Trust as a Mediator in Employee Retention: Exploring Organizational Culture, Work Environment, and Corporate Image in Open Online Flexible Distance Learning Institutions

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Abstract

Employee retention has become critical in higher education, particularly for open online distance learning institutions. These institutions rely heavily on academicians to deliver quality education and maintain organizational stability. Retaining skilled academic personnel is essential for sustaining educational standards and fostering long-term institutional growth and reputation. The present study aimed to explore the influence of organizational culture, corporate image, and work environment on employee retention, specifically emphasising the mediating role of trust within these relationships. Data were collected through structured survey questionnaires distributed to academicians in distance learning institutions, yielding a robust sample size of 301 responses suitable for analysis. The study employed Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) to analyze the data, ensuring a comprehensive assessment of the hypothesized relationships. Hypotheses testing revealed significant direct effects of organizational culture and corporate image on employee retention, while trust emerged as a vital mediator that significantly enhanced retention outcomes. The findings underscore both theoretical and practical implications grounded in Social Exchange Theory. The study confirms the importance of fostering a positive organizational culture and corporate image to build and maintain employee trust, thereby enhancing retention. Institutions should create collaborative, inclusive environments aligned with employees' values to boost organizational commitment. Additionally, initiatives to improve workplace conditions can further strengthen trust and satisfaction. Future research could delve deeper into how these factors influence trust. Longitudinal studies may offer insights into the evolving nature of these relationships over time. Investigating demographic influences on these dynamics and exploring parallel studies in traditional educational settings could enhance the generalizability of the findings. Future studies can help develop tailored strategies to boost retention across diverse educational landscapes by advancing understanding in this area.

Introduction

Employee retention in higher education institutions (HEIs), especially in open online flexible distance learning environments, is crucial for ensuring educational quality and operational continuity. Ikram et al (2021), highlight the role of internal corporate responsibility in enhancing branding and retention by aligning with employee values and expectations. Successfully retaining employees in these institutions ensures stability, leverages experienced talent and aids in achieving educational missions effectively (Kebah et al., 2019). Globally, HEIs face persistent challenges in employee retention (Osman et al, 2018). For instance, in Pakistan, Butt et al (2020), emphasize that staff retention is critical for achieving a sustainable competitive advantage. Current trends indicate a growing need for flexible work arrangements, career development opportunities, and non-monetary incentives (Li et al., 2020). Mata et al (2021), emphasize the significant influence of motivational factors on retention, indicating that professional development and workplace culture play essential roles beyond financial rewards. Leadership and human resource practices are also pivotal, as identified by Iqbal et al (2022), and Alajlani and Yesufu (2022), who discuss the gaps in leadership performance impacting retention. This is particularly relevant as educational landscapes evolve, requiring adaptable leadership approaches (Kebah et al., 2019). Despite these insights, research gaps remain, particularly in understanding organizational culture's dynamic influence on retention within distance learning contexts. Altassan and Rahman (2023), explore these cultural effects yet indicate a need for further investigation into how culture and work environment affect retention. While remuneration and job satisfaction are acknowledged factors impacting retention (Ki et al., 2022), the intricate relationships involving cultural and work environments in open-distance learning environments are less understood. This research holds significant implications for policymakers. It underscores the need for supportive policies and guidelines that promote sustainable engagement and retention of employees. For HEIs, particularly those offering open distance learning, the insights offer pathways to develop supportive organizational cultures and leadership models that align with employee priorities. Finally, employees benefit from increased job satisfaction and career progression opportunities, reinforcing their commitment to the institution. This holistic approach ensures that HEIs can effectively support their academic missions and workforce stability, adapting to future education challenges. This study aims to assess the direct and indirect relationship between work environment, organizational culture, corporate image, and employee retention with trust as a mediator among academicians in open online distance learning higher education institutions.

