

“My passion for education”: A Human Resource Management Framework for enhancing academic staff performance

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ABSTRACT

The transformation in higher education globally has intensified demands on academic staff, particularly in private higher education institutions (PHEIs) that operate within increasing market-driven environments. This study responds to these transformation pressures by developing a human resource management (HRM) framework for enhancing academic staff performance. While academic staff performance is central to educational quality, most human HRM frameworks overlook the distinctive realities of PHEIs. Using a phenomenological qualitative approach, data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with academic staff and academic management. Utilizing thematic data analysis, the study identified six interrelated HRM practices, namely professional development, provision of resources, recognition of achievements, collaboration and knowledge sharing, workload, and job security, that collectively shape academic staff ability, motivation, and opportunity to perform. While intrinsic motivation to teaching emerged as an important sustaining factor, the analysis also reveals tensions whereby reliance on passion and professional identity may normalize excessive workloads. This article, therefore, proposes a context-sensitive HRM framework that advances the understanding of academic labor in PHE and highlights the need for institutional HRM systems that complement, rather than rely upon, individual commitment to sustain academic staff performance.

KEYWORDS: Academic staff performance, AMO theory, intrinsic motivation, private higher education institutions, higher education institutions, Human resources management practices/framework, Namibia

Globalization, digital innovation, labor market transformations, and decreased funding have created pressures on higher education worldwide. For academic staff, these pressures manifest into performance accountability, increased research output, and new academic roles, manifesting into heavier workloads. In the Namibian context, the COVID-19 period further exposed these pressures within higher education institutions (HEIs), intensifying the shift to remote and digitally mediated teaching, revealing significant gaps in digital access, institutional coordination, and the overall support required by academic staff and students (Nghipandulwa et al. 2025).

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For private higher education institutions (PHEIs), navigating global megatrends is even more challenging. Without government subsidy, they must balance financial stability with quality assurance, staff well-being, and student success (Kajawo, 2020; Qureshi & Khawaja, 2021). In the global south and especially in emerging higher education systems like Namibia, private higher education providers often face challenges relating to employee job insecurity, resource limitations, technological divides, leadership deficiencies, and inadequate performance evaluation systems, which impact academic staff performance (Shimaneni & Kiley, 2025). While Human Resource Management (HRM) frameworks are acknowledged as fundamental to enhance employee performance, there is limited research on HRM frameworks tailored to the private higher education context that comprehensively integrate specific HRM practices. This gap is particularly significant given the rapid growth of PHEIs and their increasing role in shaping the global higher education landscape.

The growth of PHEIs and their contributions to the higher education sector have become a global reality. For instance, Eastern European countries, such as Germany and Russia, started to embrace higher education provisions by private providers, thus challenging those countries past administrative culture (Kajawo, 2020). Leading this trend is China's private higher education (PHE), which has become an international academic center (Kajawo, 2020). These institutions are increasingly challenging the traditional dominance of public universities in the higher education sector. In Namibia, PHEIs have emerged as key players in addressing the unmet demand for tertiary education (Shimaneni & Kiley, 2025).

While their contribution to higher education is commendable, PHEIs face challenges in managing academic staff performance. These challenges include limited financial resources, inadequate HRM systems, limited professional development opportunities, and difficulties in attracting and retaining academic staff (Kajawo, 2020). Unlike public universities that enjoy government funding, PHEIs must navigate a complex environment of self-financing, regulatory compliance and market-driven competition while striving to maintain academic quality. These challenges create a complex environment for effective management of academic staff performance, a key determinant of education quality and institutional reputation (Abdullah et al., 2020; Adebayo, 2022; Szromek & Wolniak, 2020).

Literature on HRM frameworks globally has focused on public universities and in Western contexts, overlooking the unique realities of PHEIs in Sub-Saharan Africa. This study contributes to theory by highlighting this oversight and demonstrating how context-specific HRM practices can enhance academic staff performance in PHEIs. In so doing, it advances literature by proposing an HRM framework to an environment where resource constraints, market-driven pressures, and institutional cultures diverge from those of public institutions. Derived from empirical findings and grounded in the Ability-Motivation-Opportunity (AMO) theory, the framework is anchored on specific HRM practices that respond to institutional, structural, and human resource dynamics. The article, therefore, not only contributes to the broader discourse of private higher education but also offers practical insights into HRM reform in private institutions by addressing the following research questions:

- What HRM practices enhance academic staff performance in Namibia's PHEIs?
- How can these practices be consolidated into a context-specific HRM framework?

Literature Review

Theoretical framework underpinning this study

Theoretical frameworks such as self-determination theory (SDT) and organizational culture theories explain factors that shape employee performance. Although the SDT highlights the importance of intrinsic motivation, it does not explicitly address the role of skills development and structural opportunity, which are critical in enhancing academic staff performance (Yang et al., 2025). Similarly, organizational culture theories underline how institutions' values and identities influence HRM practices (Abramo, 2023, emphasizing the collective aspect without integrating the individual's ability and motivation in a systematic manner.

