

THE EFFECT OF WORK CLIMATE AND COMPETENCE ON EMPLOYEE PERFORMANCE THROUGH WORK MOTIVATION FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF SELF-DETERMINATION THEORY

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ABSTRACT

The performance of educational staff is a crucial factor in supporting the effectiveness of distance higher education institutions, which demand high autonomy and digital competence. This study aims to analyze the direct effects of work climate and competence on employee performance and to examine the mediating role of work motivation from the perspective of Self-Determination Theory (SDT). The research was conducted at the Universitas Terbuka of Indonesia using a quantitative approach with a causal-explanatory design involving 222 educational staff members. Data analysis was performed using Structural Equation Modeling-Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS). The results reveal that work climate does not have a significant direct effect on performance, but it positively and significantly influences work motivation. Competence has a positive and significant impact on both performance and work motivation. Furthermore, work motivation positively affects performance. The mediation analysis demonstrates that work motivation fully mediates the relationship between work climate and performance, while it partially mediates the relationship between competence and performance. The novelty of this study highlights that contextual factors (work climate) and individual resources (competencies) operate through distinct motivational pathways to enhance employee performance in a technology-mediated higher education environment.

Keywords: Competencies, Employee Performance, Work Climate, Work Motivation

A. INTRODUCTION

The performance of educational staff plays a strategic role as the operational backbone of the higher education ecosystem. This role becomes increasingly important in Distance Higher Education (DHE) institutions, as academic services, administration, information technology, registration, learning assessment, student data management, and communication with stakeholders occur in a distributed and digitized manner, requiring continuous coordination.

As one of the largest providers of distance higher education in Indonesia, the Universitas Terbuka faces significant complexities in human resource management. The Open University's 2023 Performance Report notes that the number of active students reached 608,076, spread across Indonesia and 53 countries. The scale of these services reflects the high demands placed on educational staff to provide responsive, accurate, adaptive, and consistent services in support of the distance education process.

Empirical observations within the Universitas Terbuka indicate that an increase in the number of staff is not always accompanied by an improvement in performance quality. Performance data for educational staff in 2024 shows that among civil servants (PNS), the percentage of employees rated "Good" decreased from 97.9% in July to 90.1% in August, even though there was an increase of 107 employees during the same period. A similar pattern was also observed among non-civil servant staff. While the number of staff increased by 29.2%, the percentage of staff in the "Good" performance category actually decreased from 92.2% to 88.4%.

This phenomenon indicates organizational challenges in maintaining the quality of work performance amid growing staff capacity, the intensity of digital services, the dispersion of work units, and a high need for cross-functional coordination. Thus, the issue of educational staff performance cannot be understood solely as a matter of staff quantity, but also as a matter of the quality of the work environment, competency readiness, and the individual's motivational state in carrying out their work roles.

In this context, work climate and competencies are two critical factors that can significantly influence the quality of educational staff performance. A conducive work climate fosters role clarity, open communication, leadership support, fair recognition, participation in decision-making, and positive work relationships (Obeng et al., 2021). These conditions enable employees to carry out their duties in a more focused and coordinated manner, particularly within the PTJJ environment, which relies on digital systems, collaborative work, and student services across a wide geographic scope.

On the other hand, competencies reflect employees' knowledge, skills, technical abilities, and behavioral capacity to complete work effectively (Bartram et al., 2021). Competencies are becoming increasingly relevant in distance higher education settings, as educational staff are required to adapt to changes in technology, digital service procedures, user needs, and academic administrative dynamics.

However, improvements in work climate and competencies do not automatically result in optimal performance if staff members lack strong and high-quality work motivation. The research problem stems from the need to explain how

work climate and competencies influence the performance of UT educational staff, both directly and through work motivation. The *Self-Determination Theory* perspective by Deci and Ryan (2000) is used to explain this mechanism.

SDT posits that the quality of an individual's motivation is influenced by the fulfillment of three basic psychological needs: the need for autonomy, competence, and social relatedness. In a work context, a supportive work climate can provide opportunities for participation, role clarity, interpersonal support, and a sense of belonging; while competence reinforces employees' belief that they are capable of performing their tasks well. The fulfillment of these needs can foster more autonomous motivation—that is, motivation based on values, meaning, and an individual's willingness to perform at their best, rather than solely on external pressure or control. SDT literature in the workplace indicates that support for psychological needs and autonomous motivation is associated with adaptive work outcomes, such as work engagement, job satisfaction, well-being, and performance (Broeck et al., 2021).

