

Article

From self-determination to thriving at work: the moderating effect of psychological contract fulfillment in higher education

Marlina Kusumawati^{1,2}, Olivia Fachrunnisa^{1,*}, Marno Nugroho¹

¹ Department of Management, Faculty of Economics and Business, Universitas Islam Sultan Agung, Semarang 50112, Indonesia

² Faculty of Digital Economics and Business, Universitas Sains Teknologi Ekonomi Digital Indonesia, Semarang 50232, Indonesia

*Corresponding author: Olivia Fachrunnisa, Email: olivia.fachrunnisa@unissula.ac.id

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Abstract: This conceptual article develops a framework and propositions explaining the relationships among academic self-determination, psychological contract fulfillment, and thriving at work. The study adopts a comprehensive literature synthesis grounded in self-determination theory, social exchange theory, and thriving theory to construct an integrated conceptual model. The proposed model suggests that academic self-determination positively influences thriving at work by enhancing academic staff's learning and vitality in performing their professional roles. Moreover, psychological contract fulfillment strengthens this relationship, such that when academic staff perceive that higher education institutions fulfill mutual promises, expectations, and obligations, the positive effect of academic self-determination on thriving at work becomes stronger. As a conceptual study, the proposed framework has not yet been empirically validated and therefore requires future testing through quantitative, longitudinal, and mixed-methods research. Theoretically, this study extends self-determination theory by integrating it with social exchange theory and thriving theory, providing a broader explanation of how self-determined motivation fosters thriving through psychological contract fulfillment. Practically, the findings highlight the importance of promoting academic staff's autonomy, competence, and relatedness while ensuring psychological contract fulfillment through career support, professional development opportunities, fair reward systems, transparent promotion processes, and a supportive work environment. This study offers an integrated conceptual framework that explains how academic self-determination enhances thriving at work through the moderating role of psychological contract fulfillment, providing a contextually relevant perspective for understanding thriving among academic staff in higher education.

Keywords: academic self-determination; thriving at work; psychological contract fulfillment; academic staff

1. Introduction

Higher education institutions operate in an increasingly complex environment characterised by digital transformation, internationalisation, and heightened performance expectations. These developments have expanded academic responsibilities beyond teaching and research to include publication, innovation, international collaboration, student supervision, and institutional service (Janke et al., 2025; Uusiautti et al., 2025). Digital transformation and internationalisation also reshape the psychological and motivational conditions of academic work. Digitalisation requires academics to develop technological competencies, adapt teaching and research practices, and exercise autonomy in responding to evolving demands, while internationalisation requires cross-border collaboration,

engagement with diverse scholarly communities, and adaptation to international standards (Nurhidayati et al., 2026). These demands make autonomous motivation increasingly important for academics to remain self-directed in learning, adapting, and pursuing professional goals.

The changing nature of academic work has intensified psychological demands through administrative responsibilities, research and publication pressures, competition for funding, and continuous adaptation to new academic practices (Janke et al., 2025; Uusiautti et al., 2025). Digital transformation further requires academics to update digital competencies, while internationalization increases expectations for global research visibility and collaboration. When organizational resources are insufficient, these demands may undermine well-being and work engagement and increase emotional exhaustion (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Fachrunnisa et al., 2022; Haase et al., 2025). Thus, the key challenge is not merely whether academics can meet increasing performance expectations, but whether they can sustain the psychological resources required to learn, adapt, and remain energized.

This challenge is closely related to thriving at work, a positive psychological state characterised by the simultaneous experience of learning and vitality (Porath et al., 2012; Spreitzer et al., 2005). Learning reflects the development of knowledge, skills, and competencies, whereas vitality refers to feelings of energy and aliveness at work. Although thriving is relevant across knowledge-intensive occupations, it is particularly important in academia because academic work combines continuous knowledge creation, professional discretion, multiple roles, and long-term career development. Unlike R&D environments, where learning is typically driven by specific projects and commercial goals, or healthcare settings, where professional practice is guided by clinical protocols and immediate patient care requirements, academics perform multiple interconnected roles as researchers, educators, mentors, and contributors to institutional development. Therefore, thriving in academia involves not only performance and adaptation but also continuous intellectual development and sustained psychological energy across interconnected academic roles.

Despite the growing interest in thriving, research has focused more heavily on corporate, healthcare, manufacturing, and service contexts, leaving academic staff comparatively underexamined (Jiang et al., 2025; Kleine et al., 2019). This contextual gap is important because the antecedents of thriving may differ across knowledge-intensive occupations. In academia, learning involves knowledge creation, teaching development, scholarly exchange, and professional identity formation, while vitality must be sustained across teaching, research, publication, supervision, and institutional responsibilities. Understanding academic thriving therefore requires attention to its specific motivational and relational conditions.

The academic context is distinctive because professional autonomy, academic freedom, knowledge-intensive work, collegiality, and long career trajectories coexist with substantial performance pressures and multiple role expectations (Janke et al., 2025; Uusiautti et al., 2025). These characteristics make academic self-determination particularly relevant. Grounded in self-determination theory (SDT), academic self-determination refers to the extent to which academics regulate professional activities through personally endorsed values, intrinsic interests, and autonomous goals rather than external pressures (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2020). SDT proposes that satisfaction of autonomy, competence, and relatedness supports autonomous motivation, facilitating learning, creativity, persistence, well-being, and professional growth (Broeck et al., 2021; Howard et al., 2021). Accordingly, academic self-determination may provide the internal motivational resources necessary to sustain learning and vitality. However, its role in explaining thriving among academic staff remains

insufficiently specified.

