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Career Development as a Mediating Variable in Higher Education and Other Professional Sectors: A Systematic Literature Review

Haseebullah Memon*, Hana Hamidi, Agatha Lamentan Muda

*Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak,
Kota Samarahan, Sarawak, Malaysia.*

ABSTRACT

Career development (CD) has increasingly been recognized as an important mechanism for improving employee outcomes; however, its role as a mediating variable remains insufficiently synthesized, particularly in higher education institutions (HEIs) in developing countries. This systematic literature review (SLR) examines how career development functions as a mediating variable in higher education and other professional sectors, with particular attention to the Pakistani context. Following the PRISMA 2020 guidelines, a systematic search was conducted using Google Scholar, Scopus, Emerald Insight, Springer Nature, and ScienceDirect for peer-reviewed, English-language, open-access studies published between 2015 and 2025. Studies were included when they empirically examined career development as a mediating variable or within a mediation-related model and met the predefined eligibility criteria. The search identified 303 records, of which 43 duplicates were removed, 69 full-text articles were assessed, and 11 studies met the inclusion criteria. Findings indicate that career development can link organizational and institutional factors with employee outcomes, including job satisfaction, commitment, engagement, performance, and retention. Evidence was found across higher education, banking, telecommunications, public procurement, steel, financial services, and public health sectors. Social Exchange Theory and other theoretical perspectives were used to explain these relationships. Given the limited number of eligible studies and diverse contexts, findings should be interpreted cautiously rather than generalized beyond the reviewed evidence. The review highlights the need for strategically integrated career development practices and provides implications for HR professionals, institutional leaders, and policymakers.

Keywords: Career Development, Mediating Variable, Higher Education Institutions, Human Resource Development, Social Exchange Theory, Organizational Outcomes.

Corresponding Author: Haseebullah Memon
Email: haseebhrdscholar@gmail.com

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INTRODUCTION

Career development (CD) has been widely recognized as a critical mechanism for promoting faculty performance in higher education institutions (HEIs), particularly in relation to retention, engagement, and job satisfaction (Sulaiman & Sheraz, 2025; Effendi et al., 2025; Khan & Siddique, 2024). Although faculty members are directly involved in academic performance, research output, and the overall organizational image of HEIs, their professional development has become an important institutional priority (Sheraz et al., 2019). In this context, career development is not merely an individual concern but also an institutional responsibility that can directly influence long-term organizational effectiveness. Over the past decade, CD has received increasing attention in the human resource development (HRD) field because of its association with organizational commitment, employee performance, and sustainable workforce outcomes across various sectors (Jena &

Nayak, 2023; Okafor et al., 2025; Randev & Jha, 2023).

Despite its recognized importance, much of the existing literature on career development has predominantly focused on individual career self-management and outcomes such as employability and career success, particularly within government, corporate, and industrial sectors (Ismail et al., 2013; Karunia et al., 2023). This emphasis has contributed to a relatively individualistic understanding of career development, with less attention given to the organizational and contextual factors that shape career experiences. However, recent advances in career research indicate a paradigm shift toward recognizing organizational support, institutional policies, and cultural dimensions as important contextual conditions that shape career trajectories (Akkermans et al., 2021). These developments suggest that career development within the field of human resource development (HRD) should also be examined in higher education institutions, where organizational practices and institutional inputs can influence employee outcomes (Poornima et al., 2018; Ghani et al., 2022).

Within this changing environment, higher education in developing countries such as Pakistan remains comparatively underexplored from a career development perspective. Although career development has been examined in various organizational contexts, limited scholarly attention has been given to its specific role as a mediating mechanism within Pakistani HEIs (Shah, 2025). Existing research has highlighted the importance of institutional policies and career development practices for university faculty, but the evidence remains limited regarding how career development functions as a mechanism linking organizational and institutional factors with faculty outcomes (Afzal et al., 2024; Malokani et al., 2023; Nawaz & Pangil, 2016). This represents an important research gap because career development may help explain how organizational support, HRD initiatives, and related institutional practices translate into outcomes such as job satisfaction, engagement, retention, and performance. Moreover, the available evidence is dispersed across different professional sectors, creating a need for a systematic review to clarify how career development has been conceptualized and examined as a mediating variable across higher education and other professional contexts. A clearer understanding of this mechanism is important because career development may operate differently across institutional and professional settings. While organizational support and HRD practices may provide conditions for career development, the extent to which these practices translate into positive faculty outcomes remains insufficiently synthesized. The review can therefore clarify the pathways through which career development contributes to employee outcomes and indicate whether patterns identified in other professional sectors are applicable to higher education.

