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Empowerment in education: Breaking barriers to reform

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Background: Educational staff are central to educational reform, provided they are empowered. Through empowerment, higher education staff's efficiency and productivity significantly impact the performance of colleges and universities. Unfortunately, red tape and strict hierarchical structures prevent educational staff from reforming the educational environment.

Aim: This study identified the factors contributing to staff empowerment at higher education institutions in Ghana.

Setting: The research was conducted among permanent employees from four universities in Ghana. The 386 participants comprised 60.6% males and 39.4% females. Among the participants, 33.1% had up to a postgraduate level qualification, while 44.5% were senior staff in the public universities.

Method: A quantitative research approach was used. The study participants were selected from four public universities in Ghana using proportionate stratified probability sampling. The sample comprised 482 employees, of whom 386 participants completed a self-developed *Empowerment* questionnaire. Descriptive and inferential statistics were employed to identify the key factors of empowerment.

Results: Exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis identified a three-construct measurement model for empowerment: Meaningfulness, autonomy and/or decision-making and competence.

Conclusion: The traditional conceptualisation of empowerment no longer aligns with contemporary work environments, specifically higher education institutions. Investigating empowerment at higher education institutions would assist in reviewing policies and strategies needed to reform educational institutions. The study's findings provide actionable insights for leaders and decision-makers to communicate a compelling vision, empower employees, adapt leadership approaches and support empowerment across all job levels. These strategies can create an engaged and committed workforce, ultimately contributing to the reform of public universities.

Contribution: This study contributes to the understanding of employee empowerment in higher education by extending the meaning of empowerment beyond traditional definitions, reflecting the changing dynamics of modern educational environments. The findings offer practical guidance for university leaders and policymakers to design strategies that enhance staff engagement and commitment, thereby fostering institutional reform.

Keywords: empowerment; meaningfulness; autonomy; higher education institutions; decision-making; competence.

Introduction

The importance of human resources is that, unlike infrastructure, technologies, equipment and strategies that other competitors can replicate, the quality of human resources cannot be copied (Sugiarti 2022). Organisations, therefore, need to enhance the capabilities of employees so that they can remain competitive. One way of doing this is through empowerment. The empowerment of educational staff has received widespread attention because research has emphasised the positive effects of empowerment on effectiveness, school improvement and student achievement (Ahmed 2024).

Educational staff are one of the key elements in most educational reforms. Through empowerment, higher education staff's efficiency and productivity can significantly impact the

performance of colleges and universities (Ramalakshmi & Ravindran 2021). By giving academics control over the design of the curriculum and teaching methods, they will be more likely to engage in innovation and creativity. The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic necessitated changes to the nature of work, but it also changed employers' and employees' expectations. The traditional conceptualisation of empowerment is no longer aligned with contemporary work environments, specifically concerning higher education institutions and remote working environments. According to Kimwarey, Chirure and Omondi (2014), there must be a cultural shift in how educational staff are evaluated and developed to empower staff. Academics must be included at the educational, community and national levels to influence curricula and improve the quality of education. Academics involved in curriculum development can respond to changes in their field of study and offer relevant, up-to-date offerings that meet industry needs. This will further contribute to their work's meaningfulness and empowerment. The empowerment of academics advances morale, creativity and commitment, which are directly linked to teaching quality, productivity and overall departmental performance (Ahmed 2024).

Empowerment in an organisational context involves providing employees with the resources, support and authority to make decisions, take the initiative and participate meaningfully in the organisation's goals. It fosters a culture of trust, accountability and collaboration and enables employees to develop their skills and competencies to drive organisational success.

The amount of time wasted on emails, messages, requests and authorisations between managers and staff to obtain permission to perform tasks is considerable (Oliveira et al. 2023). Empowerment as a management tool promotes the delegation of power, reduces hierarchical levels and bureaucratic procedures and gives employees the decision and responsibility to manage their work.

Because empowerment involves making significant changes to the decision-making structure in the organisation, some managers may be reluctant to relinquish power and may resist efforts to grant employees greater decision-making power (Elnaga & Imran 2014). This resistance is particularly evident among managers who believe they have a superior understanding of the organisation and are better equipped to make decisions. The reluctance to relinquish power is also justified by arguing that management would be held responsible for the consequences of employees' poor decisions.

