doi: 10.36689/uhk/hed/2026-01-017

Governance From the Perspective of University Staff Management: A Conceptual Model—A Theoretical Approach

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Abstract: Research on meso-level university governance has expanded rapidly, yet remains fragmented. Existing studies typically focus on participation models, academic staff wellbeing, and quality evaluation and institutional performance metrics. The literature indicates a lack of an integrative approach at the meso level, where governance structures directly shape working conditions, workload, and the organisational climate. Prior work rarely examines how managerial models and metric-driven logics affect academic staff wellbeing, job satisfaction, and work–life balance (Levecque et al., 2017; Kinman & Wray, 2020). At the same time, emerging organisational maturity models tend to overlook the human factor as a core element of universities' missions. In response, this article argues for developing an integrated tool for evaluating universities that would capture the relationships between governance, working conditions, and the performance of academic staff as the institution's key stakeholder. Such a tool could serve a diagnostic function and support responsible, sustainable governance of higher education.

Keywords: university governance; academic work; human resource management in higher education

JEL Classification: M1; M10

1. Introduction

Over recent decades, higher education institutions worldwide have faced mounting demands: massification of education, competition for funding, expectations regarding research and teaching quality, and greater accountability to stakeholders. These shifts have moved higher education from an elite model toward mass participation, necessitating new governance solutions. The traditional collegial model, centred on autonomous academic bodies, has become less effective amid growing organisational complexity and competitiveness. Consequently, hybrid arrangements that combine collegiality with managerial governance have gained prominence, enabling faster and more flexible decision-making (Shattock, 2014, 2019).

In response, governance—understood as the constellation of actors, institutions, rules, and processes that coordinate university activity—has become critical to effective management (Paradeise et al., 2009; Bleiklie & Kogan, 2007). Well-functioning governance mechanisms allow universities to adapt to changing external and internal conditions while maintaining accountability and operational capacity, particularly in human resource

management. Contemporary universities require more precise management of resources—finance, infrastructure, and personnel—to reduce goal conflicts arising from their multi-mission character (Amaral et al., 2003). Rising demands for transparency and efficiency, together with accountability pressures, also require robust governance structures that help prevent dysfunctions such as staff overload and the erosion of trust (Brunsson & Sahlin-Andersson, 2000).

Moreover, demographic changes in the academic workforce—such as ageing staff and increasing international mobility—call for modern, strategic personnel policies whose effectiveness depends on governance quality. Research shows that a lack of coherent decision-making structures hampers career management, balancing teaching and research workloads, and attracting talent (Enders & de Weert, 2009). Governance therefore becomes a key element in ensuring the stability and quality of academic staff and, in turn, universities' teaching and research outcomes (Shattock, 2019).

Despite the growing body of research on university governance, the field remains fragmented—especially at the meso level, where governance structures shape working conditions and the organisational climate. Studies seldom examine how specific governance models and leadership quality affect academic staff wellbeing, professional autonomy, and work–life balance (Levecque et al., 2017; Kinman & Wray, 2020). To address this gap, the article proposes developing an integrated tool for evaluating university performance that analyses the institution from the perspective of its key stakeholder—academic staff—incorporating their professional experiences and perceptions of organisational justice.

2. University Governance in the Literature

In higher education research, university governance is typically analysed across three interrelated levels: macro, meso, and micro. The macro level covers the systemic relationship between the state and higher education (steering models, regulations, agencies, and policy instruments). The meso level concerns the university as an organisation with its own decision-making structures, strategies, governing bodies, and rules of resource allocation. The micro level refers to organisational units (faculties, departments) and individual actors (staff, students, leaders) and their organisational practices (Reale, 2014; Bleiklie & Kogan, 2007; Paradeise et al., 2009). This three-level perspective integrates analyses of public policy with institutional solutions and the everyday functioning of academic communities (Reale, 2014), and helps explain how system-level decisions translate into internal university processes.