For these reasons, the AMO theory was adopted for this study as it holistically links HRM practices to performance by emphasizing not only skills and motivation but also the enabling conditions that allow academic staff to apply their skills effectively (Nor et al., 2021). Its multiplicative effect, where shortcomings in one dimension can limit overall performance, makes it suitable for HEIs, demonstrating its practical relevance for designing a tailored HRM framework that enhances both individual and institutional outcomes.

Empirical literature

Global transformations in higher education

Globalization, marketization, and massification have become defining forces in higher education worldwide, reshaping institutional priorities, policies, and academic work. These megatrends not only promote access and social inclusion but also raise concerns about educational quality and the capacity of universities to maintain academic standards under growing demand (Jin, 2022). While these drivers are well established in global debates, their significance in this study lies in how they influence the realities of PHEIs in Namibia.

Namibia's PHEIs operate in a tuition-driven environment with no government subsidies, making them vulnerable to competition for students, demands for efficiency, and the need to demonstrate quality education. With no government funding, the pressure on academic staff to deliver more with limited resources is inevitable. These structural conditions intensify the need for HRM practices to enhance staff performance and maintain institutional sustainability.

These global transformations do not affect all higher education institutions (HEIs) uniformly, as their implications are mediated by funding models, national policy environments, and labor market conditions. Rather than reiterating global debates, this article treats these global forces as a backdrop against which local institutional realities unfold. This foundation is important as we now examine the expansion of PHEIs in Namibia, which reflects unique national responses to these global trends.

Namibia's private higher education institutions

The growth of Namibia's PHEIs can be traced back to its national independence, which marked the beginning of efforts to diversify the higher education sector to meet the human resource needs of the newly sovereign nation. Since then, Namibia's PHEIs have expanded significantly, minimizing the pressure of higher education demand while creating employment for many.

African higher education landscape, where Namibia's PHEIs are embedded, grapples with the dual challenges of expanding access and maintaining quality education in contexts of limited

government funding. Several scholars have argued that African PHEIs often emerge to fill gaps left by underfunded public universities, yet they remain constrained by resource shortages, dependence on tuition fees, and weak governance structures (Al-Twal, 2022; Kajawo, 2020; Shimaneni & Kiley, 2025; Shimaneni, 2024; Tamrat & Teferra, 2020). Despite expanding educational opportunities, these criticisms highlight the risky conditions under which PHEIs operate, directly shaping academic staff experiences.

Although several African higher education systems face staffing and resource challenges, these issues manifest in diverse ways within Namibia's PHE sector. Whereas private higher education systems in other African countries are much larger, more mature, and embedded in different economic histories (Teferra, 2024), Namibia's PHE is distinguished by a small student market, strict regulatory oversight, and limited academic labor supply. Labor sufficiency in countries like Nigeria and Kenya (Sangwa & Ngobi, 2025) means that their HRM practices are more shaped by career progression and staff retention rather than recruitment scarcity, which is central in Namibia. As a result, HRM strategies in the Namibian context are shaped by job insecurity, limited investment in professional development, and shortages of basic teaching resources (Shimaneni & Kiley, 2025). These dynamics produce a structurally constrained environment in which HRM practices are shaped less by strategic choice and more by institutional survival imperatives (Shimaneni, 2024; Shimaneni & Kiley, 2025).

The Namibian government recognizes PHEIs' contributions with ongoing policy efforts. National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) and the Namibia Qualifications Authority (NQA) impose stringent compliance expectations on PHEIs. These pressures, unfortunately, produce compliance-driven managerialism, where HRM strategies are shaped more by regulatory demands than by strategic HRM priorities. It also intensifies competition among themselves and increases reliance on part-time, expatriate, or early-career academic staff. These dynamics are less common in the public higher education system or larger PHEIs, with many arguing that PHEIs are subjected to overregulation compared to their counterparts.

These perspectives highlight that while Namibia shares some broad challenges with other African higher education systems, HRM realities of Namibia's PHE are shaped by a synthesis of tuition dependence, small market size, academic labor shortages, and regulatory compliance pressures. These conditions distinguish Namibia's PHE sector from both public universities and larger private systems elsewhere in Africa. As such, this study, therefore, argues that generic HRM models inadequately capture the realities faced by academic staff in this context, underscoring the need for a tailored, context-sensitive HRM framework. This argument is further supported by emerging research highlighting how organizational context can influence employee motivation during change (Shikusinde & Shimaneni, 2025).

HRM practices and academic staff performance

Academic staff are the main differentiating factor for any academic institution. As a result, HRM practices are essential in shaping their performance. Prior research in higher education identified key HRM practices such as recruitment, performance appraisal, professional development, and compensation (Mondejar & Asio, 2022). Recruitment practices ensure PHEIs attract, recruit, and retain competent staff, while performance appraisals provide structured feedback and identify performance-related issues to improve teaching and research. Professional development enhances skills and pedagogical effectiveness, while compensation is a critical factor in motivating staff to maintain high performance.

