



Empirical evidence on how perceived reward gaps undermine professionalism among university faculty through dual psychological pathways

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Abstract

Teacher professionalism is fundamentally about internalizing and enacting core values through self-regulation. Yet, under pressures like the "up-or-out" system and academic "involution", this professionalism is being eroded, leading to a decline in professional beliefs and even deviant behaviors. The deterioration of professional beliefs may further trigger a decline in professionalism, making it imperative to uncover the underlying psychological mechanisms to provide theoretical support for targeted interventions. This study aims to reveal the implicit psychological mechanisms through which perceived reward gap affects the professionalism of university teachers, and to examine heterogeneity across different types of institutions and academic disciplines. Drawing on effort-reward imbalance theory and expectancy disconfirmation theory, a dual-pathway parallel mediation model is constructed, in which perceived reward gap serves as the independent variable, professionalism as the dependent variable, and psychological contract and organizational cynicism as parallel mediators. Data were collected through a questionnaire survey, and empirical analyses were conducted using the PROCESS macro (Version 3.3) in SPSS and AMOS (Version 28). The results indicate that professionalism is directly influenced by perceived reward gaps, while psychological contract and organizational cynicism play significant parallel mediating roles between them. Moreover, the mediation effects exhibit heterogeneity across different types of institutions and academic disciplines. Therefore, Universities and government agencies should strengthen communication with teachers, improve evaluation systems, and attend to institutional and disciplinary differences. Teachers are also encouraged to enhance their psychological resilience and professional ethics to sustain personal growth and foster the educator spirit.

Keywords: Professionalism; Psychological contract; Organizational cynicism; Perceived reward gap

1. Introduction

The essence of teachers' professionalism lies in realizing the internalization and practice of core professional values through self-control and self-discipline. The ancient saying, "from the Son of Heaven down to the common people, all must regard self-cultivation as the foundation, " reflects the emphasis on personal cultivation. The development of teachers should be supported by self-control as the core, rather than relying solely on external control (Huang, 2024). As guides for young intellectuals and cultivators of the pillars of the nation, university teachers should cultivate students based on their own core competencies and guide student

development with moral character and professional expertise (Zhang & Xu, 2024). However, university teachers in China are currently facing the dual pressures of the "up-or-out" system and academic "involution." Due to the lack of effective grievance mechanisms and a classified evaluation system, early- and mid-career teachers are forced into a dilemma of high-intensity input but difficulty in meeting required standards (Xu & Yu, 2024). At the same time, the insufficiency of academic, financial, and social resources compels teachers to continuously overexert themselves in the context of "involution." The lack of effective grievance mechanisms and a classified evaluation system lead to a situation in which teachers' actual returns are lower than expected returns. This gap continuously erodes professional beliefs, results in the loss of professional value perception, and intensifies psychological disparity (Ji, 2024). Such discrepancies continuously erode teachers' professional beliefs, weaken their sense of professional value, and intensify psychological strain. Consequently, the deterioration of professional beliefs and value perception is likely to trigger a decline in professionalism, highlighting the urgent need to uncover its underlying psychological mechanisms. Similar patterns have also been observed in other developing countries. Under constraints in funding and equipment resources, combined with heavy workloads and insufficient organizational support, teachers' participation in training and their professional development are likely to be hindered (Alawi, 2024).

Existing studies have mainly focused on external regulatory mechanisms. Since 2018, the Ministry of Education of China has successively issued professional conduct guidelines and disciplinary measures, attempting to carry out external regulation through institutional boundaries. However, as of August 2023, 35 typical cases of misconduct among university teachers publicly exposed by the Ministry of Education indicate that simple external control is insufficient to prevent ethical misconduct (Wu & Li, 2024). In recent years, studies have increasingly recognized that self-control based on the internalization of moral norms is the fundamental way to prevent misconduct, while external regulation can only play a safeguarding role (He & Niu, 2025). Against the backdrop of this theoretical shift, professionalism of teachers—conceptualized as the internalization and enactment of core professional values through self-control and self-regulation—should become a central focus of scholarly attention. However, research on the antecedents of professionalism, particularly how organizational contextual factors erode or nurture this intrinsic quality, remains limited. Specifically, three critical gaps can be identified. First, existing studies have predominantly emphasized external ethical norms (e.g., professional ethics), while overlooking teachers' capacities for self-control and self-regulation (i.e., Professionalism). As a result, external norms alone cannot adequately explain why teachers may formally comply with institutional rules and regulations while their intrinsic motivation continues to decline. Second, although psychological contract and organizational cynicism have each been shown to be associated with effort–reward imbalance, they have not been examined as parallel mediators within an integrated framework. The erosion of professionalism is likely to involve both a weakening sense of obligation (psychological contract) and the emergence of detachment or alienation (organizational cynicism), which may require distinct intervention strategies. Third, insufficient attention has been paid to heterogeneity across different types of institutions and academic disciplines, thereby limiting the explanatory power and generalizability of existing findings. In response to these gaps, this study makes four primary contributions. First, by integrating effort–reward imbalance theory and expectation–disconfirmation theory, this study proposes the construct of “perceived reward gap,” and further develops the concept of “professionalism” by drawing on self-cultivation theory in conjunction with the teaching profession and Confucian thought. Second, it reveals a dual mediating mechanism characterized by the coexistence of obligation erosion (psychological contract) and cynical attitudes (organizational cynicism). Third, it examines contextual heterogeneity across different types of institutions and academic disciplines, thereby establishing boundary conditions for the proposed model. Fourth, it shifts the research focus from external regulation to internal self-regulation, offering a new theoretical perspective for understanding how perceived reward gaps undermine teachers' professionalism.

