

# Institutional Culture and Differential Treatment: Faculty Professionalism and Power Dynamics in Higher Education

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## ABSTRACT

Equality, fairness, and non-discrimination are widely promoted as core values of professional conduct in contemporary institutions. Yet beneath policy rhetoric, patterns of unequal and differential treatment continue to shape everyday academic life. This longitudinal qualitative study examines how institutional culture, managerial practices, and power dynamics shape faculty experiences of professionalism and fairness in eight higher education institutions. Grounded in an interpretivist-qualitative design, the research draws on twenty-four semi-structured faculty interviews and institutional policy analysis conducted over nine years. It explores how organisational structures, cultural hierarchies, and interpersonal networks mediate perceptions of recognition, belonging, and professional identity. Findings reveal that differential treatment is both a managerial and cultural phenomenon, sustained through implicit hierarchies of nationality, social proximity, and organisational alignment. While institutional policies promote merit and equality, informal practices reproduce symbolic power and selective privilege. Acts of moral resistance and emotional resilience emerge as strategies through which faculty preserve dignity and integrity within hierarchical academic cultures. The study extends organisational-justice theory by situating it within an interpretivist cultural framework, demonstrating how fairness and professionalism are contextually enacted and mediated by institutional culture and power dynamics. It contributes to debates on institutional culture and equity by revealing how differential treatment both reflects and reinforces broader cultural hierarchies in transnational higher education.

**Keywords:** Differential Treatment, Institutional Culture, Organisational Justice, Professionalism, Power Dynamics, Higher Education.

## INTRODUCTION

Equality, fairness, and non-discrimination are widely espoused values across modern institutions, forming the moral foundation of professional conduct and organisational legitimacy. Yet beneath this normative rhetoric, everyday experiences often reveal subtle hierarchies and unequal treatment that challenge these ideals. Nowhere is this contradiction more apparent than in higher education, where globalisation and managerialism coexist with enduring asymmetries of power, culture, and status.

In academic workplaces, professionalism is not only defined by qualifications or performance but also shaped by institutional culture, the shared assumptions, values, and practices that determine whose work is recognised and whose voice carries authority. Previous research has shown that higher education institutions frequently reproduce existing hierarchies through informal networks and differential access to opportunities (Castilla, 2011; Aydogan, 2012; Brankovic, 2018; Salh, 2025). Despite the prevalence of formal equity policies, cultural and organisational practices often sustain inequitable dynamics that remain normalised within institutional life.

Within Middle Eastern higher education, these tensions are amplified by structural dependence on expatriate faculty, demographic diversity, and high power distance (Hofstede, 2001). Faculty members frequently navigate competing expectations between institutional loyalty and professional autonomy, often under managerial regimes that emphasise compliance and performance indicators. While international scholarship has examined organisational justice, professionalism, and workplace equity in Western and Asian contexts, empirical evidence from the Middle East remains scarce. Most studies in the region focus on student outcomes or leadership structures rather than faculty perceptions of fairness, professional identity, and institutional belonging.

This gap underscores the need for a contextually grounded understanding of how faculty members experience fairness and professionalism within transnational higher education environments. The present study addresses this gap by examining how institutional culture, managerial practices, and power dynamics shape differential treatment and professional conduct in Middle Eastern higher education institutions. It aims to uncover how organisational norms and cultural hierarchies influence faculty perceptions of recognition, collegiality, and equity, contributing to broader debates on institutional culture, justice, and professionalism in global academic contexts. Building on this rationale, the study positions institutional culture as the key interpretive frame through which issues of recognition, justice, and professional identity are examined.

Accordingly, this qualitative research explores how institutional culture shapes faculty perceptions and experiences of professionalism, fairness, and power relations in Middle Eastern higher education. The study seeks to uncover how professionalism is conceptualised and enacted within these settings, how practices of fairness and inequity are perceived and negotiated, and how these processes influence faculty motivation, identity, and engagement over time. Grounded in the assumption that merit-based recognition enhances engagement while perceived inequity diminishes it, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do faculty members conceptualise professionalism within their institutional and cultural contexts?
2. How do faculty members describe workplace practices and interactions that they perceive as fair or unfair within their institutions?
3. In what ways do these perceptions influence faculty members' professional identity, motivation, and engagement?

Together, these questions aim to illuminate how institutional culture, organisational justice, and power dynamics converge to shape the moral and relational fabric of academic life in the Middle Eastern higher education context.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Understanding Institutional Culture in Higher Education

#### *Conceptualising Institutional Culture*

Institutional culture encompasses the shared assumptions, values, and norms that guide behaviour and define legitimacy within organisations (Schein, 2010). In universities, culture operates simultaneously at structural and symbolic levels, shaping how professionalism, fairness, and power are understood (Tierney, 1988; Trice & Beyer, 1993). It influences not only visible routines but also the moral order that governs belonging and status. Through everyday practices such as promotion, recognition, and informal communication, institutions reproduce hierarchies of value and privilege—a process that Bourdieu (1988) terms symbolic power.

While universities frequently present meritocracy as a guiding principle, research suggests that structural inequalities persist beneath these ideals (Meyer & Rowan, 1977, in Nitschke, 2024). Foucault's (in Gordon, 1980) notion of disciplinary power further reveals how managerial systems normalise control and compliance through the rhetoric of professionalism. Together, these perspectives highlight that institutional culture is not a neutral context but an active mechanism that sustains power and status differences.

#### *Institutional Culture in Higher Education*

Universities in the Gulf operate within complex cultural landscapes shaped by demographic diversity and high power distance (Hofstede, 2001). Nationality, language, and leadership style interact to form hybrid hierarchies that influence decision-making and faculty relations (Moghissi, 2012). While policy documents emphasise merit and transparency, informal norms, such as deference to authority, patronage, and collectivism, often shape how equality is practised (Smith, 2014). Research highlights a recurring tension between the rhetoric of equality and the reality of differential treatment, with faculty frequently reporting selective professional development and limited participation in governance (Niemann & Kotzé, 2006; Costandi et al., 2019; Akanji et al., 2020; Khalola & Oni, 2020; Kim, 2024). These patterns undermine collegiality and reinforce what Alexander (2003) describes as cultural codes of stratification, where recognition and privilege mirror existing social hierarchies.

