

Employee Perceptions of High-Performance Work Practices in UK Higher Education: Insights from Academic and Professional Staff

id Madiha Hassan, MPhil

Faculty of Foundation Year, Arden University, Birmingham Campus, United Kingdom; and Department of Interdisciplinary Research and Statistics, PENKUP Research Institute, Birmingham, United Kingdom.

id Kennedy Oberhiri Obohwemu, PhD

Department of Interdisciplinary Research and Statistics, PENKUP Research Institute, Birmingham, United Kingdom.

id Gordon Mabengban Yakpir, PhD

Faculty of Health, Wellbeing & Social Care, Oxford Brookes University, GBS Partnership, Birmingham Campus, United Kingdom; and Department of Interdisciplinary Research & Statistics, PENKUP Research Institute, Birmingham, United Kingdom.

id Charles Leyman Kachitsa, PhD

Faculty of Business Management and Enterprise, Leeds Trinity University, GBS Partnership, Manchester, United Kingdom; and Department of Interdisciplinary Research & Statistics, PENKUP Research Institute, Birmingham, United Kingdom.

id Christian Atabong Nchindia, PhD

Faculty of Business Management, Global Banking School, University of Suffolk, Manchester Campus, United Kingdom; and Department of Interdisciplinary Research and Statistics, PENKUP Research Institute, Birmingham, United Kingdom.

id Nera Perpetual Kadiri-Eneh, PhD, FWACP

Consultant Public Health Physician, School of Public Health, University of Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria; and Department of Interdisciplinary Research & Statistics, PENKUP Research Institute, Birmingham, United Kingdom.

id Ei Thu Thu Myint, DBA

Department of Business Management, Scholars School System, Leeds Trinity University Partnership, Manchester Campus, United Kingdom.

id Obiageli Uzoamaka Onyemelukwe, FWACP

Alras General Hospital, Alras, Al-Qassim, Saudi Arabia; and Department of Interdisciplinary Research and Statistics, PENKUP Research Institute, Birmingham, United Kingdom.

Patrick Femi Iramofu Dania, MPH

Department of Health and Social Care, Scholars School System, Leeds Trinity University, Manchester, United Kingdom

Corresponding Author: Madiha Hassan, MPhil

Faculty of Foundation Year, Arden University, Birmingham Campus, United Kingdom

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Abstract

Purpose

High-performance work practices (HPWP) have attracted considerable scholarly attention because of their potential to enhance employee performance and organisational effectiveness. Despite a substantial body of research examining the relationship between HPWP and organisational outcomes, much of the literature remains dominated by managerial

perspectives. Comparatively little attention has been devoted to how employees themselves perceive and experience these practices, particularly within higher education institutions where professional autonomy, collegiality and knowledge-intensive work shape employment relationships. This study explores employee perceptions of HPWP in UK higher education and examines how staff interpret the practices intended to support performance and engagement.

Design/methodology/approach

The study adopts a qualitative research design and draws on open-ended responses collected from employees working within a UK higher education institution. Data were analysed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns, experiences and perceptions relating to high-performance work practices. An employee-centred perspective was adopted to capture how staff understand the implementation and effectiveness of HR practices within their workplace.

Findings

Five interrelated themes emerged from the analysis. Employees viewed professional development as a critical foundation for effective performance and career progression. Feedback, appraisal and recognition were perceived as important mechanisms for sustaining motivation and engagement. Participants emphasised the value of fair reward systems while also highlighting the importance of non-financial recognition. Communication, teamwork and participation in decision-making were consistently identified as essential elements of a supportive work environment. Finally, employees recognised ongoing efforts to strengthen HPWP while simultaneously expressing a desire for greater consistency and strategic alignment in their implementation.

Originality/value

This study enriches current understanding of high-performance work practices by examining them through the experiences of academic and professional staff. The findings demonstrate that employees place considerable value on opportunities for development, supportive workplace relationships and meaningful involvement in organisational processes. These insights deepen understanding of how HR practices are experienced within knowledge-intensive environments and offer practical lessons for higher education leaders seeking to enhance employee engagement, wellbeing and organisational performance.

