

Mission-Driven Learning Theory: A Teleological Theory of Learning, Formation, and Responsible Contribution

Original Conceptual Article | Systematic Integrative Review and Theory Reconstruction

Sixbert Sangwa^{*1} and Placide Mutabazi²

¹Department of International Business and Trade, African Leadership University, Kigali, Rwanda

²Office of the Executive Chancellor, Open Christian University, California, United States

*Corresponding Author: ssangwa@alueducation.com

Abstract

Purpose: This article reconstructs Mission-Driven Learning Theory (MDLT) as a teleological theory of learning, formation, and responsible contribution. It asks what changes when telos is treated not as an optional motivational add-on but as a constitutive and morally evaluative dimension of learning. **Method:** A systematic integrative review and critical theory-building synthesis was conducted across SciSpace and Scite, supplemented by backward and forward citation tracing and targeted DOI verification. The search identified 147 records; after deduplication, screening, retrieval, and eligibility assessment, 49 sources informed the qualitative synthesis. The review followed PRISMA 2020 reporting principles while recognising that integrative theory construction differs from intervention-effect estimation. **Findings:** Existing theories explain behaviour, cognition, experience, participation, motivation, identity, competence, or vocational fit, yet none alone specifies how a morally worthy mission orders the selection, sequencing, persistence, transfer, and ethical use of learning. MDLT is therefore reconstructed around teleological regulation, defined as the higher-order process by which a worthy mission confers salience, integrates identity and value, directs agentic engagement, governs competence development, and evaluates enactment. The reconstructed architecture comprises five layers: normative foundation, mission ecology, developmental mechanisms, dynamic mission-learning alignment, and responsible outcomes, connected through seasonal re-discernment. Mission opportunity structures, relational discernment and communal legitimation, and a mission-worthiness test address structural inequality, cultural plurality, self-deception, and harmful ends. Ten falsifiable propositions, differential predictions, a measurement programme, and a cumulative research agenda are presented. **Originality/value:** MDLT contributes a normative and explanatory account of why learning is incomplete when it produces knowledge or competence without ordering their use toward a worthy end. The theory is explicitly Christian in its originating ontology while offering a transparent public translation for plural educational settings. It reframes educational success as the truthful, competent, adaptive, and ethically accountable enactment of learning in service of a worthy mission.

Keywords: mission-driven learning; teleological regulation; purpose in education; vocation; formation; dynamic alignment; responsible contribution; Ubuntu

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1. Introduction

Education has become increasingly proficient at specifying learning outcomes while remaining uncertain about the ends to which those outcomes should be ordered. Behaviourist traditions clarify observable performance; cognitive approaches explain the acquisition and organisation of knowledge; constructivist and situated accounts show how meaning emerges through experience and participation; motivational theories explain why learners initiate and sustain effort; competency-based models specify demonstrable performance; and vocational theories examine career identity, adaptability, and person-environment fit. These advances are indispensable. Yet the accumulation of increasingly precise means does not resolve the normative question of what learning is for, which ends deserve pursuit, or how competence should be judged when it is used efficiently for harmful purposes.

The problem is not merely that learners sometimes lack motivation. A person may be highly motivated, self-efficacious, technically competent, and well fitted to an organisation while directing those capacities toward exploitative, destructive, or trivial ends. Conversely, a learner

may possess a morally serious mission but lack the competence, opportunity, character, or communal support necessary to enact it. A comprehensive theory therefore needs to explain both the organisation of learning toward an end and the moral, relational, and structural conditions under which that end can be responsibly pursued.

Mission-Driven Learning Theory was initially proposed as a teleological framework that ordered knowledge and competence to a discerned life mission (Sangwa & Mutabazi, 2025). The foundational formulation integrated mission, calling discernment, giftedness, formation, competence, alignment, seasonality, community confirmation, agency, and stewardship. It also advanced a causal model, propositions, curricular practices, and an illustrative Mission Alignment Index. That formulation established the theoretical problem and a generative vocabulary. However, its breadth left several issues insufficiently resolved: the precise definition of learning; the hierarchy among telos, calling, mission, vocation, goals, and tasks; the mechanism by which mission changes learning; the difference between internal and structurally enabled alignment; the status of community in non-individualist contexts; the criteria by which a claimed mission

is judged worthy; the possibility that mission increases meaning without comfort; and the conditions under which the theory could be disconfirmed.

This article reconstructs MDLT rather than merely extending its list of constructs. The central thesis is that a morally worthy mission can operate as a higher-order regulatory principle that selects, values, sequences, and ethically governs learning. This process is termed teleological regulation. The article argues that learning reaches its proper end not when a learner merely knows, understands, performs, adapts, or gains credentials, but when truthfully acquired knowledge, rightly formed character, and responsibly developed competence are integrated and enacted in service of a worthy mission.

Six questions guide the reconstruction. First, how should learning be defined when telos is constitutive rather than external? Second, through what mechanisms does a worthy mission regulate attention, identity, motivation, knowledge selection, character formation, competence, transfer, and action? Third, how does MDLT differ from adjacent theories? Fourth, what relational, cultural, institutional, material, and historical conditions enable or constrain mission-driven learning? Fifth, how can the theory be measured, tested, challenged, and potentially falsified? Sixth, how can it inform educational design without becoming deterministic, individualistic, culturally parochial, or coercive?

The contribution is fourfold. Conceptually, the article provides a parsimonious hierarchy and layered architecture. Explanatorily, it identifies teleological regulation as the distinctive mechanism. Normatively, it introduces a mission-worthiness test that refuses to equate intensity of desire, economic success, or social influence with a legitimate educational end. Empirically, it offers propositions, differential predictions, measurement domains, and a staged research programme. The article is addressed to educational theorists, psychologists, philosophers, theologians, curriculum designers, and institutional leaders concerned with learning that is not only effective but also meaningful, just, and responsible.

2. Methodology

2.1 Design and epistemic stance

The study used a systematic integrative review combined with critical theory construction. Integrative reviews are appropriate when a problem crosses theoretical, empirical, philosophical, and methodological traditions and when the objective is not to estimate a single pooled effect but to clarify concepts, compare mechanisms, identify contradictions, and construct a more coherent explanatory model (Snyder, 2019; Torraco, 2005). Theory construction followed the classic requirements that a theory specify what its constructs are, how and why they relate, and who, where, and when the proposed relationships should hold (Whetten, 1989). The procedure also drew on guidance for conceptual articles that emphasises problematisation, synthesis, conceptual differentiation, and the production of testable implications (Jaakkola, 2020).

The inquiry was critical realist and teleological. It treated learner experiences, motivations, institutions, and social structures as real causal influences while recognising that

purposes are interpreted through language, culture, community, and biography. It also rejected the idea that education is normatively neutral. Every curriculum selects knowledge, privileges forms of excellence, and embodies assumptions about desirable persons and societies. The theoretical task was therefore both explanatory and evaluative: to explain how mission may influence learning and to specify why not every desired mission should be educationally endorsed.

2.2 Information sources and search strategy

Searches were conducted on 21 July 2026 in SciSpace and Scite, two multidisciplinary scholarly discovery platforms, and were supplemented by backward and forward citation tracing from the foundational MDLT article and high-relevance syntheses. Targeted title and DOI checks were used to verify bibliographic details and distinguish versions of record from repositories and preprints. The search was deliberately interdisciplinary because no single disciplinary index adequately covers learning theory, vocational psychology, philosophy of education, African relational thought, virtue ethics, and theology of work.

Nine SciSpace queries addressed teleology, purpose and calling, person-environment fit and career construction, motivation, situated and transformative learning, virtue and competence, Ubuntu and human flourishing, opportunity structures, and Christian vocation. A Scite query combined purpose-in-education terms with motivation, engagement, and learning outcomes. The exact strings and search-level yields are reported in Supplementary Table S1 and the accompanying PRISMA search log. The search identified 90 records through SciSpace, 20 through Scite, and 37 through citation tracing and targeted verification, for 147 records before deduplication.

