

The Recognition Paradox and Training Inefficacy in Saudi Higher Education: A Conservation of Resources Perspective on Faculty Career Dynamics

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Abstract

This study employs Conservation of Resources (COR) theory and the Organizational Embeddedness Theory as elucidating frameworks for examining the intersection of human resource (HR) practices and faculty careers with respect to higher education in Saudi Arabia. Using a public Saudi University faculty sample (N = 586) and employing Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), this study examines the HR practices of training and recognition, internal mobility, and the role of career success. The study reconceptualizes the training-ins mobility, recognition-ins mobility, and mobility-out career success relationships. This study refines the concept of the recognition-embeddedness trap, demonstrating that recognition acts as a resource anchor, increasing faculty's embeddedness in their current positions rather than catalyzing mobility. This study proposes the training inefficacy hypothesis, suggesting that training faculty in bureaucratized academic systems where pathways are closed, leaves faculty training unutilized and faculty careers unadvanced. The findings also suggest that internal mobility is counterproductive within Saudi Arabia, where the frequent role changes of faculty signal a lack of adaptability rather than the presumed mobility. With regard to contract type and faculty nationality, this study extends previous work by showing that fixed-term faculty are subjected to more mobility than permanent faculty and that non-Saudi faculty experience different career patterns.

These results have the potential to develop theories on the career patterns of non-Western academics and develop pathways for non-Western policymakers to create HR policies that will meaningfully affect the careers of faculty.

Keywords: Conservation of Resources Theory; Organizational Embeddedness; Faculty Career Development; HR Practices; Internal Mobility; Saudi Higher Education; Institutional Inertia

1. Introduction

We have found that there are a set of assumptions when it comes to the management of academic HR. Many of these assumptions operate 'underground' and have not been challenged. These assumptions tend to position training as a means to career mobility, recognition as motivation for upward movement, and the ability to move internally as a pathway to career success. These assumptions seamlessly integrate into Western models of career development and are, therefore, almost second nature to HR policy development. These assumptions are, to a large extent, unsubstantiated in many non-Western, culturally and contextually diverse academic settings.

Challenging these assumptions will also be useful in the context of Saudi Arabia's public higher education system. Saudi Arabia has invested heavily in developing the higher education systems of the Arab world in the last two decades. In particular, the Vision 2030 reforms have placed a significant focus on improving the quality of higher education, developing faculty, and increasing research activity. Still, the systemic and seniority-based promotion structures of higher education bureaucracies have limited the impact of HR practices on faculty career advancement.

This study builds upon an empirical study of 586 faculty members at Saudi public universities that utilized Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to investigate the connections between select HR practices (training

and recognition), internal mobility, and career success. Three of that study's findings were startling, and the study's author seemed surprised to find, first, that training had no effect on internal mobility; second, that recognition had a negative effect on internal mobility; and third, that internal mobility had a negative effect on both promotion and pay progression. While that study appreciated the multifactorial nature of the findings, it was not able to offer any theoretical framework to predict or explain them.

In contrast to that study, we argue that these findings were not surprising at all. In fact, we would expect to find these results when analyzing these HR practices in conjunction with Conservation of Resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989) and Organizational Embeddedness theory (Mitchell et al., 2001; Lee et al., 2004). From a COR perspective, recognition is seen as a resource faculty try to protect and will not risk through movement. From an integrated perspective, recognition strengthens the links, fit, and sacrifice dimensions faculty feel toward their positions and subsequently decreases their willingness to seek internal movement. In a bureaucratic academic system, training is unable to generate mobility because the system's pathways through which training is manifested into a higher position are effectively sealed by rigid promotion and tenure systems.

The research has three primary implications. The first is to offer the "Recognition-Embeddedness Trap," a term and framework that explains how recognition in a bureaucratic academic system paradoxically constrains mobility. The second is to postulate the "Training Inefficacy Hypothesis" as a context-bound framework, where the absence of mobility is explained by the rigidity of the system and the presence of mobility is explained by the system's responsiveness to the investments in development. The third is to posit that contract type (tenured vs. non-tenured) and faculty nationality (Saudi vs. non-Saudi) are important modifiers of academic mobility that previous studies have failed to adequately explain.

2. Theoretical Framework

Three complementary theories have been combined to form a comprehensive, logical, and predictive framework for the effects of faculty HR practices on faculty mobility in Saudi academia. These theories—Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, Organizational Embeddedness theory, and Institutional theory—explain why the combination of training and recognition may generate the opposite effect to the anticipated mobility in an academic context.

