

Four-Day Work Week Experiments and Their Impact on Employee Mental Health and Organizational Performance in Educational Institutions in India

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Abstract

The intensification of academic labour and escalating faculty burnout in Indian higher education have prompted renewed interest in alternative work-time arrangements. Drawing upon the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) theory and Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, this study proposes a conceptual framework examining how four-day work week experiments influence faculty mental health and organizational performance in Indian educational institutions. Despite robust international evidence demonstrating that income-preserving work-time reductions yield significant improvements in burnout, job satisfaction, and self-reported productivity, empirical inquiry remains strikingly absent in the context of India's higher education sector, where faculty routinely endure extended working hours, heavy administrative burdens, and blurred work–life boundaries. This paper synthesizes findings from large-scale international trials—including the six-country study encompassing 141 organizations and 2,896 employees, the UK pilot involving 61 companies, and longitudinal Scandinavian interventions—to contextualize the potential benefits and implementation challenges of shorter working weeks for Indian academics. We develop a set of testable hypotheses positing that four-day work week adoption is positively associated with faculty psychological well-being, work ability, and sleep quality, and indirectly enhances institutional performance through reduced absenteeism and improved talent retention. The proposed mixed-methods research design integrates longitudinal surveys with in-depth qualitative interviews across public and private universities in India. By bridging the gap between global work-time reduction research and the specific institutional realities of Indian higher education, this study contributes to HRM theory and offers evidence-based policy recommendations for academic leaders and regulatory bodies.

Keywords: four-day work week, faculty mental health, higher education, India, Job Demands–Resources theory, organizational performance, work-time reduction, burnout

1. Introduction

The standard five-day, forty-hour work week has remained largely unchallenged in higher education institutions across India, even as the nature of academic labour has undergone profound transformation. Indian faculty members increasingly confront intensified workloads stemming from expanded teaching obligations, heightened research expectations, growing administrative demands, and the encroachment of digital communication into personal time. Recent scholarship indicates that higher education teachers experience elevated levels of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment, with workload and daily working hours emerging as significant predictors of burnout syndrome. In the international context, systematic reviews have established that working more than forty hours per week is associated with increased risk of burnout symptoms, including emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced sense of personal accomplishment, alongside elevated risks of coronary heart disease, stroke, and depressive symptoms.

Against this backdrop, the four-day work week—defined as a meaningful reduction in weekly working time without commensurate loss of pay—has emerged as a compelling organizational intervention. The largest empirical investigation to date, conducted across 141 organizations in six countries, found that a six-month trial

of working four days a week reduced burnout, increased job satisfaction, and improved both mental and physical health among 2,896 employees. Crucially, the study identified three key mediators—improved self-reported work ability, reduced sleep problems, and decreased fatigue—suggesting that work-time reduction operates through identifiable psychophysiological pathways. Similarly, the United Kingdom's pilot programme, in which 61 companies participated and approximately 2,900 employees reduced their working week, found that 39% of employees were less stressed, 71% had reduced levels of burnout, and staff turnover decreased by 57%, with 92% of participating organizations electing to continue the arrangement.

Despite this accumulating global evidence, the four-day work week remains virtually unexplored within Indian educational institutions, where rigid contractual structures, semester-bound teaching schedules, and regulatory oversight by bodies such as the University Grants Commission (UGC) and National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) create distinctive implementation constraints. Faculty well-being research in India has predominantly focused on work–life balance as a generic construct, with limited attention to systemic work-time reorganization as a proactive HRM strategy. This study addresses this lacuna by proposing a theoretically grounded investigation into the effects of four-day work week experiments on faculty mental health and organizational performance in Indian higher education.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Four-Day Work Week: Conceptual Foundations and Empirical Evidence

The conceptual distinction between a genuine four-day work week and a compressed workweek—where employees work extended daily hours to accrue an additional day off—is analytically critical. The present study adheres to the definition advanced by Burchell and colleagues, who emphasize that a meaningful reduction in working time requires an absolute decrease in weekly hours rather than a redistribution of the same hours across fewer days. This distinction carries significant implications for employee health; longitudinal systematic reviews of compressed workweeks have yielded mixed results, with some studies finding increased sickness absence and predominantly negative health effects when comparing compressed schedules to standard day work.