2.3 Eligibility criteria

Sources were eligible when they made a substantive contribution to at least one of the following: a major theory of learning or motivation; purpose, calling, vocation, identity, or career construction; person-environment fit; character and ethical competence; capability and opportunity structures; relational or communitarian education; philosophical teleology; Christian theology of vocation; or methods of integrative review and theory construction. Seminal monographs were retained irrespective of publication date because theoretical influence cannot be captured by recency alone. Empirical studies were prioritised when their design permitted a defensible inference about associations, mechanisms, change, context, or intervention effects.

Sources were excluded when purpose or mission was incidental; when the work was promotional or unsupported commentary; when a stronger version of the same evidence was available; when a repository copy duplicated a version of record; when theoretical or methodological detail was insufficient for synthesis; or when language and access barriers prevented adequate assessment. Institutional success claims were not accepted as causal evidence unless accompanied by a credible counterfactual design.

2.4 Screening, retrieval, and PRISMA accounting

After removal of 31 duplicate or version-equivalent records, 116 unique titles and abstracts were screened. Forty-

two were excluded for peripheral relevance. Seventy-four reports were sought, of which eight could not be adequately retrieved. Sixty-six full-text reports or sufficiently complete authoritative records were assessed; 17 were excluded at this stage because of peripheral relevance ($n = 7$), insufficient theoretical or empirical detail ($n = 5$), duplicate or earlier-version status ($n = 3$), or language/access limitations ($n = 2$). Forty-nine sources were included in the qualitative and theory-building synthesis.

Screening and coding were conducted by the lead author in a single-reviewer workflow. No claim is made of

independent dual screening, inter-rater reliability, or preregistration. To reduce idiosyncratic judgement, the study used explicit eligibility rules, a concept codebook, repeated review of borderline sources, DOI verification, a documented evidence matrix, and sensitivity checks in which the reconstructed model was compared against rival explanations. The PRISMA diagram in Figure 3 reports the selection process. PRISMA 2020 was used as a reporting framework, not as a claim that the review was an intervention meta-analysis (Page et al., 2021).

PRISMA 2020 Flow of Evidence Identification and Selection

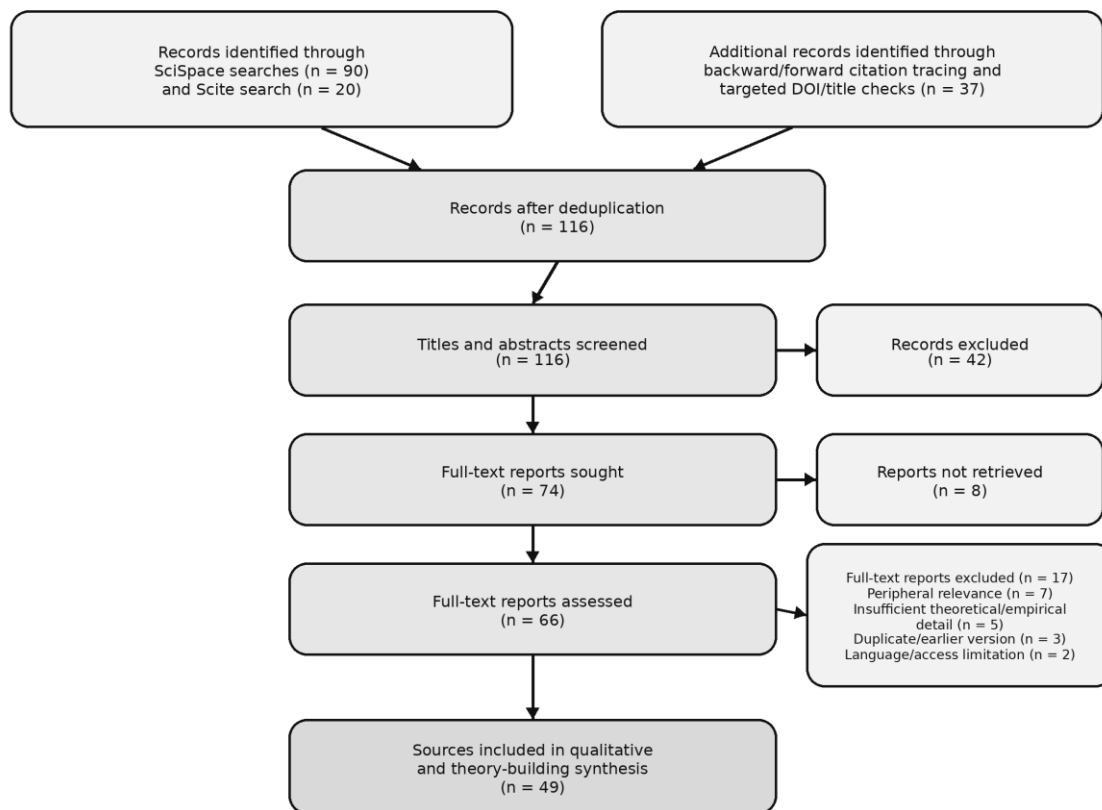


Figure 3. PRISMA 2020 flow of evidence identification, screening, retrieval, and inclusion. Counts reflect the bounded searches and citation-tracing procedure reported in Supplementary Table S1.

2.5 Evidence appraisal and theory synthesis

Evidence was appraised according to the kind of claim it could support. Philosophical texts were evaluated for conceptual clarity, internal coherence, normative justification, and relevance. Theory papers were assessed for construct precision, causal logic, boundary conditions, and differential predictions. Empirical studies were classified as experimental, longitudinal, quasi-experimental, cross-sectional, qualitative, systematic review, meta-analysis, or illustrative institutional evidence. Correlational evidence was never treated as causal proof, and findings from restricted professional populations were not assumed to generalise automatically to all learners.

The synthesis coded each source for its definition of learning or purpose, ontological assumptions, unit and level of analysis, mechanism, temporal structure, normative

commitments, outcomes, moderators, boundary conditions, measurement approach, and unresolved contradictions. Abductive comparison was then used to identify the smallest set of constructs needed to explain the phenomenon. The reconstruction proceeded through nine stages: construct identification, differentiation, consolidation, causal ordering, mechanism specification, layered model construction, proposition development, boundary specification, and articulation of disconfirmation conditions. The complete evidence matrix is supplied as a machine-readable supplementary file.

3. The Incomplete Treatment of Telos in Learning Theory

3.1 Learning as behaviour, cognition, construction, and participation

Major learning traditions illuminate different objects of explanation. Behaviourist approaches explain how environmental contingencies shape observable performance. Cognitivist approaches explain attention, memory, schema, problem solving, and metacognition. Constructivist approaches emphasise active meaning-making, prior knowledge, inquiry, and social negotiation. Experiential learning organises learning as a cycle of concrete experience, reflection, conceptualisation, and experimentation (Kolb, 1984). Situated learning and communities-of-practice accounts explain how participation, identity, legitimacy, and access to practice transform what and how people learn (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Transformative learning explains changes in frames of reference through critical reflection and discourse (Mezirow, 1991).

These theories should not be dismissed as means-only accounts. Constructivist, situated, and transformative traditions often contain strong commitments to agency, identity, emancipation, or democratic participation. Yet their principal explananda remain changes in behaviour, knowledge, participation, identity, or meaning perspective. They do not necessarily determine which ultimate ends should organise the selection and use of these changes. Transforming a frame of reference is not automatically morally good; joining a community of practice does not establish that the practice itself is worthy; and effective experiential learning may improve competence in practices that harm others.

