

HUMAN RESOURCES CHALLENGES IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS: A SYNTHESIS OF EMPIRICAL FINDINGS AND RESEARCH GAPS

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Abstract— This study investigates the contemporary human resource (HR) challenges faced by higher education institutions (HEIs), with a specific focus on institutions in Oman and the Gulf region. Anchored in a dual-method approach, the research synthesizes findings from recent literature and analyzes empirical data gathered through a survey targeting HR professionals in HEIs. The literature review identified five critical thematic areas of concern: talent acquisition and retention, digital HR systems and AI integration, employee engagement and well-being, diversity and inclusion, and the alignment between HR practices and institutional strategy.

To complement the literature, a structured survey was developed and distributed to HR staff across various HEIs. Descriptive and frequency analyses revealed that attracting and retaining qualified faculty emerged as the most pressing challenge, followed by concerns over performance appraisal and succession planning. Conversely, areas such as digital HR adoption, staff engagement, and diversity initiatives were rated as less developed, indicating operational gaps and institutional underinvestment in strategic HR capabilities.

Findings from this study expose a significant disconnect between theory and practice in HEI human resource management. The results also highlight contextual factors—such as governance rigidity and digital infrastructure limitations—that shape HR realities in the Gulf region. The study concludes by proposing a research-informed agenda to bridge these gaps and offers strategic recommendations for HR integration, digital transformation, and inclusive organizational development in higher education.

Keywords— Digital HR systems, Diversity and inclusion, Employee engagement, Faculty retention, GCC, Higher education institutions.

I. INTRODUCTION

Highlight a section that you want to designate with a certain style, and then select the appropriate name on the style menu. The style will adjust your fonts and line spacing. Do not change the font sizes or line spacing to squeeze more text into a limited number of pages. Use italics for emphasis; do not underline.

Effective human resource management (HRM) is essential for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), where organisations balance multiple demands—academic excellence, institutional reputation, innovation, and financial stewardship. Unlike private-sector firms, HEIs operate within complex governance systems (e.g., shared governance, academic freedom), adding nuance to HR strategizing (Przytuła & Sułkowski, 2025). Despite this complexity, a growing body of literature suggests a persistent “research–practice gap” in HRM: academic studies often fail to address the pressing challenges faced by HR practitioners in HEIs, limiting both scholarly relevance and practical impact (Negt & Haunschild, 2024).

In recent systematic bibliometric and scoping reviews, HRM research in HEIs has been mapped across themes such as recruitment and selection, performance and motivation, innovation, sustainability, and decision-making processes (Negt & Haunschild, 2024; Gassanova & Kozhakhmet, 2024). These reviews reveal that while certain HR topics—such as recruitment and faculty development—receive scholarly attention, others like compensation systems, motivation, and wellbeing are under-represented in empirical studies (Negt & Haunschild, 2024; Gassanova & Kozhakhmet, 2024). Indeed, in their analysis of 945 Web of Science publications between 1981 and 2022, researchers found research gaps around emerging technologies (e-HRM, AI) and green/sustainable HRM in HEIs (Gassanova & Kozhakhmet, 2024).

Compounding these thematic gaps is the broader problem of methodological disconnect. Negt and Haunschild (2024) identify three main causes exacerbating the research–practice divide: poor communication between scholars and practitioners, tensions between rigor and relevance, and limited accessibility and practical framing of HR research. Moreover, while literature often theorises potential HR solutions, little empirical investigation has examined whether HEI HR managers and staff are aware of, adopt, or find them useful in practice (Negt & Haunschild, 2024).

In parallel, more recent studies in HEI-specific contexts point to persistent real-world challenges. Bonifacio and Martir (2025), for example, conducted a descriptive-correlational study on e-HRM implementation in HEIs in the Philippines. Though HRIS tools were largely adopted, respondents still reported usability, technical support, and communication issues that complicated successful integration (Bonifacio & Martir, 2025). Other research highlights pandemic-driven changes—such as remote work adoption and workload intensification—alongside long-standing institutional constraints like budget limitations, regulatory burden, technostress, and academic burnout (Przytuła & Sułkowski, 2025; APA, 2024).

A third emerging theme concerns digital and AI-enabled HR still lacking in evidence-based contextualization. Katsamakos et al. (2024) present a systems-thinking analysis of AI transformation in HEIs, mapping feedback loops of reinforcement and risk. Despite conceptual richness, they and others urge empirical examination into how HR professionals perceive fairness, governance, bias, and implementation readiness regarding AI-driven systems (Katsamakos et al., 2024; Li et al., 2023).

There is also nascent attention on sustainability within HRM practices in HEIs—echoed in corporate green HRM frameworks. A recent exploratory study in private Indonesian HEIs found that ESG (Environmental, Social, Governance) practices boosted employee performance and wellbeing, mediated by strong governance systems (Wiyono et al., 2025). However, these findings remain very limited in scope, calling for broader comparative research (Wiyono et al., 2025).

Taken together, these findings paint a multi-dimensional landscape: the literature signals persistent, under-explored concerns in talent retention, digital transformation, wellbeing, AI governance, sustainability, and the critical research–practice divide. However, we lack systematic evidence that HR professionals within HEIs share these concerns, or that they prioritise the same issues.

Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by combining two sources of insight:

A survey of HR departments in HEIs, capturing practitioners’ perspectives on priority HR challenges; and
An integrative review of recent academic literature, identifying the thematic and methodological research gaps highlighted by scholars.

