

Unlocking Potential Through Upskilling: Motivators and Barriers Among Professional Support Staff in Higher Education

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Abstract

Aim/Purpose: The increasing complexity of academic institutions highlights the importance of continuous professional development for all staff. However, the motivators and barriers influencing upskilling engagement among administrative and technical staff remain underexplored in existing research. This study examined how these factors shape the professional development experiences of non-teaching staff who play a critical—yet often overlooked—role in supporting institutional adaptability and performance.

Introduction/Background: Grounded in self-determination theory, this study examined how motivational factors and institutional dynamics shape upskilling engagement among administrative and technical staff in higher education. By focusing on this often-overlooked segment of the academic workforce, the study addressed a gap in professional development research and offers practical insights for building institutional capacity in times of rapid change and digital transformation.

Methodology: This study adopted a qualitative case study design to explore how intrinsic and extrinsic motivators, alongside institutional barriers, influence upskilling engagement among administrative and technical staff. The case focused on a single academic unit within a large public university in Thailand. All 12 full-time staff participated (purposive sampling), representing roles in information technology, finance, general administration, and operations. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, guided by self-determination theory constructs and perceived barriers. The thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework. The researchers independently coded the data, with consensus reached through iterative discussion, providing a rich, context-specific understanding of how motivation and institutional factors interact in practice.

Findings: The study identified three core intrinsic motivators driving engagement in professional development: intellectual curiosity, professional identity, and a lifelong learning orientation. These motivators reflected the importance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in sustaining participation. Extrinsic motivators—including institutional support (particularly funding), career advancement opportunities, and recognition—further enabled engagement by signalling institutional value and support for staff development.

At the same time, several institutional barriers impeded participation. The most frequently cited obstacle was workload pressure, with many staff unable to balance daily responsibilities with development opportunities. Bureaucratic inefficiencies, such as complex funding processes and unclear approval mechanisms, discouraged staff from pursuing available opportunities. In addition, many training programmes were poorly aligned with the specific needs of administrative and technical staff, reducing the perceived value of participation.

The findings highlighted that effective engagement in upskilling arises from the dynamic interplay between personal motivators and institutional conditions. While strong intrinsic and extrinsic motivation can help staff overcome minor challenges, persistent systemic barriers undermine even highly motivated individuals. Institutions that support autonomy, competence, and relatedness—through responsive policies and inclusive practices—are better positioned to foster sustained

engagement and resilience in their workforce. Addressing these barriers is critical to unlocking the full potential of professional development efforts and supporting long-term organisational adaptability.

Contribution/Impact on Society: This study extends self-determination theory by applying it to an underexplored group—administrative and technical staff in higher education—and demonstrates that their motivation to upskill was shaped through the dynamic interaction of personal drivers and institutional structures. It contributes to the body of knowledge by highlighting how institutional environments can either support or suppress the core psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Practically, the findings provide evidence for designing professional development strategies that are inclusive, role-specific, and responsive to the lived experiences of non-teaching staff. By advancing understanding of these dynamics, the study supports institutional efforts to build a motivated and adaptable workforce, contributing to Sustainable Development Goals such as SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth). It also offers actionable insights for academic leaders, human resource practitioners, and policymakers seeking to enhance the impact of staff development initiatives within an increasingly complex higher education landscape.

Recommendations: Institutions should adopt development strategies that address both motivational drivers and structural barriers. Key actions include allocating protected time for development, streamlining access to funding, involving staff in program design to ensure relevance, linking upskilling to career progression, and embedding recognition practices. A holistic, inclusive approach can strengthen engagement and resilience as higher education adapts to digital and organisational transformation.

Research Limitations: This study was limited to a single academic unit within one Thai university, which may limit transferability of its findings to other institutional or cultural contexts. Additionally, as a qualitative study based on self-reported interviews, the results reflect participants' subjective experiences and may not capture unspoken influences on engagement in professional development. Further exploration in diverse institutional settings is needed to validate and extend these findings.

Future Research: Future research should examine motivational dynamics across varied institutional and cultural contexts, using comparative or multi-site designs. Mixed-methods and longitudinal approaches are recommended to explore the long-term effects of upskilling on retention, career mobility, and institutional adaptability. Further investigation into the role of leadership, human resource policy, and workplace culture in shaping engagement would also be valuable.