To address this gap, the current study draws on Social Exchange Theory (SET) (Blau, 2017) as its primary theoretical perspective for conceptualizing career development as an intermediary between institutional support and faculty outcomes. According to SET, organizational relationships are based on reciprocal processes, whereby employees respond to perceived organizational support through positive attitudes and behaviours (Sheraz et al., 2019). Within HEIs, organizational support in the form of investments in career development, including training opportunities, mentorship programs, and career progression pathways, may signal organizational commitment to faculty members. In turn, faculty members may reciprocate through greater engagement, organizational commitment, and improved performance (Sulaiman & Sheraz, 2025; Luthra et al., 2024). This reciprocal relationship highlights the potential mediating role of career development, through which institutional inputs may contribute to desirable outcomes such as job satisfaction, discretionary behaviour, and retention (Sarwar et al., 2025; Le et al., 2023).

The relevance of SET is particularly evident when considering the institutional context of Pakistani HEIs, where career development practices may vary in their structure and level of institutional integration. Existing evidence suggests that stronger alignment between career development initiatives and formal HRD policies may be important for improving the effectiveness of institutional support (Afzal et al., 2024). From a SET perspective, when faculty members perceive adequate organizational support for their career development, reciprocal exchanges may be strengthened, potentially contributing to greater engagement, job satisfaction, and retention (Hilamsyah et al., 2025). Therefore, career development can be conceptualized as a strategic organizational mechanism rather than merely a secondary HRD activity. Integrating CD initiatives into institutional planning and aligning them with organizational objectives may help HEIs strengthen faculty engagement, job satisfaction, and retention (Sheraz et al., 2019; Rahman et al., 2016; Mehreen & Ali, 2022; Ali et al., 2019). Based on these theoretical and contextual considerations, this paper presents a systematic literature review (SLR) following the PRISMA procedure to examine career development as a mediating variable in higher education and other professional sectors, with particular attention to evidence relevant to Pakistani HEIs during the period 2015–2025. The review synthesizes empirical findings, identifies major research trends, and examines the extent to which career development has been incorporated into models linking organizational and institutional factors with employee outcomes. Furthermore, the review relates evidence from higher education to findings from other professional sectors, where the mediating role of career

development has also been examined, including banking and telecommunications (Rahman et al., 2016; Mehreen & Ali, 2022; Ali et al., 2019).

Based on these theoretical and contextual considerations, this study contributes to the literature in three ways. First, it addresses an important evidence gap concerning career development as a mediating mechanism, particularly in the context of Pakistani HEIs. Second, it contributes to the theoretical understanding of career development by examining its mediating role through the lens of Social Exchange Theory. Third, it provides practical insights for policymakers, HR professionals, and institutional leaders regarding the integration of career development into HRD strategies to support faculty outcomes and institutional sustainability. Overall, the review highlights the need for more systematic and strategically integrated approaches to career development across higher education and other professional sectors. The following research questions guide the review. This study has investigated the following research questions:

RQ1: How has career development been examined as a mediating variable within higher education institutions, particularly in the Pakistani context?

RQ2: How has career development been examined as a mediating variable in other professional sectors, and what common theoretical and empirical patterns can be identified across these contexts?

RQ3: Which theoretical perspectives have been used to explain the mediating role of career development across higher education and other professional sectors?