Academic self-determination does not operate independently of organisational conditions. The socially embedded model of thriving emphasises that thriving is shaped by contextual resources and relational conditions as well as individual characteristics (Spreitzer et al., 2005) (One relevant contextual condition is psychological contract fulfillment (PCF), defined as employees' perceptions that their organisation has fulfilled its promises, obligations, and expectations within the employment relationship (Denise M. Rousseau, 1995). In higher education, fair promotion, career development, research support, transparent policies, and recognition may signal institutional support and strengthen trust and reciprocity (Blau, 1964; Robinson & Morrison, 2000). Adequate organisational support allows academics to convert their motivation for adaptation and continuous learning into long-term professional effectiveness, especially in response to the increasing demands of digital transformation and internationalisation (Adhiatma et al., 2022). However, failure to meet organisational commitments may erode trust and encourage withdrawal behaviours, ultimately reducing the effectiveness of this motivational mechanism.

Existing research has largely examined autonomous motivation in relation to engagement, creativity, well-being, and performance, while less attention has been paid to its contribution to thriving among academic staff (Ryan & Deci, 2020; Van den Broeck et al., 2021). Similarly, PCF has primarily been examined as a predictor of employee attitudes and behaviors rather than as a contextual condition that strengthens the translation of autonomous motivation into thriving (Laulié et al., 2023; Topa et al., 2022). Thus, an important conceptual gap remains concerning how academic motivation and organizational reciprocity jointly contribute to thriving in higher education.

Given these considerations, this study aims to answer the following research question: How does academic self-determination shape thriving at work among academic staff, and to what extent does psychological contract fulfillment amplify this positive relationship? Addressing this question moves beyond treating motivation and organizational support as separate antecedents and instead examines their interaction in explaining the simultaneous development of learning and vitality.

Accordingly, this conceptual paper integrates SDT, social exchange theory (SET), and thriving theory to develop a motivational-relational model in which academic self-determination predicts thriving at work and PCF functions as a moderator. This study offers three theoretical contributions. First, it advances SDT by broadening its explanatory scope beyond employee engagement, well-being, and performance to encompass thriving within the context of academic work. Second, it enriches thriving theory by proposing academic self-determination as a key motivational antecedent while positioning PCF as a contextual factor that enhances the development of thriving. Third, it extends SET by framing PCF as a relational resource that facilitates the conversion of academics' intrinsic motivation into sustained positive functioning and continuous thriving in their professional roles.

From a theoretical perspective, the present study makes an important contribution to the human resource management (HRM) literature by bridging two complementary but largely disconnected research domains: employees' internal motivational capacities and the organization's fulfillment of reciprocal employment obligations. Although the thriving literature predominantly explains how learning and vitality foster positive work experiences, and psychological contract research examines the outcomes of perceived organizational obligation fulfillment, limited attention has been given to how these mechanisms interact. This study addresses that gap by conceptualizing PCF as a boundary condition

that shapes the extent to which academic self-determination is transformed into thriving. Accordingly, the proposed framework offers an integrated HRM explanation, arguing that sustainable academic functioning is fostered through the alignment of employees' intrinsic motivation for learning and growth with organizational commitments that consistently recognize, support, and reciprocate their professional investment. Practically, the framework provides guidance for higher education leaders to design HR practices that support autonomous motivation, fulfill psychological contracts, and sustain academic staff development and well-being.

2. Theoretical development and proposition model

2.1. Academic self-determination

Academic self-determination describes the degree to which academic staff engage in their professional responsibilities based on internally endorsed values, intrinsic interests, and personally meaningful scholarly objectives rather than external demands or pressures. Drawing upon SDT, this construct emphasizes the quality of motivation instead of its mere existence. According to SDT, motivational regulation exists on a continuum extending from amotivation and externally controlled behavior to increasingly autonomous forms of regulation, including identified regulation, integrated regulation, and intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2020). Accordingly, academic self-determination should be understood as a multidimensional motivational process rather than a uniform psychological state. Academics may undertake comparable professional activities for fundamentally different reasons, such as obtaining external rewards, avoiding sanctions, maintaining self-worth, preventing feelings of guilt, pursuing personally valued goals, expressing professional identity, or simply deriving enjoyment from the activities themselves. As motivational regulation becomes more internalized, professional behavior is experienced as increasingly autonomous and self-endorsed, reflecting a higher level of self-determination.

Although conceptually related to autonomous motivation, academic self-determination represents a more context-specific construct because it is situated within the unique institutional and professional environment of higher education. Autonomous motivation generally refers to engaging in work because it is personally meaningful or intrinsically enjoyable across occupational settings. In contrast, academic self-determination captures how these motivational processes operate within the distinctive characteristics of academic careers. The academic profession is marked by considerable autonomy, academic freedom, peer-based evaluation, knowledge production, diverse professional responsibilities, and long-term career development. These features enable academics to pursue scholarly activities that reflect their intellectual interests and professional values while simultaneously confronting multiple institutional expectations associated with teaching, research, publication, student supervision, community engagement, and academic service. As a result, the degree to which motivation is internalized becomes a critical factor in maintaining sustained professional effectiveness, resilience, and long-term academic functioning.

In this context, academic self-determination is manifested when academics autonomously engage in teaching, research, publication, professional development, and institutional responsibilities because these activities are meaningful and consistent with their academic identity. Autonomy enables meaningful choices in scholarly and pedagogical activities, competence supports confidence in addressing complex academic tasks, and relatedness facilitates constructive relationships with colleagues, students, and institutional leaders. Satisfaction of these three basic psychological needs supports more autonomous forms

of motivation, which are associated with persistence, creativity, learning, and psychological well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2020; Van den Broeck et al., 2021).

