

## **Revisiting the Ability, Motivation and Opportunity (AMO) Model in UK Higher Education: A Conceptual Expansion of High-Performance Work Practices (HPWP)**

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## **ABSTRACT**

High-performance work practices have become a central feature of strategic human resource management research, yet most of the established models continue to reflect assumptions drawn from private-sector organisations. These models typically present high-performance work practices as a universal set of techniques that can be applied across sectors with similar effects. However, higher education operates in a very different way from corporate environments. Universities are professional, knowledge-driven communities where autonomy, collegiality, shared governance and disciplinary identity exert a strong influence on how staff interpret managerial initiatives. As a result, the direct transfer of corporate high-performance work practice frameworks into higher education often produces incomplete or misleading interpretations of staff experience and performance outcomes.

This conceptual paper argues that high-performance work practices need to be reconceptualised for the higher education sector. The paper draws on the Ability, Motivation and Opportunity (AMO) model as an organising framework, as AMO remains one of the most widely used and theoretically grounded approaches to understanding the links between human resource practices and performance. Using contemporary literature and insights that have emerged from employee perceptions in UK universities, the argument highlights several areas where current HPWP models fail to capture academic realities. These include the comparatively minor role of recruitment and selection in shaping day-to-day performance, the enduring importance of professional development, the need for meaningful performance feedback, and the particularly strong influence of opportunity-enhancing practices such as autonomy, communication, collegiality and involvement in decision-making.

The paper proposes a sector-sensitive HPWP framework that aligns more closely with the nature of academic work and the expectations of staff in universities. It concludes by discussing the theoretical implications for strategic human resource management, the practical implications for university leaders, and the avenues for future research on performance, staff wellbeing and organisational outcomes in higher education.

## **KEYWORDS**

High-performance work practices, Higher education, AMO model, Strategic human resource management, Academic work, Organisational performance.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The pursuit of organisational practices that enhance performance has long shaped the development of strategic human resource management (SHRM). Within this tradition, high-performance work practices

(HPWPs) have been advanced as a coherent set of techniques designed to raise employee capability, stimulate motivation and create conditions for improved organisational outcomes (Singh et al., 2024). HPWPs typically include selective recruitment, extensive training, performance-based rewards, employee

involvement and teamwork. The underlying logic is that these practices, when implemented systematically, generate synergistic effects that improve both individual and organisational performance. This perspective has been influential in shaping HRM scholarship and practice, particularly in private-sector contexts where competitive pressures and managerial discretion are pronounced (CIPD, 2025a).

Yet, the universalist framing of HPWPs has been increasingly questioned. Much of the foundational work in this area was developed within corporate environments, where performance imperatives, market competition and hierarchical control structures dominate. These conditions differ significantly from public-sector and professional settings, where organisational goals, governance structures and employee motivations are shaped by distinct institutional logics. As a result, dominant HPWP frameworks often assume a degree of managerial control and organisational predictability that does not always reflect the realities of other sectors (Parent-Lamarche et al., 2023). This raises important questions about the applicability of HPWPs across diverse organisational contexts and highlights the need for more nuanced, sector-specific approaches.

Higher education presents one such case where the assumptions underpinning HPWP models require careful reconsideration. Universities are complex organisations that rely heavily on professional expertise, academic identity and collegial forms of governance. They are shaped by traditions of autonomy, scholarly discretion and shared decision-making, which influence how staff respond to managerial practices. Unlike corporate environments, where managerial authority is often more direct, universities operate within cultures that value academic freedom, peer review and disciplinary norms. These characteristics complicate the application of private-sector HRM models and necessitate frameworks that account for the distinctive nature of academic labour (Wolfe, 2025).

The resource-based view (RBV) of the firm provides a useful lens for understanding why universities have nonetheless embraced aspects of HPWP logic. RBV suggests that organisations gain a competitive advantage when they utilise human capital that is valuable, rare, inimitable and not easily substituted (Bos-Nehles et al., 2023). In higher education, academic staff represent precisely such a resource: their expertise, research outputs and teaching quality are central to institutional reputation and competitiveness. Universities have therefore invested heavily in their academic workforce, particularly in response to pressures associated with global rankings, student satisfaction surveys and research assessment exercises (Rahman et al., 2024). Yet, while the RBV highlights the strategic importance of human capital, the translation of HPWP models into higher education has produced mixed results. This is largely because these models do not always account for

the professional norms, collegial relationships and governance structures that shape academic work.

A growing body of research recognises that HPWPs are not consistent across settings and that attempts to identify a universal list of practices remain problematic (Parent-Lamarche et al., 2023). Scholars have highlighted significant differences between management assumptions and employee interpretations of HR practices, noting that employees often experience HR initiatives in ways that diverge from managerial intent (Deloitte, 2025). This gap is particularly relevant in higher education, where academic staff interpret HR practices through the lens of workload, collegiality, disciplinary values and professional autonomy. For example, insights from employee perceptions within UK universities illustrate these differences clearly. Staff consistently view training and development as central to their ability to perform, while recruitment and selection play a far less prominent role in daily work, despite their prominence in corporate HPWP models (People Insight/UCEA, 2024). Motivation in universities tends to be shaped more by meaningful feedback, recognition and intrinsic professional purpose than by extrinsic financial incentives (Jayman et al., 2022; Rahman et al., 2024). These findings suggest that the motivational dynamics in higher education differ substantially from those assumed in private-sector HPWP frameworks.

Most strikingly, practices that create opportunities for staff to influence decisions, collaborate with colleagues and communicate openly appear to exert a particularly strong effect on organisational performance in universities. Research in higher education has shown that autonomy, employee involvement and teamwork contribute to higher levels of satisfaction, productivity and overall institutional performance (Rahman et al., 2024; Wolfe, 2025). Recent employee-centred insights further indicate that opportunity-enhancing practices have a stronger correlation with performance in higher education than either ability- or motivation-enhancing practices, suggesting that the academic environment rewards forms of participation and autonomy that differ from corporate settings (People Insight/UCEA, 2024). This observation challenges the universalist framing of HPWPs and underscores the importance of contextually grounded frameworks that reflect the realities of academic work.