Ghanaian universities are struggling with leadership practices that undermine empowerment. In most Ghanaian universities, centralised, top-down, non-participative leadership practices are the norm. Vice-chancellors and registrars practice directive, authoritarian leadership styles, which provide academics with little opportunity to participate in governance processes (Loglo 2024). The high power-distance culture in Ghanaian universities further prevents staff from offering creative solutions and limits the development of staff. The bureaucracy at Ghanaian universities is also responsible for fragmented communication lines, with supervisors failing to create an environment of cooperation and trust (Adiasany et al. 2023). The failure of university leaders to empower staff is leading to a stagnation in innovation and teaching quality and undermines institutional transformation and achievement of national development goals (Kuuyelleh, Awal & Atuahene-Gima 2023).

Aim and objective of the study

This study aimed to identify the factors of empowerment in higher education institutions in Ghana by developing a scale to measure empowerment. This study was guided by the research question: What are the key elements of empowerment in higher education institutions?

Literature review

Empowerment

Empowerment means different things to different people, and two perspectives are most used to explain empowerment: the psychosocial (individual) and organisational perspectives. Psychological empowerment, part of psychosocial empowerment, involves intrinsic motivation and creates discretion and self-efficacy (Van Assen 2020). Discretion and self-efficacy are built on competence and self-determination (Angelovska, Janevski & Kumanovska 2018). According to Thomas and Velthouse (1990) and Spreitzer (1995), psychological empowerment consists of four dimensions: (1) competence, (2) self-determination, (3) meaning and (4) impact. According to Ahmed (2024), teacher empowerment involves six dimensions: decision-making, self-efficacy, professional growth, impact, status and autonomy.

According to the organisational perspective of empowerment, people's perceptions of themselves are determined in relation to their work environments (Abresch 2018). From a structural viewpoint, organisational empowerment involves actions by management and policies and structures that influence employees' work-related behaviour (Kanter 1977; López-Cabarcos, Vázquez-Rodríguez & Quiñoá-Piñeiro 2022). Effective working conditions affect school outcomes through academics' organisational citizenship behaviours (Ahmed 2024). Structural power is derived from three organisational sources: information, support and resources (Aggarwal, Garg & Rastogi 2018). *Information* refers to the knowledge and communication essential to the organisation's work. *Resources* are the necessary people, money, equipment and supplies that employees need to perform. *Support* involves feedback, coaching and assistance that a person receives from management, peers and others.

Ahearn, Mathieu and Rapp (2005) identified four dimensions of empowering leadership, namely (1) meaningfulness of work, (2) autonomy, (3) decision-making and (4) expressing

confidence in performance. Because the dimensions of empowerment are determined from an individual or an organisational perspective, confusion exists as to what exactly empowerment entails. Furthermore, empowerment at a higher education institution will most likely differ from empowerment at a commercial organisation. Table 1 outlines the dimensions of empowerment according to studies by various scholars.

Regarding the higher education context, this study outlined meaningfulness, autonomy and/or decision-making and competence as key drivers of empowerment (Dsane 2024). Competence appears to be the most decisive empowerment factor across various types of organisations. Dsane (2024) outlined the importance of psychological and structural empowerment in higher education institutions.

Methods

Research approach

This study used a quantitative approach to collect respondents' data using a self-developed questionnaire. After completing the literature review, items that measured perceptions about empowerment were developed. These items were developed after considering the empowerment constructs identified by previous scholars. The initial item pool comprised 18 items. After reviewing feedback from a panel on the items, the item pool was reduced to 14 items. A six-point Likert scale response format was used to reduce the effect of the central tendency.