The constraints found in PHEIs discussed earlier translate into everyday HRM practices and shape how academic staff experience their effects on performance. Within this constrained

environment, HRM practices in Namibia's PHEIs are often informal, poorly implemented, and reactive rather than strategic. Academic staff experiences of heavy workload, job insecurity, and limited career progression are not merely operational challenges but manifestations of deeper structural constraints (Shimaneni & Kiley, 2025). Understanding these dynamics requires a framework that captures how HRM practices interact with staff capabilities, motivation, and opportunities to perform.

To examine how institutional conditions translate into academic staff performance, this study draws on the Ability-Motivation-Opportunity (AMO) theory as an analytical lens. Research in Namibia's PHEIs reveals deficits such as limited training opportunities, poor compensation, and inadequate resources, contributing to poor academic performance (Al-Twal, 2022; Shimaneni, 2024; Ssemugenyi et al., 2020). Rather than positioning these dimensions as an endpoint, AMO enables a more holistic examination of how these constraints shape academic staff abilities, motivation, and opportunities, as well as how staff navigate these conditions in practice.

Building on the AMO theory, this study identified specific HRM practices critical to academic staff performance in PHE. As argued before, many HRM models overlook the resource constraints, informal HRM practices, inadequate budgets for staff development, and unstable employment prevalent in PHEIs (Saruchera & Gie, 2024; Shimaneni & Kiley, 2025). This presents a gap in HRM literature regarding tailored models that address the unique needs of African PHEIs. The proposed framework, therefore, integrates phenomenological insights from staff experiences to contextualize the implementation of HRM practices in PHE.

Methodology

Research design

This study adopts a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore in depth academic staff experiences of HRM practices within their institution. Qualitative inquiry has been used to explore the interaction between work environments and participant experiences across different institutional contexts (Nguyen et al., 2023; Olalowo, 2020). Furthermore, this approach was suited to capturing the lived experiences and meanings that cannot be adequately measured using quantitative methods (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). Based on the research questions and predetermined criteria (Mweshi & Sakyi, 2020), only full-time academic staff employed in a registered PHEI formed part of the study.

Given the limited literature on HRM practices in Namibia's PHEIs, an exploratory design was appropriate to generate context-specific insights to inform the development of a new HRM framework. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with participants who were purposively recruited based on their roles within or outside the institution. This included 11 academic staff, 5 academic leaders, 1 HRM practitioner, as well as 1 representative from both NCHE and the Association of PHEIs, ensuring representation across functional positions and institutional types. Academic staff provided firsthand insights attached to HRM practices, while academic management offers perspectives on strategic leadership within the institution. The NCHE, as an oversight body, regulates higher education in the country in terms of accreditation and quality assurance. Including the association of PHEIs captured specific perspectives of private education providers whose operational contexts often differ from public institutions.

Sampling procedures and the study's participants

Participants were purposively sampled and interviewed, guided by questions such as “What HRM practices support your performance?” Academic staff, heads of departments, Deans, and HRM practitioners who possess first-hand experience with HRM practices for academic staff were selected. These participants have direct and indirect responsibilities for managing the performance of academics at their institution, making them well-suited to provide in-depth perspectives to understand the nature of HRM practices in PHEIs.

Participants' selection was not only based on each participant's unique perspectives but also aimed at capturing a holistic understanding of HRM practices for academic staff within the institution. A diverse range of academics, from lecturers to Deans of faculties, were the main participants as they are directly impacted by HRM practices. They possess critical perspectives on the effectiveness of current HRM practices at the selected institution. HoDs are responsible for managing academic staff performance through implementing HRM practices at the departmental level. Their perspectives provided an understanding of operationalizing HRM practices while bridging the gap between higher-level management decisions and academic staff. Senior academic leaders, the Deans, provided a lens through which the strategic alignment between HRM practices and institutional goals could be understood. A HRM practitioner, being the custodian of HRM practices in the institution, was included in the study to provide insights into the implementation, challenges, and successes of HRM practices, providing a complementary view to the academics' experiences.

Data collection

Two interview guides were developed based on the aim of the study and the underpinning theoretical framework (AMO). The first was for internal stakeholders, namely academic staff, academic management, and HRM personnel, while the second was for external stakeholders (the higher education regulator and the Association of private higher education providers). Different questions were directed at each group for relevance (Johnson et al., 2020). Face-to-face-interviews were conducted to elicit participants' feelings, experiences, perceptions, and thoughts. The interviews were conducted as guided conversations and comprised fluid, instead of structured questions.

Participants were given the option to choose their preferred mode of interview, either face-to-face or a virtual interview. The interview guides were sent to the participants before the interview sessions to help them prepare beforehand. To ensure convenience for participants (Kankam, 2020), face-to-face interviews were conducted in confidential settings within the institution's premises. Virtual interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams for participants who preferred it and those from remote locations.