Literature Review

Underpinning Theory

Social Exchange Theory, introduced by Homans (1958), suggests that human relationships are maintained through a cost-benefit analysis, where individuals seek to maximize rewards while minimizing costs. In higher education institutions, this theory can explain how organizational culture, work environment, and corporate image contribute to employee retention through trust as a mediator. Organizational culture fosters an environment of trust and support, which can lead to higher employee satisfaction and loyalty (Blau, 1964). When employees perceive a positive and inclusive culture, they are more likely to feel valued and are thus more inclined

to remain with the institution. Work environment is also crucial; supportive colleague relationships can enhance job satisfaction and commitment to the institution by reinforcing a shared positive culture (Emerson, 1976). Furthermore, the corporate image of an institution affects how employees view their workplace. A strong and positive corporate image boosts employees' professional pride and motivation, contributing to job satisfaction (Homans, 1958). Trust mediates these relationships by enhancing the perception that the benefits of staying outweigh the costs, making employees more likely to remain with the organization. These interconnected elements highlight the applicability of Social Exchange Theory in understanding retention in higher education, where fostering trust and leveraging organizational strengths are key to maintaining a committed workforce.

Relationship between Corporate Image, Trust & Employee Retention
The relationship between corporate image and employee retention is crucial in organizational behaviour, with trust as a vital mediator (Kumari et al., 2021). A positive corporate image enhances employee retention by fostering pride and belonging. When employees see their institution as reputable and socially responsible, their identification grows, increasing loyalty (Yasin, 2021). Trust mediates this by forming the basis of genuine employee engagement; it ensures employees view the corporate image as credible and aligned with their values, strengthening their commitment to stay (Chen et al., 2021). Trust is built through transparent communication and consistent leadership actions, ensuring organizational practices match promises made to stakeholders (Salam & Jahed, 2023). As trust builds, employees feel secure in their roles and align with the institution's long-term vision, reducing turnover (Yadav et al., 2020). This trust is strengthened when corporate values align with employees', fostering a harmonious environment where employees feel valued (Rawshdeh et al., 2023). Thus, trust mediates and enhances corporate image's impact on retention by transforming it from a superficial brand to a meaningful organizational identity (Le, 2023). Consequently, building a strong, authentic corporate image that employees trust is essential for higher education institutions aiming to retain top talent and achieve long-term success (Tian et al., 2020). Therefore, the following hypotheses were proposed for this study:

> *H1:   There is a relationship between corporate image and employee retention in open online flexible distance learning higher education institutions*

> *H2:   There is a relationship between corporate image and employee trust in open online flexible distance learning higher education institutions*

> *H3:   There is a mediating effect of employee trust on the relationship between corporate image and employee retention in open online flexible distance learning higher education institutions*

Relationship between Organizational Culture, Trust & Employee Retention
The interplay between organizational culture and employee retention is pivotal in shaping a productive and loyal workforce, with trust as a key mediator in this dynamic. A strong organizational culture, characterized by shared values, open communication, and collaborative practices, can significantly enhance employee retention (Salvador et al., 2022). Employees who perceive a positive culture are more likely to feel aligned with the organization's goals, boosting their sense of belonging and commitment (Widhy et al., 2021).

Trust mediates this relationship by creating a foundation of reliability and psychological safety that enhances employee engagement. When trust is present, employees feel confident that their contributions are valued and that the organization will act in their best interests (Naz et al., 2020). This trust is fostered through consistent leadership behaviour, equitable policies, and transparent communication, reinforcing employees' faith in the organization's integrity and intentions (Saleh & Atan, 2021). As trust solidifies, employees are more inclined to remain with the organization, as they believe in a fair and supportive work environment. Additionally, a trustworthy organizational culture reduces uncertainty, making employees less likely to seek opportunities elsewhere (Jun et al., 2024). Ultimately, trust mediates and amplifies organisational culture's influence on retention by transforming abstract cultural values into practical, everyday experiences that resonate with employees' personal and professional aspirations (Ko & Campbell, 2021). This underscores the necessity for institutions, particularly in higher education, to cultivate cultures of trust to retain talent effectively. Thus, the following hypotheses were proposed for this study:

> *H4:* *There is a relationship between organizational culture and employee retention in open online flexible distance-learning higher education institutions*

> *H5:* *There is a relationship between organizational culture and employee trust in open online flexible distance learning higher education institutions*

> *H6:* *There is a mediating effect of employee trust on the relationship between organizational culture and employee retention in open online flexible distance learning higher education institutions*