3.2 Learning as motivated action

Self-determination theory explains the quality of motivation through autonomy, competence, and relatedness and distinguishes controlled from autonomous regulation (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2020). Expectancy-value theory explains educational choices and persistence through expected success, subjective value, and cost (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Wang & Xue, 2022). Social cognitive theory explains reciprocal interactions among person, behaviour, and environment, with self-efficacy and agency shaping action (Bandura, 1986). Relational syntheses show that motivation is not located solely within the individual but is shaped by teachers, peers, families, and institutional climates (Martin & Dowson, 2009).

MDLT depends on these mechanisms but addresses a different question. Motivation theories explain whether and why a learner values a task, expects success, experiences autonomy, or believes action is possible. They do not by themselves establish whether the valued objective is morally worthy, how one mission should reorder an entire learning trajectory, or why two equally autonomous and competent learners may direct their capacities toward radically different ends. The self-transcendent purpose literature provides important evidence that connecting learning with contribution beyond the self can improve self-regulation, particularly when environments afford enactment (Reeves et al., 2021; Yeager et al., 2014). Even here, purpose often functions as a task-value

intervention rather than as a comprehensive account of the learner's identity, formation, competence, opportunity, and responsibility across time.

3.3 Vocation, calling, identity, adaptability, and fit

Vocational psychology moves closer to the MDLT problem. Calling has been conceptualised through transcendent summons, purposeful work, and prosocial orientation (Dik & Duffy, 2009), and recent evidence indicates that these dimensions make differentiated contributions to vocational identity, self-efficacy, and career engagement (Marsh & Dik, 2024). Calling is associated with learning engagement in professional student samples, with adaptability, commitment, and decision self-efficacy proposed as mediating processes (Chen et al., 2024; Chen & Zhang, 2023). Career construction and life-design approaches emphasise narrative identity, reflexivity, adaptability, and the reconstruction of vocational pathways across transitions (Cardoso et al., 2022; Merino-Tejedor et al., 2025; Savickas, 2013).

Person-environment fit explains congruence between individual characteristics and job, organisation, group, or supervisor and predicts important attitudinal and behavioural outcomes (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). Yet fit can be high in an unjust organisation, and a person can be comfortable in a role that wastes gifts or harms communities. Career construction explains adaptation but does not necessarily provide a normative criterion for the end toward which adaptation is directed. Calling research contributes transcendence and prosociality, but it often treats calling as a work-related psychological construct rather than a theory of learning, formation, and the ethical use of competence. MDLT therefore integrates but does not collapse into vocation, adaptability, or fit.

3.4 Character, capability, community, and structure

Theories of virtue and professional formation challenge the separation of knowing from being. Ethical competence includes the capacity to perceive moral salience, reason, deliberate, act, and sustain responsible practice, not merely to recall rules (Andersson et al., 2022). Reviews of virtue and care in professional education show that institutional cultures, exemplars, narratives, and communities can either cultivate or undermine humanistic practice (Doukas et al., 2022). Engineering and computing scholarship similarly argues that competence is incomplete without dispositions and virtues governing its use (Frezza & Mina, 2022).

Capability theory distinguishes resources from real freedoms to pursue valued forms of life (Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 1999). Ecological and structural accounts show that agency develops within nested systems and unequal opportunity structures (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Longitudinal evidence indicates that aspirations and effort do not have identical consequences across socioeconomic locations and tracked systems (Mele et al., 2023). Qualitative research with disadvantaged youth demonstrates that aspirations require institutional supports and cannot be realised by positive thinking alone (McInerney & Smyth, 2014). These insights require MDLT to incorporate opportunity structures rather than treating structural barriers as background noise.

African relational philosophies provide a further correction. Ubuntu approaches understand personhood and

flourishing through interdependence, shared humanity, dignity, and responsibility (Ejuu & Opiyo, 2022; Venter, 2004; Waghid, 2023). An Ubuntu educational philosophy cultivates self-regarding and other-regarding virtues together, making

collective life constitutive rather than merely instrumental (Manthalu, 2023). Mission, on this account, may be personally owned but is neither privately manufactured nor valid simply because the individual feels strongly about it.

Table 1. MDLT and neighbouring theories: primary mechanisms, treatment of telos, and theoretical delta

Tradition	Primary mechanism	Treatment of purpose/telos	MDLT contribution
Behaviourism/cognitivism	Conditioning; information processing; schema	Ends are generally externally set or outside the mechanism	MDLT asks which ends should organise behaviour and knowledge and how they govern use.
Constructivist/experiential learning	Meaning construction through inquiry and experience	Purpose may shape relevance but is not necessarily normative or enduring	MDLT links experience to a morally tested mission across life seasons.
Situated learning/communities of practice	Participation, identity, legitimacy, practice	Ends are embedded in the practice or community	MDLT permits critique of the practice and asks whether communal ends are worthy.
Transformative learning	Critical reflection and transformed frames of reference	Emancipation or justified meaning may function as an implicit telos	MDLT specifies responsible contribution and moral boundaries for transformation.
Self-determination/expectancy-value	Needs, autonomous regulation, expectancy, value, cost	Explains motivation toward goals but does not validate the goals	MDLT treats mission as a higher-order selector and ethical regulator of goals.
Career construction/calling	Narrative identity, adaptability, summons, purposeful work	Strong treatment of vocation and purpose	MDLT extends calling into a theory of learning, formation, opportunity, and contribution.
Person-environment fit	Congruence between person and context	Fit is descriptively useful but normatively neutral	MDLT distinguishes internal, external, constrained, apparent, and enacted alignment.
Capability/Ubuntu/virtue	Real freedoms, relational personhood, practical wisdom	Explicit concern with valued lives, dignity, and common good	MDLT integrates these as normative foundation, mission ecology, and formation.

4. Philosophical, Theological, and Normative Foundations

4.1 Teleology and the non-neutrality of education

Teleology concerns explanation and evaluation in relation to ends. In Aristotelian ethics, action is intelligible through the goods toward which it is directed, and flourishing requires practical wisdom that orders particular choices within a coherent life (Aristotle, 2009). MacIntyre (1984) later distinguished internal goods of practices from external goods such as money, power, and status, arguing that virtues are required to sustain practices against institutional corruption. MDLT adopts neither a simplistic natural teleology nor the claim that every learner possesses one discoverable occupation. It adopts the narrower but consequential proposition that learning is always ordered, explicitly or implicitly, toward some conception of the good, and that educational theory becomes incomplete when it refuses to examine that ordering.

Modern education often treats employability, productivity, certification, assessment performance, or adaptability as self-evident ends. Biesta (2010) argues that educational quality cannot be reduced to measurement because questions of purpose and desirability precede questions of effectiveness. MDLT sharpens this point by distinguishing formal excellence from final excellence. Formal excellence concerns mastery of a discipline or practice. Final excellence concerns the truthful, just, and responsible contribution for which mastery is used. Formal excellence without final excellence produces technical power without moral direction. Final aspiration without formal excellence produces benevolent intention without adequate capability.

4.2 Christian ontology of calling and vocation

The originating ontology of MDLT is Christian. Human beings are not autonomous projects who invent value ex nihilo; they are creatures whose dignity, gifts, responsibilities, and final accountability are grounded in God. Vocation is therefore response before it is preference. It includes the universal calling to belong to Christ, love God and neighbour, pursue holiness, and serve faithfully, together with multiple and changing assignments in family, church, work, citizenship, and community. This avoids reducing calling to one hidden occupation.

The theological hierarchy is supported by the claim that believers are created for good works prepared by God ([Ephesians 2:10, CSB](#)) and are to do all things for the glory of God ([1 Corinthians 10:31, CSB](#)). The governing norm is love of God and neighbour ([Matthew 22:37-39, CSB](#)), while differentiated gifts are exercised within one body for service ([Romans 12:4-8, CSB](#)). These texts establish theological premises, not empirical effect sizes.