Several previous studies have shown that work climate and competence are positively associated with employee performance (Schneider et al., 2017; Suci & Yulia, 2020; Subandi et al., 2023). A positive work climate can enhance work effectiveness through communication, social support, participation, and clarity regarding organizational expectations, while competence enables individuals to apply their knowledge and skills appropriately to achieve work targets. However, these relationships are not always consistent and do not always operate directly.

Gagné et al. (2022) position work motivation as a psychological mechanism that bridges the influence of organizational contextual factors and individual resources on performance. From an SDT perspective, the work context functions not only as an external factor but also shapes employees' perceptions of autonomy, competence, and social relatedness; these perceptions, in turn, determine the quality of motivation and individual work behavior. SDT research also emphasizes that autonomous motivation and the fulfillment of basic psychological needs tend to be associated with greater engagement, satisfaction, productivity, and work performance.

A research gap lies in the limited number of studies that simultaneously examine the effects of work climate and competence on performance through work motivation using the Self-Determination Theory perspective in the context of educational staff at a large-scale, digitized distance learning institution (PTJJ). Previous research has mostly examined the direct relationship between work climate, competence, motivation, and performance, or has been conducted in conventional organizations characterized by face-to-face work interactions and relatively centralized service structures. In contrast, the nature of work at UT involves digital coordination, large-scale student services, demands for technological adaptation, and interconnectivity among units that differ from those in regular higher education institutions. Therefore, this study aims to analyze the influence of work climate and competence on the performance of educational staff at the Open University through work motivation from the SDT perspective.

Specifically, this study addresses the following questions: (1) Does work climate influence the performance of educational staff? (2) Do competencies

influence the performance of educational staff? (3) Do work climate and competencies influence work motivation? and (4) Does work motivation mediate the influence of work climate and competencies on the performance of educational staff? Theoretically, this study expands the application of SDT within the context of distance higher education organizations and explains the role of motivation as a mechanism linking contextual factors and individual factors to performance. Practically, the research findings are expected to serve as a basis for UT in designing policies for competency development, strengthening the work climate, and implementing motivation management strategies appropriate to the characteristics of a digital workplace. The novelty of this study lies in the integration of work climate, competencies, work motivation, and performance into a single SDT-based mediation model for educational staff at a large-scale distance higher education institution.

B. LITERATURE STUDY

The Impact of Work Climate on Performance

Work climate refers to employees' shared perceptions of the organizational environment, which encompasses structure, responsibilities, rewards, support, and work standards (Litwin & Stringer, 1968). Recent empirical research indicates that a positive work climate can enhance employee engagement, work behavior, and performance by fostering a work environment that supports collaboration, role clarity, and organizational learning (Gil et al., 2024; Parker & Knight, 2024). Furthermore, recent studies confirm that work climate remains a strategic factor in enhancing organizational effectiveness, particularly in digitized and dynamic work environments (Banwo et al., 2022; Schneider & Pulakos, 2022).

Employee performance refers to the work outcomes achieved by individuals in accordance with their duties and responsibilities in support of the organization's goals (Aguinis, 2023). Empirical research indicates that performance is not only measured by work outcomes but also encompasses work behavior, adaptability, and contributions to the organization's strategic goals. Salas et al. (2021) assert that organizations that foster competencies, continuous learning, and effective performance management systems tend to achieve higher individual and organizational performance. Furthermore, Aguinis and Burgi-Tian (2021) demonstrate that performance management systems focused on feedback, development, and alignment with organizational goals play a crucial role in enhancing employee performance effectiveness. The hypothesis is:

H1: *Work climate has a positive and significant effect on employee performance.*

The Influence of Work Climate on Work Motivation

From the perspective of Self-Determination Theory (SDT), a work environment that supports basic psychological needs—namely autonomy, competence, and relatedness—will enhance autonomous work motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Empirical research indicates that a positive work climate contributes to increased work motivation by fostering an environment that supports employee engagement, learning, and well-being (Gagné et al., 2022; Gil et al., 2024). Thus,

the more conducive the work climate perceived by employees, the higher their work motivation to achieve organizational goals. The proposed hypothesis is:

