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## Examining Career Success in Academia: The Mediating Role of Employability Perceptions in Protean Career Attitudes and Organizational Learning Practices

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### Abstract

This research explores the determinants of career success by examining the interplay between individual career attitudes and organizational career development practices in academia. Recognizing employability as a key predictor of career progression, the study differentiates between perceived internal and external employability to assess their mediating roles. Based on responses from 256 Malaysian academics, results show that protean career attitude does not directly impact career success but influences it indirectly through both internal and external employability perceptions. Organizational learning practices, in contrast, exert both direct and indirect effects on career success via employability perceptions. The analysis highlights that external employability has a stronger influence than internal employability in shaping career outcomes. These findings provide new insights into how individual adaptability and organizational learning contribute to academic career advancement, while also pointing to areas for further investigation and practical applications.

**Keywords:** Perceived external employability, Perceived internal employability, Protean career attitude, Employability, Organizational learning practices, Career success

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### Introduction

The landscape of career management has undergone significant transformation with the evolution of the psychological contract, creating more complex and transactional dynamics between employers and employees [1, 2]. Traditional career paths, once centered on long-term employment stability, are now being replaced by frameworks emphasizing continuous employability throughout an individual's professional life [3-5]. In this context, employability has become a critical determinant of career outcomes, particularly for knowledge-intensive roles such as academic positions. Academics are increasingly expected to take an active role in skill development, knowledge acquisition, and adaptability to meet the demands of both their institutions and the broader labor market [6]. At the same time, organizations must engage in strategies that support employee employability, signaling commitment to workforce development and encouraging reciprocal investment from employees [7, 8].

In contemporary career models, individuals are expected to assume greater responsibility for their career paths, reflecting the principles of protean careers, which prioritize self-directed career management and flexibility [9, 10]. Nevertheless, this shift does not remove the organizational role entirely. Institutions such as universities continue to influence career trajectories, requiring a balance between individual initiative and organizational support [11]. Both individual career management (ICM) and organizational career management (OCM) contribute significantly to career outcomes, albeit through different mechanisms [10, 12]. Integrating both perspectives is essential to understand how employee and institutional actions collectively shape career development [13]. Despite growing attention to career management, the interaction between



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individual and organizational approaches remains underexplored, particularly in higher education settings [2, 10]. This study addresses this gap by analyzing the combined influence of ICM and OCM on career success among academic professionals. Employability reflects an individual's perceived capacity to obtain and maintain employment, both internally within an organization and externally in the labor market, and is widely regarded as a key predictor of career success [14, 15]. While employability represents potential opportunities for future employment, career success captures current achievements and outcomes in one's professional role [15, 16]. In this sense, employability can serve as an important indicator of sustainable career progression.

However, the construct of employability is often treated unidimensionally, limiting understanding of how individuals evaluate career prospects within internal versus external labor markets [17]. Empirical studies rarely differentiate between perceived internal and external employability, leaving a gap in understanding how these perceptions mediate career success [2]. This research seeks to fill this gap by examining the distinct and combined effects of internal and external employability perceptions on the relationships among protean career attitudes, organizational learning practices, and career success.

The changing nature of careers presents opportunities to reassess foundational concepts such as employability and career success, offering practical insights for human resource management and academic workforce planning [18, 19]. Ensuring the employability of staff is a central concern for career development strategies [5, 20], making this an important area of study for HR professionals tasked with fostering capable and sustainable academic teams. The following research questions guide this investigation:

1. How do protean career attitudes and organizational learning practices affect academic staff career success?
2. What are the effects of perceived internal and external employability on career success among academics?
3. How does a protean career attitude influence perceived internal versus external employability?
4. How do organizational learning practices shape perceived internal versus external employability?
5. Do perceived internal and external employability mediate the relationship between protean career attitudes and career success?
6. Do perceived internal and external employability mediate the relationship between organizational learning practices and career success?

The study proceeds with a review of relevant literature and hypothesis formulation, followed by research methodology, data analysis, and results. The paper concludes with a discussion of findings, practical implications, limitations, and directions for future research.