The empirical case for genuine work-time reduction, by contrast, is increasingly robust. Beyond the large-scale coordinated trials conducted by 4 Day Week Global, national-level studies have documented consistent patterns. In France and Portugal, shorter statutory working weeks have been associated with measurable improvements in worker well-being, although the magnitude of effects varies by sector and gender composition. Scandinavian longitudinal interventions have provided particularly valuable evidence: a six-hour working day trial among Swedish social services workers demonstrated significant improvements in sleep quality, mental fatigue, and social activity time, while a shorter workday intervention in Norwegian and Swedish nursing homes reduced neck-shoulder pain and post-work exhaustion. More recent analyses indicate that employees experiencing weekly reductions of eight or more hours report larger gains in well-being-related outcomes, including better job satisfaction and mental health, alongside enhanced schedule control and exercise regimes.

From an organizational perspective, business leaders participating in global trials have reported improvements in retention and recruitment, reduced sick leave expenditure, and maintained or improved revenue streams, with companies rating the trial an average of 9 out of 10. These findings challenge the conventional HRM assumption that reduced hours necessarily diminish productive output, instead suggesting that work-time reorganization can stimulate collective workflow optimization.

2.2 Employee Mental Health in Higher Education Contexts

Higher education represents a distinctive occupational context characterized by high autonomy coupled with intense emotional labour, ambiguous performance criteria, and escalating accountability pressures. International surveys indicate that 64% of higher education faculty report feeling burned out because of work, with women (69%) and gender minority faculty (71%) experiencing disproportionately elevated rates. A systematic review of factors influencing teachers' occupational well-being identified high workload, bureaucratic processes, lack of autonomy, and exclusion from decision-making as primary stressors, while social support, adaptive coping strategies, and reduced workload were consistently associated with improved mental health outcomes.

In the Indian context, descriptive studies of college faculty have documented significant work–life balance deficits, with faculty members identifying flexible scheduling, accessible wellness programmes, and clear leave guidelines as unmet needs. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these challenges, accelerating the adoption of teleworking while simultaneously blurring boundaries between professional and domestic spheres. Indian higher education institutions have begun incorporating well-being programmes, counselling services, and flexible work arrangements into their HRM portfolios; however, these initiatives remain largely peripheral rather than structural.

2.3 Organizational Performance in Educational Institutions

Organizational performance in educational institutions is typically conceptualized through multiple dimensions: academic quality (student learning outcomes, research output), operational efficiency (resource utilization, administrative throughput), and human capital indicators (faculty retention, absenteeism, recruitment success). HRM practices influence these outcomes through both direct and mediated pathways. Research in higher secondary educational contexts has demonstrated that HRM practices facilitate service innovation and organizational commitment, which in turn predict organizational performance, suggesting that human resource strategy operates through attitudinal and behavioural mechanisms rather than direct production functions.

Within this framework, work-time policies constitute a foundational HRM practice. Hamermesh and Biddle's historical analysis documents the gradual emergence of four-day work week arrangements across the latter half of the twentieth century, noting their concentration among younger, non-union, and service-sector workers. The extension of such arrangements into professional and educational sectors represents a significant frontier for HRM research, particularly in developing economies where institutional rigidities and regulatory frameworks may impede experimentation.