By contrasting practice-oriented findings with research-based recommendations, the study seeks to (a) pinpoint areas of alignment where practice-driven challenges are also under-researched, and (b) highlight mismatches where academic attention may be misaligned with operational priorities. Ultimately, the study will inform both HRM scholarship and HEI policy by uncovering researchable, real-world HR problems in academia and suggesting targeted areas for future investigation and intervention.

A. Problem Statement

Despite the increasing complexity and strategic role of HR in Higher Education Institutions, a disconnect persists between academic research on HRM and the actual challenges faced by HR professionals in the sector. While literature often addresses theoretical and conceptual aspects, HR practitioners frequently encounter issues—such as burnout, digital integration, employee engagement, and retention—that remain empirically under-explored. This misalignment creates a research–practice gap that limits both the academic contribution of HRM studies and the practical value they offer to HEIs.

B. Research Objectives

- To explore and synthesise recent academic literature on HR challenges and research gaps in HEIs.
- To collect and analyse the perspectives of HR professionals in HEIs regarding current operational challenges.
- To identify the alignment or mismatch between literature-based research gaps and real-world HR concerns.
- To propose a framework for future research and practical interventions that address priority HR issues in HEIs.

C. Research Questions

- What are the key HR challenges identified in the recent literature on higher education institutions?
- What HR-related challenges are most frequently reported by HR professionals in HEIs?
- To what extent do the challenges identified in the literature align with those experienced by HR departments?
- What new research directions or practical interventions are needed to bridge the research–practice gap in HEI HRM?

D. Significance of the Study

This study contributes to the body of knowledge on human resource management in higher education by explicitly connecting research theory with HR practice. By integrating the perspectives of HR professionals with scholarly insights, it provides a dual lens for understanding HR challenges and opportunities. The findings will benefit:

- Researchers, by offering a grounded research agenda based on real institutional needs.
- HR leaders in HEIs, by identifying common challenges and emerging trends.
- Policy makers, by highlighting areas where institutional frameworks and governance structures can be better aligned with HR capabilities.
- And practitioners, by offering evidence-based insights to improve recruitment, retention, engagement, and digital integration strategies.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section provides a comprehensive review of the existing literature related to human resource management (HRM) in higher education institutions (HEIs). It is structured into two main parts. The first part outlines the theoretical framework, which presents the foundational concepts and models that guide the study's understanding of HRM within the context of higher education. This includes relevant HRM theories, models of strategic alignment, and concepts such as the research–practice gap, e-HRM, and employee engagement.

The second part of the literature review critically examines recent empirical studies and scholarly publications that have explored HR challenges in HEIs. It highlights key themes in the literature, identifies under-researched areas, and synthesizes findings relevant to recruitment, retention, digital transformation, well-being, and sustainability. Together, these two components provide a structured foundation for understanding the existing knowledge base and framing the current study within ongoing academic discourse.

A. Theoretical Framework

Understanding the human resource challenges within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) requires a multifaceted theoretical lens that accounts for both strategic and behavioral dimensions of HRM. Given the unique environment of HEIs—characterized by decentralized governance, academic autonomy, and knowledge-intensive work—a combination of strategic and organizational behavior theories provides a robust foundation for this study. This section introduces and discusses four primary theories relevant to HRM in HEIs: Resource-Based View (RBV), Human Capital Theory, the Harvard Model of HRM, and the Theory–Practice Gap Framework.

1) Resource-Based View (RBV) of the Firm:

The Resource-Based View (RBV) posits that an organization’s sustainable competitive advantage is derived from its ability to acquire and effectively utilize valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (VRIN) resources (Barney, 1991). In the context of HEIs, human capital—including faculty, researchers, and administrative staff—represents a strategic resource that significantly influences institutional performance. From an RBV perspective, HR strategies should not merely support operational functions but should be designed to develop and retain unique competencies that contribute to the institution’s long-term goals (Wright et al., 2001).

2) Human Capital Theory:

Human Capital Theory emphasizes the economic value of employee knowledge, skills, and competencies (Becker, 1993). In academia, faculty development, training, and retention are central to institutional success and innovation. This theory underscores the importance of investment in professional development and talent management systems in HEIs. It also provides justification for exploring how challenges like turnover, lack of career progression, or underfunded professional development impact the strategic value HEIs derive from their human capital (Schultz, 1961).

3) The Harvard Model of HRM:

The Harvard Model, developed by Beer et al. (1984), is one of the earliest strategic HRM frameworks that balances soft (employee commitment) and hard (performance and control) aspects of HRM. It suggests that HRM outcomes—such as commitment, competence, congruence, and cost-effectiveness—are shaped by stakeholder interests, situational factors (e.g., labor markets, technology), and long-term consequences for both the organization and society. For HEIs, the Harvard Model is particularly relevant because it encourages alignment between institutional goals and the needs of various stakeholders: faculty, administrators, students, and external regulators.

4) Theory–Practice Gap in HRM:

The theory–practice gap refers to the misalignment between academic research and the actual practices or needs of HR professionals (Rynes et al., 2002). This gap has been repeatedly acknowledged in HRM literature, particularly in the higher education context, where academic contributions often focus on theoretical rigor rather than practical relevance (Negt & Haunschild, 2024). This study adopts this framework to explore the extent to which current HR literature addresses the real-world challenges identified by HEI HR departments.

Together, these theories provide a solid foundation for this study. RBV and Human Capital Theory highlight the strategic importance of HR in sustaining institutional performance, while the Harvard Model emphasizes the importance of contextual, stakeholder-oriented HRM practices. Finally, the theory–practice gap serves as both a lens and a justification for integrating empirical survey data with academic insights, aligning the study with calls for more relevant and impactful HRM research in HEIs.