Christian higher education scholarship warns against equating vocation with paid work and instead frames vocational living as lifelong discipleship across roles (Bowman, 2022). Institutional practices matter because universities teach an account of vocation through advising, assessment, reward systems, and organisational culture, not only through explicit courses (Roels, 2017). Contemporary theology of work also recognises that calling must be retrieved dynamically in labour markets characterised by multiple jobs, disrupted careers, unemployment, and morally compromised organisations (Kristanto et al., 2024).

4.3 Public translation without ontological concealment

A theory with Christian origins can enter plural educational settings only through transparent translation, not

by pretending that its ontology is universally shared. The public register of MDLT therefore defines mission as a self-transcendent and morally defensible contribution that a learner or community accepts responsibility to pursue. It can draw on dignity, capability, human rights, professional ethics, democratic responsibility, ecological stewardship, and the common good. This public translation preserves the theory's architecture while leaving ultimate metaphysical commitments open to argument.

Translation must not become coercion. Public institutions should not assign a religious calling, grade a learner's spiritual sincerity, or demand one approved life plan. Their legitimate role is to create protected spaces for reflection, exposure, dialogue, trial, feedback, and ethical examination; to make opportunity structures more just; and to help learners relate knowledge and competence to responsibilities beyond credential acquisition. Faith-explicit institutions may go further by integrating Scripture, prayer, worship, and ecclesial discernment, provided they remain alert to spiritual manipulation and premature certainty.

4.4 The mission-worthiness test

A mission is not worthy merely because it feels authentic, produces flow, gains community applause, or yields income. MDLT subjects a proposed mission to four tests. The truth test asks whether the mission depends on deception, denial of evidence, or ideological distortion. The dignity and justice test asks whether persons are treated as ends rather than instruments and whether benefits and burdens are distributed defensibly. The stewardship test asks whether gifts, resources, institutions, and creation are used responsibly and sustainably. The accountability test asks whether the mission remains open to correction from affected communities, professional standards, moral traditions, and, in Christian settings, Scripture and the church.

A mission that fails these tests may be psychologically compelling but cannot function as the normative centre of education. This distinction is vital in an age when propaganda, surveillance, predatory finance, exploitative technologies, and violent extremism can all recruit highly educated and motivated actors. MDLT therefore evaluates both means and ends. Worthy ends cannot legitimise intrinsically corrupt means, and competent means cannot redeem destructive ends.

5. Defining Mission-Driven Learning

5.1 Canonical definition

Mission-driven learning is the recursive, socially situated, structurally conditioned, and morally ordered process through which persons and communities discern a worthy mission, reorganise knowledge and identity around that mission, cultivate the character and competence required to pursue it, and translate learning into responsible contribution across changing life seasons.

Each term performs theoretical work. Recursive indicates that mission and learning develop through feedback rather than a linear sequence. Socially situated indicates that identity, knowledge, practice, and recognition are relational. Structurally conditioned indicates that opportunity is unequally distributed and that agency is neither sovereign nor irrelevant. Morally ordered indicates that mission is subject to truth,

dignity, justice, stewardship, and accountability. Persons and communities indicates that mission can be individual, shared, institutional, or intergenerational. Discernment distinguishes responsible inquiry from impulsive preference. Reorganise indicates that mission changes salience, sequence, and integration, not merely motivation. Character and competence join moral formation with skilled performance. Responsible contribution specifies enactment as the mature outcome. Life seasons prevent one-time vocational foreclosure.

5.2 Conceptual hierarchy

Telos is the ultimate normative end in relation to which a life and its learning are judged. Calling is the summons or responsibility received from beyond the autonomous self. In Christian MDLT, God is the Caller; in a public register, calling may be experienced through conscience, community need, professional duty, or a transcendent moral horizon. Mission is a discerned, revisable, and communicable field of contribution accepted as a responsibility. Vocation is the socially situated constellation of roles and practices through which mission is enacted. Goals are proximal achievements that advance the mission. Tasks are immediate actions through which goals are pursued.

The hierarchy permits stability without rigidity. A person's telos may remain constant while missions are clarified, vocations change, goals are revised, and tasks are replaced. A teacher may move from classroom instruction to curriculum leadership or mentoring without abandoning a mission of forming learners. A Christian may experience several simultaneous callings as parent, church member, professional, and citizen. MDLT therefore rejects both occupational reductionism and the anxiety-producing claim that one mistaken career choice frustrates an otherwise hidden divine plan.

5.3 Units and levels of analysis

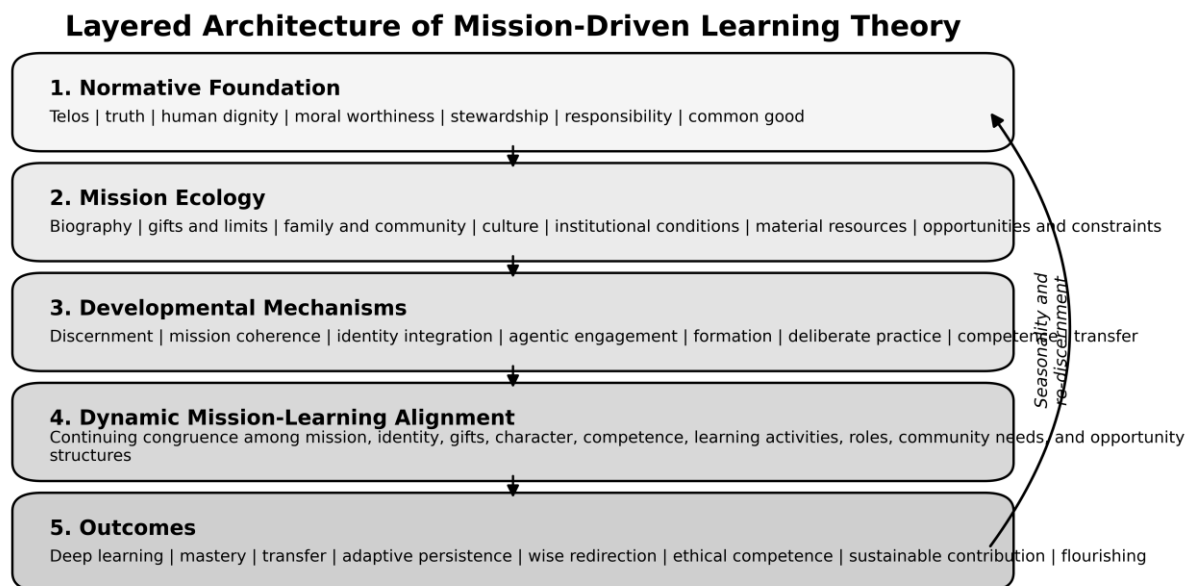
The primary unit is the learner-in-relation, not an isolated mind. Individual-level processes include attention, identity, efficacy, character, competence, and reflection. Relational processes include mentoring, recognition, correction, belonging, and shared practice. Institutional processes include curriculum, assessment, credentialing, resource allocation, labour-market connection, and organisational mission. Societal processes include law, political economy, culture, technology, inequality, and historical conditions. Collective missions can also organise learning at team, community, church, professional, or institutional levels.

The theory is developmental but not age-exclusive. Adolescence and early adulthood may be especially important for exploration, but mission can be reinterpreted after migration, disability, bereavement, technological displacement, parenthood, mid-career crisis, retirement, or spiritual renewal. MDLT applies most strongly where learners have some capacity for reflection and some real or potential latitude to act. In acute survival conditions, tightly regulated training, or coercive systems, its effects may be attenuated, delayed, or expressed primarily through communal rather than individual mission.

6. Reconstructed Architecture of MDLT

The reconstructed theory is organised into five analytically distinct layers connected by feedback. The layers distinguish norms, conditions, mechanisms, proximal

alignment, and outcomes. This prevents the original constructs from appearing as equivalent boxes and clarifies which variables should be modelled as antecedents, mediators, moderators, formative components, or consequences.