## Theoretical Framework

This research is anchored in the Social Cognitive Career Theory of Career Self-Management (SCCT-CSM; Lent & Brown, [21]), which explains how individuals utilize personal capabilities, resources, and behaviors to navigate career paths in dynamic and uncertain work environments [22]. According to Brown and Lent [23], people exercise agency over their career trajectories, but their choices and actions are simultaneously shaped by external contextual factors, jointly influencing career outcomes. Self-efficacy emerges as a key mechanism within this framework, mediating and predicting career-related success. The SCCT-CSM model has been extensively validated across multiple career domains, including career decision-making [22], career planning [24], job search intentions [25], and employability and career success [26, 27], supporting its applicability in this study.

In applying SCCT-CSM to the present research, the model has been adapted to the context of Malaysian academia. The framework suggests that career outcomes are shaped by the interplay between individual traits and organizational contexts, mediated by socio-cognitive processes. Here, a protean career attitude (individual-level trait) interacts with organizational learning practices (contextual factor) to influence career success, while perceived employability operates as both a predictor and mediator of career achievements.

### *Perceived employability and career success*

Perceived employability is defined as an individual's evaluation of their ability to secure and sustain employment within current or future work contexts [3, 28]. In today's labor market, employability has become a critical marker of career success, reflecting the capacity to adapt, acquire new skills, and remain competitive [7]. The growing prevalence of non-linear career paths and reduced job security has made employability a central determinant of professional achievement. The concept of "employability capital" highlights its role as a dynamic asset, enabling individuals to successfully transition between roles and maintain their career trajectory [14]. Scholars increasingly regard employability as an essential factor for attaining both internal and external career success [2, 29], especially in contexts affected by automation and the gig economy [1, 6].

Since employment opportunities differ in scope, it is crucial to distinguish between internal and external employability perceptions. Internal employability refers to maintaining and advancing within one's current organization, while external employability captures prospects in the broader labor market [30]. Though conceptually distinct, both forms of employability

are expected to positively affect career success due to their unique antecedents and outcomes [2, 16]. Therefore, the study proposes the following hypotheses:

**H1a:** Internal employability positively affects the career success of academic staff.

**H1b:** External employability positively affects the career success of academic staff.

### *Protean career attitude, employability, and career success*

A protean career attitude emphasizes self-directed career management guided by personal values [31]. Individuals with a protean mindset proactively acquire new knowledge and competencies, enhancing employability and career outcomes [16]. Academics with strong protean orientations are self-motivated, constantly seeking opportunities for growth, and rely on personal values to guide career decisions. Research shows that protean attitudes are linked to higher perceived employability and better career outcomes [9, 27, 32, 33]. This orientation is particularly relevant in academia, where job insecurity is prevalent, providing a theoretical lens to understand how individuals manage their careers proactively. Thus, the study posits:

**H2:** Protean career attitude is positively associated with the career success of academic staff.

Protean individuals bear primary responsibility for maintaining their employability, consistent with the principle of self-directed career management. Such individuals actively seek professional development opportunities to strengthen both internal and external career prospects [13, 32, 34]. While prior research establishes a direct link between protean attitudes and perceived employability [9, 27, 32], limited attention has been given to differentiating internal versus external employability outcomes. Therefore, this study hypothesizes:

**H3:** Protean career attitude is positively associated with academic staff's (a) internal employability and (b) external employability.

### *Organizational learning practices, employability perception, and career success*

Although employees are often seen as primarily responsible for managing their own employability, research indicates that individual efforts alone may be insufficient to maintain competitiveness [30]. Even highly self-directed academics may feel uncertain about their career prospects due to the risk of skill obsolescence or doubts about whether their competencies meet current and future labor market demands [35]. Consequently, universities and research institutions play a crucial role by providing career support, such as professional development programs, to complement employees' efforts.

Organizational learning practices (OLPs) represent a strategic approach to institutional career management [26]. Unlike traditional hierarchical career pathways, contemporary organizational practices focus on equipping employees with a diverse set of learning and development opportunities to navigate complex career landscapes [11]. These practices serve as mechanisms to build and sustain a skilled workforce, ensuring that employees are capable of contributing effectively to institutional goals [36-38]. Previous studies have documented that such practices are positively linked to career success [2, 3]. Therefore, this study proposes:

**H4:** Organizational learning practices positively influence academics' career success.

Employees often worry about maintaining their relevance in the workforce due to rapid technological changes and declining job security [18, 25]. By offering career development initiatives, organizations help employees regain confidence in their skills and facilitate adaptation to evolving work environments [30, 39]. As such, OLPs are an important managerial tool to enhance professional competencies, which in turn shapes employees' perceptions of employability.