Importantly, academic freedom or formal discretion alone does not guarantee self-determination. An academic may possess considerable freedom in selecting research topics or teaching methods while remaining primarily motivated by publication pressure, promotion requirements, or external rewards. Conversely, academics may experience strong self-determination even when institutional constraints limit their formal discretion, provided that their activities remain personally meaningful and internally endorsed (Fachrunnisa & Yulianingsih, 2025; Indriastuti & Fachrunnisa, 2024). Thus, academic self-determination captures the motivational process through which academics internalize and enact professional goals, rather than merely the structural freedom to perform academic tasks.

This distinction is particularly relevant to thriving at work. When academic staff experience their professional activities as self-endorsed and meaningful, they are more likely to invest sustained cognitive and psychological resources in learning and professional development while maintaining vitality. Therefore, academic self-determination can be conceptualized as a context-specific motivational resource that helps explain how academics sustain learning and vitality amid the complex and evolving demands of higher education.

2.2. Thriving at work

Thriving at work represents a positive psychological condition in which employees simultaneously experience continuous learning and a strong sense of vitality (Spreitzer et al., 2005). The learning dimension reflects individuals' perceptions that they are consistently expanding their knowledge, competencies, and professional capabilities through their work, whereas vitality refers to feelings of enthusiasm, energy, and psychological aliveness while carrying out job-related activities (Porath et al., 2012). The coexistence of these two dimensions differentiates thriving from several closely related constructs in organizational behavior. For example, work engagement primarily emphasizes employees' vigor, dedication, and absorption in their work, whereas thriving extends beyond engagement by incorporating ongoing personal and professional development. Likewise, psychological well-being captures broader aspects of mental health and positive functioning across life domains, while thriving focuses specifically on experiences of growth and energy within the workplace. Resilience also differs conceptually, as it describes the ability to recover and adapt following adversity, whereas thriving reflects a proactive and sustained state in which individuals continue to develop and remain energized regardless of whether significant challenges are present. Consequently, thriving provides a unique perspective on sustainable work functioning by integrating developmental progress with enduring psychological vitality.

The socially embedded model of thriving further argues that thriving is not merely an individual characteristic but an adaptive psychological state that develops through ongoing interactions between employees and their work environment (Spreitzer et al., 2005). Within this framework, thriving is supported by contextual resources such as job autonomy, supportive interpersonal relationships, access to information, and opportunities for continuous learning. This perspective aligns closely with the concept of PCF, which refers to employees' perceptions that the organization has honored its promises and reciprocal obligations within the employment relationship (Rousseau, 1995). When organizational commitments are perceived as being fulfilled through equitable treatment, recognition, career advancement opportunities, developmental support, and the provision of adequate work resources, employees are more likely to develop trust and reciprocate with positive attitudes and behaviors. These

relational conditions encourage individuals to devote greater cognitive, emotional, and behavioral resources toward continuous learning while sustaining their sense of vitality. Therefore, PCF can be viewed as an important relational mechanism that strengthens the socially embedded processes through which thriving at work develops and is maintained over time.

Empirical research links thriving with desirable outcomes including job performance, creativity, innovative behavior, work engagement, psychological well-being, and career development (Jiang et al., 2025; Kleine et al., 2019). However, thriving should not be reduced to these outcomes because it represents a psychological state that can contribute to, rather than simply result from, positive functioning. Lower thriving has been associated with emotional exhaustion, stress, and reduced adaptability (Porath et al., 2012), highlighting its relevance for sustainable professional functioning.

In higher education, thriving is particularly important because academic work requires continuous intellectual development, knowledge creation, teaching innovation, scholarly collaboration, and adaptation to changing institutional demands. Learning may be manifested through developing new research methodologies, publishing in emerging fields, updating disciplinary knowledge, or improving pedagogical approaches. Vitality, meanwhile, enables academics to sustain the energy and enthusiasm required to conduct research, prepare and deliver teaching, supervise students, collaborate with colleagues, and engage in institutional responsibilities. The simultaneous presence of learning and vitality therefore supports academics in remaining productive while continuing to develop throughout their careers.

Accordingly, thriving at work is conceptualized in this study as a context-dependent positive psychological state reflecting the simultaneous experience of continuous learning and sustained vitality among academic staff (Porath et al., 2012; Spreitzer et al., 2005). Its development is expected to depend not only on individual motivational resources but also on relational and organizational conditions. This conceptualization provides the foundation for examining academic self-determination as an internal motivational antecedent and PCF as a contextual condition that may strengthen the translation of motivation into thriving.

2.3. Psychological contract fulfillment

Psychological contract fulfillment (PCF) refers to employees' perceptions that their organization has fulfilled the implicit and explicit promises, obligations, and mutual expectations underlying the employment relationship (Rousseau, 1995). Unlike formal employment contracts, psychological contracts encompass subjective beliefs regarding reciprocal commitments between employees and organizations, including opportunities for career development, organizational support, recognition, fairness, and professional growth. When employees perceive that these commitments have been honored, they are more likely to develop trust, positive attitudes, and a stronger willingness to contribute beyond their formal job requirements. Conversely, perceived contract breaches weaken reciprocal relationships, reducing motivation, organizational commitment, and confidence in the organization (Robinson & Morrison, 2000).

Psychological contracts are also dynamic rather than static. Employees continuously reassess whether organizational obligations have been fulfilled as work experiences, institutional policies, leadership practices, and career opportunities evolve over time. Accordingly, perceptions of fulfillment may strengthen when organizations consistently provide promised support, but they may also weaken following unmet expectations, organizational change, or reduced developmental opportunities. This temporal perspective is particularly relevant

because employees' motivation and work experiences also evolve throughout their careers. Consequently, psychological contract fulfillment should be understood as an ongoing evaluative process rather than a fixed organizational characteristic.