2.1 Conservation of Resources Theory

The foundation of Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory was laid down by Hobfoll (1989) and expanded with time (Hobfoll, 2001; Hobfoll et al., 2018). COR theory has postulated that individuals tend to preserve resources or acquire new ones. Resources have broad definitions and can include things such as objects, statuses, personal traits, or energies. COR theory has two principles: the first one is that the loss of resources has a larger impact than the acquisition of resources. The second principle states that people will expend resources to defend themselves against loss or gain new resources.

COR theory can be applied to predict several features of the academic career. For example, faculty members who have achieved a lot of resources, including those socially or institutionally rewarded, or those who have achieved tenure, will have a strong incentive to protect those resources and will be disincentivized to be mobile in their academic career. From a COR perspective, "internal mobility" is essentially a resource investment that involves risk and uncertainty. Employees will give up their established social networks, the routine familiarity of their social role, and standing in the social hierarchy for potential and uncertain benefits. In cases where the criteria for promotion is opaque or involves a centralized form of a bureaucratic system, the risk of loss is high. In these cases, opting not to move will be the most rational choice.

COR theory generates additional predictions pertaining to mobility and training as a resource invested by institutions. Faculty members need to perceive clear and reliable pathways for newly acquired skills to become positional resources like higher ranks and salary increases. Without these pathways, training will remain a resource that improves competence, but will not facilitate career advancement. This is caused by the inflexibility of institutions. This idea relates to COR theory and the resource caravan passageway theory

of Hobfoll and colleagues (2018). According to this idea, resources gain their power of mobilization only when supplemented by enabling conditions within the environment.

2.2 Organizational Embeddedness Theory

Embeddedness Theory describes how the degree of embeddedness an employee develops impacts their retention. The three primary dimensions of embeddedness are fit, which speaks to how aligned an employee feels with a given role/organization, links, which are the extent and depth of an employee's connections to others in the organization, and sacrifice, which refers to the costs associated with leaving a role. Usually, the resultant state of embeddedness is a barrier to role or organizational mobility.

Within a given organization, recognition is an embeddedness reinforcing mechanism. When faculty are the recipients of awards or given other forms of public or private acknowledgment for their contributions, or if faculty are given leadership roles as a means of appreciation, recognition reinforces embeddedness. Furthermore, recognition strengthens sacrifice by increasing the costs associated with leaving or changing a role. For recognition recipient faculty, this constitutes the "Recognition-Embeddedness Trap," and ensures they are well anchored to their role.

The embeddedness framework also provides an elucidation of the negative correlation between recognition and internal mobility that the empirical data calls for. It also calls for the negative recognition effect on turnover, which is a relational effect of recognition and employee retention.

2.3 Institutional Theory and Academic Bureaucratic Rigidity

Developed by DiMaggio and Powell (1983) and Scott (2008), Institutional Theory calls for the examination of the entire institutional context in which organizations are situated. Within this context, behavior is shaped, and agency is constrained by normative, regulative, and cognitive pressures. In the case of Saudi higher education, these pressures manifest as Ministry of Education regulations concerning the rank progression of faculty, standardized promotion protocols with a focus on seniority and publication quantity, and a centralized HR policy that dictates a system-wide lack of autonomous control.

In this context of institutional isomorphism, the impact of local HR practices on the career outcomes of individuals is largely diminished. While training may improve the skills of faculty, if promotion is determined by centralized frameworks that do not take different forms of professional development into account, the training will not be valued from a career standpoint. Further, internal mobility — which may be considered positive and a demonstration of adaptability and potential for leadership in a corporate setting — may be viewed as a lack of focus and negative from a promotion standpoint in a rigid academic setting.

COR theory, Organizational Embeddedness, and Institutional Theory provide a multi-level approach that captures a wide range of phenomena, including motivation and behavior on an individual and collective level, as well as the constraints created by macro structures. Rather than merely explaining the original study's counterintuitive findings, this approach predicts these findings as a result of the design of HR practices within a specific institutional context.

3. Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

3.1 Training and the Illusion of Mobility in Bureaucratic Academic Systems

According to most human resource development literature, employee training develops skills, increases the employee's value in the labor market, and improves the employee's chances for career advancement in the organization (Dysvik & Kuvaas, 2008; Al-Emadi & Marquardt, 2007). This view, which relies on human capital theory (Becker, 1964), suggests that the connection between the development of skills and advancement in one's career occurs in an internal labor market, which is structured to recognize and reward skills with promotions.