METHODS

Search Strategy and protocol

To ensure transparency and methodological rigor, this systematic literature review (SLR) was conducted in accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 guidelines (Page et al., 2021). The review followed a predefined search, screening, eligibility, and inclusion process to identify empirical studies examining career development (CD) as a mediating variable across higher education and other professional sectors. Studies examining career development (CD) as a mediating variable in higher education institutions (HEIs) and other professional sectors were identified and analyzed using a standardized search strategy. Five academic databases were searched: Google Scholar, Scopus, Emerald Insight, Springer Nature, and ScienceDirect. The search used combinations of the following keywords and Boolean operators: “career development” AND “mediator” AND “faculty”; “career development” AND “higher education institutions”; “career development” AND “employee retention”; and “career development” AND “organizational outcomes.” The search was limited to peer-reviewed, English-language, open-access publications published between 2015 and 2025.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Table 1 outlines the criteria established for the Systematic Literature Review and shows the methodological framework used in selecting studies for the review, ensuring consistency and rigor in the process.

Table 1: Inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Published between 2015 and 2025	Studies not addressing career development as a mediator
Peer-reviewed journal articles	Conference papers, dissertations, book chapters
Studies examining CD in HEIs or other sectors	Studies focusing on career development of students
Articles with full text and open access	Non-English publications
Empirical studies using mediation or related models	Articles lacking empirical data

RESULTS

The initial search identified 303 records across the five selected databases. Of these, 43 duplicate records were removed, leaving 260 records for title and abstract screening. Following this screening, 69 records were retained for full-text assessment. After applying the predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria, 58 full-text articles were excluded for the following reasons: wrong population ($n = 15$), irrelevant outcome ($n = 18$), poor methodology ($n = 14$), and lack of peer review ($n = 11$). Consequently, 11 studies met all eligibility criteria and were included in the final systematic literature review. Figure 1 presents the PRISMA 2020 flow diagram, illustrating the identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion of studies. The relatively small number of included studies reflects the specific eligibility criteria and the limited body of empirical research directly addressing career development as a mediating variable, rather than a predetermined sample size. Therefore, the findings are interpreted within the contexts represented by the included studies and

should not be generalized beyond the available evidence.

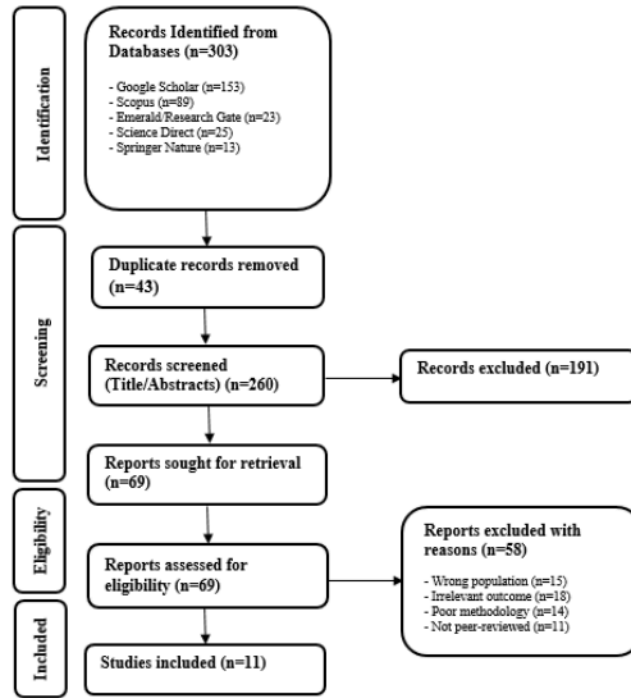


Figure 1: PRISMA 2020 flow diagram.

Table 2: Summary of Career Development as a Mediating Variable across Higher Education and Other Professional Sectors.