Despite growing research on organisational culture in Western and Asian higher education, empirical studies that unpack how such hierarchies operate in Middle-Eastern academic settings remain limited. This gap

underscores the need to examine how institutional culture mediates professional fairness and identity within culturally stratified environments.

## **Professionalism and Work Ethics in Academic Contexts**

### ***Defining Professionalism in Higher Education***

Professionalism in academia is both an ethical ideal and an organisational construct. Classical sociological accounts define it as the combination of specialised knowledge and moral responsibility (Becker, 1971; Freidson, 2001). Within education, professionalism encompasses integrity, accountability, and reflective autonomy (Hoyle & Wallace, 2005; Sachs, 2001). However, recent scholarship argues that professionalism is culturally situated rather than universally defined. Evetts (2011) distinguishes between occupational professionalism, which emerges from practitioners' self-regulation, and organisational professionalism, imposed through managerial control. Although both are essential for institutional coherence, they often sit uneasily together.

### ***Faculty Professional Identity and Ethical Practice***

Professional identity develops through negotiation between individual values and institutional expectations (Evans, 2008). Faculty members often describe professionalism as sincerity, fairness, and collegial respect (Seashore & Kruse, 1995). However, as Alvesson and Willmott (2002) note, organisations shape identity by prescribing norms of conduct that align with institutional interests. Ethical practice thus becomes a form of moral balancing act, a continual negotiation between authenticity and conformity within power-laden organisational structures.

### ***Professionalism, Emotion, and Cultural Context***

Professionalism also entails emotional labour. Hargreaves (2000) shows that trust and respect underpin teachers' emotional engagement, which, in turn, directly affects collegial relationships. In multicultural university settings, emotional expression is moderated by cultural expectations of hierarchy and restraint (Holliday, 1999). Consequently, professionalism becomes an affective and relational performance, reflecting broader cultural scripts about authority, respect, and belonging.

## **Differential Treatment and Organisational Justice**

### ***Understanding Differential Treatment***

Differential treatment refers to variations in managerial behaviour towards employees (Fevre et al., 2011). While positive differentiation reflects merit-based recognition, negative differentiation stems from bias or exclusion (Chang et al., 2009). In Middle Eastern workplaces, harmful practices such as nepotism, cronyism, and *wasta* are deeply embedded in local social norms (Cunningham & Sarayrah, 1993; Arasli & Tumer, 2008). Regardless of intent, perceived inequity weakens organisational trust and morale (Safina, 2015), suggesting that fairness cannot be separated from its cultural context.

### ***Organisational Justice and Perceived Fairness***

Greenberg's (1990) organisational justice framework—comprising distributive, procedural, and interactional fairness—offers a means to understand how inequity affects motivation and commitment. Studies show that perceptions of justice are strongly linked to employee engagement and satisfaction (Colquitt, 2001; Kiziloglu & Kalfaoğlu, 2024). Conversely, opaque decision-making and selective privilege contribute to what Argyris and Schön (1974) term the theory-practice gap, the dissonance between declared institutional values and everyday realities.

### ***Preferentialism, Nepotism, and Power Relations in Academia***

Research across Turkey, Pakistan, and North Cyprus reveals that nepotism, favouritism and informal patronage undermine perceptions of merit, erode trust, and normalise unjust workplace hierarchies, particularly in public institutions, where differential treatment is reproduced through culturally sanctioned, seemingly benign norms (Arasli and Tumer, 2008; Büte, 2011; Nadeem et al., 2015; Pearce, 2015; Ponzo and Scoppa, 2011). Similar patterns are found in Gulf universities, where *wasta*, the exchange of influence through social networks, operates as a culturally legitimised mechanism of access and advantage (Korrapati & Kannan, 2014). These practices blur the line between social solidarity and injustice, framing fairness as a negotiated and culturally mediated concept rather than a procedural standard. Bourdieu's (1984) notion of symbolic violence aptly captures how privilege is reproduced through culturally sanctioned, seemingly benign norms.

## **Power Dynamics and Institutional Hierarchies**

### ***The Sociology of Power in Academic Organisations***

Power within universities is both diffuse and relational. Foucault (1978) conceptualises power as productive rather than repressive—embedded in everyday discourse rather than purely coercive. Weber's typology of authority helps explain how expertise-based legitimacy coexists with bureaucratic control. These frameworks reveal how managerial discourse transforms compliance into virtue, making inequality appear rational and professionally justified.

### ***Managerialism and the Academic Workplace***

Managerialism reframes academic labour through performance metrics, audits, and accountability systems (Deem, 2004). These mechanisms create what Parker and Price (1994) call *illusory empowerment*, where faculty autonomy is constrained by procedural oversight. In high-power-distance settings, such practices reinforce dependence on authority and weaken collegial forms of governance.

### ***Cultural Scripts of Authority in the Middle East***

Across the Middle East, leadership styles are strongly shaped by collectivism and deference to authority (Hofstede, 2001). Paternalistic management structures privilege loyalty and compliance over critical dialogue. Evidence from Gulf universities suggests that nationality and social proximity continue to influence promotions and the distribution of workloads (Shneikat et al., 2016). Power thus operates as both a cultural and structural force, reinforcing differential treatment and shaping perceptions of fairness and professional legitimacy.

### **Intersection of Organisational Culture, Justice, and Professional Identity**

Institutional culture, power, and professionalism are deeply interconnected. Organisational norms define the ethical boundaries of conduct, while perceptions of fairness influence whether professionalism is sustained or diminished. Existing research often treats these constructs separately, overlooking how they intersect to shape the moral texture of academic life. When differential treatment reflects hierarchy rather than merit, professionalism risks becoming performative compliance (Evetts, 2011). In contrast, equitable recognition promotes collegial trust, motivation, and a shared sense of purpose—values essential to sustaining professionalism in multicultural academic environments. Addressing this intersection offers a framework for understanding how institutional culture and justice co-construct professional identity, an empirical and conceptual gap this study seeks to address.

