

Work Centrality and Psychological Contracts in Remote Academia a Post-Covid Conceptual Analysis

Niku¹, Ipshita Bansal²

Bhagat Phool Singh Mahila Vishwavidyalaya, Sonipat, Haryana, India

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51244/IJRSI.2025.1210000025>

Received: 12 Oct 2025; Accepted: 19 Oct 2025; Published: 29 October 2025

ABSTRACT

Objectives:

This conceptual paper examines the evolving dynamics of psychological contracts and work centrality within higher education institutions (HEIs) in the post-COVID context. It aims to: (1) analyse how remote and hybrid work have reshaped psychological contracts in academia; (2) investigate the moderating influence of work centrality on employee engagement and organizational citizenship behaviour (OCB); and (3) propose an integrative conceptual framework linking psychological contract management (PCM), work centrality, and institutional sustainability.

Methods:

Adopting a conceptual and theory-driven approach, this study integrates insights from **Social Exchange Theory (SET)** and **Human Capital Theory (HCT)**. A comprehensive synthesis of existing literature on psychological contracts, work centrality, and remote academic work underpins the development of a multi-level conceptual model. The framework positions PCM as a key antecedent of engagement and OCB, with work centrality acting as a moderator and sustainability outcomes (social, economic, and environmental) as the ultimate institutional objectives.

Results:

The analysis indicates that effective PCM fosters employee engagement and OCB, particularly among academics with high work centrality. These behaviours enhance institutional trust, innovation, and resilience, aligning with the **Triple Bottom Line (TBL)** framework. The model highlights that fulfilled psychological contracts strengthen reciprocity and discretionary behaviours, thereby promoting long-term institutional sustainability.

Conclusions:

Psychological contract management functions as a strategic enabler for sustainable higher education. By ensuring fairness, recognition, and flexibility, HEIs can align employee expectations with institutional goals, enhancing engagement and commitment. Future empirical research should validate the proposed framework across diverse academic and cultural contexts to substantiate its applicability and impact.

Keywords: Psychological Contract; Work Centrality; Employee Engagement; Organizational Citizenship Behaviour; Sustainability

INTRODUCTION

The landscape of higher education was irrevocably altered by the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19

pandemic reshaped work practices globally, and higher education institutions (HEIs) were no exception. As campuses closed and teaching, research, and administration shifted online, the very nature of academic work underwent a profound transformation (Crawford et al, 2020). Universities worldwide now operate in a new normal, where teaching, administration, and research collaboration are increasingly conducted in digital spaces. Faculty and staff had to renegotiate not only their roles and responsibilities but also their implicit psychological contracts with their institutions. The remote environment, however, disrupts these established norms. It offers tantalizing opportunities for flexibility and autonomy but also carries the risk of professional isolation, blurred boundaries, and a potential breach of the delicate trust that underpins the academic psychological contract.

This paper aims to conceptualize how the rise of remote and hybrid work is transforming these core elements of academic life. We explore the dynamic interplay between psychological contracts and work centrality in this new context and consider how these dynamics ultimately influence faculty engagement, organizational citizenship behaviours (OCB), and the long-term sustainability of higher education institutions (HEIs). This paper argues that the intersection of psychological contracts and work centrality provides a powerful lens through which to understand the evolving dynamics of academic work in the post- pandemic era. By conceptualising how fulfilled or breached psychological contracts influence engagement and organisational citizenship behaviours (OCB), moderated by work centrality, this study highlights a pathway for HEIs to sustain innovation, commitment, and long-term growth.