Keywords: High-performance work practices; employee perceptions; employee voice; higher education; human resource management; organisational performance; thematic analysis; UK universities

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1. INTRODUCTION

High-performance work practices (HPWP) occupy a central place in contemporary human resource management research and practice. In many organisational settings, these practices serve as mechanisms that help organisations build employee capability, strengthen motivation and establish conditions for better performance. Studies conducted over recent decades have connected HPWP to a range of positive results. These include higher productivity levels, greater organisational commitment, stronger employee

engagement and enhanced organisational effectiveness (Sheehan et al., 2022; Salin et al., 2023).

Much of the existing literature has examined HPWP primarily through a managerial or organisational lens. Researchers have focused on identifying effective bundles of practices and on ways organisations can design systems that support maximum employee performance. Less emphasis has fallen on how employees themselves experience these practices. This situation matters because the success of human resource initiatives rests not only on their formal design but also on how staff interpret, experience and act upon them.

Employees do not simply receive organisational policies in a passive manner. Their views shape how workplace practices gain meaning, acceptance, and behavioural expression (van Beurden et al., 2021; Clauss et al., 2025).

Evidence continues to accumulate that employee perceptions shape the results linked to HPWP in important ways. Studies indicate frequent gaps between the HR practices organisations intend, those they implement and the perceptions employees form about them. Well-designed initiatives can still fall short when staff see them as inconsistent, unfair or poorly aligned with professional needs. In contrast, practices that employees regard favourably tend to build trust, engagement and commitment. Attention to employee viewpoints therefore helps explain why similar HR practices can yield different results in varied organisational and contextual settings (Hauff et al., 2022).

The higher education sector offers a valuable context for examining these matters. Universities rely heavily on the expertise, commitment and discretionary effort of skilled staff. Academic and professional employees work in settings that emphasise professional autonomy, collegial relations and complex structures. Their roles in teaching, research and administration call for both collaboration and individual judgement. Employee experiences therefore exert considerable influence on the effectiveness of organisational policies and management practices. Recent pressures in UK higher education have sharpened interest in staff experiences. Universities face rising student expectations, regulatory demands, financial limitations, technological shifts and global competition. Concerns about workload, wellbeing, stress and retention have grown more visible across the sector (Wolfe, 2025; Universities UK, 2025). These developments have increased the need for workplace environments that sustain engagement, development and performance. Institutional leaders now recognise the value of understanding how staff view current HR practices when they seek to align organisational goals with employee wellbeing.

Although research on high-performance work practices (HPWP) in higher education has grown, many studies still concentrate on organisational outcomes rather than on employee experiences. Available evidence offers only limited understanding of how academic and professional staff interpret practices intended to support their performance, which elements they value, and where they

see room for improvement (Harney & Monks, 2014; García-Chas et al., 2016; Knight et al., 2022). Closer attention to employee perspectives can produce a fuller picture of how HPWP operate in universities and can help identify conditions that make these practices most effective (Boon et al., 2019).

This paper addresses the gap by investigating employee perceptions of high-performance work practices in a UK higher education institution. It draws on qualitative data examined through thematic analysis, a method well suited to exploring meanings and lived experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The study explores how staff experience important aspects of people management, including professional development, performance feedback, recognition, communication, teamwork, and participation in organisational decision processes, which are areas previously identified as central to employee-centred HRM (Jiang et al., 2012; Kuvaas et al., 2017). The analysis pays particular attention to the meanings employees assign to these practices and to the influence they exert on daily workplace life.

This focus on employee voices adds depth to existing knowledge. It moves beyond assumptions that well-designed practices will automatically produce intended effects. Instead, it highlights the active role staff play in shaping outcomes through their interpretations and responses. Such an approach contributes to more balanced and context-sensitive understandings of people management in complex professional settings like universities. Greater emphasis on these perceptions can inform both theory and practice, particularly in sectors where discretionary effort and professional judgement prove essential for success.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore employee perceptions of high-performance work practices within a UK higher education institution. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study sought to understand how employees interpreted and experienced workplace practices rather than measure predefined relationships between variables. Such an approach enables participants to describe their experiences in their own words and allows researchers to capture meanings, perceptions and workplace realities that may not be evident through quantitative measures alone (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

The study was guided by an interpretivist perspective, which assumes that organisational phenomena are understood through the meanings individuals attach to their experiences. This perspective is particularly relevant when examining employee perceptions because workplace practices may be experienced differently across individuals and professional groups despite being implemented within the same organisational environment.