### **Theoretical Frameworks Guiding the Study**

This study draws on three interrelated theoretical perspectives to explain how professionalism, fairness, and power intersect within multicultural higher education institutions. Institutional Culture Theory (Schein, 2010) provides the foundation for understanding how shared meanings, norms, and values shape behaviour and influence perceptions of professionalism within academic organisations. Organisational Justice Theory (Greenberg, 1990) offers a lens for interpreting how distributive, procedural, and interactional fairness impact motivation, trust, and professional identity. Finally, Cultural Power and Hierarchy (Foucault, 1978; Hofstede, 2001; Bourdieu, 1988) situates differential treatment within broader systems of authority and examines how cultural codes, symbolic power, and structural inequalities define what is considered legitimate or acceptable behaviour in institutional life. Together, these frameworks illuminate how professionalism is not merely an individual ethic but a socially negotiated construct, continually shaped by institutional culture and cultural hierarchies in stratified academic contexts. Figure 1 below illustrates the theoretical integration underpinning this study, showing how institutional culture, organisational justice, and cultural power frameworks collectively explain the negotiation of professionalism within multicultural and stratified higher-education contexts.



**Figure 1.** Theoretical Integration Framework.

## THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES, RESEARCH DESIGN AND RATIONALE

This study is grounded in an interpretivist ontology, which assumes that reality is socially constructed through individual and institutional interaction. Rather than seeking objective generalisations, it aims to understand how people interpret fairness, professionalism, and organisational life within their own cultural contexts. An interpretivist stance aligns with the study's focus on meaning-making, acknowledging that perceptions of equality and recognition are contextually produced rather than universally fixed.

Epistemologically, the study adopts a constructivist orientation, viewing knowledge as co-created between the researcher and participants. This position recognises that understanding institutional culture requires engagement with faculty members' lived experiences and sense-making. Such collaboration allows for the emergence of shared meanings and nuanced insights into how fairness and professionalism are enacted in everyday academic interactions.

The theoretical lens draws from cultural sociology and organisational justice theory, integrating Schein's (2010) institutional culture, Greenberg's (1990) organisational justice, and Foucault's (1978) conception of power. This combination enables exploration of how institutional norms, power structures, and perceptions of fairness intersect to shape professional identity and collegial relations. By viewing organisational justice through a cultural lens, the study moves beyond procedural fairness to reveal how justice is culturally negotiated and symbolically expressed within hierarchical academic systems.

Figure 2 below summarises the philosophical and theoretical foundations of the research, illustrating the logical flow from ontology and epistemology to theoretical framing, methodology, and methods.

The research employs a comparative, multi-site qualitative approach to examine faculty experiences across eight higher education institutions in three Middle Eastern countries. This design allows for cross-contextual analysis while maintaining attention to local cultural nuance. The study focuses on understanding, not predicting, how faculty perceive and respond to differential treatment, drawing on diverse institutional types and governance structures.

Semi-structured interviews and document analysis were chosen as complementary methods, enabling triangulation of personal narratives with formal institutional discourse. The combination strengthens analytical depth and credibility, providing both experiential and contextual perspectives on the phenomenon of differential treatment.

As reflected in Figure 2, the study's interpretivist–constructivist foundation underpins all stages of inquiry: from meaning-making between researcher and participants, through theoretically informed analysis, to validation through triangulated data sources.

