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Research Article

The Impact of Declining Student Enrolment on Employee Motivation: A Conceptual Review of Academic and Non-Academic Staff Experiences

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Abstract

Declining student enrolment is a sustained negative change in student numbers rather than a low but stable enrolment level. It increasingly confronts higher education institutions with financial and organisational design choices, including budget reductions, hiring freezes, programme consolidation, shared services, and role redesign. This integrative review examines how those organisational responses shape the motivation of academic and non-academic staff. A structured search of ERIC and Crossref-indexed journal literature was conducted in September 2026, supplemented by backward and forward citation searching. Foundational studies were retained where they defined the relevant theories, and recent studies published from 2021 to 2026 were prioritised for contemporary higher education evidence. The framework separates enrolment decline from institutional responses and proposes four employee-level mechanisms: job insecurity, demand–resource strain, institutional prestige and identity threat, and psychological contract breach with goal ambiguity. Job Demands–Resources theory, Conservation of Resources theory, organisational identification, and psychological contract theory provide the principal explanations for these mechanisms. Employee motivation is the focal outcome; commitment, satisfaction, performance, well-being, and turnover intention are positioned as related or downstream consequences. Six propositions specify the causal sequence and treat staff category as a moderator whose effects depend on employment contracts, occupational group, institution type, leadership communication, organisational support, and the national funding context. The review concludes that organisational design choices can amplify or buffer the motivational consequences of enrolment decline and identifies testable directions for longitudinal and comparative research.

Innovative Organizational Design
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Keywords

Declining student enrolment, Employee motivation, Job insecurity, Job demands and resources, Psychological contract, Organisational identification, Higher education, Organisational design

1. Introduction

Higher education institutions in many national contexts face sustained demographic and competitive pressure on student enrolment. In the United States, the approaching contraction of the college-age population has been described as a demographic storm that may threaten tuition-dependent institutions (Pavlov & Katsamakas, 2020). Comparable pressures arise from falling birth rates, competition, and changing patterns of demand in other systems; recent studies document strategic and governance responses to enrolment contraction in China, Taiwan, and the United States (Lin & Yang, 2026; Torres Lugo & Pingel, 2024; Yue et al., 2025). These pressures are commonly discussed through reduced tuition revenue, programme closure, institutional consolidation, and financial viability.

A less visible but equally consequential dimension of enrolment decline concerns its effect on the people who continue to work inside affected institutions. When institutions respond to falling enrolment with budget cuts, hiring freezes, programme consolidation, or layoffs, the employees who remain — commonly termed “layoff survivors” in the organisational behaviour literature — do not experience these changes as neutral bystanders. They experience them as direct threats to job security, workload sustainability, and professional identity, with well-documented consequences for motivation, commitment, and performance (Brockner, 1988; Cascio, 1993; Noer, 1993).

The focal construct in this review is declining student enrolment, defined as a negative change in student numbers over time. It is distinct from low enrolment, which describes an enrolment level and may be stable. This distinction matters because the mechanisms examined here usually arise when leaders respond to a downward trajectory or an anticipated revenue gap, not from small enrolment numbers alone. The term declining enrolment is therefore used consistently unless a cited study specifically concerns low enrolment as a level.

This review addresses a specific gap. Organisational research has extensively examined downsizing and job insecurity in commercial and industrial settings, but less integrative work has connected that knowledge to declining enrolment in higher education. Transfer to higher education cannot be assumed without qualification because tenure systems, fixed-term and contingent appointments, collective bargaining, academic freedom, professional labour markets, and public funding arrangements change both exposure and employee interpretation. At the same time, recent higher education evidence identifies job insecurity, excessive demands, constrained resources, and limited support as salient conditions for academic and professional staff (Guidetti et al., 2021;

McDaniel & Dean, 2023; Naidoo-Chetty & du Plessis, 2021; Nicholls et al., 2022).

The paper has four objectives: to explain the review method; to build a mechanism-based model that separates declining enrolment from organisational responses; to develop explicit propositions concerning employee motivation and differences between staff groups; and to show how organisational design choices can amplify or buffer the proposed mechanisms. Employee motivation is the principal dependent construct. Organisational commitment, job satisfaction, performance, well-being, trust, and turnover intention are treated as related or downstream outcomes rather than interchangeable focal variables.