B. Literature Review

This section critically examines empirical literature on common HR challenges in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), focusing first on Oman and GCC-based studies for contextual relevance, then on global literature.

1) Talent Retention and Compensation:

In the context of Oman, Al Harrasi et al. (2024) conducted a systematic review of 117 empirical studies on human resource management, with a significant portion of the sample derived from education-related sectors, though not exclusively higher education institutions (HEIs). The review identified compensation management, employee development, and Omanization policies as persistent challenges affecting staff motivation and turnover. Despite these recurring themes, the authors noted a critical research gap in HEI-specific retention strategies, especially in institutions undergoing localization reforms. They recommended future empirical investigations that focus exclusively on the academic sector to explore compensation equity and national workforce integration more deeply.

Al Ghunaimi and Al Ghenaimi (2024) carried out a quantitative study on private HEIs in Oman, surveying both academic and administrative staff to investigate factors influencing employee motivation and productivity. Their findings highlighted compensation fairness, organizational support, and internal communication as strong predictors of retention and performance. The study is notable for grounding its analysis in the engagement-performance-retention nexus within HEIs, an area seldom examined in the region. However, their research was limited to private institutions in Muscat, which restricts the generalizability of the findings. The authors suggested extending this research to public universities and across Oman's governorates for a broader understanding.

Another study conducted by Moideenkutty, Al-Lamki, and Murthy (2011) explored high-involvement HRM practices across various sectors in Oman, including education. Using survey data, the researchers found that training, participation, and localization policies had a positive effect on organizational performance and employee retention. While not exclusive to HEIs, the study offers useful implications for higher education institutions undergoing Omanization transitions. The authors called for sector-specific studies to evaluate how these practices operate under shared academic governance structures, which can be a unique constraint in HEIs compared to corporate settings.

Al-Saiari (2023) adopted a qualitative approach to explore the readiness of HEIs in Oman for future skills and workforce needs in line with Vision 2040. Through semi-structured interviews with HR personnel, faculty, and administrators, the study revealed that poor career progression pathways and insufficient professional development efforts were key factors driving faculty dissatisfaction and intent to leave. The study emphasized the need for institution-wide HR development frameworks that integrate future skills planning with retention strategies. A significant gap identified was the absence of performance-linked incentive models aligned with institutional goals.

Globally, Mishra and Pandey (2023) conducted a bibliometric and thematic review of HRM research in higher education across four decades. They identified faculty retention, burnout, and motivation as under-researched topics relative to recruitment and appraisal systems. The authors observed that although numerous conceptual models exist on motivation and job satisfaction, empirical studies validating these in diverse HEI contexts are scarce. They recommended more context-sensitive and institutionally embedded models of faculty retention that reflect real-world stressors such as funding constraints and academic overload.

Similarly, Przytuła and Sułkowski (2025) examined global retention challenges among academic staff by synthesizing case studies and institutional data from European and Asian HEIs. They noted a rising trend of technostress and burnout due to digitization and increased managerialism. Their findings underscore the inadequacy of fragmented retention efforts, such as salary increases alone, without addressing underlying

organizational culture and well-being. The authors called for integrated retention systems incorporating work-life balance policies, mental health support, and personalized career development.

In Indonesia, Wiyono et al. (2025) explored the relationship between ESG-driven HR practices and employee performance and retention in private HEIs. Using a mixed-methods design involving surveys and semi-structured interviews, the study concluded that governance structures significantly mediated the effectiveness of sustainable HRM. Institutions with strong internal governance and ethical HR policies reported lower turnover and higher engagement. The study advocates for incorporating environmental and social governance (ESG) metrics into academic HR practices, an area currently underdeveloped in many HE systems.

Zamri (2023), in a study of Malaysian HEIs, focused on identifying factors influencing lecturer turnover. Drawing on literature and primary data from academic staff across several universities, the study highlighted poor remuneration, lack of career advancement, and unbalanced workloads as primary turnover triggers. The study proposed that competitive compensation packages need to be supplemented by supportive leadership and institutional recognition systems. However, Zamri noted that most retention strategies in Malaysian HEIs remained reactive rather than strategic or predictive.

In the Gulf region, Al Dohan (2022) investigated the relationship between HRM practices and faculty retention in Saudi HEIs through a quantitative survey. The results demonstrated that training opportunities, performance-based incentives, and transparent compensation structures significantly contributed to faculty retention. Interestingly, recruitment and appraisal processes were not significant predictors, suggesting that onboarding and evaluation systems may not influence long-term engagement in the way development and compensation do. Al Dohan emphasized the need for retention strategies that address institutional culture and staff development beyond initial recruitment stages.

2) *Digital HR Transformation & AI Integration*

Al Haziazi (2020) investigated the impact of e-HRM implementation in Oman by surveying 154 HR professionals across sectors using structured questionnaires covering e-Recruitment, e-Training, and e-Performance Appraisal. The results revealed statistically significant associations between e-HRM variables and organizational performance, mediated by job satisfaction and process efficiency. While promising, the study did not focus exclusively on HEIs, and gave limited attention to digital literacy or long-term adoption sustainability (Al Haziazi, 2020). It recommended expanding research across sectors, including academia, with a focus on readiness and training.

