

REVIEW ARTICLE

A systematic review of job satisfaction research in higher education (2021–2025)

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ABSTRACT

Increased workload demands, organisational reorganisations, and post-pandemic changes have significantly changed working conditions in higher education in recent years, with significant ramifications for the job satisfaction of faculty and staff. In order to compile the most recent empirical data on the factors influencing job satisfaction among higher education staff, this study does a PRISMA-guided systematic review. Empirical research produced between 2021 and 2025 was thoroughly examined via an open procedure of database searching, filtering, and critical evaluation. The review categorises influencing factors into three integrative domains: context-dependent or moderating variables (e.g., institutional type, employment status, and national policy environments); negative influences (e.g., workload, job insecurity, and role conflict); and positive contributors (e.g., organisational support, leadership quality, and professional autonomy). By offering a systematic, theoretically informed synthesis that emphasises the conditional and culturally embedded aspect of work satisfaction in higher education, this review goes beyond just summarising trends and contributes to the body of knowledge. In addition to the under-representation of non-academic workers and different institutional settings, the findings show a concentration of evidence in particular national and research-intensive contexts. Although there are constant institutional levers for improving satisfaction, direct comparability is limited by variations in study designs and measuring techniques. All things considered, this review provides an evidence-based basis for future research agendas, organisational policy, and leadership practices, assisting in the creation of more equitable and context-sensitive methods to improve job satisfaction and organisational effectiveness in higher education.

Keywords: job satisfaction; higher education; systematic review; PRISMA; faculty and staff; work environment

1. Introduction

Because it affects employee motivation, productivity, and retention, job satisfaction is vital to the success of higher education institutions^[1]. Particularly in higher education, job satisfaction is a crucial management statistic. Higher education institutions can more accurately forecast and avoid problems like staff burnout and early retirement or resignation by having a better understanding of work satisfaction. A more upbeat and effective learning environment may result from this proactive approach^[2]. Understanding work satisfaction in academic and institutional contexts has become even more crucial in recent years due to the rapid changes in higher education, including digitalisation, more stringent performance evaluation, and

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post-pandemic restructuring. Because of the special demands of academic employment, such as teaching, research, and administrative duties, job satisfaction is especially crucial in the setting of higher education.

One common definition of job satisfaction is a positive emotional state resulting from one's work experience. It encompasses both positive and negative feelings that workers have about their jobs, from extreme satisfaction to severe dissatisfaction^[3,4]. Cebotari noted that job satisfaction is correlated with individual behaviour, productivity, and personal well-being and indicates how effectively a business satisfies the expectations of its employees. The degree of job satisfaction is determined by the attitudes of employees toward various aspects of their jobs, such as the type of job, relationships with coworkers, management style of supervisors, and pay scale. These multifaceted characteristics imply that job satisfaction is a dynamic concept that is influenced by shifting institutional, cultural, and legislative contexts.

In higher education, job satisfaction is characterised as a significant multifaceted construct that affects both individual well-being and the general calibre of work produced by organisations. Major factors influencing job satisfaction were identified through an analysis of instructors at Vilnius College's Faculty of Arts and Creative Technologies. These factors included interactions with peers and students, workplace impact, effective communication, the significance of the work, clearly defined roles, handling conflicts, managerial support, recognition, opportunities for career advancement, and work environments^[5]. Both extrinsic (such as pay and work environment) and intrinsic (such as career advancement and recognition) elements are important in determining employee satisfaction, according to the extensively researched Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory^[6,7]. The theoretical landscape of job satisfaction research in higher education is changing, as seen by more recent studies that increasingly rely on alternative frameworks like the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model and Social Exchange Theory.

Additionally, teachers' employment satisfaction is influenced by their career choices. According to studies, teachers who started their careers with formal teacher education typically report higher levels of job satisfaction than those who entered the field through less conventional means. To increase the happiness of non traditional instructors, studies have recommended enhancing alternative certification programs, enhancing working conditions, and offering more extensive career development options^[8]. These results suggest that career paths and institutional context have a significant moderating influence on work satisfaction outcomes.

Factors influencing job satisfaction in the context of teacher motivation range greatly throughout educational environments. According to an Israeli study, teachers at secular schools are more satisfied when they encourage civic ideals, whereas instructors in religious schools are more satisfied when they offer social and emotional support. Additionally, in secular institutions, an overemphasis on student success has a detrimental effect on teacher satisfaction^[9]. These cross-contextual variations highlight how crucial it is to take organisational, cultural, and policy contexts into account when analysing job satisfaction data and creating incentive plans.