2. Review Method

The study uses an integrative literature review, an approach suited to combining mature theories with evidence from distinct disciplinary traditions and developing a new conceptual framework (Snyder, 2019). The review is structured and transparent but is not presented as an exhaustive systematic review or meta-analysis. Searches were conducted in September 2026 in ERIC and Crossref-indexed journal metadata. Search strings combined terms for the environmental condition (declining enrolment, enrolment contraction, demographic decline), organisational responses (downsizing, restructuring, programme closure, consolidation, hiring freeze, shared services), employee mechanisms (job insecurity, workload, burnout, job demands, resources, organisational identity, institutional prestige, psychological contract), outcomes (motivation, engagement, commitment, performance, well-being, turnover), and workforce groups (academic staff, faculty, professional staff, administrative staff, non-academic staff). Backward and forward citation searching was used around foundational and recent higher education studies.

The search considered English-language peer-reviewed conceptual, review, and empirical work published through September 2026. Studies were included when they directly informed at least one link in the proposed sequence: enrolment decline, organisational response, employee perception or mechanism, motivation, or a related employee outcome. Higher education studies were prioritised, while research from other sectors was retained when it established a theory or mechanism that could be transferred with explicit sectoral qualifications. Student-only studies, work concerned solely with recruitment or institutional finance, non-scholarly commentary, duplicates, and sources without a clear workforce or organisational mechanism were excluded. Classic sources published before 2021 were retained for construct definition and theoretical provenance; research from 2021 to 2026 was prioritised to update the higher education and employee-outcome evidence.

The four theoretical domains were selected through concept mapping rather than citation frequency. Job insecurity theory directly explains anticipated job loss and powerlessness; Job Demands–Resources (JD–R) and Conservation of Resources (COR) theories explain workload and

resource depletion; social identity and organisational identification explain prestige-related threats; and psychological contract theory explains perceived breach and violation. Maslow, Herzberg, self-determination, expectancy, goal-setting, and job characteristics theories remain useful background perspectives on motivation and work design, but they do not replace mechanism-specific explanations. This selection also excludes plausible alternatives that do not directly explain the proposed mediating process; for example, institutional theory can explain organisational conformity, but it is less specific about individual motivational reactions to retrenchment.

3. Declining Enrolment as an Organisational Stressor

Enrolment decline rarely operates as a single, discrete event. More typically, it manifests as a slow-moving, multi-year erosion of student numbers that accumulates into visible budgetary and operational strain only after a delay, a pattern consistent with the systems-based modelling of tuition-dependent institutions offered by Pavlov and Katsamakas (2020). This slow-burning quality is organisationally significant: unlike a single, sharply defined crisis, enrolment decline typically unfolds as an ambiguous, prolonged threat, characterised by rolling rounds of budget review, hiring freezes, non-renewal of contract staff, and periodic restructuring announcements, rather than a single clear resolution point.

This ambiguity is theoretically important because it maps closely onto what Greenhalgh and Rosenblatt (1984) termed job insecurity: a perceived, involuntary powerlessness to maintain desired continuity in a threatened job situation. Their foundational model distinguishes job insecurity from actual job loss, arguing that the perception and anticipation of potential loss — rather than loss itself — is often the more psychologically and motivationally consequential state, because it is chronic, ambiguous, and largely outside the individual's control. An enrolment-declining institution is, almost definitionally, an environment saturated with the conditions Greenhalgh and Rosenblatt identify as generative of job insecurity: unclear timelines, incomplete information, and visible precedents of restructuring elsewhere in the sector.

Declining enrolment should nevertheless be treated as an environmental condition rather than a direct employee-level cause. Institutions with the same enrolment trajectory may respond differently because they have different reserves, revenue diversification, public subsidies, debt exposure, mission commitments, and governance arrangements. The model therefore separates the sequence into four stages: declining enrolment; organisational responses; employee perceptions and mechanisms; and employee motivation. Budget reductions, hiring freezes, programme consolidation, centralisation, shared services, non-renewal, and role redesign are the organisational choices that translate an external pressure into work experiences.

The higher education setting also establishes limits on theory transfer. Tenured or civil-service

employees may face lower risk of job loss but still fear programme closure, unwanted reassignment, diminished research opportunity, or loss of professional standing. Fixed-term academics and outsourced or grant-funded workers may face more immediate contract risk. Union consultation and shared governance may slow or reshape restructuring, while academic freedom and disciplinary labour markets can make identity and autonomy especially salient. General downsizing theory is therefore used to identify mechanisms, not to presume identical exposure across sectors or employee groups.