The architecture is recursive: outcomes and changing conditions feed back into renewed discernment, recalibration, and learning.

Figure 1. Layered architecture of Mission-Driven Learning Theory. The layers are analytically distinct but dynamically interdependent; seasonality returns outcomes and changed conditions to renewed discernment.

6.1 Layer 1: Normative foundation

The normative foundation contains telos, truth, human dignity, moral worthiness, stewardship, responsibility, love of neighbour, and the common good. It does not predict behaviour in the same manner as a psychological variable. It specifies the evaluative horizon within which claims of alignment and contribution become intelligible. Without this layer, MDLT would become a sophisticated version of goal alignment that could serve any end.

6.2 Layer 2: Mission ecology

Mission ecology refers to the biographical, relational, cultural, institutional, material, and historical field in which mission is discerned and enacted. It includes formative experiences, gifts and limitations, family obligations, community needs, traditions, mentors, labour markets, political conditions, digital infrastructures, financial resources, discrimination, and legal constraints. Ecology is not merely context surrounding an autonomous learner. It helps constitute what the learner can perceive, imagine, value, and do.

Mission opportunity structures are the enabling and constraining arrangements within this ecology. A funded internship, accessible laboratory, caring mentor, disability accommodation, safe transport system, professional network, or flexible degree map can convert aspiration into enactment. Poverty, war, caste, racism, gender exclusion, credential barriers, restrictive curricula, family care burdens, or corrupt

institutions can prevent an internally coherent learner from acting. MDLT therefore distinguishes internal alignment from external enactability.

6.3 Layer 3: Developmental mechanisms

Discernment is an iterative practice of attending to gifts, limits, convictions, needs, evidence, responsibilities, providence, and feedback. Mission coherence is the degree to which a proposed contribution is specific enough to guide learning, broad enough to survive role changes, and narratively integrated with identity. Identity and value integration occur when mission becomes a credible answer to why particular knowledge and practices matter. Agentic engagement is the learner's intentional mobilisation of attention, choice, effort, help-seeking, and self-regulation. Formation concerns virtues and dispositions such as truthfulness, humility, courage, justice, perseverance, compassion, and practical wisdom. Deliberate learning converts gifts and effort into transferable competence. Reflective enactment applies competence in real settings and returns evidence to discernment.

These mechanisms are neither strictly sequential nor universally conscious. A learner may discover mission through skilled action before articulating it, or may clarify identity through community recognition. The causal ordering is therefore probabilistic and recursive. Nevertheless, the theory predicts that mission coherence should alter the selection and interpretation of learning tasks, that formation should govern

how competence is used, and that enactment should supply feedback unavailable through introspection alone.

6.4 Layer 4: Dynamic mission-learning alignment

Dynamic mission-learning alignment is the continuing congruence among a worthy mission, identity, gifts and limits, character, competence, learning activities, vocational roles, community needs, and opportunity structures. It is not a static match, a feeling of authenticity, or a single survey score. It is a revisable relation established through evidence and practice.

Five alignment states are distinguished. Internal alignment exists when mission, identity, values, gifts, and formation cohere. External alignment exists when roles and institutions permit meaningful expression of that internal orientation. Constrained alignment occurs when internal readiness is present but structural barriers block enactment. Apparent alignment occurs when role fit, success, and satisfaction conceal moral incoherence or social harm. Enacted alignment occurs when worthy mission, adequate competence, ethical means, opportunity, and accountable contribution converge in practice.

6.5 Layer 5: Outcomes

Proximal outcomes include task significance, engagement, self-regulation, deep learning, mastery, and transfer. Developmental outcomes include identity coherence, practical wisdom, adaptive persistence, and wise redirection. Vocational outcomes include sustainable role engagement, responsible innovation, and the capacity to continue learning. Final educational outcomes include faithful enactment, beneficiary-relevant contribution, and individual and communal flourishing.

Persistence is qualified as adaptive because endurance is not virtuous when the mission, role, or means have become false, harmful, or obsolete. Well-being is differentiated into hedonic comfort, psychological functioning, eudaimonic meaning, spiritual faithfulness, mission strain, and sustainable vitality. A worthy mission may increase meaning while involving sacrifice, opposition, grief, or financial loss. Contribution is evaluated not by scale alone but by ethical quality, fidelity, beneficiary perspectives, distribution of benefits and burdens, avoidance of harm, and sustainability.

Table 2. Construct dictionary for reconstructed MDLT

Construct	Definition	Theoretical status	Key distinction	Candidate evidence
Telos	Ultimate normative end	Normative foundation	Not a preference or career target	Philosophical/theological argument; mission-worthiness criteria
Calling	Summons or responsibility received beyond autonomous preference	Normative-relational antecedent	Distinct from interest and felt passion	Calling scales; narratives; communal testimony
Mission	Discerned, revisable field of worthy contribution	Higher-order orienting construct	Broader than occupation; narrower than telos	Specificity, stability, beyond-self orientation, ethical appraisal
Mission ecology	Biographical, relational, cultural, institutional, material, historical field	Contextual system	Not reducible to social support	Context mapping; opportunity and constraint indicators
Mission coherence	Specificity, narrative integration, communicability, and revisability	Mediator	Distinct from commitment intensity	Narrative coding; coherence scale; temporal stability
Teleological regulation	Mission-based selection, valuation, sequencing, and ethical governance of learning	Core mechanism	More than motivation or task value	Attention choices; curricular selection; self-regulation; transfer
Formation	Development of virtues and dispositions governing practice	Developmental mechanism	Not identical to compliance or personality	Scenario judgement; mentor ratings; longitudinal portfolios
Competence	Knowledge and skilled performance adequate to mission-relevant tasks	Developmental capacity	Not a moral warrant	Authentic performance tasks; external assessments
Dynamic alignment	Revisable congruence across mission, person, learning, role, community, and opportunity	Proximal state/system property	More than person-job fit or satisfaction	Multimethod alignment profile
Responsible contribution	Truthful, competent, just, sustainable enactment benefiting legitimate recipients	Outcome	Not equivalent to influence or income	Beneficiary evidence; harm and sustainability indicators

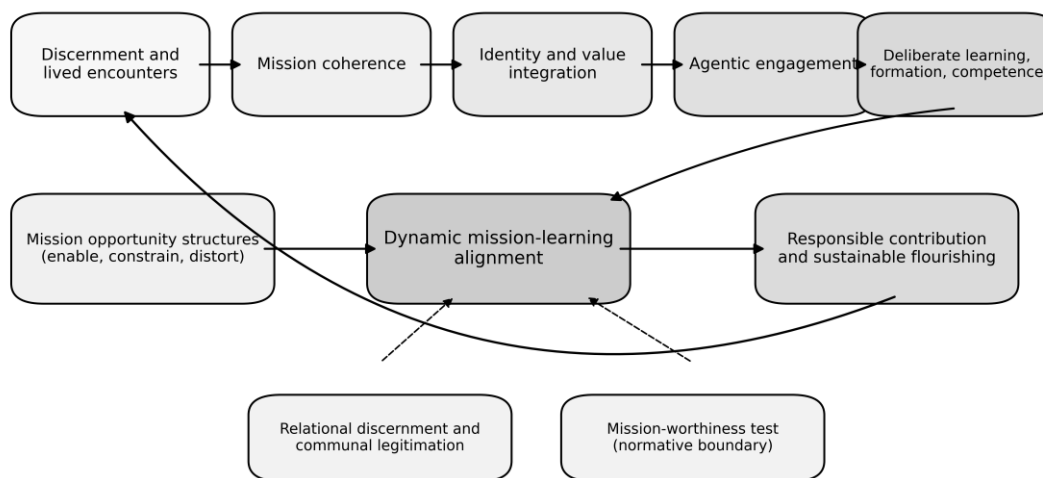
7. Teleological Regulation as the Core Mechanism

Teleological regulation is the distinctive explanatory mechanism of MDLT. It is the process through which a worthy mission confers salience on information, establishes the significance of tasks, integrates identity and values, selects goals, allocates effort, sequences learning, interprets difficulty, directs transfer, and ethically governs the use of competence. It

is higher-order because it organises several mechanisms already explained by other theories rather than replacing them.