Content and face validity

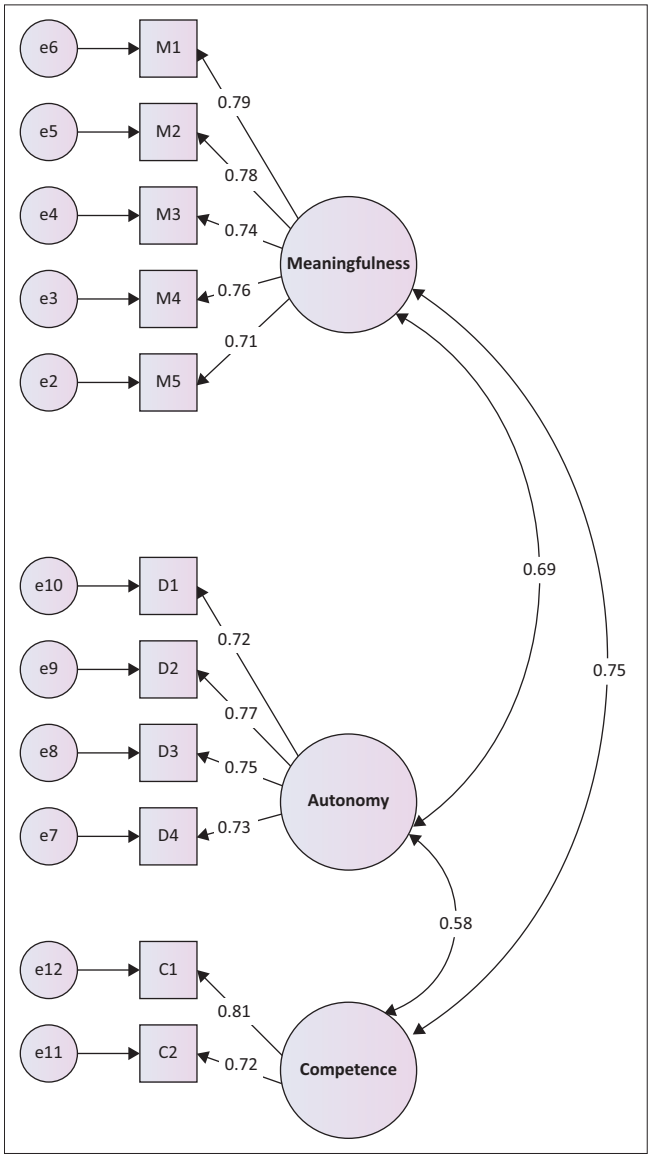
The content and face validity of the items were evaluated using a panel of seven people who did not form part of the study's sample to assess and identify the items that should be retained, revised or removed from the questionnaire. This panel comprised three subject experts, a statistician and three colleagues. The purpose of the study was outlined to the panel members. They were requested to comment on the items and their relatedness to empowerment and outline any difficulties they experienced in completing the questionnaire.

TABLE 1: Summary of the empowerment constructs.

Empowerment approach	Scholar	Constructs
Psychological empowerment	Spreitzer (1995)	Competence Self-determination Meaning Impact
Structural empowerment	Kanter (1977)	Access to information Access to resources Support Opportunities
Leader-member exchange	Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995)	High-quality relationships
Multi-dimensional construct	Thomas and Velthouse (1990)	Choice Competence Meaningfulness Impact
Teachers' empowerment in Saudi Arabia	Short and Rinehart (1992)	Decision-making Professional growth Self-efficacy Impact Autonomy Status
Teacher's empowerment	Hidiroglu and Tanriogen (2020)	Trust Status Professional development Cooperation
Empowerment at Higher Education Institutions in Ghana	Dsane (2024)	Meaningfulness Autonomy and/or decision-making Competence

Participants and setting

A sample of the population of the four universities was invited to participate in the study. The sample comprised 482 of 10 890 employees at higher education institutions in Ghana. A total of 386 responses were received, and a response rate of 80% was deemed sufficient for data analysis. The respondents were categorised by gender, age, educational level and the job category. Concerning gender, males constituted 60.6% of the total sample. Most respondents (19.2%) were in the age category of 18–25 years, and the least represented age category was employees aged 56–60 years (1.8%). The percentage of employees in a public university



Source: Dsane, N.A.K., 2024, 'A leadership competency framework for the empowerment of employees and the enhancement of organisational citizenship behaviour in public universities in Ghana', Doctoral thesis, University of South Africa, Pretoria

FIGURE 1: Standardised path diagram of the dimensions of empowerment.

who had up to a postgraduate level qualification was 33.1%; this was followed by graduates (30%) and undergraduates (25%). Regarding job level, 44.5% were academics (senior staff) and 55.5% were administrative staff.

