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Trials And Tribulations Encountered By Human Capital: Perspectives Of Academics At A Pakistani University

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Abstract

Universities are vital in a knowledge-driven society, as they equip present and future generations to become change agents. Consequently, educators play a key role in delivering high-quality education. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the importance of human capital within the higher education sector by examining academics' challenges and difficulties at a private university in Pakistan. Additionally, critics contend that the teaching profession, once held in high esteem, appears to be diminishing regarding respect, compensation, and working conditions. Thus, this paper's results highlight eight recurring themes that contribute to this decline. Moreover, the article highlights the necessity of reforming Pakistan's higher education sector by considering the views of academic staff, which uncovers a concerning situation. Tackling the issues faced by academic staff will profoundly affect students, industries, and society as a whole. Furthermore, the research will aid university administrators, policymakers, line managers, and HR practitioners in enacting essential reforms within their institutions by addressing significant challenges to enhance academic staff's physical and mental health, ensuring they can produce a skilled workforce for the job market. Ultimately, this study will contribute to fulfilling the United Nations Goal 4 and Indicator 4c, which stresses the significance of quality education and aims to increase the availability of qualified teachers through international collaboration for teacher training in developing countries by 2030, respectively. The research utilized a cross-sectional qualitative case study method, employing semi-structured interviews to gather data from fifteen faculty members/ academics across various university departments. Participants were chosen using purposive sampling due to their ability to provide valuable insights for the study.

Key words: Higher education sector of Pakistan, human capital, challenges, academics, sustainability, qualitative study, UN SDG #4.

INTRODUCTION

Human capital has become a crucial element in the development of human resources, and the literature offers various definitions of this concept. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) defines human capital as the abilities, knowledge, and skills that enable individuals to be productive. Baron (2011) defined human capital as the stock of knowledge, skills, and abilities an employee possesses to add value to the organization. Similarly, human capital includes an employee's creativity, knowledge, competency, exposure, professional experiences,

and cognitive abilities (Namasivayam & Denizci, 2006). Kucharcikova et al. (2015) said that human capital has the necessary expertise, loyalty, problem-solving approach, motivation, exposure, skills, and knowledge to increase productivity. Human capital can improve employee efficiency as it is a source of competitive advantage for organizations (Pasban & Nojedeh, 2016). Peter Drucker, a renowned author, educator, and management consultant, believed that infrastructure such as equipment, machinery, and land could be devastated but rebuilt using an organization's employees. Therefore, developing human capital, particularly academics in higher education, is essential for achieving sustainable competitive advantages. Furthermore, organizations use human capital as a catalyst for improved performance and the economic development of a country. It is an embodiment of unique and imitable qualities. Theorists in the field of human capital agree that at a macro level, human capital is crucial to a country's economic growth and development (Ogundari & Awokuse, 2018). Maia et al. (2021), in support of past studies, assume that economic growth is possible through higher education, which is a way to improve an individual's skills and knowledge through teaching and research. Likewise, Adebayo and Gombakomba (2013) said that education plays a crucial role in the nation-building of a developing country, and academicians can nurture the hearts and souls of the youth who are considered to be the leaders of tomorrow. Hence, it is concluded that human capital impacts the country's socio-economic advancement and provides a knowledgeable and skilled workforce to the labor market and society.

Another significant aspect of human capital is that universities can play an instrumental role in developing a knowledge-based society. Universities contribute to the economy by training individuals with knowledge and skills that meet the employment needs of both the public and private sectors (World Bank, 2017). To summarize, increasing interest has been in developing a knowledge-based society where universities can transform current and future generations (Vanevenhoven, 2013).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Contribution of Human Capital to Universities

The university's human capital includes academic staff, administrative staff, university management, and student body, thus contributing to the spectrum of knowledge as an intangible asset (Ramirez Corcoles et al., 2011). Moreover, in the context of the higher education sector and universities, human capital mainly refers to academic staff's knowledge, expertise, and experiences (Leitner et al., 2014). This notion is backed by the evidence (Reichenberg & Andreassen, 2018) that supports referring to academics' human capital as having cognitive abilities, experiences, skills, potential, and knowledge potential to create value for their institutions. Therefore, this study mainly focuses on the perspectives of academics.