The author's professional engagement with some of Namibia's PHEIs provided a contextual understanding but might also have introduced potential bias. To mitigate this, the author maintained reflexive memos throughout the research process and engaged in a collaborative coding process with a certified, independent researcher.

Data Analysis

Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim using Microsoft Word. I read transcripts several times to gain an overall comprehension of the data. Data analysis was guided by Miles and Huberman's three-tiered data analysis, which involves data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification, using ATLAS.ti software (23.3.4.28863™).

The first step involved the initial coding of identifying meaningful phrases and assigning descriptive codes (e.g., recognition of achievements, leadership support, professional development). To consolidate the data into broader categories, related codes were then clustered together through pattern coding. In the second step, the reduced data were organized into matrices and thematic maps. For instance, codes relating to career aspirations were grouped and compared with those concerning resource provision and workload. This process visually mapped the relationships between themes and facilitated comparison across participants. In so doing, patterns and connections were more transparent, which helped refine the emerging framework. The third step involved interpreting the displayed data by linking it to the study's research questions and the AMO theoretical framework. As I concluded, themes such as collaboration and knowledge sharing or recognition and rewards were repeatedly verified against the transcripts to ensure consistency and credibility.

Trustworthiness was enhanced by adopting several credibility and dependability measures consistent with Miles and Huberman's (1994) three-tiered framework. The analysis was further strengthened through collaborative coding with a certified ATLAS. ti specialist, who serves as an independent analytical auditor. The initial codes were cross-checked by the specialist, verifying the alignment between coded segments and the raw data, and reviewed successive iterations of the codebook. This process functioned as a form of peer debriefing, contributing to the stability and clarity of the coding frame. Throughout the analysis, an audit trail was maintained in ATLAS. ti, documenting coding decisions, memos, and theme development. We applied iterative refinement, clustering, and pattern identification as guided by Miles and Huberman's data reduction, data display, and conclusion-drawing stages.

With methodological triangulation, the study's interviews were conducted with academics, Deans of Faculties, and Heads of Departments. Instead of direct access to confidential institutional HRM policies, an interview was conducted with an HRM practitioner who possesses knowledge of these policies. This interview served as an alternative document analysis method to obtain detailed information about the implementation of these policies. For instance, during data collection, some participants made statements about the lack of professional development, which were cross verified with the HRM practitioner and compared with the content of the training schedules provided.

To further enhance trustworthiness, participants who indicated willingness were provided with transcripts for review. Furthermore, the study enhanced credibility by interviewing higher education regulators and a representative from the Association of PHEIs. These interviews provided valuable insights that were cross verified with information from academic staff and heads of departments. Collectively, these procedures ensured the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the final themes. Data saturation was reached after 19 interviews, with no new themes emerging thereafter.

Ethical considerations

Following the approval of the study by the private higher education institution, an ethical clearance was issued by Cape Peninsula University of Technology to conduct the study (Reference Number: 2023_FBMSREC_ST06).

Participants provided written consent prior to participation by signing a consent form, which also outlined the purpose of the research and participants' right to withdraw at any stage without repercussions. Pseudonyms such as Participant 1, Participant 2, etc. were utilized to ensure that participants were not identifiable by the information they provided. All data were stored securely on password-protected devices accessible only to the researcher.

Results

Findings revealed a range of HRM practices that significantly influence academic staff performance. Although various HRM practices were initially identified, several were overlapping (for instance, recognition of achievements, intrinsic rewards, and compensation). To enhance analytical clarity, the identified practices were consolidated into six major themes: professional development, recognition and rewards, organizational culture and leadership, resource provision, collaboration and knowledge sharing, and workload and job security.

Table 1

Themes and Sub-Themes on Lived Experiences of HRM Practices for Academic Staff

Themes	Sub- themes
Professional development	Career progression pathways Publication incentives Research opportunities
Recognition and rewards	Training opportunities Passion for education Academic freedom Recognition of achievements
Organizational culture and leadership	Poor remuneration Academic leadership support Qualified HR practitioners Diversity in recruitment
Resource provision	Clear processes and structures Internet accessibility Digital divide
Collaboration and knowledge sharing	The use of personal laptops Co-publishing with peers Organizing conferences with other institutions
Workload and job security	Heavy teaching workloads Excessive marking Temporary employment contracts

Theme 1: Professional Development

Professional developmental initiatives such as “research opportunities”, “writing opportunities” and “conference opportunities (Participant 3; faculty officer; female 3) “publication incentives” (Participant 2; Lecturer; male) and “lecturers’ training on pedagogical content” (Participant 2; Lecturer; male; Participant 3; faculty officer; female) emerged as some of the

significant HRM practices influencing academic staff performance. Many participants linked professional development with career progression, noting the need for career advancement pathways by building a strong curriculum vitae. As one lecturer remarked, “In my institution, for you to go to the next level, you must do more. *Now I am a lecturer; the next level is a senior lecturer. So, for you to become a senior lecturer, you must have certain publications and research supervision. Personally, I think that is the only thing that indeed makes me want to do more.*”

Theme 2: Recognition and Rewards

Participants emphasized the recognition of achievements by their management, students, and parents as a motivating factor. These acknowledgements serve as a great validation for academic staff contributions and efforts. As one participant alluded:

The institution must also make sure that they recognize our input’ (Participant 2). Another participant explained, “Some parents, when they know that you are their children’s lecturer, they give you some kind of appreciation, even if it is just a verbal one. This is enough for me; it can change me.” (Participant 6, female, lecturer).