In the complicated and dynamic globalised world of today, job satisfaction varies in tandem with the surroundings. The multifaceted characteristics of job satisfaction across various occupational contexts and their influencing mechanisms have already been made clear by existing research. For example, work family conflict is a major contributor to emotional weariness, which lowers job satisfaction, according to a study conducted on construction professionals by Dodanwala and Shrestha^[10]. This research emphasises how crucial it is to manage emotional stress and maintain a healthy work-life balance in high-demand settings. In a similar vein, certain factors affect faculty members' job satisfaction in higher education. As a result, precisely recognising and comprehending these impacting elements is essential for providing help for

university decision-making. However, given how quickly job situations in higher education changed after 2020, it's possible that earlier syntheses didn't adequately capture new trends and factors.

Furthermore, despite the abundance of research on work satisfaction, there aren't many contemporary, theory-integrated, PRISMA guided systematic reviews that particularly synthesise empirical data from the post 2020 era in higher education. As a result, the purpose of this study is to methodically examine the demographic trends, geographic distribution, and theoretical frameworks used in job satisfaction research. Finding research gaps, comprehending population diversity, and planning future studies all depend on doing this. This review provides an updated and context-sensitive synthesis by concentrating on research published between 2021 and 2025, which captures changes in academic labour conditions connected to the post-pandemic and digital revolution. More significantly, this review will summarise the major factors that have influenced job satisfaction over the previous five years across various educational categories. By influencing institutional policy and workforce management tactics in higher education, the findings advance both theory (via comparative theoretical integration) and practice.

This study is guided by the following questions:

RQ1. What are the study population characteristics in higher education?

RQ2. What are the current theoretical research trends in job satisfaction?

RQ3. What factors influence the job satisfaction in higher education?

2. Methods

The PRISMA 2020 recommendations^[11], which provided a framework for openness and rigour, were followed in the design of the systematic review procedure. To guarantee reproducibility, standardised screening, and a methodical synthesis of recent empirical findings, a PRISMA guided systematic review was used rather than a narrative or scoping review. The four primary steps of this approach (identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion) will be covered in detail in this paper.

2.1. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Inclusion and exclusion criteria were created to ensure the selection of literature that is closely related to the study's topic and to ensure the quality and relevance of research materials (**Table 1**).

Table 1. Inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Criterion	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Document Type	Articles published in academic journals, full text available.	Full text unavailable.
Publication Period	Published between 2021 to 2025	Studies published before 2021.
Research Focus	Research topic relates to examined or discussed elements related to job satisfaction in higher education.	Publications unrelated to the topic; Content discussed job satisfaction in general terms without educational or competence development outcomes.
Research Methodology	The review included empirical primary studies utilizing quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods research designs.	Studies employing research approaches outside of quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods designs.
Peer Review	Peer-reviewed studies.	Non-peer-reviewed studies.
Publication Language	Academic articles written in English.	Non-English content.

2.2. Search strategy

2.2.1. Resources

With the goal of capturing the present situation, patterns, and extent of academic research in this area, this paper offers a comprehensive assessment of studies on job satisfaction in higher education that were published between 2021 and 2025. Higher education institutions saw significant changes in work organization, digitisation, and academic labour circumstances throughout the post COVID-19 era, which is reflected in the chosen time frame. The key sources for this review were the Web of Science, Scopus, Taylor & Francis, and ERIC Online databases, which offer thorough and pertinent coverage of the global academic literature on job satisfaction among professionals in higher education.

2.2.2. Identification

Keywords pertinent to the research topic were identified during the first identification phase. Combinations of terms like "job satisfaction," "work satisfaction," "higher education," "university staff," "faculty," and "academic staff," joined by Boolean operators (AND, OR), were used to create search strings based on the key idea of "job satisfaction" in higher education contexts. Prior to duplication removal, the first search produced 1,310 articles, as indicated in **Table 2**, with 323 records coming from Web of Science, 565 from Scopus, 68 from Taylor & Francis, and 354 from ERIC.

Table 2. Search results based on different databases.

	Search strings	Amount
Web of Science	TS = ("job satisfaction" OR "work satisfaction"AND "higher education" OR "university staff" OR "faculty"OR "academic staff")	323
Scopus	TITLE-ABS-KEY (TS = ("job satisfaction" OR "work satisfaction"AND "higher education" OR "university staff" OR "faculty"OR "academic staff"))	565
Taylor&Francis	TS = ("job satisfaction" OR "work satisfaction"AND "higher education" OR "university staff" OR "faculty"OR "academic staff"))	68
ERIC	TS = ("job satisfaction" OR "work satisfaction"AND "higher education" OR "university staff" OR "faculty"OR "academic staff"))	354
Total		1310

2.2.3. Screening

Screening of articles was part of the selection process. There were 1,002 publications left for additional review after 308 duplicate papers were eliminated. Other selection criteria were developed in order to further reduce the number of articles.