Evidence is emerging that challenges this assumption in conditions that have a rigid system. In their study, Wright and Nishii (2013) found that the HR practices will yield their expected results, but there is often a gap between the realization of the practices and the context of the practices, and therefore, the practices do not convey their intended meaning to the employees.

In a bureaucracy, promotion can become completely dissociated from performance; this dissociation is even evident in central promotion mechanisms that are indifferent to participation in training programs (Bonache & Stirpe, 2012).

For instance, within Saudi Arabia's higher education system, faculty member promotions as part of the employment framework operate under the Ministry of Education's promotion criteria which include published research, citations, and time-in-rank. Developmental programs are left out. Therefore, training becomes a skill enrichment activity that faculty members partake in. However, training does not offer a faculty member promotion in a higher education institution due to the absence of institutional triggers for faculty member mobility. Using COR theory, it can be understood that faculty members realize that engaging in training does not lead to a promotion, resulting in a decrease in training activities as a career strategy.

H1: Training will not significantly predict internal mobility in Saudi public universities, reflecting the structural decoupling between competence development and institutional career advancement mechanisms.

3.2 Recognition and the Embeddedness Effect: A Paradoxical Prediction

Recognition is a major component of motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985) as well as an element of HR management practices. Recognition is said to enhance an employee's motivation, commitment, and performance and subsequently improve their efforts to pursue the internal career opportunities offered by the organization. Eisenberger et al (1999) found that recognition strengthened an employee's sense of obligation to reciprocate through loyalty and engagement with their career by demonstrating perceived organizational support.

However, the impact of recognition on career mobility remains, at best, partially understood. Where recognition is considered from an Organizational Embeddedness perspective, the picture becomes clearer. Recognition strengthens the three dimensions of Embeddedness — fit, links, and sacrifice. Recognition keeps the recipient more firmly anchored to their existing position. For example, a faculty member acknowledged for research excellence through External Awards, celebrated for receiving competitive internal grants, and accorded a higher social standing through recognition by the institution, would have increased perceived fit, deeper links within the department, and a higher perceived sacrifice for losing recognition and leaving the position.

From a COR perspective, recognition is a protective resource. The uncertainty of internal mobility — new management, new networks, new performance — is a threat to resources. Faculty that have the resource of recognition are likely to perceive that resource is at risk, causing them to avoid mobility instead of seeking it (Hobfoll, 2001). Further, highly-recognized faculty are likely to have a strong professional standing outside of the institution, making career opportunities outside of the institution more appealing, and making their career aspirations outward rather than inward.

H2: Recognition will negatively predict internal mobility among Saudi faculty, as institutional recognition deepens organizational embeddedness and increases the perceived resource risk of career transition.

3.3 Internal Mobility as a Career Disruptor in Rigid Academic Hierarchies

The existing studies on internal mobility in business function on the basis that employee transitions between roles can be beneficial for one's career. This is because role transitions broaden employees' skills, create new professional relationships, and show flexibility to higher management, which can enhance career opportunities (Ng et al., 2005; Rosenbaum, 1979). This represents the tournament mobility model. In

this model, the organization is expected to have a certain level of permeability and movement can be viewed by evaluators as a sign of talent and initiative.

The model fails to hold in many of the academic institutions. This is especially true for those that operate in centralized national educational systems. Within academic careers, mobility is restricted by the disciplinary field and the department affiliation. In addition, promotion decisions are made based on the assessment of one's disciplinary research output and the number of years served in that rank. Under these circumstances, lateral mobility may signal a loss of focus on the discipline instead of being viewed by promotion committees as flexibility in the organization.

Additionally, from a COR perspective, there is an expenditure of resources (time, energy, and social capital spent on learning about and building new networking skills for new roles) with no promise of gain from learning new roles and building new networks. In the case that mobility does not lead to improved pay grades or positions, it is considered a loss of resources. COR theory indicates that when the costs of mobility become evident, individuals will avoid that loss (Hobfoll, 1989). This prediction is fulfilled by the data we have; faculty who have experienced internal mobility have been promoted less often, and their salaries have increased less frequently.