4. Theoretical Foundation

4.1. Motivation and Work Design

Any analysis of motivational decline must be grounded in an explicit theory of what motivation is and how it is generated or eroded in organisational settings. Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs remains a widely referenced starting point, positioning security as a lower-order need that must be adequately satisfied before higher-order needs — belonging, esteem, and self-actualisation — can meaningfully drive behaviour. Applied to the enrolment-decline context, this suggests that when job security is threatened, employees' motivational focus may regress toward security-seeking behaviour (such as job searching or risk-averse task performance) at the expense of the discretionary effort, creativity, and engagement associated with higher-order motivational states.

Herzberg et al.'s (1959) two-factor theory offers a complementary lens, distinguishing hygiene factors, including job security, salary, and working conditions, from motivators such as achievement, recognition, and the work itself. Deterioration in hygiene factors may produce dissatisfaction, but restoring them does not by itself create positive motivation. Self-determination theory similarly predicts motivational loss when restructuring limits autonomy, weakens employees' sense of competence, or disrupts relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Expectancy theory adds that effort is less likely when employees doubt that effort will lead to valued performance or outcomes (Vroom, 1964). Goal-setting theory emphasises specific and attainable goals (Locke & Latham, 2002), while the job characteristics model explains how autonomy, task identity, task significance, skill variety, and feedback shape internal motivation (Hackman & Oldham, 1975). These perspectives are especially relevant to role redesign, but the four mechanisms below require more specific explanatory theories.

4.2. Job Insecurity

Job insecurity theory, as developed by Greenhalgh and Rosenblatt (1984) and substantially extended in subsequent decades, provides the most directly applicable theoretical anchor for this paper's framework. Sverke et al.'s (2002) meta-analytic review confirmed robust, consistent negative relationships between job insecurity and a wide range of employee outcomes, including job

satisfaction, organisational commitment, trust in management, and physical and psychological well-being, alongside positive relationships with turnover intention. De Witte (1999) further distinguished cognitive job insecurity (the perceived likelihood of job loss) from affective job insecurity (the fear and worry associated with that perceived likelihood), a distinction with direct relevance to the enrolment-decline context, since employees may exhibit low cognitive job insecurity while still experiencing elevated affective job insecurity driven by generalised institutional anxiety.

Recent higher education research supports the relevance of this mechanism without implying uniformity. Guidetti et al. (2021) found that individual job insecurity and a climate of insecurity were associated with cynicism and dedication among postdoctoral researchers, while supervisor support mattered to those relationships. Nicholls et al.'s (2022) systematic review and qualitative meta-synthesis likewise identified job insecurity and high expectations as threats to academic researchers' mental health and well-being. These findings make job insecurity a plausible motivational mechanism, while also indicating that supervision, support, and employment status can alter its strength.

4.3. Demand and Resource Strain

JD–R theory proposes that sustained job demands consume physical and psychological energy, whereas job resources support goal attainment, learning, and engagement (Bakker et al., 2023; Demerouti et al., 2001). COR theory adds that individuals seek to protect valued resources and experience stress when resources are threatened, lost, or insufficient to meet demands (Hobfoll, 1989). Enrolment-related vacancies, hiring freezes, larger spans of responsibility, and consolidation may increase workload while reducing time, staffing, autonomy, and developmental support. The mechanism is therefore not workload alone; it is an adverse demands–resources balance that makes sustained effort harder to maintain.

A systematic review of academic staff work identified workload, work–life conflict, job insecurity, autonomy, support, and recognition as recurring demands and resources in higher education (Naidoo-Chetty & du Plessis, 2021). Recent studies also connect overwhelming workload and limited organisational understanding to burnout among student-support staff and identify vulnerability, social exchange, and resilience processes in academic burnout (Figueiredo & Ferreira, 2024; McDaniel & Dean, 2023). This evidence broadens the mechanism beyond academics and supports explicit attention to professional and support roles.

4.4. Institutional Prestige and Identity Threat

Social identity theory holds that people partly define themselves through group membership (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Organisational identification is strengthened when employees perceive their organisation as distinctive and positively evaluated, whereas an unfavourable external image may

threaten self-concept and weaken attachment (Dutton et al., 1994). Declining enrolment can become an identity threat when it is interpreted as evidence that a programme, occupation, campus, or institution has lost legitimacy or standing. The relevant mechanism is employees' perceived identity threat, not an objective assumption that a smaller institution necessarily has lower prestige.

