦЬКА РОЛЬ ЗАЦІКАВЛЕНОСТІ В РОБОТІ У ВЗАЄМОДІЇ МІЖ ГНУЧКИМИ УМОВАМИ ПРАЦІ ТА РОЗШИРЕННЯМ ПОВНОВАЖЕНЬ ПРАЦІВНИКІВ

Заклади вищої освіти відіграють важливу роль в економічному зростанні, формуючи людський капітал, необхідний для стимулювання інновацій, змін і трансформацій. Незважаючи на важливу роль у розвитку економіки, ці заклади стикаються з високою плінністю кадрів, що негативно позначається на їхній ефективності й продуктивності. Отож, глобальний попит на висококваліфікованих фахівців значною мірою сприяв відтокові кваліфікованих кадрів із закладів вищої освіти Зімбабве до інших країн. У цьому дослідженні оцінена посередницька роль залученості до роботи у взаємозв'язку між гнучкими умовами праці та розширенням повноважень працівників у секторі вищої освіти Зімбабве.

Для збирання даних було використано кількісний дизайн дослідження на зручній вибірці з 200 респондентів у цьому секторі. Окрім кількісного підходу, дослідники використовували пояснювальне тематичне дослідження та перехресний дизайн дослідження. Дані були проаналізовані за допомогою коефіцієнта кореляції Пірсона з використанням пакета статистичних програм для соціальних наук (SPSS). Результати показують міцні взаємозв'язки між змінними, підкреслюючи їхній істотний внесок у пояснення відмінностей у вимірюваних конструкціях. Результати цього дослідження показують значний взаємозв'язок між гнучкими умовами праці, залученістю до роботи та розширенням повноважень співробітників.

Результати дослідження свідчать про те, що адміністрація університетів повинна розробити комплексні стратегії гнучкої організації праці для розв'язання проблем, із якими стикається їхній персонал. Крім того, вони повинні поліпшити умови праці своїх співробітників як засіб підвищення загальної якості вищої освіти. Це дослідження також пропонує ідеї для державної політики щодо вимог до робочої сили в секторі вищої освіти.

**Ключові слова:** гнучкі умови праці, залученість до роботи, розширення повноважень співробітників, сектор вищої освіти, ефективність, продуктивність, науковці, робоча сила

**JEL Класифікація:** J22, J28, I23, M52, M54