Apart from intangible recognition, participants also emphasized the importance of tangible rewards. Benefits extended to family members, such as tuition support, were particularly valued:

“There are also other benefits for our family members. If my child studies here, he/she can be given a tuition rebate” (Participant 4, lecturer, male).

This reflects how institutions creatively compensate for limited salary budgets. At the same time, low salaries were a concern, with participants noting that their salary was insufficient to support professional development: “One would have an interest in something, but looking at the private institution you are working for, what you earn, you might not be able to upgrade yourself, so you remain at the level you are. You cannot even afford to publish” (Participant 12, Head of Department, female).

Despite these limitations, several participants reported drawing on intrinsic motivation as rewards:

“My passion and interest in education are what brought me here. Where I was, I had a better salary. So, what pushed me is more of my passion and interest. I want to be a professor, one day. (Participant 12, Head of Department, female). “As an educator, it gives me pleasure to see students excelling in their academic endeavors, and it also gives me pride when I see them graduate”. (Participant 2; Lecturer; male).

However, the study also revealed instances of managerial interference, indicating certain constraints on academic freedom:

“To a certain degree, academic freedom is there, but at some point, you would see that there is a little bit of interference with your work from management (Participant 2; Lecturer; male).

The findings also highlight academic freedom as a form of reward:

“When it comes to research, they do not impose any boundaries, such as telling you to only collaborate with certain people or not to publish with someone from institution A or B.” So, you can. They even encourage us to participate in any academic event organized by other institutions to enhance our knowledge and skills” (Participant 12, Head of Department, female).

Theme 3: Organizational culture and leadership

The participants highlighted the conducive culture in their institution as indicated in the following quotations:

“Our institution motivates us to achieve greater heights. It encourages us to teach our students effectively because we are competing with other institutions. If your institution is not producing or delivering good quality results, it will be a shame.” (Participant 16; Dean; female).

“The environment is so conducive and friendly, the people that I am working with are friendly, and there is a lot of teamwork.” (Participant 5). With remarks such as these, it is apparent that academic staff perform well in a conducive atmosphere:

” But otherwise, the culture, the environment is good for academia. The regular meetings and committees that we have are encouraging.” (Participant 15; Dean, male).

Conversely, participants reported mixed feelings on academic leadership, with some citing the inadequacy of such support:

“There is a lot of support that is provided by the leadership, but you know our support mostly comes from the Dean.” (Participant 7; lecturer; male)

“In some departments, effective leadership is lacking, leaving staff on their own”. (Participant 1; lecturer, male).

Furthermore, the study highlighted the importance of clear institutional processes to create an environment where staff members understand their roles and feel supported:

“Where there are creativity and innovation, there are supporting structures to help. There is too much bureaucracy in our institution, too many structures that need to be followed”. (Participant 4; lecturer; male).

The participants also emphasized the importance of well-trained HR practitioners, acknowledging their often-underestimated role in higher education institutions (HEIs):

“I think we need to explore the route of HR working closely with faculty. Most of the time there is a working gap between HR and faculties.” (Participant 2; Lecturer; male).

Organizational values and expectations were equally important, with participants underscoring the institution’s effort to communicate institutional values:

“So, in terms of values, I spoke of integrity, excellence, and loyalty. Our institution is very keen on loyalty, and as a member of staff, I am expected to be loyal to my institution.

Diversity in recruitment was another recurring factor, with participants indicating a satisfactory practice of a diverse workforce:

“If you meet the requirements to be at the institution, you are welcome to be here”. (Participant 9; lecturer, male). Another lecturer reiterated: “We have quite a lot of colleagues from other countries, many from African countries, I do not think there is any of our campus that does not have them”. (Participant 11; lecturer; female)

Theme 4: Provisions of resources

As revealed by the study’s findings, resource provision emerged as a critical factor shaping academic performance. Academic staff repeatedly emphasized the need for teaching materials and off-campus internet connection:

“I think they should give us data. Even when I am not here at work, I can have internet accessibility wherever I am.” (Participant 12, Head of Department, female).

Several participants noted the lack of basic resources, such as laptops:

“These laptops we are using are personal. If something happens to it, you fix it yourself. (Participant 10; lecturer; female).

It was also established that there is a challenge of digital literacy and technological skills among academic staff, posing a significant challenge to effective performance. Those with limited skills may struggle to integrate digital tools into their teaching, as alluded by one of the participants:

“Not every lecturer is fully versed in integrating technology into teaching and learning. Despite possessing qualifications, some struggle to embrace technology”. (Participant 3; faculty officer, female).

