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FROM EXTERNAL COMPLIANCE TO SPIRIT-LED EXCELLENCE: A TRIADIC IDENTITY-PURPOSE MODEL FOR TRANSFORMING HIGHER EDUCATION MOTIVATION

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Abstract:

Universities globally are faced with a critical problem increasingly which includes the ever-increasing dependence of students on extrinsic systems of motivation. Institutional assistance has become the sole source of completing homework, projects, theses, and independent study tasks. Although the dependency consumes valuable institutional resources, but it does not produce graduates who are self-driven and complete with meeting an innovation-based world economy calling for adaptive thinking and innovative problem-solving. In this article, the Triadic Identity-Purpose Model (Spirit → Soul → Body) is presented, a theoretical model that brings together spiritual development and academic achievement. According to the model, godly identity is where solid academic motivation can be established. Based on Self-Determination Theory, neuroplasticity research, and transformational leadership, it illustrates how students who internalize their identity as God's children are loved, valued, and created with purpose. These demonstrate stronger intrinsic motivation, enhanced psychological resilience, and greater innovative capacity. By addressing the contemporary challenge of digital distraction, the model provides a holistic response that extends beyond rational engagement with technology. It emphasizes the cultivation of imagination, intuition, and fault tolerance, the qualities essential for fostering breakthrough innovation. The implications of this model extend to curriculum planning, assessment practices, and instructional design. It offers a comprehensive framework for reimagining educational excellence in the twenty-first century. Future research directions

include the empirical evaluation of this model to quantify its impact on learning outcomes, student well-being, and institutional effectiveness.

Keywords:

Intrinsic Motivation, Spiritual Formation, Higher Education, Transformational Leadership, Divine Identity, Neuroplasticity, Educational Innovation

Introduction

The Motivation Crisis in Higher Education: Scope and Implications

Higher education today is confronted with a single yet compound challenge of student motivation that affects institutional performance as profoundly as it affects graduate readiness. String research has proven the reality that students are more dependent on extrinsic drivers such as grades, parental values, peer comparison, and institutional demands to pass even the simplest academic examinations (Wilcox, 2021). This dependence is manifest in a series of portentous sentences such as endemic procrastination. As many as 70% of university students endure endemic academic burnout resulting in breakdown, and endemic disengagement from learning for intrinsic joy for hedonic pleasure (Bristi et al., 2025).

Stakes extend far beyond student achievement to touch institutional performance, effective utilization of resources, and social contribution. Colleges and universities are signalling that they are devoting larger percentages of their budget to academic support services, counselling interventions, and retention programs to minimize student disengagement. Most troubling, the dependence on extrinsic motivation is creating a generation of graduates who, though technically proficient, do not possess the intrinsic motivation to foster innovation, adaptive leadership, and service to society in a more complex world economy.

Zajda's (2023) motivation theory does steer clear of tackling more fundamental existential concerns that are rightfully beyond human action and decision-making. The tertiary students are less motivated to study or acquire qualifications but are really in search of meaning, purpose, and identity formation. And the more that these deeper spiritual and existential human needs get shortchanged in school systems, the more they launch graduates who may be technologically adept but not internally motivated toward a lifetime of learning, ethical leadership, and imaginative problem-solving in the workplace and in life.

Research Objectives

This study aims to:

1. Propose a novel Triadic Identity-Purpose Model integrating spiritual identity as the core of academic motivation.
2. Analyze the limitations of current secular motivational frameworks in addressing existential and spiritual needs.
3. Outline practical strategies for curriculum design, assessment, and faculty development based on the model.

Scope of the Research

This conceptual research pertains to reframing motivational theory within Christian higher education, although its tenets are expressed as more universal in scope. It is integration of theory from educational psychology, neuroscience, leadership studies, and theology with practice in pedagogy and institutional policy implications.