The Ability, Motivation and Opportunity (AMO) model provides a valuable foundation for reconceptualising HPWPs in higher education. The AMO framework proposes that employees perform best when they possess the skills required (ability), feel motivated to contribute (motivation) and have the opportunity to exercise their capabilities (opportunity) (Bos-Nehles et al., 2023). While widely adopted, the AMO model is typically interpreted through a managerial lens that prioritises formal HR mechanisms such as training programmes, performance appraisals and incentive schemes. In universities, however, the meaning of ability, motivation

and opportunity is shaped by professional norms, collegial relationships and academic expectations. For instance, ability is often linked to disciplinary expertise and scholarly development rather than generic training; motivation is tied to intrinsic academic values and recognition of scholarly contributions; and opportunity is associated with autonomy, collegial governance and involvement in decision-making. This suggests that the AMO components must be reconsidered if they are to reflect the realities of academic work.

This paper uses a conceptual review design to bring together insights from peer-reviewed academic studies, sector policy reports, and employee-focused research in UK higher education. It aims to create a framework for high-performance work practices that is grounded in theory and sensitive to context. The approach is interpretive rather than exhaustive. It focuses on clarity, integration, and relevance to the sector instead of covering all available studies. This design fits well in a field where empirical evidence is scattered across strategic human resource management, higher education, and organizational behavior. The main goal is to refine theory, clarify concepts, and develop a useful framework, rather than to test hypotheses or generalize findings.

The aim of this paper is therefore to develop a conceptual model of HPWPs that aligns more closely with the nature of higher education. Drawing on theoretical debates and employee perceptions emerging from the sector, the paper argues that a higher-education-specific HPWP framework must foreground professional development, academic autonomy, collegial communication and involvement in decision-making. Rather than offering a fixed list of practices, the paper proposes a contextually grounded framework that captures the complexity of academic work and provides a more realistic basis for strategic HRM in universities. Such a framework would not only enhance organisational performance but also respect the professional identities and values that underpin academic labour. In doing so, it would contribute to a more nuanced understanding of HPWPs and their role in diverse organisational contexts.

### **CONTEXT: THE HIGHER EDUCATION SECTOR AS A DISTINCTIVE WORKPLACE**

Higher education is often described as a knowledge-intensive sector where organisational outcomes depend heavily on the expertise, professional judgment and discretionary effort of academic and professional staff. This makes universities fundamentally different from many private-sector organisations, where performance is shaped more directly by managerial control and formalised systems. The nature of academic work is grounded in professional autonomy, disciplinary identity and self-directed behaviour, which creates a distinctive context for understanding how human resource practices influence performance (Wolf & Jenkins, 2021).

Universities in the United Kingdom operate within a competitive and rapidly changing environment. International rankings place substantial emphasis on teaching quality, research outputs, faculty reputation and academic performance, creating pressure on institutions to maintain and improve their standing (QS World University Rankings, 2025). Shifts in the global higher education landscape have required institutions to invest in the quality of teaching and research infrastructure in order to remain competitive (Universities UK, 2025). These pressures have contributed to a stronger managerial orientation within universities, prompting greater attention to strategic human resource management (NTT Data, 2025).

The academic workforce itself reflects this complexity. Staff in higher education comprise a mixture of academic and non-academic employees with diverse expectations and responsibilities (HESA, 2025). Academic staff engage in teaching, curriculum development, research, supervision and pastoral care. These activities are closely tied to professional values such as scholarly independence and intellectual contribution, which influence how staff evaluate organisational initiatives. Research shows that universities in the UK are increasingly attempting to formalise performance expectations through approaches such as balanced scorecards, performance metrics and elements of lean thinking (Sheikh et al., 2022). However, scholars have questioned whether these mechanisms align with the realities of academic work, noting that they may be incompatible with the collegial and creative nature of higher education (Personnel Today, 2025).

The distinctiveness of academic work is also evident in the factors that shape staff performance. Training and development, for example, are essential for maintaining high teaching and research standards, and are often viewed as a central component of academic professional identity (University of York, 2025; University of Huddersfield, 2025). Similarly, autonomy and involvement in academic decision-making have been shown to underpin productivity, job satisfaction and organisational performance in higher education settings (Advance HE, 2025). These features illustrate how opportunity-enhancing conditions are embedded in the professional culture of universities.

At the same time, universities depend on collaborative relationships and shared norms to function effectively. Teamwork, knowledge sharing and collegial communication are central to managing teaching responsibilities, research collaboration and administrative processes. Studies indicate that effective teamwork and supportive communication structures contribute to higher levels of satisfaction, innovation and overall institutional performance (Francis et al., 2025; Navío-Marco et al., 2025). These findings highlight the social and relational aspects of academic work, which contrast with more individualised performance expectations often found in corporate settings.

The higher education sector is also shaped by broader organisational and ethical pressures. Universities are required to balance competing demands related to student expectations, widening participation, quality assurance, research funding and internationalisation. These pressures shape the organisational climate in which staff work, making the relationship between human resource practices and performance more complex than in environments where goals and output measures are more narrowly defined (McKinsey, 2025).

Alongside these structural pressures, recent evidence points to widespread mental ill-health, stress, overwork and burnout within the UK higher education sector (Douglas et al., 2025). These conditions further complicate the effectiveness of HR interventions, as performance cannot be separated from staff wellbeing and workload sustainability. Strategic human resource management in higher education therefore requires a holistic approach that aligns people, organisational structures and institutional priorities in ways that respect the professional character of academic work and address the wellbeing of the workforce (Universities UK, 2025; Douglas et al., 2025).