Measuring instrument

The questionnaire consisted of two parts: Section A included items related to demographic information, and Section B comprised the Empowerment questionnaire. The demographic questions collected information on the age, gender, educational level and job category of the participants. Section B consisted of 14 items and measured respondents' perceptions of empowerment. The items were developed by referring to the empowerment constructs identified in previous studies. The survey was conducted in 2023 after permission was granted by the four Ghanaian universities. The items were designed to reflect situations within a higher education institution setting, and a 6-point Likert scale (1 = totally disagree; 6 = totally agree) was used.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the University of South Africa Human Resource Management Ethics Review Committee on 28 October 2021 (Reference No. 2021_HRM_008). Participants consented to participate and completed the survey online. The data were secured by password protection and stored in a locked location.

Results

This section presents the study's findings, including the descriptive statistics of the identified empowerment factors, exploratory factor analysis (EFA), confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and an assessment of the reliability and validity of the measurement scales. Descriptive statistics such as standard deviations, means, skewness and kurtosis are reported to provide an overview of the data. Exploratory factor analysis is discussed to explore the empowerment scale's underlying factor structure, and the CFA results are presented to validate the measurement model. Finally, the scale's reliability in terms of Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (CR) is examined, while validity is evaluated through the average variance extracted (AVE).

Descriptive statistics

The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), version 22.0 of 2013, was used to analyse the dataset. The EFA used principal axis factoring as an extraction method and Varimax for the rotation. The results of the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) and Bartlett's tests (Bartlett 1954) determined whether the data were suitable for factor analysis. The KMO value should be greater than 0.70; an average value falls between 0.70 and 0.80, a good value falls between 0.80 and 0.90 and an excellent value falls between 0.90 and 1.00. According to Sharma (1996), KMO values between 0.50 and 0.60 are flawed but acceptable. These tests confirmed that the scale items correlated adequately, and eigenvalues greater than 1.00 were used as the factor criterion. A cut-off score of 0.50 was used for factor loadings. The reliability of the empowerment measure was assessed by using a Cronbach's alpha coefficient cut-off score of 0.70. Murphy and Davidshofer (1988) state that Cronbach values < 0.60 are unacceptable; 0.70 is low, between 0.80 and 0.90 is moderate, and > 0.90 is high.

Descriptive statistics provide an overview of the distribution of responses for the identified empowerment factors: meaningfulness, autonomy and/or decision-making and competence. Table 2 presents each factor's mean, standard deviation, skewness and kurtosis values.

The mean scores indicate the overall level of agreement among respondents, with meaningfulness (M = 5.09, standard deviation [SD] = 0.83) and competence (M = 4.99, SD = 0.88) receiving relatively high ratings. At the same time, autonomy and/or decision-making (M = 4.54, SD = 1.02) was rated slightly lower. The standard deviations suggest that the responses for autonomy and/or decision-making were more varied than the other two factors.

Regarding the distribution, skewness and kurtosis values help assess normality. Meaningfulness (skewness = -2.06, kurtosis = 6.37) and competence (skewness = -1.56, kurtosis = 3.35) exhibited negative skewness, indicating that most respondents rated these factors highly. Their kurtosis values suggest a leptokurtic distribution (higher peak), meaning that the responses were concentrated around the mean. In contrast, autonomy and/or decision-making (skewness = –0.78, kurtosis = 0.30) is closer to a normal distribution but still slightly skewed negatively, showing a slight tendency towards higher ratings.

TABLE 3: Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin and Bartlett's test for employee empowerment.

Variable	Employee empowerment
Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin measure of sampling adequacy	0.93
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	
Approx. Chi-square	3866.12
df	120
Sig.	0.00

Source: Dsane, N.A.K., 2024, 'A leadership competency framework for the empowerment of employees and the enhancement of organisational citizenship behaviour in public universities in Ghana', Doctoral thesis, University of South Africa, Pretoria

sig., significance; *df*, degrees of freedom; Approx., approximate.

TABLE 2: Descriptive analysis of empowerment.