Limitations of Contemporary Secular Approaches

Educational psychology's current theories of motivation, as empirically informed and methodologically sound as they are, also naturally tend to think of human beings essentially psychological and social human beings, entirely overlooking the religious dimension that most students refer to as being central to their life and sense-making (Baral & Giri, 2025). Urhahne and Wijnia (2023) offer a great and highly regarded method of examining motivation theory in the educational setting by tastefully integrating expectancy-value theory, self-determination theory, and achievement goal theory into a model of analysis. While the synthesized model is strong and scholarship laden as it is, however, it fails to somehow encapsulate the profound spiritual ambitions and greater ambitions research indicates underpin much human striving, particularly through those early college years of identity development.

The rich literature on organizational culture and higher education excellence provides us with convergent conceptual gaps. Wiśniewska and Grudowski (2024) also provide us with some of the crucial aspects of excellence in higher education institutions such as transformational leadership, planning excellence, stakeholders, and results-oriented measurable outcomes. But their institution-wide strategy, worthwhile even from an operational perspective, is not rooted in the existential spiritual foundation that would generate lasting motivation to perform at optimal levels irrespective of reward or relative position. That disengagement is especially relevant insofar as several studies show students self-reporting spiritual seeking and meaning making as important campus developmental processes, frequently calling on those interests more frequently than preparation for career or success.

Besides, transformational leadership literature, although cognizant of vision and inspiration, is not typically so fearless as to operationally define spiritual change sources. Samodien et al. (2024) illustrate that institutions adopting transformational leadership strategies benefit from draconian improvement in performance on issues such as student engagement, employee morale, and institution image. Their inquiry is less focused on finding the religious basis that would make such transformation enduring and under changing conditions when such would come.

Emerging Recognition of Spiritual Integration in Educational Excellence

There is evidence in support of extending the recognition of spirituality's core role in educational excellence and long-term institutional transformation. Chabokrow et al. (2024) have conducted pioneering research on exploring the meaning of "spirit at work" in Australian higher education institutions and statistically confirmed positive effects on employee outcomes such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment, creative problem-solving, and overall performance competence (Tröndle & Schindler, 2021). Their results provide strong evidence that when people can really put spiritual identity into work, they are healthier psychologically, with improved longer-term motivation and more creative thinking capacity. This has profound implications for motivational student outcomes and shows clearly that instruction modes that

respect and support spiritual identity can yield improved academic and personal growth outcomes.

Baral and Giri (2025) depict in a detailed case study analysis how ancient spiritual wisdom, in this instance, learning from the Bhagavad Gita, can be brought systematically into contemporary higher education curriculums to promote external academic success as well as internal psychological peace. Their longitudinal study shows that religious systems have the potential to offer the stable motivational foundation needed to sustain long-term academic success because they can meet higher-order human needs for meaning, purpose, and transcendent relatedness likely to be excluded by secular alternatives.

The concept of spirit-led excellence has begun to be formulated in pioneering learning spaces, and pioneering learning schools have realized that education that can change lives, must touch the entire person in spirit, soul, and body, not merely mental development (Blair et al., 2024). This integrated perspective essentially questions traditional assumptions regarding educational quality's definition, measurement, and pursuit, that true excellence must include not just academic success and competence building but also character development, spiritual maturation, and preparation for serving others and society in a significant way.

Table 1: Summary of Key Past Findings on Motivation and Spirituality in Education

Author(s) (Year)	Focus of Study	Key Finding	Relevance to Current Study
Wilcox (2021)	Discourses of teaching excellence	Critiques over-reliance on external metrics, highlighting a missing dimension of intrinsic purpose.	Supports the need for a model based on internal, spiritual motivation.
Urhahne & Wijnia (2023)	Integrative framework of motivation theories	Provides a robust psychological model but acknowledges it does not address transcendent or spiritual goals.	Identifies the gap that the Triadic Model aims to fill.
Chabokrow et al. (2024)	Spirit at work in Australian HEIs	Found a statistically significant positive correlation between spirituality at work and employee satisfaction, commitment, and creativity.	Provides empirical support for integrating spirituality into academia.
Baral & Giri (2025)	Integrating Bhagavad Gita teachings in HE	Longitudinal data showed improved student well-being and sustained academic motivation through spiritual integration.	Offers evidence for the feasibility and benefits of the proposed model.