2.2 Study Context and Participants

The study was conducted within a UK higher education institution operating in an increasingly competitive and complex sector characterised by changing student expectations, financial pressures, regulatory requirements and evolving workforce demands. Employees working across academic and professional service functions were invited to participate in the study.

Participants represented a range of occupational roles and brought diverse experiences of the institution's human resource practices. The inclusion of both academic and professional staff provided a broader understanding of how workplace practices were experienced across different areas of the university.

2.3 Data Collection

Data were collected through open-ended survey questions designed to elicit employee views regarding the implementation and effectiveness of high-performance work practices within the institution. Participants were invited to reflect on several aspects of their work experience, including training and development opportunities, performance appraisal processes, feedback mechanisms, reward and recognition practices, communication, teamwork and involvement in organisational decision-making.

Open-ended responses were selected because they allowed participants to express their views freely while ensuring that data could be gathered from employees across different organisational units. This approach facilitated the collection of rich qualitative data while maintaining participant anonymity.

2.4 Data Analysis

The data were analysed using thematic analysis following the approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2022). Thematic analysis was selected because of its

flexibility and suitability for identifying recurring patterns across qualitative datasets.

Analysis proceeded through six stages. The first stage involved repeated reading of participant responses to achieve familiarity with the data. During the second stage, initial codes were generated to capture meaningful features relevant to employee experiences of high-performance work practices. The third stage involved grouping related codes into broader themes. These preliminary themes were then reviewed against the dataset to ensure coherence and distinctiveness. In the fifth stage, themes were refined, defined and named to reflect their underlying meaning. The final stage involved developing an interpretive account of the findings and relating them to existing literature.

The analytical process focused on identifying shared experiences and recurring perceptions rather than quantifying response frequencies. Particular attention was given to themes that captured employees' views of practices that supported or constrained performance, engagement and workplace satisfaction.

2.5 Trustworthiness

Several measures were adopted to enhance the trustworthiness of the analysis. Credibility was strengthened through systematic engagement with the dataset and repeated review of coding decisions throughout the analytical process. Dependability was supported by maintaining a clear analytical process from initial coding to final theme development. Confirmability was enhanced through careful grounding of interpretations in participant responses, ensuring that findings remained closely connected to the data. Transferability was supported through detailed descriptions of the institutional context and research procedures, enabling readers to assess the relevance of the findings to similar higher education environments (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

2.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles guided all stages of this research. The study was conducted in accordance with Birmingham City University's code of conduct for research and adhered to all relevant institutional and data-protection requirements. Participation was entirely voluntary, and respondents were informed of the purpose and scope of the study prior to data collection. The intent of the research was clearly explained, and participants were

provided with an informed-consent form to review and sign.

Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout the research process. No identifying information was included in the analysis or reporting of findings, and the identities of participants were kept private and confidential in line with university ethical guidelines. Participants were assured that the data collected would be used solely for academic purposes and that strict ethical standards would be followed at all times. They were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without providing a reason.

The study team recognised that, because the research focused on employees' perspectives, some individuals might feel reluctant to participate. To mitigate this, clear assurances were provided regarding confidentiality, the secure handling of data, and the non-disclosure of names or identifiable details without explicit permission. All data were collected, stored, and preserved in accordance with institutional ethical procedures and relevant data-management protocols.

The methodological approach adopted in this study was designed to generate a detailed understanding of employee experiences of high-performance work practices within higher education. The insights derived from this process provide a foundation for examining how staff perceive the practices intended to support their performance, development, and engagement within the contemporary university workplace.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Overview of Findings

The findings are presented in two stages. First, the qualitative findings derived from the thematic analysis of employee responses are reported. These findings address the research objective concerned with understanding how employees perceive high-performance work practices within higher education. Second, the quantitative findings examine the relationships between the three dimensions of the Ability-Motivation-Opportunity (AMO) framework and organisational performance. Together, these findings provide insight into both the content of high-performance work practices valued by employees and their perceived contribution to organisational outcomes.