Contemporary scholarship clearly emphasises that governance is a key factor shaping universities' capacity to fulfil their missions, adapt to changing conditions, and manage resources effectively. Transformations of the academic environment—massification, internationalisation, pressure on research and teaching quality, competition for funding, and rising public accountability requirements—have increased organisational complexity and exposed the limitations of classic collegial models (Bleiklie & Kogan, 2007; Paradeise et al., 2009). In this context, governance—understood as a set of mechanisms, structures, and

processes of steering, coordination, and control—assumes central importance for organisational stability and institutional performance.

The importance of governance is confirmed by comparative research, including studies indexed in Scopus and Web of Science, which show that the organisation of authority and decision-making is among the strongest predictors of scientific, teaching, and organisational outcomes (Shattock, 2019; Dobbins & Knill, 2014). Governance is often described as a university's "architecture of possibilities": it provides a framework for strategic planning, defines rules of participation, establishes accountability relations and resource-allocation conditions, and shapes the balance between academic autonomy and public responsibility (Reale, 2013). From a normative perspective, governance grounded in transparency, participation, and accountability fosters trust both within the institution and in relations with external stakeholders (students, the state, funders, and economic partners).

Governance is also significant due to its direct practical implications for university management. Empirical research indicates that universities with stable, coherent, and professional governance mechanisms achieve better results in educational service quality and human resource management (Atanaw et al., 2025). Transparent decision-making rules enhance staff engagement, reduce organisational conflict, and enable more consistent personnel policies—including workforce development planning, optimisation of teaching and research workloads, and the creation of conditions conducive to research (Fumasoli et al., 2015). Governance also matters for quality assurance processes: not only as a set of formal structures but also as an institutional practice that shapes organisational culture, information flows, and the coherence of internal assessment systems (Seyfried & Pohlenz, 2018). Accordingly, governance is increasingly treated as a factor conditioning the effectiveness of organisational change and mitigating the unintended costs of reforms (e.g., growing bureaucratisation or declining internal trust).

Recent systematic reviews further show that governance gains new relevance in the context of twenty-first-century challenges such as digitalisation, risk management, sustainability, and the growing importance of institutional reputation (Oliveira et al., 2022; Raza et al., 2024). Universities with more mature and modern governance mechanisms appear better able to learn organisationally, respond rapidly to crises (e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic), and maintain institutional resilience amid dynamic environmental change. Governance thus ceases to be merely descriptive and becomes a strategic determinant of universities' long-term development, quality maintenance, and delivery of their social mission.

In sum, the international literature confirms that university governance is of fundamental importance both for higher education research and for the practice of managing academic institutions. Its growing salience reflects environmental pressures as well as the need to use resources effectively and to build an organisational culture grounded in transparency, responsibility, and participation. Strong governance enhances universities' capacity to make sound decisions, implement strategies, and maintain balance across multiple goals; it also creates conditions conducive to academic staff development, teaching innovation, research excellence, and institutional stability.

3. Academic Staff as a Key Stakeholder of University Governance

Research on university governance increasingly focuses on academic staff—not only as performers of teaching and research tasks but also as active stakeholders whose experiences and views reflect how governance structures operate. The literature discussed here clusters around three parallel streams: (1) participation models and shared governance, (2) academic staff wellbeing, and (3) quality evaluation, metrics, and institutional assessment systems.

3.1. Shared Governance

A growing body of work examines how higher education institutions implement shared governance models that involve academic staff in decision-making on strategy, internal policy, educational quality, and resource allocation. Reviews highlight considerable diversity in definitions, concepts, and practices, indicating increasing interest in how governance structures respond to demands for inclusiveness and collegiality (Honu, 2018; Birnbaum, 2004; Kezar & Eckel, 2004). Synthesis studies suggest that shared governance remains an ambiguous organisational category whose implementation depends on institutional traditions, leadership models, and the strength of academic bodies (Shah, 2014; Minor, 2004). Empirical evidence shows that, in many universities, formal participation does not translate into real influence over decision processes—especially in strategic and financial domains (Honu, 2018; De Boer & File, 2009; Lapworth, 2004). Staff are often marginalised in key managerial processes, which is also supported by comparative studies of participatory governance pointing to "symbolic representation" of employees in university governing bodies (Jungblut, 2017; Gayle et al., 2003).