These dynamics illustrate why high-performance work practices cannot be transferred directly from private-sector models into universities. The academic environment is shaped by autonomy, collegiality, intrinsic motivation and professional identity, all of which influence how staff interpret and respond to HR initiatives. These features provide the foundation for the reconceptualisation of HPWP developed later in this paper.

## **THE AMO MODEL AS AN INTERPRETIVE LENS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION**

The AMO model has become one of the most influential frameworks for explaining how human resource practices influence employee performance. It proposes that individuals perform well when they have the ability to do their jobs, the motivation to apply that ability and the opportunity to contribute meaningfully to organisational goals (Appelbaum et al., 2000). Over the last decade, the AMO model has been widely adopted in public, private and non-profit settings, and it remains a dominant lens in HRM research (Paauwe & Boon, 2018; Kuvaas et al., 2023). However, applying the model to the higher education sector requires careful interpretation, as the meaning of each dimension shifts in professional and academic environments.

### **Ability-enhancing practices in higher education**

In traditional AMO research, ability-enhancing practices typically include rigorous recruitment, structured training and systematic appraisal systems designed to improve skills and competencies. While these practices have been linked to performance in many industries

(Boxall et al., 2016; Jiang & Messersmith, 2018), the academic environment presents a different picture.

In universities, recruitment plays a central strategic role, but once staff are appointed, day-to-day performance is shaped less by entry criteria and more by ongoing professional development, scholarly growth and peer learning (Alsafadi & Altahat, 2021). Recent analyses in higher education show that staff place substantial value on developmental activities such as pedagogical training, research mentoring and opportunities for scholarly advancement (Rozhnova et al., 2024). These forms of ability enhancement are embedded in academic identity and are viewed as essential for maintaining teaching and research quality.

This suggests that in higher education, ability is not merely a function of initial hiring standards but a lifelong developmental process rooted in learning cultures, disciplinary knowledge and institutional investment in staff expertise.

### **Motivation-enhancing practices in professional academic settings**

Motivation in AMO frameworks is often assumed to arise from extrinsic levers such as performance-based pay, financial incentives, bonus schemes or promotion opportunities (Alatailat & Elrehail, 2019). Yet the evidence in higher education points to a different motivational structure.

Studies consistently show that academic staff derive motivation from intrinsic factors, including intellectual fulfilment, autonomy, recognition of scholarly contribution, collegial respect and the ability to influence academic decisions (Kallio & Kallio, 2014; Victor & Babatunde, 2014). More recent research confirms that performance-based pay and tight performance controls often have neutral or even negative effects on academic engagement, as they can conflict with professional values and academic freedom (Jensen, Patel & Messersmith, 2022; Kuvaas et al., 2023).

Instead, staff respond more positively to meaningful feedback, mentoring, opportunities for leadership in teaching or research and supportive relationships with line managers. This aligns with evidence that relational and intellectual forms of motivation are more powerful predictors of academic behaviour than financial incentives.

### **Opportunity-enhancing practices and their heightened importance in HE**

The opportunity aspect of the AMO model pertains to structures that enable employees to effectively utilise their abilities and motivations. These include participation in decision-making, teamwork, communication channels, job autonomy, and flexible work arrangements. Although these practices are vital

across various sectors, evidence from higher education indicates that they are particularly significant in academic environments. Furthermore, research demonstrates that academic staff rely heavily on discretion and professional judgement in their daily tasks, meaning that opportunity-enhancing conditions such as autonomy and participatory frameworks directly influence whether expertise can be translated into high-quality teaching and research outputs (Li et al., 2025).

Opportunity-enhancing practices such as academic autonomy, participatory governance, collegial committees, collaborative research structures, open communication, and discretionary space for innovation are deeply embedded in university culture (Agarwal & Adjirackor, 2016; Hanaysha, 2016a). Recent studies of higher education institutions show that employee participation and collaborative structures significantly enhance knowledge sharing, innovation, and affective commitment (Wolfe, 2025). Similarly, analyses of HRM systems in knowledge-intensive workplaces reveal that opportunity-related practices exert the strongest relationship with performance outcomes, surpassing ability and motivation practices (CIPD, 2025a). These practices effectively serve as the organisational infrastructure through which knowledge-intensive work can occur, supporting innovation, collaboration, and long-term academic contribution.

These findings highlight a key aspect of academic work: the opportunities to influence decisions, exercise autonomy in teaching and research, and collaborate collegially are not merely beneficial; they are essential to academic productivity and identity. This makes enhancing opportunities the main driver of performance in higher education, rather than a secondary aspect of HR practice. This aligns with broader findings that academic identity and productivity are strengthened when staff experience trust, voice, and meaningful involvement in shaping institutional decisions (Douglasa et al., 2025).

### **Adapting the AMO model for higher education**

Applying the AMO model to universities needs a broader and more context-aware interpretation of each component. Ability should focus on developmental and scholarly growth instead of just narrow skills. It should reflect the ongoing learning and intellectual progress that support academic work. Motivation should consider both internal and relational factors tied to professional values, such as recognition, support from colleagues, and a sense of purpose in academia. Opportunity should include autonomy, shared governance, and creative freedom, as these factors help academics use their skills meaningfully. As Paauwe and Boon (2018) argue, HRM frameworks must be understood within their institutional and professional context, making it vital to reinterpret AMO in ways that reflect the unique cultural and structural features of higher education.

While the AMO model is a useful analytical tool, applying it to higher education shows the need for clear adjustments based on context. In universities, ability, motivation, and opportunity cannot be seen as generic or interchangeable. Each element is influenced by professional standards, institutional cultures, and governance structures that shape how academic work is organized and assessed. This new view broadens the theoretical scope of AMO, moving it away from being mainly a management tool to a framework that reflects the actual experiences of professionals.

This shift improves the utility of AMO as a flexible framework for examining the relationship between human resource management and performance in knowledge-based and professional fields. Instead of being a rigid model applied the same way across different organizations, AMO proves to be adaptable to various contexts, leading to better understanding of how HR practices affect performance in higher education universities (Bos-Nehles et al., 2023).