Empowerment factor	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness		Kurtosis	
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Std. Error
Meaningfulness	5.09	0.83	-2.06	0.12	6.37	0.23
Autonomy and/or decision-making	4.54	1.02	-0.78	0.12	0.30	0.23
Competence	4.99	0.88	-1.56	0.12	3.35	0.23

Source: Dsane, N.A.K., 2024, 'A leadership competency framework for the empowerment of employees and the enhancement of organisational citizenship behaviour in public universities in Ghana', Doctoral thesis, University of South Africa, Pretoria

The descriptive statistics suggest that respondents generally perceived meaningfulness and competence more positively, while autonomy and/or decision-making showed greater response variability. The kurtosis and skewness values indicate the normality of the data (Kline 2011).

Exploratory factor analysis

Table 3 presents the results to confirm the suitability of the data for factor analysis. The value for the KMO measures of sampling adequacy was 0.93, well above the threshold of 0.60 (Kaiser 1970). The significance level of Bartlett's test of sphericity was 0 and below the threshold of $p < 0.05$ (Bartlett 1954). According to the results of the Kaiser–Olkin measure of sampling adequacy and Bartlett's test of sphericity, factor analyses were appropriate. In addition, items 10 and 15 were cross-loaded and could not be allocated to a specific factor and were thus also deleted from further analysis. According to Hair et al. (2019) and Tabachnick and Fidell (2019), items with low communalities may fail to load meaningfully onto factors and can distort the factor solution. Field (2018) further suggests that such items do not effectively measure the intended construct, making their removal necessary to improve the model's interpretability and validity.

Concerning the reliability of the factors identified, a coefficient alpha of 0.6 or more is acceptable (Bryman et al. 2014). The coefficients ranged from 0.787 to 0.893, which exceeded the 0.70 threshold value proposed by Hair et al. (2019). The following reliability scores were determined for each of the empowerment factors: meaningfulness (7 items): $\alpha = 0.893$; autonomy (5 items): $\alpha = 0.859$ and competence (2 items): $\alpha = 0.787$.

The principal-axis factor analysis revealed three factors with eigenvalues exceeding 1.0, which cumulatively explained 58.73% of the variance in empowerment. The factor loadings were all above 0.50 (Veth et al. 2018) and were considered suitable for inclusion in a factor. The factor loadings in the rotated factor matrix, as illustrated in Table 4, were analysed in line with the theory and labelled as follows:

Factor 1: Meaningfulness
Factor 2: Autonomy and/or decision-making
Factor 3: Competence

TABLE 4: Empowerment – Varimax-rotated factor matrix.

Factor	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Communalities
Meaningfulness	0.78	-	-	0.68
	0.74	-	-	0.63
	0.67	-	-	0.54
	0.66	-	-	0.52
	0.60	-	-	0.63
	0.60	-	-	0.50
	0.54	-	-	0.49
Autonomy and/or decision-making	EMP3	0.78	-	0.58
	EMP14	0.75	-	0.57
	EMP7	0.59	-	0.52
	EMP6	0.58	-	0.52
	EMP12	0.51	-	0.48
Competence	EMP13	-	0.58	0.51
	EMP16	-	0.55	0.50
Eigenvalue	-	6.38	1.36	1.02
Cumulative contribution rate %	-	24.87	43.78	58.73

Source: Dsane, N.A.K., 2024, 'A leadership competency framework for the empowerment of employees and the enhancement of organisational citizenship behaviour in public universities in Ghana', Doctoral thesis, University of South Africa, Pretoria

EMP, extraction method principal axis factoring.

Confirmatory factor analysis

Confirmatory factor analysis, using AMOS version 26 software, was performed to confirm the reliability and construct validity of the employee empowerment scale. The analysis assessed the measurement model fit and examined key validity indicators, including factor loadings, Cronbach's alpha, CR and AVE.

The model fit was evaluated using several goodness-of-fit indices, including the chi-square statistic (χ^2), comparative fit index (CFI), Tucker–Lewis index (TLI), root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) and standardised root mean square residual (SRMR). Factor loadings were examined to ensure that all items were significantly loaded onto their respective constructs, with a recommended threshold of 0.50 or higher (Hair et al. 2019).

Cronbach's alpha (α) and CR values were computed to establish construct reliability. Cronbach's alpha assessed internal consistency, with acceptable reliability indicated by values above 0.70 (Nunnally & Bernstein 1994). Similarly, CR values above 0.70 confirmed adequate reliability, offering a more suitable measure within the structural equation modelling (SEM) framework, as it accounts for individual item factor loadings rather than assuming equal contributions (Raykov 1997). While Cronbach's alpha provides a widely recognised benchmark, CR offers a more precise reliability estimate for latent constructs (Fornell & Larcker 1981; Hair et al. 2014).

