

ENHANCING EMPLOYEE PERFORMANCE THROUGH COMPETENCE: A THEORETICAL EXPLORATION OF SELF- DETERMINATION THEORY

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Abstract. This conceptual paper explores the enhancement of employee performance through competence, using Self-Determination Theory as a theoretical lens. Focusing on non-academic staff in Nigerian higher education institutions, it examines how satisfying the basic psychological needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness can foster intrinsic motivation and drive organizational effectiveness. While SDT offers valuable insights, its application in the Nigerian context is challenged by entrenched hierarchies, high power distance, technological limitations, and deeply rooted cultural norms. The paper underscores the pivotal role of competence in motivating staff and advancing institutional goals, and it advocates for inclusive, context-sensitive strategies that support professional development and employee engagement. Addressing centralized decision-making and limited access to professional development opportunities is essential for overcoming structural barriers and enhancing institutional responsiveness. Finally, the study proposes future research directions that investigate the intersection of organizational hierarchy, cultural dynamics, and SDT, offering practical implications for optimizing staff development and performance in resource-constrained environments.

Keywords: *employee performance, self-determination theory, employee competence, non-academic staff, organizational performance*

Introduction

In an era of continuous organizational transformation, employee competence has become central to institutional resilience and success. Recognized as a critical organizational asset, competence enhances workflow efficiency, promotes continuous learning, and drives adaptive performance elements essential for maintaining a competitive edge in today's knowledge-driven economy (Christou and Piller, 2024; Peres et al., 2023). Within the higher education sector, the rapidly changing landscape demands that universities equip their workforce particularly non-academic staff with the skills and capabilities necessary to respond effectively to institutional and societal needs (Li, 2024; Anane, 2022). As the administrative backbone of universities, non-academic staff play a pivotal role in service delivery, academic support, and strategic decision-making processes (Le et al., 2023; Tushar and Sooraksa, 2023). Investing in their professional development not only strengthens institutional performance but also fosters a collaborative culture and better aligns administrative practices with the broader mission and goals of higher education institutions. Employee competence is the lifeblood of any institution, facilitating the seamless exchange of knowledge and ideas, and driving organizational development (Kim and Jung, 2022). Within a university setting, it plays a crucial role in ensuring operational efficiency and advancing the institution's strategic objectives (Kharub et al., 2025). Non-academic staff, in particular, form the backbone of university administration, student services, and operational

support (Bacelar-Nicolau et al., 2023). Their capacity to adapt, solve problems, and provide high-quality service is closely linked to their competencies and ongoing professional development (Li, 2024; Wibowo et al., 2024). Competence among employees serves as the bridge between institutional vision and day-to-day execution, enabling universities to align administrative functions with broader academic and strategic goals (Dehtjare et al., 2024; Priya and Sangeeta, 2024). By prioritizing the development of non-academic staff, university leadership not only improves institutional performance but also fosters a culture of excellence, collaboration, and innovation across all levels of the organization (Gulo et al., 2024; Hosen et al., 2024; Ajobi and Owunna, 2022).