### **INSIGHTS FROM EMPLOYEE-CENTRED EVIDENCE**

Much of the high-performance work practices (HPWP) literature has historically been developed from a managerial perspective, often assuming that employees will respond predictably to formal HR interventions. Contemporary research increasingly challenges this assumption, showing that the effects of HR practices depend on how employees interpret and experience them. This employee lens is particularly important in professional and knowledge-intensive environments, such as universities, where autonomy, disciplinary identity and collegial norms strongly shape the meaning of HR initiatives. This aligns with broader research showing that academics evaluate organisational practices through lenses of fairness, transparency and alignment with disciplinary values, which strongly influence whether HR initiatives are perceived as legitimate or intrusive (People Insight/UCEA, 2024; Douglasa et al., 2025). Recent studies demonstrate that employees do not automatically align with managerial intentions; instead, they evaluate HR practices through their own expectations, values and prior experiences (Douglasa et al., 2025; Wolfe, 2025). This divergence between intended and perceived HRM highlights the importance of integrating employee-centred insights into conceptual models of HPWP for higher education.

### **Divergence between managerial assumptions and employee priorities**

Employee-focused research consistently shows that staff do not attach equal importance to all components of conventional HPWP bundles. Traditional frameworks often emphasise recruitment, selection and performance-linked incentives as primary levers for raising

productivity (Salin et al., 2023). Yet, evidence from higher education indicates that academic staff place greater value on developmental and relational aspects of HRM, such as opportunities for skill enhancement, mentorship and supportive feedback (Moe-Cox & Benn, 2025; People Insight/UCEA, 2024). This pattern reflects broader findings across knowledge-intensive sectors, where continuous professional development is viewed as essential for maintaining relevance and expertise (Li et al., 2025).

Recruitment is acknowledged as important for establishing capability, but employees rarely perceive it as a factor influencing their day-to-day performance. Instead, staff development, pedagogical training and protected time for research are consistently identified as practices that directly enhance academic performance. This mismatch between conventional HPWP frameworks and the lived experience of academic staff underscores the need to rethink which practices are most salient in higher education. This divergence does not reflect resistance to managerial expectations but instead highlights a structural mismatch between corporate-style HPWP assumptions and the professional logic that guides academic work (Kallio & Kallio, 2014).

### **Motivation rooted in recognition, academic purpose and relational support**

The motivational landscape in universities differs substantially from the assumptions embedded in many HPWP models. Whereas corporate frameworks often prioritise financial incentives, bonus structures or performance-related pay, employees in higher education frequently view these mechanisms as misaligned with academic values or even counterproductive (Kuvaas et al., 2023; Matei et al., 2025). Motivation in academic contexts tends to arise from recognition of scholarly contributions, meaningful feedback, collegial respect and opportunities to influence decisions about teaching and research. These motivational drivers reflect deeply embedded academic values, where intellectual fulfilment, autonomy and scholarly contribution operate as primary sources of engagement rather than financial incentives or performance-linked rewards (Kuvaas et al., 2023).

Recent studies confirm that intrinsic motivation remains a key driver of academic engagement. Research examining academic staff commitment shows that relational support and recognition of expertise significantly influence job satisfaction and organisational citizenship behaviours (CIPD, 2022; Boocock, 2025). These findings resonate with evidence across knowledge-based professions, where workers respond more positively to practices that affirm professional identity and autonomy (Zegullaj et al., 2024). Motivation-enhancing practices in higher education must therefore prioritise intellectual

fulfilment, relational support and acknowledgement of academic labour rather than relying on extrinsic rewards.

### **The elevated role of opportunity-enhancing practices**

A consistent theme across recent higher education research is the disproportionate importance of opportunity-enhancing practices. This finding aligns with broader evidence from knowledge-intensive sectors, which shows that autonomy, participation and collaboration are central to sustainable performance (CIPD, 2025b). When employees describe the conditions that support high performance, they frequently highlight practices that expand their influence, enable collaboration and provide space for professional discretion.

Studies across universities in Asia, Europe and the UK indicate that autonomy, collegial decision-making and open communication are strongly associated with outcomes such as knowledge sharing, innovation, job satisfaction and institutional commitment (Hanaysha, 2016b; Al-Hamad et al., 2023; Wolfe, 2025). Opportunity structures such as involvement in curriculum decisions, participation in research networks and engagement in shared governance bodies create meaningful avenues for academic staff to apply and deepen their expertise. These opportunities strengthen the relationship between individual motivation and institutional outcomes by positioning staff as active contributors to organisational goals rather than passive recipients of managerial directives.

Employee-centred findings in UK universities reinforce this pattern, showing that performance is most directly influenced by autonomy, communication and involvement in decision-making (People Insight/UCEA, 2024). These practices align strongly with the AMO framework's opportunity dimension, supporting the argument that opportunity-enhancing mechanisms constitute the most influential component of HPWP in higher education.

### **Implications for a reconceptualised HPWP model**

Insights from employee perspectives clearly show the need to rethink high-performance work practices in higher education. Staff in both academic and professional roles consistently highlight the value of developmental, relational, and participatory practices. They suggest that universities respond best to HR systems that focus on collaboration, autonomy, continuous learning, and shared governance. These preferences reflect the professional and knowledge-centered nature of academic work, where performance is closely tied to trust, collegial interaction, and the freedom to make scholarly judgments. In this context, HR practices are assessed more by their ability to support professional identity and meaningful contributions, rather than by managerial control.

A sector-sensitive high-performance work practices framework must go beyond models based on control or narrow transactional practices. Instead, it should emphasize systems that allow for professional discretion, strengthen collegial relationships, and promote academic development over time. Employee-centered evidence enhances the understanding of the AMO model in higher education by showing how ability, motivation, and opportunity are experienced and expressed in academic settings. These elements do not operate independently; instead, they interact through relational and participatory mechanisms that are key to academic performance.