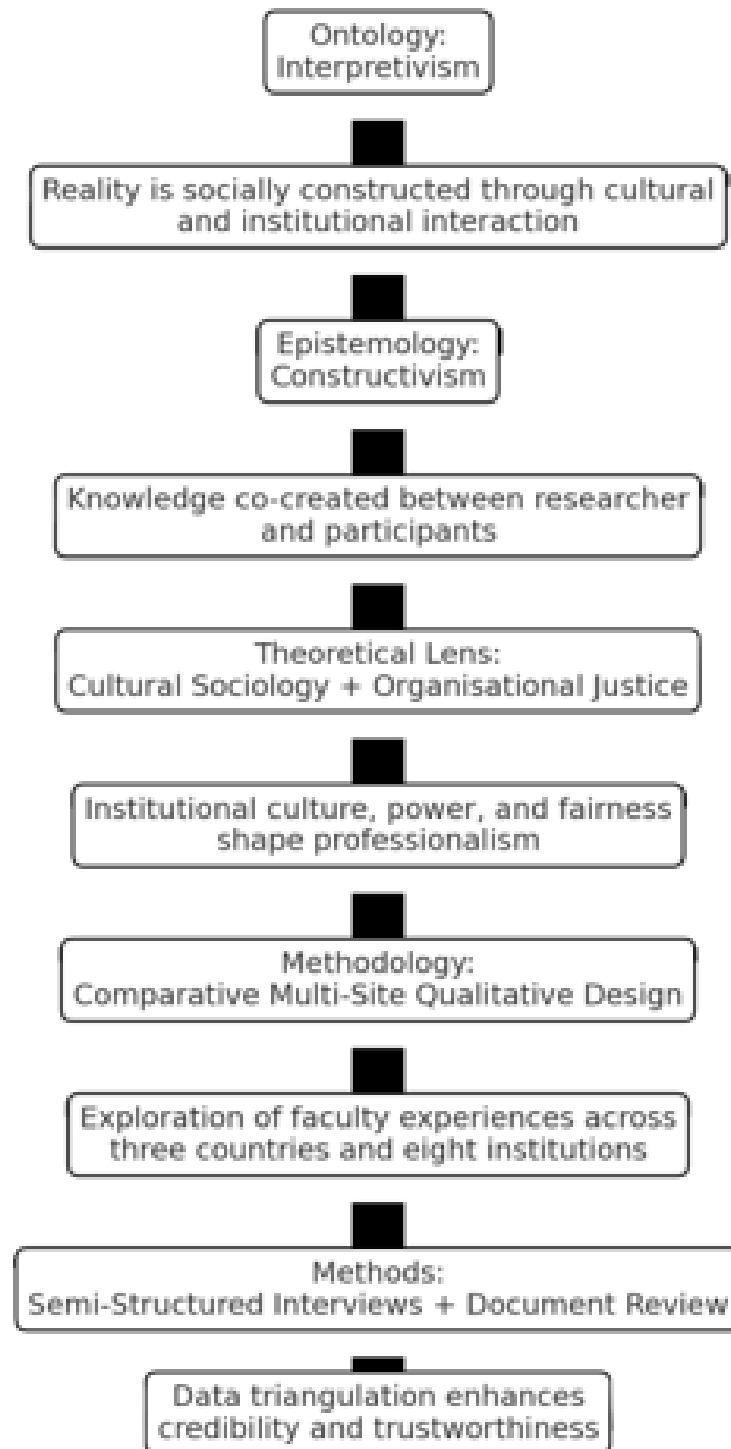


Figure 2. Theoretical and Methodological Framework of the Study.

## METHODOLOGY

### Study Context

The research was conducted across eight higher education institutions in three Middle Eastern countries, each operating within distinct but comparable national policy frameworks governing academic quality, professional development, and employment equity. The institutions represent a mix of federally funded public universities and semi-autonomous private institutions, collectively employing over 2,000 faculty members from diverse cultural,

linguistic, and disciplinary backgrounds. This diversity reflects the broader demographic realities of the region, where expatriate academics constitute the majority of the higher-education workforce.

Across all participating institutions, professionalism, accountability, and technological competence are emphasised as key indicators of faculty performance. Most universities offer tuition-free education for domestic students and prioritise technology integration in their national education agendas (Al Murshidi & Wright, 2022). Consequently, faculty are required to undertake regular professional development (PD) initiatives focused on digital pedagogy, research productivity, and culturally responsive teaching practices. PD opportunities are often tied to annual performance appraisals that include lesson observations, student feedback, and peer reviews.

Administrative structures across the institutions are typically hierarchical, with programme coordinators or department heads serving as line managers who report to deans or vice-chancellors. These managers oversee faculty appraisals, allocate teaching loads, and recommend promotion or renewal decisions. While such mechanisms are designed to ensure quality and accountability, they also introduce power asymmetries that can influence how differential treatment is perceived and enacted. Performance-based incentives, such as merit pay or professional recognition, are common, as are corrective measures, including mandatory PD or additional evaluations for low-performing staff.

All eight institutions maintain formal policies outlining codes of conduct, equal opportunity, research funding, and academic ethics. However, the interpretation and implementation of these policies often vary across cultural and managerial contexts, shaping how professionalism, fairness, and institutional loyalty are constructed and negotiated by faculty members. This diversity in policy enactment and workplace culture provides the comparative foundation for this study.

### **Participants**

Participants were selected using non-probability purposive sampling, i.e., randomly chosen for a specific purpose (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010). This approach was consistent with the study's interpretive design, which values depth of insight over representativeness. A total of 24 faculty members from eight higher education institutions across three Middle Eastern countries participated. The institutions represented both federally funded public universities and semi-autonomous private institutions, allowing examination of diverse organisational and cultural contexts.

The sample comprised male and female faculty aged 35–55, each holding at least a master's degree and possessing 4–15 years of higher-education experience. Participants taught a range of courses in various disciplines, including English language teaching, business, engineering, and social sciences, to provide cross-disciplinary perspectives on professionalism and workplace dynamics. Selection was guided by participants' willingness to reflect critically on their experiences and their familiarity with institutional policies and practices. This purposive strategy ensured access to information-rich cases with first-hand experience of faculty evaluation, managerial practices, and professional development, thereby generating data directly relevant to the study's aims.

### **Data Collection Methods**

Data were generated through semi-structured interviews and the review of institutional documents over a period of nine years. Interviews provided narrative accounts of participants' professional experiences. In contrast, policy documents, such as codes of conduct, HR frameworks, and professional development policies, offered insight into institutional discourse on fairness, equity, and professionalism.

Interviews, lasting between 45 and 90 minutes, were conducted in English, recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim. Open-ended prompts encouraged reflection on experiences of professional recognition, inclusion, and managerial interaction. Ethical clearance was obtained from the researcher's host institution, and participation was voluntary and confidential.

To complement and triangulate the interview data, the document review analysed institutional policy materials to identify how professionalism, equity, and performance expectations are formally articulated and enacted. Together, these two methods enhanced the credibility, depth, and cultural contextualisation of the study.

### **Data Analysis**

Data were analysed thematically, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. Transcripts and documents were coded inductively and iteratively to identify recurring categories, which were then compared across institutions to capture convergent and divergent patterns. Codes were clustered into overarching themes reflecting perceptions of differential treatment, institutional culture, and professional identity.

Analytic memos and reflexive journaling supported transparency and rigour, allowing the researcher to track interpretive decisions throughout the process. Data interpretation was informed by the theoretical framework, with

emphasis on how participants' accounts revealed the operation of cultural power and organisational justice in everyday professional life.

**Research Quality and Ethical Considerations**

Credibility was enhanced through triangulation of interviews and document analysis, prolonged engagement with participants, and reflexive peer discussion. Thick description allowed findings to capture contextual complexity rather than statistical generalisability. Ethical considerations, including informed consent, anonymity, and voluntary participation, were upheld throughout.

**Methodological Contribution**

By merging multiple institutional contexts, this study advances understanding of how faculty navigate fairness and professionalism within hierarchical academic systems. The interpretivist design foregrounds subjective experience, revealing how organisational culture and cultural power shape the moral fabric of professional life.

**FINDINGS**

Analysis of the twenty-four faculty interviews and institutional policy documents revealed five interrelated themes illustrating how institutional culture, power relations, and organisational justice shape perceptions of professionalism and fairness across Middle Eastern higher education.

These themes represent recurring patterns identified through iterative coding and constant comparison across eight universities and three national contexts.