A relevant study by Belushi et al. (2024) presents a comprehensive literature review of the stressful implications of remote e-working in the Arab Gulf, focusing on systemic stressors encountered during COVID-19 lockdowns. Conducted within a Gulf regional context, the review identified key factors such as technological barriers, lack of face-to-face interaction, and the dilution of work–family boundaries. These stressors were found to significantly affect employee well-being and organizational engagement. The paper reinforces the need for relevant institutional policies—particularly in HEI settings—that address digital readiness, mental health support, and structured employee engagement. Importantly, it highlights a gap in current strategic HR practices, suggesting that outward-facing policies are not matched by internal HR readiness to support remote working arrangements.

A more region-specific perspective is offered by Al-Haziazi et al. (2022), who conducted a literature-based review focused on the opportunities and challenges of digitalizing HRM in the Middle East. Their study, which includes evidence from Omani institutions, highlights how digital HR systems can enhance recruitment, engagement, and performance monitoring, but also raises concerns about the emotional disconnect in technology-mediated processes. The authors note that although digitalization offers cost efficiency and strategic alignment, its success heavily depends on contextual factors such as leadership

support, employee readiness, and regulatory frameworks. These findings align with the broader literature's emphasis on organizational culture and change management as critical determinants of digital HRM success.

Getaruelas et al. (2024) conducted a mixed-methods study of digital integration in private-sector organizations in Oman, collecting data from HR professionals and employees through surveys and interviews. The findings showed that while 90% of respondents were optimistic about fully digitizing HR within five years, challenges included lack of top management support and inadequate digital skills. Benefits cited included reduced backlog and secure data storage. The authors suggested adopting integrated e-HRM systems, investing in staff training, and building strategic leadership support. However, HEIs were not included, illustrating a gap in sector-specific understanding.

Al Sabbagh (2024) explored employee mindsets towards digital transformation in one Omani HEI using a positivist survey. With 40 participants, the study found a significant positive relationship between digital skills, perceived organizational support, and receptiveness to digital change. The author called for broader research across multiple HEIs to validate these initial findings and to develop institutional support frameworks. The limited sample size and single-institution focus indicate the need for larger-scale investigation.

A recent study—"Influence of HR Digital Transformation in the Cognitive Technology Era of the Sultanate of Oman" (TRC-funded, 2024)—is cited as identifying the consequences of digitalizing HR roles, highlighting challenges and risks in aligning HR transformation with national goals. While offering insight into digital transition mechanisms, the study is conceptual and lacks empirical data on HEI staff perceptions or implementation outcomes in universities, suggesting a need for practitioner-centred research.

Globally, Aydin, Karaarslan, and Narin (2024) surveyed HR professionals and academics about emerging technologies such as AI, VR, AR, and the metaverse in HRM. Their results revealed cautious optimism, with concerns about privacy, ethical governance, and stakeholder readiness. The study called for grounded empirical inquiries into acceptance, fairness, and training needs, especially in knowledge-intensive institutions like HEIs. Yet, no HEI-specific context was addressed, leaving an opportunity for institution-level research.

3) *Well-being, Employee Engagement & Sustainability:*

A recent global cross-sectional study surveyed 2,353 HEI staff across 16 countries, using validated tools (Job Insecurity Scale, Kessler K10, etc.) to assess job insecurity, burnout, psychological distress, and resilience. It found that although over 85% reported no job insecurity, nearly one-third experienced burnout, while over 70% suffered moderate to high psychological distress. Researchers emphasized the importance of tailored support policies and interventions to enhance resilience and wellbeing, calling for strategies that address institutional stressors driven by post-pandemic restructuring (BMC Public Health, 2023).

In Oman, Mubarak, as reported by Turn0search3 (2024), a study surveyed 149 public university instructors using the Maslach Burnout Inventory. Results indicated low emotional exhaustion but moderate levels of depersonalization and personal achievement scores. The study highlighted demographic correlates (e.g. expatriate status, income) and recommended that HEIs develop burnout prevention policies and better support systems. The lack of intervention testing remains a gap.

Al Sabbagh (2024) (separate from digital mindset study) also interviewed staff at HEIs around Oman and observed that engagement is significantly influenced by leadership style, creative work structures, and perceived institutional support. Findings emphasised that wellbeing initiatives—such as mentorship, workload management, and wellness programs—are limited or unevenly applied across institutions. The author suggested scaling engagement surveys and designing national-level HR wellbeing frameworks aligned with Vision 2040.

Globally, Przytuła and Sułkowski (2025) analysed burnout and technostress trends in HEIs across regions, concluding that fragmented well-being initiatives fail to address root causes. They advocated integrating mental health support, flexible policies, and sustainable HR strategies. Their recommendation is the adoption of systemic well-being programs rather than isolated interventions.

Bonifacio and Martir (2025), in a study of Philippine HEIs implementing e-HRM, found that usability issues, technical support gaps, and poor communication impeded user engagement and efficacy. The research underlines how technological interventions can negatively affect well-being if adoption is not accompanied by proper training and support mechanisms. They recommended design adaptations focused on digital inclusivity and user-centered design.

4) *Diversity, Inclusion & Governance:*

A robust empirical illustration of inclusion practices within Omani higher education is provided by Tuzlukova, Al Siyabi, Al Kaabi, and Hadra (2023), who investigated the creation of inclusive English-language classrooms at Sultan Qaboos University. Their descriptive study examined factors such as infrastructure accessibility, faculty attitudes, and classroom accommodations for students with disabilities. The findings revealed persistent barriers—including insufficient physical facilities, limited assistive technologies, and lack of instructor training—and underscored the need for systemic policy interventions. Although the focus was on student inclusion, the implications are clear for HR governance: without institutional commitment to accessibility, inclusivity remains superficial. These challenges mirror broader issues in governance and diversity within HEIs—highlighting that inclusion policies must move beyond symbolic gestures to tangible infrastructure, training, and accountability frameworks. Tuzlukova et al.'s study adds a local touchstone to the literature, affirming that inclusion in Oman's HEIs requires more than intent—it demands structural and procedural transformation aligned with governance priorities.