Theoretical Framework: The Triadic Identity-Purpose Model

Foundational Premises and Philosophical Foundations

The Triadic Identity-Purpose Model is based on a set of foundational assumptions that, in application, separate it from mere secular models of educational motivation but are also compatible with high-quality scholarship. To begin with, it maintains that human beings are above all spiritual beings made in the image of God, who bear inherent worth, dignity, and creative potential regardless of performance, achievement, or external endorsement (Hukkinen et al., 2025). This defining identity provides the psychological safety required for genuine scholarly risk-taking, innovative questioning, and durable learning in the context of unavoidable adversity and discouragement.

Second, the model recognizes that students are specially designed for reasons that go much further than personal success, career accomplishment, and accumulation of material wealth to include significant service to other people and significant contribution to God's redemptive work in the world. This purpose motivation is one of the sources of intrinsic motivations that must rise above extrinsic reward and punishment since it connects learning and individual development and final meaning and eternal worth.

Thirdly, the model recognizes God's Spirit as the ultimate teacher, counselor, and giver of wisdom, who is able to provide understanding, imagination, and insight superior to human mind and normal avenues of education. This religious element does not replace careful scholarly study but enhances and gives meaning to it by basing human knowledge upon God-directed wisdom and creative power.

The Triadic Flow: Spirit → Soul → Body Integration

The model proposes a hierarchical influence of spirit on soul on body, both in keeping with biblical anthropology and with the most recent findings in neuroscience and psychology into how spiritual, psychological, and physical health all intersect.

Spirit Level: Divine Connection and Transformational Foundation

Spiritually, students can deeply connect with their spiritual self and get daily direction by God's Spirit in the process of learning and personal development. Spiritual connection with God comes with some great advantages towards enduring motivation and life-transforming learning experience.

It introduces the first unconditional value and sense of belonging, which erases fear of failure and the performance anxiety otherwise putting students into paralysis each time they are given difficult schoolwork or new learning experience. Students knowing that they are God's beloved children can learn in joy, confidence, and healthy curiosity instead of anxiety, competition, or other external pressures.

Secondly, the spirit level provides students with immediate access to divine wisdom and limitless imagination. The Spirit, the "Spirit of wisdom and understanding" (Isaiah 11:2), if the Bible does write of it in those words, can guide students into creative problem-solving, outside-the-box thinking, and right judgment decision-making outside regular schooling procedures. Spiritual intervention is particularly useful in solving knotty, esoteric problems that require break-through thinking and out-of-the-box solutions.

Third, the spirit level brings before students' questions of personal calling and God's purpose, allowing them to see how their personal interests, gifts, and academic ambitions fit into God's larger purposes in the world. Once students know their God-ordained design and their heavenly destiny, they are likely to cultivate their gifts not for themselves but as acts of worship and service.

The overall design of the Triadic Model and pedagogic value are encapsulated in Figure 1, which details the orderly development from religious origins through psychological working towards productive academic outputs and measurable outcomes.