The five major themes are:

1. Managerial Power and Symbolic Recognition
2. Fairness, Justice, and Collegial Relations
3. Professionalism, Emotion, and Identity
4. Nationality, Networks, and Cultural Hierarchies
5. Moral Resistance and Collaborative Professionalism

Each theme is supported by subthemes that capture the diversity and nuance of faculty experiences. Together, they form an interpretive framework that links institutional culture, fairness, and professional identity. Table 1 below summarises the thematic structure, associated theoretical frameworks, and interpretive meanings that guided the presentation of findings in the following sections.

**Table 1.** Thematic Map of Faculty Experiences of Professionalism and Fairness.

| Theme  | Subthemes   | Linked Theoretical Frameworks                   | Interpretive Summary  |
|--|---|---|---|
| 1. Managerial Power and Symbolic Recognition       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Managerial proximity and access to recognition</li> <li>• Performance surveillance and conformity as legitimacy</li> <li>• Symbolic capital through loyalty and alignment</li> </ul> | Foucault (1978); Bourdieu (1988); Schein (2010) | Power operates productively through managerial norms that define what counts as professionalism and whose contributions are valued.           |
| 2. Fairness, Justice, and Collegial Relations      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interactional fairness and respect</li> <li>• Transparency and trust in decision-making</li> <li>• Moral rather than procedural definitions of equity</li> </ul>                     | Greenberg (1990); Hofstede (2001)               | Fairness is culturally enacted and relational; justice is defined through moral propriety and respect rather than procedural uniformity.      |
| 3. Professionalism, Emotion, and Identity          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emotional labour and self-regulation</li> <li>• Balancing authenticity and conformity</li> <li>• Professional identity as moral negotiation</li> </ul>                               | Hargreaves (2000); Evetts (2011); Schein (2010) | Professionalism involves emotional and ethical labour, balancing authenticity with institutional expectations to sustain collegial stability. |
| 4. Nationality, Networks, and Cultural Hierarchies | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• National identity and institutional belonging</li> </ul>   | Hofstede (2001); Bourdieu (1984);               | Institutional culture functions as a field of symbolic power where  |

|   |   |                                   |   |
|---|---|-----------------------------------|---|
|   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Informal patronage (<i>wasta</i>) and social proximity</li> <li>• Culturally legitimised advantage and exclusion</li> </ul>  | Cunningham & Sarayrah (1993)      | nationality and networks shape access, legitimacy, and opportunity.   |
| 5. Moral Resistance and Collaborative Professionalism | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Acts of ethical resistance and integrity</li> <li>• Collegial mentoring and informal support</li> <li>• Reclaiming professionalism as collective moral practice</li> </ul> | Foucault (1978); Greenberg (1990) | Resistance emerges as a moral counter-conduct to hierarchy; professionalism is sustained through everyday acts of fairness and integrity. |

## Professionalism as the Foundation of Professional Work

### *Perceptions of Professionalism*

Across participants, there was strong awareness of what professionalism entails, often described as sincerity, fairness, discipline, and respect. Faculty consistently viewed professionalism as both a moral and behavioural code. Cameron explained: “Professionalism is being able to carry out your job according to your job description, without bias or personal emotions coming into it.” Nelly also associated professionalism with honesty and passion: “You give 100% at your work, you’re passionate, you strive to grow professionally, and you’re honest—with your colleagues and with yourself.” Similarly, Connor and Sheena emphasised mutual respect as central to professional behaviour.

Drawing on Becker’s (2023) notion of “moral desirability in the world of work,” they believed that professionalism meant treating colleagues and students with dignity. Jack observed:

*Everybody’s got to be treated with a certain amount of respect. Management needs to treat people under them respectfully—we do a job we’ve been trained for. Professionalism is about how you behave in the workplace.*

Silvie added: “As a teacher, I have to be professional—not embarrass students, respect them. Dressing up nicely isn’t professionalism; it’s how you treat people—fairly, with respect. That’s what work ethics are.” Marianne linked professionalism to discipline and adherence to institutional rules: “Professionalism means observing etiquette and the rules of any workplace... it shows how dedicated you are and how ready you are to learn or unlearn the decorum of any workplace.”

Betty understood professionalism through equality and sincerity:

*Professionalism is turning up for work, doing your job thoroughly, and speaking to everybody equally. Not treating people differently due to race or whatever. It’s just doing your job properly.”*

For all participants, professionalism was not a superficial formality but an ethical stance. They defined it through doing one’s job sincerely, treating others fairly, and maintaining respect for institutional rules and colleagues alike.

### *Importance of Professionalism at Work*

All participants underscored professionalism as essential to institutional functioning and collegiality. Echoing Seashore and Kruse’s (1995) claim that “the lack of professionalism can mean the difference between the success and failure of schools’ reform efforts,” Becky noted:

*If people just look the part but don’t do anything, everyone gets annoyed. It’s not fair. Everyone should be doing what they’re supposed to. Otherwise, people get disgruntled.”*

Leanne saw professionalism as intergenerational mentorship:

*It’s the senior members who help the junior ones learn what being professional really means. We’re talking about a workplace where the real stakeholders are people—it involves people!”*

John elaborated that professionalism “shapes you” and “paves your way for the future,” creating a sense of belonging. Meanwhile, Cameron warned against emotional over-involvement:

*Too much emotion in dealing with colleagues can affect how you treat people. If you’re too close to someone, you might give them unprofessional treatment.”*

For faculty, professionalism thus intertwines personal ethics with organisational justice. It was both a personal commitment and an institutional value shaping trust and morale.

## Organisational Differential Treatment versus Positive Reinforcement

### *Perceptions of Differential Treatment*

Participants interpreted differential treatment in varied ways, distinguishing between positive differentiation and unfair favouritism. Michell expressed clear opposition to unjust practices:

*Treating people differently when they’re at the same level isn’t good. Everyone should be the same. If someone’s struggling, give them extra help—but don’t do it in a negative, nasty way. The environment should be supportive, not competitive.”*

Having been “picked on” by her line manager, he linked negative treatment to demotivation:

*“It makes you feel lousy about your job and yourself. You start wondering, ‘Why am I here? What’s the point?’ It just eats away at you.”*

By contrast, John viewed positive differentiation as motivating when used constructively:

*“Differentiation can mean helping people—letting them take off from work or helping them become better colleagues. That can motivate and enhance confidence.”*

However, he cautioned that selective support could harm others’ opportunities: *“If a boss gives me more chances, that’s good for me—but maybe bad for others who don’t get exposure. It can hurt their growth.”*

Ahmed asserted that differentiation “creeps from the top” and “is never a part of professionalism,” creating “hatred, jealousy and negativity.” He described his manager, who shared crucial information selectively, leaving others “aloof from what is actually part of their work.”