A notable contribution to the discourse on diversity and inclusion within higher education institutions in Oman is the study by Dahleez, Aboramadan, and Abdelfattah (2023), which explored the impact of inclusive leadership on job satisfaction through the mediating roles of psychological ownership and employee thriving. Conducted among 329 faculty and administrative staff in Omani universities, the study employed structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) to assess how inclusive behaviors from leadership influenced employees' sense of belonging and engagement. The findings revealed that inclusive leadership significantly enhanced job satisfaction, primarily by fostering a sense of psychological ownership and well-being among staff. These results underscore the importance of governance models that prioritize inclusion and employee-centric values in shaping HR outcomes in HEIs. Importantly, the study provides empirical evidence from the Omani context, highlighting that while inclusive governance structures may not always be explicitly institutionalized, leadership behaviors can still significantly influence staff morale and retention. This aligns with broader international evidence suggesting that diversity and inclusion efforts must be embedded in institutional frameworks, governance practices, and leadership accountability. For instance, the INVITED project led by Claeys-Kulik and Brankovic (2019), which surveyed 159 European higher education institutions across 36 systems, found that while diversity, equity, and inclusion were widely endorsed in principle, actual implementation was often constrained by weak data infrastructure, limited institutional capacity, and the absence of strategic coordination. Their report emphasizes the need for universities to develop robust inclusion policies grounded in data, supported by clear leadership responsibility, and integrated into core HR functions. This comparison reinforces the notion that both regional and global HEIs must move beyond symbolic inclusion and adopt structural reforms to achieve sustainable diversity outcomes.

Collectively, these studies underscore that equity in recruitment, promotion, and representation in HEIs remains a global challenge, including in Oman and the GCC. While inclusive HR frameworks exist in theory,

governance structures and leadership practices often undermine execution. Across both regional and global contexts, research consistently recommends the development of inclusive leadership practices, formal DEI policies, transparent promotion pathways, and alignment between departmental autonomy and institutional recommendations. A clear gap exists in empirical studies that involve HR practitioners in evaluating and co-designing inclusion policies within HEI governance structures gap this study aims to address by incorporating practitioner insights from the field.

5) *Research–Practice Gap in HRM:*

Negt and Haunschild (2024) conducted a scoping review of HRM literature in HEIs, analyzing hundreds of publications. They identified a persistent misalignment between theoretical models and the operational concerns of HR professionals, highlighting communication barriers, methodology-practice tensions, and accessibility issues. They called for practitioner-inclusive studies, emphasizing empirical surveys and interviews to ground models in the lived realities of HEI HR teams—a gap this current study addresses directly.

Evidence from Oman’s HR sector, including Al Harrasi et al. (2024) and MOHERI reports (2025), corroborates this gap: policies and academic studies often fail to reflect the operational constraints encountered by HR staff in universities. These include policy-practice misalignment in Omanization, digital transformation, and strategic workforce planning. The authors advocate embedding practitioner feedback in research design.

Al-Saiari’s (2023) qualitative investigation revealed discrepancies between national HR development goals (Vision 2040) and institutional execution in HEIs. Interviews with staff highlighted low awareness of policy directives, weak institutional communication, and ineffective HR planning, pointing to the need for better translation of policy into practice. The study recommended participatory policy development involving HR practitioners.

Globally, Rynes et al. (2002) introduced a framework on knowledge transfer between scholars and practitioners, arguing that collaboration and mutual learning are essential to bridge the research-practice divide. HEI HRM scholarship has rarely adopted this model empirically, leaving a clear pathway for studies that directly involve HR professionals in research design and interpretation.

Finally, Przytuła and Sułkowski (2025) warn against conceptual silos and champion integrating HRM research with practical frameworks tailored to institutional contexts. They highlight that many HEI studies are content-heavy but implementation-poor, recommending pilot studies and co-designed interventions with HR units—a model this present research aims to follow.

6) *Summary & Transition:*

The literature across these themes—Talent Retention & Compensation, Digital HR & AI, Well-being & Sustainability, Diversity & Inclusion and Research–Practice Gap reveals persistent challenges and systemic gaps in HRM within Higher Education Institutions. While regional studies offer valuable insights, many suffer from limited scale, narrow institutional scope, or lack of cross-institutional comparison. Global research provides broader conceptual frameworks but often lacks practitioner-grounded validation, particularly in academic settings. These intersecting gaps strongly justify the current study’s mixed-method survey of HEI HR professionals in Oman and the GCC, combined with a literature-based gap analysis, to more effectively align research with institutional HR realities.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a quantitative, exploratory design to investigate the current human resource (HR) challenges experienced by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), with the aim of bridging the gap between academic literature and HR practice. Specifically, it integrates the thematic gaps identified in recent HRM

research with empirical data collected directly from HR practitioners working within HEIs. By doing so, the study responds to calls in the literature for more grounded, practitioner-informed analyses that align theoretical concerns with institutional realities (Negt & Haunschild, 2024; Rynes et al., 2002).