H3: Internal mobility will negatively predict both promotion and salary progression among Saudi faculty, reflecting the career disruption effects of mobility in bureaucratically rigid academic promotion systems.

3.4 The Moderating Role of Employment Contract Type

One important and overlooked dimension in studying academic careers is the varying career experience of faculty on permanent contracts and those on fixed-term or contractual agreements. In the original study, 62.6% of the sample held permanent contracts, while 37.4% were fixed-term. This is an important subpopulation with very different career dynamics to their permanently contracted colleagues.

COR theory establishes a strong foundation for anticipating different impacts by contract type. Permanent faculty have progressed in the labor hierarchy and attained job security, which they are highly likely to defend. Because their institutional job security mitigates the resource threat of remaining immobile, they have the ability to resist job mobility without the concern of professional stagnation. On the other hand, fixed-term faculty are continuously exposed to the resource threat of their employment contracts being terminated. This creates a different incentive to be mobile, where the threat of losing a resource is less than the opportunity of fixed employment contracts. From an embeddedness perspective, the permanent faculty are also highly more embedded in their current position than the fixed-term faculty because the latter have weak institutional ties. If their sacrifice dimension is also low, then they are more likely to consider recognition a poor substitute and view professional development, in the form of training, as a career-enhancing endeavor, and hence engage in mobility behavior that is in line with normative expectations.

H4: Employment contract type moderates the relationship between recognition and internal mobility, such that the negative effect of recognition on mobility is stronger for permanent faculty than for fixed-term faculty.

3.5 The Moderating Role of Faculty Nationality in Career Trajectory Patterns

Three citizenship categories were included in the study: Saudi nationals (63.5%), non-Saudi Arabs (30.9%), and non-Arab (5.6%) respondents. This distribution illustrates a defining characteristic of the higher education systems of the Gulf States: a high degree of international faculty recruitment, and a structural disparity between the career trajectories of expatriate faculty members and those of the faculty members of the Gulf States.

Faculty members who are non-Saudi and on fixed contracts have many differences in their careers, based on their motivations. Non-Saudi faculty members have a lower institutional embeddedness compared to Saudi nationals. Non-Saudi faculty members may not fit into the social networks of their department, have

a lower perceived alignment with the national academic culture, and are not committed to the same long-term goals because they have a career alternative in their home country. Therefore, non-Saudi faculty members may see internal mobility as an opportunity to fulfill their contract in administration as a way to ensure job security, as opposed to moving up in their academic discipline.

Saudi faculty have careers in a defined national structural system, Saudi Civil Service System, and the Saudi Ministry of Education. These faculty members have a defined and regulated career progression based on rank and therefore are not permitted to deviate from the rank progression. Therefore, as a result of the Saudi faculty members embedding in their institution, they are reinforced by being recognized for their work and having a higher perceived alignment with the system.

H5: Faculty nationality moderates the relationship between HR practices and career outcomes, such that the negative effects of recognition on mobility and the disruptive effects of mobility on career success are stronger for Saudi national faculty than for non-Saudi faculty.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design and Sample

This research adopts a quantitative, cross-sectional approach, taking data from a survey of faculty members at Saudi public universities. The sample of 586 faculty members used in this research was drawn from several universities in Saudi Arabia. The sampling technique used was random sampling. The study was conducted in compliance with research ethics. The study obtained the participants' informed consent, and an ethics review approval was obtained. By design, the study was anonymous. The sample was diverse in several demographics, including: gender (men 69.1%, women 30.9%), academic rank (Assistant Professors 51.2%, Associate Professors 24.2%, full Professors 24.6%), and type of employment (permanent employees 62.6%, employees on fixed contracts 37.4). The diversity of the sample provided a sufficient basis for subgroup analyses and moderation analyses.

4.2 Measures

All constructs were measured using validated scales rated on seven-point Likert scales (1 = Strongly Disagree; 7 = Strongly Agree). Training was operationalized using four items adapted from Al-Emadi and Marquardt (2007) and Dysvik and Kuvaas (2008), assessing perceived training quality, frequency, and relevance to career advancement ($M = 4.39$; $SD = 1.84$). Recognition was measured using five items from Eisenberger et al. (1986) and Gagné and Deci (2005), capturing the perceived frequency and quality of institutional appreciation ($M = 4.58$; $SD = 1.70$). Internal Mobility was assessed through five items (Ng et al., 2005; Rosenbaum, 1979) examining perceived opportunities for promotion, lateral transfer, and career movement within the institution ($M = 4.80$; $SD = 1.80$). Career success was operationalized objectively as reported number of promotions received (Promotion) and self-assessed salary progression over time (Salary Progression), consistent with Kraimer et al. (2011). All measures demonstrated strong internal reliability, with Cronbach's alpha values exceeding .80, confirming measurement quality.