Identity effects may differ by occupational referent. An academic may identify primarily with a discipline, profession, department, or university, whereas a professional staff member may identify more strongly with a service function, institution, or public mission. Department closure may therefore threaten disciplinary continuity for one group and organisational belonging or role continuity for another. These differences are contingent and should be measured rather than assigned in advance.

4.5. Psychological Contract Breach and Goal Ambiguity

Psychological contracts comprise employees' beliefs about reciprocal obligations between themselves and their employer (Rousseau, 1989). Perceived breach arises when employees judge that the organisation has failed to fulfil promised or inferred obligations; perceived violation refers to the emotional response that may follow (Morrison & Robinson, 1997). Repeated restructuring, reassignment, frozen promotion pathways, reduced research or service support, and inconsistent communication can be interpreted as breaches even when formal contracts remain intact.

Recent evidence connects job insecurity and psychological contract breach dynamically rather than treating either as a one-way cause. Within-person research shows that causal attributions condition their relationship, and studies of crisis-induced unpaid leave link breach to emotional exhaustion through distrust and insecurity (Qadri et al., 2022; Vander Elst et al., 2024). Goal ambiguity compounds breach when employees cannot identify stable priorities or credible performance–reward links. The resulting loss of trust and expectancy provides a direct explanation for reduced motivational investment.

4.6. Downsizing and Survivor Responses

Where enrolment decline progresses to active workforce reduction, the organisational downsizing literature becomes directly relevant. Cascio's (1993) review challenged the assumption that downsizing reliably improves organisational performance because motivational and morale costs among remaining staff can erode expected benefits. Brockner (1988) documented that layoff survivors may show reduced commitment, risk-taking, and discretionary effort, while Noer (1993) described guilt, anger, fear, and loss of trust. In higher education, non-renewal, attrition, and repeated small cuts may prolong these reactions because employees cannot identify a clear end point.

4.7. Outcome Boundaries

Employee motivation is the focal outcome in this framework: the direction, intensity, and

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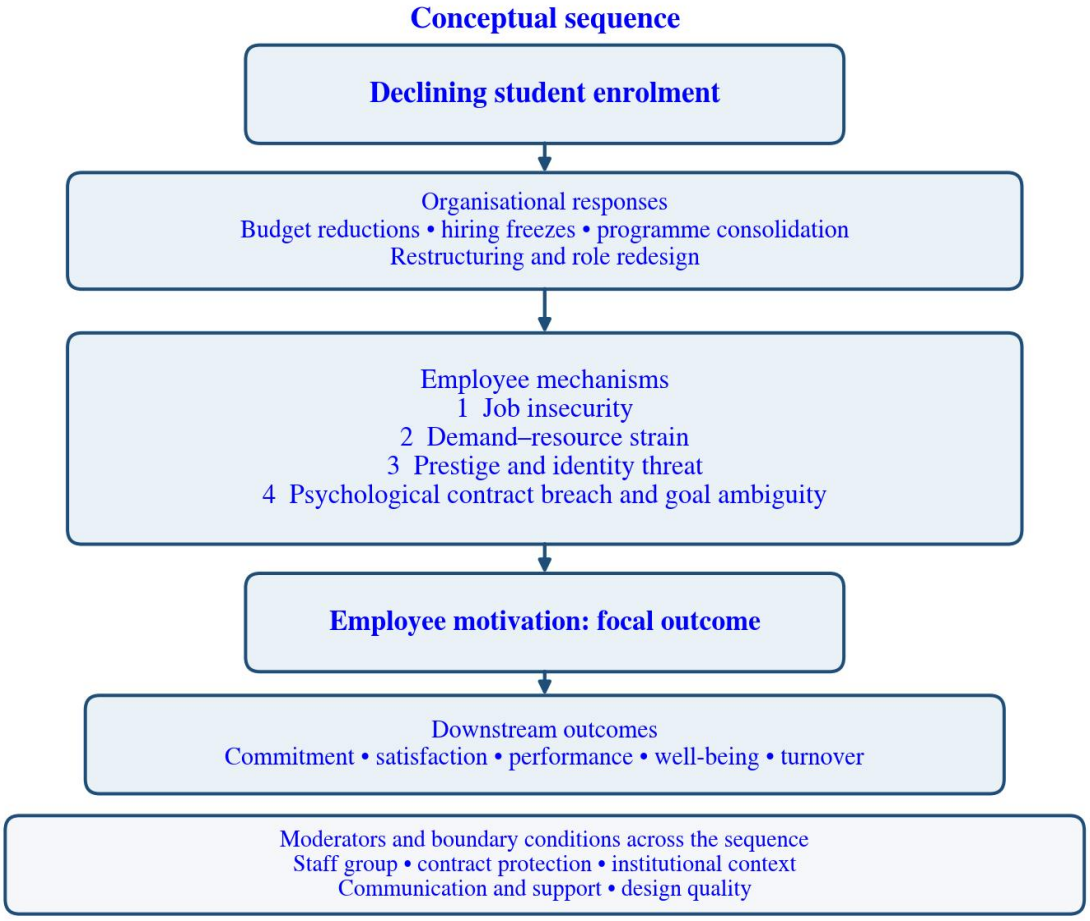
persistence of work-related effort. Organisational commitment is not treated as a substitute dependent variable. Meyer and Allen's (1991) affective, continuance, and normative commitment dimensions are positioned as related attitudes that may change alongside or after motivation. Job satisfaction, trust, well-being, performance, and turnover intention are likewise downstream or associated outcomes. This ordering prevents the framework from treating distinct constructs as interchangeable and permits future studies to test mediation and temporal sequence.