The structure of this paper is as follows. The first section is the introduction, which clarifies the research background, research gaps, and contributions. The second section is the literature review, which systematically reviews relevant theories and proposes research hypotheses. The third section is the research methodology, which provides a detailed description of the questionnaire design, sample characteristics, and measurement scales. The fourth section is the empirical analysis and results discussion, which reports the results of hypothesis testing and heterogeneity analysis. The fifth section presents the conclusions and implications, summarizing the research findings and proposing theoretical and practical recommendations.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Mechanisms Linking Perceived Reward Gap to Professionalism and Hypotheses Development

As Siegrist (2026) summarizes in a recent retrospective review, effort-reward imbalance theory posits that the effort individuals invest in their work should be matched by corresponding rewards, which are mainly reflected in economic compensation, social respect, and status recognition. When there is an imbalance between effort and reward, individuals are likely to develop negative psychological reactions (Siegrist, 2026). As Zhang et al (2022) note, expectancy-disconfirmation theory posits that satisfaction arises from individuals' comparative evaluation between perceived outcomes and prior expectations: when actual perceptions exceed expectations, individuals tend to form positive evaluations; conversely, when outcomes fall short of expectations, dissatisfaction is likely to occur (Zhang et al., 2022). Based on the integration of these two theories, this study proposes the concept of perceived reward gaps, which serves as a measure of the discrepancy between individuals' subjective evaluation of rewards and their psychological expectations. For instance, under pressures such as the "up-or-out" tenure-track system and intensified internal competition, university teachers often experience declining job security and are compelled to undertake high-cost work tasks. Despite substantial effort, they may fail to obtain corresponding rewards, such that actual returns fall markedly below expected returns. This discrepancy gives rise to perceived reward gap, which in turn affects teachers' professionalism.

Although direct research on professionalism remains limited, extensive scholarship has examined teachers' professional codes of conduct, accumulating rich findings across dimensions such as professional spirit, professional ethics, and moral responsibility (Han & Li, 2022; Decker et al., 2022; Cao et al., 2023). Collectively, this body of research reveals the core connotations of the teaching profession, including solid instructional competence, moral judgment ability, value commitment, and a conscious assumption of ethical responsibility. The theory of self-cultivation conceptualizes self-cultivation as the concrete process through which individuals pursue their ideal moral character, manifested in everyday practices of self-discipline and proactive efforts to align oneself with higher-level moral standards in society. It encompasses stages such as self-reflection, self-restraint, self-learning, and self-dedication (Duan et al., 2022). Drawing on both the conceptualization of the teaching profession and self-cultivation theory, this study proposes the notion of teachers' professionalism, defined as the process by which teachers proactively guide and regulate their own behavior through self-control and self-restraint, thereby consciously cultivating and enacting the core values of their profession. Teacher professional ethics are typically regarded as social responsibilities and moral expectations that teachers are obliged to fulfill, which represent ought-to behaviors driven by external control (Yu, 2022). In contrast, professionalism emphasizes internally regulated, self-directed behavior; it reflects actual behavior grounded in self-control rather than external enforcement.

Further, when there is a gap between teachers' expectations of academic practice (such as social expectations and self-evaluation expectations) and the actual academic environment and support conditions, it may affect the development of teachers' professionalism (Han & Xie, 2022). At the same time, there exists a discrepancy between teachers' expectations of professional value and societal expectations of teachers, which may influence teachers' occupational attractiveness and professionalism (Johnston & Lane, 2023). Large-scale micro-level survey data have found that there is a significant gap between the actual salary and expected salary levels of university teachers in China. This gap is likely to reduce teachers' intrinsic motivation to engage in their primary work and may even lead to turnover intentions (Hu et al., 2024). In addition, when teachers perceive a discrepancy between expected and actual support and resource returns in academic innovation and entrepreneurship activities, their enthusiasm for such activities is weakened (Yu et al., 2022). Specifically, mismatches in compensation weaken the motivation for investment and professional development. Insufficient recognition of research and innovation achievements hinders the improvement of professionalism in the academic field. This gap frustrates teachers' career development and affects their professional behavior as well as long-term development. Based on the above analysis, this study proposes the following hypotheses.

H1: Perceived reward gap has a significant negative effect on university teachers' professionalism.

2.2 The Mediating Role of the Psychological Contract and Hypotheses Development

As summarized by Rousseau (2020) in a recent review, psychological contract theory posits that, distinct from formal written economic contracts, the psychological contract refers to the implicit mutual expectations and shared understandings between employers and employees (Rousseau, 2020). As an unwritten contract, it not only profoundly shapes individuals' emotions, attitudes, and behavioral responses, but also constitutes a foundation of psychological identification that goes beyond economic exchange. Building on this, when employees perceive that organizational returns in terms of compensation, promotion, or respect fall short of their expectations, the psychological contract is likely to be violated (Yu et al., 2022). Similarly, according to the effort–reward imbalance (ERI) model, when university teachers experience a discrepancy between high effort and low reward, their psychological contract with the organization is significantly weakened (Xie et al., 2021). Existing research has shown that a positive organizational climate fostered by leadership can significantly improve teachers' psychological outcomes, thereby providing empirical support for the mediating role of organizational contextual factors in teachers' psychological mechanisms (Khan et al., 2022). Building on this line of reasoning, the present study adopts the perspective of the “perceived reward gap” to examine the psychological erosion it induces, thereby offering a new theoretical lens for uncovering the pathways through which organizational contextual factors influence teachers' psychological processes.

As reviewed by Kaswa (2025), cognitive dissonance theory holds that when individuals face psychological dissonance, they regulate it through two pathways: behavioral adjustment and cognitive rationalization (Kaswa, 2025). Specifically, in the context of university teachers, when teachers perceive a low level of psychological contract, they may reduce work investment and weaken professional identity as a form of behavioral adjustment; alternatively, they may engage in cognitive rationalization, such as self-suggesting that "overinvestment equals professional dignity," thereby inducing involution. Both responses hinder the long-term development of professionalism by eroding psychological well-being (Wang et al., 2022). Meanwhile, the optimization of the psychological contract can effectively enhance teachers' work engagement, self-driven motivation, and sustained dedication behaviors (Njobvu & Daka, 2025). Based on the above analysis, this study proposes the following hypotheses:

H2: The psychological contract mediates the relationship between perceived reward gap and university teachers' professionalism.