Relationship between Work Environment, Trust & Employee Retention
The relationship between peer influence and employee retention is a significant factor in organizational success, with trust playing a critical mediating role. Peer influence refers to colleagues' impact on an individual's behavior and attitudes within the workplace, encompassing support, motivation, and shared values. (Naz et al., 2020) When employees experience positive peer interactions, they often feel more connected and engaged within their organization, which can significantly increase their likelihood of staying (Sharma & Sharma, 2021). Trust mediates this relationship by creating a sense of security and mutual respect within teams. When trust is present, employees are more likely to rely on and value the input and support of their peers, enhancing collaboration and cohesion (Yadav et al., 2020). This trust is cultivated through consistent peer behaviours that embody reliability, integrity, and mutual respect, reinforcing a positive group dynamic (Baquero, 2023). As trust deepens, employees feel confident in their work environment, knowing they have dependable support systems, which decreases their desire to leave (Yusliza et al., 2021). Trust transforms peer influence from merely a social interaction into a powerful retention tool, ensuring that employees perceive their workplace as a collaborative community (Putra & Ketut, 2024). This highlights the importance for organizations, particularly in dynamic environments such as higher education, to foster trust-rich cultures that leverage peer influence to retain talent effectively (Varma & Kaur, 2024). Hence, the following hypotheses were proposed for this study:

H7:   There is a relationship between work environment and employee retention in open online flexible distance-learning higher education institutions

H8:   There is a relationship between work environment and employee trust in open online flexible distance learning higher education institutions

H9:   There is a relationship between employee trust and employee retention in open online flexible distance-learning higher education institutions

H10:   There is a mediating effect of employee trust on the relationship between work environment and employee retention in open online flexible distance learning higher education institutions
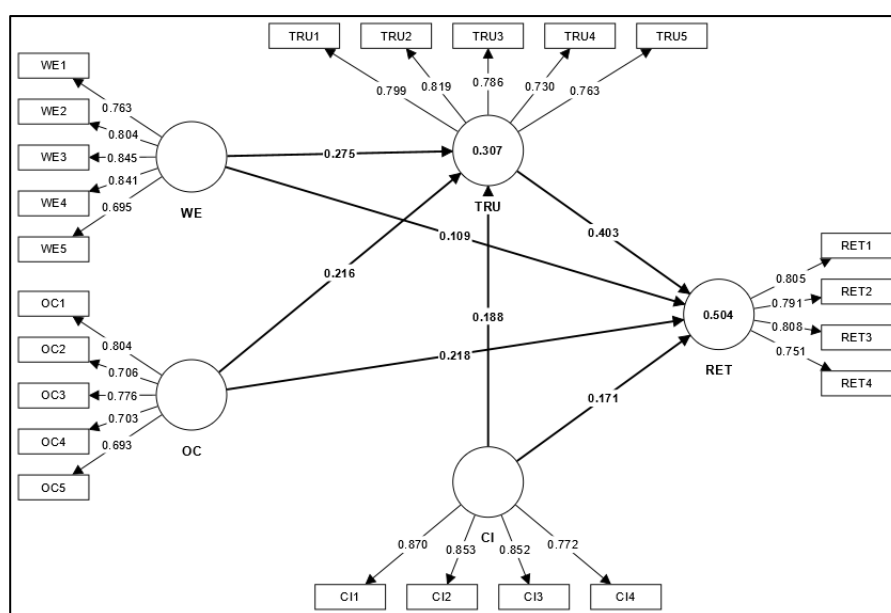

Figure 1: Research Model
Notes: WE=Work Environment   OC=Organizational Culture   CI=Corporate Image
TRU=Employee Trust   RET=Employee Retention

Methodology

This study sought to explore the direct and indirect effects of the work environment, organizational culture, and corporate image on employee retention, focusing on trust as a mediator among academicians in open online flexible distance learning higher education institutions. Researchers carefully gathered primary data to achieve this goal, selecting reliable and valid measurements through a comprehensive literature review. Survey questionnaires were emailed to selected participants using purposive sampling due to the lack of a complete population list. The analysis covered 23 observed variables, including the independent variables of the work environment (5 items) from Kundu & Lata (2017), organizational culture (5 items) from Van den Berg & Wilderom (2004), and corporate image (4 items) from (Lee, 2004). The mediating variable was employees' trust (5 items) from Saparito et al (2004), and the dependent variable was employee retention (4 items) from (Kundu & Lata, 2017). Respondents rated each construct using a Likert scale with five response options, forming a substantial dataset. Of the 465 surveys distributed, 358 were

returned, reflecting a strong response rate of 76.9% suitable for structural equation modelling (SEM). After review, 301 surveys were valid for analysis. Researchers utilized Smartpls4 software, which was noted for its SEM prowess, to perform data analysis and hypothesis testing. This was chosen due to the software's robust ability to handle multivariate data analysis, aligning with the study's aims and following (Ringle et al., 2022). Smartpls4 enabled detailed evaluation of the hypotheses and facilitated comprehensive multivariate data analysis, allowing for an in-depth assessment of both measurement and structural models.