Publications had to be peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, conference papers, or dissertations, written in English, centred on educational situations, published between 2021 and 2025, and freely available in full form in order to meet the eligibility requirements. After the initial screening, 843 records were disqualified for the following reasons: 613 were published outside of the designated timeframe; 17 were written in languages other than English; 127 did not focus on higher education; 86 were reviews, notes, editorials, or other non-empirical materials. Furthermore, 66 articles were eliminated because of limited or insufficient access. As a result, 93 publications met all inclusion requirements and were kept for the assessment of eligibility.

Two reviewers separately screened, and to improve dependability, differences were discussed and settled.

2.2.4. Eligibility

The final collection of publications considered for inclusion was determined by following the PRISMA methodology during the eligibility step, as shown in **Figure 1**. The 93 full-text papers that were obtained for a thorough eligibility evaluation were examined in light of predetermined inclusion criteria. Reports that were only theoretical studies with no empirical support were disqualified at this point ($n = 35$).

Citation count was eliminated as an exclusion criterion in accordance with best practices for systematic reviews because it is not a reliable indicator of methodological quality, especially for recent publications.

As a result, the final systematic review comprised 58 empirical papers that satisfied all inclusion standards. Articles were specifically taken from Taylor & Francis, Web of Science, ERIC, and Scopus. A thorough synthesis of the literature in the context of higher education was made possible by the final organization and transformation of the chosen studies into an appropriate format for analysis.

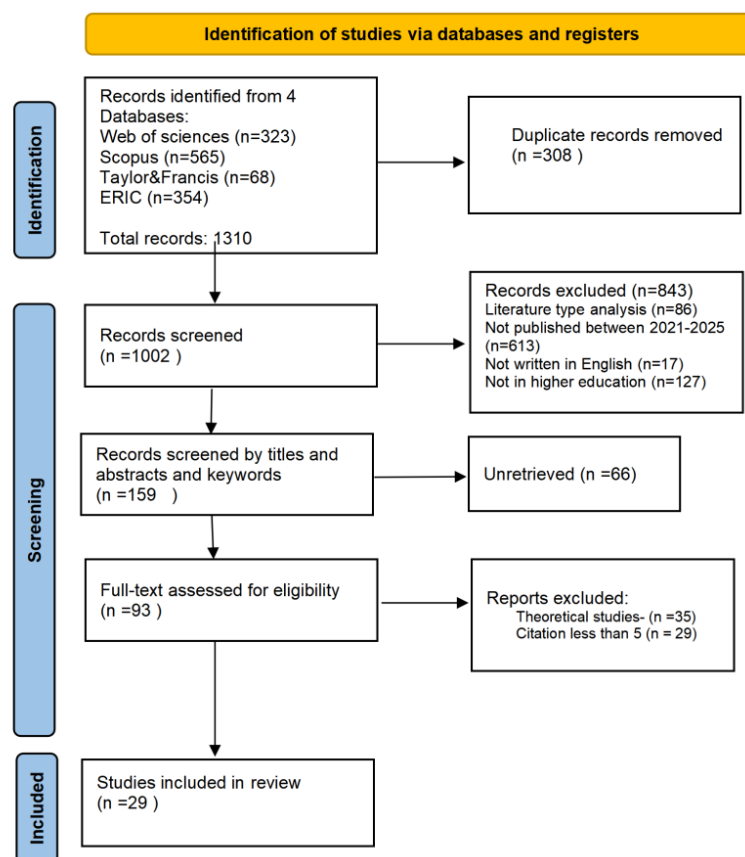


Figure 1. Research flow diagram adapted from Page MJ, et al(2020)^[11].

3. Results

Three categories of findings are presented in this section. Initially, the study populations are analysed. The second is the application of work satisfaction theories. Lastly, the examination of the variables affecting job satisfaction in learning environments provides a basis for further research.

3.1. Study population characteristics

Several noteworthy developments in higher education contexts are revealed by a survey of study populations looked at in job satisfaction research from 2021 to 2025. Academic staff members are the group that has been researched the most, appearing in nine studies^[12-20]. This highlights the crucial role that

academics play in conversations about job satisfaction and demonstrates a persistent focus on teaching staff impressions of the workplace, professional growth, and institutional support.