Methodology	Theories Used	Key Findings	Sector	Country	References
Survey; Regression Analysis	Career development theories	Career development enhances satisfaction and commitment in academic settings.	Education	Pakistan	(Rahman et al., 2016)
Survey; SEM	Social Exchange Theory	Career development supports succession planning, enhancing readiness and performance.	Banking	Pakistan	(Ali et al., 2019)
Survey; Regression Analysis	Mediation Model; Career Development Theories	Career development increases satisfaction and retention by reinforcing organizational commitment.	Telecom	Pakistan	(Sheraz et al., 2019)
Survey; Moderation Analysis	Perceived Organizational Support Theory; Person-Organization Fit Theory	Career development enhances the positive effects of organizational support on OCB.	Banking	Pakistan	(Jehanzeb, 2020)
Survey; Mediation Analysis	Human Capital Theory	Career development and education improve employee performance by aligning development with organizational goals.	Banking	Pakistan	(Mehreen & Ali, 2022)
Survey; Mediation Analysis	Resource-Based View Theory	Career development plays a positive but partial mediating role in organizational settings.	Banking	Indonesia	(Laras et al., 2021)
Survey; Path Analysis	Agency Theory	In private universities in Sindh, career development completely mediates succession planning and staff retention.	Education	Pakistan	(Malokani et al., 2023)
Survey; Mediation Analysis	Human Resource Development Theories; Mediation Framework	Career development is vital for performance enhancement in public sector roles.	Public Procurement	Tanzania	(Jaffu, 2023)
Survey; SEM	Human Capital Theory; Social	Career development enhances the	Steel	Indonesia	(Karunia et al.,

	Exchange Theory; Career Development Theory	effect of environment and training on employee performance.	Industry		2023)
Survey; Regression Analysis	Organizational Culture Theory; Organizational Commitment Theory; Career Development Theory; OCB Frameworks	Career development reinforces employee behaviors and commitment post-merger.	Islamic Banking/Financial Services	Indonesia	(Hasan et al., 2024)
Survey; Mediation & Moderation Analysis	Conservation of Resources Theory; Organizational Justice Theory	Career development and career growth build resilience, driving engagement and better outcomes.	Public Health	Nigeria	(Okon et al., 2025)

The trend in publications over time and sector can be shown in figures 2 and 3 graphically. This statistics can provide useful information about the latest changes in the academic industry over the last decade. It also gives a breakdown of the contributions in different sectors, as far as academic output is concerned, demonstrating how different sectors have contributed. By this, we are able to gain deeper insights of the areas to put more focus that have emerged and correlate with broader industry and academic development.

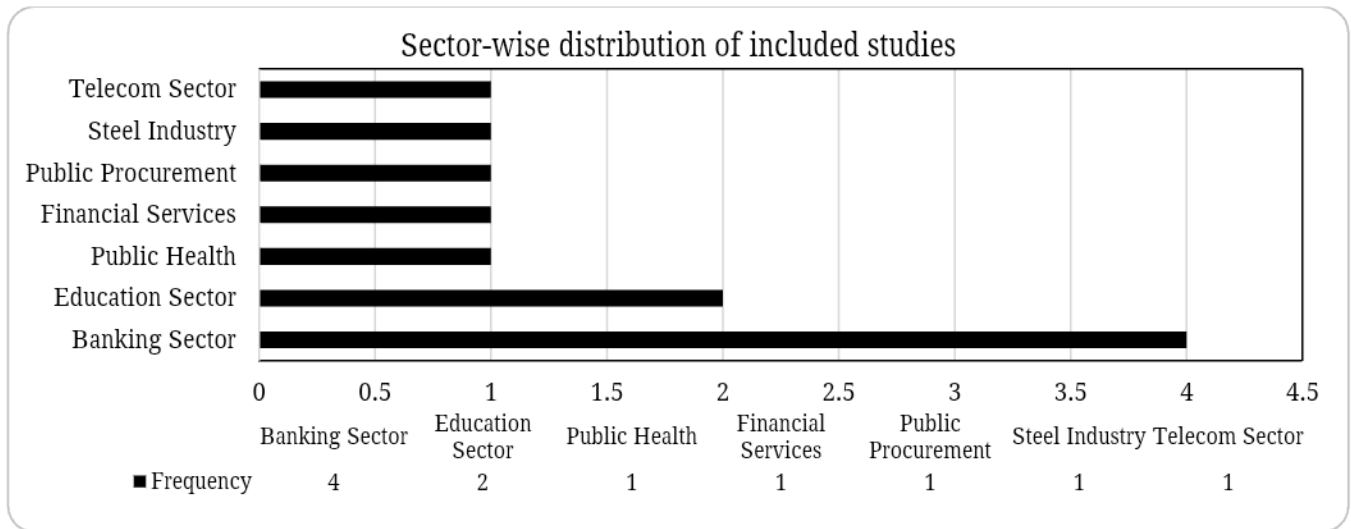


Figure 2: Sector-wise distribution of included studies.