4.3 Analytical Strategy

To analyze the data, this research adopted Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). One of the benefits of SEM is the ability to analyze multiple relationships simultaneously, as well as the ability to analyze the effects of measurement error. This research adopted SEM in accordance with the field of organizational research (Hair et al., 2019). Specifically, this research assessed the fits of the measurement models and the reliabilities and validities of the constructs prior to estimating the structural paths. Effects of mediation were assessed using bootstrapped confidence intervals with 5,000 replications (Baron and Kenny, 1986; Preacher and Hayes, 2008). In this research, moderation was assessed using multi-group SEM. Specifically, the sample was divided based on type of employment contract (i.e., permanent vs. fixed) and faculty citizenship (i.e., Saudi vs. non-Saudi) to analyze the contextual boundary effects on the primary relationships of interest. To assess the fits of the models, the research adopted the traditional model fit indices including CFI, TLI, RMSEA, and SRMR.

5. Results

5.1 Descriptive Statistics and Correlational Patterns

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics and bivariate correlation matrix for all study variables. The average perceived training level ($M = 4.55$, $SD = 1.72$) and recognition ($M = 4.57$, $SD = 1.60$) were both above the midpoint of the scale, indicating moderately positive perceptions of these HR practices. Internal mobility perceptions were notably lower and more variable ($M = 3.36 - 5.27$ across sub-items), suggesting that faculty held mixed and conflicted views about career movement opportunities within their institutions.

Critically, the correlation matrix revealed a pattern of relationships markedly divergent from conventional predictions. Training was negatively correlated with internal mobility ($r = -0.20$, $p < .01$), and recognition was more strongly negatively correlated with mobility ($r = -0.24$, $p < .01$). Internal mobility was significantly and negatively correlated with both promotion ($r = -0.38$, $p < .01$) and salary progression ($r = -0.36$, $p < .01$). These patterns are exactly consistent with the theoretical predictions derived from COR theory and Organizational Embeddedness theory articulated in this study.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Bivariate Correlation Matrix

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4
1. Training	4.55	1.72	1.00			
2. Recognition	4.57	1.60	0.42**	1.00		
3. Internal Mobility	4.80	1.80	-0.20**	-0.24**	1.00	
4. Promotion	—	—	0.08	0.10*	-0.38**	1.00
5. Salary Progression	—	—	0.09	0.07	-0.36**	0.79**

Note. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

5.2 Structural Equation Modeling Results and Hypothesis Testing

The structural model demonstrated acceptable fit to the data ($CFI = .94$; $TLI = .92$; $RMSEA = .06$; $SRMR = .07$), confirming the overall adequacy of the model specification. Table 2 presents the SEM path coefficients and hypothesis testing results.

H1 was supported: training did not significantly predict internal mobility ($\beta = .07$, $p = .08$), consistent with the proposed Training Inefficacy Hypothesis. H2 was supported: recognition significantly and negatively predicted internal mobility ($\beta = -.10$, $p = .03$), consistent with the Recognition-Embeddedness Trap construct. H3 was supported: internal mobility significantly and negatively predicted both promotion ($\beta = -.38$, $p < .001$) and salary progression ($\beta = -.36$, $p < .001$), consistent with the Career Disruption Hypothesis. These three findings jointly confirm the predictive validity of the integrated COR-Embeddedness framework proposed in this study.

With respect to direct effects on career success, recognition demonstrated a significant positive direct effect ($\beta = .19$, $p = .04$), while training showed no significant direct effect ($\beta = -.01$, $p = .79$). The mediation analysis revealed that the indirect effect of recognition through internal mobility on career success was weakly significant ($\beta = .04$, $p = .05$), while the indirect effect of training was non-significant ($\beta = .003$, $p = .92$).

Multi-group analyses provided partial support for the moderation hypotheses. The negative effect of recognition on mobility was significantly stronger in the permanent contract subgroup ($\beta = -.17$, $p = .01$) compared to the fixed-term subgroup ($\beta = -.06$, $p = .19$), supporting H4. Regarding H5, the negative association between internal mobility and career outcomes was stronger among Saudi national faculty ($\beta = -.44$, $p < .001$) than among non-Saudi faculty ($\beta = -.29$, $p < .01$), partially supporting the proposed nationality moderation effect.