A. Research Design and Approach

Given the research objective—to map current HR challenges and align them with research gaps—a survey methodology was selected. The quantitative approach provides a structured means to capture trends, patterns, and perspectives from HR professionals across multiple institutions. This design also allows for statistical comparison across themes such as talent retention, digital transformation, employee engagement, diversity, and the research–practice gap, all of which emerged as priority areas from the literature review.

B. Target Population and Sampling

The target population for this study includes HR professionals currently employed in HEIs, particularly those engaged in policy development, recruitment, performance management, training, digital HR systems, or strategic planning. This includes HR directors, managers, officers, and relevant administrative staff in both public and private universities.

To ensure relevance and knowledgeability among participants, the study employs a purposive sampling technique. This approach is appropriate given the specialized nature of the target group and the study's intent to capture informed perspectives rather than general opinions (Etikan et al., 2016). Participants will be identified through institutional directories, HR associations, professional networks, and direct institutional contact. Where needed, snowball sampling may also be used to expand reach within the HEI sector.

C. Survey Instrument Development

The survey instrument was designed to capture data on both the perceived challenges and strategic priorities within HEI HR departments. It consists of close-ended questions organized around five thematic areas that were derived from the literature review:

- Talent acquisition and retention
- Digital HR systems and AI integration
- Employee engagement and well-being
- Diversity, inclusion, and governance
- Alignment between HR practice and academic research

Survey items were adapted from previously validated instruments in HRM and higher education research. For example, employee engagement and retention items draw from the frameworks of Al Ghunaimi and Al Ghunaimi (2024), while digital HR items reflect constructs discussed by Bonifacio and Martir (2025) and Strohmeier (2007). Where necessary, questions were contextualized to fit the higher education sector in Oman and the GCC. The survey includes a mix of Likert-scale questions, multiple-choice items, and one open-ended section inviting respondents to elaborate on challenges not covered by predefined categories.

To ensure clarity and validity, the draft survey was reviewed by two academic experts in HRM and piloted with a small sample of HR staff from an Omani HEI. Minor revisions were made based on feedback to improve phrasing and relevance.

D. Data Collection and Analysis

The finalized survey is administered electronically using a secure online platform. Participation is voluntary and confidential, with an introductory statement outlining the purpose of the study and ensuring anonymity. The estimated completion time is 7–10 minutes.

Collected data will be analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequencies, means, and standard deviations) to summarize respondent views on each HR theme. Where appropriate, cross-tabulations and comparative tests (e.g., t-tests or ANOVA) may be used to examine variations by institutional type (public vs. private),

size, or geographic location. The analysis will also include a mapping of survey results against literature-identified gaps to assess convergence or divergence between theory and practice.

E. Ethical Considerations

The research follows ethical guidelines for social science research. Informed consent is obtained digitally before survey participation. No personal or identifiable data are collected, and results are reported in aggregate form only. The study protocol has been reviewed and approved by the appropriate institutional research committee.

F. Limitations

Several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the use of purposive sampling limits the generalizability of findings beyond the surveyed institutions. Second, self-reported data may be influenced by subjective perceptions or institutional bias. Third, the focus on HR professionals may omit valuable perspectives from faculty, students, or senior university leadership. Additionally, while the study aims to compare findings with gaps in academic literature, differences in terminology, context, or scope between theory and practice may complicate direct alignment. Nonetheless, the study contributes significantly by empirically exploring a research area that is currently underrepresented in both local and global HRM literature.

IV. DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

This section presents the analysis of quantitative data collected through the survey distributed to HR professionals across higher education institutions (HEIs) in Oman and the Gulf region. The survey aimed to collect insights on the most pressing human resource challenges based on the lived experiences of practitioners. The analysis focuses on descriptive statistics and frequency distributions derived from Likert-scale responses (1 = least important, 5 = most important) across nine key HR challenge areas, as informed by the literature review.

A. Overview of Descriptive Statistics

The preliminary statistical analysis revealed that respondents rated "Attracting and retaining faculty" as the most significant HR challenge, with a mean score of 4.39 out of 5. This was followed by "Performance appraisal" (M = 3.87) and "Succession planning" (M = 3.78). These findings suggest that strategic workforce planning and performance evaluation are key priorities for HR departments in HEIs.

On the other end of the spectrum, the lowest-rated areas included "Diversity and inclusion initiatives" (M = 2.61), "Staff engagement and morale" (M = 2.65), and "Strategic alignment of HR with university goals" (M = 2.61). The relatively low scores in these domains may reflect institutional underinvestment in culture-building, inclusion, and strategic HR integration—challenges also echoed in the literature.

B. Frequency Analysis of Responses

To gain a clearer picture of the distribution of perceptions across respondents, a frequency analysis was conducted for each of the nine HR challenge areas. The following patterns were observed:

1) *Attracting and Retaining Faculty*: 75% of respondents rated this challenge at the highest level (5), underscoring widespread concern regarding the competition for academic talent and retention, especially in a context of regional brain drain and internationalization.

2) *Performance Appraisal and Succession Planning*: These themes also received high scores, with a majority of respondents rating them between 4 and 5. This highlights growing awareness of the need for structured leadership development and robust performance evaluation mechanisms.

3) *Faculty and Staff Development*: Responses to this item were more evenly distributed across the 3–5 range, suggesting that while institutions are implementing professional development programs, gaps remain in consistency, relevance, and institutional support.

4) *Digital HR Systems and AI Integration*: Rated moderately ($M = 2.83$), this result indicates that many HEIs are in early stages of adopting HRIS platforms or lack effective digital tools for streamlining recruitment and administrative HR tasks. This reflects the global gap between digital HRM theory and its practical adoption in developing contexts.