Theme 5: Collaboration and knowledge-sharing

Collaboration and knowledge sharing were confirmed as significant practices that can enhance both individual and institutional performance:

“We even do some collaboration with colleagues. I write papers and publish them together with my subordinates.” (Participant 7; lecturer; male). “Our institution also engages with other organizations to organize even a conference”. (Participant 12, Head of Department, female). “Collaborations between different institutions will really work well”. Because I have seen most of the time we work in silos”. (Participant 4; lecturer, male).

The academic staff who participated in this study expressed appreciation for collaborations. They took independent decisions and personal initiatives to collaborate among themselves.

Theme 6: Workload and job security

Ensuring a manageable workload was reported as crucial for the overall performance and well-being of academic staff. Participants described carrying a heavy workload:

“So, there is a push factor to perform. The workload is too much, because sometimes you find yourself in a situation where you cannot attend to both full-time and part-time students. This makes you stay in the office from morning hours until 9:30 in the evening to also attend to part-time students” (Participant 3; faculty officer; female).

Several reported that excessive workload undermines their effectiveness, as stressed by one participant:

“The academics’ workload is often a challenge. Institutions must address this for quality education” (Participant 19, Association representative, male). The work of an academic staff extends beyond the classroom. By working long hours, academic staff ensure that all students have equal access to guidance and support. However, this practice points to a heavy workload: lecturers have excessive marking from full-time and part-time students as well as marking students’ portfolios” (Participant 5).

Appointment of tutors and part-time staff, as well as implementing an equitable workload, can mitigate the burden and lead to better work-life balance among academics.

The study further highlighted the need for greater job security and stability, calling for policy revision regarding temporary employment contracts:

“We are operating on contracts that get to be renewed, of course, based on the performance.” (Participant 4, lecturer, male). “Having staff on contracts has been a challenge, and I see it is a prevailing trend among private higher education institutions.” (Participant 4, lecturer, male).

However, other respondents dispelled the fear of job insecurity, evident in the following attestations:

“I do not have the feeling of being tossed away tomorrow. No, I think I approach such fear differently”. (Participant 3, faculty officer, female)

“There is one thing I know; I am a Christian. So, I believe that wherever God puts you, it is temporary, and then it is up to you to make changes”. (Participant 6, lecturer, female).

These results not only highlight the mixed feelings about job insecurity but also reveal the complex dynamics in which academic staff operate.

Discussion

The findings of this study revealed a paradoxical environment of persistent structural constraints and heightened performance expectations. While professional development is formally encouraged (Jacob et al., 2021; Jacob & Musa, 2020; Ssemugenyi et al., 2020), limited institutional funding, high workloads, and short-term training opportunities restrict the extent to which newly acquired skills can be effectively deployed (Saruchera & Gie, 2024; Shimaneni & Kiley, 2025). Whereas PHEIs expect academic staff to engage in professional development, academic staff, on the other hand, face low compensation, limited funding, and high teaching workloads, making it difficult to participate in further studies. This tension creates what can be theorized as “professional accountability”, whereby academic staff assume personal responsibility for maintaining competence and performance, despite uneven institutional support. Within such conditions, the traditional assumptions of the AMO framework require contextual interpretation, as the presence of ability does not automatically translate into enhanced performance when opportunities to apply skills are structurally constrained. Professional development, therefore, becomes aspirational rather than actionable, fueling diminished job performance despite its centrality to performance.

The findings indicate that intrinsic motivation is a significant driver of academic staff performance, embedded in commitment to teaching, professional identity, and the value placed on academic freedom. Non-financial recognition from students, parents, management, and peers reinforced this motivation, particularly in contexts where formal rewards were limited. However, the study also revealed a critical tension between intrinsic rewards and material insecurity. This implies that recognition and appreciation provide short-term motivation and may not sufficiently mitigate the long-term strain caused by financial insecurity. Therefore, limited financial incentives and inconsistent recognition practices constrained the extent to which motivation could be sustained over time, suggesting that intrinsic commitment alone is insufficient to offset structural precarity within PHEIs.

Leadership practices were central in shaping academic staff experiences of autonomy and opportunity. Leadership support and clear processes not only enhanced motivation but also enabled staff to navigate institutional constraints more effectively. While these findings align with prior literature that emphasized the importance of supportive leadership (Rudhumbu & Du Plessis, 2021), compliance-driven managerialism, linked to regulatory demands and student satisfaction metrics, undermined academic autonomy. This paradox illustrates how leadership simultaneously

enables and constrains AMO elements, reinforcing the significance of context-sensitive leadership approaches in PHE.