One of the most recent systematic reviews, covering 48 empirical studies (Raza et al., 2024), identifies five main analytical axes of shared governance research: (1) actors involved in decision-making, (2) roles of academic leaders, (3) values and norms underpinning co-governance, (4) decision-making procedures, and (5) organisational models of shared governance. This indicates growing maturity and structuring of the research field. Consistent with other studies, governance appears to be evolving toward hybrid forms that combine managerialism with traditional collegiality, often generating tensions between administration and academic staff (Bleiklie & Kogan, 2007; Deem, 2007; Bolden et al., 2009). The literature stresses that the effectiveness of shared governance depends heavily on the quality of staff–leader relations, levels of trust, transparency of communication, and genuine opportunities to influence decisions (Tierney, 2006; Ramsden, 1998). Taken together, these findings suggest that academic staff participation is a core element of governance, yet its effectiveness is strongly contingent on the organisational and cultural context of the university.

A substantial body of research—especially bibliometric work—analyses relationships between university governance and the delivery of core missions: teaching, research, and the so-called third mission (engagement with external partners and knowledge transfer). In a review perspective, Rodríguez-Castro et al. (2021) propose a functional framework that identifies key institutional "functions and capabilities" and shows that governance—understood as decision-making structures, resource allocation, and steering mechanisms—is

crucial for maintaining balance between educational, research, and societal roles (Rodríguez-Castro et al., 2021). Similarly, comparative analyses by Huisman and Mampaey (2018) underline that governance affects the organisation of academic work, the dynamics of research teams, and universities' capacity to adapt to systemic change. This approach—linking institutional policy, management, and assessment systems—implies that academic staff, as the primary executors of the mission, are integral to governance analysis because the effectiveness of management systems is directly reflected in the quality of research and teaching (Fumasoli et al., 2015). The literature also includes a growing number of studies on institutional maturity models that conceptualise the university as an organisation evolving in its structures, processes, and institutional culture. Szydło (2024), in a bibliometric analysis of Web of Science and Scopus publications, shows that interest in maturity models increased sharply after 2010 and that one of the most frequently cited maturity factors is the stability and quality of governance. Teeroovengadum (2020) similarly argues that governance is a foundation of institutional quality and of universities' capacity to implement development-oriented strategies.

3.2. Academic Staff Wellbeing

Over the last two decades, the literature has shown a marked increase in interest in academic staff wellbeing and in the relationship between wellbeing and governance structures in higher education. These studies assume that governance—understood as a system of rules, procedures, decision structures, and leadership models—directly shapes academic working conditions and thereby determines wellbeing, work–life balance, and job satisfaction (Shin & Jung, 2014; Levecque et al., 2017).

A first stream of research focuses on academics' psychological wellbeing (mental health, wellbeing) as a function of organisational conditions. In seminal work, Levecque et al. (2017), studying doctoral candidates in Belgian universities, found that more than one-third reported clinically relevant depressive symptoms; key predictors included publication pressure, role ambiguity, interpersonal conflict, and lack of supervisory support—factors closely linked to local governance arrangements. Similar results were obtained in larger-scale UK studies, which showed that perceptions of organisational justice, transparency of promotion decisions, and the quality of relations with supervisors correlate with academic staff wellbeing more strongly than individual-level factors (Kinman & Wray, 2020; Guthrie et al., 2017). A growing body of systematic evidence also confirms that governance and organisational culture are decisive for employees' mental health (Hughes et al., 2020).