Keywords: *Professional development, motivation, upskilling barriers, higher education*

Introduction

The increasing complexity of academic institutions has heightened the demand for continuous professional development across all staff categories. While faculty development has been well-documented, upskilling for administrative and technical staff—whose roles are critical to institutional effectiveness—remains under-researched (Graham et al., 2013; Yilmaz et al., 2023). These staff members are key to service delivery and institutional transformation, yet their motivational dynamics and the barriers they face in professional growth have received limited scholarly attention.

Professional development is shaped by both intrinsic and extrinsic motivators. Intrinsic motivation is driven by intellectual curiosity, mastery, and alignment with professional identity (Guay, 2022; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Extrinsic drivers, such as institutional support, career progression, and recognition, further influence engagement—especially in roles where learning is not embedded in daily routines (Harrison et al., 2020; Patre et al., 2024). However, institutional barriers—including workload constraints, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and misaligned training offerings—can undermine these drivers, particularly among support staff (Johnsrud & Rosser, 2002; Novianty & Evita, 2018).

This study explored how intrinsic and extrinsic motivators interact with institutional barriers to shape the upskilling experiences of administrative and technical staff. Moving beyond broad

generalisations, a qualitative case study was used to examine these dynamics within a single academic unit with a diverse range of roles—including IT, finance, operations, and administration (Yin, 2018).

As higher educational institutions undergo rapid technological and structural change, professional development is increasingly critical—not only for teaching excellence, but for institutional adaptability and resilience. However, while much is known about faculty responses to pedagogical change, there is limited understanding of how support staff navigate new expectations, technologies, and competencies. The interaction between motivation and institutional context has important implications for workforce resilience, but existing studies often lack a cohesive framework to capture these dynamics (Guay, 2022; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

The self-determination theory (SDT) offers a robust framework for understanding these dynamics. Emphasising autonomy, competence, and relatedness, SDT has traditionally informed research on student and faculty motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2015). However, its application to non-teaching academic staff remains limited. This study applied SDT to examine how psychological needs and institutional conditions shaped motivation and upskilling engagement among support staff.

Literature Review

The self-determination theory (SDT), developed by Ryan and Deci (2000), offers a robust framework for understanding workplace motivation by distinguishing between intrinsic and extrinsic drivers. It posits that individuals are most engaged when three core psychological needs are fulfilled: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2015; Otoshi & Heffernan, 2011). While SDT has been widely applied in student and faculty contexts, its utility also extends to understanding motivation among administrative and technical staff in higher educational institutions. SDT further highlights how organisational structures—such as job design, access to learning, and recognition—can either support or inhibit motivation (Gagné & Deci, 2005; Henderson & Sowa, 2022).

Autonomy reflects employees' ability to make self-directed choices in professional development—for example, choosing relevant training based on job responsibilities (Gomathi et al., 2023). Constraints such as rigid schedules or centralised course offerings can hinder autonomy and reduce motivation (Johnsrud & Rosser, 2002).

Competence refers to the pursuit of mastery and effective performance. For support staff, this often involves skills in digital systems, project management, or operational coordination (Hilty et al., 2019). When training enhances relevant capabilities, perceived competence increases, motivating further learning (Patre et al., 2024).

Relatedness reflects the need to feel valued and connected. For support staff—who may lack visibility in institutional life—recognition and inclusion are vital (Kaefer & Chiviacowsky, 2022; Zumbunn et al., 2014). Inclusive development initiatives, cross-functional learning, and institutional recognition foster a sense of belonging and motivation (Harrison et al., 2020).

In sum, SDT provides a lens to examine how institutions can cultivate conditions that support motivation and engagement. Development programs that promote autonomy, strengthen role-specific competence, and foster belonging are more likely to generate sustained participation (Trenshaw et al., 2016; Vieira & Ortega-Alvarez, 2019). However, these outcomes depend not only on availability but on structural alignment with staff needs (Gagné & Deci, 2005).

While SDT is widely applied in teaching and learning contexts, its relevance remains underexplored among administrative and technical staff despite their integral roles in institutional performance. In this study, SDT was adopted to examine how motivation to upskill among non-teaching staff was shaped by both internal drivers and external institutional conditions. This application extends SDT into the under-researched context of non-academic staff development, highlighting how psychological needs shape engagement beyond traditional teaching roles (Khosha et al., 2024).