2.3 The Mediating Role of the Organizational Cynicism and Hypotheses Development

As Mignonac et al (2023) note, organizational cynicism refers to a negative attitude, emotional detachment, and behavioral withdrawal that individuals develop in response to dissatisfaction and disappointment with the organization (Mignonac et al., 2023). In academic contexts, such cynicism often arises when university teachers experience a breach of prior expectations—such as guarantees of academic freedom, career development, and fair evaluation—thereby reinforcing negative perceptions of the institution (Zhong & Guo, 2025). Similarly, in preschool settings, perceived discrepancies between actual rewards and expected returns generate frustration and dissatisfaction, further triggering cynical attitudes (Huang et al., 2023). Drawing on conservation of resources theory, individuals are understood to seek to acquire, retain, and protect valued resources; the threat or loss of such resources tends to produce psychological stress and negative affect (Bon & Shire, 2022). Organizational stressors in educational settings and the perceived reward gap both fall within the domain of resource loss. Such loss of resources directly gives rise to psychological strain, including irritability and anxiety, which serves as a precursor to the emergence of organizational cynicism (Pedroso et al., 2022). Once cynicism develops, teachers' organizational identification and sense of responsibility typically weaken, resulting in diminished professional enthusiasm and impaired commitment to self-cultivation, which ultimately undermines both teaching quality and research input. Critiques of educational cynicism further highlight that an excessive focus on metric-based management and performance orientation within higher education erodes pedagogical ideals and fosters a sense of pseudo-participation among faculty (Wang, 2022). Moreover, when distributive injustice is perceived, employees are more likely to adopt cynical stances toward the organization, progressively reducing work input and motivation while exhibiting disengaged and withdrawal behaviors (Agina et al., 2023). Perceived reward gap can thus be understood as a form of resource loss that elevates university teachers' negative impressions of their institutions into organizational cynicism, thereby undermining professional identification. Based on this analysis, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3: Organizational cynicism mediates the relationship between perceived reward gap and professionalism.

2.4 The Parallel Mediating Roles of Psychological Contract and Organizational Cynicism and Hypotheses Development

Based on the analysis of the mediating mechanisms of psychological contract and organizational cynicism, this study identifies two distinct psychological pathways—positive and negative—through which the perceived reward gap influences professionalism. On the basis of this integrated framework, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H4: The psychological contract and organizational cynicism jointly operate as parallel mediators in the relationship between perceived reward gap and professionalism.

2.5 Theoretical Model

On the basis of the hypotheses proposed above, further integrating the relationships among variables from a holistic perspective helps deepen the understanding of the psychological driving mechanisms of teacher

professionalism and explains, to some extent, the observed decline in teacher professionalism. As Liao et al (2024) note, social exchange theory posits that individuals determine whether to continue investing resources and emotional commitment in their organizations based on the perceived balance between their inputs and returns (Liao et al., 2024). When teachers anticipate that their psychological contracts are likely to be breached, organizations that comprehensively employ both positive and negative incentive mechanisms can help reshape teachers’ perceptions and expectations of the psychological contract, thereby stimulating positive work behaviors (Wu, 2025). Conversely, when expectations and needs remain unmet over a prolonged period, an internal sense of alienation gradually accumulates, fostering latent resistance and emotional detachment, which in turn erodes the stability of professional identity and the continuity of professional commitment (Xiong et al., 2024). Based on this reasoning, this study proposes a Dual-Pathway Psychological Driving Mechanism Model (as shown in Figure 1), which aims to elucidate how perceived subjective discrepancies subtly influence individuals' psychological states and subsequently shape their professional behaviors in a systematic manner.

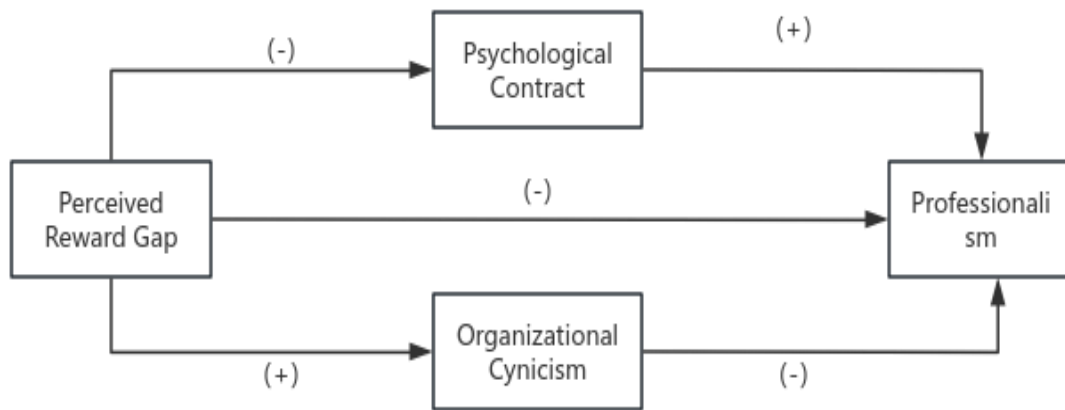


Figure 1: The Dual Psychological Pathways Driving Model of Professionalism

3. Methodology

3.1 Questionnaire Design

The survey primarily targeted young and middle-aged university teachers, and first-hand data were collected through a questionnaire-based survey. The survey was administered online in April 2025. The survey was administered through a paid commission to a professional survey platform (Credamo), yielding a total of 270 responses, of which 258 were valid, corresponding to an effective response rate of 95.6%. The questionnaire consisted of two main sections.

The first section collected demographic and professional information, including gender, age, educational attainment, monthly income, academic rank, years of teaching experience, disciplinary field, and institutional tier. The second section measured perceived reward gap, psychological contract, organizational cynicism, and professionalism, with items adapted from established and widely used scales in the literature (Li & Sun, 2006; Bai, 2013; Ma et al., 2023; Qian & Wang, 2022; Wang & Wu, 2017). The second part of the questionnaire adopts a seven-point Likert scale.

3.2 Sample Characteristics

Table 1 presents the respondents' demographic and professional characteristics, detailed below.