Based on this synthesis, three related conceptual propositions can be outlined. These propositions illustrate how high-performance work practices function in higher education and lay the groundwork for future empirical research.

Proposition 1. Opportunity-enhancing practices, such as academic autonomy, participatory governance, and collegial communication, have a stronger direct impact on staff performance in higher education than practices that enhance ability or motivation.

Proposition 2. Ability-enhancing practices are most effective in higher education when they focus on development and scholarship, supporting ongoing professional growth and academic skills rather than just defined competencies.

Proposition 3. Motivation-enhancing practices in universities mainly operate through intrinsic and relational mechanisms. Recognition of academic contributions, collegial support, and meaningful involvement in decision-making are more closely linked to staff performance than transactional financial incentives.

These propositions challenge one-size-fits-all high-performance work practice models and highlight the need for specific configurations of human resource practices in the sector. They suggest that university performance arises not from strict managerial control but from a combination of developmental support, intrinsic motivation, and opportunities for participation. Importantly, these propositions are interconnected; they contribute to designing a cohesive framework that captures the multi-level, relational, and professional dynamics of academic work.

Building on these propositions, it is vital to formalize them into a redefined high-performance work practices framework for higher education, structured around an adapted AMO model that illustrates how ability, motivation, and opportunity interact at individual, collective, and institutional levels.

**RECONCEPTUALISED HPWP FRAMEWORK FOR HIGHER EDUCATION**

The analysis of existing high-performance work practice (HPWP) frameworks, combined with insights from employee-centred evidence, strongly indicates that universities require a sector-specific understanding of HPWP. The distinctive nature of academic work, grounded in autonomy, collegiality and professional identity, makes it unlikely that standard corporate models will capture the mechanisms that genuinely influence performance in higher education. To address this gap, a reconceptualised HPWP framework is introduced (Figure 1), tailored to the higher education context and structured through an adapted interpretation of the AMO model.



**Figure 1: The Reconceptualised AMO Model for Higher Education**

The proposed framework is not intended as a rigid checklist but as a conceptual model that reflects the values, structures and behaviours that characterise universities. It builds on contemporary literature and employee insights to reframe the AMO components in ways that align with academic realities. The model is presented across three interconnected domains.

### **Ability in Higher Education: A Developmental and Scholarly Construct**

In traditional HPWP models, ability is often defined through competencies, qualifications and the outcomes of formal training programmes. In higher education, however, ability is shaped far more by the ongoing development of academic expertise, pedagogical skills and research capability. Academic staff typically enter the profession with substantial disciplinary knowledge, but maintaining high performance requires continuous engagement with scholarly communities, evolving pedagogical practices and innovations in research.

Recent studies confirm that staff in universities place strong value on developmental opportunities such as mentorship, research training, pedagogical workshops and collaborative learning networks (Li et al., 2025; Moe-Cox & Benn, 2025). These activities reinforce academic identity while sustaining the intellectual capital that underpins institutional performance. Ability development in universities is therefore best understood as a dynamic, iterative process tied to disciplinary learning and professional growth.

Reconceptualised ability-enhancing practices include:

1. Ongoing pedagogical development, including evidence-informed teaching enhancement
2. Structured research mentorship and methodological support
3. Opportunities for academic leadership development
4. Protected time for scholarship, research and innovation
5. Collaborative learning spaces and communities of practice

These practices recognise ability as a continuous scholarly trajectory rather than a static competency set. This contextualised view of ability reflects arguments that HRM frameworks must be interpreted within their institutional environments, reinforcing that universities require models aligned with professional norms rather than generic competency-based approaches (Paauwe & Boon, 2018).

### **Motivation in Higher Education: Recognition, Purpose and Relational Support**

Motivation in academic environments is shaped less by extrinsic rewards and more by intrinsic and relational drivers. Research shows that academics are motivated by intellectual fulfilment, opportunities to contribute meaningfully to their field, and recognition of their expertise (Kuvaas et al., 2023; Matei et al., 2025). Employee-centred scholarship further emphasises relational support, mentorship and meaningful performance feedback as central to sustaining motivation (Boocock, 2025).

A sector-sensitive interpretation of the AMO model must therefore view motivation not through the lens of financial incentives but through the creation of environments that enable staff to experience purpose, pride and collegial respect in their work.

Reconceptualised motivation-enhancing practices include:

1. Recognition of academic contributions through collegial, peer-informed systems
2. Constructive, developmental performance feedback aligned with academic values
3. Supportive leadership that respects autonomy and professional judgement
4. Opportunities for meaningful academic citizenship (for example programme leadership or research clusters)
5. Workload systems that protect time for high-quality teaching and research

Motivation in higher education thus rests on intellectual and relational fulfilment rather than transactional rewards.

### **Opportunity in Higher Education: Autonomy, Voice and Collegial Participation**

The opportunity dimension is the most distinctive in the higher education context and, as recent evidence shows, the most influential in shaping staff performance (CIPD, 2025b). Opportunity in universities is constituted by the structures that allow academics to exercise professional agency, collaborate effectively and shape institutional direction.

Academic work is inherently self-directed, and the ability to influence decision-making processes remains a fundamental part of professional identity. Research demonstrates that autonomy, participatory governance and collegial communication predict outcomes such as innovation, knowledge sharing, job satisfaction and institutional commitment (Al-Hamad et al., 2023; Wolfe, 2025). These conditions empower academic staff to apply their expertise in ways that align with institutional goals while preserving their sense of ownership and identity.

Reconceptualised opportunity-enhancing practices include:

1. Genuine involvement in curriculum design, assessment decisions and research strategy
2. Transparent, two-way communication between leadership and staff
3. Collaborative decision-making through committees, working groups and shared governance structures
4. Protected autonomy in research and teaching design
5. Opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration and academic networking

This redefinition positions opportunity not as a supplementary factor but as the core driver of performance in higher education.