3.2 Employee Perceptions of High-Performance Work Practices

Thematic analysis identified three broad categories of high-performance work practices corresponding to the AMO framework. Within these categories, several recurring themes emerged that employees regarded as particularly important for enhancing performance within higher education institutions. The findings reveal a strong emphasis on employee development, supportive performance management processes, and workplace environments that facilitate participation and collaboration.

3.2.1 Ability-Enhancing Practices

Employees consistently identified training and development as the most important practices for strengthening individual capability and improving organisational performance. Training emerged as the dominant theme within this category, with approximately 90% of respondents referring to training, professional development, learning opportunities, coaching, mentoring, or continuous professional development when discussing practices that improve employee abilities.

Participants viewed training as extending beyond the acquisition of technical skills. Responses suggested that development activities were valued because they supported career progression, enhanced confidence, increased competence, and enabled employees to respond effectively to changing organisational requirements. Continuous professional development was frequently described as essential within the higher education sector, where employees are expected to maintain professional expertise while adapting to evolving teaching, research, and administrative demands.

Interestingly, recruitment and selection, despite being prominent components of ability-enhancing practices within the broader literature, received comparatively little attention from participants. Employee responses focused more heavily on developmental experiences occurring after recruitment than on the processes used to attract and select staff. This finding suggests that employees evaluate capability-building practices primarily through their day-to-day experiences of learning and development rather than through organisational hiring processes.

The findings indicate that employees perceive investment in learning and development as a central mechanism through which organisations strengthen workforce capability and improve performance.

3.2.2 Motivation-Enhancing Practices

Three interconnected themes emerged within the motivation dimension: performance feedback, performance appraisal, and performance-based rewards.

Performance feedback was frequently identified as an important factor influencing employee motivation. Participants emphasised the value of regular, meaningful, and constructive feedback that helps employees understand their performance and identify opportunities for improvement. Feedback was viewed not merely as a monitoring mechanism but as a developmental process that supports learning and professional growth.

Performance appraisal also emerged as a significant theme. More than 60% of respondents identified appraisal systems as an important component of employee motivation. Employees highlighted the importance of fairness and transparency in appraisal processes, suggesting that appraisal systems are most effective when they are perceived as equitable and linked to genuine performance improvement.

Performance-based rewards and pay constituted the third major motivational theme. Employees continued to regard rewards as important mechanisms for encouraging effort and recognising contribution. Responses reflected both financial and non-financial perspectives on reward. Some participants emphasised competitive salaries and financial incentives, whereas others highlighted recognition, appreciation, and acknowledgement of achievement as equally important sources of motivation.

Collectively, these findings suggest that motivation within higher education is influenced by a combination of developmental, relational, and financial factors. Employees appear to value systems that recognise contribution, provide meaningful feedback, and reward performance in a fair and transparent manner.

3.2.3 Opportunity-Enhancing Practices

The strongest consensus among participants emerged within the opportunity dimension of the AMO framework. Three themes were particularly prominent:

involvement in decision making, teamwork, and communication.

Employee involvement in decision making was the most frequently cited opportunity-enhancing practice. Participants consistently emphasised the importance of having opportunities to contribute to decisions affecting their work. Involvement was associated with increased responsibility, stronger commitment, and greater ownership of organisational outcomes. Employees appeared to value environments in which their expertise and perspectives were recognised and utilised.

Teamwork represented the second major theme. Participants highlighted the importance of collaborative working relationships, shared goals, and supportive team environments. Teamwork was viewed as facilitating knowledge sharing, collective problem-solving, and mutual support. Responses suggested that effective teamwork contributes to both individual effectiveness and broader organisational performance.

Communication emerged as the third significant theme. Employees described communication as fundamental to organisational effectiveness and highlighted the importance of information sharing, feedback, and open dialogue. Strong communication was perceived as contributing to a positive work environment and supporting effective collaboration across organisational levels.

Taken together, these findings indicate that employees regard opportunity-enhancing practices as central components of a high-performance work environment. Practices that facilitate participation, collaboration, and information exchange appear to be particularly valued within the higher education context.

3.2.4 Perceptions of Existing High-Performance Work Practices

Participants were also asked to evaluate the extent to which their organisation currently reflected the characteristics of a high-performance work system. Responses revealed a generally positive but cautious assessment.