1. Gender. The sample comprised 101 male and 157 female respondents, accounting for 39.1% and 60.9% of the total, respectively, indicating a broadly balanced gender distribution.
2. Age. The majority of respondents were aged between 26 and 35 years, representing 66.6% of the sample. This distribution reflects the ongoing trend toward a younger faculty structure in higher education.
3. Educational Attainment and Monthly Net Income. A total of 143 respondents (55.5%) held junior college or bachelor's degrees, with junior college degrees accounting for only 3.9%. Respondents with master's or doctoral degrees constituted 44.5% of the sample, highlighting the pronounced trend toward higher educational attainment within higher education institutions. In terms of monthly net income, 58.9% of respondents reported earnings below RMB 6,000 to 8,000, which is consistent with the moderately above average yet structured salary profile typical of university teachers.
4. Academic Rank and Years of Teaching Experience. Assistant professors and lecturers accounted for 54.3% and 36.4% of the samples, respectively, and 64% of respondents reported fewer than six years of teaching experience.
5. Disciplinary Field. Faculty members in science and engineering disciplines constituted 67.4% of the sample, while those in humanities and social sciences accounted for 32.6%.
6. Institutional Type. Teachers from public universities represented 70.5% of the sample, whereas those from private institutions accounted for 29.5%.

3.3 Scale Analysis

Tables 2 and 3 present the specific measurement items for perceived reward gap, psychological contract, organizational cynicism, and professionalism. The results indicate that the Cronbach's alpha coefficients for all scales exceeded 0.751, demonstrating satisfactory internal consistency and reliability of the questionnaire.

SPSS 21.0 and AMOS 28 were used for data management and statistical analysis. Since questionnaire data are susceptible to systematic errors, which may distort the true relationships among variables, Harman's single-factor test was employed for preliminary diagnosis to effectively screen for the risk of common method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2024). The results show that the first factor accounts for only 14.48% of the variance, which is far below the critical threshold of 40% suggested by Kock (2021), indicating that there is no serious bias. Subsequently, single-factor confirmatory factor analyses were performed for perceived reward gap, psychological contract, organizational cynicism, and professionalism, respectively (Kock et al., 2021). As shown in Table 4, the results indicate that the measurement models for all constructs exhibited good model fit.

Table 2: Sample Characteristics

Variable	Category	N	%	Variable	Category	N	%
A1. Gender	1. Male	10	39.1	A5. Academic Rank	1. Teaching Assistant	94	36.4%
		1	0%		2. Assistant Professor	140	54.3
	2. Female	15	60.9		3. Associate Professor	19	7.40%
	7	0%	4. Professor		5	1.90%	
A2. Age	1. 25 years and below	30	11.6		A6. Years of Teaching Experience	1. 1-5 years	165
			0%	2. 6-10 years		72	27.9
	2. 26-30 years	10	42.2	3. 11-15 years		17	6.60%
		9	0%	4. 16-20 years		3	1.20%
	3. 31-35 years	63	24.4	5. 21 years and above		1	0.40%
			0%	A7. Academic Discipline	1. Natural Sciences	117	45.3
4. 36-40 years	44	17.1	2. Engineering		57	22.1	
		0%	3. Humanities and Social Sciences		84	32.6	
5. 41-45 years	8	3.1				0%	
A3. Educational Level	1. Associate Degree	10	3.9	A8. Type of Higher Education Institution	1. Project 985/211 Universities	29	11.2
			0%		2. Public Undergraduate Institutions	117	45.3
	2. Bachelor's Degree	13	51.6		3. Private Undergraduate Institutions	50	19.4
		3	0%		4. Public Junior Colleges	36	14.0
3. Master's Degree	99	38.4	5. Private Junior Colleges		26	10.1	
		0%			0%		
A4. Monthly Net Income	4. Doctoral Degree	16	6.2			0%	
			0%			0%	
	1. Below 4,000	8	3.1			0%	
			0%			0%	
	2. 4000-6000	52	20.2			0%	

Note: Project 985/211 were national initiatives in China that selected and provided substantial funding to a group of universities designated as top-tier institutions. These labels continue to hold significant influence in terms of prestige and graduate employability, representing China's most elite universities.

Table 3. Measurement Items for the Explanatory and Mediating Variables

Variable	Items and Codes
Perceived Reward Gap ($\alpha=0.875$)	B1. Public respect for the teaching profession in higher education has declined. B2. University teachers do not hold a high status within the institutional hierarchy of universities. B3. My income does not adequately match the heavy teaching and research workload I undertake. B4. Individuals with similar qualifications to mine earn significantly more when working in other industries. B5. I am often informed late about major decisions regarding personnel affairs and disciplinary development at my university. B6. In university administrative affairs, I am usually placed in the position of being supervised and evaluated rather than participating in decision-making.
Psychological Contract ($\alpha=0.751$)	D1. Regardless of circumstances, I remain firmly committed to the development goals of higher education. D2. Fulfilling the task requirements stipulated in my employment contract is a responsibility I consciously uphold. D3. Contributing ideas and advice to the development of my university is an obligation I willingly assume. D4. As a teacher, my emotional attachment to my university is comparable to that toward my own family. D5. When required by work, I am willing to accept job or position adjustments without hesitation. D6. I feel a sense of guilt whenever I fail to accomplish my assigned work tasks.
Organizational Cynicism ($\alpha=0.888$)	E1. When I think about the university where I am employed, I feel angry. E2. When I think about the university where I am employed, I feel tense, anxious, or uneasy. E3. Working as a university teacher makes me feel emotionally and physically depleted. E4. Working as a university teacher leads me to experience emotional exhaustion. E5. I often criticize the strategies and practices of the university where I work in front of others.