5. Conceptual Framework and Propositions

Figure 1 presents the full conceptual sequence. Declining enrolment creates pressure but does not determine employee reactions. Organisational responses translate that pressure into changes in employment continuity, job demands and resources, identity-relevant signals, and perceived obligations. The four mechanisms then shape employee motivation, with other attitudes and behaviours positioned downstream.

Figure 1

Conceptual model linking declining student enrolment to employee motivation



5.1. Job Insecurity Mechanism

WISDOM ACADEMIC https://doi.org/10.63808/iod.v2i3.511 Volume 2 , Issue 3

Budget reductions, non-renewal, hiring freezes, and unclear restructuring timelines signal possible job loss or unwanted change. Cognitive appraisals of likelihood and affective fear may reduce employees' willingness to invest discretionary effort, particularly when they perceive little control and weak organisational support.

Proposition 1. Organisational responses to declining enrolment that heighten perceived job insecurity will be associated with lower employee motivation.

5.2. Demand and Resource Mechanism

Unfilled vacancies, larger service portfolios, consolidated programmes, and cross-functional assignments may raise demands while reducing time, staffing, autonomy, feedback, and development. JD–R and COR theories predict that persistent imbalance depletes energy and shifts effort toward resource protection rather than engagement.

Proposition 2. Organisational responses to declining enrolment that increase job demands relative to available resources will be associated with lower employee motivation.

5.3. Prestige and Identity Mechanism

Employees may interpret declining applications, programme closure, or public retrenchment as negative signals about the standing of an institution, department, occupation, or professional community. When those signals threaten a valued identity, pride and attachment may weaken, reducing the meaning attached to work.

Proposition 3. Perceived institutional or occupational identity threat arising from organisational responses to declining enrolment will be associated with lower employee motivation.

5.4. Psychological Contract and Goal Mechanism

Employees may perceive breach when restructuring contradicts prior expectations concerning security, development, autonomy, collegiality, resources, or procedural fairness. Shifting priorities and unclear roles additionally weaken goal clarity and expectancy.

Proposition 4. Perceived psychological contract breach and goal ambiguity arising from organisational responses to declining enrolment will be associated with lower employee motivation.

5.5. Organisational Response and Compounding Effects

The mechanisms can interact and compound. Resource strain may be interpreted as evidence of future staffing instability, while identity threat can reduce the benefit of the doubt extended to leaders and increase breach perceptions. Conversely, financial reserves, credible communication, employee participation, supervisor support, workload protection, and fair redesign may interrupt the sequence. The same enrolment decline can therefore yield different motivational outcomes.

WISDOM ACADEMIC https://doi.org/10.63808/iod.v2i3.511 Volume 2 , Issue 3

Proposition 5. The relationship between declining enrolment and employee motivation will be mediated by organisational responses and the resulting employee perceptions, rather than by enrolment decline alone.