Intrinsic Motivators for Educator Upskilling

Intrinsic motivation plays a central role in driving professional development, particularly among administrative and technical staff. Unlike participation based on compliance or external rewards,

intrinsically motivated staff pursue upskilling out of a genuine desire for learning, mastery, and self-improvement (Kusurkar et al., 2011; Trenshaw et al., 2016). According to SDT, intrinsic motivation is fostered when autonomy, competence, and relatedness are supported in the work environment (Ryan & Deci, 2000). For non-teaching staff—whose growth pathways are often less formalised—these needs are especially critical, as their roles demand adaptability and evolving expertise. Environments that meet these psychological needs promote deeper engagement and sustained learning (Gagné & Deci, 2005; Guay, 2022).

Intellectual curiosity drives many administrative and technical staff to be proactive about staying current and effective in their fields. Whether through mastering new systems, adopting emerging tools, or improving processes, this pursuit reflects SDT's notion of competence (Chan et al., 2011; Gottfried, 2016). Unlike faculty, whose development paths may be formalised, support staff often initiate their own upskilling. Institutions that recognise and enable this curiosity—through flexible, relevant learning opportunities—foster sustainable engagement (Gomathi et al., 2023).

Professional identity and alignment of values further support intrinsic motivation. When upskilling reinforces an employee's evolving identity and purpose within the institution, engagement deepens. This alignment—linked to lifelong learning and reflective practice—builds intrinsic commitment to one's role and organisation (Pingo et al., 2024). For administrative and technical staff, development tied to personal standards of competence and responsibility fosters motivation, especially when recognition is present (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Guay, 2022).

Lifelong learning orientation commitment drives many non-teaching staff to pursue professional growth beyond formal requirements. This mindset enables them to adapt to changing institutional needs and technological advancements (Chukwuedo et al., 2021; Larson & Rusk, 2011). It also reflects the SDT construct of competence, as individuals derive satisfaction from mastering new skills (Dadiz & Baldwin, 2016; Mustafa & Lleshi, 2024). Institutions that support lifelong learning—through flexible access, peer networks, and recognition—promote engagement and workforce resilience.

Extrinsic Motivators for Professional Development

While intrinsic motivators drive long-term engagement, extrinsic factors often initiate participation in professional development—particularly for administrative and technical staff. These include financial support, career advancement opportunities, and institutional recognition. In SDT terms, external influences can enhance motivation when perceived as autonomy-supportive rather than controlling (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Gagné & Deci, 2005).

Financial incentives are a key extrinsic motivator, enabling participation in activities such as workshops, certifications, or advanced degrees (Han, 2022; Harrison et al., 2020; Landry et al., 2017; Novianty & Evita, 2018). Aligned with staff values and goals, such incentives can reinforce motivation (Gagné & Deci, 2005). For instance, administrative staff may seek funding for leadership training, while technical staff may pursue emerging technology certifications (Patre et al., 2024). However, limited budgets and complex approval processes often act as barriers, underscoring the need for streamlined, equitable access (Kunicina et al., 2023).

Career advancement opportunities that link professional development to career progression also motivate staff engagement. Opportunities tied to promotion, job security, or expanded roles foster participation (Artiningsih et al., 2023; Ramasamy & Mengling, 2024). For example, administrative staff may engage in leadership development to prepare for management roles. Clear pathways linking upskilling to career outcomes encourage both participation and satisfaction (Jain et al., 2021; Mackay, 2017).

Moreover, recognition through certifications, awards, and internal or public acknowledgment reinforces engagement and affirms the value of development efforts (Spowart et al., 2019). For non-teaching roles that often lack visibility, such recognition fosters relatedness and morale, promoting a culture of continuous improvement (Hilty et al., 2019; Shagrir, 2023).

Finally, balancing intrinsic and extrinsic motivators is an effective professional development strategy that balances intrinsic motivators (such as curiosity and personal fulfilment) with extrinsic supports

(financial incentives, career progression, recognition). Aligning institutional practices with staff aspirations fosters sustained engagement, contributing to both individual growth and organisational performance (Chakravarti, 2023).