According to the (UN, 2015), heightened attention has been given to developing a qualified teaching workforce. On September 25, 2015, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the 17 proposed Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). "Goal 4: Ensure that all people have access to inclusive, fair, and quality education and promote opportunities for continuous learning." Goal 4 includes seven indicators, including "4c: By 2030, substantially increase the supply of qualified teachers, including through international cooperation for teacher training in developing countries, especially least developed countries and small island developing States."

It is worth noting that the quality of academic human capital shapes the delivery of cutting-edge knowledge for students and the development of new businesses and organizational processes.

Ginsburg (2012) said that according to an analysis of the World Bank's education sector policy documents from 1995, 1999, and 2011, academics are considered human capital and required to produce learning outcomes for students, just as workers are in the production of goods and services are needed (Becker, 2009). Therefore, academic performance should be aligned with the competencies students require in the job market. Eventually, a university will be responsible for providing a skilled and qualified workforce to the job market.

Many analysts now argue that the teaching profession is losing its charm. For instance, the teaching profession has historically been highly regarded, but its status appears to be declining recently in terms of respect, pay, and working conditions (Evans & Yuan, 2018)

It is essential to realize that academics are the cornerstone of universities, and institutions cannot survive without them. However, they have recently been facing growing complexity and formidable challenges.

Challenges of Academics in Universities

The higher education sector's effectiveness is based on adapting to global challenges like Artificial Intelligence, data science, metaverse, gamification, and entrepreneurial ventures, which are essential tools for measuring university performance. Kareem and Hussein (2019) said that universities should try to deliver quality education, and academics are the backbone for bringing credibility to the university.

Keeping in view these arguments, critics claim that it is difficult for academics to achieve the underlying objectives because they experience a lack of organizational support, lack of performance feedback, unfair work demands, limited career development opportunities, vague contractual terms, and a lack of job orientation (Solomon & Plessis, 2024). Davidson (2005) noted that the lack of academic motivation may impact the quality of teaching. In addition, Jessop (2017) mentioned that universities now operate more like businesses, with students acting as paying customers for services. It is argued that a lack of resources such as financial support, paid leave, recognition, role clarity, and supervisor support can lead to employee burnout (Gauche et al., 2017).

As discussed earlier, human capital is vital for a knowledge-based economy, but graduates should be equipped with industry-related skills to succeed in the knowledge economy. Therefore, the effectiveness of a university can be measured by the quality of the academics who teach these skills to the pupils. The students' success can be measured based on the skills they develop. Sultanova and Auken (2016) said a discrepancy exists between the skills developed and the grades students achieve. Consequently, the intellectual performance of academics impacts the employability of future graduates. Theron and Theron (2014) asserted that the demand for academics in universities has increased, and a further increase is expected. However, there are several reasons for the rise in their dissatisfaction. These factors include resignations, lack of recognition, unrealistic publishing goals, mundane administrative tasks, layoffs, poor compensation, ad hoc scheduling, terrible working conditions, mental and physical exhaustion, and lack of personal development and industry-related experience limitations. It has become difficult for universities to retain, manage, and attract academics to help achieve a state's economic goals (Hoque & Tshutsha, 2022). Barnes et al. (2021) identified the challenges academics face with external stakeholders, regulators, systems, policies, and organizational culture. Moreover, Chatterjee (2018) said academics suffer from additional workload due to increased student enrollment and other expected outcomes. Evans and Yuan (2018) said that the worldwide dilemma is that academics are paid salaries according to their qualifications and experience rather than their potential. The authors also found that a supportive work environment is essential for academics' emotional, mental, and physical well-being. In addition, teachers' work performance is based on

subsidized meals, high-quality furniture, well-ventilated office spaces and classrooms, updated learning materials, and state-of-the-art infrastructure, but these essential perks seem missing. Furthermore, Mbukwana and Ayandibu (2023) said that employees in the education sector intend to leave due to a lack of work-life balance, low pay, persistent workload, inadequate performance management system, and micromanagement leadership styles. Expectations from the university and its leadership have undeniably increased (Saiti et al., 2018). However, Ngowi (2018) argued that universities recruit academic leaders based on their seniority in academic ranks rather than on proven leadership skills. Hence, it is reasonable to assume that academic activities have been commodified (Puxty et al., 1994).