The second most often studied category is university instructors, who are mentioned in seven papers^[21-27]. Three studies looked at lecturers, a separate category^[28-30]. Despite having similar instructional obligations, lecturers and university teachers have varied employment terms and workload arrangements, which calls for further research that takes a more differentiated approach.

Other professional groupings, on the other hand, have been the subject of less research, but they nonetheless add to our understanding of job satisfaction. A single study has been conducted on each of these groups, which include English teachers^[31,32], administrative staff^[33], counsellors^[34], educators^[35], university-employed women^[36], higher education employees^[37], faculty members^[38], and frontline personnel^[39]. Furthermore, Khalid Husain's study, which concentrated on female Executive MBA students, provided a distinctive perspective on job satisfaction from the point of view of students enrolled in executive education programs^[40].

The current research is systematically unbalanced, as evidenced by the scant attention paid to non-academic staff members like as administrators, support workers, and counsellors. Despite being essential to universities' operational and student-centered missions, these positions' work satisfaction ratings are nevertheless under reported. This disparity restricts the applicability of current studies and points to a crucial area for further investigation.

Overall, the results show that teaching and academic staff are the subject of the majority of research, with relatively few studies focusing on non-academic staff, gender-specific groups, or diversity in institutional roles. Therefore, creating a thorough and institution-wide understanding of job satisfaction in higher education requires a more expansive and inclusive approach to research populations.

3.2. The current theoretical research trends

The two most commonly used theoretical frameworks among the 14 studies analysed in this paper were Social Exchange Theory and Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory, each of which was mentioned in three studies (**Table 3**). Numerous academics have used the Two-Factor Theory to carefully analyse the ways in which hygiene elements and motivators interact together to influence workplace results, demonstrating the theory's broad application^[41,42]. Villay and Velasco-Fahernera expanded on this theoretical framework by emphasising that a lack of motivational factors might still result in turnover even when hygienic needs are satisfied^[43]. This theory's lasting explanatory capacity highlights how useful it is for comprehending employee motivation in a variety of organisational contexts.

Table 3. Category of the application of theories.

No.	Author	Theory	Study construct
1	Mgaiwa (2021)	Field theory (Lewin, 1951)	perceived work environment—job satisfaction
2	Khalid Husain (2021)	Role Conflict Theory (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985)	Work-family conflict—Job satisfaction—Life satisfaction
3	Akosile & Ekemen (2022)	Self-determination theory (Deci, E., 2017)	Core Self-Evaluations—Intrinsic Motivation, Extrinsic Motivation—Job Satisfaction Core Self-Evaluations—Intrinsic Motivation, Extrinsic Motivation—Turnover Intention
4	Kumar (2022)	Broaden-and-build model (Fredrickson, B. L., 1998)	Job satisfaction—Subjective well-being—Job performance
5	Ağalday (2022)	Herzberg's Two-factor Theory (Herzberg, F., 1959)	Alienation from Academic Profession—Job Satisfaction—Organizational Deviance

No.	Author	Theory	Study construct
6	Luzipho et al. (2023)	Job Demand Control Model (Karasek, 1979; Odetunde, 2021) Herzberg's Two-factor Theory (Herzberg, F., 1959)	Job stressors—Work tension—Job satisfaction
7	Kim et al. (2023)	The theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) (Ajzen, 2020)	Work-family conflict, Workload—Job stress—Job satisfaction
8	Borrego et al. (2023)	Kanter's theory of power in organizations (Kanter, 1993)	structural empowerment—Psychological empowerment—Job satisfaction
9	Gessesse & Premanandam (2023)	Herzberg's two-factor theory (Herzberg, F., 1959)	Institution type (public/private), Pay, Supervision, Job security—Job satisfaction
10	Gessesse & Premanandam (2023)	Social exchange theory (Lawler, E. J., 2001)	Job satisfaction—Affective commitment—Turnover intention
11	Nguyen & Ha (2023)	Social exchange theory (Blau, P. M., 1964)	Internal communication—Job engagement, Organisation engagement, Job satisfaction—Employee loyalty
12	Liu et al. (2023)	Social cognitive career theory (Lent et al., 1994; Lent & Brown, 2006)	Job stress—College teaching self-efficacy—Job satisfaction
13	Kim & Maijan (2024)	Social exchange theory (SET) and norm of reciprocity (NOR) (Blau, 1986)	Work-family conflict, Workload—Stress, Burnout—Job satisfaction
14	Dangaiso et al. (2024)	The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004; Bakker and Demerouti, 2017) The equity theory (Adams, 1963) The hierarchy of needs theory (Maslow, 1943) The expectancy theory (Vroom, 1964)	Remote working, Flexible schedules, Employee remuneration—Job satisfaction—Employee loyalty

Table 3. (Continued)

But in contrast to earlier research, most recent studies now view Herzberg's model as a foundational rather than comprehensive framework, frequently combining it with relational and resource-based theories to better represent the working realities of higher education today.