While prior research has shown a general link between organizational learning and employability [26], few studies differentiate between perceptions of internal and external employability. Evidence suggests that internal employability—confidence in retaining and advancing within the current organization—is more directly influenced by organizational learning initiatives, whereas the impact on external employability—confidence in securing opportunities elsewhere—is less consistent [7, 26]. Some studies even suggest that enhancing external employability might inadvertently encourage turnover [40]. To examine these dynamics, the following hypothesis is proposed:

**H5:** Organizational learning practices positively affect academics' (a) perceived internal employability and (b) perceived external employability.

### *The mediating role of perceived employability*

In contemporary career frameworks, protean individuals actively scan both internal and external career opportunities and take deliberate actions to safeguard their employability, which supports their overall career outcomes [13, 34, 41]. This self-directed career approach suggests that both internal and external employability perceptions can enhance an individual's sense of career success, yet research exploring these mediating effects remains limited.

Similarly, organizational learning practices can indirectly influence career success by improving employees' employability perception. Academics who receive development support from their institutions are more likely to pursue internal opportunities and achieve career progression, reflecting the mediating role of perceived employability [7, 26]. However, the extent to which these practices impact external employability and broader career success has not been empirically validated.

Since internal and external employability address different domains—current organizational retention versus future market mobility—they may generate distinct direct and indirect effects on career outcomes [5, 15, 42]. This study therefore conceptualizes perceived employability as a mediating mechanism in the relationships between protean career attitudes, organizational learning practices, and career success. Accordingly, the following hypotheses are formulated:

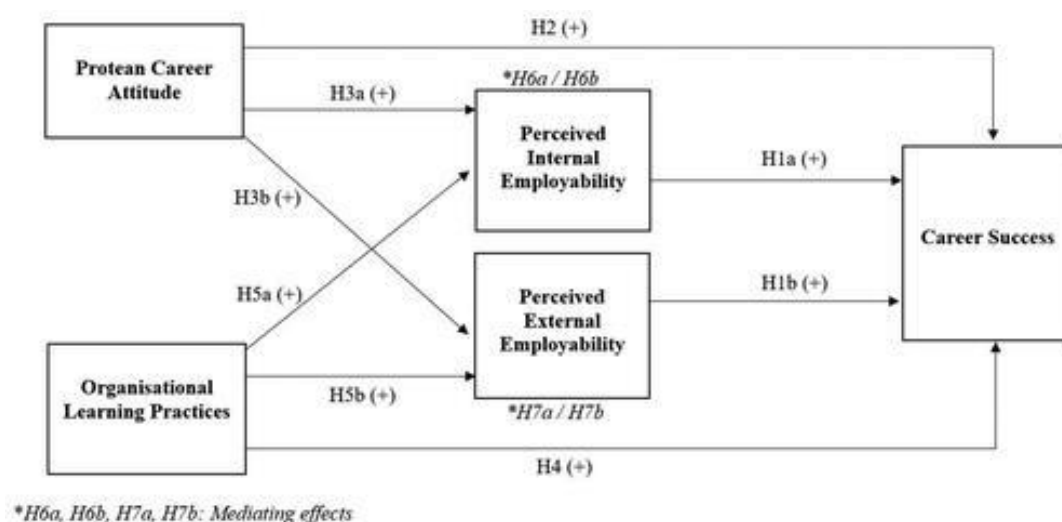
**H6a:** Perceived internal employability mediates the effect of protean career attitude on academics' career success.

**H6b:** Perceived external employability mediates the effect of protean career attitude on academics' career success.

**H7a:** Perceived internal employability mediates the effect of organizational learning practices on academics' career success.

**H7b:** Perceived external employability mediates the effect of organizational learning practices on academics' career success.

By simultaneously considering individual (protean career attitudes) and organizational (learning practices) factors, this study provides a more integrated understanding of how perceived employability shapes career outcomes. Moreover, separating internal and external employability allows for a nuanced examination of how these perceptions differently contribute to academic career success. The research model illustrating these relationships is presented in **Figure 1**.



**Figure 1.** Research framework

## Methodology

### Participants

This research adopted a cross-sectional approach to gather insights from academic professionals employed at private universities in Malaysia. The study targeted a total of 256 participants whose roles encompass not only teaching but also research, publishing, mentoring students, and engaging in various professional collaborations, providing a well-rounded perspective on academic career development.