Barriers to Academic Staff Upskilling

Despite the presence of intrinsic and extrinsic motivators, administrative and technical staff often face institutional barriers that constrain participation in professional development. These barriers reflect misalignments between staff needs and organisational practices (Fernet et al., 2016; Pan et al., 2023), and if unaddressed, can erode motivation and create inequities in access to learning.

Workload constraints include heavy operational demands that often limit time for structured learning. Unlike faculty, non-teaching staff typically lack formal development hours or protected time, making upskilling appear optional or disruptive (Patil, 2023). Inflexible schedules and workload pressures reduce participation, particularly for site-dependent roles (Jaquess et al., 2018; Karthikeyan & Ponniah, 2019; Thornby et al., 2023), undermining both motivation and the institutional message that learning is valued (Gomathi et al., 2023). While funding for development may be available, it is often restricted by complex approval processes or limited allocation (Kunicina et al., 2023). Staff who rely on institutional funding to obtain specialized certifications often encounter structural limitations that undermine equitable participation in upskilling. Without embedded and inclusive support systems, such dependencies may inadvertently suppress proactive engagement in continuous learning and widen professional development disparities between employees (Kuforiji, 2025).

Generic or faculty-oriented training often fails to meet specific needs of support staff, who require development in leadership, project management, or digital operations (Patre et al., 2024). Poor alignment reduces participation and the perceived relevance of institutional offerings (Agah et al., 2020). Rigid institutional policies and performance-driven cultures may de-prioritise long-term staff development. A lack of recognition for non-teaching contributions, cultural resistance to change, and siloed structures further undermine motivation (Sormani et al., 2022). Addressing these challenges requires institutional commitment to designing supportive, inclusive learning environments.

However, existing research provides limited insight into how motivation and institutional barriers interact—particularly for administrative and technical staff. Much literature remains faculty-centric, with non-teaching experiences underexplored (Harrison et al., 2020; Patre et al., 2024). Studies often treat motivators and barriers in isolation, lacking an integrated perspective on how institutional structures shape or suppress individual motivation. Furthermore, application of SDT to non-teaching staff remains sparse (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Agah et al., 2020), as do context-specific insights from individual academic units. To address these gaps, this study explored the following questions.

Research Question

How do intrinsic and extrinsic motivators, in interaction with institutional barriers, shape the upskilling engagement of administrative and technical staff in an academic institution?

Supporting Sub-Questions

1. How do administrative and technical staff experience key intrinsic motivators—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—in their professional development journeys?
2. How do institutional and organisational conditions—including policies, incentives, and cultural barriers—influence staff motivation and engagement in upskilling?

By addressing these questions, this study contributes to theory by extending SDT to non-teaching contexts, and to practice by informing the design of inclusive, role-specific development strategies that align staff aspirations with institutional objectives.

Methodology

In this study, a qualitative case study design was adopted to explore how intrinsic and extrinsic motivators, together with institutional barriers, influence the upskilling engagement of administrative

and technical staff (Stake, 1995). A case study approach enables an in-depth understanding of complex motivation-institution dynamics within a specific context (Yin, 2018). As an inductive, theory-informed inquiry, this design supported a bottom-up understanding of motivation aligned with Self-Determination Theory (SDT). The case focused on a single academic unit within a large public university in Thailand, selected for its diverse mix of non-teaching roles and an active institutional mandate for staff development. Using a purposive sampling strategy, all 12 full-time administrative and technical staff in the unit were recruited. Participants represented varied roles—including IT, operations, finance, and administration—and a range of tenures and responsibilities, ensuring depth and diversity of perspectives (Table 1).

Table 1 *Participants’ Demographic Data*

No.	Participant Code	Gender	Position	Service Years
1	Participant #1	M	General Administration Officer	27 yrs
2	Participant #2	F	Human Resources Officer	31 yrs
3	Participant #3	F	General Administration Officer	34 yrs
4	Participant #4	F	General Administration Officer	28 yrs
5	Participant #5	F	Finance and Accounting Analyst	10 yrs
6	Participant #6	F	General Administration Officer	5 yrs
7	Participant #7	F	General Administration Officer	15 yrs
8	Participant #8	F	Educator	11 yrs
9	Participant #9	F	General Administration Officer	37 yrs
10	Participant #10	F	Finance and Accounting Analyst	5 yrs
11	Participant #11	F	Graphic Designer	2 yrs
12	Participant #12	M	Computer System Analyst	18 yrs

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, well-suited to exploring motivation, institutional experience, and professional development (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Interviews (60–90 minutes) were guided by SDT dimensions (autonomy, competence, relatedness), extrinsic incentives (funding, recognition, career mobility), and perceived barriers (workload, bureaucracy, access). Interviews were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and returned to participants for validation.

Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-phase framework. Codes were developed through both theory-driven and emergent analysis. Four overarching themes emerged: Intrinsic Motivation (intellectual curiosity, professional identity, lifelong learning), Extrinsic Motivation (institutional support, recognition, career advancement), Barriers to Upskilling (workloads, bureaucracy, misaligned training), and Interplay of Factors (dynamic relationships between motivation and institutional constraints). Coding was conducted independently by two researchers, with consensus reached through iterative comparison. Memos and audit trails ensured analytical rigour.

Ethical approval was granted by the institution’s ethics committee. Participants were fully informed of the study purpose and confidentiality measures, and all data were anonymised and securely stored. Voluntary participation and withdrawal rights fostered trust and openness. The research design also incorporated reflexivity to acknowledge the positionality of the lead researcher, who holds an administrative leadership role within the institution. This insider perspective contributed to contextual understanding, but also required conscious management of potential bias, which was addressed through memo writing and peer debriefing. Data saturation was assessed iteratively during analysis and was considered to have been achieved by the twelfth interview, as no substantially new themes or codes emerged, and participant perspectives showed sufficient diversity and depth to address the research questions (Guest et al., 2006).

Findings and Discussion

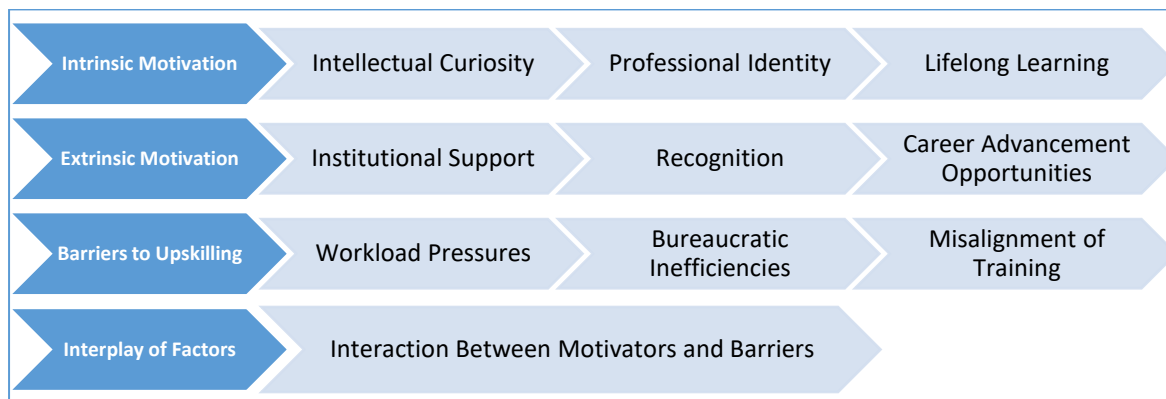
The findings presented here are context-specific yet offer insights that may be transferable to comparable higher educational environments. Rather than aiming for statistical generalisation, the

richness of qualitative accounts provides a foundation for interpreting motivational dynamics and institutional conditions in similar contexts. The first theme, Intrinsic Motivation, captured how internal drivers such as curiosity, identity, and personal growth shaped participants' engagement with professional development.

Intrinsic Motivators Driving Professional Growth

Three key intrinsic motivators shaping administrative and technical staff engagement in professional development were identified in this study: intellectual curiosity, professional identity, and a commitment to lifelong learning. These themes directly reflect Self-Determination Theory's (SDT) core psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—and support Sub-RQ1 on how internal drivers influence upskilling behaviours; they are presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1 *Thematic Map of Motivators, Barriers, and Their Interplay*



Participants described a proactive desire to stay current and deepen expertise in their functional areas. For many, this intellectual curiosity was linked to personal pride and professional relevance:

My motivation to upskill comes from wanting to remain an expert in my field; it's about personal pride and professional relevance (Participant #4).