Research Objectives: To examine how remote and hybrid work has reshaped psychological contracts in HEIs. To explore the role of work centrality as a moderator in employee engagement and OCB. To propose a conceptual framework linking psychological contract management, work centrality, and institutional sustainability.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

2.1 Psychological Contracts in Higher Education:

The psychological contract refers to the implicit, often unspoken expectations employees and employers hold regarding mutual obligations (Rousseau, 1995). Unlike formal employment contracts, PCs are subjective and evolve over time through social interactions, organisational culture, and individual experiences (Conway & Briner, 2005). In higher education, psychological contracts encompass expectations of academic freedom, recognition, fair workload distribution, career progression opportunities, and institutional support for teaching and research (Decramer, Smolders, & Vanderstraeten, 2013). When these expectations are fulfilled, employees report higher engagement, trust, and willingness to engage in discretionary behaviours that benefit the institution (Robinson & Rousseau, 1994; Zhao et al, 2007). Conversely, psychological contract breaches perceived failures by the institution to honour its implicit commitments lead to disappointment, withdrawal behaviours, and reduced OCB (Morrison & Robinson, 1997). In the context of remote work, the PC is reshaped. Faculty members now expect technological support, flexible policies, fair recognition of online teaching efforts, and clear communication from administrators (Watermeyer et al, 2021). Institutions that fail to meet these expectations risk eroding trust and engagement, even if formal contractual obligations remain unchanged.

2.2 Work Centrality in Academic Contexts:

Work centrality (WC) reflects the degree to which work forms a central part of one's self- concept and identity (Paullay et al, 1994). Individuals with high WC see work not only as a source of income but also as a vital element of their purpose and self-worth. Those with low WC, in contrast, prioritise non-work domains and may regard employment primarily as a means of material survival. In academia, work centrality is often pronounced. Faculty identities are closely tied to teaching excellence, research outputs, and professional recognition (Marginson, 2016). However, the shift to remote and hybrid work has disrupted these identities. For some, the flexibility of remote work has deepened their attachment to academic roles by offering autonomy and expanded opportunities for international collaboration. For others, the isolation and blurred work-life boundaries have weakened the salience of academic work in their self-concept (Saragih, 2020). This

variability in WC matters because it shapes how academics respond to psychological contracts. For example, a high-WC academic who perceives institutional support may reciprocate with extraordinary commitment and OCB. Conversely, a low-WC academic facing a perceived breach may disengage more readily. Thus, WC may act as a moderator in the PC– outcome relationship.

2.3 Remote Work and Higher Education Post-COVID:

The pandemic forced a mass experiment in remote delivery for HEIs. While the initial crisis mode has subsided, hybrid and fully remote models have become embedded features of the sector. This brings distinct challenges, including digital fatigue, the difficulty of switching off when home becomes the office, and the erosion of the informal collegiality that sparks collaboration and provides social support. Yet, it also presents significant opportunities more flexible and accessible education, the potential for global research collaborations unhindered by geography, and for some, a better integration of work and personal life. Crucially, remote work alters the implicit exchange of trust, visibility, and support. The traditional sight-based accountability of being on campus is replaced by a system requiring greater trust in output and results, fundamentally changing the academic-institution relationship.

2.4 OCB and Institutional Sustainability:

Organizational Citizenship Behaviour (OCB) encompasses voluntary, discretionary actions that are not part of an academic's formal job description but that promote the effective functioning of the organization (Organ, 1997). Examples include helping colleagues with their teaching load, voluntarily mentoring junior faculty, sharing resources, and participating in committee work with a positive spirit.

We propose that when psychological contracts are fulfilled and work centrality is high, faculty are more likely to exhibit strong OCB. This, in turn, directly contributes to an institution's sustainability. In this context, sustainability is multidimensional it involves social sustainability (fulfilling SDG 4 through quality education and SDG 8 through decent work), economic sustainability (retaining talented staff and maintaining reputation), and effective governance (SDG 16) through collaborative and ethical institutional management sustainability (retaining talented staff and maintaining reputation), and effective governance (SDG 16) through collaborative and ethical institutional management.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND:

To examine the interplay between psychological contracts, work centrality, and remote academic work, this study draws on Social Exchange Theory (SET) and Human Capital Theory (HCT).