### **Interdependence of AMO Components in the HE Sector**

Although ability, motivation and opportunity are presented separately, their effects in higher education are strongly interdependent. Developmental opportunities strengthen academic ability; recognition and collegial support heighten motivation; and participatory structures enable staff to apply their abilities and motivation effectively. Opportunity-enhancing practices often serve as the mechanism through which ability and motivation translate into performance, underscoring the need to treat the AMO components as mutually reinforcing rather than discrete elements.

The reconceptualised model therefore positions academic autonomy, developmental support and relational motivation as central pillars of staff performance. These elements collectively recognise the professional, intellectual and collaborative character of academic work, offering a more accurate framework for designing HR systems in universities.

### **A Multi-Level Perspective on the Reconceptualised Framework**

The new framework works at different organizational levels. At the individual level, AMO (Ability, Motivation, Opportunity) factors shape how academics experience their roles, develop skills, and engage in teaching and research. Recent studies show that HR practices that enhance AMO affect academic wellbeing, role clarity, and the formation of professional identity (Saad, 2023).

At the team or departmental level, practices that create opportunities, such as committees, collaborative research structures, and shared curriculum design, promote knowledge sharing and improve team performance. These practices encourage a culture of learning and strengthen relationships, particularly when they align with AMO principles (Naqshbandi et al, 2024).

At the institutional level, governance arrangements, strategic priorities, and HR policies create the larger opportunity space where individual and team dynamics take place. Multi-level thinking in strategic HRM reveals how institutional structures influence performance, innovation, and engagement (Van Beurden et al., 2025).

Looking at High-Performance Work Practices (HPWP) from a multi-level perspective highlights the need to connect different organizational layers. HRM strategies that focus only on individual practices may miss the structural and relational supports that drive performance. A multi-level perspective emphasizes the necessity for integrated HR approaches that connect individual growth, team-based academic practices, and institutional governance. Bos-Nehles et al. (2023) highlight the need for clear concepts and accurate measurements when applying AMO across levels, reinforcing the importance of multi-level alignment in HRM research.

### **The Contribution of the Reconceptualised Framework**

The revised framework improves the literature on high-performance work practices by tackling issues found in mostly universal and manager-focused models. By highlighting the professional and knowledge-based nature of academic work, it shows that HPWP can only be understood by considering the occupational norms, identities, and relationships that influence how performance is carried out in universities. This challenges the idea that HR practices made for businesses can be applied directly to higher education without losing important theoretical or practical elements.

The framework also clarifies the use of the Ability, Motivation, and Opportunity model by looking at its main parts through an academic perspective. Ability is seen as a growing and learning process, not just a fixed set of skills. Motivation comes mainly from intrinsic factors and relationships tied to recognition, support from peers, and the purpose of academia. Opportunity is seen as the key factor in performance, including autonomy, shared governance, and teamwork that allow staff to use their skills meaningfully. This rethinking expands AMO theory by showing how its aspects work together in professional settings and at individual, group, and institutional levels.

Finally, the framework lays a strong conceptual foundation for creating HR systems that genuinely support academic involvement. Instead of promoting control-based or transactional methods, it emphasizes HR setups that build trust, encourage peer interaction, and allow professional judgment. This offers both researchers and practitioners a more practical way to assess and develop HR strategies in line with the values and practices of universities. Together, these insights create a foundation for theoretical growth and more relevant approaches to human resource management in higher education.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR SHRM THEORY AND PRACTICE**

The reconceptualised high-performance work practices (HPWP) framework presented in this paper carries significant implications for both strategic human resource management (SHRM) theory and the practical organisation of work within higher education institutions. By integrating insights from AMO theory, employee-centred research and sector-specific dynamics, the framework challenges the assumption that high-performance practices operate uniformly across organisational contexts. Instead, it demonstrates that the mechanisms linking HRM and performance are fundamentally shaped by the professional character of academic work.

### **Implications for SHRM Theory**

The first theoretical implication concerns the *contextualisation of SHRM models*. Much of the literature on HPWP and SHRM has historically emphasised universalistic frameworks that assume consistent effects across settings (Boxall & Purcell, 2016; Paauwe & Boon, 2018). The evidence synthesised in this paper supports recent calls for greater contextual sensitivity, particularly in public and knowledge-based sectors. This reconceptualised model reinforces the argument that HRM–performance relationships cannot be understood without reference to the institutional, professional and occupational norms that shape employee experience (Douglassa et al., 2025; Wolfe, 2025).

Second, the framework modifies the application of the *AMO model*, demonstrating that its components must be interpreted differently in knowledge-intensive settings. Contemporary HRM research increasingly recognises that AMO is not a fixed formula but a flexible model that adapts to sectoral realities (Bos-Nehles et al., 2023; Kuvaas et al., 2023). By reframing ability, motivation and opportunity through the lens of academic work, this paper extends the AMO model beyond its conventional managerialist orientation and shows how professional identity, autonomy and collegial norms alter its functional dynamics.

Third, the model contributes to debates around *employee perceptions* and their centrality in shaping HRM outcomes. Recent literature highlights that employee interpretations of HR practices can diverge markedly from managerial intentions, directly affecting the strength and direction of HRM–performance relationships (Jensen et al., 2021; CIPD, 2025b). The reconceptualised HPWP model positions employee experience not as a secondary outcome of HR practice but as one of the primary mechanisms through which performance effects emerge.

### **Implications for HR Practice in Higher Education**

For practitioners, the reconceptualised framework highlights the need for HR strategies that genuinely reflect the academic environment rather than imposing corporate models that may conflict with professional values. Several practical implications follow from this.

*First*, HR leaders should prioritise *developmental forms of ability enhancement*. Investment in pedagogical training, research mentorship, scholarly communities of practice and leadership development aligns closely with employees' expectations and supports the intellectual capital that underpins institutional reputation (Li et al., 2025; Moe-Cox & Benn, 2025).