This aligns with SDT's concept of competence—the need to feel capable and effective in one's role (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Slemp et al., 2020). Curiosity-driven learning was also tied to adaptability in a fast-evolving environment:

Learning new skills keeps me sharp and allows me to feel competent in a rapidly changing work environment (Participant #7).

Upskilling also reinforced a strong sense of professional identity. Participants viewed learning as a way to remain faithful to their roles and responsibilities:

It's about being true to the responsibilities and expectations of my role (Participant #2).

Upskilling allows me to contribute more effectively to my team and the institution as a whole, which gives me a sense of purpose (Participant #8).

A strong orientation toward lifelong learning also emerged across the participant pool. For many, this was not only a means of maintaining competence, but an intrinsic expression of growth:

Lifelong learning is a personal commitment; it ensures I'm always ready to meet new challenges in my role (Participant #9).

I don't just upskill for immediate rewards; it's about the satisfaction of knowing I'm growing as a professional (Participant #11).

Together, these patterns suggested that intrinsic motivation was central to sustained upskilling—especially when development opportunities support self-directed learning, role alignment, and psychological growth. Designing professional development that is intellectually challenging, affirms

role identity, and supports learning as a personal journey can foster long-term engagement and strengthen institutional resilience.

Extrinsic Motivators Driving Engagement

External motivators also played an important role in encouraging administrative and technical staff to engage in professional development. These included institutional support, access to funding, career advancement opportunities, and recognition. While intrinsic motivation sustained long-term engagement, these external factors often initiated participation and signalled institutional investment in staff development (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Participants consistently emphasised the importance of institutional support—particularly through financial assistance:

The institution's willingness to fund training programs makes a huge difference; it shows that they value our growth and development (Participant #3).

Without the funding... it would be challenging to attend external training sessions or purchase necessary materials (Participant #6).

These findings supported prior research highlighting funding as both an incentive and an institutional commitment (Han, 2022; Harrison et al., 2020).

Career advancement also featured prominently as a motivating factor. Participants linked new skills to internal promotion, expanded responsibilities, and enhanced professional standing:

Upskilling has opened doors for me to take on more challenging roles, which is incredibly rewarding both personally and professionally (Participant #9).

Knowing that upskilling improves my chances for promotion motivates me to invest in my growth (Participant #5).

These insights echo prior findings that clear career pathways encourage greater engagement in development (Chakravarti, 2023).

Recognition also emerged as a powerful driver. For many, being acknowledged reinforced a sense of belonging and value, especially in behind-the-scenes roles. As one participant reflected:

When the institution publicly recognizes my efforts, it validates my hard work and motivates me to keep learning (Participant #8);

Being recognized for my skills and efforts makes me feel valued as part of the institution (Participant #10).

This aligns with SDT's concept of relatedness—where social acknowledgement fosters stronger engagement (Gagné & Deci, 2005; Lebzar & Dean, 2024).

Taken together, these findings underscore that while intrinsic motivation drove personal investment, extrinsic factors also played a critical enabling and reinforcing role. Institutions aiming to strengthen upskilling engagement should ensure that development opportunities are supported through accessible funding, career-linked pathways, and inclusive recognition systems. Aligning this external support with staff aspirations contributes to a more equitable and motivating environment for sustained professional growth.

Systemic Barriers Hindering Engagement

Despite strong intrinsic and extrinsic motivators, administrative and technical staff faced persistent institutional barriers that hindered participation in professional development. These included workload pressures, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and misalignment of training opportunities—reflecting structural gaps between institutional policies and staff experience. Lack of time was the most immediate obstacle cited by participants.

Balancing daily responsibilities with professional development is almost impossible: there's just not enough time to do both effectively (Participant #6).

High service demands, especially in operational roles, left little room for flexible scheduling. Without adjustments such as protected time or workload planning, development activities were frequently deprioritised. These findings echo calls for integrating learning opportunities into regular work structures to ensure feasibility (Thornby et al., 2023).

Administrative inefficiencies further discouraged participation. Participants described lengthy forms, unclear eligibility, and opaque approval processes:

The processes to access training funds are so complicated that it sometimes feels easier to give up (Participant #6).