Overall, these studies highlight the importance of academic staff contributions to tertiary education, and the challenges they face should be addressed timely to achieve sustainability in the long run. As Hatch and Dyer (2004) noted, human capital can yield a sustainable competitive advantage for an organization. Higher education has prioritized sustainable development for over 20 years (Mader & Rammel, 2015). Sustainability is more important than ever as anthropogenic activity has increased, climate change has advanced, and its effects are being felt. However, in practice, change toward a more sustainable world is happening painfully slowly. Organizations, governments, and educational institutions are urged to take action and increase their investments in implementing creative, multidisciplinary approaches to address our pressing sustainability challenges (Almeida et al., 2013).

Perils of Academics in Universities of Pakistan

The higher education sector has witnessed massive change in the last few decades, and Pakistan is no exception. Zahid et al. (2020) said globalization has impacted Pakistan's higher education sector.

There has been a mushroom growth of universities recently, but ironically, the quality of education has not improved significantly. Pakistan faces challenges in its higher education sector, such as brain drain, a preference for skills rather than degrees, underemployment, outdated curricula, etc. Given this current situation, the role of academic staff is becoming increasingly complex and demanding. Rasheed et al. (2016) said that engagement of academics in invigilation duties, co-curricular activities, supervising research projects, mentoring student societies, disciplinary committees, and counselling students along with a 12-credit hour course load is hectic for academics in Pakistan. Hence, these pressures affect the emotional well-being of academics. Asrar-ul-Haq et al. (2017) said that emotional intelligence significantly impacts academics' job performance. Likewise, Ishaq and Mahmood (2017) said that academics face stress and burnout due to inadequate infrastructure, management incompetence, and inadequate pay structure in the workplace. Tasleem et al. (2023) posit that working conditions, extra workload, delayed promotions, and job insecurity cause workplace stress among university teachers. Therefore, university leaders must provide their academic staff with adequate professional development opportunities to effectively discharge their duties and responsibilities.

This paper explores the significance of human capital in the higher education sector, focusing on the trials and tribulations faced by academics in Pakistani universities. The study will assist university leaders, policymakers, line managers, and HR practitioners in addressing strategic issues to improve academic staff's physical and mental well-being and ensure they can generate a high-quality workforce for the job market.

This research seeks to address the following questions:

- What unrealistic demands are placed on academics for teaching and research publications?
- How does leadership influence the support provided to academics?

- Are the systems for managing performance practical?
- Is the role of the regulator satisfactory?
- How do financial incentives impact academic job satisfaction levels?
- Do learning and growth opportunities influence the performance of academics?
- How satisfied are academics with their organizational culture?
- Are Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) being effectively implemented

METHODOLOGY

Research setting and background of the case

The Ministry of Education and the Higher Education Commission (HEC) oversee higher education in Pakistan. This includes universities, degree-awarding institutions, and affiliated colleges, all of which contribute to the country's human resources and technological capabilities (World Bank, 2007).

Higher Education Commission (HEC), established in 2002, is a regulatory body that aims to transform universities into world-class research and teaching centers. It is responsible for governing, managing, and accrediting both public and private sector universities in Pakistan (Riaz et al., 2023); however, reforms introduced by HEC are still incapable of reaping fruitful results because universities face many difficulties (Amir et al., 2020). It is argued that the HEC has developed draconian laws that promote bureaucracy and inhibit creativity for academics and students.

Qai[1], the selected varsity for this case study, was founded in early 2000 as a private-sector university in Pakistan. Since its inception, Qai has expanded in revenue, student enrollment, infrastructure, campuses and research activities nationwide. It has approximately 200 faculty members, most of whom have doctoral degrees. Qai University is opted for this study because of its strong appetite for research ambitions, national/international rankings, and compliance with regulatory requirements. Qai's leadership mainly focuses on achieving regulators' objectives at all costs.

Research Design

The study adopted a cross-sectional qualitative case study approach with semi-structured interviews to collect the data from fifteen academic staff members (faculty) representing different university departments: business administration, computer science, psychology, and media sciences. Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their potential to contribute to the study (McDonnell et al., 2014). Data from various perspectives have provided a more detailed and comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study (Alvesson et al., 2008).