Table 4. Measurement Items of the Outcome Variable

Variable	Items and Codes
Self -Control (α=0.659) Self -Discipline (α=0.650) Professionalism (α=0.896) Self -Directed Learning (α=0.715) Self -Dedication (α=0.806)	H1 You reflect on whether your actions are beneficial to your organization, service recipients, and your work.
	H2 You continuously reflect on the quality of your teaching, research, and collective service.
	H3 After completing a task, you often reflect on whether you could have undertaken additional tasks.
	H4 You frequently discuss teaching experiences, research insights, and departmental affairs with colleagues.
	H5 You strictly adhere to teaching and research plans to ensure tasks are completed on time.
	H6 You are able to resist distractions (e.g., entertainment or trivial matters) and remain focused on academic and research tasks.
	H7 You maintain long-term self-discipline to sustain high professional standards and teaching preparation quality.
	H8 You are able to regulate your emotions effectively during teaching and research activities and avoid acting impulsively.
	H9 You actively participate in academic conferences and communicate with colleagues and supervisors to compensate for gaps in your knowledge.
	H10 When encountering problems and challenges at work, you strive to understand them as thoroughly as possible.
	H11 You develop written plans to ensure the achievement of your teaching and research goals.
	H12 You engage in creative thinking related to your teaching and research activities.
H13 You believe that the profession of university teaching helps you fulfill your life mission.	
H14 You chose your current career path because you perceive a sense of mission that transcends personal interests.	
H15 Through your role as a university teacher, you feel that you are fulfilling the meaning of your existence.	
H16 You firmly believe that the profession of university teaching is the career to which you should devote your life	

Table 5. Fit Indices of Single-Factor Confirmatory Factor Analysis for Each Variable

Variable	χ^2/df	GFI	AGFI	NFI	CFI	TLI	SRMR	RMSEA
PRG	1.689	0.990	0.957	0.989	0.995	0.986	0.016	0.052
PC	2.112	0.987	0.945	0.971	0.984	0.952	0.031	0.066
OC	1.421	0.991	0.967	0.991	0.997	0.993	0.017	0.040
PM	1.745	0.926	0.949	0.888	0.948	0.936	0.048	0.054

Note: PRG=Perceived Reward Gap; PC=Psychological Contract
 OC=Organizational Cynicism; PM=Professionalism

4. Results and discussions

4.1 Confirmatory Factor Analysis and Descriptive Statistics

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was employed to examine the structural validity of the measurement model, which can effectively assess convergent validity and discriminant validity (Cheung et al., 2024). In this study, AMOS 28 was used to conduct CFA to test the discriminant validity of four constructs: perceived reward gap, psychological contracts, organizational cynicism, and professionalism. According to the criteria for model fit indices proposed by Kline (2023) ($\chi^2/df < 3$, CFI > 0.90, RMSEA < 0.08, SRMR < 0.08), the four-factor model in this study demonstrates a good fit ($\chi^2/df = 1.049$, $p < 0.01$, SRMR = 0.0481, CFI = 0.984, TLI = 0.874), which is superior to all alternative models (see Table 5), indicating that the four constructs in the model have good discriminant validity (Kline, 2023). Table 6 reports the means, standard deviations, and correlation coefficients for all variables. The mean values of the variables ranged from 4.26 to 5.73. Perceived reward gap was negatively correlated with psychological contract and professionalism, while it was positively correlated with organizational cynicism.

Table 6. Results of Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Model	χ^2/df	GFI	AGFI	TLI	NFI	CFI	SRMR	RMSEA
Single-factor model (PRG+PC+OC+PM)	3.890	0.565	0.507	0.586	0.543	0.612	0.107	0.106
Two-factor model (PRG+PC+OC; PM)	2.869	0.709	0.668	0.732	0.666	0.751	0.107	0.085
Three-factor model (PRG; PC+OC; PM)	2.265	0.759	0.722	0.819	0.738	0.833	0.090	0.070
Four-factor model (PRG; PC; OC; PM)	1.135	0.898	0.872	0.981	0.879	0.984	0.048	0.023

Table 7. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations of Variables

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4
PRG	4.26	1.30	1			
PC	5.41	0.75	-0.268**	1		
OC	3.04	1.36	0.593**	-0.364**	1	
PM	5.73	0.63	-0.352**	0.726**	-0.492**	1

Note. The valid sample size is N = 258. * Indicates significance at the 0.05 level, and ** indicates significance at the 0.01 level. The same notation applies hereinafter.

4.2 Mechanism Testing

To test the proposed hypotheses, this study employed the PROCESS macro (Version 3.3) in SPSS to examine the mediating effects. This method is based on Bootstrap resampling to generate bias-corrected confidence intervals, allowing for accurate estimation of indirect effects without assuming a normal distribution (Hayes, 2022). Model 4 was used to test the mediation mechanism, and 5,000 Bootstrap samples were applied to calculate the 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals to examine the significance of the dual-path mediation effects. If

the confidence interval (LLCI, ULCI) does not include 0, the indirect effect is considered significant; if it includes 0, the effect is not significant (Fang & Wen, 2022). Table 7 reports the results of the mediation analyses, where Models 1 through 6 present the hierarchical regression results. In Models 2 and 3, psychological contract and organizational cynicism serve as the outcome variables, respectively, whereas professionalism is the outcome variable in the remaining models. Table 8 presents the results of the mediation tests, including the total effect, direct effect, and indirect effects. In addition, the specific indirect paths and their associated statistical estimates are detailed, elucidating the mediating mechanisms operating between the variables.

Table 8. Hierarchical Regression Analysis with Perceived Reward Gap as the Explanatory Variable

	PC	PM	PM	OC	PM	PM
	<i>Model 1</i>	<i>Model 2</i>	<i>Model 3</i>	<i>Model 4</i>	<i>Model 5</i>	<i>Model 6</i>
Explanatory Variable						
RPG	-0.115**	-0.142**	-0.076*	0.619**	-0.015	-0.014
Mediating Variables						
PC			0.570**			0.522**
OC					-0.204**	-0.110**
Control Variables						
Gender	0.0703	0.022	0.012	0.025	0.039	0.021
Age	-0.0681	0.075	-0.028	0.015	0.001	-0.032
Educational Level	-0.2043	-0.172*	0.054	-0.044	-0.086	0.023
Monthly Net Income	-0.1103	0.071	0.019	0.060	0.038	0.011
Academic Rank	0.1084	0.075	-0.052	-0.010	0.013	-0.036
Years of Teaching	0.0159	0.060	0.074	0.108	0.111	0.078
Academic Discipline	0.0783	0.017	-0.009	0.001	0.017	0.001
Type of Higher Education Institution	-0.0823	-0.030	-0.012	-0.029	-0.046	-0.022
R^2	0.135**	0.161**	0.373**	0.561**	0.285**	0.594**
F	4.308	4.822	16.392	15.080	4.822	32.6901

Table 9. Mediation Mechanism Test Based on Psychological Contract and Organizational Cynicism