2.4 The Indian Higher Education Landscape

India's higher education system is one of the largest globally, yet it faces chronic challenges including faculty shortages, uneven resource distribution across public and private institutions, and intensifying accountability pressures linked to national ranking frameworks and accreditation requirements. HRM in Indian higher education has historically emphasized compliance and administrative efficiency over employee well-being, although post-pandemic shifts have generated modest interest in flexible work arrangements and digital HR transformation. The regulatory environment, however, presents unique constraints: faculty workload norms prescribed by the UGC, fixed academic calendars, and examination schedules limit the latitude for institutional experimentation with work-time reduction. Nevertheless, the growing policy discourse on faculty mental health, combined with competitive pressures to attract and retain academic talent, creates a receptive context for pilot interventions.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Job Demands–Resources Theory

The Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) theory provides the primary theoretical architecture for this study. The theory posits that every occupation encompasses specific job demands and job resources, whose interplay determines employee well-being and performance outcomes. Job demands refer to physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects of the job that require sustained physical and psychological effort, while job resources denote functional means for achieving work goals, reducing demands, or stimulating personal growth. In the context of Indian academia, heavy teaching loads, administrative duties, research expectations, and emotional labour with students constitute salient job demands, while autonomy, social support, professional development opportunities, and recovery time function as critical resources.

The four-day work week operates within the JD-R framework as a structural job resource that enhances recovery and reduces exhaustion. By compressing the temporal boundaries of work, the intervention limits exposure to job demands while expanding opportunities for psychological detachment, thereby disrupting the depletion cycle that leads to burnout. International trial data support this mechanism: reduced working hours were correlated with decreased fatigue and improved self-reported work ability, suggesting that time itself functions as a replenishable resource within the JD-R dynamic.

3.2 Conservation of Resources Theory

Complementing the JD-R framework, Conservation of Resources (COR) theory emphasizes that individuals strive to obtain, retain, protect, and build resources, and that psychological distress occurs when resources are threatened, lost, or insufficiently replenished. Hobfoll's seminal formulation identifies key resource categories including object resources (e.g., pay stability), condition resources (e.g., seniority, tenure), personal resources (e.g., self-efficacy, optimism), and energy resources (e.g., time, knowledge). A four-day work week preserves income-related object resources while augmenting energy resources through the provision of additional discretionary time. This resource gain spiral is particularly relevant for Indian faculty, who often experience resource depletion across multiple domains simultaneously—academic, administrative, and domestic. The COR perspective predicts that faculty participating in a four-day work week experiment will experience not merely reduced strain but active resource accumulation, manifesting in enhanced psychological well-being and expanded capacity for organizational citizenship behaviours.

4. Hypotheses Development

Drawing upon the theoretical frameworks and empirical evidence reviewed above, we propose the following hypotheses:

H1: Four-day work week adoption is positively associated with faculty mental health, operationalized as reduced symptoms of burnout, anxiety, and depression.

H2: Four-day work week adoption is positively associated with faculty sleep quality and perceived work ability.

H3: The relationship between four-day work week adoption and faculty mental health is mediated by improved sleep quality and reduced fatigue.

H4: Four-day work week adoption is positively associated with organizational performance in educational institutions, measured through faculty retention rates, reduced absenteeism, and student satisfaction scores.

H5: The relationship between four-day work week adoption and organizational performance is mediated by faculty mental health and work ability.

H6: The positive effects of four-day work week adoption on mental health and organizational performance are moderated by institutional type (public vs. private), with stronger effects observed in private institutions owing to greater implementation flexibility.

5. Methodology

This study proposes a mixed-methods longitudinal design conducted across a purposive sample of public and private universities in India. The quantitative component involves pre-test/post-test surveys administered to faculty participants ($n = 400$) and matched control groups ($n = 400$) at institutions maintaining standard five-day schedules. Survey instruments include the Maslach Burnout Inventory, the Depression Anxiety Stress Scales-21, the Pittsburgh Sleep Quality Index, and bespoke measures of work ability and organizational commitment. Institutional performance data—turnover rates, sick leave utilization, student feedback scores, and research output metrics—will be collected from administrative records.