The provisional causal sequence is: discernment and lived encounters generate mission coherence; coherence supports identity and value integration; integration energises agentic engagement; engagement directs deliberate learning and formation; competence and character interact with opportunity structures to produce dynamic alignment; enacted alignment enables responsible contribution; and experience returns the learner to renewed discernment. Figure 2 represents this sequence without implying deterministic linearity.

Dynamic Causal Model of Teleological Regulation



Teleological regulation is not a single motivational input. It is a higher-order process that selects, values, sequences, and ethically governs learning in relation to a worthy mission.

Figure 2. Dynamic causal model of teleological regulation. Opportunity structures can enable, constrain, or distort the movement from learning to enactment. Relational discernment and mission-worthiness function as calibrating and normative processes.

7.1 Salience, task significance, and knowledge selection

A mission changes what a learner notices and how knowledge is classified. Information previously experienced as disconnected can become instrumentally and morally significant when linked to a concrete responsibility. The purpose-intervention literature demonstrates that self-transcendent framing can improve persistence on tedious tasks (Yeager et al., 2014), but effects depend on whether settings provide credible affordances for enactment (Reeves et al., 2021). MDLT generalises this insight from a brief motivational intervention to a developmental architecture: mission makes some knowledge urgent, some skills foundational, some trade-offs acceptable, and some opportunities irrelevant or unethical.

This selection function must not become anti-intellectual narrowing. A mature mission requires breadth, because unforeseen knowledge can correct the mission, reveal harms, or open better means. Teleological regulation therefore orders rather than merely filters. It integrates disciplinary foundations, critical perspectives, and exploratory learning with mission-relevant depth.

7.2 Identity integration and agentic engagement

When mission becomes narratively coherent, learning tasks can be interpreted as expressions of who one is becoming and whom one is responsible to serve. Identity-based value can strengthen effort, but identity fusion can also create brittleness. MDLT therefore requires revisability, communal correction, and a distinction between mission and any single role. Agentic engagement includes choosing, initiating, seeking feedback, requesting resources, and redesigning pathways. It is not heroic individualism. Agency is exercised through relationships and under unequal conditions.

7.3 Formation and the ethical governance of competence

Formation regulates the means by which mission is pursued and the uses to which competence is put. Technical mastery increases the radius of possible action; it does not determine whether the action is wise. Practical wisdom is required because missions create conflicts among goods, obligations, risks, time horizons, and affected communities. Formation also protects against the corruption of mission by status, power, institutional incentives, or self-righteousness.

The relation is bidirectional. Character supports deliberate practice through perseverance, humility, and teachability. Practice exposes character through pressure, ambiguity, and responsibility. Ethical education does not automatically produce ethical competence, as systematic evidence from health professions shows (Andersson et al., 2022). MDLT therefore predicts that formation requires repeated, accountable enactment rather than declarative values alone.

7.4 Relational discernment and communal legitimation

The original concept of community confirmation is expanded because communities do more than affirm a pre-existing private calling. They shape moral horizons, identify gifts, narrate needs, provide roles, distribute resources, and sometimes suppress legitimate missions. Relational discernment is the dialogical process through which learners, mentors, peers, families, professionals, faith communities, and affected beneficiaries interpret evidence about a mission. Communal legitimation is provisional recognition that the mission and its proposed enactment are credible and worthy.

Community is not infallible. Families can impose status ambitions; professional groups can normalise injustice; religious communities can spiritualise coercion; majorities can silence prophetic minorities. Legitimation must therefore

remain accountable to truth, dignity, justice, and the voices of those affected. Ubuntu contributes an ontology of interdependence without converting consensus into moral certainty.

7.5 Seasonality and adaptive fidelity

Seasonality is the temporal logic of MDLT. A stable telos may be expressed through changing missions, vocations, goals, and tasks. Re-discernment is triggered by new evidence, success, failure, suffering, family responsibility, migration, technological change, institutional closure, or moral awakening. Adaptive fidelity means remaining faithful to the worthy end while revising the path. It differs from career indecision, opportunistic drift, and rigid persistence.

Seasonality also establishes a falsification opportunity. If structured re-discernment does not improve alignment, reduce avoidable burnout, or support wiser redirection compared with ordinary advising, the proposed mechanism should be revised. If learners with high mission coherence remain no more selective, persistent, transferable, or ethically reflective than otherwise comparable learners, teleological regulation would lack empirical distinctiveness.

8. Canonical Principles and Testable Propositions

8.1 Seven canonical principles

Principle of Telic Priority: Learning is ultimately evaluated in relation to the worthiness of the end it serves.

Principle of Teleological Regulation: A coherent mission can organise attention, value, identity, effort, knowledge selection, transfer, and ethical judgement.

Principle of Integrated Formation: Competence without character can magnify harm, while character without competence can fail those it intends to serve.

Principle of Dynamic Alignment: Learning is strengthened by continuing congruence among mission, identity, gifts, formation, competence, community, role, and opportunity.

Principle of Relational Discernment: Mission is personally owned but socially situated, communally tested, and morally accountable.

Principle of Seasonal Adaptation: Faithfulness may require revision of pathways, roles, strategies, and goals.

Principle of Responsible Contribution: Learning matures when developed capacities are translated into truthful, competent, just, and sustainable service.

8.2 Propositions, rival explanations, and disconfirmation

The propositions below are deliberately conditional. They are not definitions disguised as empirical claims. Each specifies a relationship that can fail, be weaker than alternatives, or hold only under identifiable conditions. The propositions should be tested with temporal designs, multimethod measurement, and explicit comparisons with self-determination, expectancy-value, identity, calling, fit, and career-construction models.

Table 3. Propositions, operationalisation, rival explanations, and disconfirmation criteria

Proposition	Claim	Illustrative operationalisation	Principal rival	Disconfirmation signal
P1	Structured discernment plus lived mission-relevant encounters will increase mission coherence over time more than reflection-only or information-only conditions.	Narrative coherence and specificity at follow-up	Career information or general maturation	No incremental change or effects fully explained by baseline identity clarity.
P2	Mission coherence will predict selective attention, curricular choice, and perceived task significance beyond autonomous motivation and subjective task value.	Behavioural choice and task-significance measures	Self-determination/expectancy-value	No incremental validity beyond SDT and expectancy-value variables.
P3	Identity and value integration will mediate the association between mission coherence and agentic engagement.	Longitudinal mediation	Self-efficacy alone	Indirect effect absent or better explained by efficacy and prior achievement.
P4	Formation will moderate competence enactment such that equally competent learners differ in ethical judgement, harm avoidance, and beneficiary responsiveness.	Scenario judgement and field performance	Competence is sufficient	No interaction or ethical action determined only by rules/incentives.
P5	Dynamic alignment will predict deep learning, transfer, and adaptive persistence more strongly than person-job fit or satisfaction alone.	Transfer tasks and survival models	Fit theory	MDLT alignment adds no explanatory or predictive value.
P6	Mission opportunity structures will moderate the coherence-to-enactment path; high coherence under severe constraint will produce constrained rather than enacted alignment.	Multilevel opportunity indicators	Individual agency model	Structural measures do not alter effects or agency fully compensates.
P7	Relational discernment will improve calibration of mission claims when feedback is epistemically diverse and ethically accountable, but not when communities are coercive or homogeneous.	Calibration against performance and beneficiary evidence	Social support effect	Any support works equally, or community input consistently worsens calibration.
P8	Mission-worthiness appraisal will distinguish apparent from enacted alignment and predict lower harm and higher beneficiary legitimacy independent of success and satisfaction.	Harm, justice, and beneficiary indicators	Success equals contribution	Worthiness adds no discrimination or prediction.
P9	Seasonal re-discernment will reduce maladaptive persistence and facilitate wise redirection without increasing indiscriminate career instability.	Burnout, role change quality, alignment trajectories	Ordinary career adaptability	No advantage over standard adaptability/advising interventions.
P10	Institutional MDLT architectures will produce stronger long-term responsible contribution only when mentoring, authentic practice, curricular latitude, and equitable opportunity operate together.	Stepped-wedge or cluster trial outcomes	Single-component intervention	Effects arise from one component alone or fail across multiple institutions.