		Effect Path	β Standardized Coefficient	Proportion of Total Effect	LLCI	ULCI
Single-Mediator Scenario	Total Effect	PRG→PM	-0.142		-0.201	-0.082
	Direct Effect	PRG→PM	-0.076	53.09%	-0.121	-0.032
	Indirect Effect	PRG→PC→PM	-0.065	46.01%	-0.106	-0.024
	Direct Effect	PRG→PM	-0.015	10.056%	-0.082	0.052
	Indirect Effect	PRG→OC→PM	-0.127	89.044%	-0.171	-0.089
Parallel-Mediator Scenario	Total Effect	PRG→PM	-0.014	90.9%	-0.065	0.037
	Direct Effect	PRG→PM	-0.128	9.1%	-0.181	-0.077
	Indirect Effect	PRG→PC→PM	-0.060	46.09%	-0.097	-0.023
	Effect	PRG→OC→PM	-0.068	53.01%	-0.102	-0.038

According to Model 1, perceived reward gap has a significant negative effect on professionalism ($\beta = -0.142, p < 0.01$), indicating that H1 is supported. Furthermore, in Model 2, perceived reward gap significantly affects psychological contract ($\beta = -0.115, p < 0.05$), while in Model 3, both perceived reward gap and psychological contract have significant effects on professionalism ($\beta = -0.076, p < 0.05$; $\beta = 0.57, p < 0.05$, respectively). Additionally, as shown in Table 8, the total effect of "perceived reward gap → professionalism" is significant ($\beta = -0.142, 95\% \text{ CI} = [-0.201, -0.082]$), the direct effect is significant ($\beta = -0.076, 95\% \text{ CI} = [-0.121, -0.032]$), and the indirect path "perceived reward gap → psychological contract → professionalism" is also significant ($\beta = -0.065, 95\% \text{ CI} = [-0.106, -0.024]$). These results indicate that psychological contract significantly mediates the effect of perceived reward gap on professionalism, thereby supporting H2.

In Model 4, perceived reward gap significantly affects organizational cynicism ($\beta = 0.619, p < 0.05$). Model 5 shows that organizational cynicism significantly influences professionalism ($\beta = -0.204, p < 0.01$), whereas the direct effect is not significant ($\beta = -0.015, 95\% \text{ CI} = [-0.082, 0.052]$). Furthermore, Table 8 indicates that the indirect path "perceived reward gap → organizational cynicism → professionalism" is significant ($\beta = -0.065, 95\% \text{ CI} = [-0.171, -0.089]$). These findings suggest that organizational cynicism fully mediates the effect of perceived reward gap on professionalism, thereby supporting H3.

Model 6 integrates Model 3 and Model 5, thus constituting a parallel mediation model. Both psychological contract and organizational cynicism significantly affect professionalism ($\beta = 0.522, p < 0.01$; $\beta = -0.110, p < 0.01$, respectively). As shown in Table 8, the direct effect is not significant ($\beta = -0.014, 95\% \text{ CI} = [-0.065, 0.037]$), while the two indirect paths—"perceived reward gap → psychological contract → professionalism" ($\beta = -0.060, 95\% \text{ CI} = [-0.097, -0.023]$) and "perceived reward gap → organizational cynicism → professionalism" ($\beta = -0.068, 95\% \text{ CI} = [-0.102, -0.038]$)—are both significant. These results indicate that psychological contract and organizational cynicism jointly serve as full parallel mediators in the relationship between perceived reward gap and university teachers' professionalism. In conclusion, H4 is supported, thereby validating the parallel mediation model proposed in this study.

4.3 Heterogeneity Analysis

To further explore the heterogeneous psychological driving mechanisms underlying professionalism, this study focuses on disciplinary field and institutional type among the various individual characteristics. These two factors are considered more representative than other variables, as they are better able to capture deeper structural sources of variation in university teachers' professionalism.

4.3.1 Institutional Heterogeneity

With respect to institutional heterogeneity among university teachers, prior studies suggest systematic differences between public and private institutions. Research indicates that teachers in private universities experience higher job mobility and lower occupational security, often failing to develop a strong sense of organizational identification and belonging (Li et al, 2024). Furthermore, private institutions are positioned at a disadvantage compared to public universities in terms of resource allocation and institutional safeguards (Li & Wang, 2025). As a result, faculty in public universities, who generally benefit from more stable career development prospects and remuneration—represent a more typical population for examining sustained professional engagement. It is also noted that while teachers in private universities are typically expected to possess dual-competency qualifications integrating teaching proficiency with industry experience (e.g., enterprise collaboration), public institutions tend to emphasize research output more heavily in performance evaluations (Wang et al, 2025). Differences in evaluation systems thus lead to divergent perceptions of reward and expectation discrepancies. Based on these considerations, it is necessary to conduct separate analyses for public and private universities.

Using Model 6 in Table 7 as the baseline, parallel mediation analyses were performed separately for public and private university subsamples. The results are reported in Table 9. Control variables (gender, age, educational attainment, monthly net income, academic rank, and years of teaching experience) are included in all models but are not reported in the table for brevity and are uniformly denoted as YES. In the public university subsample, Model 4 indicates that both psychological contract and organizational cynicism exert significant effects on professionalism ($\beta = 0.519, p < 0.01$; $\beta = -0.115, p < 0.01$), while the direct effect of perceived reward gap is not significant ($\beta = -0.112, p > 0.05$), thereby exhibiting a full parallel mediation pattern. The results of the remaining models are also consistent with those obtained from the full sample. These findings align with theoretical expectations: in contexts characterized by relatively stable career development and remuneration, individuals tend to hold higher expectations toward their organizations. Consequently, perceived reward discrepancies are more likely to trigger psychological imbalance and organizational cynicism, which in turn exert latent detrimental effects on professionalism. Within the full sample, teachers from public universities closely conform to this mechanism, underscoring their representativeness in explaining the overall pattern.