The qualitative component comprises semi-structured interviews with 40 faculty members and 20 academic administrators at intervention sites, exploring implementation experiences, workflow adaptations, and perceived barriers. Data collection will span 18 months, encompassing a six-month baseline period, a six-month trial phase, and a six-month follow-up period. Hierarchical linear modelling will be employed to account for nested data structures (faculty within departments within institutions), while thematic analysis will identify patterns in qualitative narratives.

6. Expected Contributions

This research makes three principal contributions. First, theoretically, it extends the JD-R and COR frameworks into the underexplored domain of work-time reduction within developing economy higher education, specifying

the mechanisms through which temporal restructuring influences faculty well-being. Second, methodologically, it introduces a rigorous experimental design to Indian HRM research, addressing persistent calls for evidence-based management in educational institutions. Third, practically, it generates actionable insights for academic leaders, regulatory bodies, and faculty unions contemplating work-time reorganization, offering a template for pilot implementation that balances pedagogical continuity with employee welfare.

7. Challenges and Limitations

The translation of four-day work week experiments from corporate and Nordic public-sector contexts into Indian higher education confronts substantial structural, regulatory, and cultural impediments. First, the regulatory architecture governing Indian universities presents formidable barriers. The University Grants Commission (UGC) prescribes minimum teaching and research workload norms for faculty, while the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) benchmarks institutional performance partly through quantifiable contact hours and faculty–student ratios. Any meaningful reduction in weekly working time risks triggering compliance deficits unless regulatory frameworks are proactively amended to recognize well-being-oriented HRM as a legitimate accreditation criterion. As Budhwar and Bhatnagar (2009) observe, Indian HRM systems have historically prioritized administrative compliance over employee-centric work redesign, suggesting that institutional inertia may resist temporal restructuring without top-down policy endorsement.

Second, the academic calendar in Indian higher education is structurally rigid. Semester-bound examination schedules, centralized admission timelines, and statutory committee meetings leave limited discretionary time for faculty workflow reorganization. Unlike service-sector firms where task batches can be compressed through digital automation, academic labour involves synchronous student contact, asynchronous grading and mentoring, and longitudinal research supervision that resist simple temporal compression. Kezar (2014) emphasizes that colleges and universities are fundamentally conservative organizations where change encounters entrenched interests and normative expectations; consequently, pilot interventions must anticipate stakeholder resistance from administrators fearing productivity loss, students anxious about reduced access, and parents interpreting fewer campus days as diminished educational value.

Third, methodological limitations attend the proposed research design. Self-reported measures of mental health, sleep quality, and work ability—while standard in occupational health research—are susceptible to social desirability bias and Hawthorne effects, particularly when participants are aware of their involvement in a novel HRM experiment. The eighteen-month longitudinal window, though superior to cross-sectional designs, may still prove insufficient to capture the full trajectory of adaptation; prior Scandinavian interventions suggest that physiological benefits of reduced hours consolidate over multi-year horizons (Barck-Holst et al., 2017). Furthermore, attrition in longitudinal academic samples is non-trivial, given faculty mobility between institutions and sabbatical leaves, threatening the statistical power of hierarchical linear models.

Fourth, generalizability constraints are pronounced. Private universities in India typically enjoy greater operational autonomy, flexible funding, and leaner bureaucratic structures than public institutions, which are encumbered by government staffing norms, pay commission mandates, and unionized workforces. Consequently, findings derived from elite private institutions may not transfer to under-resourced public colleges where faculty shortages are acute and where a four-day week might exacerbate existing workload concentrations rather than alleviate them. Finally, disciplinary heterogeneity complicates uniform implementation: laboratory-based science faculty face equipment scheduling and safety supervision obligations that differ qualitatively from humanities scholars whose work is more spatially and temporally fungible.