Table 1

Theoretical mechanisms and testable links

Mechanism	Principal theory	Employee appraisal	Motivational implication
Job insecurity	Job insecurity theory	Perceived likelihood of job loss or unwanted change; fear and powerlessness	Lower direction, intensity, or persistence of effort (P1)
Demand–resource strain	JD–R theory; COR theory	Workload growth, resource loss, reduced autonomy, insufficient staffing or support	Energy depletion and resource-protective behaviour (P2)
Prestige and identity threat	Social identity; organisational identification	Negative image of institution, programme, occupation, or professional community	Reduced pride, meaning, and identification-based effort (P3)
Psychological contract breach and goal ambiguity	Psychological contract; expectancy and goal-setting	Perceived unfulfilled obligations, distrust, unclear priorities, unstable performance–reward links	Reduced trust and motivational investment (P4)

6. Academic and Non-Academic Staff as a Boundary Condition

Staff category is conceptualised as a moderator and boundary condition, not as a fixed psychological profile. Academic and non-academic employees may differ in exposure channels, employment arrangements, professional identities, decision rights, and labour-market options. Those differences can change which mechanism is most salient, but they do not justify assuming that every academic experiences cognitive insecurity or every non-academic employee experiences affective insecurity.

6.1. Academic Staff

Academic staff may observe class size, cancelled sections, programme reviews, student credit hours, and research support directly. Such information can make risk appraisals more concrete. Programme consolidation may also threaten disciplinary identity, autonomy, curriculum control, and promotion pathways. Exposure varies substantially, however, between tenured, permanent,

WISDOM ACADEMIC https://doi.org/10.63808/iod.v2i3.511 Volume 2 , Issue 3

probationary, adjunct, fixed-term, and grant-funded academics and across public and private funding systems. The evidence on postdoctoral insecurity illustrates this heterogeneity rather than a universal academic pattern (Guidetti et al., 2021).

6.2. Non-Academic Staff

Professional, administrative, technical, facilities, and student-support staff may encounter enrolment decline through budgets, service consolidation, automation, outsourcing, or centralisation. Where decision criteria are opaque, insecurity may be diffuse; where a service is explicitly targeted, risk can be highly concrete. Workload may increase when vacancies remain unfilled or shared services expand portfolios. McDaniel and Dean's (2023) analysis of student-support staff shows why role-specific demands and limited organisational understanding require attention rather than treating non-academic staff as a single category.

6.3. Comparative Propositions

Table 2 states expected relative tendencies and the conditions that may reverse them. Occupational group, contract type, tenure, union protection, institutional mission, tuition dependence, national labour law, and leadership practice should be measured directly in empirical tests.

Table 2

Conditional differences between academic and non-academic staff

Dimension	Academic staff	Non-academic staff	Key boundary conditions
Information exposure	Often direct at programme or course level	Often mediated through institutional budgets or service redesign	Access to data; decision transparency; unit-level dependence on enrolment
Employment risk	Ranges from tenure protection to contingent non-renewal	Ranges from civil-service protection to outsourcing or role elimination	Contract type; tenure; union protection; labour law
Identity referent	May centre on discipline, profession, department, or institution	May centre on occupation, service function, institution, or public mission	Strength and target of identification
Demand–resource change	Teaching, research, advising, and service redistribution	Larger service portfolios, vacancy absorption, centralisation, automation	Role design; staffing ratios; autonomy; training and support

WISDOM ACADEMIC https://doi.org/10.63808/iod.v2i3.511 Volume 2 , Issue 3

Likely response	Cannot be specified solely from staff category	Cannot be specified solely from staff category	Appraisal of threat, fairness, support, and alternatives

Proposition 6. *Staff category will moderate the relative salience of the four mechanisms, but the direction and magnitude of moderation will depend on occupational group, employment contract, institutional context, and the design and communication of organisational responses.*

7. Organisational Design and Practical Implications

Declining enrolment is an organisational design problem because leaders must reallocate tasks, authority, resources, and coordination responsibilities under constraint. Design choices can reduce cost while simultaneously changing autonomy, workload, identity, fairness, and uncertainty. Their motivational effects therefore depend on implementation, not only on the structural form selected.