A second line of work examines work–life balance and its links to institutional policies and management practices. Bibliometric and comparative research (e.g., Siem, 2025) indicates that academia is among the most demanding professional environments, and that the intensifying "measure and publish" culture—driven by evaluation policies—reduces the capacity to maintain balance between professional and private life (Kyvik & Aksnes, 2015). Gender-studies-informed scholarship (e.g., Sallee, 2012; O'Meara et al., 2019) highlights that governance policies can reinforce inequalities in workload, particularly for women and for staff in lower-ranking positions who are more frequently drawn into organisational and

teaching tasks at the expense of research. These studies suggest that universities employing more participatory and transparent governance models report higher staff satisfaction with working conditions and better opportunities to sustain work–life balance.

Research also addresses the effects of performance pressure and metric logic on staff wellbeing. Evaluation systems based on publication point schemes, bibliometric indicators (e.g., the h-index), journal rankings, and unit-level performance-based assessments strongly shape academics' working environments, as documented in numerous WoS/Scopus-based analyses (Hicks et al., 2015; Aagaard, 2015; Moher et al., 2020). This work shows that metrics can increase workload, shorten research time horizons, intensify publication races, and restrict professional autonomy—which, combined with inadequate support structures, directly elevates stress and burnout (Shin & Jung, 2014; Guthrie et al., 2017). The phenomenon is sometimes described as an "academisation of organisational pressure," whereby governance—through evaluation regulation—creates a high-demand environment with substantial physical and emotional costs.

A related stream examines academic leadership as a mediator between governance and wellbeing. Studies by Bolden et al. (2009) and Ramsden (1998) show that management style, communication transparency, and the quality of staff–leader relations substantially affect employees' sense of security. Douglas (2025), in a qualitative analysis of UK universities, argues that staff wellbeing is interpreted primarily in organisational terms—as a function of policy clarity, support, and predictability—rather than solely as the outcome of individual coping strategies.

3.3. Quality Evaluation, Metrics, and Institutional Assessment Systems

A review of the literature indicates that interest has grown in recent years in the relationship between governance systems and quality evaluation practices, organisational maturity models, and institutional performance assessment in higher education. Governance—understood as a system of rules, decision-making structures, procedures, and coordination mechanisms—is treated as a key determinant of how quality and control processes operate within universities (Paradeise et al., 2009; Shattock, 2019).

A first prominent strand concerns the links between governance and quality evaluation systems. Many studies show that rising accountability and efficiency pressures have led to the institutionalisation of diverse assessment mechanisms—including accreditation, audits, benchmarking, and national systems of performance-based evaluation of units (Stensaker & Harvey, 2011). Quality evaluation functions both as a control instrument and as a mechanism for strategic steering, which is particularly evident in New Public Management-based systems emphasising measurable results and process standardisation (Ferlie et al., 2008). From a governance perspective, the literature suggests that appropriate decision structures and process transparency are prerequisites for effective implementation of quality policies; their absence tends to produce superficial bureaucratisation and academic staff resistance (Huisman et al., 2007).

A second developing strand focuses on institutional maturity models used to assess universities' organisational development. Szydło (2024) reports a dynamic rise in interest in

maturity models after 2010, reflecting the need to understand the stages of organisational development in which universities are located and how governance affects their adaptive capacity. These models classify universities by the advancement of managerial, quality, and digital processes and assess organisational and strategic coherence. Schneider and Sadowski (2022) similarly show that institutional maturity correlates with operational effectiveness, the quality of strategic decision-making, and organisational resilience.

A third key strand relates to performance metrics, which over the last two decades have become an integral component of higher education governance. Hicks et al. (2015), in articulating the Leiden Manifesto, caution against excessive metricisation of science and argue for responsible use of bibliometric indicators. The literature repeatedly notes that indicator-based systems—publication evaluations, unit-level assessments, and university rankings—serve as instruments of organisational control and shape strategic behaviours of institutions and their employees (Aagaard, 2015; Moher et al., 2020). Kyvik and Aksnes (2015) show that evaluation-driven publication pressure significantly alters academics' research strategies, indicating that governance performs both regulatory and culture-forming functions.