8. Findings and Discussion

Although the proposed empirical investigation remains to be executed, the theoretical synthesis and international evidence reviewed permit a discussion of anticipated findings and their interpretive implications for Indian higher education. Drawing upon the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) framework and Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, the discussion proceeds hypothesis by hypothesis, contextualizing projected results within the institutional realities of Indian academia.

Mental Health and Burnout Reduction. If Hypothesis 1 is supported, faculty participating in the four-day work week trial would exhibit statistically significant reductions in emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and depersonalization relative to control-group counterparts maintaining standard five-day schedules. This outcome would align with the six-country coordinated trial in which 2,896 employees demonstrated post-intervention improvements in burnout, job satisfaction, and both mental and physical health (Fan et al., 2025). The JD-R mechanism is instructive here: the fifth non-work day functions as a structural job resource that curtails exposure to chronic job demands—excessive teaching loads, administrative meetings, and student consultations—while enabling psychological detachment and recovery. In the Indian context, where faculty routinely report work–life balance deficits and where institutional wellness programmes remain peripheral (Tiwari et al., 2024), a four-day week would represent a fundamental rather than cosmetic intervention. Notably, the magnitude of burnout reduction may prove larger for women faculty and early-career academics, groups that existing literature identifies as disproportionately vulnerable to emotional exhaustion in higher education contexts.

Sleep Quality and Work Ability. Support for Hypothesis 2 would manifest as improved Pittsburgh Sleep Quality Index scores and elevated self-rated work ability among intervention participants. Scandinavian evidence provides strong precedent: Swedish social services workers experiencing six-hour days reported significant improvements in subjective sleep quality, mental fatigue, and time available for social and family activities (Schiller et al., 2017; Åkerstedt et al., 2001). For Indian faculty, who frequently engage in evening and weekend email correspondence, examination evaluation, and research writing, the provision of an uninterrupted midweek or extended weekend block may disrupt the rumination cycles that impair sleep onset and maintenance. The COR theoretical lens suggests that sleep functions as a replenishable energy resource; its protection through temporal boundary-setting should generate resource gain spirals, enhancing next-day cognitive engagement and instructional quality.

Mediation Through Recovery Mechanisms. Hypothesis 3 posits that sleep quality and fatigue reduction mediate the relationship between work-time reduction and mental health. This mediation pathway is critical because it shifts the explanatory focus from mere correlation to identifiable psychophysiological mechanisms. The international trial data identified precisely this pattern: reduced working hours were correlated with decreased fatigue and improved self-reported work ability, which in turn predicted well-being gains (4 Day Week Global, 2022). In Indian educational institutions, where faculty often lack dedicated recovery periods between semesters due to examination duties and admissions processes, the mediation model implies that policy makers should attend not merely to the quantity of working hours but to the quality and contiguity of recovery time. Interventions that fragment the fifth day across administrative catch-up tasks would likely attenuate mediation effects, underscoring the importance of genuine work disengagement.

Organizational Performance. Perhaps the most counterintuitive yet empirically robust anticipated finding concerns organizational performance (Hypothesis 4). Despite a 20% reduction in contracted hours, international pilot companies maintained or improved revenue streams while experiencing a 57% reduction in staff turnover and significant declines in sick leave utilization (4 Day Week Global, 2023). Pencavel (2014) demonstrates that productivity per hour exhibits an inverted-U relationship with working time, declining markedly beyond a threshold due to fatigue-induced errors and diminished cognitive efficiency. Applied to academia, this suggests that compressed, fatigued faculty may produce lower-quality research and less engaging instruction than well-rested colleagues operating within shorter temporal boundaries. Student satisfaction scores—a key performance metric for Indian institutions navigating NAAC accreditation—may consequently rise rather than fall, as faculty bring greater emotional energy to synchronous teaching interactions.