3.1 Social Exchange Theory (SET)

(Blau, 1964) provides a foundational logic. It posits that relationships are built on a pattern of reciprocal exchanges. When an HEI fulfils its obligations by providing digital tools, recognizing effort, and ensuring fair workload academics feel a normative obligation to reciprocate with greater engagement, commitment, and OCB.

3.2 Human Capital Theory

(Schultz, 1961) frames academics as valuable assets in whom the institution invests. Effective management of PCs and the nurturing of WC are strategic investments that enhance the returns on this human capital, leading to greater innovation, teaching quality, and research output. HCT therefore positions work centrality as a critical factor in determining whether HEIs can effectively leverage their academic workforce for sustainability and innovation.

3.3 Integrating the Theories:

Together, SET and HCT provide a robust theoretical foundation for the proposed framework. SET highlights

the relational dynamics of trust, reciprocity, and fairness in managing psychological contracts, while HCT underscores the strategic value of employee engagement and identity in sustaining organizational outcomes. By integrating these perspectives, this paper argues that the effective management of psychological contracts, moderated by work centrality, enables HEIs to maximize human capital contributions and foster sustainable, innovative institutions.

Conceptual Framework:

The dynamic environment of higher education requires institutions to rethink how they engage and sustain their academic workforce. Based on the reviewed literature and theoretical grounding, this paper proposes a conceptual framework that links psychological contract management (PCM), work centrality, and employee outcomes to broader sustainability outcomes in higher education institutions (HEIs).

4.1 Core Proposition

The central premise is that effective management of psychological contracts enhances employee engagement and organizational citizenship behaviour (OCB). These outcomes are further shaped by the degree of work centrality among academic staff, which influences how strongly individuals respond to fulfilled or breached expectations. In turn, heightened engagement and OCB contribute to sustainability outcomes social, economic, and environmental in HEIs.

4.2 Key Constructs:

1. **Psychological Contract Management (PCM):** Refers to the institutional practices that clarify expectations, ensure fairness, provide recognition, and support academic career development (Conway & Briner, 2005). PCM is crucial in remote and hybrid work contexts, where ambiguity and disconnection can easily erode trust (Bal et al, 2013).
2. **Work Centrality:** Denotes the importance of work in an individual's life relative to other domains (Paullay et al, 1994). For academics, high work centrality manifests as strong professional identity, dedication to research/teaching, and willingness to go beyond formal job requirements.

Employee Outcomes:

Engagement Characterized by vigour, dedication, and absorption in work tasks (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004).
Organizational Citizenship Behaviour (OCB) Includes altruism, conscientiousness, civic virtue, and sportsmanship, which contribute to institutional effectiveness (Organ, 1997).

Sustainability Outcomes

Social: Enhanced trust, collaboration, and improved teaching quality.

Economic: Reduced turnover, higher productivity, and efficient resource use.

Environmental: Stronger faculty support for green initiatives and sustainability curricula (Lozano et al, 2014).

4.3 Propositions:

Drawing on Social Exchange Theory (SET) and Human Capital Theory (HCT), the framework suggests the following propositions

1. P1 Effective PCM positively influences employee engagement and OCB.
2. P2 Work centrality strengthens the relationship between PCM and employee outcomes; when work is central to identity, fulfilled PCs have stronger positive effects.
3. P3 Employee engagement and OCB act as mediators between PCM and sustainability outcomes.
4. P4 Trust and perceived organizational support further mediate the relationship between PCM and employee outcomes.

5. P5 Leadership style (transformational vs. transactional), organizational culture, and digital readiness moderate the strength of PCM's effects.

4.4 Conceptual Model

The framework is visually represented in Figure It positions PCM as the antecedent, engagement and OCB as mediators, work centrality as a moderator, and sustainability outcomes (social, economic, environmental) as the ultimate results.