A fourth strand, related to the above, examines the relationship between governance and institutional development. The literature suggests that universities operating under more collegial and participatory governance models cope better with implementing quality systems and assessment tools, whereas universities dominated by managerial models more often use evaluation as a control instrument (Bleiklie & Kogan, 2007). Studies also confirm that the way metrics and assessment models are used functions both as an indicator of organisational development and as a strategic planning tool, influencing mission, development priorities, the organisation of staff work, and stakeholder relations (Shattock, 2019; Pinheiro et al., 2015).

A synthesis of the available literature shows that, despite intensive development of governance research, several areas remain underexplored. As noted above, existing work concentrates primarily on three parallel streams: (1) participation models and shared governance, (2) academic staff wellbeing, and (3) quality evaluation, metrics, and institutional assessment systems. Each area is well represented; however, there is a substantial gap in integrating them, particularly at the meso level of institutional governance structures. Although many studies address shared governance and academic staff roles in decision-making, most do not examine how governance models directly affect staff wellbeing and professional functioning. Wellbeing research focuses on workload, publication pressure, or employment conditions, but rarely links these phenomena to institutional power structures, leadership quality, or degrees of participation (Levecque et al., 2017; Kinman & Wray, 2020). Thus, empirical accounts connecting governance →management practices → wellbeing remain scarce. Second, research on metrics and institutional evaluation tends to focus on consequences for scientific productivity, publication behaviour, and institutional strategies (Aagaard, 2015; Hicks et al., 2015), but pays less attention to impacts on the quality of academic work, work–life balance, or job satisfaction. As a result, explanatory models are

still lacking regarding how metric logic—as an element of governance—shapes staff wellbeing and organisational climate.

The author also notes that while institutional maturity models are developing (Szydło, 2024), they primarily analyse managerial and organisational processes without fully incorporating the human factor—especially the perspective of academic staff as the main executors of universities' missions. Research linking governance maturity to staff wellbeing, workload, and work quality remains limited.

Existing studies often analyse governance at the macro level (state policies) or the micro level (individual experiences), whereas the meso level—the everyday functioning of institutional governance structures—is comparatively under-described. Yet it is precisely at the meso level that the practical consequences of policies emerge: workload, accountability, metric culture, and leadership support.

There is therefore a need to propose an integrated tool for evaluating university performance that would analyse institutional functioning from the perspective of its key stakeholder—academic staff. Current assessment models—whether focused on teaching quality, research performance, or organisational maturity—provide fragmentary information and do not capture the systemic interdependencies between governance structures, working conditions, and employees' wellbeing and performance. The literature emphasises that institutional quality is inseparable from the conditions under which staff operate, as they carry the core educational and scientific mission (Fumasoli et al., 2015; Huisman & Mampaey, 2018). Meanwhile, dominant evaluation tools in higher education focus on organisational, bibliometric, or financial metrics, largely neglecting employees' professional experiences, perceived workload, organisational justice, and the quality of relations with leadership (Shin & Jung, 2014; Levecque et al., 2017).

Implementing an integrated evaluation tool—combining governance, academic staff wellbeing, metric culture, professional autonomy, working conditions, leadership quality, and organisational effectiveness—would enable comprehensive, multidimensional monitoring of university functioning. The literature highlights a gap precisely in this area: the absence of an instrument that analyses universities not only as organisational structures but also as workplaces and developmental environments for the most important stakeholder group, whose condition directly affects educational and research quality (Kinman & Wray, 2020; Hughes et al., 2020). Such a tool would also help identify latent governance dysfunctions, better align personnel policies, and, consequently, improve overall university performance in line with principles of responsible and sustainable management.

4. Proposed Conceptual Model

Figure 1 presents a proposed conceptual model of meso-level governance and its influence on the management of academic staff.