Qamreen acknowledged that differential treatment can be positive when grounded in mentorship:

*“Sometimes a manager recognises your potential and gives you more opportunities. That’s fair—if it’s based on work, not personal liking.”*

Across cases, faculty differentiated between supportive recognition and preferentialism, but most agreed that institutional cultures often blurred these boundaries.

### **Imbalanced Power Dynamics**

Thematic analysis revealed that power relations were a pervasive concern across institutions. Participants’ speech patterns reflected emotional intensity. For instance, repetition of the words “yes” (72 times), “definitely” (25 times), and “of course” (45 times) when describing bias contrasted with frequent use of “no” (72 times), “not” (188 times), and “never” (36 times) when describing fairness.

Melissa noted:

*“Nobody says no to him. Promotions go to those who socialise with the boss. Those of us outside that circle don’t stand a chance.”*

Such comments indicate both awareness of and resignation to entrenched hierarchies. Participants frequently referred to these informal networks using ironic euphemisms such as “the Golden Circle,” “the Lunch Group,” “the Chosen Ones,” and “Those-with-Pink-Gloves.” These linguistic devices, as Kerry (2005) argues, allow workers to discuss sensitive issues while maintaining civility.

Seema described how these alliances shaped decision-making: *“If you’re part of the circle, you’re safe. If not, you’re invisible.”*

Hence, the faculty members perceived managerial discretion as subjective, influenced by personal loyalty and social proximity rather than transparent performance indicators. Across countries and institutions, respondents felt that authority was centralised and accountability uneven, reinforcing hierarchical rather than collegial cultures.

### **Impact of Preferentialism**

#### ***Sentiments of disillusionment, demotivation and insignificance***

Consistent with Büte’s (2011: 188) view of preferentialism as “preferring friends and acquaintances,” all participants reported that favouritism was commonplace. Participants consistently expressed feelings of disillusionment, demotivation, and insignificance due to preferentialism within their institutions. They described emotional strain, reduced motivation, and a sense of professional insignificance. For instance, Mahmoud shared that his manager “picked on” him, assigning heavier workloads and excluding him from leadership roles: *“I was told I’m negative. But I worked harder than most people—it just didn’t matter.”* Similarly, Sheena expressed frustration at inequitable scheduling:

*“They kept giving me repeating students and awful timetables. I refused extra duties not in my job description, so they put me on the shelf—even though they need me.”*

Nolan empathised with colleagues who were “heartbroken” by bias that created “negative vibes.” Kitty reported being denied professional development opportunities abroad and said her contributions to a research journal were ignored, leaving her feeling “inconsequential” and “not committed.”

*“I worked on a research journal for five years, but my name was never mentioned. It makes you feel inconsequential.”* Cameron and Connor echoed this sense of disillusionment. Connor recounted:

*“I left because the treatment was horrendously unfair. Those who drank with the manager got promoted. I felt looked down on.”*

Cameron summarised the psychological toll:

*“When you’re mistreated, you jeopardise your professionalism—it’s demotivating. Why bother putting in so much effort if it’s going to be knocked down anyway?”*

Betty described multiple instances of unfair treatment, including being given extra work without time release, being demoted from a leadership position, and being repeatedly told she was “a negative person.” She felt her manager

“just picked on” her and “had it in for” her. Shane voiced similar frustration at being repeatedly assigned failing students and unfavourable timetables:

*“At the end, I can’t... imagine I can’t look at him! They put me on their shelf—even though I have more experience and they need me. I’m not asleep; that’s why. When I say no, and nobody else says no, I do!”*

Sarah, though not directly targeted, observed colleagues who were “heartbroken” and “consumed by hatred, negativity, and jealousy.” Cameron and Connor echoed this disillusionment. Connor resigned after what he called “horrendously unfair treatment,” noting that promotions went to “those who went drinking at the bar with the manager.” Cameron concluded:

*“When you’re mistreated, you jeopardise your professionalism... it’s demotivating. If you’re treated unfairly, your productivity drops—you just think, why bother?”*

The cumulative impact was visible in Betty’s sarcastic but candid remark:

*“Oh God! On a scale of 1 to 10--2. Geez, I hate work. I hate coming... Other people get treated better than you, and you’re not stupid, you know it. What can you do about that? You just go, “Hmm, great! Another fantastic timetable on my shit.”*

The study participants’ views were aligned entirely with Safina’s (2015: 632) conclusions that favouritism causes the “loss of employees’ motivation, apathy, self-belief and abilities” and results in their “social alienation, the feeling of being needless in the organisation, creates permanent fear and negative anticipatory thinking (e.g. fear of demoting from the position being occupied/rightsizing etc.)”

### Perceptions of Privilege and Positive Reinforcement

Although most experiences were negative, participants acknowledged rare instances of positive differentiation. Ayesha and Bonny received time release, Carmen a pay raise, and Mary a conference opportunity. Yet, they believed these rewards reflected personal favour rather than merit. Ayesha admitted, “I got a PD trip, but only because my manager liked me.”

Others noted ethnocultural bias favouring Middle Eastern and Western faculty over Filipino and Asian colleagues. Connor observed that some were “looked down on,” while Cameron rationalised:

*“It’s natural for people to gravitate towards those similar to them—but it shouldn’t decide opportunities.”*

Overall, participants viewed preferentialism as detrimental to equality, morale, and professional growth, reinforcing divisions that undermine collaboration.

## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The findings reveal that faculty across Middle Eastern higher education institutions share a consistent concern: the gap between institutional ideals of professionalism and the lived reality of inequitable practice. Participants defined professionalism through fairness, honesty, and respect, yet described organisational cultures dominated by favouritism, opaque decision-making, and uneven power.

While occasional mentorship or recognition was appreciated, most faculty perceived managerial discretion as subjective rather than merit-based. Differential treatment, whether rooted in social proximity, ethnicity, or personal rapport, was seen as eroding trust and motivation. The recurrence of emotional language, ironic group labels, and expressions of cynicism points to deeply internalised experiences of exclusion. Faculty also articulated a collective desire for transparent procedures, equitable leadership, and mutual respect, underscoring professionalism not as compliance with institutional codes but as a lived ethic of fairness and integrity.

To illustrate how the analytic themes respond to the study’s research aims, Table 2 maps the relationship between the three research questions and the five emergent themes.

**Table 2.** Alignment of Themes with Research Questions.

| Research Question   | Aligned Themes   | Interpretive Focus   |
|---|--|--|
| RQ1. How do faculty members conceptualise professionalism within their institutional and cultural contexts?                               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Managerial Power and Symbolic Recognition</li> <li>• Professionalism, Emotion, and Identity</li> <li>• Moral Resistance and Collaborative Professionalism</li> </ul>  | Professionalism is understood as both moral and relational, and defined through institutional norms, emotional labour, and acts of integrity that sustain belonging and legitimacy within hierarchical settings. |
| RQ2. How do faculty members describe workplace practices and interactions that they perceive as fair or unfair within their institutions? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fairness, Justice, and Collegial Relations</li> <li>• Nationality, Networks, and Cultural Hierarchies</li> <li>• Managerial Power and Symbolic Recognition</li> </ul> | Perceptions of fairness are shaped by relational justice, cultural hierarchies, and differential access to recognition. Justice is interpreted as moral respect rather than procedural equality.                 |

|   |  |  |
|---|--|--|
| <p>RQ3. In what ways do these perceptions influence faculty members' professional identity, motivation, and engagement?</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Professionalism, Emotion, and Identity</li> <li>• Moral Resistance and Collaborative Professionalism</li> <li>• Fairness, Justice, and Collegial Relations</li> </ul> | <p>Experiences of inequity and inclusion shape motivation and self-concept. Faculty negotiate professional identity through emotional regulation, collegial support, and ethical resistance to unfair practices.</p> |
|---|--|--|

## DISCUSSION

The alignment presented in Table 2 demonstrates how the five emergent themes collectively address the study's three research questions. RQ1 is reflected in faculty narratives that reveal professionalism as a culturally situated and morally negotiated construct. RQ2 is addressed through patterns of perceived fairness and inequity shaped by organisational hierarchies, networks, and informal norms. RQ3 is captured in accounts of emotional regulation, moral resistance, and collegial solidarity that show how these perceptions influence professional identity and engagement.

Together, the themes illustrate that professionalism, fairness, and power are interdependent processes embedded in institutional culture. The following discussion interprets these relationships through the theoretical frameworks of institutional culture (Schein, 2010), organisational justice (Greenberg, 1990), and cultural power (Foucault, 1978; Hofstede, 2001; Bourdieu, 1988), moving beyond description to consider their broader moral and cultural implications.

This study set out to explore how institutional culture, organisational justice, and power relations shape faculty experiences of professionalism and fairness within Middle Eastern higher education. The findings reveal that differential treatment is not merely a result of managerial discretion but is deeply embedded in cultural and institutional logics that normalise hierarchy and patronage. The discussion, therefore, moves beyond descriptive accounts to interpret these dynamics through the three theoretical lenses underpinning the study.

### Managerial Power and Professional Recognition

The findings revealed that managerial authority strongly influences who receives recognition and access to development opportunities. Drawing on Foucault's (1978) conception of power as productive rather than purely repressive, managerial control operates through subtle mechanisms of normalisation and evaluation. Performance reviews, committee appointments, and informal praise function as disciplinary practices that define what counts as professionalism.

From Schein's (2010) perspective, these practices represent the "artefacts" of institutional culture that convey deeper shared assumptions about hierarchy and legitimacy. Recognition becomes both a cultural signal and a tool of governance. Faculty internalise these expectations, aligning their behaviour with managerial ideals to maintain a sense of belonging. This extends Bourdieu's (1988) notion of symbolic power: compliance transforms into symbolic capital, granting legitimacy within unequal institutional fields.

### Fairness, Justice, And Collegial Relations

Faculty often interpreted fairness not as strict procedural equality but as relational justice grounded in respect and transparency. Greenberg's (1990) organisational-justice framework helps explain this emphasis: distributive fairness (who benefits) mattered less than interactional fairness (how people were treated). Collegial respect and trust shaped perceptions of fairness, even when outcomes were unequal.

This reaffirms that justice is culturally enacted, not universally defined. In high-power-distance settings (Hofstede, 2001), hierarchical relations are accepted as natural; fairness is judged through moral propriety rather than procedural conformity. The study therefore expands organisational-justice theory by highlighting its cultural contingency—fairness is relational and moral in collectivist contexts, rooted in social harmony rather than equality of outcome.

### Professionalism, Identity, and Emotional Labour

Participants described professionalism as emotional as well as ethical work. Hargreaves (2000) and Holliday (1999) help frame this as "emotional labour" governed by cultural scripts of restraint and deference. Faculty managed feelings of frustration or exclusion to sustain collegial civility, reflecting how power shapes emotion.

Through Schein's cultural lens, these emotional performances reinforce institutional stability by reproducing the shared assumption that loyalty and composure signal professionalism. Yet they also expose tension between authenticity and conformity. Professional identity thus becomes a negotiated moral economy, a balance between personal integrity and institutional expectation, echoing Evetts' (2011) distinction between occupational and organisational professionalism.

### **Nationality, Networks, and Informal Hierarchies**

Across sites, nationality and social networks emerged as key determinants of access and voice. Foucault's view of power as relational explains how privilege circulates through interpersonal alliances rather than formal rules. Practices such as *wasta* or patronage reflect culturally legitimate modes of reciprocity (Cunningham & Sarayrah, 1993).