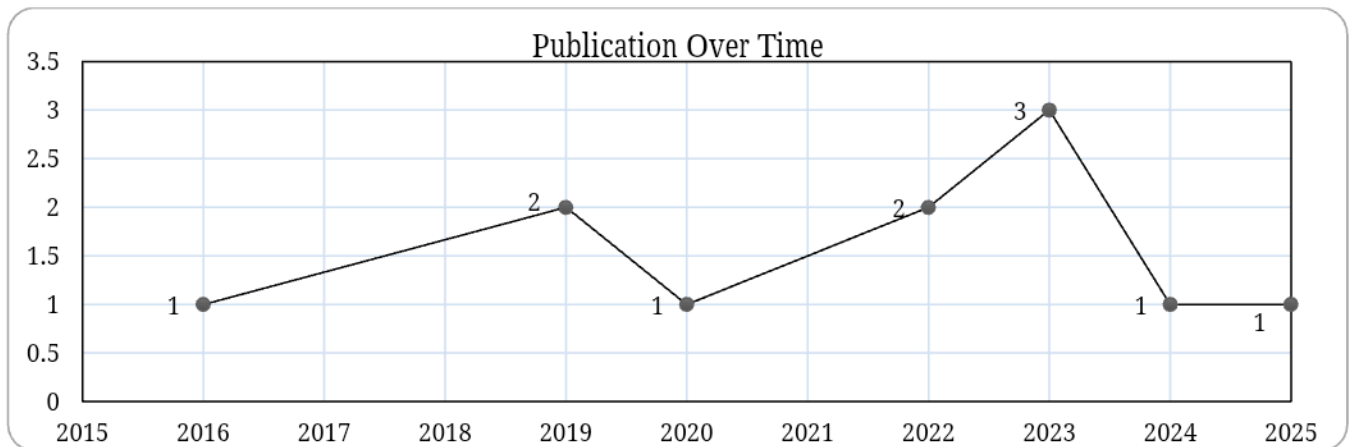


Figure 3: Year-wise publications on CD as a mediator.

This search has also covered publications on mediation role of career development over time, as depicted in Figure 3. The figure highlights are providing a visual representation of how publication rates have varied across different periods. By

examining these trends, we can identify key fluctuations in research activity, indicative periods of significant growth or decline.

DISCUSSION

The discussion synthesizes the findings of the systematic literature review on career development (CD) as a mediating variable across higher education institutions (HEIs) and other professional sectors. The findings are interpreted in relation to the three research questions, with particular attention to the contextual and theoretical conditions through which career development may influence employee outcomes. Across the reviewed studies, CD generally operates as an intervening mechanism linking organizational practices and institutional support with outcomes such as performance, engagement, commitment, retention, and job satisfaction. However, the evidence also shows considerable variation in sectors, theoretical perspectives, and organizational contexts, suggesting that the mediating role of CD should not be interpreted as universally identical across settings. Recent research on career-related constructs further supports the importance of psychological mechanisms in shaping positive work outcomes, including work engagement and perceptions of decent work (Carkit & Yalçın, 2025).

RQ1: Career Development as a Mediator in Higher Education Institutions

The reviewed evidence indicates that career development can function as an important mediating mechanism within higher education, although the available evidence remains limited. Studies from Pakistan, particularly those examining education and related organizational contexts, indicate that career development can connect institutional practices with outcomes such as satisfaction, commitment, performance, and retention (Malokani et al., 2023; Rahman et al., 2016). Evidence from other professional sectors provides additional support for this mechanism but should not be treated as direct evidence of the same effect within HEIs. This distinction is important because higher education organizations have distinctive career structures, promotion systems, academic expectations, and professional identities that may shape how faculty members respond to career development opportunities. From a critical perspective, the available evidence therefore supports the relevance of CD as a mediator in HEIs but does not yet establish that the mechanism operates uniformly across institutions. The limited number of studies directly addressing Pakistani HEIs also indicates a need for further empirical research. RQ1 is therefore addressed by identifying career development as a potentially important pathway through which institutional practices may influence faculty outcomes.