Table 10. Institutional Heterogeneity Analysis Based on a Parallel Mediation Model

	Public Undergraduate Institutions				Private Undergraduate Institutions			
	PM	PC	OC	PM	PM	PC	OC	PM
	<i>Model 1</i>	<i>Model 2</i>	<i>Model 3</i>	<i>Model 4</i>	<i>Model 5</i>	<i>Model 6</i>	<i>Model 7</i>	<i>Model 8</i>
Explanatory Variable								
PRG	-0.141**	-0.118**	0.589**	-0.012	-0.135	-0.091	0.678**	-0.014
Mediating Variables								
PC				0.519**				0.515**
OC				-0.115**				-0.110
Control Variables	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
R^2	0.206**	0.178**	0.353**	0.615**	0.107	0.071**	0.403	0.578**
F	6.430	5.392	13.543	30.536	1.164	0.746	6.567	10.062

In contrast to the overall sample, the underlying mechanisms observed in public universities are largely consistent, whereas the private university subsample does not exhibit a complete parallel mediation model. Specifically, in Model 5, the path from perceived reward gap → professionalism is not significant; in Model 6, the effect of perceived reward gap on psychological contract is not significant; and in Model 8, the indirect path from perceived reward gap → organizational cynicism → professionalism is also not significant. These results indicate that, within private universities, perceived reward gap neither significantly undermines the psychological contract nor does organizational cynicism significantly reduce professionalism. This pattern stands in apparent contrast to the findings for the full sample. Such divergence may be attributed to deeper structural differences in private universities, including compensation systems, evaluation criteria, workload arrangements, and the alignment (or misalignment) between teachers’ personal expectations, perceived rewards, and role cognitions.

4.3.2 Disciplinary Heterogeneity Analysis

Turning to disciplinary heterogeneity in university teachers’ professionalism, Farhi argues that groups characterized by a problem-solving-oriented cognitive style tend to overlook or suppress their emotional experiences in work contexts. Research indicates that when psychological distress arises, such individuals may struggle to recognize and regulate it in a timely manner, leading to more severe manifestations of psychological issues—a tendency particularly pronounced among science and engineering faculty (Farhi & Rubinsten, 2024). It is further noted that the career development of science and engineering teachers is heavily reliant on laboratory facilities and substantial financial investment, with their professional growth closely tied to research output and its practical application (Dong, 2024). In contrast, the work of humanities and social sciences faculty depends more extensively on academic databases and literature resources, and their professional advancement is predominantly linked to publishing in authoritative journals and producing scholarly monographs (Zhang & Shi, 2024). Differences in disciplinary conditions, evaluation requirements, and research outputs thus generate distinct perceptions of reward discrepancies. Accordingly, it is necessary to conduct separate analyses for science and engineering versus humanities and social sciences faculty.

Using Model 6 in Table 7 as the baseline, parallel mediation analyses were conducted separately for the science and engineering and the humanities and social sciences subsamples. The results are reported in Table 10. In the science and engineering subsample, Model 4 shows that both psychological contract and organizational cynicism exert significant effects on professionalism ($\beta = 0.510, p < 0.01$; $\beta = -0.151, p < 0.01$), while the direct effect of perceived reward gap is not significant ($\beta = -0.001, p > 0.05$), indicating a full parallel mediation model. The results of the remaining models are consistent with those obtained from the full sample. These findings suggest that, under conditions of perceived reward gap, individuals with a problem-oriented cognitive style and a tendency toward emotional suppression are more likely to experience accelerated depletion of psychological resources, which in turn facilitates the emergence of organizational cynicism and gradually erodes professionalism. Within the overall sample, science and engineering faculty display response patterns that more closely align with this mechanism, demonstrating stronger representativeness and highlighting the typical manifestation of this phenomenon within specific occupational contexts.

Table 11. Disciplinary Heterogeneity Analysis Based on a Parallel Mediation Model

	STEM Disciplines				Humanities and Social Sciences			
	PM	PC	OC	PM	PM	PC	OC	PM
	<i>Model 1</i>	<i>Model 2</i>	<i>Model 3</i>	<i>Model 4</i>	<i>Model 5</i>	<i>Model 6</i>	<i>Model 7</i>	<i>Model 8</i>
Explanatory Variable								
PRG	-0.146**	-0.114**	0.572**	-0.001	-0.136*	-0.120	0.680**	-0.070
Mediating Variables								
PC				0.510**				0.581**
OC				-0.151**				0.005
Control Variables	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
R^2	0.169**	0.152**	0.338**	0.612**	0.185*	0.238	0.455**	0.620**
F	4.818	4.263	12.081	28.772	2.463	3.399	9.054	13.397

In contrast to the overall sample, the underlying mechanism for science and engineering faculty is largely consistent, whereas the humanities and social sciences subsample do not exhibit a complete parallel mediation model. For example, in Model 6, the path from perceived reward gap → psychological contract is not significant, and in Model 8, the indirect path from perceived reward gap → organizational cynicism → professionalism is not significant. These findings indicate that perceived reward gap neither significantly undermines the psychological contract nor does organizational cynicism significantly reduce professionalism among humanities and social sciences faculty. This pattern is consistent with the results of the institutional heterogeneity analysis. Such divergence can be attributed to deeper structural differences in disciplinary conditions, evaluation tasks, and research output requirements, as well as differences in teachers’ expectations, perceived recognition, and professional identity across disciplines.

4.4 Discussions

The results indicate that perceived reward gap has a significant negative effect on university teachers’ Professionalism and further exerts an indirect influence by weakening the psychological contract and

intensifying organizational cynicism. This finding is consistent with the mechanism proposed in the Effort-Reward Imbalance (ERI) theory, which suggests that imbalance leads to psychological strain (Siegrist, 2026). Under distorted academic incentive mechanisms such as the "up-or-out" system, university teachers are often exposed to sustained high levels of effort input. When discrepancies arise between expected and actual rewards, teachers are more likely to perceive that the organization has failed to adequately fulfill the psychological contract, thereby generating dissatisfaction and weakening their professionalism (e.g., self-control and self-regulation abilities). This result is, to some extent, consistent with prior findings on the negative behavioral consequences of psychological contract breach (Yin et al., 2025). As professionalism declines, teachers' sense of professional mission and organizational belonging gradually diminishes, which in turn increases the likelihood of deviant behaviors. This finding also aligns with existing research suggesting that psychological contract breach influences counterproductive behaviors through organizational cynicism (Ahmed & Zhang, 2024).