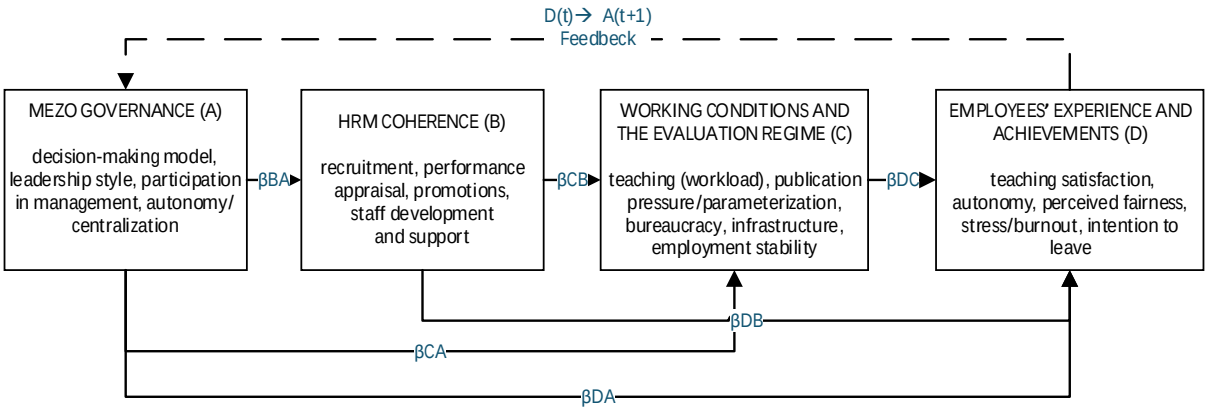

Figure 1. Relational conceptual model of academic work (blocks A–D)

The proposed conceptual model depicts the university as a complex system in which governance structures, personnel policy, organisational culture, and staff experiences form a dynamically connected configuration of mutually interacting elements. The framework is grounded in a relational perspective, which assumes that institutional effectiveness, the quality of academic work, and staff wellbeing do not result from single solutions but from interactions across the meso-organisational and micro levels. The model captures subtle—often not immediately visible—linkages between formal structures and everyday academic practices, highlighting the multidimensional nature of contemporary universities.

At the centre of the model is Block A, covering meso-level university governance. It is at this level that the institutional framework for the remaining processes is shaped. Governance constructs the architecture of authority, determines the degree of centralisation, the scope of unit autonomy, and the relationships between administration, academic authorities, and academic staff. The adopted steering mode sets directions and boundaries. Its significance lies in influencing both formal procedures and informal mechanisms that regulate day-to-day institutional functioning.

Within this block, the governance model plays a particularly important role, as it determines decision-making processes and the level of collegiality and organisational stability. It directly affects the extent to which staff can co-shape their working environment and the institution's capacity to create conditions supportive of research and teaching autonomy. Leadership style serves as a bridge between formal structures and individual experiences: it influences how decisions are communicated, interpersonal relation patterns, and the practical interpretation of university strategy. It can foster dialogue and trust—or, conversely, reinforce a hierarchical and control-oriented organisation. Staff participation, which is central to shared governance, is another key element: it provides opportunities to influence institutional decisions, strengthens perceptions of organisational justice, and reduces tensions between administrative and academic roles. The block is completed by organisational autonomy, which determines the university's ability to shape HR policies, research priorities, and curricula, and thus to balance external pressures with the institution's internal mission.

Built on these institutional foundations is Block B, which concerns the human resource management (HRM) system. In the model, HRM is not treated as a merely technical set of procedures but as a carrier of values and a mechanism shaping academic norms. Recruitment, evaluation, promotion, remuneration, and professional development systems reflect strategic priorities, and their implementation affects trust, perceptions of fairness, and staff motivation. HRM is therefore one of the main channels through which governance influences daily staff experience. At the same time, HR practices shape organisational culture by rewarding particular behaviours, promoting specific forms of research and teaching activity, and affecting relationship structures and collaboration. HRM thus has both regulatory and culture-forming functions.