RQ2: Career Development in Sectors beyond HEIs

The evidence from professional sectors beyond higher education indicates that career development operates as a mediating mechanism across diverse organizational contexts. In banking, CD has been linked to succession planning, employee development, performance, and retention (Mehreen & Ali, 2022; Ali et al., 2019; Batool et al., 2022), while evidence from telecommunications suggests that CD can connect organizational commitment with employee retention (Sheraz et al., 2019). Similar mediating patterns are reported in the steel industry, public procurement, and public health, where career development links organizational practices such as training, work environment, and organizational support with employee performance, engagement, and resilience (Karunia et al., 2023; Jaffu, 2023; Okon et al., 2025). Evidence from financial services further indicates that CD may function as either a partial or complete mediator depending on the organizational context (Laras et al., 2021; Hasan et al., 2024).

Taken together, these findings suggest a recurring mechanism rather than an identical effect: organizational resources and practices may create conditions for career development, which can subsequently influence employee-related outcomes. However, the variation in sectors, countries, theoretical perspectives, and research designs cautions against interpreting CD as a universally consistent mediator. For example, the banking evidence from Pakistan highlights the role of perceived organizational support and person-organization fit in strengthening discretionary employee behaviors through career development (Jehanzeb, 2020). Thus, the cross-sector evidence broadens the relevance of CD while also demonstrating that its mediating role is shaped by contextual conditions. RQ2 is therefore addressed by showing that CD has applicability beyond HEIs, while recognizing that sectoral and institutional differences may influence the strength and nature of the mediation pathway.

The findings also provide practical implications for higher education and other professional organizations. University administrators can strengthen career development by establishing transparent career pathways, mentoring opportunities, training programs, and clear progression criteria. Human resource departments can integrate career development into formal HRD policies and regularly assess employees' development needs to align individual career goals with organizational objectives. Policymakers can support these efforts by developing institutional guidelines and encouraging sustainable

investment in employee development and career progression. These measures may help organizations strengthen employee engagement, satisfaction, performance, and retention.

The findings of the present review are broadly consistent with previous review-based evidence on academic and organizational career development. Previous review evidence on academic career development has highlighted the importance of contextual factors, mentoring, and career development interventions in shaping academic career trajectories, while also identifying the need for stronger theoretical and methodological development in academic career research (Zacher et al., 2019). Similarly, a systematic review of organizational career management research reported generally positive effects across diverse organizational contexts and emphasized the importance of mediating and moderating mechanisms in explaining these relationships (Zhao et al., 2022). The present review extends this evidence by focusing specifically on career development as a mediating variable and by synthesizing findings across higher education and other professional sectors, with particular attention to the Pakistani context.

RQ3: Theoretical Frameworks Underpinning Career Development as a Mediator

The reviewed studies demonstrate that career development has been examined through multiple theoretical perspectives, indicating that no single theoretical framework fully captures the complexity of the construct. Social Exchange Theory (SET) provides an important explanation of reciprocal relationships between employees and organizations, particularly where organizational investment in career development is perceived as support that may be reciprocated through positive attitudes and behaviors (Blau, 2017). Human Capital Theory explains career development through investments in employee knowledge, skills, and productivity (Karunia et al., 2023; Mehreen & Ali, 2022), while the Resource-Based View emphasizes the development of organizational capabilities through valuable human resources (Laras et al., 2021). Agency Theory provides an alternative perspective by highlighting the alignment of individual and organizational interests (Malokani et al., 2023), whereas Conservation of Resources Theory emphasizes employees' efforts to acquire and protect resources that support resilience and engagement (Okon et al., 2025).

These perspectives are complementary rather than mutually exclusive. SET is particularly useful for explaining the relational pathway through which organizational support may translate into employee outcomes, while Human Capital Theory and the Resource-Based View emphasize the developmental and strategic value of career investments (Becker, 1989; Barney, 1991). Agency Theory and Conservation of Resources Theory provide additional explanations concerning goal alignment and resource preservation (Jensen & Meckling, 2019; Hobfoll, 1989). Therefore, the findings do not justify identifying SET as the “best” or universally most suitable theory. Rather, SET appears particularly relevant to the present review because the mediating role of career development involves a reciprocal relationship between institutional support and employee responses, especially in the context of HEIs.