Data Analysis
Respondents' Profiles
The respondent profile in this study provides a comprehensive overview of the demographic distribution based on gender, age, years of employment, and professional position within the institution. Regarding gender representation, the sample comprises 142 males, accounting for 47.2% of the respondents, and 159 females, making up 52.8%, indicating a slight female majority in the participant pool. Age distribution reveals that individuals aged 41-50 represent the largest group, comprising 32.6% (98 respondents), followed by those aged 31-40 at 29.9% (90 respondents). Respondents under 30 years from 11.3% (34 individuals), the 51-60 years group includes 17.6% (53 individuals), and those over 60 constitute 8.6% (26 individuals), illustrating a diverse age range with a significant concentration in the middle age brackets. Regarding employment duration, those with 11-15 years of service represent the largest segment at 29.9% (90 individuals), closely followed by employees with 16-20 years at 24.6% (74 individuals). Employees with 6-10 years make up 23.6% (71 respondents), while 14.3% have 21-25 years of service (43 respondents), and a small fraction of 5% (15 respondents) have been employed for less than 5 years. Those over 25 years account for just 2.7% (8 individuals), suggesting a workforce with considerable experience. Regarding professional roles, the majority are Senior Lecturers, comprising 56.8% (171 individuals), followed by Lecturers at 35.2% (106 individuals). Associate Professors make up 7.6% (23 respondents), whereas Professors are rare, with only one individual (0.3%).

Common Method Bias
The analysis of common method bias (CMB) using full collinearity testing involves examining each construct's variance inflation factors (VIFs) to identify potential multicollinearity issues that could suggest common method bias. In Table 1, the VIF values are provided for the constructs of Student Retention (RET), Work Environment (WE), Organizational Culture (OC), Corporate Image (CI), and Student Trust (TRU). According to Kock (2015), a VIF value above 3.3 indicates potential common method bias concerns. However, all VIF values in this analysis are well below this threshold, with the highest VIF being 1.946 for Student Retention under the influence of other constructs. Specifically, Work Environment has VIF values ranging from 1.316 to 1.885, Organizational Culture from 1.491 to 1.938, Corporate Image from 1.276 to 1.321, and Student Trust from 1.420 to 1.930. These values suggest a low likelihood of multicollinearity and minimal common method bias influence across the constructs. The relatively low VIF scores across all constructs imply that the measurement model is unlikely to be compromised by shared method variance. This aligns with recommendations by Kock and Lynn (2012), who emphasize the importance of addressing multicollinearity to prevent misleading results in SEM. The findings suggest that the relationships among the variables are primarily due to their underlying theoretical connections rather than artefacts of the data collection method.

Table 1
Full Collinearity

	RET	WE	OC	CI	TRU
RET		1.946	1.871	1.733	1.594
WE	1.885		1.456	1.880	1.854
OC	1.855	1.491		1.878	1.938
CI	1.276	1.316	1.321		1.321
TRU	1.420	1.705	1.741	1.930	

Measurement Model
The analysis of construct reliability and validity (Table 2) begins with examining the key metrics: Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability, average variance extracted (AVE), and item loadings as presented in the table. For the Corporate Image construct, item loadings range from 0.772 to 0.870, which are excellent and above the general threshold of 0.7, suggesting strong indicators of the construct. The Cronbach's alpha of 0.857 and composite reliability of 0.859 exceed the acceptable limit of 0.7, indicating high reliability. An AVE of 0.702 further confirms adequate convergent validity, as it surpasses the 0.5 benchmark, suggesting that the construct captures more than half of the variance in the indicators. The Organizational Culture construct shows item loadings between 0.693 and 0.804. While OC5 has the lowest loading at 0.693, it is still close to the acceptable boundary. The Cronbach's alpha of 0.790 and composite reliability of 0.792 indicate satisfactory reliability, though slightly lower than the Corporate Image, yet still above the threshold. An AVE of 0.544 suggests adequate convergent validity but may benefit from improved loadings on some items. For the Work Environment, item loadings are strong, spanning from 0.695 to 0.845, demonstrating good alignment with the construct. The Cronbach's alpha of 0.851 and composite reliability of 0.875 highlight excellent reliability. An AVE of 0.627 points to sufficient convergent validity, confirming that the construct explains a substantial portion of the variance in indicators. The Employee Retention construct has loadings between 0.751 and 0.808, robustly indicating the construct components. A Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability of 0.798 and 0.805 suggest solid internal consistency, with an AVE of 0.622 corroborating convergent validity. Lastly, for Trust, loadings range from 0.730 to 0.819, all above 0.7, supporting strong construct representation. The Cronbach's alpha of 0.839 and composite reliability of 0.843 signify high reliability. The AVE of 0.608, exceeding the minimum criterion, indicates sound convergent validity.