Block C focuses on the immediate work environment, which most strongly determines academic staff's everyday experience. It encompasses the material, organisational, and procedural conditions of work that generate stress, satisfaction, overload, burnout, or effectiveness.

A key component is teaching workload: its intensity, diversity, and scheduling influence opportunities for research, recovery, and balancing responsibilities. Another element is publication pressure and performance-based assessment, which define the framework for evaluating scientific output. At its centre lies a point-based logic, journal lists, and publication expectations that shape the hierarchy of academic activities.

A important dimension of Block C is bureaucratisation of work, including reporting, accountability documentation, and administrative tasks shifted onto academic staff. High levels of bureaucratisation often reduce research efficiency. Access to research infrastructure is also crucial, as it determines the capacity to conduct internationally competitive research. Finally, employment stability affects perceived security, career planning, and the motivation of early-career researchers.

Block C serves as an environmental transmission channel through which governance and HRM exert influence. Its quality directly determines staff wellbeing.

These processes are reflected in Block D, which encompasses individuals' experiences and wellbeing. In the relational model, this level is treated as the most sensitive indicator of the university's overall functioning. Staff wellbeing results from perceived autonomy, fairness, workload, organisational security, and fit between institutional expectations and professional values. How staff perceive their situation shapes engagement, creativity, willingness to initiate actions, and intent to remain in the organisation. At the same time, individual experiences feed back into higher levels of the model: satisfied and motivated staff more readily participate in participatory processes, strengthen a culture of trust, and contribute to governance stabilisation. In this way, Block D is not only an outcome but also an active element of the relational system.

Overall, the model portrays the university as a structure in which institution-level decisions, HR practices, organisational climate and culture, and staff wellbeing constitute mutually conditioning components of a single system. Central to this approach is relationality: the processes are not analysed in isolation but as parts of a dynamic network of feedback loops. This perspective helps explain variation in university functioning in Poland

and internationally, underscores the importance of institutional relationship quality, and opens space for designing more adequate management interventions that reflect the complexity of the academic environment.

To increase analytical precision, the proposed framework can be expressed as a simple path model (structural equation model, SEM) that mirrors the relationships shown in Figure 1. Let A denote the quality of meso-level governance (e.g., decision-making arrangements, leadership style, participation, autonomy), B the coherence of the HRM system (recruitment, appraisal, promotion, development), C working conditions and the evaluation regime (teaching load, publication pressure, bureaucratization, research infrastructure, employment stability), and D employees' experiences and well-being (satisfaction, perceived organizational justice, autonomy, stress/burnout). The relationships between blocks can then be represented by three equations:

$$B = \beta BA \cdot A + \varepsilon B \tag{1}$$

$$C = \beta CB \cdot B + \beta CA \cdot A + \varepsilon C \tag{2}$$

$$D = \beta DA \cdot A + \beta DB \cdot B + \beta DC \cdot C + \varepsilon D \tag{3}$$

This formulation implies that governance shapes HRM, HRM structures the work environment, and the work environment co-determines well-being. At the same time, "shortcut" effects may be incorporated (e.g., a direct path A → D) if they are supported empirically. A key advantage of this formalization is that it separates direct effects (e.g., governance on well-being) from indirect effects (e.g., governance → HRM → working conditions → well-being). Practically, this enables estimation of whether staff well-being depends primarily on the governance model itself or rather on how governance is translated into HR policies and the concrete conditions under which academic work is performed.

Because the model also assumes feedback mechanisms (well-being influences participation, governance quality, and the implementation of HRM), these relationships can be most clearly captured in a dynamic, time-indexed form, for example: $A(t+1) = \phi A \cdot A(t) + \gamma AD \cdot D(t) + \eta A$ (analogously for B and C). Such a specification strengthens the scholarly status of the concept by indicating clear pathways for empirical testing (e.g., cross-institutional comparisons, panel designs, or SEM-based estimation) while preserving the multidimensional relationships depicted in the figure.