From the perspective of social exchange theory, psychological contract fulfillment represents an important relational resource that strengthens the quality of the exchange relationship between employees and organizations. Employees who perceive high levels of organizational support, fairness, and fulfilled obligations are more likely to reciprocate through stronger work engagement, organizational commitment, and constructive work behaviors because they view the employment relationship as mutually beneficial (Blau, 1964; Laulié et al., 2023). Consequently, psychological contract fulfillment extends beyond contractual compliance by fostering a climate of trust and reciprocity that encourages employees to invest additional effort in achieving both individual and organizational goals (Pramusinto et al., 2026).

Extensive empirical research supports the positive role of psychological contract fulfillment across diverse organizational settings. Studies consistently demonstrate that employees who perceive greater fulfillment of organizational commitments report higher levels of job satisfaction, organizational commitment, work engagement, psychological well-being, organizational citizenship behavior, and individual performance (Laulié et al., 2023; Topa et al., 2022). In contrast, unmet expectations often generate dissatisfaction, emotional withdrawal, and reduced discretionary effort, limiting employees' willingness to contribute beyond minimum performance requirements. These findings indicate that psychological contract fulfillment functions as a critical organizational condition that supports both employee well-being and sustainable performance.

Within the context of higher education, PCF is demonstrated through institutional practices that reflect fairness and reciprocity, including transparent promotion systems, adequate research facilities and funding, clear organizational policies, professional development opportunities, and leadership that values and acknowledges academic achievements. Given that academic careers unfold over long time horizons and institutional priorities are continually evolving, academics regularly reassess whether their universities continue to honor the commitments and expectations underlying the employment relationship. These ongoing evaluations shape their perceptions of organizational reliability, which may subsequently influence their trust in the institution, organizational commitment, and willingness to devote sustained effort to core academic responsibilities such as teaching, research, publication, student supervision, community engagement, and institutional service.

Building on this perspective, the present study conceptualizes PCF as a dynamic contextual resource whose influence is inherently subjective and dependent on employees' interpretations of organizational actions. Rather than functioning solely as a direct antecedent of positive work outcomes, PCF is proposed to enhance the extent to which academic self-determination translates into thriving at work. When academics perceive that institutional obligations are consistently honored, their intrinsically driven motivation is more likely to be expressed through continuous learning, professional growth, and sustained psychological vitality. Conversely, because perceptions of contract fulfillment are shaped by changing expectations, organizational experiences, and individual interpretations, the strength of this relationship is unlikely to remain constant across employees or over time. Consequently, positioning PCF as a moderating variable offers a stronger theoretical explanation of how organizational reciprocity shapes the effectiveness of academic self-determination in fostering thriving at work.

2.4. Theoretical integration: a unified framework

The proposed framework integrates SDT, SET, and thriving theory to explain how academic self-determination contributes to thriving at work and how PCF may strengthen this relationship. Rather than treating the three theories as independent explanations, the framework positions them as complementary perspectives addressing different levels of the same process: SDT explains the internal motivational mechanism, SET explains the relational and organizational conditions, and thriving theory explains the positive psychological outcome. Their integration therefore provides a more comprehensive explanation of how academic staff sustain learning and vitality in increasingly demanding higher education environments.

2.4.1. Complementarity of SDT, SET, and thriving theory

SDT provides the individual-level motivational foundation of the model self-determination theory posits that autonomous motivation emerges when individuals experience satisfaction of the basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2020). Under these conditions, behavioral regulation becomes increasingly self-endorsed, enabling individuals to pursue work activities because they are personally meaningful rather than externally imposed. In higher education, this motivational process is reflected in academic self-determination, where academics engage voluntarily in teaching, research, publication, professional development, and other scholarly responsibilities because these activities are integrated with their professional identity and long-term academic values. Such internally regulated motivation provides the psychological foundation for sustained commitment to academic work and continuous professional growth. SDT therefore explains why academic staff are willing to invest cognitive, emotional, and behavioral resources in continuous professional development.

However, SDT alone does not fully explain whether internal motivation can be sustained and effectively expressed within an organizational context. This is where SET provides a complementary relational perspective. Blau (1964) conceptualizes employment relationships as reciprocal exchanges in which favorable treatment from organizations encourages employees to reciprocate through positive attitudes and behaviors. PCF represents this relational condition because it captures employees' perceptions that organizational promises and obligations have been fulfilled (Rousseau, 1995). When academic staff perceive fair promotion, research support, professional development opportunities, recognition, and transparent governance, they may develop greater trust in the institution and become more willing to invest in their professional roles. Thus, SET explains how organizational reciprocity can create conditions that reinforce the expression of individual motivation.

Thriving theory provides the outcome perspective by conceptualizing thriving as the simultaneous experience of learning and vitality (Porath et al., 2012; Spreitzer et al., 2005). Learning reflects continuous development of knowledge, skills, and capabilities, whereas vitality reflects psychological energy and aliveness at work. Thriving theory is particularly relevant because academic work requires both dimensions simultaneously. Academics must continuously acquire new knowledge, develop research capabilities, improve teaching practices, and adapt to technological and institutional changes while maintaining sufficient energy to perform these activities over extended career trajectories.

The three theories therefore explain different but interconnected components of the proposed process. SDT answers why academics become internally motivated; SET explains how organizational relationships condition the expression of that motivation; and thriving theory explains what positive psychological state

results when motivation is effectively translated into professional functioning. This integration avoids treating motivation, organizational support, and thriving as unrelated constructs and instead establishes a motivational-relational pathway from internal resources to sustainable academic functioning.