Table 2
Construct Reliability and Validity & Item Loadings

Constructs	Indicators	Loadings	CA	CR	AVE
Corporate Image	CI1	0.870	0.857	0.859	0.702
	CI2	0.853			
	CI3	0.852			
	CI4	0.772			
	OC1	0.804			
Organizational Culture	OC2	0.706	0.790	0.792	0.544
	OC3	0.776			
	OC4	0.703			
	OC5	0.693			
Work Environment	WE1	0.763	0.851	0.875	0.627
	WE2	0.804			
	WE3	0.845			
	WE4	0.841			
	WE5	0.695			
Employee Retention	RET1	0.805	0.798	0.805	0.622
	RET2	0.791			
	RET3	0.808			
	RET4	0.751			
Trust	TRU1	0.799	0.839	0.843	0.608
	TRU2	0.819			
	TRU3	0.786			
	TRU4	0.730			
	TRU5	0.763			

Notes: CA=Cronbach Alpha   CR=Composite Reliability   AVE=Average Variance Extracted

The Hetrotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio analysis provides insights into discriminant validity by evaluating correlations between different constructs relative to those within the same construct. HTMT values should generally be below 0.85 to ensure that constructs are distinct (Henseler et al., 2015). In Table 3, all HTMT ratios indicate satisfactory discriminant validity, well below this threshold. The HTMT ratio between Corporate Image and Organizational Culture is 0.464; with Work Environment, it is 0.446; and with Retention, it is 0.540. For organizational culture, the HTMT ratio with work environment is 0.785, the highest reported value yet acceptable, indicating that these constructs are closely related but distinct. Organizational Culture, Retention, and Trust ratios are 0.670 and 0.564, respectively. Work Environment's HTMT with Retention is 0.602, and with Trust is 0.560. The HTMT between Retention and Trust is 0.751, confirming sufficient discriminant validity. Overall, the analysis supports the distinct identity of each construct within the framework.

Table 3
Hetrotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) Ratios

Constructs	CI	OC	WE	RET
OC	0.464			
WE	0.446	0.785		
RET	0.540	0.670	0.602	
TRU	0.446	0.564	0.560	0.751

Structural Model

In this study, the structural model evaluation followed the approach by Hair et al. (2017), focusing on pathway coefficients (β) and coefficients of determination (R^2). The Partial Least Squares (PLS) method was applied, utilizing 5000 sub-samples to assess the significance of path coefficients. The results of hypothesis testing, including confidence intervals for path coefficients (beta), associated t-statistics, and p-values, are detailed in Table 4. This rigorous analysis provides critical insights into the significance and strength of the relationships among variables within the structural model. The detailed presentation in Table 4 offers an in-depth analysis of each hypothesis, showcasing Beta coefficients, T-statistics, P-values, and the final decisions on hypothesis support. This enhances the study's findings by providing a clearer and deeper understanding of the interactions between the variables examined. Analyzing the hypotheses testing results provides significant insights into the relationships among corporate image, organizational culture, work environment, employee trust, and employee retention. *Hypothesis H1*, which posits a direct relationship between corporate image and employee retention, is supported by a beta coefficient of 0.171, a t-statistic of 3.156, and a p-value of 0.002, indicating a significant effect. Similarly, *H2*, which examines the impact of corporate image on employee trust, is accepted with a beta of 0.188, a t-statistic of 3.540, and a p-value of 0.000, emphasizing corporate image's strong influence on building trust. The mediated relationship proposed in *H3*, where corporate image affects employee retention through trust, is also supported, with a beta of 0.076, a t-statistic of 3.140, and a p-value of 0.002. This underscores the mediating role of trust in enhancing retention through a positive corporate image. Hypotheses relating to organizational culture show similar patterns.