Participants were recruited through convenience sampling, focusing on the Klang Valley region due to its high concentration of private higher education institutions [43]. Ethical approval was secured from the Ethics Committee of Asia Pacific University of Technology and Innovation, Kuala Lumpur (APUFE/27/2024). Before participation, all respondents gave written and verbal consent, and their responses were treated confidentially in line with the Personal Data Protection Act (PDPA) 2010, with data usage restricted exclusively to academic research.

Regarding demographic characteristics, the sample included slightly more men (55.2%) than women (44.8%). Age distribution showed that nearly half of the participants (49.3%) were between 30 and 40 years, followed by 25.7% aged 41 to 50, 13.9% over 50, and 11.1% under 30. Educational backgrounds were varied, with the majority holding Master's degrees (58.7%), followed by Doctorates (24%) and Bachelors (17.3%). In terms of professional rank, half of the respondents were senior lecturers or assistant professors, 35.1% were lecturers, 9.7% were associate professors, and 5.2% were full professors.

**Table 1.** Respondents' demographic profile

Demographic	Frequency ( <i>n</i> = 256)	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	142	55.2
Female	114	44.8
Age		
Less than 30	28	11.1
30 to 40	126	49.3

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41 to 50	67	25.7
51 and older	35	13.9
Highest education level		
Bachelor's degree	44	17.3
Master's degree	150	58.7
Doctoral degree	62	24.0
Position held in organisation		
Asst. Lecturer/Lecturer	90	35.1
Senior Lecturer/Asst. Professor	128	50.0
Associate Professor	25	9.7
Professor/Distinguished Professor	13	5.2

### Research instruments and measures

A structured questionnaire was employed to gather data, with items adapted from established scales to ensure accuracy and comparability. Responses were recorded using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). As recommended by Hair *et al.* [33], adopting validated instruments enhances both the reliability and validity of the measurements.

Protean career attitude (PCA) was measured using a 14-item scale, while organizational learning practices (OLP) were assessed via a 21-item questionnaire adapted from the Dimensions of Learning Organisation Questionnaire (DLOQ) developed by Yang *et al.* [44]. The DLOQ comprises seven dimensions, each represented by three items; in this study, OLP was treated as a reflective-formative second-order construct. Perceived employability was measured using Rothwell and Arnold's [15] Self-Perceived Employability Scale, comprising four items for perceived internal employability (PIE) and seven items for perceived external employability (PEE). Career success (CS) was evaluated through six indicators: four objective measures and two subjective measures.

To confirm the appropriateness of the adapted instruments for the current study, a pre-test was conducted with three human resources experts. Only minor revisions were made to improve clarity and readability of the items.

### Data analysis

Data analysis was performed using SmartPLS 3.3.6 through Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). This approach allowed for both the evaluation of the measurement model and testing of the structural model, including direct and indirect effects. PLS-SEM is recognized as particularly suitable for management research involving complex models with multiple constructs and mediating effects [45]. Hair *et al.* [46] further highlight that PLS-SEM offers advantages over regression-based approaches for mediation analyses, which justifies its use in this study.

## Results

Harman's single-factor test was conducted to check for common method variance (CMV) before analysis [47]. The first factor accounted for 24% of the variance, which is below the 50% threshold, indicating that CMV is not a major concern in the data.

### Reflective measurement model assessment

The reflective constructs—PCA, PIE, PEE, and CS—were examined for reliability and validity. Internal consistency was assessed using composite reliability (CR), with acceptable values above 0.70 [46]. Indicator reliability was evaluated through outer loadings, with values above 0.70 indicating sufficient contribution to the construct. Convergent validity was tested via the Average Variance Extracted (AVE), which measures the proportion of variance in indicators explained by their latent construct; values exceeding 0.50 indicate acceptable convergent validity [48]. Discriminant validity was assessed using the Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratio, with a threshold of 0.85 [49].

Two items, PCA10 and PEE7, were removed because their loadings fell below 0.60. This adjustment increased AVE values for protean career attitude (from 0.497 to 0.503) and perceived external employability (from 0.526 to 0.554), surpassing the minimum threshold. Remaining indicators with loadings  $\geq 0.60$  were retained.

**Table 2** provides a summary of the reflective model results. Indicator loadings ranged from 0.60 to 0.70, AVE values were all above 0.50, and CR values ranged from 0.84 to 0.93, confirming the constructs' reliability and internal consistency.