This finding enriches Hofstede's (2001) and Bourdieu's (1984) frameworks by illustrating that power distance and symbolic capital intersect. National identity, institutional loyalty, and proximity to authority function as symbolic resources that confer advantage. These dynamics show that institutional culture operates as a field in which legitimacy is earned through social proximity as much as through performance. Differential treatment, therefore, reflects embedded cultural rationalities rather than managerial deviation.

### **Professional Integrity and Moral Resistance**

Despite constraints, some faculty resisted inequitable norms through integrity, mentorship, or collaborative support. Such micro-acts of resistance align with Foucault's (1978) idea that power always provokes counter-conduct and spaces where individuals assert moral agency within constraints. These practices reveal professionalism as ethical resistance rather than passive compliance.

Viewed through the lens of organisational justice theory, these responses illustrate a search for restorative fairness: faculty attempt to recreate justice through peer solidarity when formal mechanisms fail. This re-situates professionalism as a collective moral project that sustains dignity in hierarchical environments.

### **Integrating the Frameworks: Rethinking Professionalism in Stratified Academia**

Integrating Schein, Greenberg, and Foucault's perspectives reveals that professionalism in Middle-Eastern higher education is not an individual trait but a socially constructed negotiation of morality and legitimacy. Institutional culture provides the grammar of professional behaviour; organisational justice defines its moral boundaries; and power relations determine whose interpretations prevail.

The study thus re-conceptualises professionalism as contextually contingent ethical practice, continuously shaped by cultural scripts and institutional hierarchies. This insight extends Western frameworks of professionalism by situating them within non-Western moral economies, demonstrating how fairness and legitimacy are co-produced through culture and power rather than procedural standardisation.

### **Implications For Policy and Practice**

At a practical level, the findings indicate that meaningful reform in higher education requires addressing the cultural foundations of authority, legitimacy, and recognition. Policies alone cannot transform behaviour unless they challenge the symbolic hierarchies and informal networks that sustain inequity. Institutions must establish precise mechanisms to distinguish positive differentiation, such as mentorship and developmental support, from favouritism and bias. Performance evaluation and professional-development policies should be communicated transparently and applied consistently to reinforce perceptions of fairness.

Leadership development and evaluation systems must embed reflexive dialogue about fairness, transparency, and cultural difference, equipping leaders with the cultural competence, ethical awareness, and inclusive communication skills needed to mitigate implicit bias. Ultimately, institutional culture must evolve from hierarchical compliance to collaborative professionalism, where fairness is lived rather than a symbolic ideal. As faculty themselves emphasised, professionalism is sustained not by formal rules alone but through everyday acts of respect, sincerity, and moral consistency that build trust and collective integrity within the academic community.

### **Theoretical Contribution**

Theoretically, this study bridges organisational-justice and institutional-culture frameworks through the lens of cultural power. It shows that justice and professionalism are not discrete constructs but interdependent moral processes embedded in institutional life. By empirically illustrating how power operates through recognition and belonging, the research advances a culturally nuanced understanding of fairness in global higher education.

### **Limitations of the Research**

As an exploratory longitudinal study, this research aimed to develop a deeper understanding of how institutional culture influences professionalism, fairness, and power relations rather than to produce generalisable findings (Saunders et al., 2009). The inquiry involved 24 faculty members across eight higher education institutions in three Middle Eastern countries, prioritising interpretive depth over statistical representation.

While the extended time frame enhanced contextual insight and credibility, the study's focus on faculty perspectives alone may limit the breadth of interpretation. The exclusion of managerial and student viewpoints restricted triangulation and a fuller understanding of institutional dynamics. Moreover, the findings reflect

experiences specific to particular organisational and cultural settings and should therefore be understood as contextually bounded interpretations rather than universal claims.

Future research could extend this work by incorporating multi-stakeholder perspectives and comparative or mixed-methods approaches to explore further how power, culture, and fairness interact in higher-education institutions.

## CONCLUSION

The analyses and findings indicate that differential treatment has a significant impact on faculty perceptions of professionalism, motivation, and subsequent performance. Even though no conclusive evidence was found regarding the employees' decreased productivity, the data indicate that workers are treated differently within the same workplace, despite government and institutional policies and proclamations that advise otherwise. Consequently, workers develop varying perceptions about their organisation and managers. The governmental policies, procedures, and proclamations against differential treatment are essential, provided they are effectively implemented. A single instance of differential treatment can foster negative perceptions of faculty in a learning institution, leading to demotivation and poor performance, and vice versa. Similarly, when favouritism is allowed across faculties, whether among teachers or learners, professionalism is adversely affected and loses focus. The findings also concurred with Rajamani's (2012) beliefs that when differential treatment is fairly applied, teachers develop perceptions of positivity, justice and customised treatment, which motivates them to work harder. Non-discriminatory differential treatment sends a message to teachers that their institution values them and acknowledges their efforts. This develops positive perceptions that their managers are fair. However, when managers were unfair and discriminatory, these teachers developed negative attitudes towards the managers and their workplace, which adversely affected the relationship between the two, leading to demotivation, poor faculty performance, and thereby undermining their sense of professionalism.

Additionally, when teachers were discriminated against or subjected to favouritism, they developed feelings of dislike, distrust, and disrespect towards their unfair managers, which reportedly compromised their professionalism. Besides, this demotivation apparently resulted in frustration, emotional exhaustion, disharmony, poor interpersonal relationships and unwanted workplace behaviour, which, according to the participants, goes against the principles of professionalism. A few also reported a slight decline in their productivity. They affirmed that when there are acts of differential treatment and bias, the outcome is that perceived trials regarding honesty, integrity, self-regulation, and competency are adversely affected, thereby changing the way professionalism is perceived. Geong and Kim (2022) deem this type of differential treatment a challenge for employees, resulting in numerous difficulties in performance. The study indicates that when this is the case, the impacts are adverse, especially on the affected who often feel dehumanised. Thus, utmost care must be exercised when applying the practice to avoid employee demotivation and maximise productivity.

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