H4 suggests a direct link between organizational culture and employee retention, supported by a beta of 0.218, a t-statistic of 3.243, and a p-value of 0.001. *H5* confirms the positive impact of organizational culture on trust with a beta of 0.216, a t-statistic of 3.516, and a p-value of 0.000. Additionally, *H6*, which details the mediating effect of trust in the relationship between organizational culture and employee retention, is accepted, as reflected by a beta of 0.087, a t-statistic of 3.457, and a p-value of 0.001, highlighting trust as a critical mediator. Conversely, the direct impact of the work environment on employee retention *(H7)* is not supported, evidenced by a beta of 0.109, a t-statistic of 1.541, and a p-value of 0.123, indicating no significant effect.

However, *H8* reinforces the strong influence of the work environment on employee trust, with a beta of 0.275, a t-statistic of 4.008, and a p-value of 0.000. *H9* was also supported, with employee trust showing a substantial effect on retention, highlighted by a beta of 0.403, a t-statistic of 7.946, and a p-value of 0.000. Finally, *H10*, exploring the mediated pathway from work environment through trust to employee retention, is valid, with a beta of 0.111, a t-

statistic of 3.318, and a p-value of 0.001. The summary of the hypotheses testing results is shown in Table 4.

Table 4
Hypotheses Testing Results

Hypotheses	Beta	T statistics	P values	2.50%	97.50%	Decision
H1: CI -> RET	0.171	3.156	0.002	0.059	0.269	*Accepted*
H2: CI -> TRU	0.188	3.540	0.000	0.080	0.288	*Accepted*
H3: CI -> TRU -> RET	0.076	3.140	0.002	0.032	0.127	*Accepted*
H4: OC -> RET	0.218	3.243	0.001	0.083	0.342	*Accepted*
H5: OC -> TRU	0.216	3.516	0.000	0.094	0.335	*Accepted*
H6: OC -> TRU -> RET	0.087	3.457	0.001	0.042	0.141	*Accepted*
H7: WE -> RET	0.109	1.541	0.123	-0.032	0.245	*Rejected*
H8: WE -> TRU	0.275	4.008	0.000	0.138	0.405	*Accepted*
H9: TRU -> RET	0.403	7.946	0.000	0.304	0.502	*Accepted*
H10: WE -> TRU -> RET	0.111	3.318	0.001	0.053	0.186	*Accepted*

Notes: significance p<0.05

Table 5 provides a detailed analysis of effect sizes (f^2), categorized according to Cohen's (1992) guidelines: small (0.020 to 0.150), medium (0.150 to 0.350), or large (0.350 or greater). The effect sizes observed in the study range from small (0.012) to large (0.227), highlighting the varying impact of the variables considered. Additionally, the Intrinsic Value Inflation Factor (VIF) values in Table 5 are consistently below the threshold of 5, with the highest value being 1.935. This low level of collinearity supports the reliability of size comparisons and coefficient interpretations within the structural model. The robustness of the model is further evidenced by a substantial explained variance for the endogenous construct, with an R^2 value of 0.504, as shown in Figure 1. Regarding the mediator, the model successfully accounts for about 30.7% of the variance, as indicated by an R^2 value of 0.307, demonstrating its effectiveness in capturing the mediation dynamics.

Table 5
Effect Sizes (f^2) & Variance Inflation Factors (VIF)

	f^2		VIF	
Constructs	RET	TRU	RET	TRU
CI	0.046	0.042	1.275	1.224
OC	0.051	0.037	1.888	1.821
WE	0.012	0.060	1.935	1.826
TRU	0.227		1.444	

The evaluation of the model's inference and managerial implications included a thorough out-of-sample predictive analysis using the PLSpredict method, as recommended by Shmueli et al. (2016, 2019). As shown in Table 6, the use of PLS-SEM resulted in significantly higher Q^2 predictions (>0) when compared to naive mean predictions and consistently demonstrated lower Root Mean Square Error (RMSE) values than those of linear model (LM) benchmarks, showcasing its predictive solid capabilities. Remarkably, in all nine instances, the RMSE values for PLS-SEM predictions outperformed the linear model predictions, highlighting the proposed model's predictive strength as illustrated in Table 6. The integration of the Cross-

Validated Predictive Ability Test (CVPAT) by Hair et al (2022), combined with its application alongside the PLSpredict analysis by Liengaard et al. (2021), represents significant progress in predictive modelling techniques. Additionally, Table 8 confirms the superior predictive abilities of PLS-SEM, as evidenced by lower average loss values compared to indicator averages and LM benchmarks, providing robust support for its enhanced predictive performance.