*Second*, universities must strengthen *relational and intrinsic motivators*. Instead of relying on performance-linked incentives, HR teams should focus on cultivating cultures of recognition, constructive feedback, academic citizenship and meaningful involvement in shaping teaching and research agendas. These approaches are more likely to reinforce commitment, job satisfaction and knowledge-sharing behaviours (Matei et al., 2025; Boocock, 2025).

*Third*, the prominence of opportunity-enhancing practices suggests that universities should protect and expand *academic autonomy and participatory governance*. This might involve ensuring transparency in decision-making, enabling staff to contribute to curriculum development and research strategies, and supporting collaborative structures such as interdisciplinary networks and collegial committees. Such practices allow academics to apply their expertise freely, enhancing both individual and institutional performance (Al-Hamad et al., 2023; People Insight/UCEA, 2024).

*Fourth*, HR systems in universities should be designed to accommodate the *interdependence of AMO components*. For example, workload allocation systems that protect research time not only provide opportunities but also sustain motivation and enhance ability development. Similarly, leadership behaviours that encourage open communication simultaneously support opportunity, motivation and relational effectiveness.

### **Implications for Organisational Culture and Leadership**

The reconceptualised framework also has implications for institutional culture and leadership in higher education. Evidence suggests that academic performance is strongly influenced by cultures that value trust, intellectual freedom, collegiality and shared purpose (CIPD, 2025b; Wolfe, 2025). Senior leaders must therefore adopt styles that facilitate communication, empower academic staff and respect the traditions of scholarly autonomy. Leadership in this context is less about directional control and more about enabling environments in which academic expertise can flourish.

HRM in universities must therefore align with broader cultural initiatives, positioning people management not as an administrative function but as a strategic enabler of academic excellence. Embedding the reconceptualised HPWP model within institutional culture can help create conditions where staff feel valued, motivated and empowered to contribute to teaching, research and innovation.

### **Implications for Policy and Strategic Planning**

The model also has implications for sector-wide policy discussions. As higher education continues to face pressures related to student expectations, performance measurement, international competition and financial sustainability, policymakers and senior leaders must recognise that academic productivity cannot be increased through control-based HR mechanisms alone. Policies that promote workload manageability, research support, professional development and participatory governance are more likely to yield sustainable performance improvements (Universities UK, 2025; McKinsey, 2025).

The framework further offers a guide for aligning people strategies with institutional missions. Understanding the unique drivers of ability, motivation and opportunity in universities, institutions can develop HR plans that enhance staff wellbeing and performance while supporting long-term academic goals.

Furthermore, the new framework brings the wellbeing effects of high-performance work practices in higher education to the forefront. Existing research shows that high-performance systems can improve performance while increasing job demands. This can lead to stress, burnout, and problems with retention (Jayman et al., 2022; Rahman et al., 2024). Highlighting practices that enhance opportunities while protecting autonomy, voice, and teamwork, the model fits with new ideas about 'high wellbeing and performance work systems.' These ideas aim to balance performance with sustainable working conditions (Parent-Lamarche et al., 2023). In higher education, this means that high-performance work practices should be designed not only to increase academic effort but also to reduce the risks of overload and loss of professional values.

### **DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

The reconceptualised high-performance work practices (HPWP) framework proposed in this paper raises several important avenues for future research. As universities continue to navigate growing pressures around performance, accountability and workforce wellbeing, there is a need for empirical investigations that deepen our understanding of how HR practices shape outcomes in academic settings. The higher education sector has long been underrepresented in mainstream SHRM scholarship, and the distinctiveness of academic work

invites a richer and more context-sensitive research agenda.

### **Empirical testing of the reconceptualised HPWP model**

The first and most immediate direction for future research is the empirical evaluation of the proposed framework. Although recent studies offer encouraging evidence that opportunity-enhancing practices play a critical role in academic performance (Li et al., 2025; Wolfe, 2025), further work is required to examine the mechanisms involved. Mixed-methods designs, combining surveys, interviews and organisational data, could provide a more holistic understanding of how developmental, relational and participatory practices interact to support performance in teaching, research and administration.

Longitudinal studies would be particularly valuable, as academic work unfolds over extended timeframes, and many HR practices such as mentoring, research development or collaborative governance structures exert cumulative rather than immediate effects.

### **Comparative studies across institutional types and national contexts**

The higher education sector is far from homogeneous. Differences in governance structures, funding models, labour market conditions, and cultural expectations shape how HR practices function across institutions. Comparative studies across research-intensive and teaching-focused universities, public and private institutions, and disciplines with distinct academic traditions would shed light on how the reconceptualised AMO dimensions vary across settings.

International comparative work is especially relevant. Recent analyses show that academic identity and autonomy are understood differently across regions (Daniels et al., 2017; Przytuła, S., Sułkowski, Ł., & Kulikowski, 2024), suggesting that the balance of AMO practices may differ in Europe, Asia, Africa, and North America. Cross-national research could clarify how cultural and institutional contexts shape the effectiveness of HPWP in universities.

Illustrative evidence highlights this variation. Studies in Kenyan private institutions demonstrate that combining HRM practices such as talent management, involvement, and HR information systems significantly enhances faculty performance, underscoring institutional type as a key variable (Ngema et al., 2025; Tomeyan & Mose, 2025). Similarly, research in Europe shows that institutional autonomy and governance structures exert a major influence on academic procedures and strategic decisions, with implications for how AMO dimensions and HPWPs function (Painsi, Leitner, & Rybnicek, 2025). In Vietnam, autonomy acquisition has been shown to affect university performance and sustainability,

further demonstrating how governance reforms shape HRM practices in higher education (Hieu & Niem, 2024; Le, 2024).

### **Investigating employee perceptions across academic and professional staff**

Much of the existing research focuses primarily on academic staff, even though professional services employees play a critical role in enabling academic work. Universities rely heavily on administrators, library professionals, student support teams, IT staff, and operational managers. Understanding how HPWP function across these groups is crucial.