Convergent and discriminant validity ensure the structural validity of the empowerment construct. Convergent validity was measured using AVE, with values above 0.50 indicating that the construct explained more than half of the variance in its indicators (Fornell & Larcker 1981). The refined factor structure was then subjected to CFA to further validate the scale . Out of the 14 items, three items (5, 11 and 12) were eliminated and not included in the CFA. These items exhibited commonalities below 0.5, indicating that they did not share sufficient variance with their respective factors and contributed weakly to the overall measurement structure. This adjustment allowed for a clearer identification of the underlying constructs and enhanced the reliability and validity of the measurement model. Average variance extracted ensured that items within a construct were highly correlated and measured the same underlying concept. Discriminant validity was established by comparing the square root of AVE with the inter-construct correlations, ensuring that each construct was distinct. By incorporating these measures, the study adhered to best practices in construct validation, ensuring that the empowerment construct demonstrated strong internal consistency, convergent validity and discriminant validity, thereby

supporting the robustness of the theoretical model (Hair et al. 2014). The CFA results provided empirical support for the three-factor model of meaningfulness, autonomy and/or decision-making and competence, confirming that the scale was a reliable and valid measure of employee empowerment in higher education institutions.

Model fit indices for the empowerment scale

The model fit indices provide an overall evaluation of the alignment between the measurement model for the empowerment scale and the observed data. Figure 1 provides a graphical representation of the alignment between the constructs of empowerment. The chi-square statistic (CMIN) of 201.400 with 68 degrees of freedom (DF) is significant, which is expected because of its sensitivity to the sample size. To account for this limitation, the relative chi-square (CMIN/DF) is assessed, with a value of 2.962 falling within the acceptable range of 1 to 3, thus confirming that the underlying structure of the data is adequately represented by the model.

Further support for model fit comes from the CFI, the normed fit index (NFI) and the TLI, which measure how well the proposed model fits compared to a null model. The CFI value of 0.940 is slightly below the recommended threshold of 0.95 but still acceptable. Similarly, the NFI and TLI values of 0.922 meet the acceptable benchmark of 0.90, reinforcing the model's adequacy. These indices indicate that the specified factor structure provides a reasonably good representation of the data, with only minor deviations from an ideal fit.

The absolute fit indices, including the SRMR and the RMSEA, offer additional insights into the model performance. The SRMR value of 0.058, below the 0.08 threshold, suggests an excellent fit, indicating minimal residual discrepancies between the observed and predicted covariance matrices. The RMSEA value of 0.064 is slightly above the ideal threshold of 0.06 but remains within the acceptable range, implying that the model adequately approximates the population-level data. These fit indices demonstrate that the empowerment scale exhibits a satisfactory model fit, supporting its reliability and validity for measuring the empowerment construct. Table 5 presents the model fit indices for the empowerment scale.

TABLE 5: Structural equation modelling fit indices for the empowerment scale.

Measure	Estimate	Threshold	Interpretation
CMIN	201.40	-	-
DF	68.00	-	-
CMIN/DF	2.96	Between 1 and 3	Acceptable
CFI	0.94	> 0.95	Acceptable
NFI	0.92	> 0.90	Acceptable
TLI	0.92	> 0.90	Acceptable
SRMR	0.06	< 0.08	Excellent
RMSEA	0.06	< 0.06	Acceptable

Source: Adapted from Dsane, N.A.K., 2024, 'A leadership competency framework for the empowerment of employees and the enhancement of organisational citizenship behaviour in public universities in Ghana', Doctoral thesis, University of South Africa, Pretoria

CMIN, chi-square statistic; DF, degrees of freedom; CMIN/DF, relative chi-square; CFI, comparative fit index; TLI, Tucker–Lewis index; RMSEA, root mean square error of approximation; SRMR, standardised root mean square residual; NFI, normed fit index.