H2: *Work climate has a positive and significant effect on work motivation.*

The Effect of Competence on Performance

Competence is a fundamental individual characteristic that encompasses knowledge, skills, abilities, and personal attributes that influence the successful performance of work (Spencer & Spencer, 1993). Recent empirical research indicates that competence is a key factor in enhancing work effectiveness, adaptability, and employee performance within dynamic organizations. Bartram et al. (2021) assert that competencies relevant to job demands contribute to improved individual and organizational performance, while recent research on competency development indicates that competencies serve as a crucial foundation for enhancing performance quality and professional capacity across various sectors (van Berkum et al., 2023). The hypothesis is:

H3: *Competencies have a positive and significant effect on employee performance.*

The Influence of Competencies on Work Motivation

Competencies are an individual's abilities that encompass the knowledge, skills, and capacity to perform work effectively. Employees with high competencies will be more confident in completing tasks, have a good understanding of their work, and be motivated to deliver the best results. Furthermore, based on Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory, the need for competence is one of the factors that can increase a person's intrinsic motivation. Employees who feel capable and competent in their work tend to have higher work motivation. Gagné et al. (2022) and Van den Broeck et al. (2021) also explain that individual competence plays a role in increasing engagement and work motivation. The hypothesis is:

H4: *Competence has a positive and significant effect on work motivation.*

The Effect of Work Motivation on Performance

Work motivation is an internal drive that directs, sustains, and optimizes an individual's behavior in achieving organizational goals. According to Self-Determination Theory (SDT), motivation develops through the fulfillment of basic psychological needs, namely autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Recent empirical research indicates that fulfilling these psychological needs enhances the quality of motivation, engagement, well-being, and employee performance (Gagné et al., 2022). Furthermore, a meta-analysis synthesis indicates that more autonomous motivation has a stronger relationship with performance, commitment, and positive work behavior compared to controlled motivation (Van den Broeck et al., 2021). Empirical evidence also indicates that work motivation is positively associated with employee performance, both directly and through related attitudinal mechanisms (Yuspitawati & Ghofar, 2024; Yahya & Ekawati, 2024). The hypotheses are:

H5: *Work motivation has a positive and significant effect on employee performance.*

Work Motivation as a Mediator of the Effect of Work Climate on Employee Performance

A conducive work climate can create an environment that fosters employee comfort, engagement, and enthusiasm in performing their duties. Positive working conditions, such as organizational support, good working relationships, and task clarity, can enhance employee work motivation. Furthermore, high work motivation will encourage employees to give their best effort, thereby leading to improved performance. Thus, work motivation is expected not only to have a direct effect on performance but also to act as a mediating variable that strengthens the relationship between work climate and employee performance. The hypothesis is:

H6: *Work motivation positively and significantly mediates the effect of work climate on employee performance.*

Work Motivation in Mediating the Effect of Competence on Employee Performance

Employee competence—which encompasses knowledge, skills, and work abilities—is a key factor in improving performance. Employees with high competence are better able to complete tasks effectively. However, employees' competencies will be optimized when supported by work motivation that encourages individuals to use those abilities to achieve organizational goals. Thus, competencies can enhance work motivation, and in turn, work motivation can strengthen the effect of competencies on employee performance. The hypothesis is:

H7: *Work motivation positively and significantly mediates the effect of competence on employee performance.*

Based on Self-Determination Theory, the work climate is viewed as a contextual resource capable of fulfilling employees' psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The fulfillment of these needs increases work motivation, thereby leading to higher performance. On the other hand, competence is an individual resource that not only directly improves the ability to complete tasks but also strengthens intrinsic motivation. Thus, this study proposes that work motivation serves as a psychological mechanism explaining the relationship between work climate, competence, and employee performance. The relationships among the variables in this study are summarized in the conceptual framework as shown in Figure 1.