Mental Health as a Mediator of Performance. Hypothesis 5 extends the performance discussion by proposing that faculty mental health and work ability mediate the relationship between four-day week adoption and institutional outcomes. This aligns with HRM research demonstrating that human resource practices influence organizational performance through employee attitudes and behaviours rather than through direct production functions. Faculty who experience reduced burnout and enhanced work ability are more likely to exhibit organizational citizenship behaviours—voluntary mentoring, curriculum innovation, and institutional service—that accreditation frameworks value but rarely measure directly. The mediation model thus offers a theoretical bridge between employee well-being and institutional competitiveness, reframing work-time reduction as a strategic investment rather than a cost centre.

Institutional Moderation Effects. Hypothesis 6 anticipates that institutional type moderates intervention effectiveness, with private universities realizing larger well-being and performance gains than public counterparts. This moderation effect is theoretically grounded in the greater implementation flexibility, lower bureaucratic encumbrance, and more agile staffing models characteristic of private institutions. Public universities, constrained by UGC staffing norms, centralized pay scales, and faculty union agreements, may struggle to redistribute workloads or hire adjunct support necessary to absorb the fifth day's teaching obligations. However, if public institutions can negotiate pilot exemptions with regulatory bodies, their typically larger scale and disciplinary diversity would yield more generalizable evidence for national policy formulation.

9. Suggestions and Recommendations

For Institutional Leaders and Academic Administrators. University vice-chancellors and deans contemplating four-day week pilots should adopt a phased implementation strategy rather than institution-wide rollout. An initial phase targeting administrative staff and non-teaching weeks (examination evaluation periods, semester breaks) would generate organizational learning while minimizing pedagogical disruption. Prior to launch, workflow audits should identify and eliminate low-value administrative tasks—redundant committee meetings, excessive documentation, and ceremonial obligations—that consume faculty time without advancing institutional missions. The UK pilot's success was partly attributable to firms' willingness to "collectively adjust and optimize their workflows" (Schor, 2025); Indian institutions must similarly cultivate a culture of temporal efficiency. Communication strategies should explicitly frame the intervention as "same pay, same output, fewer hours" to preempt stakeholder concerns about diminished educational quality.

For Regulatory and Policymaking Bodies. The UGC, AICTE, and NAAC should collaboratively develop a framework for "well-being responsive accreditation" that permits experimental deviations from standard workload norms for institutions participating in approved pilot studies. Regulatory sandboxes—time-bound exemptions from rigid contact-hour requirements—would enable public universities to experiment without jeopardizing accreditation status. Furthermore, NAAC criteria should be expanded to include faculty well-being indicators (turnover rates, absenteeism, survey-based burnout metrics) alongside traditional input and output measures. National funding agencies might incentivize work-time reduction research through dedicated grants, positioning India as a leader in developing-economy HRM innovation.

For Human Resource Departments. HR units in higher education institutions should move beyond peripheral wellness programmes—yoga sessions, counselling helplines, and stress-management workshops—toward structural interventions that redesign the temporal architecture of academic work. This requires HR professionals to acquire competencies in work-time analytics, pilot study design, and evidence-based policy evaluation, capabilities that remain underdeveloped in Indian HEIs (Budhwar & Bhatnagar, 2009). HR departments should also facilitate participatory design processes, involving faculty unions and departmental representatives in scheduling decisions to ensure that the fifth day's reduction does not simply redistribute unpaid labour onto evenings and weekends.

For Faculty Unions and Professional Associations. Unions should advocate for four-day week pilots as a component of broader collective bargaining agendas, linking work-time reduction to parallel demands for adequate staffing ratios and teaching assistant support. Without sufficient personnel, reduced weekly hours may intensify daily workloads, undermining the intervention's well-being objectives. Unions can also serve as data custodians for pilot evaluations, lending credibility to self-reported outcome measures and protecting participant confidentiality.

10. Future Scope of the Study

The proposed research opens several avenues for subsequent inquiry. First, the eighteen-month observation window, while methodologically rigorous, should be extended to five-year longitudinal cohorts to assess whether well-being gains persist, attenuate, or compound over time. Burnout research indicates that honeymoon effects frequently characterize novel HRM interventions; sustained follow-up is necessary to distinguish genuine structural improvement from temporary Hawthorne responsiveness.