Data Collection

Firstly, a literature review was conducted on the challenges faced by academic staff in higher education. Secondly, data were collected through in-depth face-to-face interviews to develop respondents' perspectives. We continued interviews until saturation or redundancy was reached (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes. Before the interview began, respondents were given information sheets explaining the study's research objectives. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim with prior consent from participants.

[1] Pseudonym used for the case institution in this text.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data was analyzed using thematic analysis. The author used Microsoft Excel to label the data emerging from the dataset, which allowed them to add additional categories or themes.

Rigor in Study

The accuracy or quality of the data results was ensured using several techniques. The member check technique was used, in which participants were provided with coding sheets for approval and feedback. An audit trail was created, documenting methodological decisions and justifications for those decisions and preserving evidence of all research activities (Tracy, 2010). In this way, trustworthiness was ensured**.**

Considering Malterud's (2001) approach, the author used a journal to ensure reflexivity throughout the research process, as this is beneficial in reducing the researcher's bias.

The pilot study, which involved three participants, was also conducted before the final research to correct errors in the interview protocol.

All ethical requirements, such as briefing participants about the research objectives, ensuring anonymity, and obtaining informed consent, have been met.

Findings and Discussion

Eight broad themes emerged from the analysis.

Unrealistic workplace goals

The significance of teaching has completely diminished. Modern universities are judged by only one criterion, namely, research publications. Research-based performance goals have reduced job satisfaction and increased stress levels among academics. Therefore, research has become a commodity for government regulators and international-ranking agencies to improve university performance. As noted by Smyth (2017), the "publish or perish" culture for academics is becoming so intensified that they hardly have any opportunity to think and reflect.

The participants answered:

"Research publications in impact factor journals are the only criteria for a teacher's promotion, without focusing on the teacher's ability to give a lecture. It feels like I work in a paper factory, not a university. The research papers barely address real-world problems (Male, Senior Lecturer, Department of Psychology)."

"We are not viewed as humans but as robots. We are burdened with invigilation duties and increased workloads. Academics must teach 12 credit hours weekly, perform administrative and supervisory duties, and conduct guest speaker sessions. The pressure to produce research papers in high-impact journals is unbearable (Female, Assistant Professor, Department of Business Administration)."

Leadership Dilemma

The universities lack visionary leaders, and politics has wreaked havoc on leadership (Sebola, M. P., 2023). Incompetent managers may hinder academics' job performance through favoritism, unprofessionalism, intimidation, victimization, and excessive inspection. Positions are filled based on academic achievements rather than leadership skills, which harms academic' motivation. Al-Bakr et al. (2017) said that management prerogatives in decisions such as salary increases, promotions, and leaves contradict the guidelines of the human resources policy.

The participants answered:

"Management discretion is essential for decisions such as teaching appointments, promotions, study leave, etc., and these decisions may or may not be consistent with HR policies, but who cares? (Female, Junior Lecturer, Department of Media Sciences)"
"The university's management does not deal effectively with workforce optimization, and the director is aloof in addressing employee complaints (Male, Assistant Professor, Department of Computer Science)."
"Directors micro-manage their employees and lack the leadership skills to motivate and guide them (Female, Associate Professor, Department of Business Administration)."
"I have only studied transformational leadership in books; in reality, there is no such thing at my university, and we still work under transactional leaders whose mantra is the carrot-and-stick approach (Male, Assistant Professor, Department of Computer Science)."

Ineffective Performance Management System

The performance management system includes social, extrinsic, and intrinsic rewards the employer offers its employees. However, it is not intended as a tool for the growth of academic staff; instead, it is designed to guarantee their impact on the ranking outcomes. Inadequate performance assessments can lead to anxiety, increased workload, and, ultimately, loss of academic human capital.
The results align with the traditional performance management systems that measure teaching hours and publication output are not practical for universities because they do not demonstrate the practical impact of knowledge transfer into society (Ter Bogt & Scapens, 2012).
The participants answered:
"I received no feedback during the performance review. My reporting manager evaluated me without identifying my strengths and areas for improvement, and my higher-level needs were not considered (Male, Lecturer, Department of Media Sciences)."
"I am tired of the rat race for paper publications; the only criterion for performance evaluation and my teaching ability is not considered (Female, Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology)."