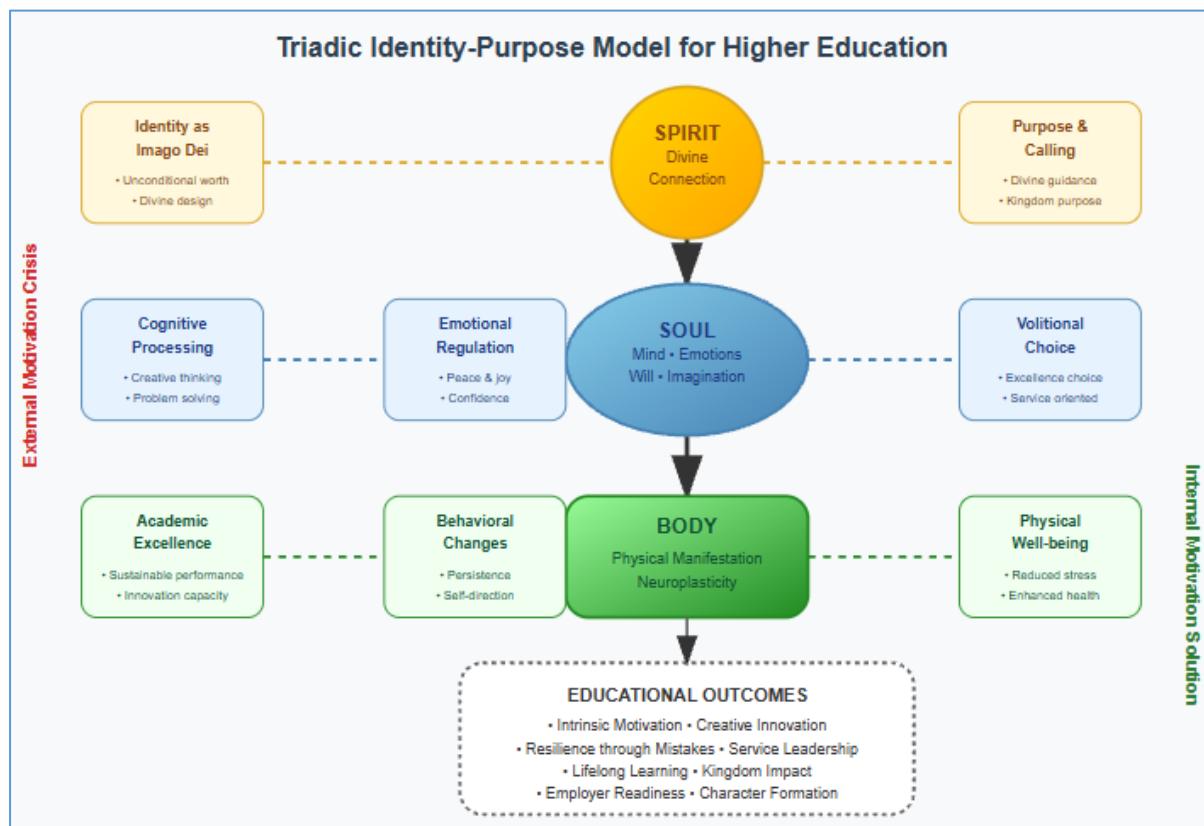


Figure 1: The Triadic Identity-Purpose Model Showing the Hierarchical Flow from Spirit to Soul to Body, With Corresponding Educational Components and Practical Outcomes for Higher Education Transformation.

Soul Level: Cognitive-Emotional-Volitional Integration

The soul level encompasses the mind, emotions, and will. These psychological components traditionally addressed by educational psychology and cognitive science. However, the Triadic Model recognizes that these psychological capacities function optimally when properly aligned with spiritual identity and purpose rather than operating independently or in opposition to spiritual considerations.

Cognitive processing benefits significantly from spiritual alignment through several measurable mechanisms. First, the renewed mind, progressively transformed by spiritual truth and divine perspective, approaches problems with enhanced creativity, broader perspective, and deeper insight. Research in neuroscience suggests that spiritual practices can enhance

cognitive flexibility and creative problem-solving capacity (Kumar et al., 2021). Second, emotional regulation improves substantially as students experience the psychological peace, authentic joy, and unshakeable confidence that emerge from secure spiritual identity rather than performance-based self-worth.

Third, volitional alignment occurs as students learn to choose academic excellence not to earn approval, avoid punishment, or achieve competitive advantage, but as authentic expressions of worship, service, and stewardship of their God-given abilities. This transformation in motivation from external to internal sources proves far more sustainable and satisfying than traditional motivation systems.

The soul level also encompasses imagination and intuition. The cognitive capacities are often undervalued or ignored in traditional educational approaches despite their crucial importance for innovation, creativity, and breakthrough thinking. When students are spiritually grounded and psychologically secure, they can more readily access these higher-order cognitive capacities without fear of judgment, failure, or ridicule.

Body Level: Physical Manifestation and Neuroplastic Transformation

Body level refers to the measurable, quantifiable expression of spiritual and psychological transformation in body health, behavior habits, and scholarly achievement. The most recent neuroscience research increasingly confirms the viability of profound brain alteration through extended spiritual discipline, mind alteration, and intentional learning (Kumar et al., 2021).