**Table 2.** Results of reflective model assessment.

Latent variable	Item	Convergent validity		Internal consistency reliability		Discriminant validity
		Outer Loading	AVE	Composite Reliability	Cronbach Alpha	HTMT values <0.85



Career success	CS1	0.738	0.501	0.889	0.857	Yes
	CS2	0.765				
	CS3	0.763				
	CS4	0.698				
	CS5	0.784				
	CS6	0.766				
Protean career attitude	PCA1	0.671	0.503	0.929	0.918	Yes
	PCA11	0.651				
	PCA12	0.709				
	PCA13	0.740				
	PCA14	0.766				
	PCA2	0.696				
	PCA3	0.718				
	PCA4	0.686				
	PCA5	0.747				
	PCA6	0.692				
	PCA7	0.721				
Perceived external employability	PEE1	0.798	0.554	0.881	0.838	Yes
	PEE2	0.690				
	PEE3	0.700				
	PEE4	0.794				
	PEE5	0.771				
	PEE6	0.703				
Perceived internal employability	PIE1	0.748	0.573	0.843	0.751	Yes
	PIE2	0.797				
	PIE3	0.725				
	PIE4	0.755				

To confirm discriminant validity, the HTMT values for all pairings of constructs are less than 0.85, indicating that the model is discriminately valid. **Table 3** shows the results for discriminant validity using the HTMT criterion.

**Table 3.** HTMT Criterion Results

	CS	PCA	PEE	PIE
CS				
PCA	0.477 (0.383, 0.564)			
PEE	0.812 (0.756, 0.866)	0.598 (0.507, 0.683)		
PIE	0.732 (0.649, 0.805)	0.447 (0.343, 0.548)	0.743 (0.660, 0.817)	

*Criterion:* Discriminant validity is established at HTMT0.85.

*Note:* CS = career success, PCA = protean career attitude, PEE = perceived external employability, PIE = perceived internal employability.

### *Assessing reflective-formative higher-order construct*

OLP was conceptualized as a reflective-formative higher-order construct. The higher-order OLP construct was evaluated using repeated indicators mode B estimation. As shown in **Table 4**, all of the lower-order constructs' assessment requirements have been fulfilled, resulting in acceptable reliability and validity levels.

**Table 4.** Results of lower-order measurement model assessment.

Lower-order Construct	Item	Loadings	CR	AVE	VIF Value	HTMT (< 0.85 & CI do not include 0)
Continuous Learning (CL)	OL1	0.784	0.865	0.682	1.588	Yes
	OL2	0.858				
	OL3	0.834				
Inquiry & Dialogue (ID)	OL4	0.735	0.820	0.604	1.678	Yes
	OL5	0.794				
	OL6	0.801				
Team Learning (TL)	OL7	0.820	0.865	0.681	2.317	Yes
	OL8	0.824				
	OL9	0.830				
Embedded System (ES)	OL10	0.793	0.854	0.661	2.279	Yes

	OL11	0.842				
	OL12	0.803				
Empowerment (EP)	OL13	0.802	0.798	0.569	1.923	Yes
	OL14	0.761				
	OL15	0.695				
System Connection (SC)	OL16	0.758	0.818	0.600	1.570	Yes
	OL17	0.769				
	OL18	0.795				
Strategic Leadership (SL)	OL19	0.794	0.878	0.706	1.655	Yes
	OL20	0.879				
	OL21	0.845				

**Table 5.** Results of structural model assessment and hypothesis testing

Hypothesis	Path	Std. Beta	p-value	t-value	Decision	R <sup>2</sup>	Q <sup>2</sup>
H1a	PIE → CS	0.190	0.000	3.706*	Supported	0.563	0.259
H1b	PEE → CS	0.459	0.000	9.027*	Supported		
H2	PCA → CS	0.057	0.106	1.251	Not Supported		
H4	OLP → CS	0.193	0.000	3.362*	Supported	0.361	0.186
H3a	PCA → PIE	0.232	0.000	4.504*	Supported		
H5a	OLP → PIE	0.489	0.000	9.515*	Supported		
H3b	PCA → PEE	0.412	0.000	8.825*	Supported	0.407	0.209
H5b	OLP → PEE	0.379	0.000	7.705*	Supported		

Note. PCA = Protean career attitude, OLP = Organisational learning practices, PEE = Perceived external employability, PIE = Perceived internal employability, CS = Career success.