2.4.2. Mechanism linking the three theories

The proposed mechanism begins with academic self-determination. When academic staff experience autonomy, competence, and relatedness, they are more likely to develop autonomous engage in professional learning and challenging academic activities (Ryan & Deci, 2020; Van den Broeck et al., 2021). Such motivation provides the psychological energy and direction necessary to pursue continuous development.

However, the translation of this motivation into thriving is expected to depend partly on the quality of the employment relationship. PCF functions as a contextual and relational condition that strengthens the motivational process. When institutions fulfill perceived obligations, academics may experience greater trust, security, and reciprocity, making it easier to invest their internally motivated resources in learning and professional activities. Conversely, when organizational commitments are perceived as unmet, distrust and withdrawal may reduce the extent to which self-determined motivation translates into sustained learning and vitality (Robinson & Morrison, 2000; H. Zhao et al., 2007).

Thriving theory completes this mechanism by explaining the resulting psychological state. Academic self-determination provides the internal motivational resource, while PCF provides a supportive relational context in which that resource can be effectively expressed. When both conditions are present, academic staff are expected to experience greater learning and vitality, resulting in higher thriving at work.

2.4.3. Theoretical boundaries and potential tensions

Although the three theories are complementary, their assumptions are not identical. SDT emphasizes internalized motivation and psychological need satisfaction, whereas SET emphasizes reciprocity and exchange relationships. These perspectives may potentially diverge when academics experience strong external organizational incentives but low internal motivation. For example, an institution may provide substantial rewards or career opportunities that encourage reciprocal behavior, but such conditions do not necessarily create autonomous motivation. From an SDT perspective, highly controlling rewards may even undermine the quality of motivation if they reduce perceived autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Thus, favorable exchange conditions alone should not be assumed to produce self-determined motivation.

Conversely, academics may possess strong autonomous motivation but experience low PCF. In such circumstances, SDT would suggest that internal motivation may continue to support engagement and development, whereas SET predicts that unmet organizational obligations may weaken reciprocity and reduce willingness to invest additional resources in the institution. This potential tension provides a theoretical justification for treating PCF as a moderator rather than as a direct substitute for academic self-determination.

Thriving theory further establishes a boundary by emphasizing that learning and vitality must coexist. High motivation or strong organizational exchange may increase effort or commitment without necessarily producing thriving if academics experience exhaustion or lack opportunities for development. Therefore, the proposed framework does not assume that motivation or positive organizational relationships automatically result in thriving. Rather, thriving emerges when internal motivation and supportive relational conditions jointly enable academics to continue learning while maintaining psychological vitality. **Table 1** provides

theoretical integration of SDT, SET, and thriving theory in the proposed model.

Table 1. Theoretical integration of SDT, SET, and thriving theory in the proposed model

Theoretical perspective	Primary focus	Role in the proposed model
SDT	autonomy, competence, relatedness	explains academic self-determination as the internal motivational resource
SET	reciprocity, trust, organizational obligations	explains PCF as the relational/contextual condition
Thriving theory	learning and vitality	explains thriving at work as the positive psychological outcome

2.5. Academic self-determination and thriving at work

Academic self-determination is an important psychological resource in terms of SDT that allows academics to engage in their professional activities in accordance with their internal values, scholarly interests and long-term career aspirations. Autonomously motivated academics engage in their work not because of external incentives or institutional pressures, but because they perceive their work as personally meaningful and congruent with their professional self-concept (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2020). This internal regulation of motivation results in a greater sense of ownership and commitment that promotes continued engagement in teaching, research, publication, professional development, and community service. Thus, academic self-determination is the motivational basis of persistent academic activity and long-term professional success.

SDT proposes that the satisfaction of autonomy, competence, and relatedness constitutes a central mechanism through which self-determined motivation contributes to positive functioning. Autonomy enables academic staff to experience volition in scholarly and pedagogical decisions, competence strengthens confidence in managing complex academic demands, and relatedness facilitates meaningful connections with colleagues, students, and institutional stakeholders. When these basic psychological needs are satisfied, academic staff are more likely to experience greater internalization, persistence, engagement, and psychological well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2020; Van den Broeck et al., 2021).

The satisfaction of these needs provides a plausible pathway linking academic self-determination to learning and vitality, the two dimensions of thriving at work. Need satisfaction can encourage academics to invest cognitive resources in acquiring new knowledge, developing research capabilities, improving teaching practices, and responding to changing academic demands, thereby supporting the learning dimension of thriving. At the same time, experiencing autonomy, competence, and relatedness can strengthen psychological energy, enthusiasm, and meaningfulness in academic work, thereby supporting vitality. Thus, thriving is expected to emerge not merely from being self-determined, but from the extent to which self-determination is accompanied by the satisfaction of fundamental psychological needs.

Accordingly, this study proposes that basic psychological need satisfaction serves as a mediating mechanism through which academic self-determination contributes to thriving at work. Academic self-determination provides the motivational foundation, while the satisfaction of autonomy, competence, and relatedness facilitates its translation into continuous learning and sustained vitality.