Table 2. SEM Path Coefficients and Hypothesis Testing Results

H	Path	β	SE	p-value	Decision
H1	Training → Internal Mobility	.07	.04	.08	Supported
H2	Recognition → Internal Mobility	-.10	.04	.03	Supported
H3a	Internal Mobility → Promotion	-.38	.06	<.001	Supported
H3b	Internal Mobility → Salary Progression	-.36	.06	<.001	Supported
H4	Contract Type × Recognition → Mobility	-.11	.05	.03	Supported
H5	Nationality × Mobility → Career Success	-.15	.07	.04	Partially Supported

Note. β = standardized path coefficient; SE = standard error.

6. Discussion

6.1 The Training Inefficacy Hypothesis: When Skill Development Cannot Open Closed Doors

The non-significant relationship between training and internal mobility (H1 supported) constitutes one of the most theoretically important findings of this study, and it deserves more than dismissal as a contextual anomaly. The Training Inefficacy Hypothesis proposed in this paper argues that training's capacity to generate career mobility is fundamentally contingent upon the existence of institutional translation mechanisms — formal pathways through which newly acquired competencies can be recognized, valued, and rewarded through structural career advancement.

In Saudi public universities, these translation mechanisms are substantially attenuated by three interrelated institutional features. First, promotion criteria are established centrally by the Ministry of Education and emphasize quantitative publication metrics and rank seniority over evidence of professional development. Second, department-level HR discretion — the capacity for local supervisors to recognize and reward training investment through accelerated promotion — is limited by centralized regulatory frameworks that standardize promotion timelines. Third, the cultural valuation of seniority over demonstrated competence as the primary basis for career advancement creates an environment in which training, however substantive, cannot substitute for temporal accumulation of rank-years.

This finding resonates with Wright and Nishii's (2013) HR implementation gap framework, which distinguishes between intended HR practices (what institutions design), actual HR practices (what supervisors implement), and perceived HR practices (what employees experience). In the Saudi academic context, the training-career translation gap represents a systemic implementation failure that is not correctable at the individual level: faculty members can participate in training programs, but the institutional machinery for converting that participation into career gains is effectively non-functional.

6.2 The Recognition-Embeddedness Trap: A Novel Theoretical Construct

The negative relationship between recognition and internal mobility (H2 supported) represents the most counterintuitive finding of the original study and the most theoretically generative finding of the present analysis. The Recognition-Embeddedness Trap, as conceptualized in this paper, describes a paradoxical dynamic in which the motivational resources provided by institutional recognition simultaneously suppress the motivational drive toward career mobility.

This trap operates through at least three distinct mechanisms, each grounded in the theoretical frameworks integrated in Section 2. The first is the embeddedness deepening mechanism: recognition, as demonstrated through awards, honorific appointments, and institutional celebration, strengthens all three embeddedness dimensions (fit, links, sacrifice), binding faculty more firmly to the institutional position in which they are celebrated. The second is the resource protection mechanism: from a COR perspective, recognized faculty members who have accumulated the resource of institutional prestige will resist mobility because mobility constitutes a resource threat — the risk of losing an established reputation in a new environment where they are unknown. The third is the external opportunity amplification mechanism: recognized faculty, particularly those with strong research outputs or pedagogical reputations, may be more likely to receive extra-institutional opportunities (international collaborations, consulting assignments, visiting positions) that redirect career ambition outward rather than inward, further reducing the motivation for internal mobility.

The Recognition-Embeddedness Trap has important implications beyond the Saudi academic context. It suggests that any institutional context characterized by strong embeddedness conditions, high recognition salience, and limited structural mobility pathways may produce this paradoxical dynamic. Corporate environments with strong corporate culture programs, military organizations with rank-based prestige systems, and public sector bureaucracies with tenure-equivalent security arrangements may all exhibit similar patterns. Future research should examine the generalizability of this construct across organizational and cultural contexts.

6.3 Internal Mobility as a Career Disruptor: The Paradox of Movement

The finding that internal mobility negatively predicted both promotion and salary progression (H3 supported) challenges the foundational assumption of tournament mobility theory (Rosenbaum, 1979) that career movement within organizations is inherently advancement-facilitating. The present study offers three complementary explanations for this finding.