Almost 43% of theoretical applications are based on traditional motivational theories, which place a strong emphasis on comprehending how rewards, fairness, and fundamental psychological needs influence employee satisfaction. These theories include Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, Vroom's Expectancy Theory, Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory, and Equity Theory. While acknowledging intrinsic motivators that improve job happiness, these theories primarily target the structural and external aspects of work environments.

The ability of these theories to adequately explain dynamic and context-sensitive changes in academic work environments in the wake of post pandemic restructuring and digital transformation may be limited, however, by their propensity to conceptualise happiness as comparatively stable and individually orientated.

With 36% of theoretical applications, social and organisational theories, such as Kanter's Theory of Power in Organisations and Social Exchange Theory, represent another important group. These methods emphasise the value of relationship interactions, internal communication, and empowerment in maintaining job satisfaction, especially in situations where reciprocity and organisational support are essential.

When it comes to understanding how perceived institutional support, trust, and fairness influence affective commitment and turnover intentions in higher education settings, social exchange-based approaches have a stronger explanatory power than standard motivational models.

The balance between job demands and available resources is emphasised as a critical predictor of employee well-being in resource-based models, such as the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model and the Job Demand Control Model, which make up around 14% of the total. Comparably, behavioural and cognitive theories, such as the Broaden-and-Build Model, the Theory of Planned Behaviour, the Social Cognitive Career Theory, and the Self-Determination Theory, make up about 29%. This suggests that academic workplaces are becoming more interested in psychological resilience, motivation, and individual agency.

Emerging stressors that are less specifically covered by traditional motivational theories, like increased workload, remote learning, and emotional labour, are especially well-suited to be captured by these more recent frameworks.

All things considered, the tendency toward theoretical pluralism has been more pronounced. A thorough method of capturing the structural and psychological aspects of job satisfaction has been demonstrated by the numerous research that have combined several theoretical frameworks (for example, the JD-R model with equity theory and Maslow's hierarchy of needs). The academic community's increasing understanding that job satisfaction among higher education professionals naturally has multifaceted characteristics is reflected in this trend, which calls for the creation of theoretical models that take situational, organisational, and individual factors into account.

This integrative shift, which moves away from one-theory explanations and toward more context sensitive and multilevel analytical frameworks, is a significant theoretical achievement. By developing thorough frameworks that integrate viewpoints on motivation, interpersonal relationships, and resource foundations, future research should carry on this integration trend and offer a comprehensive understanding of faculty experiences in various institutional contexts.

3.3. The influencing factors of job satisfaction in higher education

Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory, which distinctly divides influencing elements into intrinsic aspects (such recognition and career growth chances) and extrinsic factors (like compensation and work environment), has long served as the framework for research on job satisfaction (**Table 4**). Numerous studies in the field of education have embraced this approach^[6,44,45].

Table 4. Category of the specific job satisfaction factors.

No.	Author	Specific Job Satisfaction Factors
1	Issah(2021)	Person-job fit was strongest predictor; gender, years of service, and age also played roles
2	Mgaiwa(2021)	teamwork, supervision, academic freedom, participative decisions, and resources
3	Ngirande(2021)	Working climate, employee assistance programmes
4	Tentama et al.(2021)	Employability, transformational leadership
5	Yildirim & Yüksel Şahin(2021)	Education level, university education adequacy, job title
6	Khalid Husain, Urfi(2021)	Work-family conflict, family support, societal values
7	Dasanayaka et al.(2021)	Fairness of performance appraisal, link to promotion and salary
8	Preechawong et al.(2021)	Mental health, emotional exhaustion, depersonalization
9	Akosile & Ekemen(2022)	Core Self-Evaluations; Intrinsic Motivation; Emotional Intelligence; Career Commitment
10	Chen & Chen(2022)	Emotional labor load, burnout, well-being, leadership support
11	Kumar(2022)	Positive emotions, well-being support
12	Annamalai(2022)	Perceived equity, job enrichment, burnout