Proposition 1: *Academic self-determination positively influences thriving at work among academic staff in higher education institutions.*

2.6. Psychological contract fulfillment as a moderating variable

PCF is an important contextual condition that determines the extent to which academic staff can convert their internal motivation to thrive at work. Academic

self-determination is an internal motivational resource that is based on SDT. The beneficial impacts of academic self-determination depend in part on the quality of the exchange relationship between employees and their organization, according to SET (Blau, 1964; Ryan & Deci, 2020). Academic staff are more likely to develop trust, and reciprocate with greater commitment and discretionary effort, when they are convinced their institution is meeting its obligations and value their contribution (Denise M. Rousseau, 1995; Laulié et al., 2023). Thus, PCF will enhance rather than replace the effect of academic self-determination on thriving. Under high PCF conditions, perceptions of fairness, organizational support, recognition, research resources, professional development opportunities, and transparent institutional practices foster trust and reciprocity. These relational resources enable academic staff to express their autonomous motivation more fully through teaching, research, publication, collaboration, and professional development. Consequently, the positive effect of academic self-determination on thriving is expected to be stronger when PCF is high, because internally driven motivation is reinforced by a supportive and reciprocal organizational relationship (Blau, 1964; Rousseau, 1995; Spreitzer et al., 2005).

In contrast, low PCF conditions may create perceptions that institutional promises and obligations have not been adequately fulfilled. Such perceptions can weaken trust and reciprocity and encourage psychological withdrawal, reduced discretionary effort, and reluctance to invest additional personal resources (Robinson & Morrison, 2000; H. Zhao et al., 2007). Therefore, even highly self-determined academics may experience greater difficulty translating their motivation into sustained learning and vitality when organizational conditions are perceived as unsupportive. Accordingly, low PCF is expected to weaken the Academic Self Determination (ASD)–thriving relationship rather than compensate for low academic self-determination.

The proposed interaction is therefore synergistic (amplifying) rather than buffering. Specifically, the relationship between academic self-determination and thriving is expected to have a steeper positive slope under high PCF and a flatter positive slope under low PCF. Thus, as academic self-determination increases, thriving is expected to increase more strongly when PCF is high than when PCF is low. The proposed conceptual model presented in **Figure 1**, while the proposed interaction pattern is illustrated in **Figure 2** where the high-PCF line represents a stronger positive association and the low-PCF line represents a weaker association.

Proposition 2: *Psychological contract fulfillment positively moderates the relationship between academic self-determination and thriving at work. Specifically, the positive effect of academic self-determination on thriving at work is stronger when psychological contract fulfillment is high and weaker when psychological contract fulfillment is low among academic staff in higher education institutions.*

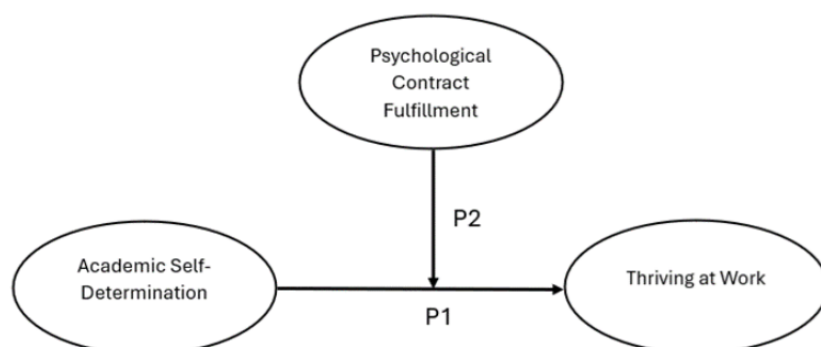


Figure 1. Proposed conceptual model of academic self-determination, psychological contract fulfillment, and thriving at work

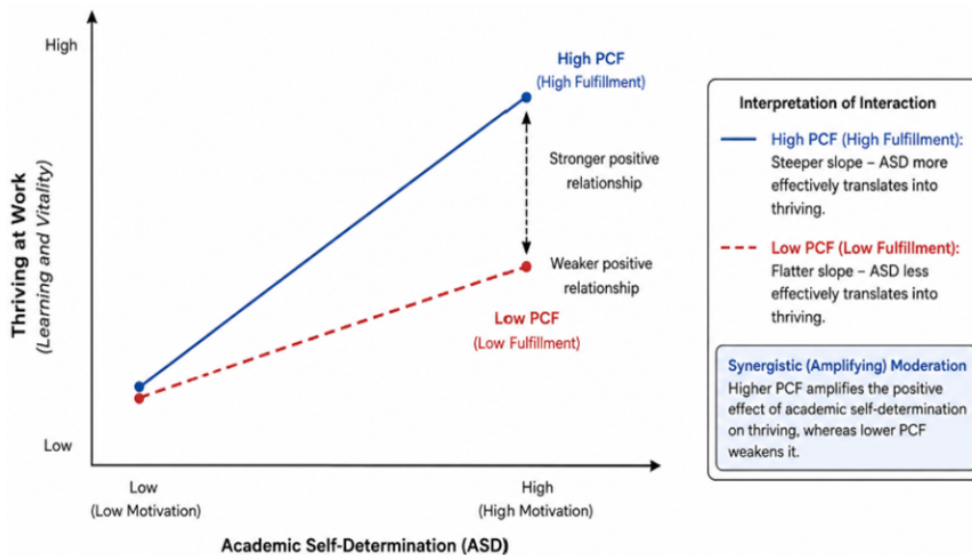


Figure 2. The moderating role of psychological contract fulfillment (PCF) on the relationship between academic self-determination and thriving at work.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Results

This conceptual paper advances the literature on thriving at work by integrating SDT, SET, and thriving theory to explain how academic self-determination and PCF jointly contribute to thriving among academic staff. Thriving is conceptualized as a positive psychological state characterized by the simultaneous experience of learning and vitality (Porath et al., 2012; Spreitzer et al., 2005). The central theoretical argument is that thriving should not be understood solely as a consequence of individual motivation or favorable organizational resources. Rather, it emerges when internally endorsed motivation is supported by a relational organizational context characterized by reciprocity, trust, and fulfillment of mutual expectations (Blau, 1964; Ryan & Deci, 2000). This integrated perspective is particularly relevant to higher education, where academics must continuously learn, adapt, innovate, and sustain professional performance amid changing knowledge, technologies, and institutional expectations.