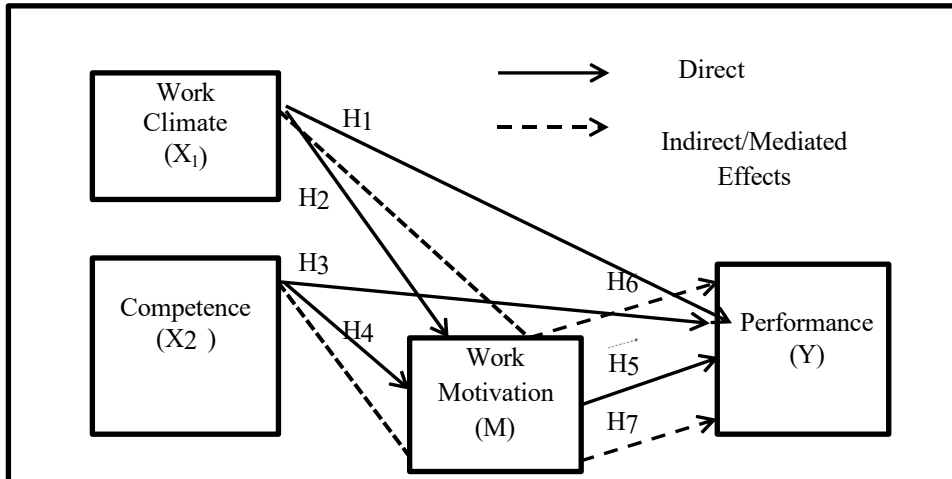


Figure 1
Conceptual Framework

C. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a quantitative approach with an explanatory *research* design aimed at analyzing the causal relationship between work climate and competencies on employee performance, with work motivation serving as the mediating variable. Data analysis was conducted using Structural Equation Modeling–Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS) because this study not only tests the direct effects between variables but also analyzes indirect effects through a mediating mechanism. SEM-PLS was chosen over Covariance-Based SEM (CB-SEM) because it is more suitable for research oriented toward developing predictive models, involves complex latent constructs, and does not strictly require the assumption of data normality (Hair et al., 2022).

The study population consisted of all educational staff at the Open University, both at the central office and regional branches, totaling 457 individuals (209 at the Central Office and 248 at regional branches). The sample size comprised 222 respondents, a figure consistently reported throughout the manuscript. This number meets the requirements for SEM-PLS analysis because it provides adequate model estimates for testing the structural relationships among variables.

The SEM-PLS analysis procedure was conducted in two stages: evaluation of the measurement model (outer model) and the structural model (inner model). The outer model was evaluated through tests of convergent validity, construct reliability, and discriminant validity. Convergent validity was assessed using outer loadings and Average Variance Extracted (AVE), while construct reliability was tested using Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability. The test results showed that the research indicators met the criteria for validity and reliability, thereby consistently representing the research constructs.

The inner model was evaluated through tests for multicollinearity using the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF), path coefficient tests, and the coefficient of determination (R^2). Hypothesis testing was conducted using the bootstrapping procedure by examining path coefficients, t-statistics, and p-values. The interpretation of the results is not based solely on statistical significance but is also

linked to the theoretical framework that explains the relationships among the variables.

A mediation test was conducted to determine the role of work motivation in mediating the effects of work climate and competence on employee performance. Theoretically, work motivation acts as a psychological mechanism that encourages employees to utilize their abilities and respond optimally to work environment conditions, thereby leading to improved performance. Thus, the SEM-PLS analysis provides a more comprehensive picture of both the direct and indirect relationships among the variables in the research model.

D. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This study involved 222 respondents who are educational staff at the Open University. Based on their characteristics, the majority of respondents were male (52.7%), were in the productive age range of 35–44 years (48.6%), and held a bachelor's degree (S1) as their highest level of education (52.7%). Most respondents had been working for more than 10 years (59.9%), were in rank III (86.5%), held the status of Civil Servant (66.2%), and held staff positions (86%). Thus, the respondent profile is dominated by civil service staff with substantial work experience and an adequate educational background.

Table 1.
Respondent Characteristics

Respondent Characteristics	Number	Percentage
Gender		
a. Male	117	52.7%
b. Female	105	47.3%
Age		
a. 25–34 years	45	20.3%
b. 35–44 years	108	48.6%
c. 44–54 years	60	27%
d. > 54 years old	9	4.1%
Education		
a. High School/Vocational High School	7	3.2%
b. Diploma	12	5.4%
a. Bachelor's Degree	117	52.7%
b. Master's Degree	86	38.7%
Length of Service		
a. < 1 year	9	4.1%
b. 1–5 years	39	17.6%
c. 6–10 years	41	18.5%
d. 11–15 years	58	26.1%
e. > 15 years	75	33.8%
Employment Category		
a. Group I	6	2.7%
b. Group II	19	4.5%
c. Goal III	192	86.5%
d. Goal IV	14	6.3%

Respondent Characteristics	Number	Percentage
Employment Status		
a. Civil Servant	147	66.2%
b. Non-Civil Servant	56	25.2%
c. Contract Employees	19	8.6%
Position		
a. Staff	189	86%
b. Manager/Assistant Head of General Affairs	29	14%

Source: Processed data (2026)

An evaluation of the measurement model (*outer model*) was conducted to ensure that every indicator and latent construct in this study met the requirements for validity and reliability. The analysis results show that all indicators have *outer loadings* above the minimum threshold of 0.50, indicating that each indicator is deemed capable of adequately reflecting the construct it measures. Substantively, these results indicate that the items within the variables of work climate, competence, work motivation, and employee performance have a sufficiently strong empirical relationship with their respective theoretical constructs, making them appropriate to retain in the model.