Second, future studies should integrate student learning outcomes as a dependent variable. If faculty mental health improves under a four-day week but student examination performance or course satisfaction declines, the policy calculus becomes more complex. A balanced scorecard approach—simultaneously tracking faculty well-being, student outcomes, research productivity, and financial sustainability—would provide a more complete evidence base for institutional decision-making.

Third, economic cost-benefit analyses represent a critical gap. While international trials suggest that reduced turnover and absenteeism offset revenue concerns (4 Day Week Global, 2023), Indian institutions operate under distinct labour market conditions where replacement costs and adjunct wages differ substantially from developed economies. Future research should model the net institutional cost of hiring additional faculty or teaching assistants to cover fifth-day obligations against savings from reduced attrition, lower sick leave, and improved NAAC rankings.

Fourth, cross-national comparative studies involving other large developing economies—Brazil, South Africa, Indonesia—would illuminate whether the four-day week's efficacy is contingent upon national income levels, labour market regulations, or cultural orientations toward work. Such comparisons would advance HRM theory by specifying boundary conditions for work-time reduction theory.

Fifth, the intersection of digital transformation and temporal restructuring warrants investigation. Artificial intelligence tools for automated grading, chatbot-based student query management, and AI-assisted research literature reviews may function as complementary resources that make four-day weeks feasible even in resource-constrained public institutions. Future research should examine whether technology-mediated workload reduction and temporal restructuring operate synergistically or redundantly.

Finally, gendered analyses deserve dedicated attention. Women faculty in India disproportionately shoulder domestic and caregiving responsibilities; a four-day week may yield larger well-being dividends for this cohort by expanding time available for household labour without compromising professional identity. Conversely, if the fifth day is absorbed by domestic obligations rather than rest, gendered recovery deficits may persist. Qualitative research exploring how faculty of different genders experience and utilize non-work time would refine implementation guidelines.

11. Conclusion

Indian higher education stands at an inflection point. Faculty shortages, intensifying accountability pressures, and post-pandemic digital acceleration have converged to produce an occupational environment in which emotional exhaustion is not an aberration but an occupational norm. Peripheral wellness initiatives—occasional counselling sessions, generic work–life balance workshops, and tokenistic flexible-leave policies—have proven insufficient to address the systemic temporal demands placed upon academics. The four-day work week represents a paradigmatic shift from ameliorative to structural HRM: rather than helping faculty cope with unsustainable workloads, it redesigns the workload itself.

The evidence synthesized in this paper suggests that income-preserving reductions in weekly working time yield consistent, replicable benefits for employee mental health, sleep quality, and work ability, while organizational performance indicators—retention, absenteeism, and self-reported productivity—either improve or remain stable. The Job Demands–Resources and Conservation of Resources theories provide coherent explanatory mechanisms, identifying recovery and resource accumulation as the pathways through which temporal restructuring enhances both individual well-being and institutional effectiveness.

Yet the Indian context imposes distinctive constraints. Regulatory rigidity, public–private institutional divergence, academic calendar inflexibility, and disciplinary heterogeneity mean that successful implementation cannot rely upon simple policy transplantation from corporate or Nordic contexts. Instead, carefully designed pilot studies, regulatory sandboxes, participatory workflow redesign, and longitudinal evaluation are prerequisites for evidence-based scaling.

This paper contributes to the HRM literature by proposing the first theoretically grounded, methodologically rigorous framework for examining four-day work week experiments in Indian educational institutions. By

bridging international work-time reduction research with the specific institutional realities of Indian academia, it offers a roadmap for academic leaders, policymakers, and faculty advocates seeking to reconcile educational excellence with human sustainability. The question is no longer whether Indian higher education can afford to experiment with shorter working weeks, but whether it can afford not to.

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