Pupils who consistently achieve from unshakable spiritual self and transparent divine mandate can create measurable neuroplasticity that increases capacity to learn, consolidate memory, think creatively, and resist stress. They may be observed with neuroimaging technologies and measured with standardized psychological and cognitive assessments.

Body level also enjoys quantifiable change of observable behavior. This unchanging pattern of intellectual achievement, mind determination, cooperative service, and moral decision that are internal transformation and not external obedience program. These behaviors are not intelligent programmed and external motivation but natural and long-lasting result of spiritual and psychological rebirth.

Finally, the body level entails quantifiable betterment of physical health, as studies demonstrate repeatedly that academically healthy and healthy-spirited students demonstrate lower stress hormones, optimal immune function, adequate sleep, and overall improvement of markers of health that are promotive and not depletive to learning.

Integration with Contemporary Educational Excellence Literature

The Triadic Model may complement recent research on educational excellence and wider and deeper wisdom and knowledge in bringing about and co-existence with sustainable motivation. Gill et al. (2022), Helmold (2023) and Barbu & Scarlat (2024) report an intriguing fresh vision of "transformative quality" in higher education aimed at unifying academic excellence and institutional inclusivity with seemingly balanced elusive balance in education today. Their empirically tested five-factor model includes critical confidence, adaptive problem-solving capacity, intensive awareness, resisting prejudice ability, and pragmatic skilfulness

(Manyazewal et al., 2022 and de Jong et al., 2022). These are all the outcomes that are largely consistent with intended effects of the use of the Triadic Model (Riza et al., 2025).

Extensive transformational leadership literature also offers strong corroborative evidence in the case of the Triadic Model's vision, purpose, and inspirational motivation needs (Pennell, 2023). Zhao et al. (2024) carried out systematic bibliometric research affirming transformational leadership as a fundamental variable in institutional performance enhancement, highlighting the emphasis on inspirational vision, individual inspiration, and individualized consideration. Triadic Model improves and expands on this concept by suggesting the most basic source of long-term change to be spiritual and not psychological, with human leaders simply a vehicle of godly power and not initiators of change (Qazi & Al-Mhdawi, 2024).

Implications for Educational Practice and Institutional Transformation

Curriculum Design and Implementation Strategies

The Triadic Model calls for a variety of distinct, practical approaches to curriculum design that can have the power to significantly elevate student motivation, learning gains, and moral development. Courses must intentionally include clear time for students to explore their spiritual identity and divine calling, making rich connections between course content and life purpose. This integration could include reflective service-learning activities in which students can use what they have learned in class for the benefit of others, creative projects that foster personal expression and religious reflection, and tasks that invite students explicitly to consider how their chosen field of study connects to their sense of God-given purpose and calling.

Second, the curriculum would intentionally weave contemplative practices throughout so that students can gain access to spiritual identity and receive divine guidance in academic as well as life choices. This may be in the guise of directed blocks of prayer, meditation, and religious reflection as part of routine course study, and assignments with a formal invitation to students to seek recourse in spiritual insight and Godly understanding in dealing with challenging academic concerns. Hukkinen et al. (2025) provide wonderful demonstration of how Holy Spirit ministry and biblical wisdom literature can be integrated into contemporary education systems in an orderly and systematic way to enable true spiritual development and true self-directed learning.

Third, the curriculum must clearly and innovatively engage the intersection of learning and faith so that students can see how their fields of study can be placed within a Christian world view and how spiritual truths can enrich, illuminate, and enlighten scholarly investigation and professional practice. This cannot be cited but rather demonstrate how spiritual thinking can inform and refine analytical thinking, creative problem-solving, and moral decision-making in some academic fields.

Assessment and Evaluation Practice Transformation

Traditional testing procedures foster extrinsic motivation by prioritizing most heavily grades, rankings, and relative ranking above learning, growth, and ethical growth. The Triadic Model suggests several alternative strategies that will more powerfully foster intrinsic motivation and yet permit academic seriousness and institutional integrity.

First, assessment must always take spiritual maturity and character development in conjunction with academic success into consideration, recognizing that education should develop the whole child and not merely mind. This perhaps in specially designed portfolios of spiritual consciousness, markers of character development, and service to others, so the learner may be viewed more holistically.