\* $p < .05$ ,  $t > 1.65$ , one-tailed.

### Measurement model evaluation

The reliability of the constructs was confirmed through composite reliability, with values spanning from 0.798 to 0.878, indicating strong internal consistency. Convergent validity was supported as the AVE values ranged from 0.569 to 0.706, surpassing the 0.50 benchmark. Discriminant validity was achieved using the HTMT criterion, with all values below 0.85, confirming that the constructs are conceptually distinct. Additionally, multicollinearity within the formative higher-order construct was not a concern, with all VIF values below 3.3 [50]. Bootstrapping with a 95% bias-corrected and accelerated confidence interval further demonstrated that all lower-order constructs were significantly associated with their higher-order constructs ( $t > 1.96$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ), supporting their retention in the model [46].

### Structural model assessment

The structural model was analyzed to examine hypothesized direct relationships among variables. The results indicated that organizational learning practices (OLP), perceived internal employability (PIE), and perceived external employability (PEE) exert significant positive effects on career success. Specifically, the path coefficients showed the following relationships: OLP positively influenced CS ( $\beta = 0.193$ ), PIE ( $\beta = 0.489$ ), and PEE ( $\beta = 0.379$ ); PCA affected PIE ( $\beta = 0.232$ ) and PEE ( $\beta = 0.412$ ); and both PIE ( $\beta = 0.190$ ) and PEE ( $\beta = 0.459$ ) positively predicted CS. Notably, protean career attitude (PCA) did not exhibit a direct effect on career success ( $\beta = 0.057$ ,  $t < 1.645$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ). Overall, these findings support the hypothesized direct effects except for H2, which posited a direct relationship between PCA and CS.

**Table 6.** Results of mediation model assessment and hypothesis testing

Hypothesis	Mediation Path	Specific Indirect Effect	Total Indirect Effect	Total Effect	95% Confidence Interval	Decision
H6a	PCA→PIE→CS	0.044*	0.233*	0.291*	(0.023; 0.081)	Supported
H6b	PCA→PEE→CS	0.189*			(0.145; 0.262)	Supported
H7a	OLP→PIE→CS	0.093*	0.267*	0.460*	(0.041; 0.158)	Supported
H7b	OLP→PEE→CS	0.174*			(0.114; 0.226)	Supported

Note. PCA = Protean career attitude, OLP = Organizational learning practices, PEE = Perceived external employability, PIE = Perceived internal employability, CS = Career success.

\* $p < .05$ ,  $t > 1.96$ , two-tailed.

As the analysis revealed, protean career attitude (PCA) did not exert a significant direct effect on career success. However, both its indirect and total indirect effects were significant, indicating a full mediation effect. This suggests that the impact of PCA on career success operates entirely through perceived employability, both internal and external. In contrast, the

relationship between organizational learning practices (OLP) and career success was only partially mediated by perceived employability.

To evaluate the relative strength of these mediating effects, the “variance accounted for” (VAF) was calculated by dividing the indirect effect by the total effect. Along the PCA → career success pathway, VAF was 0.65 for perceived external employability (PEE = 0.189/0.291) and 0.15 for perceived internal employability (PIE = 0.044/0.291). In the OLP → career success path, VAF was 0.38 for PEE (0.174/0.460) and 0.20 for PIE (0.093/0.460). These results indicate that PEE serves as a stronger mediator than PIE for both PCA and OLP in influencing career success. Overall, all hypotheses regarding mediation (H6a, H6b, H7a, and H7b) were supported.

## Discussion

Over the past several decades, considerable research has explored career management, examining both individual and organizational approaches [9, 12, 26, 27]. Despite the evolution of career management practices at both levels, a comprehensive understanding requires examining how individuals and organizations collectively shape career outcomes. In this study, we focused on the role of employability by differentiating between internal and external perceptions and assessing their direct and mediating effects in the academic context.

The first set of hypotheses (H1a and H1b) tested whether perceived internal and external employability influence academic career success. Both were supported, providing empirical confirmation that employability perceptions are key predictors of career success. Interestingly, academics demonstrated higher optimism regarding their external employability than internal, reflecting the modern emphasis on individual agency in career development [13, 34].