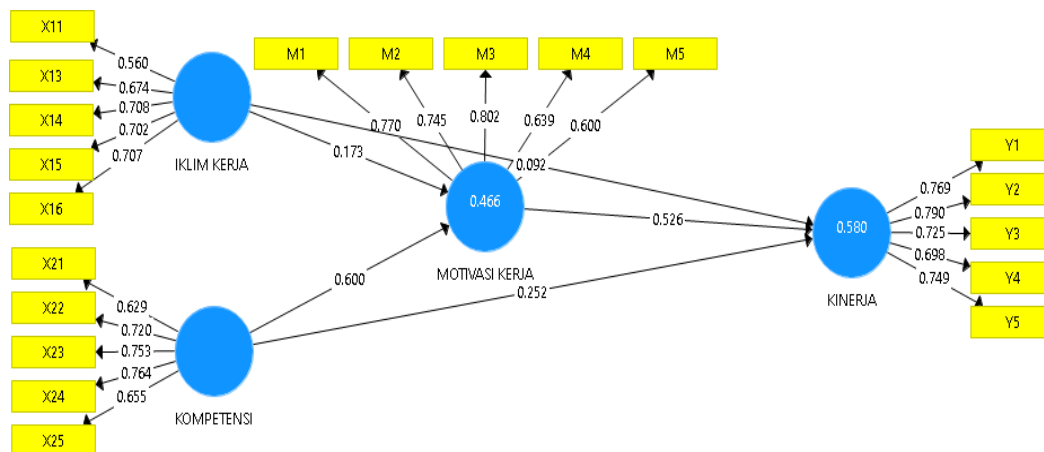


Figure 2.
PLS Model

The Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values also met the convergence criteria for all constructs: performance at 0.558, competence at 0.509, work climate at 0.503, and work motivation at 0.512. Since all AVE values exceed the 0.50 threshold, each construct is able to explain more than 50% of the variance in its respective indicators. Thus, the model's convergent validity can be deemed adequate, meaning that the indicators within each variable consistently measure the same concept. Furthermore, the reliability test results show that all constructs have *Composite Reliability* values above 0.70, namely performance at 0.863, competence at 0.832, work climate at 0.804, and work motivation at 0.838, as well as Cronbach's Alpha values of 0.802, 0.747, 0.710, and 0.760, respectively. These findings indicate that all constructs exhibit good internal consistency, meaning the research

instrument is not only conceptually valid but also reliable in producing stable measurements. In other words, respondents interpreted the indicators within each construct relatively consistently, making the measurement results trustworthy for subsequent structural equation modeling analysis.

Table 2.
Reliability Test Results

Variable	Cronbach's Alpha	rho_A	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Performance	0.802	0.807	0.863	0.558
Competence	0.747	0.754	0.832	0.509
Work Environment	0.71	0.728	0.804	0.503
Work Motivation	0.76	0.781	0.838	0.512

Source: SEM-PLS Ver 3.0 (2026)

An evaluation of the structural model (*inner model*) shows that the R-squared value for work motivation is 0.466 and for performance is 0.580. The value of 0.466 indicates that 46.6% of the variation in work motivation can be explained by work climate and competence, while the remainder is influenced by other factors outside the model. Meanwhile, the value of 0.580 indicates that 58.0% of the variation in employee performance can be explained by a combination of work climate, competence, and work motivation.

Substantively, both values fall into the “*moderate*” category, meaning the model has reasonably good explanatory power but is not yet fully comprehensive. These findings suggest that the constructed model has been able to capture the primary mechanisms underlying the formation of educational staff motivation and performance, but there are still other variables outside the model such as digital leadership, organizational culture, or technological support that have the potential to influence these two endogenous constructs.

Table 3.
R-Square Values

Variable	R-Square	Adjusted R-Square	Model
Work Motivation	0.466	0.461	Moderate
Performance	0.580	0.574	Moderate

Source: SEM-PLS Ver 3.0 (2026)

In addition to assessing the significance of the paths, this study also evaluated *the effect size* through the f-square value to determine the practical contribution of each exogenous variable to the endogenous construct. The analysis results show that work climate has a weak effect size on work motivation ($f^2 = 0.048$) and also a weak effect size on performance ($f^2 = 0.017$). These findings indicate that although work climate plays a role in the model, its direct contribution to changes in both endogenous variables is relatively small.