Second, measurement should always be more process-oriented than product-oriented, acknowledging that spiritual development and character are ongoing processes of process rather than discrete quantifiable ends. This orientation aligns with current scholarship in growth mindset and formative measurement and includes the spiritually essential dimension that provides ultimate purpose and long-term motivation for sustained learning and development.

Third, evaluation should offer high-quality experiences for learners to showcase creativity, innovation, and service to others. The consequences are undoubtedly driven by safe spiritual identity and unmistakable divine purpose. These could be in the form of capstone projects that involve solving real-world issues of local communities, creative expression that reflects personal call and spiritual wisdom, and service-learning opportunities that provide opportunity to exercise emerging gifts and abilities in the service of others.

Faculty Development and Institutional Support Systems

Effective application of the Triadic Model is based on large-scale development of faculty and organizational support systems that value spiritual formation as well as excellence in teaching. To begin, faculty must have formalized experiences in investigating their own spirituality and divine calling, coming completely to a realization of how their work as educators fits into their own spiritual journey and divine plan. This theological foundation has the potential to offer the long-standing inspiration and godly insight required for genuinely revolutionary pedagogy that can influence intellectual as well as spiritual growth (Adeniyi et al., 2024).

Second, the faculties must receive formal training in how to properly bridge academic excellence and spiritual formation, acquiring hands-on competencies for ministering to the whole person in body, soul, and spirit within their own specific areas of study. Integration must include both theological education and pedagogical teaching competencies in spiritual mentoring, guidance, and formation in the academy (Dinh et al., 2023).

Third, ongoing support to the faculty in designing and creating evaluation processes that function towards deeper intellectual depth as well as genuine spiritual development should be provided. This can include training in alternate forms of evaluation, peer mentoring by more senior spiritual directors, and scholarly study in sacred texts for handling students' different spiritual issues across the academy.

Research Directions and Empirical Validation Strategies

Comprehensive Research Methodology Framework

Empirical testing of the Triadic Model requires new paradigms for research that honor scientific validity and spiritual rigor and that provide robust results that can feed back into education practice and policy. Mixed-method research designs could systematically combine quantitative measures of academic achievement, psychological well-being, and behavioural

conduct with qualitative measures of spiritual growth, character development, and life satisfaction.

Longitudinal studies would follow students from school start and throughout professional life, fully measuring enduring effects of spirit-guided learning methods. Longitudinal studies would contrast secular-educated and Triadic Model-educated students periodically, statistically comparing academic success, job satisfaction, serving others, ethical behavior, and blissfulness at several points in time.

Neuroimaging can research the measurable brain alterations associated with spiritual growth and identity-driven motivation, bringing the latest in neuroscience technology to the task of measurement of cognitive development, emotional regulation, and creative potential. Developments in fMRI and other neurosciences over the past few years provide for an unparalleled level of observation of brain activity during spiritual activities and measurement of neuroplastic change potentially brought about by long-term spiritual change and goal-directed learning.

Measurement Challenges and Innovative Solutions

Spiritual sources and outcomes are precisely challenging and opportunity-rich in a unique sense to quantify through methodologically sound education research. Old-fashioned psychological testing will not be capable of measuring the complete spectrum of spiritual experience, divine guidance, and transcendent outcomes of the Triadic Model. Empirically derived measures specially designed will need to build and prove that will be capable of satisfactorily measuring spiritual identity, divine guidance, and purpose-motivated motivation without compromising scholarly validity and statistical significance.

The research program will further have to respond reflectively to religious and cultural diversity in such a manner that procedures and instruments are functional and suitable to students with diverse spiritual backgrounds and traditions. This can entail the creation of alternative instrument forms for other spiritual contexts while keeping assumptions not limited to one spiritual context and making them convergent across groups.

Institutional Implementation and Case Study Research

Triadic Model adoption institutional case studies would offer school leaders rich learnings on how to prepare for the same transformation. Long-term successful integrated institution case studies would identify success drivers, typical implementation challenges, and compelling resistance-mobilizing strategies while being intellectually demanding.