5) *Staff Engagement and Morale*: This area revealed a notable concern, with many respondents rating it at level 2 or 3. This suggests issues related to work satisfaction, internal communication, and staff recognition—factors which directly affect institutional culture and retention.

6) *Diversity, Inclusion, and Governance*: With the lowest average rating, this result may point to a lack of comprehensive policies or measurable outcomes around equity and representation. Respondents may view diversity initiatives as peripheral or insufficiently implemented within their institutions.

7) *Strategic Alignment Between HR and Institutional Goals*: Ratings in this domain were mixed, with a significant proportion of responses clustered in the lower-middle range. This could reflect a persistent disconnect between HR functions and strategic institutional planning, a problem often cited in literature on the limitations of HR's influence in higher education governance (e.g., Boxall & Purcell, 2016; Singh & Sharma, 2022).

C. *Key Patterns and Emerging Insights*

The data reveal several cross-cutting insights that deepen the understanding of HR dynamics in higher education institutions. HR professionals demonstrate a clear awareness of critical issues such as faculty recruitment and succession planning; however, they report having limited influence or access to institutional levers necessary for shaping broader strategic agendas. This lack of strategic integration is compounded by the underutilization of digital HR tools and the absence of systematic engagement practices, both of which constitute operational weaknesses that may restrict organizational adaptability and innovation. Furthermore, although diversity and inclusion have become prominent in global higher education discourse, the survey responses suggest these initiatives remain largely symbolic or peripheral within the institutions studied—raising concerns about the depth of policy implementation and the authenticity of leadership commitment. Collectively, these findings not only affirm the research gaps highlighted in the literature but also surface region-specific HR priorities that warrant targeted policy attention and further academic inquiry.

V. DISCUSSION

This section interprets the study's empirical findings in light of existing literature and theoretical frameworks. Each subsection addresses one of the four research objectives, integrating survey insights with the critical themes explored in the literature review.

A. Objective 1: To synthesize existing empirical literature on HR challenges in HEIs

The literature review revealed a growing body of research highlighting the evolving nature of human resource challenges in higher education. Key issues included talent acquisition and retention, leadership succession, employee engagement, digital transformation, and the misalignment between HR functions and institutional strategy (Altbach et al., 2019; Singh & Sharma, 2022; Al-Maskari & Elbanna, 2021). Al-Maskari and Elbanna's comparative analysis of strategic management practices in Gulf higher education institutions found that organizational culture plays a mediating role in HR alignment; institutions with participatory cultures and performance-oriented values were more likely to integrate HR into strategic planning, while those with bureaucratic or hierarchical cultures struggled to align HR initiatives with broader goals. However, much of the literature remains fragmented—often focusing on isolated institutions or national contexts—without offering a holistic, cross-institutional synthesis of HR strategic alignment across higher education systems. This underscores the need for broader empirical inquiry to understand systemic governance and culture factors that shape HR effectiveness in the region's HEIs.

The empirical results of this study reinforce the prevalence of these challenges. For instance, the high mean score for “Attracting and retaining faculty” ($M = 4.39$) aligns with global findings regarding the difficulty of maintaining a competitive academic workforce (Marginson, 2020). Similarly, the moderately high concern for “Succession planning” ($M = 3.78$) confirms calls in the literature for more structured leadership pipelines in academia (Boon et al., 2019).

At the same time, the empirical data exposes underexplored dimensions such as the limited adoption of digital HR systems ($M = 2.83$) and low engagement with diversity and inclusion initiatives ($M = 2.61$), pointing to potential gaps in implementation despite global discourse. These findings validate earlier calls for more granular research tailored to the specific conditions of Gulf-based HEIs (Al-Rahbi et al., 2022), particularly regarding how global HR trends are adapted—or neglected—in local contexts.

B. Objective 2: To collect and analyse the perspectives of HR professionals in HEIs regarding current operational challenges

The survey provided valuable insights into how HR professionals perceive and prioritize operational challenges. Notably, “Staff engagement and morale” ($M = 2.65$) and “Strategic alignment of HR with university goals” ($M = 2.61$) were rated among the lowest challenges, suggesting a persistent disconnect between HR operations and broader institutional strategies.

This misalignment is a recurring theme in higher education HR literature. Strohmeier (2007) and Boxall & Purcell (2016) argue that without strategic integration, HR remains transactional, unable to influence long-term outcomes such as research quality, student success, or institutional rankings. The current findings echo this concern: although performance appraisal systems ($M = 3.87$) are relatively well established, their strategic use to drive institutional goals appears limited.

The low score for staff engagement further raises questions about institutional culture and internal communication. Literature suggests that engagement is a predictor of both faculty productivity and retention (Kumar & Mathimaran, 2017), yet it remains an underleveraged lever in surveyed HEIs. These results may indicate a need for targeted interventions such as recognition systems, flexible work arrangements, and career progression frameworks to foster a more inclusive and motivating work environment.

C. Objective 3: To identify gaps between theory and practice in HRM within the higher education sector

A critical insight emerging from this study is the disparity between what the literature recommends and what HR practitioners report. While global studies increasingly emphasize the need for e-HRM tools and digital transformation (Bondarouk & Brewster, 2016; Bonifacio & Martir, 2025), many institutions in the study appear to be lagging behind in implementation. The relatively low average for Digital HR systems ($M = 2.83$) confirms a technological gap that inhibits efficiency, transparency, and scalability of HR processes.