9. Measurement and Empirical Validation

9.1 From a single index to a measurement system

The original Mission Alignment Index was a useful heuristic but should not be treated as validated. The reconstructed theory contains constructs of different ontological and measurement types. Mission coherence may be modelled reflectively; opportunity structures are formative and contextual; mission worthiness requires reasoned judgement rather than psychometric endorsement; competence requires performance evidence; and responsible contribution requires beneficiary and harm data. Collapsing these into one score risks construct contamination and false precision.

The recommended approach is a Mission-Learning Alignment System comprising linked measures: a Mission Coherence Scale; an Identity and Value Integration Scale; a Teleological Regulation Scale; a Formation and Stewardship assessment; an Opportunity Structure Profile; competence tasks; a Dynamic Alignment Profile; and a Responsible Contribution Dashboard. The system should generate a multidimensional profile, not a deterministic ranking of persons.

9.2 Development and validation sequence

Construct explication should precede item writing. Domain maps should be reviewed by learning theorists, vocational psychologists, philosophers, theologians, cross-cultural scholars, practitioners, learners, and community representatives. Cognitive interviews should test whether terms such as calling, mission, contribution, and alignment carry unintended religious, individualist, or status-laden meanings. Exploratory factor analysis should be separated from confirmatory testing, with independent samples where feasible. Reliability should include omega, temporal stability for

relatively stable constructs, and responsiveness for constructs expected to change.

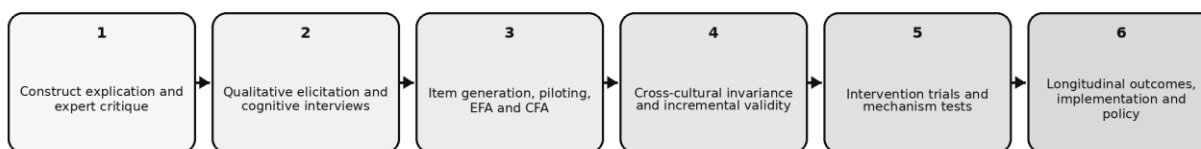
Validity evidence should include content, response-process, structural, convergent, discriminant, incremental, predictive, known-groups, and consequential evidence. Incremental validity is central: MDLT measures must predict theoretically relevant outcomes beyond purpose-in-life, calling, self-determination, expectancy-value, self-efficacy, vocational identity, and person-environment fit. Measurement invariance should be examined across gender, age, disability, socioeconomic status, culture, country, faith orientation, educational level, and professional field. Non-invariance should prompt theory refinement rather than forced equivalence.

9.3 Multimethod evidence and ethical safeguards

Self-reports should be triangulated with behavioural choices, learning analytics, portfolio artefacts, authentic performance tasks, mentor ratings, peer feedback, opportunity indicators, institutional records, and beneficiary assessments. Narrative methods are essential because mission coherence includes temporal and moral meaning that cannot be reduced to Likert items. Longitudinal qualitative interviews can reveal whether apparent stability reflects maturation, foreclosure, conformity, or genuine integration.

Measurement can itself cause harm. Institutions must not grade the sincerity of a mission, deny access to undecided learners, force public disclosure of spiritual convictions, or track students into narrow pathways on the basis of an early score. Results should be formative, confidential, revisable, and governed by clear data-protection standards. Low clarity is not failure; it may indicate a healthy period of exploration.

Cumulative Validation Roadmap for Mission-Driven Learning Theory



Evidence accumulates from conceptual clarity to measurement, causal identification, longitudinal prediction, and context-sensitive implementation.

At every stage, null results, rival explanations, adverse effects, and cultural non-invariance are treated as opportunities to revise or delimit the theory.

Figure 4. Cumulative validation roadmap. The theory should progress from construct clarity to measurement, causal tests, longitudinal prediction, and implementation research, with revision at every stage.

10. Implications for Educational Design and Policy

10.1 Curriculum as ordered breadth and mission-relevant depth

An MDLT curriculum does not replace disciplinary foundations with personal projects. It uses a dual architecture:

common foundations protect breadth, intellectual standards, and public knowledge, while mission pathways permit increasing depth, integration, and application. Early phases emphasise exploration of problems, communities, histories, disciplines, gifts, and constraints. Middle phases combine mission design studios, interdisciplinary study, internships, service learning, and mentor-guided reflection. Later phases

require authentic enactment, public defence, ethical appraisal, and a portfolio demonstrating how knowledge, formation, competence, and feedback have developed.

Backward design begins not with a job title but with a worthy field of contribution and the capabilities required to serve it. Curriculum maps then distinguish essential disciplinary knowledge, mission-specific competencies, formation opportunities, and experiences that test assumptions. Learners should encounter disconfirming evidence and alternative missions, not only activities that reinforce an early narrative.

10.2 Pedagogy, mentoring, and assessment

Pedagogy should connect explanation with enactment. Case-based inquiry, community-engaged projects, apprenticeships, simulations, reflective writing, deliberative dialogue, and interdisciplinary problem studios can make the consequences of knowledge visible. Teachers remain disciplinary authorities but also become interpreters of relevance and designers of opportunities. Mentors help learners distinguish gift from fantasy, conviction from status aspiration, perseverance from rigidity, and service from saviourism.

Assessment should evaluate disciplinary mastery, transfer, ethical judgement, reflective calibration, and responsible performance. A Mission Alignment Portfolio may contain a mission narrative, evidence of exploration, competency demonstrations, feedback from communities and mentors, records of revision, ethical risk analysis, and an enactment project. It should be assessed with transparent rubrics focused on reasoning and evidence, not conformity to a predetermined mission.

10.3 Institutional architecture and equity

Mission-driven learning cannot be sustained by one inspirational seminar while the institution rewards only grades, prestige, income, and rapid placement. Advising, financial aid, internship funding, accessibility, timetabling, assessment, faculty workload, community partnerships, and alumni support must align. Mission Development Centres can coordinate mentoring, reflection, experiential learning, and opportunity

Table 4. Cumulative research and validation programme

Study	Indicative design	Primary contribution	Principal risk
1. Foundational evaluation	Delphi panels, adversarial collaboration, philosophical critique	Construct clarity, parsimony, rival explanations, boundary conditions	Over-expansion or construct redundancy
2. Realist/systematic synthesis	Context-mechanism-outcome review of purpose and vocation interventions	When and for whom mission-oriented practices work	Publication bias and heterogeneous interventions
3. Measurement development	Cognitive interviews, EFA/CFA, IRT, invariance, multimethod validation	Reliable and culturally defensible measures	Reification and consequential misuse
4. Intervention trial	Cluster-randomised or stepped-wedge mission module versus active advising	Mission coherence, regulation, transfer, well-being, adverse effects	Contamination and facilitator effects
5. Multi-institution longitudinal study	Growth models, cross-lagged panels, survival analysis	Temporal ordering, adaptive persistence, career and contribution trajectories	Attrition and changing labour markets
6. Cross-cultural realist evaluation	Comparative mixed methods across faith, cultural, and resource contexts	Mechanism variation, collective mission, opportunity structures	False equivalence and measurement non-invariance
7. Implementation and policy study	Cost-effectiveness, fidelity-adaptation analysis, equity audit	Scalability, institutional readiness, distributional effects	Symbolic adoption without structural support

mapping, but responsibility should remain distributed across academic programmes rather than outsourced to a career office.