Validity and reliability of the empowerment scale

Ensuring the reliability and validity of the measurement constructs is essential for establishing the robustness of the research model. Reliability assesses the consistency of the measurement scale, while validity ensures that the constructs accurately capture the intended theoretical concepts. In this section, CR (AVE), maximum shared variance (MSV) and Cronbach's alpha are reported. The MSV was examined to assess discriminant validity, ensuring that the constructs are distinct. These metrics collectively comprehensively assess the measurement model's quality and appropriateness.

To assess the construct validity and reliability, CR, AVE, MSV and maximum reliability (MaxR[H]) were calculated using Gaskin's statistical tool (Gaskin 2016). This tool facilitated an efficient evaluation of convergent and discriminant validity, ensuring that the measurement model met acceptable validity and reliability thresholds. Table 6 presents the results of CR, AVE, MSV and the correlations among the three empowerment factors: meaningfulness, competence and autonomy and/or decision-making. The CR values for meaningfulness (0.871), competence (0.741) and autonomy (0.831) exceed the recommended threshold of 0.70 (Hair et al. 2019), indicating strong internal consistency. Additionally, the maximum reliability, MaxR(H), values are slightly higher but remain close to their respective CR values, further supporting the reliability of the constructs. These findings suggest that the empowerment scale is reliable for measuring empowerment in higher education institutions.

The AVE values indicate the extent to which a construct explains the variance in its indicators and were used to assess convergent validity. The AVE values for meaningfulness (0.575), competence (0.589) and autonomy (0.552) exceed the minimum recommended threshold of 0.50 (Fornell & Larcker 1981), confirming that each construct captures a sufficient proportion of variance from its items. As all AVE values surpass 0.50, it can be concluded that the items measuring each construct are well related and contribute meaningfully to their respective latent variables.

TABLE 6: Reliability and validity of empowerment.

Empowerment factor	CR	AVE	MSV	MaxR(H)	Meaningfulness	Competence	Autonomy
Meaningfulness	0.87	0.57	0.56	0.87	0.76	-	-
Competence	0.74	0.59	0.56	0.75	0.75	0.77	-
Autonomy	0.83	0.55	0.48	0.83	0.69	0.58	0.74

Source: Dsane, N.A.K., 2024, 'A leadership competency framework for the empowerment of employees and the enhancement of organisational citizenship behaviour in public universities in Ghana', Doctoral thesis, University of South Africa, Pretoria

AVE, average variance extracted; MSV, maximum shared variance; CR, composite reliability.

Discriminant validity was determined by comparing the square root of the AVE (bolded diagonal values) with the inter-construct correlations. The square root of AVE for meaningfulness (0.758), competence (0.768) and autonomy (0.743) is larger than their correlations with other constructs, indicating that each construct is distinct from the others (Rönkkö & Cho 2022). The MSV for competence (0.558) is close to its AVE (0.589), suggesting substantial shared variance with other constructs but not to the extent that it compromises discriminant validity. Similarly, meaningfulness (MSV = 0.558) and autonomy (MSV = 0.482) exhibit an acceptable level of distinction.

The correlation analysis reveals significant positive relationships among the three factors. Meaningfulness and competence ($r = 0.747$) show a strong association, suggesting that employees who find their work meaningful tend to feel more competent. Meaningfulness and autonomy ($r = 0.694$) also exhibit a strong relationship, indicating that employees who perceive their tasks as meaningful are more likely to experience autonomy in decision-making. Meanwhile, competence and autonomy ($r = 0.581$) show a moderate correlation, implying that employees who feel competent in their roles also experience a certain level of decision-making autonomy. These findings highlight the interconnected nature of the three dimensions of empowerment while affirming their distinctiveness as separate constructs.

A KMO of 0.935 was obtained. All the items had factor loadings equal to or greater than 0.50. The total variance was 58.73%. All the factors had Cronbach's alpha values > 0.70, which indicated high internal consistency. The items discriminated sufficiently with no item having a median close to one of the extremes.

Discussion

The study aimed to identify the factors that influence staff empowerment by developing a measuring scale for empowerment, as applicable in a higher education context. Both EFA and CFA were conducted. The EFA revealed three factors: meaningfulness, autonomy and/or decision-making, and competence. Meaningfulness refers to the alignment between the purpose of work tasks and employees' value systems so that they feel their tasks are meaningful. Autonomy and/or decision-making relates to employees' freedom to execute their tasks. Competence involves providing employees with opportunities to use their skills and abilities to perform their work. Competency reflects a sense of self-efficacy and how employees deal with different situations at work. The CFA confirmed the results of the EFA. The results further indicated that the empowerment scale is reliable and valid for measuring the empowerment of higher education staff.