The framework extends established resource-based perspectives, particularly the job demands–resources (JD-R) model and conservation of resources (COR) theory, by shifting attention from resource availability and accumulation toward the motivational and relational mechanisms through which organizational conditions are experienced and translated into thriving (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). JD-R emphasizes the role of job resources in motivating employees and buffering job demands, whereas COR focuses on the acquisition, protection, and preservation of valued resources. Although these perspectives provide important explanations of employee well-being, they offer less explicit insight into why individuals may respond differently to similar organizational conditions. The present framework addresses this issue by conceptualizing academic self-determination as an internal motivational mechanism that encourages academics to willingly invest in learning, professional development, and sustained effort (Ryan & Deci, 2020), while PCF represents a relational condition reflecting perceptions that organizational obligations and expectations have been fulfilled (Rousseau, 1995).

The integration of SDT, SET, and thriving theory constitutes the primary theoretical contribution of the proposed model. SDT explains the motivational mechanism, SET provides the relational-organizational perspective, and thriving

theory explains the resulting state of learning and vitality (Blau, 1964; Ryan & Deci, 2020; Spreitzer et al., 2005). This integration suggests that academic self-determination may not consistently lead to thriving when academics perceive substantial discrepancies between institutional commitments and their actual experiences. Conversely, supportive organizational conditions may not fully translate into thriving when academics lack self-endorsed motivation to invest in learning and professional development. PCF therefore represents a theoretically meaningful relational condition that can strengthen the translation of self-determination into thriving (Rousseau, 1995). In this sense, the framework moves beyond viewing resources as inherently beneficial and instead emphasizes how motivation and relational fulfillment shape their psychological significance.

The framework also extends the application of thriving theory to the higher education context. Academic work requires continuous learning, knowledge creation, teaching innovation, research engagement, collaboration, and adaptation to evolving professional expectations. Thriving is therefore particularly consequential for academic staff because it captures the simultaneous experience of learning and vitality, rather than merely general employee well-being (Kleine et al., 2019; Spreitzer et al., 2005). By connecting thriving to both self-determined motivation and fulfillment of the employment relationship, the proposed framework provides a more integrated explanation of how academic staff sustain positive functioning and continued professional development over time.

Overall, the theoretical contribution lies in explaining the conditions under which academic self-determination is translated into thriving. Whereas JD-R and COR primarily emphasize the availability, acquisition, preservation, and effects of resources (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017), the present framework highlights the complementary roles of internal motivation and relational fulfillment. Academic self-determination and PCF are therefore positioned as theoretically connected mechanisms through which academics interpret and respond to their organizational environment. This perspective complements existing resource-based approaches by providing a more nuanced explanation of how organizational conditions contribute to learning and vitality among academic staff.

3.2. Discussion

This conceptual study contributes to HRM by extending the understanding of academic staff thriving beyond a predominantly resource-provision perspective. The proposed framework suggests that HRM effectiveness depends not only on the resources and opportunities provided, but also on their capacity to support academics' self-determined motivation and fulfill perceived organizational obligations. HRM therefore plays a dual role: supporting internal motivation and maintaining a reciprocal employment relationship through which motivation can be translated into thriving. This perspective positions HRM as a mechanism that facilitates learning and vitality rather than merely a provider of organizational resources.

This contribution has direct implications for the design and implementation of HR practices in higher education. Structured mentoring, flexible research leave, transparent promotion criteria, equitable workload allocation, research funding, developmental feedback, recognition systems, and individualized career development can simultaneously support academic self-determination and PCF. Participatory decision-making and flexible work arrangements can enhance autonomy, while developmental opportunities and research support can strengthen competence and professional growth. Mentoring and recognition may further reinforce relatedness and perceptions of organizational support. When

implemented consistently, these practices can also signal institutional fairness, reliability, and commitment, thereby strengthening PCF (Broeck et al., 2021; Ryan & Deci, 2020).

The framework further suggests that HRM effectiveness should be assessed not only by the availability of HR practices but also by how academics experience and interpret them. Similar resources may generate different outcomes when employees differ in their perceptions of autonomy, developmental support, fairness, and fulfillment of institutional commitments. HR professionals should therefore consider both the motivational and relational consequences of HR practices. This shifts HRM from a focus on resource provision toward creating conditions in which organizational practices are experienced as supportive, credible, and aligned with academics' professional aspirations.

Institutional leadership is critical in translating formal HR policies into everyday relational experiences. University leaders should communicate commitments regarding promotion, workload, research support, recognition, career development, and professional opportunities clearly and implement them consistently across faculties and departments. Deans and department heads can strengthen PCF through fair workload allocation, transparent promotion processes, recognition of academic contributions, timely developmental feedback, and responsiveness to research and career aspirations. Consistency between institutional commitments and managerial practices is essential for maintaining trust and reciprocal relationships (Denise M. Rousseau, 1995; C. Zhao et al., 2024).

HR departments should also systematically monitor PCF as an evolving organizational condition. Annual or biannual confidential surveys covering promotion, workload fairness, research support, recognition, career development, and leadership communication can be complemented by pulse surveys, focus groups, and confidential feedback mechanisms. Such monitoring can identify gaps between institutional commitments and academics' experiences and enable corrective action before unmet expectations develop into distrust, withdrawal, or reduced discretionary effort.