Regulatory Constraints

Regulators' requirements influence academics' job satisfaction and workload, and they must ensure compliance despite work pressures. Alqahtani and Ayentimi (2021) asserted that the government's regulatory body undermines the autonomy of higher education institutions.
The participants answered:
"I am tired of government regulator accreditation visits because good rankings require too much window dressing and data manipulation. They are hectic, a waste of my intellectual abilities, and regulatory bodies' expectations and requirements hinder academic career development (Male, Assistant Professor, Department of Computer Science)."
"The university's management is not autonomous due to government regulatory restrictions, and the regulators' rules are outdated (Male, Senior Lecturer, Department of Computer Science)."

Lack of Monetary Benefits

Employees render their services in exchange for financial incentives; the perks and privileges should be attractive enough to retain them. Rasheed et al. (2016) point out that compensation packages and monetary incentives are crucial considerations for employees in the competitive landscape of the higher education sector.

The participants answered:
"There is a huge salary gap between academic staff and deans/directors; management follows the mantra of do more with academics (Female, Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology)."
"I am being promoted to a senior lecturer position without a raise. Financial incentives do not encourage me to work hard, negatively impacting my performance and productivity (Female, Senior Lecturer, Department of Business Administration)."
"My institution does not consider academics as human capital; we are mere slaves and liabilities, and no funding is provided for certifications, the pursuit of a PhD, or article processing fees (Male, Junior Lecturer, Department of Business Administration."
"Getting a PhD degree offers no special incentives to teachers (Female, Senior Lecturer, Department of Computer Science)."

Inadequate Learning and Development Opportunities

Learning and development opportunities are essential for career advancement. Academics are knowledge assets, so investing in them benefits both the employee and the organization. Czerniawski et al. (2017) said academics are willing to participate in professional development programs offering experiential learning. It is worth noting that to build human capital, investments should be made in learning and development to improve teachers' knowledge and skills.
The participants answered:
"The effectiveness of T&D activities has not been measured using any mechanism, and it seems that just posting on social media is sufficient to be exhibited to the world (Female, Assistant Professor, Department of Business Administration)."
"*There is a mismatch between teachers' training needs and actual training activities in the institution (Male, Junior Lecturer, Department of Media Sciences)."*
"The results of performance appraisals do not align with the professional development activities (Female, Associate Professor, Department of Computer Science)."
"Gen Z is entering the workforce, but we are still teaching courses in traditional ways, with no training in innovative teaching methods like gamification, artificial intelligence, or data science. As a result, student-centric pedagogy is being undermined (Male, Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology)."

Toxic Work Culture

Organizational culture plays a vital role in modelling employee behaviour (Floyd & Lane, 2000). Walker and Oldford (2020) said that dialogue, leadership, and group cohesion enable reflection among the organization's employees.
In addition, today, employers should prioritize good working conditions for teachers to increase their productivity and efficiency. Ngwenya (2021) suggested that poor working conditions in educational institutions lead to turnover, absenteeism, and low productivity, while favorable conditions lead to satisfied and effective teachers.
The participants answered:
"*The academics' morale is down because the administrative staff and management insult them. We feel insulted by the administrative staff, and our physical, emotional, psychological, and social well-being is not considered (Female, Assistant Professor, Department of Media Sciences)."*
"The teaching profession is more of a service to satisfy students; customers are paying the price to enjoy the benefits of a higher CGPA (Female, Lecturer, Department of Psychology)."

"There is no job orientation at my university. HR does not provide guided tours, employee handbooks, or schedules for new hires, so I was confused in my initial days (Male, Senior Lecturer, Department of Business Administration)."
"I work in poor conditions, without proper lighting in classes and offices, mics and sound systems, air conditioning in faculty offices, or uncomfortable tables (Female, Assistant Professor, Department of Computer Science)."