Equity is constitutive, not supplementary. Unpaid internships, informal networking, travel requirements, digital costs, and rigid sequencing disproportionately exclude learners with fewer resources. Institutions should fund exploration, provide proactive mentoring, recognise family and community missions, create flexible pathways, offer disability access, and monitor whose missions receive legitimacy. Policy should measure not only aspiration but conversion capability: whether learners possess real opportunities to transform mission and competence into contribution.

10.4 Faith-explicit and plural settings

Faith-explicit institutions may integrate prayer, Scripture, spiritual gifts, testimony, church discernment, and theology of work. They should also guard against claiming divine certainty for institutional preferences, elevating paid ministry above ordinary work, or pressuring students to announce a singular calling. Public institutions should use inclusive language of purpose, responsibility, contribution, dignity, and common good while permitting learners to interpret these through their own worldviews.

In both settings, the strongest safeguard is epistemic and moral accountability. Missions should be exposed to evidence, professional standards, affected communities, alternative perspectives, and the possibility of revision. A curriculum that merely encourages students to follow passion is not MDLT. A curriculum that assigns institutional missions without learner agency is not MDLT either.

11. Cumulative Research Agenda

MDLT should develop through a programme rather than one decisive study. The sequence below prioritises construct clarity, causal identification, cross-cultural validity, and implementation realism. Studies should preregister hypotheses where appropriate, publish null results, examine adverse effects, and compare MDLT against active alternatives rather than weak controls.

Causal designs should be matched to mechanisms. Brief purpose interventions can test task significance and self-regulation, while multi-year programmes are needed to test identity integration, competence development, and alignment. Multilevel models can separate learner, mentor, programme, and institution effects. Difference-in-differences and regression discontinuity may be useful when institutions phase in programmes or allocate scarce opportunities by thresholds. Longitudinal structural equation models can test temporal ordering, but causal claims should remain cautious when unmeasured selection is plausible. Realist qualitative work is necessary to explain why the same intervention supports one group, pressures another, and fails where opportunity structures are absent.

12. Limitations and Critical Challenges

12.1 Scope and evidence limitations

This reconstruction is theory-building rather than a complete systematic review of every literature named. The search used two multidisciplinary discovery platforms and citation tracing rather than direct exports from every disciplinary database listed in the original protocol. Although the search log, counts, criteria, evidence matrix, and DOI checks are supplied, the bounded corpus may underrepresent non-English scholarship, Indigenous traditions, African-language sources, and unpublished evaluations. Single-reviewer screening increases the risk of selection and coding bias despite explicit safeguards.

The empirical base is uneven. Purpose interventions offer experimental evidence for proximal motivational outcomes, whereas many calling, fit, and vocational studies are cross-sectional and concentrated in professional students or employees. Long-term responsible contribution remains difficult to attribute because missions, opportunities, labour markets, institutions, and family responsibilities co-evolve. The theory should therefore be judged by the precision and testability of its claims, not by the volume of adjacent evidence.

12.2 Normative disagreement and theological particularity

The mission-worthiness test does not eliminate moral disagreement. Truth, dignity, justice, stewardship, and common good require substantive interpretation. Christian MDLT makes its theological commitments explicit, but its public translation cannot assume agreement on divine calling, human nature, or final ends. Dialogue across traditions may reveal shared practical criteria while leaving deep metaphysical disagreement unresolved.

There is also a danger of institutional coercion. Schools may use mission language to demand loyalty, suppress dissent, spiritualise overwork, or steer learners into labour-market shortages. Religious leaders may confuse personal authority with divine confirmation. Employers may appropriate purpose to extract unpaid commitment. MDLT must therefore include rights, consent, boundaries, plural accountability, and the freedom to revise or reject institutionally proposed missions.

12.3 Premature foreclosure, sacrifice, and burnout

Mission can stabilise identity, but it can also intensify perfectionism, guilt, or foreclosure. Learners may believe

every setback proves personal failure or divine disobedience. The distinction between telos, mission, vocation, goals, and tasks is designed to reduce this risk. Seasonality and adaptive fidelity normalise revision, while community feedback should open possibilities rather than close them prematurely.

Calling can also legitimise sacrifice. Some sacrifices are intrinsic to service; others result from exploitation, poor institutional design, or preventable injustice. MDLT must not romanticise burnout. Sustainable vitality, boundaries, shared responsibility, and structural reform are part of stewardship. A mission that consistently destroys the learner, harms dependants, or relies on institutional abuse requires re-discernment rather than heroic persistence.

12.4 Falsifiability and theoretical restraint

The theory would be weakened if mission coherence did not predict any distinctive learning selection, self-regulation, transfer, or ethical enactment beyond established constructs. It would also require revision if opportunity structures did not moderate enactment, if relational discernment systematically reduced calibration, if mission-worthiness assessments failed to distinguish harmful from responsible contribution, or if seasonal checkpoints merely increased instability. Boundary conditions should not be used after the fact to explain every null result. Repeated non-replication should lead to removal, consolidation, or reformulation of constructs.

13. Conclusion

Mission-Driven Learning Theory begins from a simple but demanding observation: educational means do not justify themselves. Knowledge can enlighten or deceive; competence can serve or exploit; motivation can sustain justice or fanaticism; fit can support flourishing or complicity; adaptability can enable resilience or accommodation to injustice. A theory of learning that explains only acquisition, engagement, performance, or adjustment therefore remains incomplete.

The reconstructed MDLT defines learning as a recursive, relational, structurally conditioned, and morally ordered movement from discernment through formation and competence to responsible contribution. Its distinctive mechanism, teleological regulation, explains how a worthy mission can organise attention, identity, value, effort, knowledge selection, transfer, and ethical judgement. Its layered architecture prevents norms, contexts, mechanisms, alignment, and outcomes from being conflated. Mission opportunity structures prevent the theory from blaming learners for structural exclusion. Relational discernment and communal legitimation correct individualism. The mission-worthiness test prevents purpose from becoming a morally empty intensifier of performance. Seasonality protects fidelity from rigidity.

MDLT does not claim that every learner must identify one immutable occupation, that purpose guarantees comfort, or that institutions can measure a person's calling with final certainty. It makes the more defensible claim that learning becomes coherent and accountable when knowledge, character, competence, opportunity, and action are continuously ordered toward a worthy contribution. The theory will deserve acceptance only if its constructs show discriminant and

incremental validity, its mechanisms survive causal testing, its measures travel across cultures without coercion, and its institutional forms improve learning and contribution without deepening inequality. Its promise lies not in declaring a revolution but in making educational purpose precise enough to be argued, designed, measured, criticised, and lived.

Declarations

Funding

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no financial conflict of interest. The foundational MDLT article was published in the target journal; this intellectual relationship is disclosed for transparency.

Ethics statement

The study synthesised published literature and did not involve human participants, identifiable private information, or animal subjects. Formal research ethics approval was therefore not required.

Data availability

The search log, evidence matrix, construct dictionary, proposition matrix, and editable figure files accompany the manuscript as supplementary materials.

Author contributions

Sixbert Sangwa: conceptualisation, methodology, investigation, evidence synthesis, theory development, visualisation, and original drafting. Placide Mutabazi: conceptualisation, theological interpretation, critical validation, and review and editing. Both authors approved the final conceptual and interpretive account presented in the manuscript.

Generative AI disclosure

A generative AI system was used to support literature organisation, drafting, language refinement, and figure prototyping. The authors remain responsible for search decisions, source verification, theoretical claims, interpretation, and the submitted text. The system is not an author and made no autonomous research decisions outside the documented workflow.

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