Such bureaucratic barriers undermine autonomy by stripping control from staff and creating unnecessary obstacles to learning access (Kuforiji, 2025). Many also highlighted the poor alignment between available training and actual job needs.

Most of the available training programs don't address the practical skills I need for my day-to-day work (Participant #11).

These findings point to a critical need for institutional reform in both mindset and mechanisms. Without rethinking how time, access, and content are managed, professional development risks becoming an aspirational concept rather than an achievable reality. Institutions aiming to foster meaningful upskilling must address these systemic constraints alongside motivational strategies—ensuring that development is not only encouraged, but also structurally supported and role-relevant.

Interplay of Factors

While intrinsic and extrinsic motivators encouraged engagement in professional development, their impact was strongly shaped—positively or negatively—by institutional conditions. This dynamic relationship between personal motivation and structural support directly addressed the main research question. Institutional support helped staff overcome some barriers, as one participant explained:

Knowing the institution values my growth by providing funding and recognition encourages me to pursue more training opportunities, even with the challenges (Participant #9).

This was aligned with Gagné and Deci's (2005) view that external support can reinforce intrinsic motivation when perceived as autonomy supportive. Recognition and financial assistance often helped sustain engagement, even when other constraints were present (Lebzar & Dean, 2024). Conversely, many participants reported that systemic limitations—such as lack of funding, inflexible schedules, or misaligned training—dampened even strong initial motivation (Kunicina et al., 2023; Patre et al., 2024). This reflects SDT's core argument: when basic psychological needs are thwarted by institutional structures, motivation is undermined (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Sormani et al., 2022).

Overall, these findings suggest that motivation alone is insufficient to sustain participation in professional development. While strong motivators help offset minor barriers, persistent structural constraints erode engagement over time. Aligning development opportunities with both staff needs and institutional delivery mechanisms remains critical for fostering sustained participation (Guay, 2022; Gomathi et al., 2023). These insights are summarised in Table 2, which integrates the relationship between themes, relevance to the research questions, and practical significance—offering a foundation for a subsequent discussion on theoretical and managerial implications.

Conclusion

This study examined how intrinsic and extrinsic motivators, in interaction with institutional barriers, shaped the upskilling engagement of administrative and technical staff in an academic institution. Grounded in Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and using a qualitative case study approach, the research highlighted the dynamic interplay between individual drivers and organisational structures in professional development. The findings demonstrated that intrinsic motivators—such as intellectual curiosity, professional identity, and lifelong learning orientation—were critical to sustaining engagement over time. Extrinsic factors, including institutional support, career

advancement pathways, and recognition, further enable participation. However, persistent institutional barriers—such as workload constraints, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and poorly aligned training—continue to erode engagement and disrupt the fulfilment of core psychological needs.

Table 2 Summary of Themes, Sub-Themes, Illustrative Quotes, Research Questions Addressed, & Practical Implications

Theme	Sub-Theme	Example Quote	RQs Addressed	Practical Implications
Intrinsic Motivation	Intellectual Curiosity	<i>My motivation to upskill comes from wanting to remain an expert in my field; it's about personal pride and professional relevance. (Participant #4)</i>	Sub-RQ1	Foster intrinsic motivation by embedding intellectually stimulating and domain-relevant content into upskilling programs that align with staff curiosity and self-driven growth.
	Professional Identity	<i>Upskilling allows me to contribute more effectively to my team and the institution as a whole, which gives me a sense of purpose. (Participant #8)</i>	Sub-RQ1	Professional development programs should align with staff roles and aspirations to enhance their sense of purpose. Reinforce role clarity and purpose by aligning professional development opportunities with staff aspirations and evolving responsibilities.
	Lifelong Learning	<i>Lifelong learning is a personal commitment; it ensures I'm always ready to meet new challenges in my role. (Participant #9)</i>	Sub-RQ1	Promote a culture of lifelong learning by integrating flexible and future-focused training opportunities.
Extrinsic Motivation	Institutional Support	<i>The institution's willingness to fund training programs makes a huge difference; it shows that they value our growth and development. (Participant #3)</i>	Sub-RQ2	Increase access to funding and create transparent processes to sustain engagement in professional development.
	Recognition	<i>When the institution publicly recognizes my efforts, it validates my hard work and motivates me to keep learning. (Participant #8)</i>	Sub-RQ2	Implement formal recognition programs to boost morale and encourage continuous learning.
	Career Advancement Opportunities	<i>Upskilling opens pathways to better roles and responsibilities within the institution, which is a big motivator for me. (Participant #5)</i>	Sub-RQ2	Link professional development to tangible career advancement opportunities to drive participation.
Barriers to Upskilling	Workload Pressures	<i>Balancing daily responsibilities with professional development is almost impossible: there's just not enough time to do both effectively. (Participant #6)</i>	Sub-RQ2	Allocate dedicated time for professional development to mitigate workload challenges.
	Bureaucratic Inefficiencies	<i>The processes to access training funds are so complicated that it sometimes feels easier to give up. (Participant #6)</i>	Sub-RQ2	Streamline administrative processes to ensure accessibility and reduce frustration among staff.
	Misalignment of Training	<i>Most of the available training programs don't address the practical skills I need for my day-to-day work. (Participant #11)</i>	Sub-RQ2	Co-design training programs with staff input to align offerings with their specific needs.
Interplay of Factors	Interaction Between Motivators and Barriers	<i>Knowing the institution values my growth by providing funding and recognition encourages me to pursue more training opportunities, even with the challenges. (Participant #9)</i>	Main RQ	Adopt a holistic approach by balancing motivators and reducing barriers to create a supportive environment.