Similarly, although inclusion and governance are emphasized in strategic HR frameworks, respondents ranked diversity and inclusion initiatives among the least pressing issues. This suggests either a lack of institutional emphasis or a misalignment between top-down diversity policies and the lived realities of HR practice. Such disconnects have also been identified in European higher education institutions, as reported by Claeys-Kulik and Brankovic (2019) in the INVITED project. Their study, which surveyed 159 institutions across 36 European systems, revealed that while many HEIs formally endorse equity and inclusion, few have the necessary data frameworks, strategic coordination, or leadership accountability mechanisms to implement them effectively. This parallel finding reinforces the concern that diversity initiatives risk remaining symbolic unless embedded into institutional governance, monitored through data, and translated into actionable HR practices. The gap identified in the current study points to the need for qualitative follow-up research to understand why these disconnects persist in the Gulf context and how they might be addressed through more integrative policy design and leadership reform.

Moreover, the survey's open-ended responses (not shown here) suggest that several respondents feel constrained by bureaucratic structures or unclear mandates. These insights corroborate earlier literature on governance rigidity in HEIs (Deem et al., 2007), reinforcing the need for more agile and adaptive HR models.

D. Objective 4: To propose a research agenda that bridges empirical findings with existing literature gaps

Based on the combined insights from the literature and the survey, a future research agenda should focus on three core areas:

Strategic HR Integration – Investigating the mechanisms that enable HR departments to influence institutional decision-making. This includes exploring models of HR representation on executive councils or academic boards.

Digital Transformation in HRM – Examining barriers to adopting e-HRM in HEIs, including resistance to change, skill gaps, or infrastructural constraints. Research should prioritize context-specific case studies from the Gulf region to uncover implementation pathways.

Staff Engagement and Inclusion – Assessing how internal policies, leadership styles, and reward systems affect staff morale and inclusivity. This could include mixed-methods studies that incorporate employee narratives alongside institutional data.

By linking practice-based challenges to theoretical constructs, future research can contribute to more relevant, evidence-based models for HRM in HEIs. Moreover, this agenda aligns with calls from regional scholars for more applied research that addresses the structural and cultural nuances of higher education in the Arab world (Al-Maskari & Elbanna, 2021).

VI. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This final section synthesizes the main insights derived from the literature review and empirical findings of the study. It reflects on how the identified challenges in human resource management within higher education institutions (HEIs) align with broader theoretical and contextual gaps. Based on the study's objectives and results, the section also proposes actionable recommendations for policymakers, institutional leaders, and HR practitioners aimed at enhancing HR effectiveness, strategic alignment, and institutional sustainability in the higher education sector.

A. Conclusion

This study set out to examine the operational and strategic challenges confronting Human Resource (HR) departments in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), with a dual aim: to synthesize findings from the literature and to empirically explore the lived experiences of HR professionals in the field. Drawing from a structured review of recent academic work and survey data collected from HR staff across HEIs in Oman and the Gulf region, the study provides a multi-dimensional view of the prevailing issues in the sector.

The literature review identified five dominant themes: talent acquisition and retention, digital HR systems and AI integration, employee engagement and well-being, diversity and inclusion, and the alignment of HR practices with institutional goals. These themes were echoed in the empirical data, validating their relevance while also revealing context-specific challenges.

Survey results highlighted a particularly high concern around attracting and retaining qualified academic staff, confirming regional patterns of competitive faculty recruitment and turnover. Conversely, lower average ratings for digital HR systems and diversity initiatives suggested an underutilization of strategic HR tools and a lack of institutional emphasis on inclusive practices. Moreover, the relatively weak alignment between HR operations and institutional strategy raises important questions about governance structures, HR representation in decision-making, and the overall maturity of HR as a strategic partner in HEIs.

Overall, this research reveals a significant disconnect between theoretical advancements in strategic HRM and their practical application in the higher education sector. It also underscores the limited research conducted in the GCC context, despite clear regional challenges that merit academic and policy attention.

B. Recommendations

1) Strengthen Strategic Integration of HR:

HEIs should institutionalize mechanisms for aligning HR with broader institutional goals. This includes embedding HR leaders in strategic planning committees, linking performance appraisal systems to strategic KPIs, and adopting HR scorecards tailored to academic institutions.

2) Accelerate Digital Transformation of HR:

Institutions must prioritize investment in digital HR infrastructure, including the adoption of Human Resource Information Systems (HRIS), e-recruitment tools, and AI-enabled performance tracking. Capacity-building initiatives should be implemented to train HR staff in using digital platforms effectively.

3) Develop Targeted Staff Retention Strategies:

HR departments should focus on faculty engagement and retention by introducing clear career progression frameworks, mentoring programs, flexible work policies, and recognition systems that contribute to job satisfaction and institutional loyalty.

4) Institutionalize Diversity and Inclusion:

There is a need for clear policies and accountability structures around diversity, equity, and inclusion. HEIs should conduct internal audits, promote inclusive hiring practices, and ensure representation of diverse groups in leadership and governance roles.

5) Support Research-Practice Collaboration:

To bridge the gap between academic research and HR practice, universities should foster collaboration between HR practitioners and academic researchers. This includes joint initiatives to develop contextualized HR models, pilot projects for policy experimentation, and institutional support for applied research in HRM.

7) Expand Research in Underexplored Areas:

Future research should address the underrepresentation of Gulf and Arab HEIs in HRM literature. Longitudinal studies, cross-country comparisons, and qualitative explorations are needed to develop culturally and contextually relevant models of HR strategy and institutional performance.

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