Table 6
PLSpredicts

Indicators	Q^2predict	PLS-RMSE	LM-RMSE	PLS-LM
RET1	0.299	0.543	0.550	-0.007
RET2	0.218	0.547	0.560	-0.013
RET3	0.244	0.593	0.610	-0.017
RET4	0.139	0.651	0.661	-0.010
TRU1	0.221	0.561	0.566	-0.005
TRU2	0.181	0.560	0.575	-0.015
TRU3	0.120	0.607	0.609	-0.002
TRU4	0.153	0.620	0.638	-0.018
TRU5	0.192	0.553	0.567	-0.014

Table 7
Cross Validated Predictive Ability Test (CVPAT)

	Average loss difference	t-value	p-value
RET	-0.098	5.389	0.000
TRU	-0.070	4.135	0.000
Overall	-0.082	5.395	0.000

Ringle and Sarstedt (2016), along with Hair et al. (2018), introduced Importance Performance Map Analysis (IPMA) to evaluate the significance and effectiveness of latent variables in explaining acceptance, as elaborated in Table 8. Trust is the most critical construct, with an importance of 0.403 but a lower performance score of 60.925, suggesting a need for improvement. Enhancing trust through transparent communication and consistent leadership could significantly impact outcomes. Organizational Culture has an importance of 0.305 and a performance score of 66.026, indicating room for growth by promoting inclusivity and shared values. Corporate Image, with a significance of 0.247 and performance at 67.610, performs relatively well yet could be strengthened through increased external communication and community involvement. The Work Environment has the lowest importance score at 0.220 and a performance score of 66.528. Improving this could involve enhancing physical and psychological workplace conditions, like ergonomic improvements and work-life balance initiatives, to boost employee satisfaction and retention.

Table 8
Importance-Performance Map Analysis (IPMA)

Constructs	Importance	Performance
CI	0.247	67.610
OC	0.305	66.026
WE	0.220	66.528
TRU	0.403	60.925

Discussion & Conclusion

Discussion
In open online flexible distance learning higher education institutions, positively influencing employee retention among academicians can be effectively achieved through strategic enhancements in the work environment, organizational culture, and corporate image, with employee trust serving as a crucial mediator. From the data analysis, the β values demonstrate the impact of these constructs on retention. Organizational culture holds a β of 0.218 for its direct effect on retention, indicating that fostering a culture of collaboration, inclusivity, and shared values fosters employees' sense of belonging and satisfaction. By embedding these values into everyday practices, institutions can create environments where trust is naturally built, as reflected in the strong β value for trust (0.403) directly affecting retention. Similarly, the corporate image has a β of 0.171 on retention, suggesting that a reputable and socially responsible image amplifies employees' pride and identification with their institution. When trust mediates this relationship, the perception of the corporate image becomes more aligned with employees' values, reinforcing their commitment to the institution as indicated by the mediated β of 0.076. The work environment, despite having a lower direct β of 0.109 (not significantly impacting retention alone), can still enhance retention through improvements in the workplace setting that prioritize ergonomic well-being and professional support. Additional measures, such as offering professional development opportunities and recognizing academic achievements, contribute to a supportive environment that fosters trust. By increasing trust through consistent, transparent communication practices, employees are more likely to feel respected and valued, facilitating a positive mediated effect on retention, as suggested by the work environment's significant influence on trust (β of 0.275). These strategies, focused on aligning institutional efforts with trust-building initiatives, provide a comprehensive approach to strengthening retention among academicians in these evolving educational landscapes, thus ensuring the stability and growth of academic institutions.