This study provides clear evidence that individual motivation alone is insufficient to drive sustained participation in professional development. Instead, successful engagement requires an intentional alignment between staff needs and institutional systems. Without such alignment, even highly motivated staff may disengage. Addressing this challenge demands an integrated strategy—combining targeted design of development opportunities, inclusive institutional practices, and systematic removal of structural barriers—to ensure that professional development is both accessible and impactful. In light of the study’s insights, institutions should adopt development strategies that address both motivational drivers and structural barriers by allocating protected time for learning, simplifying funding access, involving staff in program design, linking training to career progression, and embedding recognition practices to sustain engagement and institutional resilience.

Contribution to Theory and Practice

This study offers several key contributions to both theory and practice. The research extends the application of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) to the underexplored context of non-teaching staff in higher education. While prior SDT research has focused largely on faculty or student populations, this study demonstrated that autonomy, competence, and relatedness are equally relevant psychological needs shaping professional development among administrative and technical staff. Moreover, the study contributes an integrated perspective by showing how these needs are either supported or suppressed by institutional systems—addressing a gap in SDT literature, which often isolates individual motivation from structural context.

For academic institutions, the findings highlight the need to move beyond generic or one-size-fits-all approaches to professional development. Programmes should be designed with the specific functions, motivations, and career aspirations of non-teaching staff in mind. Relevance, flexibility, and equitable access to funding are critical in fostering engagement. In addition, recognition, career-linked pathways, and inclusive institutional practices are essential in sustaining motivation. By addressing systemic barriers—such as workload constraints and bureaucratic inefficiencies—institutions can better align development opportunities with staff needs, thereby enhancing both individual growth and organisational resilience. These contributions also align with broader institutional goals related to SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), by promoting inclusive access to development and fostering sustainable career pathways for all staff categories.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study provides rich insights into the upskilling experiences of administrative and technical staff, its scope is limited to a single academic unit within one institution. As such, the findings are not intended to be statistically generalised. However, the depth of contextual detail allows for transferability to similar higher educational environments, particularly those facing comparable organisational and developmental challenges. Additionally, as a qualitative study based on self-reported interviews, the results reflect subjective experiences and may not fully capture unspoken or unconscious influences on engagement.

Future research could build on these findings through multi-institutional or cross-cultural studies, exploring how varying organisational structures and cultures shape staff motivation and development. A mixed-methods approach could further strengthen the evidence base by combining qualitative insights with quantitative measures—such as participation rates, learning outcomes, and career mobility.

Longitudinal research is particularly needed to assess the long-term impacts of upskilling on performance, retention, and institutional adaptability. Further exploration of how emerging factors—such as digital transformation, artificial intelligence, and hybrid work models—reshape staff development needs would also extend the relevance of this research. These directions offer opportunities to refine theoretical frameworks like SDT and support the design of more resilient, inclusive development strategies in higher education.

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