More than half of respondents believed that existing practices remained in a developmental stage and required further improvement before they could be considered fully representative of a high-performance work environment. Employees acknowledged positive

progress while simultaneously recognising opportunities for further development. Several responses suggested that organisational practices were moving in the right direction but had not yet reached a level capable of delivering a sustained competitive advantage.

A smaller proportion of participants described existing practices as flexible, approachable, and supportive. However, even among these respondents there was recognition that high-performance work practices represent an ongoing process rather than a fixed organisational achievement.

Employees perceived their organisation as progressing towards a stronger high-performance work environment while acknowledging the need for continued development and refinement.

3.3 Quantitative Findings

Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationships between ability-enhancing, motivation-enhancing, and opportunity-enhancing practices and organisational performance.

3.3.1 Ability-Enhancing Practices and Organisational Performance

The results demonstrated a statistically significant positive relationship between ability-enhancing practices and organisational performance ($r = .526, p = .004$). This finding indicates a moderate positive association, suggesting that higher levels of ability-enhancing practices are associated with stronger organisational performance.

3.3.2 Motivation-Enhancing Practices and Organisational Performance

Motivation-enhancing practices also demonstrated a statistically significant positive relationship with organisational performance ($r = .389, p = .041$). Although the relationship was weaker than that observed for ability-enhancing practices, the findings nevertheless indicate that motivation-enhancing practices contribute positively to organisational outcomes.

3.3.3 Opportunity-Enhancing Practices and Organisational Performance

The strongest relationship was observed between opportunity-enhancing practices and organisational performance. The correlation coefficient ($r = .878, p <$

$.001$) indicates a very strong positive association between the two variables. This finding suggests that practices that increase employee involvement, participation, communication, and teamwork are strongly associated with organisational performance within the study context.

3.3.4 Comparative Analysis of AMO Dimensions

Comparison of the three AMO dimensions revealed a clear pattern. Although all three dimensions were positively associated with organisational performance, the strength of these relationships varied considerably.

Opportunity-enhancing practices exhibited the strongest relationship with organisational performance, followed by ability-enhancing practices and then motivation-enhancing practices. The findings therefore indicate that employees perceive practices that provide opportunities for participation, collaboration, and decision-making involvement as having the greatest influence on organisational effectiveness.

The quantitative results support all three hypotheses and demonstrate that each AMO dimension contributes positively to organisational performance. However, the substantially stronger relationship observed for opportunity-enhancing practices distinguishes this dimension as the most influential predictor of organisational performance within the study sample.

This pattern of findings provides an important foundation for the discussion that follows, particularly regarding the distinctive role of participation, autonomy, communication, and employee voice within higher education institutions.

4. DISCUSSION

The findings provide important insights into how employees in higher education perceive high-performance work practices and the extent to which these practices are associated with organisational performance. A notable feature of the results is the prominence of developmental, participatory and relational practices within employee accounts. Rather than focusing exclusively on financial incentives or formal performance management systems, participants consistently emphasised professional development, meaningful feedback, communication, teamwork and involvement in decision-making. This pattern reinforces growing concerns within the higher education literature

that people management approaches borrowed from corporate settings do not always align with the realities of academic and professional work (Kallio et al., 2016; Franco-Santos & Doherty, 2017; Hassan et al., 2025).

Training and development emerged as the most valued ability-enhancing practice. Employees viewed continuous learning opportunities as essential for maintaining competence and adapting to the changing demands of higher education. This finding is consistent with previous research demonstrating that investment in employee development strengthens capability, engagement and organisational effectiveness (Jiang & Messersmith, 2018; Obeng-Tuaah, 2025). Within universities, where knowledge creation and dissemination constitute core organisational functions, opportunities for professional growth appear particularly important. Employee perceptions suggest that development initiatives are interpreted not simply as mechanisms for improving skills but also as indicators of organisational commitment to staff growth and career progression.