No.	Author	Specific Job Satisfaction Factors
13	Adeka & Mede(2022)	Personal, organizational, student-related, pandemic-related factors
14	Uwannah et al.(2022)	Job autonomy, workload, home-work conflict
15	Wang & Rashid(2022)	Learning opportunities, leadership, connection
16	Ağalday(2022)	Negative impact of Alienation from the Academic Profession(including self-alienation, alienation from scientific research, alienation from teaching, isolation , weakness)
17	Staniec et al.(2023)	Negative impact of forced remote work on autonomy and job satisfaction; productivity increased
18	Luzipho et al.(2023)	Higher role stressors increased work tension, which reduced job satisfaction
19	Mgaiwa(2023)	Academic rank and age had significant differences in job satisfaction
20	Kim et al.(2023)	Stress mediated effects of workload and work-family conflict on job satisfaction
21	Borrego et al.(2023)	Access to opportunities, resources, information, support (structural empowerment) and psychological empowerment
22	Gessesse & Premanandam(2023)	Private: pay, supervision; Public: job security
23	Gessesse & Premanandam(2023)	Job satisfaction predicted lower turnover intention through affective commitment
24	Nguyen & Ha(2023)	Internal communication, engagement Motivation to work in the field (e.g., altruism, passion for teaching) Institutional support and conditions (e.g., staff provision, work environment) Opportunities for professional development
25	Morris & Mo(2023)	Differences between public and private institutional experiences Leadership and management practices Mental health and well-being Career development opportunities Clarity and alignment between expectations and real experiences
26	Liu et al.(2023)	Teaching self-efficacy, experience, coping with stress
27	Sucuoğlu & Karnley(2023)	low remuneration; poor general conditions; relative disadvantage compared to administrative and other sectors)
28	Kim & Maijan.(2024)	Stress, burnout (negatively influenced by work-family conflict and workload), moderated by work experience
29	Dangaiso et al.(2024)	Work-life balance, remote work, flexible schedules, remuneration

Table 4. (Continued)

Although this dichotomy serves as a helpful heuristic, new empirical research indicates that it is not enough to reflect the nuanced and context-dependent aspects of work satisfaction in modern higher education.

Nevertheless, this dual model has been greatly enhanced and improved by other studies. In particular, extrinsic factors now explicitly include organisational and institutional conditions like workplace amenities, general working conditions, and interpersonal relationships^[4,7], whereas the concept of intrinsic factors has broadened to include important psychological and behavioural traits like self-efficacy, communication, and self-development^[46,47]. In addition to directly influencing workers' job satisfaction, these multifaceted elements have a strong correlation with improved employee performance, retention, and overall organisational success^[48]. Additionally, there is a consensus among researchers that demographic factors like gender, age, years of service, marital status, education level, and school location should be included in a thorough evaluation because they have a significant impact on satisfaction levels, underscoring the significance of structural and contextual factors^[49].

To sum up, in order to comprehend job satisfaction in various cultural contexts, an integrated theoretical framework that transcends the straightforward intrinsic-extrinsic dichotomy and incorporates personal, organisational, and socio-cultural dimensions is necessary. Additionally, stable and trustworthy measurement tools are essential^[50].

3.4. A synthesis-oriented framework

Therefore, in order to improve analytical clarity, this analysis takes a synthesis-oriented approach, classifying findings into context-dependent or moderating variables, positive contributors, and negative influences.

Three primary categories were identified from the review of 29 research on work satisfaction in higher education: context-dependent or moderating variables, negative influences, and positive contributors.

3.4.1. Positive contributors

Organisational resources, psychological support, and other multifaceted features are determined to be beneficial variables that promote job satisfaction through categorisation and sorting. According to Mgaiwa, supportive work cultures that are marked by academic freedom, teamwork, good supervision, and participatory decision-making are important determinants of faculty satisfaction^[18]. Additionally, Ngirande found that job satisfaction is positively connected with both the availability of employee help programs and positive working environments^[20]. Furthermore, leadership qualities including equity in performance reviews, career advancement chances, and open pay scales are important^[14,22]. Higher levels of satisfaction were also influenced by internal motivating elements, such as core self-evaluations, professional commitment, and emotional intelligence^[13]. For women and frontline university employees, autonomy, flexible work schedules, and participation were especially important^[36,37,39]. Internal communication and institutional support were identified as key organisational enablers^[32,37].

When taken as a whole, these results demonstrate that psychological resources, organisational support, and leadership quality are key factors that contribute to favourable work satisfaction outcomes in higher education.

3.4.2. Negative influences

On the other hand, a number of detrimental factors affecting job satisfaction were found. The most common mediators of the association between workload and satisfaction were emotional tiredness and work-family conflict^[29,40]. Moreover, job satisfaction was considerably lowered by high role stress, an overwhelming workload, and a lack of academic recognition^[17,24]. It has also been demonstrated that disengagement from teaching and research, as well as alienation from the academic profession, negatively impacts satisfaction^[12]. Structural problems like poor pay, few benefits, and job insecurity were the source of additional discontent, especially in institutional environments with inadequate resources or unfair treatment^[15,38].