First, the disciplinary commitment hypothesis: In academic institutions governed by disciplinary evaluation norms, faculty who move across departments or administrative roles may be perceived by promotion committees as having fragmented disciplinary focus. Since publications, citations, and disciplinary recognition are the primary currencies of academic career advancement, any sustained diversion from disciplinary concentration — even if motivated by institutional service — risks reducing the research productivity metrics that drive promotion decisions.

Second, the network disruption hypothesis: Internal mobility requires faculty to rebuild professional networks in new institutional locations. Since informal networks are critical for accessing information about funding opportunities, research collaborations, and nomination for prestigious appointments, network disruption through mobility carries a career cost that may outweigh the potential benefits of positional diversification (Burt, 2004).

Third, the institutional signaling hypothesis: In Saudi academic contexts, where cultural norms strongly associate professional stability with trustworthiness and commitment, frequent internal mobility may inadvertently signal a lack of loyalty or satisfaction with one's current position, leading supervisors and promotion committees to interpret mobility as a warning sign rather than a developmental asset.

6.4 Moderating Effects: Contract Type and Nationality as Boundary Conditions

Moderating analyses examined the potential boundary conditions on the primary relationships of interest. Relating to H4 (which is supported), there is a stronger negative relationship between recognition and the mobility of permanent faculty. This reflects the COR prediction and suggests that resource security results in an increase in resource protection motivation. Permanent faculty have guaranteed tenure in their positions and therefore have more to lose if they are to become mobile; that is, they lose their recognition, which is a crucial aspect of their institutional identity. In contrast, faculty with fixed-term contracts face a constant resource threat of contract non-renewal and thus have little organizational embeddedness and little recognition-based anchoring.

According to the nationality moderation results (which partially support H5), Saudi faculty face greater career disruption as a result of internal mobility than do faculty with non-Saudi citizenship. This may be a reflection of Saudi nationals' greater embeddedness in the Saudi academic system, where promotion is more closely aligned with seniority and is less constrained by the Saudi Ministry regulations. Non-Saudi faculty may have more international career mobility and less involvement in the Saudi prestige hierarchy; thus, they may perceive internal mobility as less disruptive to their career.

7. Theoretical Contributions

This study makes major contributions to the literature. First, it introduces and provides empirical analysis for two novel theories, the Recognition-Embeddedness Trap and the Training Inefficacy Hypothesis. Both theories address a gap in the extant literature that overlooks the conditions under which the outcomes of recognition and training, typically seen in literature as positive HR practices, would not have a positive career influence, or would have none at all. By creating these theories, this study offers the tools and mechanism to explain and analyze the phenomenon in other contexts.

Second, this study has made a notable contribution in the field's methodology by showing that integrated, multi-level frameworks can explain the impact of HR practices in non-Western contexts. The combined COR and Organizational Embeddedness and Institutional theories create a framework that accounts for motivational dynamics for individuals, as well as embeddedness and institutional structures. Very few scholars have addressed the impact of HR practices in non-Western systems, and this framework enables serious engagement in that field.

Third, this study contributes to the growing literature on career development in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) higher education systems, which remains substantially underrepresented in global HR management scholarship. By demonstrating that the relationships between HR practices and career outcomes in Saudi universities are not merely quantitatively different from those observed in Western contexts, but qualitatively distinct in their direction and mechanism, this study makes a strong case for context-sensitive career theory development.

Fourth, the moderation findings establish employment contract type and faculty nationality as under-theorized boundary conditions for HR practice effects in academic settings. Future meta-analytic work on HR practices and career outcomes in higher education should account for these structural variables as potential moderators, as their exclusion may have led to overestimation of universally positive HR practice effects in prior aggregated research.

8. Practical Implications

The results from this study provide concrete recommendations for university administrators, HR policy makers, and academic leaders on designing functional faculty career development systems.

First, the Training Inefficacy Hypothesis means that the investment of resources into training faculty is not sufficient for faculty career progression. Universities must create structures for transparent career progression (i.e., promotion based on demonstrated training and competencies, recognition of professional development during tenure reviews, use of discretion to award training attendance). Without these structures, resource expenditures of training programs will not translate into career outcomes and will lead to loss of faculty interest in professional development.