In contrast, competence has a strong effect size on work motivation ($f^2 =$

0.584), but only a weak one on performance ($f^2 = 0.082$). This suggests that competence primarily functions as a strong motivational driver, rather than merely as a source of direct influence on work outcomes. Meanwhile, work motivation has a strong effect size on performance ($f^2 = 0.352$), confirming that motivation is the most important mechanism in bridging individual resources and the work environment to actual employee performance. Thus, from a practical perspective, increasing work motivation and strengthening competence are the two most strategic points of intervention in this model.

Table 4.
F-Square Values

Independent Variables	Work Motivation	Model	Performance	Model
Work Climate	0.048	Weak	0.017	Weak
Competence	0.584	Strong	0.082	Weak
Work Motivation	-	-	0.352	Strong

Source: SEM-PLS Ver 3.0 (2026)

Hypothesis testing was conducted through an analysis of *direct effects* and *indirect effects* using the *bootstrapping* procedure in SmartPLS 3.0. Direct effects were used to assess the influence of work climate and competence on work motivation and performance, as well as the influence of work motivation on performance. Indirect effects were used to assess the mediating role of work motivation in the relationship between work climate and performance, as well as between competence and performance. A summary of the hypothesis testing results is presented in Tables 5 and 6.

Table 5.
Hypothesis Testing Results (Direct Effects)

Relationship	Original Sample	T-Statistic	P-Values	Decision
Work Environment → Performance	0.092	1.937	0.053	Rejected
Work Climate → Motivation	0.173	3.445	0.001	Accepted
Competence → Performance	0.252	3.959	0.000	Accepted
Competence → Motivation	0.600	10.958	0.000	Accepted
Motivation → Performance	0.526	7.920	0.000	Accepted

Source: SEM-PLS Ver 3.0 (2026)

Furthermore, testing for indirect effects revealed that work motivation acts as *a* full mediator in the relationship between work climate and performance, as indicated by an indirect effect value of 0.091 ($p = 0.002$), thus accepting H6. Meanwhile, work motivation also acts as *a partial* mediator in the relationship between competence and performance, with an indirect effect value of 0.316 ($p < 0.001$), thus accepting H7. These findings confirm that work motivation is an important psychological mechanism that transforms the influences of work climate and competence into the actual performance of Open University educational staff.

Table 6.
Hypothesis Testing Results (Indirect Effect)

Relationship	Original Sample	T-Statistic	P-Values	Decision	Type of Mediation
Work Climate → Motivation → Performance	0.091	3101	0.002	Accepted	Full Mediation
Competence → Motivation → Performance	0.600	10.958	0.000	Accepted	Partial Mediation

Source: SEM-PLS Ver 3.0 (2026)

DISCUSSION

The Effect of Work Climate on Performance

This study examines the effect of work climate on the performance of educational staff at the Universitas Terbuka as a Distance Higher Education Institution (PTJJ). The results of the hypothesis test indicate that work climate does not have a significant direct effect on performance (path coefficient = 0.092; $p = 0.053 > 0.05$), so H1 is rejected.

The lack of a significant direct effect of work climate on performance suggests that, in the context of the Open University, a conducive work environment does not automatically translate into higher work output. In distance higher education institutions, most administrative and academic service tasks are carried out within a digitized, distributed work system with relatively minimal face-to-face supervision. In such a context, the work climate is more likely to function as a supportive condition that fosters a sense of security, support, and role clarity, but it is not sufficient to generate performance without the presence of internal psychological motivation.

From the perspective of Self-Determination Theory, these findings suggest that the influence of contextual factors on work outcomes is not always direct but depends on the extent to which the context fulfills basic psychological needs and fosters work motivation. In other words, the work climate at the Open University is better understood as *an enabling condition* rather than *a direct driver of performance*. An alternative explanation that also makes sense is that the operational standards, digital systems, and service targets at the Open University are sufficiently structured, so that variations in performance are determined more by individual capacity and motivation than by perceptions of the work climate alone. These results are consistent with the findings of Fauzi and Nugroho (2024).