Future research should explore whether opportunity-enhancing practices such as involvement in decision-making influence professional services staff as strongly as academic staff, whether developmental needs differ across job families, and how interdependence between academic and professional functions shapes organisational performance. This broader focus would enrich both the theoretical understanding of HPWP in universities and the design of HR strategies that support the whole workforce.

The significance of including professional services staff alongside academics in research is highlighted by recent multilevel research conducted in Ethiopian higher education institutions, which revealed that perceived high-performance work systems influenced engagement and justice perceptions differently across staff roles (Gogsido, Getahun & Alemu, 2024).

Furthermore, research conducted in India indicates that HPWPs improve engagement, psychological capital, and meaningful work in addition to performance, highlighting the connection between HR practices and employee wellbeing in a variety of jobs (Shaik et al., 2025).

### **Examining leadership as a moderator of HPWP effectiveness**

Leadership is a critical but under-researched factor in HPWP studies. Recent work highlights the moderating role of supportive, autonomy-respecting leadership in strengthening HRM–performance relationships in knowledge-intensive contexts (Afzal & Bashir, 2021). Further research should examine how leadership behaviours influence staff perceptions of developmental, motivational, and opportunity-enhancing practices, whether academic leaders such as programme directors and research leads shape HPWP differently from professional leaders such as HR directors, and the impact of distributed or shared leadership models on performance outcomes. These questions are especially relevant in universities, where leadership often operates through influence rather than formal authority.

Transformational and authentic leadership greatly boosts productivity and digital capability, according to recent empirical research from Cameroon and international higher education contexts. For example, Etomes et al. (2024) show that transformational leadership significantly enhances sustainable productivity in Cameroonian HEIs. Similarly, Kelder et al. (2025) demonstrate that authentic leadership behaviours improve digital productivity and capability across diverse higher education systems. Together, these findings suggest that leadership behaviour moderates the effectiveness of HPWP in higher education, especially under hybrid and digital work conditions.

### **Integrating wellbeing and work–life balance into HPWP models**

A growing body of research recognises the importance of employee wellbeing as both an outcome and a determinant of performance. Academic staff experience high levels of workload pressure, emotional labour, and stress, with implications for both performance and staff retention. Future research should examine how HPWP interact with wellbeing, burnout, and job satisfaction, whether opportunity-enhancing practices mitigate stress by providing autonomy and control, and how workload allocation and flexible work policies can be incorporated into expanded AMO-based models.

As wellbeing becomes a central policy concern within higher education, integrating these dimensions into HPWP research will be essential. Recent evidence from Indian higher education institutions shows that HPWPs improve employee engagement, psychological capital, and a sense of meaningful work, emphasising the significance of incorporating wellness and purpose alongside conventional AMO aspects (Shaik, Batta, Cristofaro, Parayitam, & Nawaz, 2025). Similar findings in other contexts highlight that wellbeing-focused HR practices enhance resilience and retention, reinforcing the need for holistic HRM strategies in universities (Singh et al., 2021; Alam, 2022).

### **Using advanced analytical approaches to unpack complex relationships**

Future research would benefit from using analytical methods that can capture the complex, multi-level nature of HRM in higher education. Structural equation modelling (SEM), multilevel modelling to account for departmental differences, social network analysis to examine collegial and collaborative structures, and qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) to explore different HPWP pathways could all provide deeper insights.

Such approaches can reveal patterns that traditional correlations or regressions may miss, offering a more nuanced understanding of how HPWP operate within the intricacies of academic work. The value of these methods

for capturing nested and context-specific effects has been demonstrated by recent studies. For example, multilevel modelling has been used to examine justice perceptions and involvement across employee positions in Ethiopian higher education institutions (Gogsido et al., 2024). Similarly, SEM has been applied in global higher education contexts to explore how authentic leadership and digital capability interact with HR practices under hybrid work conditions (Kelder et al., 2025).

## CONCLUSION

High-performance work practices have been widely promoted within strategic human resource management as mechanisms for improving organisational performance. Yet the longstanding assumption that these practices operate uniformly across sectors has limited our understanding of how HRM influences behaviour in professionalised and knowledge-intensive environments. Higher education offers a clear example of a sector where conventional HPWP models do not fully account for the complexities of the workforce or the organisational context in which performance unfolds.

This paper has argued that the distinctive characteristics of academic work, including autonomy, collegiality, scholarly identity and disciplinary expertise, require a reconceptualisation of HPWP. By integrating contemporary literature with insights emerging from employee perspectives, the paper has reframed the AMO model through the lens of academic practice, demonstrating that each component functions differently in universities compared with corporate settings. Ability rests on continuous professional and scholarly development rather than discrete training events. Motivation is shaped primarily by intrinsic and relational factors such as recognition, academic purpose and supportive leadership. Opportunity, particularly in the form of autonomy, voice and participatory governance, emerges as the most influential driver of performance in academic settings.

The reconceptualised HPWP framework presented here provides a more realistic and context-sensitive foundation for understanding HRM in universities. It highlights the interdependence of developmental support, intrinsic motivation and collaborative structures, and emphasises the importance of designing HR practices that reflect the values and working patterns of academic professionals. For theorists, the framework contributes to ongoing efforts to contextualise SHRM and refine the AMO model for complex organisational environments. For practitioners, it offers guidance on building HR systems that enable staff to perform effectively while supporting institutional goals.

As universities continue to face pressures related to performance measurement, student expectations, financial constraints and global competition, a nuanced understanding of how HR practices shape academic work will become increasingly important. Future empirical

research will be essential to further refine and validate the reconceptualised framework and to guide evidence-informed policy and practice across the higher education sector.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

The conception and design of the study were undertaken by M.H. The development of the theoretical framework was carried out by M.H., S.A., and K.O.O., who also contributed to the primary drafting of the manuscript. All authors collaborated in drafting, revising, and approving the final manuscript.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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