Second, the Recognition-Embeddedness Trap argues that if recognition programs are not designed thoughtfully, as many Saudi universities do, then they may end up 'anchoring' faculty to their current positions rather than encouraging movement to new positions within the university. To counter this, recognition programs can be designed to award individuals recognition along with other opportunities that may be positioned outside the faculty member's current role (e.g., leading cross-departmental initiatives, leading projects outside the university, engaging in international collaborations, etc.) as means to encourage faculty members to elevate their careers, as opposed to consolidating their position within their current unit.

Third, the career interference finding suggests that the faculty member's career capital should be protected from interference when internal mobility programs are implemented. To achieve this, programs should ensure mobility to other positions does not impact faculty members' productivity (e.g., by offering mobility to other positions along with time to engage in research during the mobility period). Additionally, opportunities to engage in research should not be impacted, along with mobility being formally acknowledged in promotion portfolios.

Fourth, the finding that permanent and fixed-term faculty show different career dynamics suggests that the different career states of each group should shape the university's HR strategies. For fixed-term faculty, who experience greater resource threat and lower embeddedness, greater job security in permanent positions may be gained by performance-based pathways to permanent positions. For permanent faculty, greater mobility is likely to come from fostering district career developmental conversations aimed at greater career ambition and challenging comfort of positional stability.

Career orientations and constraints are broad among Saudi Nationals and Expat faculty. Therefore, findings regarding moderation by nationality suggest that HR policies must recognize these distinctions. The need for culturally competent HR management of varied academic workforces stems from the idea that the same HR practices may have different meanings and may lead to different outcomes for employees who are from different national and cultural backgrounds.

9. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Inevitably, this study must acknowledge the limitations it has, which should also guide the understanding of its findings. The first limitation is that the study is based upon a cross-sectional design and therefore, does not allow for the determination of the extent to which certain HR practices, internal mobility, or career outcomes may be causally linked. Causal relationships are better supported with the employment of a longitudinal design to track faculty careers over multiple time periods.

Second, the study's generalizability is limited because it examines only Saudi public universities. Although the theoretical constructs developed in this paper were intended to be applicable to institutionally rigid academic systems, their relevance to private universities, the other GCC member countries, or non-Arab Muslim majority academic systems is an open question. Boundary limitations of the Recognition-Embeddedness Trap and the Training Inefficacy Hypothesis may be considered in another comparative cross-national research.

Third, considering only salary and promotion as indicators of career success is limited. Other dimensions, such as personal satisfaction and work-life balance, may provide insight into the perceptions of faculty concerning the impact of HR practices on their wellbeing. Future studies may consider composite measures of career success that include both tangible and intangible outcomes.

Fourth, due to the small sample size, the moderation analyses were restricted. Future studies that employ more purposively stratified and larger samples should refine these analyses, particularly the three-way interactions of HR practices, contract type, and faculty nationality.

Fifth, the Recognition-Embeddedness Trap and the Training Inefficacy Hypothesis, the new theory systems introduced in this paper, need to be developed and substantiated further. These should include studies

that describe the experiences of faculty in this paradox via qualitative research and mixed-methods approaches. Such work is likely to provide a more in-depth understanding of how these career paradoxes operate at an individual level.

10. Conclusion

The goal of this study was to construct predictive frameworks that take theory and empirical evidence more or less equally into account, with more or less equal coherence. While recognizing the limits of empirical evidence with respect to the predictability of paradoxical findings, this study pursues a middle ground and offers a more or less coherent take on the consequences of interaction, particularly of the dynamics of individual resources (i.e. social and psychological resources), the mechanisms of interpersonal embeddedness, and the macro-institutional frameworks and embedded interplays of paradox in the social sciences.

While the Recognition-Embeddedness Trap and the Training Inefficacy Hypothesis were designed to explain phenomena in the Saudi context, they provide a starting point for the development of theories that explain the paradoxical nature of behavior of career catalysts and career anchors/disruptive elements in various institutional contexts. These theories might provide insights well beyond the field of Saudi higher education, including the need for a more context-sensitive career theory that addresses the role of institutional frameworks in determining individual and organizational resources and career outcomes.

In general, this study aims to improve the thinking and designing of higher education HR systems. If universities wish to provide environments that genuinely promote faculty career flourishing, their HR systems need to be based on empirical evidence of effective systems elsewhere and on a grounded understanding of the particular systems that determine the faculty career systems of the universities. This study attempts to provide such a grounding.

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