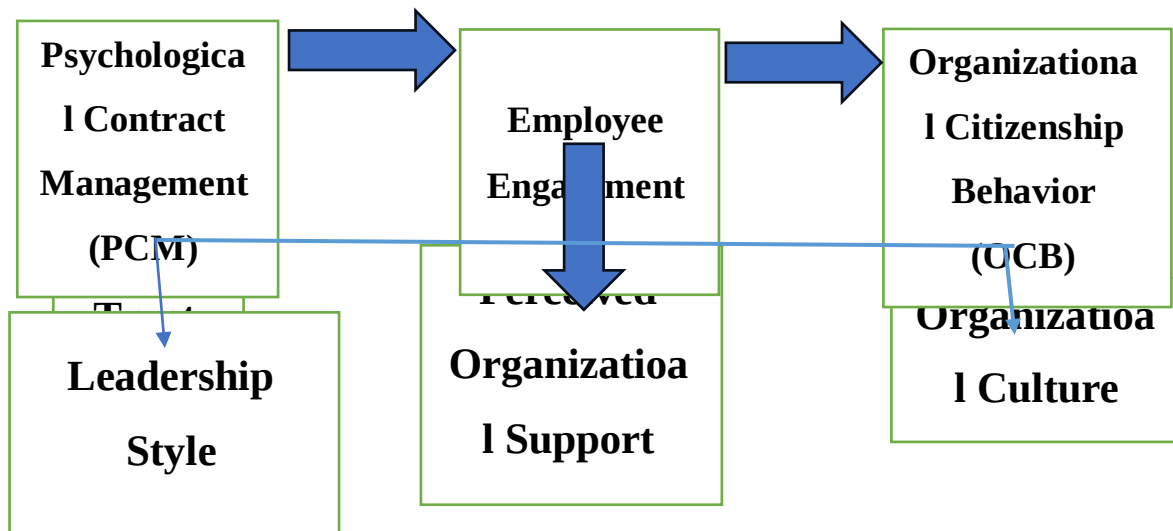


Figure 1: conceptual Framework Linking psychological Contract Management to organizational Citizenship Behavior

DISCUSSION:

5.1 Contribution to Literature

This paper extends psychological contract (PC) research by positioning it not only as a micro- level construct affecting individual employee attitudes but also as a strategic enabler of institutional sustainability. While prior studies have shown that fulfilled psychological contracts improve employee trust and engagement (Robinson & Rousseau, 1994; Zhao et al, 2007), this paper innovates by explicitly linking PC management with sustainability outcomes in higher education institutions (HEIs). Moreover, by incorporating work centrality as a moderating factor, the framework recognizes the unique nature of academic work. Faculty members often identify deeply with their professional roles, and this centrality shapes how they perceive and respond to institutional obligations (Paullay et al, 1994). This adds nuance to the traditional PC-OCB relationship, which has not been sufficiently explored in higher education contexts. The integration of Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964), Human Capital Theory (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004), and the Triple Bottom Line framework (Lozano et al, 2014) also advances theoretical discussions by connecting micro-level HR processes with macro-level sustainability goals. In doing so, the model broadens the lens through which organizational behaviour and higher education management are studied.

Practical Implications

For HEI leaders, managing psychological contracts effectively is more than an HR function it is a strategic management practice. Transparent communication about workload expectations, equitable recognition systems, and career development support can minimize breaches and reinforce employee commitment (Decramer, Smolders, & Vanderstraeten, 2013). The proposed framework also underscores the importance of employee engagement and OCB as drivers of institutional resilience. Faculty and staff who feel their implicit expectations are acknowledged are more willing to experiment with innovative pedagogies, pursue

interdisciplinary grants, and build community partnerships. These discretionary behaviours directly contribute to HEIs' ability to adapt to global challenges and maintain sustainable operations.

5.3 Policy Implications

At the policy level, governments and accreditation bodies can integrate psychological contract considerations into higher education quality assurance frameworks. For example, national rankings and audits could assess metrics related to staff engagement, fair employment practices, and participatory governance. Such systemic attention would incentivize HEIs to adopt sustainable HR practices aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2015). This approach aligns especially with SDG 4 (quality education), SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth), and SDG 16 (peace, justice, and strong institutions). By embedding PC management in higher education policy, institutions can more directly contribute to achieving these goals.