Recent studies demonstrate that the presence of supportive resources, such as technological accessibility and balanced work demands, reinforces employee motivational levels (Shikusinde & Shimaneni, 2025). This aligns with the study's findings in which resource provision emerged as a critical factor shaping academic staff performance. Inadequate teaching resources limited digital tools, and the absence of structured platforms for knowledge sharing restricted academic staff's capacity to perform effectively, even where ability and motivation were present. Collaboration thus emerged largely through individual initiative rather than institutional support. Although literature highlights the importance of collaboration and knowledge-sharing in HEIs (Jacob & Musa, 2020; Szromek & Wolniak, 2020), the findings reveal that in Namibia's PHEIs, workload pressures and job insecurity often limit time and willingness for peer collaboration. This tension suggests that while academic staff appreciate collaboration, resource scarcity undermines it. As a result, the opportunity dimension within the AMO framework is eroded, highlighting the fragility of performance-enhancing practices in PHEIs.

Heavy workloads, multiple roles, and employment insecurity further undermined academic staff performance. Temporary contracts and uncertainty regarding renewal discouraged long-term investment in institutional engagement. While staff continued to perform through personal commitment and resilience, these conditions raise concerns about the sustainability of such performance over time, particularly in environments where institutional support remains limited. This concern must be addressed through HRM practices related to contract renewals, a fair evaluation system, fair recognition and rewards, and appropriate development programs (Al-Twal 2022).

The Paradox of passion: Hidden costs of intrinsic motivation in academia

While intrinsic motivation and passion for education were identified as protective factors that sustain academic staff performance, alternative interpretations warrant consideration. In some contexts, intrinsic motivation may mask or normalize forced labor conditions, whereby academic staff unintentionally absorb excessive demands through personal sacrifice, shifting responsibility for coping from institutions to individuals.

Similarly, the recurrent discourse of "passion for education" can function not only as a source of resilience but also as a normative constraint. When commitment to teaching and students is morally legitimized, academic staff may feel compelled to tolerate work conditions they would otherwise contest, thereby reproducing inequitable labor arrangements. Acknowledging these tensions does not negate the role of intrinsic motivation identified in this study; rather, it underscores the need for institutional responsibility to complement individual commitment. This reflexive stance reinforces the argument that sustainable performance cannot rely solely on passion but requires robust HRM systems that ensure fairness, security, and sustainable working conditions. Narrative research further demonstrates that academic staff members' perceptions of workplace conditions and their personal leadership values significantly shape work engagement and career decisions, underscoring the need for context-sensitive HRM frameworks that integrate both organizational conditions and individual meaning-making processes (Richardson, 2023).

Implications of the findings for existing empirical knowledge

At the global level, the contribution of PHE providers to higher education is commendable and celebrated. The number of PHE providers continues to grow worldwide, signaling expanding

demand for access, shifting academic labor dynamics, and increased marketisation and competition (Kajawo, 2020; Qureshi & Khawaja, 2021). The findings of this study have significant implications for these global trends in that they highlight HRM dynamics for academic staff in a typical developing country. The literature highlighted generic challenges such as staffing shortages, funding limitation and infrastructural constraints as challenges facing higher education (Kajawo, 2020; Sangwa & Ngobi, 2025; Teferra, 2024). This study also confirmed this situation, but in the Namibian context, it creates HRM dynamics that differ from those in larger African PHE systems.

Literature further highlighted that PHEIs are often agile, innovative-driven and function more efficiently to improve student experiences (Qureshi & Khawaja, 2021). However, this study provides empirical evidence that Namibia’s PHEIs experience a misalignment between their mission for student success and the resource conditions under which academic staff operate. It suggests that in resource-constrained contexts, PHEIs may struggle to implement effective HRM practices. Studies have revealed that PHEIs operate under numerous risks that can threaten their existence (Qureshi & Khawaja, 2021; Tamrat & Teferra, 2020). This study further deepens these empirical insights, illustrating the psychological toll of unpredictable employment contracts, heavy workloads, and unclear career pathways. These issues remain underexplored within southern African PHE literature.

This study, therefore, recommends a comprehensive HRM framework to enhance academic staff performance in PHE, as discussed in the section below. Considering its single-institution focus, a multi-institutional study employing mixed method design is recommended to broaden the framework’s applicability.

HRM framework for enhancing academic staff performance

The findings confirm a comprehensive HRM framework encompassing specific and contextual practices that enhance academic staff performance in PHE. These practices move beyond the generic HRM practices to highlight how the specific institutional realities of Namibia’s PHEIs reshape the traditional AMO-performance relationship.