Unsustainable Business Model

Sustainable Development (SD) has attracted growing interest among researchers, industry experts, and decision-makers (United Nations, 2016). Netswera and Rankhumise (2005) mentioned that productive employees create sustainable development for universities, and losing these employees will cost institutions in the long run.
"I know that my university has been ranked by TIMES recently. However, I am unaware of the Times Higher Education (THE) Impact ranking assigned to my university. Why should I bother to know? Green rewards are not given to us, and there is no collaboration with sustainable networks or local or international universities to share best practices. Awareness sessions to align Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with the institution's vision, operational goals, curriculum, and research output seem like a distant reality at my university. In light of this scenario, the irony is that I am always asked to meet the SDGs through guest speaker sessions (Female, Assistant Professor, Department of Business Administration)."
"There is too much talk about the SDG agenda, but no training/workshops are conducted for academics on integrating it into the curriculum (Male, Senior Lecturer, Department of Computer Science)."
"The implementation of SDGs is not done in true letter and spirit, and no capacity-building measures have been taken for decarbonizing, energy efficiency, waste recycling, biodiversity, SDGs committees, and ethical champions (Female, Assistant Professor, Department of Business Administration)."
"My university relies on passive measures rather than active plans for sustainable development (Male, Lecturer, Department of Computer Science)."
"The research papers and thesis produced by students are not integrated with sustainability measures, although management aims to acquire high-impact rankings (Female, Associate Professor, Department of Business Administration)."

CONCLUSION

Academics are the most vital human capital in a university. This paper emphasizes the need to reform Pakistan's higher education sector by considering the perspectives of academic staff, which reveals an alarming situation. Addressing the concerns of academic staff will have significant impacts on students, industry, and society as a whole. Consequently, it is crucial to approach academics with care and consider their concerns, as this will enhance their productivity and well-being and contribute to the university's long-term sustainability.
Implications for Policy and Practice
This article contributes to the literature on the policy debate on human capital and academic well-being. It offers management leadership and regulatory representatives a new perspective on the problems and needs of academic staff. Policymakers and human resources professionals can create strategies and reforms to empower academic staff and support a nation's socioeconomic development from a practical perspective.

These reforms and strategies can be used to effectively address the declining status of academics in the universities of Pakistan.

- Develop a triple helix platform, i.e., a link between industry, academia, and government in practice to address the issues of academics' physical and mental well-being.
- Set realistic goals by focusing on applied or action research rather than primary research to understand real-world problems. In addition, lecturers should accompany senior professors in the transfer of knowledge.
- Revise the criteria for faculty promotion and develop a system for sharing the research papers' results with subject matter scientists and industry experts. This will help the faculty focus on the quality of the research papers, not just the quantity.
- Expand the workforce for invigilation and administrative tasks so that teaching staff can concentrate on more productive activities such as teaching and research.
- Reliance on rankings must end, and students must learn contemporary skills. This approach will contribute to solving the brain drain issue in Pakistan.
- Initiate growth and educational opportunities focusing on professional advancement in the modern era, including areas like artificial intelligence, data science, chatbots, and gamification integrated into the curriculum.
- Recruit leaders based on personality traits, not career achievements and research output.
- Develop an employee feedback mechanism to capitalize on their strengths and address areas for improvement
- Formulate a fair compensation policy that would encourage academic staff to work harder for better performance.
- Hold interactive sessions with the academic staff regularly so that they can openly share their suggestions
- Launch Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) for academics' psychological and physiological well-being, such as reunion dinners, retreat activities, subsidized food, carpool service, paid leave for higher studies and certifications, etc.
- Provide a pleasant work environment to increase productivity, such as ergonomic tables and chairs, well-ventilated classrooms and offices, microphone and sound systems, and air conditioning.
- Recruit staff and student Sustainability Champions to execute the UN’s SDGs effectively.
- Develop a network with local universities and sustainability agencies to share best practices.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Firstly, the study findings are solely based on the opinions of academic staff and other stakeholders; deans, department heads, industry, regulators, policymakers, international accreditation agencies, and students should be considered in future studies. Secondly, the study is cross-sectional, i.e., changes over time are not considered. Therefore, a longitudinal study is recommended. Thirdly, sustainable higher education practices, including their antecedents, mechanisms, and outcomes, are promising areas for future researchers.

Despite the shortcomings, the results contribute to the human capital literature by presenting the perspectives of academics.

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