5.4 Innovating Management through PC

Traditionally, HEI management has relied heavily on formal rules and structures. The framework proposed here advocates for a dual approach combining formal structures with psychological contract management innovations such as

- Participatory decision-making to preserve academic autonomy.
- Recognition systems that value both teaching and research contributions.
- Flexible workload arrangements that respond to post-pandemic realities.

These practices not only strengthen employee commitment but also lay the foundation for entrepreneurial universities, where staff are motivated to engage in innovation and community-driven projects (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2019).

5.5 Psychological Contract as a Driver of Sustainability:

By fulfilling the implicit expectations of employees, HEIs can activate a cycle of reciprocity in which engagement and OCB flourish. In turn, these behaviours advance sustainability outcomes

- Social sustainability: faculty invest more in student learning and collaborative culture.
- Economic sustainability: reduced turnover and greater productivity strengthen institutional stability.
- Environmental sustainability: engaged staff champion green initiatives and embed sustainability into curricula.

Thus, psychological contract management is not peripheral but central to higher education's sustainability agenda.

REFLECTION AND CONCLUSION

6.1 Reflection

The rapid transformation of higher education has created both opportunities and challenges for institutional leaders, faculty, and policymakers. This paper has argued that psychological contract management (PCM) when understood as a strategic practice has the potential to shape not only employee outcomes but also the broader sustainability agenda of higher education institutions (HEIs). By integrating psychological contract theory, work centrality, and organizational citizenship behaviour (OCB) with the sustainability framework of the Triple Bottom Line (TBL), this study provides a novel lens through which to view human resource management in HEIs. The reflection emerging from this work is clear institutions often invest in physical infrastructure and curriculum reforms, but the implicit, psychological relationship between employees and their institutions remains underexplored, despite being central to institutional resilience. In reflecting on this model, it becomes evident that trust, fairness, and recognition are not abstract ideals; they are practical levers that shape how employees perceive their roles and how far they are willing to go beyond formal duties. When employees feel valued and their implicit expectations are acknowledged, engagement and OCB rise, translating into tangible sustainability outcomes. This reflection underscores the urgent need to reframe HEI management practices from transactional to relational and balanced approaches.

IN CONCLUSION

A framework connecting psychological contract management, job centrality, and employee outcomes (OCB and engagement) to sustainability outcomes in HEIs was presented in this conceptual study. By emphasizing the strategic significance of PCM in institutional sustainability, the framework contributes to the body of literature. • Outlining work centrality as a mediator that influences the association between PC and employee outcomes. • Linking HR practices at the micro level to sustainability outcomes at the macro level, using the TBL framework, Human Capital Theory, and SET as a guide.

Practically speaking, the study offers university administrators useful advice on how to promote engagement and motivate employees to go above and beyond the call of duty by implementing open lines of communication, equitable workload regulations, and recognition systems. These methods are essential for creating innovative, entrepreneurial, and long-lasting organisations. From a policy viewpoint, incorporating psychological contract concerns into frameworks for evaluating higher education might help institutions connect their practices with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially SDG 16 (strong institutions), SDG 8 (decent work), and SDG 4 (excellent education). The work needs empirical validation, nevertheless, because it is conceptual in nature. The suggested links should be tested longitudinally in a variety of cultural and policy contexts in future studies. They should also look at how PC-driven involvement translates into particular sustainability behaviours like green campus initiatives or sustainability-focused curricula. This study concludes by presenting psychological contract management as a calculated route to long-term growth in higher education. A resilient workforce that actively supports instructional quality, research innovation, and the global sustainability agenda can be developed by HEIs by coordinating institutional policies with employee expectations.