The motivation-related findings similarly point towards a more complex understanding of employee engagement than is often reflected in traditional HRM models. Performance feedback, appraisal and rewards were all viewed positively, but their effectiveness appeared to depend heavily on fairness, transparency and developmental value. Employees did not portray motivation as a product of financial incentives alone. Recognition, appreciation and constructive feedback were repeatedly identified as meaningful sources of encouragement and commitment. These findings align with evidence suggesting that intrinsic and relational factors frequently exert a stronger influence on employee attitudes than purely transactional rewards, particularly within professional and knowledge-intensive settings (Paauwe & Boon, 2018; Moran et al., 2021; Holmes & Vine, 2026).

The strongest findings emerged within the opportunity dimension of the AMO framework. Employee involvement in decision-making, teamwork and communication received greater emphasis than any other category of practice. This result is particularly significant because it reflects a consistent preference for participation and collaboration as defining features of an effective work environment. The finding supports growing evidence that employee voice and involvement play a central role in organisational effectiveness and

employee wellbeing (CIPD, 2026; People Insight, 2025). Opportunities to influence decisions appear to strengthen employees' sense of ownership, commitment and connection to institutional goals.

The quantitative results reinforce these qualitative observations. Although all three AMO dimensions demonstrated significant positive relationships with organisational performance, opportunity-enhancing practices exhibited a markedly stronger association than either ability-enhancing or motivation-enhancing practices. This pattern suggests that creating opportunities for participation may be particularly important within higher education institutions. Universities operate as knowledge-intensive organisations in which performance depends heavily on professional expertise, collegial relationships and discretionary effort. In such environments, practices that encourage collaboration, communication and employee voice may create conditions that enable staff to contribute more effectively to organisational objectives (Boxall et al., 2016).

The prominence of opportunity-enhancing practices also reflects broader developments across the higher education sector. Universities increasingly face pressures associated with financial sustainability, regulatory change, workforce wellbeing and organisational transformation. Responses to these challenges often require cooperation across academic and professional boundaries, making communication and employee involvement critical organisational resources (Universities UK, 2026; HESA, 2026). Employee accounts in this study suggest that staff are more likely to engage positively with institutional priorities when they are provided with meaningful opportunities to participate in shaping them.

Another important finding concerns employee perceptions of the institution's current HPWP maturity. Although participants acknowledged positive developments, many believed that existing practices had not yet reached the level associated with a fully developed high-performance work environment. This observation reflects a degree of organisational realism among respondents. High-performance work systems appear to be viewed not as fixed organisational achievements but as evolving arrangements requiring continuous refinement. Such perceptions reinforce arguments that effective HR systems depend not only on formal policies but also on how consistently those

policies are implemented and experienced across the organisation (Barrena-Martínez et al., 2019; Boon et al., 2019; Aguinis et al., 2022).

The findings therefore suggest that effective people management in higher education extends beyond the provision of training, appraisal systems and reward structures. Greater emphasis appears to be placed on creating environments characterised by trust, communication, collaboration and meaningful participation. Employee experiences indicate that the most influential practices are those that enable individuals to contribute, influence decisions and engage fully with the academic community. These insights provide a richer understanding of how high-performance work practices are experienced within universities and offer a valuable foundation for strengthening employee engagement, wellbeing and organisational effectiveness in the sector.

5. IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND POLICY

The findings offer several important implications for the management of people within higher education institutions. Employee responses suggest that the effectiveness of high-performance work practices depends not only on the presence of formal HR policies but also on how those practices are experienced by staff. This observation reinforces the importance of adopting employee-centred approaches to human resource management that recognise the distinctive characteristics of academic and professional work.

A first implication concerns professional development. Training and development emerged as the most frequently cited ability-enhancing practice, indicating that employees place considerable value on opportunities to strengthen their knowledge, skills and professional capabilities. Universities seeking to enhance organisational performance should therefore continue to invest in structured development programmes, mentoring initiatives and continuous professional learning opportunities. Such investments are particularly important within higher education, where rapid technological change, evolving pedagogical approaches and increasing regulatory demands require employees to update their expertise continually (Obeng-Tuaah, 2025). Development initiatives are likely to be most effective when they are aligned with individual career aspirations as well as institutional objectives.

The findings also highlight the importance of designing performance management systems that employees perceive as fair, developmental and meaningful. Feedback and appraisal processes were viewed positively when they supported professional growth rather than serving purely administrative or compliance functions. University leaders should therefore prioritise feedback cultures that encourage dialogue, reflection and improvement. Appraisal systems that emphasise learning and development may generate stronger employee engagement than approaches focused primarily on performance monitoring. Such practices may be particularly relevant within academic environments, where professional autonomy and expertise are central aspects of employee identity (Namaziandost et al., 2024).