These results highlight the compounding and cumulative consequences of workplace stressors, which may increase the likelihood of burnout and attrition in addition to lowering job satisfaction.

3.4.3. Context-dependent and moderating factors

Numerous research emphasised moderating or context-dependent aspects that influenced the perception of job satisfaction. Gessesse and Premanandam discovered that, at various institutional levels, faculty at public universities placed a higher importance on job security, while teachers at private universities were generally more satisfied with compensation and supervision. According to research findings, demographic characteristics like age, gender, years of service, and academic rank all significantly moderate these associations^[18,33]. Additionally, the influence of occupational demands is moderated by mental health and emotional resilience, as well as the alignment of employee expectations with institutional reality^[25,32]. Importantly, coping mechanisms and teaching self-efficacy successfully reduce stress in high pressure situations, assisting educators in preserving more consistent levels of satisfaction^[24].

These findings highlight the need for context-sensitive policy responses by showing that job satisfaction is strongly influenced by institutional type, employment conditions, and personal coping mechanisms.

According to recent studies, the interplay of contextual, institutional, and personal elements shapes the multifaceted structure of job satisfaction among higher education professors. While organisational pressures and structural inequities continue to be obstacles, effective leadership, autonomy, perceived justice, and emotional well-being are important factors that contribute to increased job satisfaction.

By combining disparate empirical findings into a cohesive, multi-level framework that explains how several categories of factors work together to influence job satisfaction, this synthesis adds to the body of current literature.

4. Discussions

4.1. Summary of the findings

In addition to identifying a structured set of influencing elements that function at the individual, organisational, and environmental levels, this systematic review synthesises recent empirical research on job satisfaction among higher education professionals. The results, which were derived from research chosen using a PRISMA guided process and published between 2021 and 2025, show that supportive resources, work-related demands, and moderating contextual circumstances interact in a complicated way to shape job satisfaction in higher education. Instead of being based on a single factor, job satisfaction is a multifaceted result that takes into account the lived experiences of teachers and staff in particular institutional settings as well as the structural aspects of academic employment.

Perceived organisational support, the calibre of leadership and supervision, professional development opportunities, collegial connections, autonomy, and recognition were all consistently favourable contributors throughout the examined research. Because they increase workers' sense of worth, competence, and belonging, these elements have been consistently linked to better levels of satisfaction. Workload increase, role overload, job instability, administrative stress, work-life conflict, and perceived unfairness in promotion and assessment processes, on the other hand, were the main negative impacts. By raising emotional weariness and decreasing feelings of justice and control over working conditions, these stressors have been demonstrated to undermine job satisfaction.

Significantly, a third area of context-dependent and moderating variables is also highlighted in the review. These include national policy contexts, institutional type, employment status (e.g., tenured vs. contingent personnel), and cultural norms surrounding academic labour. These elements influenced the direction and strength of the associations between job satisfaction and working conditions, suggesting that comparable organisational strategies may produce different results in various contexts. When taken as a whole, these results highlight the fact that understanding work satisfaction in higher education requires taking into account institutional context and employment structures.

All things considered, this synthesis contributes to the literature by bringing a disjointed body of research into a logical, three-domain framework that makes clear how contextual moderators, job-related stressors, and supportive resources all interact together to affect job satisfaction. In addition to bolstering theoretical knowledge of satisfaction in higher education, this integrated viewpoint offers institutions a useful starting point for creating focused, research based plans to improve organisational efficacy and the well-being of professors and staff.

4.2. Theoretical implications

By supporting and expanding multidimensional and resource-based perspectives on academic labour, the results of this systematic review advance the theoretical understanding of job satisfaction in higher education. The compiled evidence shows that the dynamic balance between job demands (such as workload, administrative burden, and job insecurity) and job resources (such as organisational support, leadership quality, autonomy, and professional development) shapes job satisfaction, which is in line with frameworks like the Job Demands–Resources (JD–R) model and social exchange theory. This review offers a concise conceptual framework that unifies previously disparate data and makes clear how satisfaction manifests as a relational and contextually embedded construct by classifying the literature into positive, negative, and moderating domains.