Future Work:

This conceptual paper lays out a number of potential lines of inquiry. First, the evolution of psychological contracts during institutional changes like funding reforms, digital transformation, or post-pandemic recovery should be monitored by longitudinal study. This would offer a more profound comprehension of the gradual development of trust and commitment. Second, considering the disparities in educational systems and cultural norms among nations, cross-cultural comparisons can show how work centrality and PC judgements differ. Lastly, future research might concentrate on particular sustainability goals, such the ways in which motivated staff members support inclusive education, green initiatives, or social innovation projects. In summary, empirical validation of the ways in which psychological contract management propels creative and sustainable higher education institutions should be the focus of future research in order to close the gap between theory and practice.

REFERENCES

1. Altbach, P. G., Reisberg, L., & Rumbley, L. E. (2019). Trends in global higher education: Tracking an academic revolution (Vol. 22). Brill.
2. Bal, P. M., De Lange, A. H., Jansen, P. G., & Van Der Velde, M. E. (2013). A longitudinal study of age-related differences in reactions to psychological contract breach. *Applied Psychology*, 62, 157–181.
3. Blau, P. (2017). Exchange and power in social life. Routledge.
4. Conway, N., & Briner, R. B. (2005). Understanding psychological contracts at work: A critical evaluation of theory and research. Oxford University Press.
5. Crawford, J., Butler-Henderson, K., Rudolph, J., Malkawi, B., Glowatz, M., Burton, R., . . . Lam, S. (2020). COVID-19: 20 countries' higher education intra-period digital pedagogy responses. *Journal of applied learning & teaching*, 3, 1–20.
6. Decramer, A., Smolders, C., & Vanderstraeten, A. (2013). Employee performance management culture and system features in higher education: relationship with employee performance management satisfaction. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 24, 352–371.

7. Lee, B. X., Kjaerulf, F., Turner, S., Cohen, L., Donnelly, P. D., Muggah, R., . . . others. (2016). Transforming our world: implementing the 2030 agenda through sustainable development goal indicators. *Journal of public health policy*, 37, 13–31.
8. Lozano, R., Lukman, R., Lozano, F. J., Huisinigh, D., & Lambrechts, W. (2013). Declarations for sustainability in higher education: becoming better leaders, through addressing the university system. *Journal of cleaner production*, 48, 10–19.
9. Marginson, S. (2016). The worldwide trend to high participation higher education: Dynamics of social stratification in inclusive systems. *Higher education*, 72, 413–434.
10. Morrison, E. W., & Robinson, S. L. (1997). When employees feel betrayed: A model of how psychological contract violation develops. *Academy of management Review*, 22, 226–256.
11. Organ, D. W. (2014). Organizational citizenship behavior: It's construct clean-up time. In *Organizational citizenship behavior and contextual performance* (pp. 85–97). Psychology Press.
12. Paullay, I. M., Alliger, G. M., & Stone-Romero, E. F. (1994). Construct validation of two instruments designed to measure job involvement and work centrality. *Journal of applied psychology*, 79, 224.
13. Robinson, S. L., & Rousseau, D. M. (1994). Violating the psychological contract: Not the exception but the norm. *Journal of organizational behavior*, 15, 245–259.
14. Rousseau, D. (1995). *Psychological contracts in organizations: Understanding written and unwritten agreements*. Sage.
15. Schaufeli, W. B., & Bakker, A. B. (2004). Job demands, job resources, and their relationship with burnout and engagement: A multi-sample study. *Journal of Organizational Behavior: The International Journal of Industrial, Occupational and Organizational Psychology and Behavior*, 25, 293–315.
16. Schultz, T. W. (1961). Investment in human capital. *The American economic review*, 51, 1–17.
17. United Nations. (2015). *Transforming our world: The 2030 agenda for sustainable development*. United Nations. <https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>
18. Zhao, H. A., Wayne, S. J., Glibkowski, B. C., & Bravo, J. (2007). The impact of psychological contract breach on work-related outcomes: a meta-analysis. *Personnel psychology*, 60, 647–680.