Furthermore, this study conducts a heterogeneity analysis of the dual psychological pathway model of professionalism across disciplinary fields and institutional types. The results show that teachers in public universities tend to have a stronger sense of organizational identification and belonging. Consequently, when experiencing reward discrepancies, they are more susceptible to psychological contract disruption and are more likely to develop organizational cynicism, which subsequently undermines their internal regulatory mechanisms of professionalism. This finding is consistent with prior research indicating that employment stability (tenure) enhances individuals' sensitivity to psychological contract breach (He et al., 2023). In contrast, teachers in private universities generally bear heavier teaching workloads and exhibit greater dissatisfaction with institutional systems. However, due to their relatively lower level of organizational identification, they are more likely to interpret reward discrepancies as part of the broader contextual reality rather than as a breach of contract, thereby exerting a comparatively weaker impact on the internal regulation of professionalism. This result is also in line with studies on the relationship between psychological contract breach and organizational cynicism (Aydin, 2023). Regarding disciplinary differences, prior research has suggested that imbalances in social exchange relationships serve as an important source of organizational cynicism. Building on this, the present study finds that such mechanisms exhibit differentiated patterns across disciplines. Teachers in science and engineering fields, who are more dependent on organizational resources, are more likely to experience psychological strain and develop cynical attitudes when perceiving reward imbalances. In contrast, teachers in the humanities and social sciences tend to possess stronger emotional regulation capabilities and lower dependence on organizational resources, thereby buffering the transformation from perceived reward gap to organizational cynicism (Pfrombeck et al., 2020). Nevertheless, the indirect effect of the psychological contract pathway remains significant, indicating that perceived unfairness in rewards continues to exert a persistent erosive effect on professional beliefs. This finding is consistent with existing research highlighting the role of psychological contract in shaping individual behavioral responses through emotional and cognitive mechanisms (Bari et al., 2022).

This study is among the first to introduce the concept of "professionalism" into the field of teacher behavior research, moving beyond the traditional focus on external institutional constraints to examine the internal psychological drivers from a self-regulation perspective. The findings suggest that university teachers' professionalism is significantly influenced by negative psychological mechanisms and exhibits heterogeneity across disciplines and institutional contexts. These findings provide new theoretical insights for fostering the spirit of educators: university governance should not rely solely on external institutional controls but should also emphasize the enhancement of teachers' intrinsic motivation and self-regulation mechanisms. Previous studies have demonstrated that intrinsic motivation and the satisfaction of psychological needs play a crucial role in shaping individual behavior (Li et al., 2020). Moreover, it is essential to consider the differentiated needs across

disciplines and institutional contexts and to adopt targeted incentive and support strategies based on variations in resource and pressure structures. This perspective is also consistent with recent advancements in the application of self-determination theory in educational research (Rosli et al., 2022).

5. Conclusions

5.1 Key Findings

Based on the foregoing analyses, this study reaches the following conclusions. First, perceived reward gap significantly negatively affects the psychological contract and significantly positively affects organizational cynicism. That is, the greater the perceived discrepancy in rewards, the lower the level of psychological contract and the stronger the tendency toward organizational cynicism. Psychological contract, in turn, has a significant positive effect on professionalism, whereas organizational cynicism has a significant negative effect on professionalism. In other words, higher levels of psychological contract are associated with stronger professionalism, while higher levels of organizational cynicism are associated with weaker professionalism.

Second, mediation analyses using the PROCESS macro confirm that the effect of perceived reward gap on university teachers' professionalism operates through a parallel mediation mechanism involving psychological contract and organizational cynicism. Perceived reward gap not only directly affects professionalism but also exerts indirect effects through these two mediators. Thus, a model of influence mechanisms has been established and validated, wherein perceived reward gaps serve as the independent variable, professionalism as the dependent variable, with the aforementioned dual psychological pathways acting as parallel mediators.

Finally, heterogeneity analyses reveal substantial differences across institutional types and disciplinary fields, underscoring the contextual nature of the psychological mechanisms underlying professionalism.

5.2 Policy Implications

To cultivate the spirit of educational professionalism, advance national educational development goals, and promote teachers' professional growth, university administrators, government agencies, and teachers themselves should place greater emphasis on teachers' psychological well-being and the internal control of professionalism. Accordingly, this study offers the following recommendations:

1. Universities should strengthen psychological support and communication mechanisms with teachers, gain deeper insight into their actual needs and expectations, improve expectation-reward alignment, enhance psychological contracts, and mitigate the emergence of cynical attitudes.
2. Universities should improve teacher evaluation systems by adopting diversified assessment criteria that emphasize teaching quality, educational impact, and social service contributions, thereby reducing the distortion of incentive policies.
3. Government agencies should promote and recognize exemplary teachers and actively disseminate the spirit of educational professionalism, leveraging positive social feedback to reinforce the beneficial role of psychological contract in professionalism.
4. Governments should establish dedicated funding and regular supervision mechanisms to ensure that universities provide teachers with access to psychological counseling, stress management training, and emotional regulation resources, thereby safeguarding the stable development of professionalism.
5. Private universities should strengthen resource-based compensation mechanisms, while public universities should place greater emphasis on fulfilling institutional commitments and expectations.

6. Science and Engineering faculty require reasonable performance targets and reward mechanisms, whereas humanities and social sciences faculty benefit more from institutional transparency and enhanced participation in governance.

7. Teachers should continuously improve their psychological adjustment capacities, confront professional challenges with a positive and stable mindset, cultivate moral character, and achieve sustained personal and professional growth.

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Ethics approval/declaration: This study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and relevant institutional ethical guidelines. Formal ethical approval was not required because the anonymous online survey did not collect sensitive personal information or identifiable data.

Consent to participate: Informed consent was obtained from all participants via the Credamo platform before survey completion. Participation was voluntary.

Consent for publication: Not applicable. This article does not contain any identifiable personal data requiring consent for publication.

Data availability: The datasets generated or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Authors' contribution: Junhui Guo: Funding acquisition, supervision, manuscript revision, and final approval. Boyuan Hu: Study design, data collection, data analysis, and manuscript drafting. Tao Jiang: Manuscript review, revision guidance, and editorial suggestions.

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