Furthermore, by emphasising the conditional nature of job satisfaction processes in higher education, the identification of context-dependent moderators strengthens current theories. The findings imply that national policy contexts, job status, and institutional features actively influence how professors and staff perceive and understand demands and resources rather than just acting as background circumstances. This bolsters arguments in the literature to abandon universalistic models of academic work and adopt more context-sensitive theories that take into consideration cross-national heterogeneity and academic workforce stratification. Therefore, by presenting higher education as a distinct organisational domain where structural and cultural factors systematically influence individual level results, this review expands on satisfaction theory.

4.3. Practical and policy implications

The results highlight the necessity for higher education institutions to implement all-encompassing, multilevel initiatives to improve work satisfaction from a practical and policy standpoint. Without structural adjustments to workload distribution, assessment procedures, and job security, interventions that only target individual resilience or coping are unlikely to be adequate. Department chairmen, deans, and senior administrators play a crucial role in determining the daily work environments, as evidenced by the persistent correlation found between job satisfaction, leadership quality, and perceived organisational support. Thus, leadership development initiatives that prioritise fair decision making, open communication, and supportive supervision may be high leverage institutional investments.

At the corporate level, work-life balance, workload management, and administrative burden reduction initiatives are likely to result in significant increases in employee retention and satisfaction. The results also highlight the significance of tailored regulations for a variety of employment groups, especially non academic and contingent employees, who frequently experience increased insecurity and restricted opportunities for professional growth. National and institutional policy frameworks that place a high priority on fair promotion standards, stable job pathways, and inclusive governance structures may be able to lessen systemic causes of discontent. All of these ramifications point to the need for integrated efforts across the domains of leadership, organisational design, and policy to improve work satisfaction in higher education as opposed to discrete or transient solutions.

4.4. Limitations and future research

Despite the research's rigorous and PRISMA guided approach, some limitations should be mentioned. First, only empirical studies published between 2021 and 2025 were included in the review, which might have left out previous foundational work and made it more difficult to spot longer term patterns in higher education staff members' job satisfaction. Second, direct comparability was limited and quantitative meta analysis was not possible due to differences in study designs, assessment tools, and operationalizations of job

satisfaction. Third, the findings were not as generalisable to under represented regions, vocational institutions, and non academic staff groups because the evidence base was not evenly distributed across geographic regions, institutional types, and professional roles, with a concentration in particular national and research intensive contexts. Furthermore, the use of published literature increases the risk of publication bias. Therefore, longitudinal and mixed methods designs should be given priority in future research, cross cultural and institutional coverage should be increased, and a wider spectrum of higher education staff members, including administrative, professional, and contingent staff, should be included. In addition to supporting the creation of more fair and context sensitive institutional interventions targeted at improving job satisfaction, such initiatives would fortify the empirical basis for theory development.

5. Conclusion

Recent research shows a distinct move away from broad evaluations and toward more complex and context specific analysis. Research is increasingly concentrating on certain faculty subgroups, broken down by demographic background, institutional type, and career stage. Using theoretical frameworks like Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory, Social Exchange Theory, and new resource based and psychological models, the literature has mostly concentrated on academic and teaching staff in order to analyse determinants through psychological, individual, organisational, and environmental dimensions. The results confirm that job satisfaction is multifaceted and complex, emphasising the importance of autonomy, leadership, and institutional support in promoting job satisfaction as well as the negative impacts of stressors like work family conflict, increased workload, and structural injustices.

This review adds value by methodically synthesising post 2021 empirical evidence, integrating various theoretical viewpoints, differentiating between moderating, positive, and negative elements, and spotting new post pandemic trends in higher education work environments.

Given the significant influence these positions have on institutional operations, academic careers, and student achievement, research focusing on various higher education groups, such as faculty, students, administrative staff, and support personnel, remains scarce but vitally important. In order to reflect changing academic labour conditions, future research should broaden its focus to include non academic personnel, enhance cross cultural and policy sensitive analyses, and further incorporate relational and resource based theories. In order to offer evidence based insights for policymaking and useful enhancements in personnel management in higher education, such initiatives are necessary.

Author contributions

Conceptualization, Yan Zhou, Bity Salwana Alias and Aida Hanim A. Hamid; methodology, Yan Zhou; software, Yan Zhou; validation, Yan Zhou, Bity Salwana Alias and Aida Hanim A. Hamid; formal analysis, Yan Zhou; investigation, Yan Zhou; resources, Yan Zhou; data curation, Yan Zhou; writing—original draft preparation, Yan Zhou; writing—review and editing, Bity Salwana Alias, Aida Hanim A. Hamid; visualization, Yan Zhou; supervision, Bity Salwana Alias, Aida Hanim A. Hamid; project administration, Bity Salwana Alias, Aida Hanim A. Hamid. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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