The Effect of Work Climate on Work Motivation

Test results indicate that the work climate has a positive and significant effect on the work motivation of Open University educational staff (path coefficient = 0.173; $p = 0.001$). This finding confirms that a conducive work

environment—including recognition of work performance and leadership support—plays a direct role in enhancing employees' intrinsic motivation. Consistent with Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), the work climate at UT serves to fulfill employees' basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

The positive influence of the work climate on work motivation indicates that the quality of the organizational environment holds real psychological significance for educational staff. When they feel support from supervisors, clarity in procedures, good communication, and recognition of their work contributions, their basic needs for relatedness, autonomy, and competence are better fulfilled. Within the SDT framework, the fulfillment of these needs serves as the foundation for the growth of more autonomous and sustainable motivation.

In the context of the Open University, this is important because educational staff work within a system that requires cross-unit coordination, technological adaptation, and service to students who are geographically dispersed. Therefore, a supportive work environment not only creates a comfortable work atmosphere but also strengthens psychological readiness to actively engage in one's duties. This finding is also consistent with a study published in the *Untar journal*, which shows that psychological variables and the quality of the work environment can improve work behavior outcomes through internal mediation mechanisms, such as employee engagement. These results align with the research by Fitria and Fauzan (2024), which states that organizational support fulfills basic psychological needs that form the foundation of intrinsic motivation.

The Effect of Competence on Performance

The test results demonstrate that competence has a positive and significant effect on the performance of UT educational staff (path coefficient = 0.252; $p < 0.001$). This finding confirms that an increase in competence—including knowledge, technical skills, as well as a disciplined and responsible attitude—is directly followed by an improvement in performance.

The positive influence of competence on performance underscores that the technical abilities, job knowledge, and adaptive capacity of educational staff are productive assets that directly translate into work outcomes. In the PTJJ environment, demands for technological proficiency, the accuracy of administrative services, and the ability to complete tasks independently make competence a critically important operational prerequisite. Therefore, more competent educational staff tend to be able to work more effectively, accurately, and responsively to the needs of both the institution and students.

Theoretically, these findings suggest that individual resources function not only as potential but also as actual determinants of performance when job demands depend on the quality of task mastery. An alternative explanation to consider is that within the Open University's digitized work system, employees with higher competencies find it easier to navigate procedures, technology, and cross-unit coordination, resulting in more stable performance compared to those with limited work capacity. These findings are consistent with the research by Suci and Yulia (2020) as well as Subandi et al. (2023). In the context of UT, the

knowledge-based nature of the work makes competence an absolute prerequisite for achieving performance.

The Effect of Competence on Work Motivation

The test results demonstrate that competence has a positive and highly significant effect on the work motivation of educational staff at the Open University (path coefficient = 0.600; $p < 0.001$), making it the strongest relationship in the research model. This finding confirms that competence serves not only as a tool for performance but also as a potential source of psychological motivation. Based on Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), fulfilling the need for competence through task mastery fosters a sense of mastery and self-efficacy, which in turn triggers intrinsic motivation.

The strongest influence of competence on work motivation indicates that a sense of competence is a crucial source of psychological energy in distance higher education organizations. When educational staff feel they have mastery over their tasks, digital skills, and the confidence to perform their work well, they tend to demonstrate a greater internal drive to excel. Within the SDT framework, the perception of competence is one of the basic psychological needs that, when met, strengthens intrinsic motivation.

This finding also explains why competence is not only related to “being able to work,” but also to “being willing to work diligently.” In the context of the Open University, which demands a high level of independence and the ability to work across digital systems, mastery of competencies provides a sense of control and self-confidence that strengthens commitment to tasks. These results align with a study by Untar showing that self-efficacy or personal resources can enhance work output both directly and through mediating psychological mechanisms. These findings confirm that competence is not merely a tool for performance but also a highly potent source of psychological motivation, consistent with Bandura’s (1997) concept of self-efficacy.

The Influence of Work Motivation on Performance

The test results confirm that work motivation has a positive and highly significant effect on the performance of UT educational staff (path coefficient = 0.526; $p < 0.001$), making it the strongest single predictor of performance in the research model. This finding strongly supports the proposition that performance is a function of ability and motivation (Mangkunegara, 2017).

The strong influence of work motivation on performance indicates that motivation is the most decisive proximal mechanism in translating ability into actual performance. In the PTJJ work environment, which does not always rely on direct control, work motivation plays a role in maintaining consistency of effort, perseverance, responsibility, and results orientation. Therefore, educational staff with higher motivation tend to be better able to maintain service quality and complete tasks more effectively.

