Chapter 10
Enhancing Work–Life Balance and Research Engagement Among Students in Higher Education Institutions

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ABSTRACT

Engagement in higher degree pursuit is a function of psychological constructs including core self-evaluations, academic motivation, work-life balance, and research skills proficiency. Core self-evaluations and academic motivation are precursors for student engagement in terms of effort expenditure, collaboration, institutional support-seeking, and relating with faculty. However, given that higher degree students are mainly working class, their work-life balance as well as research skills proficiency act as intervening variables to influence the relationship between the dispositional states and actual engagement of the students. Basing on empirical findings from various studies, the authors explicate in this critical review the (combined) mediation and moderation effects of the intervening variables on the links between academic motivation and core-self evaluations as predictors and the students’ research engagement as a criterion variable. A conceptual model is theorized for the links between these concepts as a framework for research engagement and hence research completion among students.

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INTRODUCTION

This section presents the understanding of the concepts of core self-evaluations, academic motivation, work-life balance, research skills proficiency, and students’ research engagement. The conceptualisation includes an understanding of the subconstructs. Occasionally, the linkages between the concepts are presented.

Core Self-Evaluations

The “core self-evaluations” construct stems from the primordial term “core evaluations.” Judge, Locke, and Durham (1997) define core evaluations as fundamental, bottom-line evaluations individuals hold about themselves (known as core self-evaluations), the world (known as core world evaluations), and others (known as core others evaluations). The trait has been acclaimed by Judge et al. (2004, p. 342) as “the most useful personality trait in the realm of human performance.” Bono and Judge (2003) state that core evaluations influence people’s appraisals of themselves, the world, and others in a subconscious way. This implies that most people are not aware of the influence their self-evaluations have on their perceptions or behaviours, further implying that the trait takes effect in outcomes through the influence of other surface variables.

Core self-evaluations specifically refer to one’s deep-seated, fundamental, inner cognitive ratings of oneself (Judge et al., 1997). Whereas a lot of research has been conducted on the core self-evaluations construct, little is known about the core world evaluations and core other evaluations. This owes to the fact that although individuals may have core evaluations in multiple domains, that is, core self-evaluations, core world evaluations, and core other evaluations, core self-evaluations are the most important (Bono & Judge, 2013). However, Chang, Ferris, Johnson, Rosen, Tan (2012) suggest that core world evaluations and core other evaluations can be combined into core external evaluations to provide a virgin area for investigations.

In a critical review and analysis of literature, Chang et al. (2012) assert that a core evaluations trait qualifies as such by adherence to three criteria: (a) evaluation focus, (b) fundamentality, and (c) scope. The authors define evaluation focus as the extent to which traits involve evaluation of the self (e.g., self-esteem is an evaluation of self-worth) as opposed to descriptions of the self (e.g., agreeableness is a label for behaviours like cooperation and showing empathy). The fundamentality criterion refers to the extent to which traits are central to the self-concept. Fundamental traits as opposed to peripheral or surface traits must have greater interconnectivity with other traits, perceptions, and attitudes. Scope refers to how broad (e.g., general self-esteem) or narrow (e.g., organisation-based self-esteem) a trait is, in which case the former more likely reflects self-based evaluations as opposed to domain-specific evaluations.

Traits that have been most frequently incorporated in core self-evaluations include self-esteem, neuroticism (or emotional stability), locus of control, and generalised self-efficacy, with the first three appearing in over 50,000 studies (Bono & Judge, 2003). Self-esteem is an overall appraisal of one’s self-worth (Rosenberg, 1965); or as Coopersmith (1967) later defined it, it is the approval of oneself and the degree to which one sees oneself as “capable, significant, successful, and worthy” (pp. 4-5). Generalised self-efficacy is an estimate of one’s ability to perform and cope successfully at a global level within an extensive range of situations (Chen, Gully, & Eden, 2001). Emotional stability is the propensity to feel calm and secure (Eysenck, 1990). Locus of control is the belief that desired effects result from one’s