Higher education staff rated meaningfulness as the most important in terms of empowerment. The higher education environment is highly regulated, and staff accept the possibility that there is little room for autonomy. From the perspective of control, staff believe that competence would contribute significantly to their empowerment. The psychological dimensions of empowerment (meaningfulness and competence) are thus more important than structural empowerment (autonomy and/or decision-making), as evidenced by the descriptive statistics. The descriptive statistics indicated that respondents perceived meaningfulness and competence more positively than autonomy and/or decision-making.

The factorial structure differs from Spreitzer's original structure (competence, self-determination, meaning, impact). Still, it aligns with all the definitions of empowerment based on a cognitive state characterised by perceptions of competence, control and the internalisation of goals (Oliveira et al. 2023). Compared to the factorial structure of teacher empowerment by Short and Rinehart (1992), this study's results confirmed the dimensions of autonomy and/or decision-making and impact (meaningfulness). It was interesting to note that this study did not identify self-efficacy as a dimension of empowerment. A possible reason could be that academics in higher education institutions use a team approach towards curriculum development and implementation, and personal input is less visible. This may result in academics not realising their individual ability and role in students' success.

Empowerment is an ever-evolving construct that depends on different contexts, populations and work situations. Staff empowerment might thus change according to changes in organisational settings and structural and personal circumstances.

Theoretical and practical implications

The study contributes to understanding empowerment within the context of higher education in several ways. It confirms the role of the meaningfulness of work as a significant dimension of empowerment, resonating with the findings of Pradhan and Mishra (2019). Regarding autonomy, the power to make decisions should be delegated to staff. This confirms the findings of various studies on how power, information, resources and rewards are shared to enable staff to make autonomous decisions (Fernandez & Moldogaziev 2013; Gomez & Rosen 2001). Competence plays an important role in the efficient functioning of departments and colleges and refers to staff's content knowledge, cognitive processing, behavioural skills and personality traits (Potnuru, Sahoo & Sharma 2019).

Human Resource practitioners and managers should assess the empowerment of employees to manage performance. Key performance indicators should consider the extent of empowerment afforded to staff. Higher education institutions could use the results of this study as input to leadership development programmes. The ability of leaders to disseminate information, delegate authority, create forums for joint decision-making and create opportunities for staff development is critical to empower staff to change the status

quo. Performance management should focus on intrinsic motivation and cognitions such as meaning, competence and self-determination (Angelovska et al. 2018).

Overall, the study adds to the existing theories of empowerment. It explains which dimensions of empowerment are the most important to higher education staff. Government institutions are known for their bureaucracy and rigid hierarchical structures. Structural and psychological empowerment are critical for facilitating changes in educational institutions.

Limitations

Culture, leadership, workload, supervisor support and other institutional variables must also be considered influencers on empowerment. It is recommended that future studies refine the measurement of empowerment to include contextual factors.

Empowerment dynamics change constantly. As a result, future studies could investigate how online work influences empowerment dynamics in an educational institution.

Recommendation

Using a measurement instrument that integrates structural and psychological empowerment would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how empowerment could be promoted. This would further assist in developing strategies to advance empowerment in the workplace. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought many challenges, and more research is needed on how remote work influences perceptions of empowerment.

Conclusion

This study identified three factors of empowerment in higher education institutions: meaningfulness, autonomy and/or decision-making and competence. By fostering a deeper connection to purpose, granting employees greater decision-making power and investing in their skills, organisations can ignite true empowerment. Ultimately, it is the leadership's choice – will they enforce conformity or fuel transformation through empowerment?

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

M.C. and N.A.K.D. worked jointly in the conceptualisation of the research topic, in the design and interpretation of the data and in the final report. Both authors worked on the draft and finalised the article.

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Data availability

The data used were obtained via a survey and represented in tables in the manuscript. The data were gathered according to ethical principles, and the authors confirm the soundness of the data. The data can be accessed by contacting the corresponding author, M.C.

Disclaimer

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