Table 3

Organisational design choices and motivational safeguards

Design choice	Potential benefit	Motivational risk	Safeguard
Department or programme consolidation	Duplicates may be reduced and scarce expertise pooled	Loss of disciplinary identity; ambiguous governance; increased span of control	Publish criteria; preserve academic voice; clarify decision rights and programme identity
Centralisation and shared services	Standardised processes and resource pooling	Distance from users; role loss; workload transfer; reduced local discretion	Define service levels; retain local escalation rights; monitor workload and response times
Role redesign and cross-functional work	Broader capability and flexible deployment	Role ambiguity, overload, competence threat, weakened task identity	Co-design roles; provide training, autonomy, feedback, and time-limited review
Staffing flexibility and vacancy management	Short-term cost control and redeployment	Job insecurity, survivor strain, loss of expertise	Use transparent criteria; assess workload; prioritise redeployment and development
Resource-allocation systems	Resources follow strategy and demand	Opaque formulas can intensify internal competition and distrust	Make assumptions visible; include mission commitments, quality thresholds, and appeal processes

WISDOM ACADEMIC https://doi.org/10.63808/iod.v2i3.511 Volume 2 , Issue 3

Leadership communication should specify what is known, what remains undecided, the criteria and timetable for decisions, and how employees can participate. This approach addresses cognitive uncertainty without making guarantees that leaders cannot keep. Communication should be paired with supervisor support, workload monitoring, fair procedures, and meaningful employee voice. Reassurance alone cannot offset a design that continually removes resources or changes obligations.

A brief scenario illustrates the difference. Consider a regional university facing a 10% enrolment decline over two years. An across-the-board hiring freeze combined with an unexplained centralisation of advising may shift vacancies to remaining staff, obscure decision rights, and signal further cuts, activating all four mechanisms. An alternative design could consolidate only selected back-office processes, publish the criteria and review date, retain programme-level advising decisions, audit transferred workload, redeploy affected staff where possible, and provide training for revised roles. Both designs seek savings, but the second preserves more resources, control, procedural fairness, and identity continuity. The framework predicts a smaller motivational loss under the second design, a proposition suitable for comparative empirical testing.

8. Limitations and Future Research

This paper is a conceptual integrative review rather than an empirical study or exhaustive systematic review. The propositions require testing before they can be treated as findings. The search was limited to English-language peer-reviewed literature indexed in the selected sources, and the direct evidence linking enrolment decline to employee motivation remains thinner than the evidence for the individual mechanisms. The framework therefore makes explicit where it transfers theory from other sectors and where higher education conditions may alter that transfer.

Longitudinal research should measure enrolment trajectories, specific organisational responses, employee appraisals, motivation, and downstream outcomes at multiple time points. Multilevel designs could separate institution-level decline and design choices from unit-level implementation and individual perceptions. Comparative studies should sample academic and non-academic occupational groups within the same institutions and test staff category alongside contract type, tenure, union protection, leadership communication, organisational support, financial reserves, tuition dependence, and national funding context. Qualitative process studies could examine how employees interpret consolidation, centralisation, shared services, and role redesign, while comparative case studies could identify design configurations that protect motivation without assuming that one structure fits every institution.

Future studies should also distinguish motivation from commitment, satisfaction, well-being, performance, and turnover intention and test their temporal ordering. Validated measures of cognitive and affective job insecurity, job demands and resources, organisational identification, psychological

WISDOM ACADEMIC https://doi.org/10.63808/iod.v2i3.511 Volume 2 , Issue 3

contract breach, and work motivation would permit direct tests of Propositions 1–6. Attention to curvilinear or threshold effects may be valuable because modest decline buffered by reserves may have little employee impact, whereas repeated rounds of visible retrenchment may produce cumulative effects.

9. Conclusion

Declining student enrolment does not automatically reduce employee motivation. It creates financial and strategic pressure that institutions translate into organisational responses. Budget reductions, hiring freezes, programme consolidation, centralisation, shared services, and role redesign then shape job insecurity, the balance between demands and resources, identity-relevant signals, and employees' judgments about organisational obligations and goals. These four mechanisms provide a more precise explanation than a direct enrolment–motivation link.

The framework makes employee motivation the focal outcome, states six testable propositions, treats staff category as a conditional moderator, and places organisational design at the centre of managerial choice. Institutions cannot always prevent demographic contraction, but they can choose how authority, work, resources, and communication are redesigned. Those choices determine whether adaptation protects or further weakens the motivation of the employees required to carry it out.

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