Another important implication relates to employee recognition. Participants consistently identified recognition as a significant source of motivation. Financial rewards remain important; however, the findings indicate that employees also value appreciation, acknowledgement and visible recognition of their contributions. Universities operating under financial constraints may therefore benefit from strengthening non-financial recognition mechanisms, including opportunities for professional visibility, career progression and institutional acknowledgement of achievement. Recognition practices that reinforce a sense of value and belonging may contribute positively to employee morale and organisational commitment.

The strongest practical implications emerge from the findings relating to opportunity-enhancing practices. Employee involvement in decision-making, effective communication and collaborative working relationships were consistently viewed as critical components of a positive work environment. These findings suggest that universities should pay particular attention to creating structures that facilitate employee voice and participation. Opportunities for meaningful involvement in organisational decisions can strengthen trust, commitment and engagement while improving the quality of decision-making through the inclusion of diverse perspectives (People Insight, 2025). Participation should extend beyond formal consultation processes and become embedded within everyday organisational practices.

Communication also warrants particular attention. Employees identified communication as essential for effective organisational functioning. Transparent

communication regarding institutional priorities, organisational changes and strategic decisions may help strengthen trust and reduce uncertainty during periods of transformation. In increasingly complex higher education environments, communication serves not only as a mechanism for information exchange but also as a means of fostering organisational cohesion and shared purpose.

The findings additionally carry implications for higher education policy. Policymakers and sector bodies frequently focus on institutional performance indicators such as student outcomes, research productivity and financial sustainability. The evidence presented here suggests that employee experiences should also be considered an important component of institutional effectiveness. Policies that encourage staff development, participation and wellbeing may contribute indirectly to broader organisational outcomes by strengthening employee engagement and commitment.

A broader lesson emerging from this study is that high-performance work practices should not be viewed as a collection of isolated HR interventions. Employees appeared to interpret these practices as interconnected elements of a wider organisational environment. Training, feedback, recognition, communication and participation were frequently discussed in ways that reflected their combined influence on workplace experiences. Effective people management therefore requires a coherent and integrated approach rather than reliance on individual practices implemented in isolation.

Employee perceptions ultimately suggest that the most effective workplace environments are those in which individuals feel supported, valued and able to contribute meaningfully to organisational life. Universities that create such conditions may be better positioned to attract, retain and engage talented employees while strengthening their capacity to achieve strategic objectives in an increasingly challenging sector.

6. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study. First, the research was conducted within a single higher education institution. Although the findings provide valuable insights into employee perceptions of high-performance work practices, organisational cultures, governance arrangements and HR systems vary across institutions. Consequently, the transferability of the findings to the

wider higher education sector should be approached with appropriate caution. Research involving multiple universities would provide a broader understanding of how employees experience high-performance work practices across different institutional contexts.

Second, the study relied on a relatively modest sample size. While the response rate was acceptable and sufficient for the analyses undertaken, a larger sample would enhance the robustness of the findings and strengthen confidence in the observed relationships. Future studies could utilise larger datasets drawn from multiple institutions to improve generalisability and facilitate more detailed subgroup analyses.

Third, the study employed a cross-sectional design, capturing employee perceptions at a single point in time. Employee experiences and organisational practices are dynamic and may change in response to leadership transitions, policy reforms, resource constraints or wider sector developments. Longitudinal research would therefore provide valuable insights into how perceptions of high-performance work practices evolve over time and how such changes influence organisational outcomes.

A further limitation relates to the use of self-reported data. Although employee perceptions are central to understanding how HR practices are experienced, self-report measures may be influenced by personal attitudes, individual experiences and response tendencies. Future studies could strengthen the evidence base through the inclusion of additional organisational indicators such as employee retention, student satisfaction, productivity measures or performance outcomes. Combining perceptual and objective indicators would provide a more comprehensive assessment of the effectiveness of high-performance work practices.