Hypothesis H2, which proposed a direct effect of protean career attitude on career success, was not supported. This may be explained by the fact that the effects of PCA are channeled through employability perceptions, particularly external employability (H3). Previous research also indicates that protean career attitude tends to correlate more strongly with subjective indicators of success (e.g., self-perceived employability) than objective measures such as promotions or salary increases [13, 32, 33]. Consistent with this, hypotheses H3a and H3b confirmed that PCA positively influences both internal and external employability, with a stronger effect observed for external employability. This aligns with contemporary career concepts emphasizing mobility and boundaryless careers as key markers of success [18, 51, 52].

Regarding organizational learning practices, hypothesis H4 was supported, suggesting that academics perceive their careers as more successful when universities provide developmental resources, such as training, workshops, and conference support. Hypotheses H5a and H5b further revealed that OLP positively affects both internal and external employability, with a stronger influence on internal employability. This implies that institutional support encourages academics to remain committed to their current organization while simultaneously boosting their perception of internal career prospects. These results are in line with signaling theory, where organizational investments in learning are interpreted as indicators of value and growth opportunities, thereby enhancing internal employability [14, 53].

Finally, the mediating role of employability was examined. For PCA, perceived external employability emerged as a stronger mediator than internal employability, confirming that protean individuals are more likely to pursue opportunities beyond their current institution as a strategy for career advancement [27, 39]. Similarly, for OLP, external employability mediated the relationship with career success more strongly than internal employability. Interestingly, despite OLP having a stronger direct impact on internal employability, academics relied more on external employability when assessing their career outcomes. This suggests that skills and expertise gained through organizational learning are perceived as transferable capital, enhancing marketability beyond the organization [30]. The findings highlight that, particularly in the rapidly expanding Malaysian higher education sector, academics place considerable value on external employability as a marker of career success.

## Implications

The findings of this study offer meaningful theoretical contributions to the fields of employability and career management, particularly in addressing the contemporary need for a holistic perspective on career practices and success [10, 12]. By simultaneously examining individual and organizational factors, this research provides insights into how employees navigate their career trajectories and achieve success. Contrary to some prior studies, protean career attitude was not found to be a strong predictor of career success, thereby enhancing understanding of its nuanced effects and explaining why its direct impact may be limited.

Additionally, this study underscores the critical role of perceived employability by distinguishing between internal and external employability. Results indicate that employees, particularly academics, prioritize external employability when advancing their careers, highlighting the importance of understanding employees’ self-assessment of career potential. From a practical standpoint, the findings suggest that institutions should foster protean career attitudes by supporting autonomy, encouraging initiative, and motivating adaptive behaviors. While employers cannot directly influence employees’ perception



of external employability, they can shape internal employability through well-designed learning and development initiatives. For example, institutions can provide targeted training, workshops, and opportunities for participation in local and international conferences, thereby enhancing academics' skill sets and reinforcing their internal career prospects. Such efforts are likely to cultivate stronger career self-management and positively influence perceptions of both internal and external career success.

Furthermore, enhancing employees' employability perceptions should be a key priority in career development strategies. Organizational learning initiatives can trigger reciprocal behaviors, leading employees to value and engage with internal career opportunities. While internal employability may have a comparatively smaller effect on career success, targeted retention strategies can help retain talent and reduce turnover to the external job market. By granting academics flexibility and autonomy in managing their careers, institutions can foster stronger employability perceptions across both internal and external labor markets.

## Conclusion

This research explored career management among Malaysian academic staff by examining the roles of protean career attitude and organizational learning practices in shaping employability and career success. With the exception of the direct path from protean career attitude to career success, all hypotheses were supported, effectively addressing the study's research questions. The results highlight that protean career attitude exerts a stronger influence on perceived external employability, whereas organizational learning practices predominantly affect perceived internal employability.

Importantly, this study extends prior research by demonstrating that both internal and external employability perceptions act as key predictors and mediators in the relationship between protean career attitude, organizational learning practices, and career success. The model exhibits substantial explanatory power, offering both theoretical and practical insights into how academics perceive and manage their employability and career outcomes.

## Limitations and future research

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, all data were collected from a single source—academic staff—which raises the possibility of common method bias. Future studies could incorporate perspectives from supervisors, managers, or other organizational stakeholders to provide a more comprehensive understanding of employability and career outcomes.

Second, employability and career success are cumulative constructs that evolve over time [54]. A cross-sectional design cannot capture these dynamic processes or account for changes in experiences and attitudes over the career trajectory. Future research should consider longitudinal designs to track career development and employability perceptions over time, enabling a richer understanding of how these variables interact and influence career success across different stages.

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