RQ3 is therefore addressed by demonstrating that career development is supported by a pluralistic theoretical foundation, with SET offering a particularly useful relational explanation while other theories provide complementary perspectives. Future research may benefit from integrating these theoretical lenses according to the specific organizational and cultural context under investigation.

CONCLUSION

This systematic literature review indicates that career development (CD) can function as an important mediating mechanism linking organizational and institutional practices with employee outcomes, including faculty engagement, job satisfaction, retention, performance, and organizational citizenship behavior. Although career development has been widely examined in corporate and other professional settings, its role within higher education institutions (HEIs), particularly in developing countries such as Pakistan, remains comparatively underexplored. The findings suggest that Social Exchange Theory provides a useful relational perspective for understanding how institutional support may translate into positive faculty outcomes through career development, while other theoretical perspectives offer complementary explanations.

The review further indicates that career development has potential to contribute to faculty retention, job satisfaction, engagement, and other organizational outcomes, but its integration into institutional policies and practices remains uneven. Evidence from other sectors and geographical contexts suggests that the mediating role of career development may extend beyond higher education; however, the limited number of eligible studies and diversity of contexts require cautious interpretation. Future research should therefore examine career development through longitudinal and context-sensitive designs and further investigate the conditions under which it mediates relationships between organizational practices and employee outcomes.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Despite the insights provided by this review, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the geographical coverage of the included studies was limited, with evidence concentrated in Pakistan, Indonesia, Tanzania, and Nigeria. This limits the generalizability of the findings and highlights the need for future reviews and empirical studies covering a wider range of countries and institutional contexts.

Second, the predominance of cross-sectional research limits the ability to establish the long-term effects of career development and to draw strong causal conclusions regarding outcomes such as retention, engagement, and job satisfaction. Future studies should therefore employ longitudinal designs and, where appropriate, mixed-method or experimental approaches to provide stronger evidence concerning temporal and causal relationships.

Third, the reviewed studies employed diverse theoretical perspectives, including Social Exchange Theory, Human Capital Theory, Resource-Based View, Agency Theory, and Conservation of Resources Theory. Although this theoretical diversity provides broader explanations of career development, the lack of a consistent theoretical foundation may limit comparability across studies. Future research could integrate complementary theoretical perspectives according to the organizational and cultural context under investigation.

Fourth, the review was restricted to English-language, peer-reviewed, and open-access publications. This may have excluded relevant studies published in other languages, non-open-access journals, or sources not captured by the selected databases, thereby introducing potential selection and publication bias. Future reviews could expand database coverage, include additional languages where feasible, and incorporate a broader range of scholarly sources.

Finally, the limited number of studies examining organizational citizenship behavior (OCB), particularly in relation to career development within HEIs, represents an important area for future research. Further empirical investigation is needed to determine how career development practices influence faculty members' discretionary behaviors and OCB in academic institutions.

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DATA AVAILABILITY

The data supporting the findings of this study are derived from publicly available sources. All relevant data are included within the article, and the referenced studies can be accessed through the cited literature.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study is a systematic literature review based solely on previously published studies and publicly available data sources. As no primary data were collected and no human participants were directly involved, ethical approval was not required. The review process followed established academic guidelines, and all sources have been appropriately cited to ensure transparency, integrity, and avoidance of plagiarism.

ABBREVIATIONS

HRD: Human Resource Development, HEIs: Higher Education Institutions, SLR: Systematic Literature Review, SET: Social Exchange Theory, CD: Career Development, OCB: Organizational Citizenship Behaviour.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict in the publication of this article.

AUTHOR'S CONTRIBUTION

Haseebullah Memon led the conceptualization and methodology of the study, and drafted the original manuscript. Hana Hamidi supported the methodology, and assisted in writing and manuscript revision. Agatha Lamentan Muda contributed in critical review and editing. All authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript.

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