The proposed framework demonstrates how the distinctive institutional dynamics, such as resource scarcity, tuition-driven funding, and short-term managerial priorities, alter the function of the AMO components and introduce contextual mechanisms that the standard AMO framework does not explicitly account for. Ability-enhancing practices show reduced impact when opportunity structures are weak, while motivation becomes highly dependent on non-financial drivers. Opportunity emerges as the most constrained dimension, reflecting institutional resource scarcity and conditions the effects of both ability and motivation. These patterns provide a contextualized AMO framework, specifying boundary conditions and proposing an interactional mechanism in which “Opportunity” moderates’ other dimensions. The framework is displayed on the table below:

Table 2*HRM Framework for Enhancing Academic Staff Performance in PHEIs*

AMO Dimension	Context-Specific HRM Practices	Contextual Explanation
Ability enhancers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Professional development (workshops, conferences, training) - Career progression - Recruitment and selection - Trained HR professionals 	<p>Limited, short-term professional development due to financial constraints.</p> <p>Career progress exists but inconsistent.</p> <p>Recruitment prioritize affordability, reducing research capacity.</p> <p>HR team constrained in strategic initiatives.</p>
Motivation enhancers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Limited monetary rewards - Strong intrinsic motivation - Academic freedom - Leadership encouragement 	<p>Informal recognition dominates. Intrinsic motivation compensates but not sustainable.</p> <p>Tuition discounts insufficient for long-term growth.</p> <p>Academic freedom inconsistently supported.</p>
Opportunity enhancers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Organizational culture and values - Collaboration and knowledge sharing - Resource provision - Diversity in recruitment - Workload management - Job security 	<p>Teamwork encouraged but inconsistent.</p> <p>Collaboration depends on personal initiative.</p> <p>Contractual insecurity harms engagement.</p> <p>Workload pressures limit development and research opportunities.</p>

Theoretical contribution

This study extends the AMO theory by articulating how the above-identified practices modify the causal pathways assumed by the standard AMO model. It offers a theoretical extension of the standard AMO theory in three substantive ways. First, it identifies resource scarcity as a boundary condition that limits the effect of ability-enhancing practices. When PHEIs cannot provide research resources, protected time, or development funding, staff may acquire new skills that they cannot meaningfully apply. Second, the study demonstrates empirically that “Opportunity” functions as a moderator of “Ability” and “Motivation”. Even elevated levels of skill and intrinsic motivation do not yield performance gains when academics face excessive workloads or lack structural support. Third, the study introduces the concept of a “managerial resource-allocation motive,” which expresses how academic leaders in tuition-dependent institutions prioritize short-term financial survival over long-term capability development. This motive reshapes the selection, sequencing, and impact of HRM practices, thereby altering the

AMO's underlying assumptions. Collectively, these contributions refine AMO's explanatory power in low-resourced PHE contexts.

Implications of the study

Several important implications for practice, policy, and leadership are evident:

PHEIs should prioritize long-term professional development and career pathways despite financial challenges.

- Strengthening academic leadership practices can mitigate the tension between managerialism and academic autonomy.
- Resource provision, both teaching materials and technology, is critical for enabling academic staff to achieve expected performance standards.
- For policy and leadership, the study demonstrates the importance of formal mechanisms for collaboration and knowledge sharing.
- Workload, job security, and recognition of achievements should be treated as critical levers to foster academic staff performance.
- National policies can support capacity-building initiatives, such as scholarships or incentives for postgraduate staff development.
- Reliance on academic staff's intrinsic motivation and passion should not substitute for fair workloads, job security, and material support, as doing so risks normalizing unsustainable and potentially coercive labor practices.

Limitation

This study's findings provided an HRM framework underpinned by the AMO model. It should, however, be generalized across Namibia's PHEIs with caution, given its single-institution focus. This restricted scope reflects participants' perceptions and may have overlooked the diversity across various academic institutions. Future research should, therefore, consider employing a multi-institutional and mixed-method design for broader applicability.

Conclusion

The study contributes to HRM and PHE literature by providing empirical evidence that academic staff performance in Namibia's PHE sector is influenced by an interconnected set of HRM practices shaped by the country's unique regulatory, financial, and labor-market conditions. It highlights that practices such as professional development, organizational culture and leadership, resource allocation, collaboration and knowledge-sharing, and workload and job security are central to enhancing academic performance. However, the implementation of these practices is shaped by scarce resources, compliance-driven managerial approaches, and employment insecurity. This study, therefore, demonstrates that academic staff performance in PHEIs is a function of HRM practices that intersect with a complex environment.

The study concludes that enhancing academic staff performance in Namibia's PHEIs requires a comprehensive HRM framework that is both grounded in the AMO model and responsive to the structural conditions that define this sector. The proposed framework thus integrates ability-enhancing, motivation-enhancing, and opportunity-enhancing practices with contextual explanations that exist in the PHE sector. The suggested framework assumes that the implementation of HRM practices in Namibia's PHEIs is challenged by resource constraints,

regulatory burdens, tuition dependence, and labor shortages. Therefore, enhancing academic staff performance will depend on context-sensitive strategies, provision of support and resources, and addressing the underlying challenges experienced by academic staff. The paper contributes to empirical insights by offering a robust HRM framework to guide the implementation of HRM practices in Namibia's growing PHE sector.

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Institutional review Board Statement

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Informed consent form

Informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in the study.

Data availability statement

The data that supports the findings of this study is available from the author upon reasonable request.

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Conflict of interest

No potential conflict of interest is present.

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