Theoretical Implications
The theoretical implications of the study, grounded in Social Exchange Theory (SET), provide valuable insights into understanding employee retention dynamics in open online flexible distance learning higher education institutions. SET posits that human relationships are shaped by the exchange of resources, emphasizing reciprocity and mutual benefit (Putra & Ketut, 2024). In this context, the study amplifies SET's relevance by demonstrating how organizational culture, corporate image, and work environment contribute to forming perceived organizational support, which is fundamental to fostering employee trust. Organizational culture reflects SET's premise that a positive cultural exchange—characterized by collaboration and shared values builds employees' reciprocal sense of belonging (Naz et al., 2020). This cultural support aligns with SET by enhancing employees' psychological

attachment and promoting mutual loyalty that impacts retention. Similarly, corporate image underscores the importance of the institution's reputation as a valuable resource exchanged between the organization and its members. A strong corporate image encourages employees to reciprocate through loyalty and retention, aligning with SET's exchange principles. The study also elucidates the mediating role of trust, showcasing its significant impact on retention (Le, 2023). Trust is framed as a product and facilitator of positive exchanges within SET. It serves as the conduit through which the benefits of organizational culture, corporate image, and work environment are effectively translated into employee retention. By validating the exchange of trust as a mediator, the research reinforces SET's applicability to modern organizational contexts, highlighting the need for mutually beneficial relationships that enhance employee commitment and retention (Jun et al., 2024). This theoretical expansion underscores SET as a vital framework for examining complex interpersonal and institutional interactions in educational settings.

Practical Implications
The practical implications of this study are instrumental for open online flexible distance learning higher education institutions seeking to enhance employee retention. By recognizing the critical role of organizational culture, corporate image, and work environment, institutions can adopt targeted strategies to create more supportive and engaging academic contexts. Emphasizing the development of a positive organizational culture can lead to increased collaboration, inclusivity, and shared values, fostering a stronger sense of belonging and loyalty among staff. Enhancing corporate image by aligning institutional values with social responsibility initiatives can further amplify employees' pride and identification with the organization, making them more committed. This can be achieved through transparent communication and active community engagement, increasing overall morale and retention rates. Improving the work environment by focusing on ergonomic well-being, offering professional development opportunities, and recognizing academic achievements can address the specific needs of faculty members, thereby boosting job satisfaction. Importantly, the study highlights the mediating role of trust, suggesting that fostering transparent and consistent communication, coupled with supportive leadership, can significantly strengthen trust, thereby translating into higher retention rates. These practical strategies, rooted in Social Exchange Theory, enable educational institutions to cultivate environments that retain and motivate their academic staff, ensuring sustained institutional success and growth.

Suggestions for Future Study
Future research could explore how organizational culture, corporate image, and work environment cultivate trust in employees within open online flexible distance learning institutions. Given the pivotal role of trust as a mediator, understanding these mechanisms may offer more profound insight into how trust is built and sustained in educational contexts. Additionally, examining the influence of demographic factors, such as age, gender, and years of experience, might reveal how these variables impact perceptions of culture, image, and work environment and, consequently, trust and retention. Furthermore, it would be beneficial to conduct longitudinal studies to assess how changes in organizational practices affect trust and retention over time. Exploring the potential role of digital tools and platforms in enhancing organizational culture and communication could be a valuable study area, particularly as institutions increasingly rely on online platforms for interaction and engagement. Finally, comparative studies across different types of educational institutions,

including traditional on-campus settings, could uncover unique challenges and strategies pertinent to various academic environments, enhancing the generalizability and applicability of the findings. These avenues for future investigation can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of employee retention dynamics in diverse educational settings.

Conclusion

The study underscores the critical interplay between organizational culture, corporate image, and work environment in influencing employee retention, with employee trust as a key mediating factor. Theoretical implications rooted in Social Exchange Theory highlight the role of these constructs in creating a reciprocal and supportive organizational environment that fosters loyalty and commitment among academicians. By viewing trust as a product and facilitator of these exchanges, the study expands SET's applicability to modern, flexible educational contexts, emphasizing the need for mutual benefits in institutional relationships. The findings suggest that institutions should enhance organizational culture through increased collaboration and inclusivity, thereby strengthening employees' psychological attachment. Efforts to bolster corporate image via transparent communication and social responsibility can further amplify employee pride and retention. Improving the work environment with attention to well-being and professional growth aligns with these objectives, fostering a supportive setting that meets staff needs. This study offers a comprehensive framework for improving retention among academicians in open online flexible distance learning institutions. By integrating these theoretical insights and practical strategies, institutions can cultivate environments conducive to trust and loyalty, ensuring sustained success and growth in the evolving educational landscape. Future research can build on these findings to deepen understanding and efficacy in diverse educational settings.

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