Overall, the HRM contribution of the framework lies in demonstrating that academic staff thriving depends not solely on the availability of HR resources, but on the extent to which HR practices support self-determined motivation and reinforce fulfillment of the employment relationship. This motivational–relational perspective provides a more nuanced basis for designing HR systems in higher education and offers a pathway through which aligned HR practices and leadership can foster sustained learning, vitality, innovation, and professional development.

4. Conclusion

This conceptual paper advances the thriving-at-work literature by proposing an integrated framework that explains how academic self-determination and psychological contract fulfillment jointly foster thriving among academic staff in higher education institutions. Drawing on SDT, SET, and thriving theory, the proposed model argues that thriving emerges through the interaction between individual motivational resources and supportive organizational conditions. Academic self-determination provides the intrinsic motivation that encourages meaningful engagement in academic work, whereas psychological contract fulfillment creates an institutional environment that enables this motivation to be translated into continuous learning and sustained psychological vitality. By integrating these complementary perspectives, the proposed framework offers a more comprehensive explanation of thriving than approaches that focus exclusively on either individual or contextual factors.

The primary theoretical contribution of this study lies in synthesizing SDT, SET, and Thriving Theory into a unified conceptual framework that explains the psychological and organizational mechanisms underlying thriving among academic staff (Blau, 1964; Ryan & Deci, 2000b; Spreitzer et al., 2005). Furthermore, positioning psychological contract fulfillment as a moderating variable extends the thriving-at-work literature by demonstrating that supportive institutional relationships strengthen the positive influence of academic self-determination on thriving. This perspective contributes to higher education management by recognizing that thriving is particularly important in knowledge-intensive academic environments characterized by continuous learning, research productivity, collaboration, and adaptation to evolving institutional demands (Janke et al., 2025; Uusiautti et al., 2025).

From a managerial perspective, the proposed framework highlights the importance of designing human resource policies that strengthen both motivational and relational resources. Universities should cultivate professional autonomy, provide opportunities for continuous learning and career development, and maintain transparent, fair, and supportive institutional practices. Reinforcing psychological contract fulfillment through equitable promotion systems, consistent leadership, adequate research support, and fair workload allocation can strengthen trust and reciprocal relationships, creating conditions that enable academic staff to sustain learning, vitality, and long-term professional growth.

Although conceptual in nature, this study provides a theoretically grounded foundation for future empirical research. The proposed propositions may be tested across different higher education systems using longitudinal, cross-cultural, or mixed-methods approaches. Future research may also extend the framework by incorporating additional psychological and organizational variables to further explain the development of thriving among academic staff.

Overall, this study argues that thriving at work should be understood as a dynamic outcome arising from the alignment of autonomous motivation and supportive institutional relationships. As higher education institutions continue to face increasing complexity and global competition, fostering thriving among academic staff will be essential for promoting sustainable professional development, enhancing educational quality, strengthening research performance, and supporting the long-term effectiveness and resilience of higher education institutions.

5. Limitations and future research directions

This study is conceptual in nature and proposes a theoretical framework linking academic self-determination, psychological contract fulfillment, and thriving at work through the integration of SDT, SET, and thriving theory. As the proposed relationships have not been empirically tested, the model should be regarded as a foundation rather than conclusive evidence. Future research should therefore empirically validate the proposed relationships using rigorous quantitative, longitudinal, multi-level, or mixed-methods designs across diverse higher education contexts.

Several methodological challenges should be considered when testing the proposed framework. First, common method variance may arise when academic self-determination, PCF, and thriving are measured through self-reported questionnaires from the same respondents. Future research could reduce this risk through temporal separation, multi-source data, supervisor assessments, and institutional records, complemented by appropriate procedural and statistical remedies. Second, reciprocal causality may exist among the proposed constructs. While academic self-determination may enhance thriving, thriving may subsequently strengthen perceptions of autonomy, competence, and positive

organizational relationships. Similarly, PCF may contribute to thriving, while thriving experiences may influence subsequent evaluations of the employment relationship. Longitudinal, repeated-measures, and cross-lagged panel designs would therefore provide stronger evidence regarding temporal ordering and causal direction.

Future studies could also employ multi-level designs to examine individual-level psychological processes alongside departmental or institutional-level conditions. Academic staff work within departments that differ in leadership practices, workload allocation, collegial relationships, and organizational support. Multi-level modeling could determine whether contextual characteristics strengthen or weaken the proposed relationships. Experience sampling methods could further capture daily fluctuations in self-determination, PCF, learning, and vitality, providing a more dynamic understanding of how academic staff experience thriving in their everyday work.

The framework could also be extended by examining specific mediators and moderators. Organizational justice may influence whether academic staff perceive institutional exchanges as fair, while leader-member exchange may determine whether motivational resources are supported through high-quality leadership relationships. Psychological safety may explain how fulfilled psychological contracts translate into learning and vitality by enabling academic staff to express ideas, seek feedback, and engage in developmental activities. Institutional culture may further moderate these relationships by shaping academic freedom, collegiality, trust, fairness, and performance expectations.

Finally, cross-cultural replication is necessary because higher education systems vary considerably across countries and institutions. Differences in national culture, academic governance, employment arrangements, promotion systems, workload structures, and institutional autonomy may influence how academic self-determination and PCF translate into thriving. Comparative and multi-group studies across countries, public and private institutions, or different institutional cultures could therefore test the generalizability and boundary conditions of the proposed framework. Collectively, these directions would strengthen its empirical validity, causal interpretation, and contextual relevance while advancing a more comprehensive understanding of sustainable thriving among academic staff.

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