A review of contemporary literature indexed in Scopus suggests that the proposed model is innovative, although its novelty lies primarily in integrating previously separate research approaches. The dominant JD–R (job demands–resources) perspective in studies of academic work focuses on relationships between demands and resources and their effects on stress, burnout, and wellbeing, without systematically incorporating the role of governance and formal institutional policies (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Boya et al., 2022). Research on teaching workload management, in turn, typically approaches it from the perspective of organisational efficiency and labour distribution (Szelągowska-Rudzka, 2018) and does not integrate it with evaluation regimes or employees' psychosocial experience.

A parallel stream on evaluation regimes and research performance-based assessment emphasises increasing indicator pressure, the influence of ranking systems, and publish-or-perish logics that distort scientific priorities and shape organisational culture (De Rijcke et al., 2016; Moed, 2017). However, this literature rarely links evaluation mechanisms with HRM practices or governance styles, limiting the ability to capture their systemic consequences for academic work. Conversely, HRM research in higher education increasingly addresses relationships between HR practices and employee engagement and wellbeing, but typically omits working conditions as a distinct analytical level (Przytula et al., 2025; Yin & Frenkel, 2020).

Against this background, the proposed model offers an original relational framework that connects four levels: governance (Block A), HRM (Block B), working conditions and the evaluation regime (Block C), and individual wellbeing (Block D). Particularly innovative is the delineation of Block C as the work environment, integrating teaching workloads, bureaucratisation, employment stability, infrastructure access, and publication pressure into a single coherent analytical category. In the literature these elements usually appear in a dispersed form, assigned to different research strands and rarely treated as systemically interconnected components of everyday academic work.

The model thus provides substantial added value by enabling analysis of academic work as a configuration of interacting structures, practices, and environmental conditions rather than the outcome of single factors. It thereby offers a fuller explanation of variation in wellbeing and work outcomes among universities operating under similar legal and policy environments. The model's innovation lies in creating a holistic theoretical framework that coherently integrates previously fragmented research areas in higher education studies.

5. Conclusions

The aim of this study was to propose a relational conceptual model explaining the conditions of academic work by linking four levels of university functioning: meso-level governance (Block A), the human resource management system (Block B), working conditions and the evaluation regime (Block C), and employees' experiences and wellbeing (Block D). The author's intention was to develop an analytical framework that clarifies how institutional rules, HR practices, and the work environment translate into academic staff's everyday functioning and why staff experiences may differ even within the same higher education system. In the context of dynamic changes in university management—rising evaluation pressure, intensification of research and teaching work, and progressive bureaucratisation—this perspective is relevant both theoretically and practically.

The model's relevance also stems from a research gap: existing studies of academic work remain dispersed across analyses of the psychosocial consequences of publication pressure, governance research, and selected HRM issues. Integrative approaches that capture interdependencies and feedback loops are still scarce. The proposed model addresses this problem by treating the work environment (Block C) as an autonomous yet pivotal analytical level that mediates between HRM practices and employee wellbeing.

A strength of the concept is its holistic and relational character: academic work is not presented as a consequence of individual procedures but as the result of a configuration of structural, organisational, and psychosocial factors. The model is anchored in the realities of contemporary higher education (metricisation, increasing workloads, bureaucratisation) and enables these phenomena to be operationalised. Its flexibility is also an advantage—it can be used in quantitative and qualitative research as well as in comparative analyses.

A limitation of the model is its complexity, which may hinder unambiguous operationalisation of the blocks and the measurement of relationships, particularly within Block C, which requires precise indicators. Moreover, the framework does not explicitly include macro-structural factors (public policy, global competition for talent, digitalisation) that may substantially shape university functioning and should be incorporated in further developments of the model.

The model opens promising avenues for further research, including empirical testing of relationships between blocks, institutional and international comparisons, long-term analyses of the effects of changes in evaluation and governance, and expansion of the framework to the macro level. Overall, it represents a step toward a more systemic understanding of academic work and may support more informed and sustainable design of HR policies and university governance strategies.

Conflict of interest: none

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