The study also focused primarily on broad dimensions of the AMO framework. Although this approach facilitated examination of the relationships between ability-enhancing, motivation-enhancing and opportunity-enhancing practices and organisational performance, it did not explore the potential interactions between individual practices. Future research could investigate how specific combinations of practices influence employee attitudes and organisational outcomes. Such work would contribute to a more detailed understanding of the mechanisms through which high-performance work systems operate within higher education settings.

Several promising avenues for future research emerge from the findings. Comparative studies examining different categories of higher education institutions would provide insight into whether employee perceptions vary according to institutional mission, size or governance structure. International comparative research would also be valuable given the increasing globalisation of higher education and the growing emphasis on workforce performance and employee wellbeing across national systems.

The strong relationship observed between opportunity-enhancing practices and organisational performance warrants particular attention in future investigations. Additional research could examine the specific mechanisms through which participation, communication, teamwork and employee voice contribute to organisational effectiveness. More sophisticated analytical approaches, including structural equation modelling and multilevel analysis, may provide deeper insight into these relationships.

Research exploring the experiences of specific employee groups would also be beneficial. Academic staff, professional services staff, managers and senior leaders may experience organisational practices differently. Greater understanding of these differences could assist institutions in developing more targeted and effective people-management strategies.

Continued research in these areas would strengthen understanding of how high-performance work practices operate within higher education and help identify approaches capable of supporting both employee wellbeing and organisational effectiveness in an increasingly complex and demanding sector.

7. CONCLUSION

This study examined employee perceptions of high-performance work practices within a UK higher education institution and explored the relationships between ability-enhancing, motivation-enhancing and opportunity-enhancing practices and organisational performance. The findings provide evidence that employees view high-performance work practices as important contributors to both individual effectiveness and organisational success. At the same time, the results demonstrate that employees distinguish between different categories of practices and place varying levels of importance on each.

Training and development emerged as the most prominent ability-enhancing practice, reflecting the importance employees attach to continuous learning and professional growth. Within the motivation dimension, feedback, appraisal and recognition were viewed as important mechanisms for supporting engagement and encouraging performance. The strongest emphasis, however, was placed on opportunity-enhancing practices. Employee involvement in decision-making, effective communication and teamwork emerged as central features of positive workplace experiences and were consistently associated with perceptions of organisational effectiveness.

The quantitative findings reinforced these observations. All three dimensions of the AMO framework demonstrated significant positive relationships with organisational performance. Opportunity-enhancing practices exhibited the strongest association, suggesting that environments characterised by participation, collaboration and employee voice may be particularly important within higher education institutions. These findings reflect the distinctive nature of academic and professional work, where performance depends heavily on knowledge sharing, professional autonomy and collective engagement.

Employee responses also indicated that high-performance work systems are not evaluated solely on the basis of formal HR policies. Perceptions of fairness, support, communication and meaningful involvement appeared to play a significant role in shaping how organisational practices were experienced. Effective people management therefore extends beyond the implementation of individual HR initiatives and requires attention to the broader organisational environment in which those practices operate.

The study contributes to a growing body of research that seeks to understand high-performance work practices from the employee perspective rather than solely through managerial or organisational lenses. Employee accounts reveal that the practices most valued within higher education are those that foster development, recognise contribution and create opportunities for meaningful participation. These insights provide a deeper understanding of how high-performance work practices are experienced within universities and offer practical guidance for institutions seeking to strengthen employee engagement, workplace wellbeing and organisational performance.

As universities continue to navigate financial pressures, technological change, workforce challenges and increasing stakeholder expectations, the ability to create supportive and participatory work environments is likely to become even more important. The evidence presented in this study suggests that institutions that invest not only in employee capability and motivation but also in opportunities for meaningful involvement may be better positioned to achieve sustainable organisational success.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

All authors played a substantive role in shaping this study and developing the manuscript. M.H. conceptualised the work and designed the overall study framework. Data analysis, interpretation, and validation of findings were carried out collaboratively, with each author contributing to the discussions that informed the final results. M.H. and K.O.O. prepared the initial manuscript draft, covering the introduction, methods, results and discussion. Co-authors strengthened the analysis, offered detailed revisions and enhanced the clarity and coherence of the final document. Every author reviewed the complete manuscript, approved the final version and accepted responsibility for the integrity of the work.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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