Comparative evaluation of the various implementation strategies would have the prospect of determining the most viable ones for an extremely broad array of institutional contexts, including secular colleges and universities, religious colleges and universities, and international multicultural educational institutions. Policy makers and institutions wanting to maximize students' motivation and learning through faith-based intentional integration would benefit from this research.

Conclusion and Future Directions

The primary finding of this research is the development of a comprehensive, spiritually grounded framework that addresses the core of the motivation crisis in higher education. The discussion synthesizes how the model connects theoretical principles to practical outcomes.

Table 2: Proposed Manifestations of the Triadic Model at Different Levels

Level	Theoretical Principle	Practical Application & Outcome	Measurable Indicator (Example)
Spirit	Unconditional Worth (SDT)	Reduced performance anxiety; willingness to engage in scholarly risk-taking.	Lower scores on anxiety scales; increased participation in class discussions.
Soul	Cognitive Flexibility (Neuroplasticity)	Enhanced creativity and problem-solving abilities in complex projects.	Higher scores on Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking; quality of project innovation.
Body	Ethical Leadership (Transformational)	Consistent moral decision-making and initiative in service-oriented activities.	Participation in service-learning hours; peer evaluations on ethical behavior.

The Triadic Identity-Purpose Model offers a grand and visionary template for reshaping higher education motivation by indelibly integrating true spiritual formation and profound academic excellence. By knowing and nurturing students as spiritual humans made in the image of God and uniquely crafted for purposes ordained by Him, colleges and universities can tap into and accelerate the innermost sources of human motivation, creativity, and strength.

The model directly confronts the dependency crisis of today by constructing a strong inner support system of spiritual purpose and divine identity capable of motivating lifelong learning, moral leadership, and other centered service. The model provides concrete, practical approaches to curriculum design, assessment reform, and faculty development balancing academic excellence and spiritual formation with achieving measurable gains in student outcomes.

This argument is also corroborated by more current research. For example, Riza et al. (2025) discovered that participative leadership and organizational culture consistent with the model's focus on purpose and community strengthen organizational performance and commitment in higher education institutions considerably. In addition, Hukkanen et al. (2025) present a theological analogy, illustrating how the biblical wisdom and workings of the Holy Spirit afford a background to understanding self-directed learning (heutagogy) that is most directly supportive of the Triadic Model's soul-level processes.

Although large-scale empirical testing of the model would be a worthwhile next step, the continued research on transformational leadership, intrinsic motivation, neuroplasticity, and spiritual integration allows for promising early evidence of the value and transformational value of the model. The focus of the model on purpose, identity, and service jibes with current motivational research on motivation and psychological well-being and inserts the necessary spiritual component that brings ultimate meaning, enduring direction, and transcendent hope.

Schools openly endorsing the Triadic Model are ready to propel graduates into the innovation-based world economy increasingly dependent on intrinsically motivated professionals with bases in moral leadership, creative thinking, and flexibility. And above all, they can see how the inclusion of the spiritual aspect of education is reflective to augment and not erase academic excellence, resulting in graduates who are technically proficient and intellectually capable but spiritually contented, morally grounded, and zealously devoted to good service to others and society.

The call to educational transformation is both urgent and filled with hope. As institutions increasingly recognize the fundamental limitations of purely secular approaches to motivation and excellence, they have an unprecedented opportunity to rediscover and reclaim the profound spiritual foundations that have historically provided the deepest motivation for learning, discovery, and service. The Triadic Identity-Purpose Model provides a comprehensive framework for this crucial rediscovery, offering a clear path toward educational excellence that honours the full dignity, potential, and eternal destiny of every student. By fostering a generation of purpose-driven ethical leaders and innovators, the model contributes to national development goals. It promotes social cohesion, ethical citizenship, and sustainable innovation, which are crucial for the long-term health and competitiveness of a nation.

Future research should focus on developing robust measurement instruments, conducting longitudinal outcome studies, and creating practical implementation guides that can help institutions successfully navigate the transformation from external compliance systems to spirit-led excellence that serves both temporal and eternal purposes.

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