Theoretically, these findings reinforce the view that performance is not merely the result of ability but also the result of an internal drive to use that ability productively. In the context of the Open University, motivation is particularly

important because the flexible and digitized work system provides ample room for self-management. These results align with findings in the *Untar* journal that work motivation has a positive and significant influence on employee work outcomes or work attitudes within a SEM-based model. These findings reinforce the theory that no matter how great a person's competencies may be, without motivation, that potential will not be fully realized.

Work Motivation as a Mediator of the Influence of Work Climate on UT Employee Performance

The results of the mediation test indicate that work motivation acts as a full mediator in the relationship between work climate and UT employee performance (indirect effect = 0.091; $p = 0.002$; the direct effect is not significant with $p = 0.053$). This finding validates the Self-Determination Theory framework, which posits that work climate does not directly drive performance but rather creates an environmental foundation that meets employees' psychological needs—such as managerial support and recognition—which in turn enhances work motivation; and it is this motivation that serves as the primary driver of improved performance.

The full mediating role of work motivation in the relationship between work climate and performance indicates that work climate does not operate through a direct pathway but first shapes the psychological conditions that encourage educational staff to work with greater enthusiasm and engagement. Psychologically, a supportive work climate provides experiences of support, recognition, and connectedness, which in turn boost work motivation. This motivation serves as the “psychological bridge” between the organizational context and actual work outcomes, making the work climate–performance relationship significant only through the mediation pathway.

Work Motivation as a Mediator of the Effect of Competence on Employee Performance

Conversely, the partial mediation of work motivation in the relationship between competence and performance indicates that competence operates through two mechanisms simultaneously. The first pathway is direct, as mastery of knowledge and skills does indeed enhance the ability to complete tasks. The second pathway is indirect, as competence also fosters a sense of competence, self-confidence, and psychological readiness that strengthen work motivation. This distinction between *full mediation* and *partial mediation* is theoretically significant, as it demonstrates that contextual and individual factors do not influence performance through the same mechanisms. In the context of the Open University, the work environment primarily influences performance through motivation, whereas competence influences performance through both functional and motivational channels.

E. CONCLUSION

This study shows that the performance of educational staff at the Open University is determined more by their competencies and work motivation than by

the direct influence of the work climate. The work climate was found to have no significant direct effect on performance but did influence work motivation, which then fully mediated that effect. Conversely, competence not only had a direct effect on performance but also exerted a strong influence on work motivation, such that motivation partially mediated the relationship between competence and performance.

Theoretically, these findings expand the application of Self-Determination Theory in the context of distance higher education by demonstrating that contextual resources and individual resources operate through distinct motivational pathways. Work climate primarily functions as a contextual factor that creates supportive psychological conditions, whereas competence serves a dual role as both a functional capacity and a motivational trigger. Thus, this study enriches the literature on management and organizational behavior by affirming that in digitized higher education organizations, the performance of educational staff cannot be explained solely by the work environment but must be understood through motivational mechanisms that link context, individual capacity, and work outcomes.

The managerial implications of these findings are that the Open University needs to prioritize competency development and the strengthening of work motivation as two key priorities in its strategy to improve the performance of educational staff. Since competencies have a direct impact on performance as well as a strong influence on motivation, training programs should not focus solely on the transfer of technical skills but should also be designed to build a sense of competence, self-confidence, and readiness to adapt to digital work systems.

On the other hand, since the work climate has been shown to influence performance through motivation, unit leaders need to strengthen managerial practices that enhance the positive psychological experience of educational staff, such as providing meaningful recognition, clear workplace communication, support for autonomy, and more collaborative cross-unit coordination. These findings also suggest that performance evaluation systems should not only assess work output but also integrate aspects of competency development and motivation enhancement as part of human resource management policies within the PTJJ environment.

This study has several limitations. First, the *cross-sectional* design limits the study's ability to capture the dynamics of causal relationships in greater depth over time. Second, the research model only includes work climate, competencies, and work motivation; thus, it remains possible that other factors—such as digital leadership, virtual organizational culture, work engagement, or technological support—also play a role in explaining the performance of educational staff at distance higher education institutions.

Given these limitations, future research is advised to use a *longitudinal* or *mixed-methods* design to capture the changes in motivation and performance in a more dynamic manner. Furthermore, follow-up studies should expand the model

by incorporating variables relevant to the international discourse on digital organizations and higher education management, so that the findings not only hold strong in the context of the Open University but are also more closely connected to the global debate on workforce performance in digitized educational institutions.

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