In contemporary higher education landscape, the concept of employee competence has evolved beyond the traditional understanding of efficiently handling administrative tasks (Salman et al., 2020). For non-academic staff who serve as the operational backbone of universities, competence now encompasses the ability to navigate complex institutional systems, utilize digital tools effectively, and provide professional support to both academic and student-facing services (Ogunode et al., 2023). As universities continue to embrace digitization, globalization, and increased accountability, the role of competent non-academic personnel becomes even more critical in ensuring seamless administrative operations and aligning institutional services with broader academic strategies (Nga et al., 2025; Nyone, 2024). Their capacity for problem-solving, effective communication, and resource management significantly influences institutional performance and reputation (Rahmania et al., 2024). Conversely, a gap between institutional expectations and employee competencies can result in dissatisfaction, stress, and disengagement (Bahrain et al., 2023; Khan et al. 2022a) further emphasize that such misalignment often leads to absenteeism, burnout, and diminished employee morale. As the first point of contact for students, faculty, and external partners, non-academic staff play a pivotal role in shaping how the university is perceived. Research highlights that these staff members are instrumental in influencing the institutional image and the quality-of-service delivery (Musaigwa, 2023; Abbas, 2020). When non-academic employees view themselves as competent and valued, their sense of commitment and loyalty to the university strengthens leading to enhanced performance, collaboration, and workplace morale (Modise, 2023; Khan et al., 2022b). Thus, investing in their professional development is not merely a supportive measure but a strategic imperative that drives institutional excellence, adaptability, and long-term success in higher education. Employee competence is widely recognized as a key driver of individual performance and institutional effectiveness (Kim and Jung, 2022). In higher education, non-academic staff form a substantial segment of the workforce, essential to administrative stability, service delivery, and stakeholder engagement (Ogunode et al., 2023). Yet, research on their development and motivation remains limited. This paper applies Self-Determination Theory (SDT) to explore how the psychological need for competence influences motivation and performance. SDT posits that satisfying this need alongside autonomy and relatedness enhances intrinsic motivation, fostering greater engagement, productivity, and organizational commitment (Guo and Chelliah, 2024). Framing competence within this theory offers a conceptual basis for designing development strategies that strengthen employee outcomes and support institutional goals in higher education.

Background of the study

With the shift in institutional operations, the ability of employees to perform effectively is indispensable, as clarity, timeliness, and accuracy in work are foundational to fostering commitment, collaboration, and improved morale ultimately enhancing institutional performance (Radu, 2023). Despite the significance of employee competence, empirical studies focusing on non-academic staff in Nigeria remain limited (Adejare et al., 2020). Existing research primarily centers on the financial sector, with scant attention paid to universities and other sectors such as small-scale enterprises (Owunna et al., 2024; Akinsola et al., 2023; Adetipe, 2020). Meanwhile, the digital revolution of the 21st century has dramatically transformed workplace expectations and practices (Hao, 2024). In this context, the rise of digital technologies and the proliferation of online platforms have reshaped the competence demands placed on non-academic staff in higher education. Digital literacy, effective communication, and adaptability have become essential for facilitating seamless interaction, efficient information exchange, and integrated collaboration across academic and administrative functions (Zhang, 2023).

The integration of 21st-century technologies into education has yet to fully transform employee competence in Nigeria. Many organizations, including those in the higher education sector, continue to grapple with evolving skill demands a challenge intensified by economic constraints and infrastructural deficiencies that widen the technological gap and impede overall employee performance (Yusuf and Mohd, 2023; Ogunode and Musa, 2020). Within Nigerian universities, the development of competencies among non-academic staff is shaped by a complex interplay of factors, including institutional knowledge, cultural diversity, and the intricate structure of university administration (Lucky Uko, 2024; Solomon et al., 2020). These dynamics directly affect how employees acquire, refine, and utilize the skills necessary for efficient service delivery, administrative effectiveness, and institutional advancement (Jacob et al., 2021; Adejare et al., 2020). One persistent obstacle to improved performance is the challenge many non-academic staff face in adopting and effectively using digital tools essential for modern administrative tasks (Singun, 2025; Kallmuenzer et al., 2024).

Nonetheless, these limitations also create avenues for innovation and collaborative solutions that can enhance institutional resilience and growth (Zou et al., 2025; IseOlorunkanmi et al., 2021). Addressing these gaps requires embracing self-determination theory as a strategic framework one that fosters intrinsic motivation, empowers non-academic employee development, and equips them to adapt to the changing demands of contemporary university administration (Forner et al., 2020).

The situation

The pursuit of employee performance in Nigeria grapples with deeply rooted challenges. Within the higher education sector, developing competence particularly among non-academic staff remains a persistent issue shaped by systemic, infrastructural, and institutional constraints (Owunna et al., 2023). Many universities operate in resource-limited environments where access to digital tools is inadequate, professional development opportunities are scarce, and bureaucratic hurdles impede efficiency (Yusuf and Mohd, 2023; Adejare et al., 2020). Although non-academic staff play a critical role in the daily operations of academic institutions, they are frequently excluded from strategic capacity-building initiatives, leading to persistent skill gaps and diminished motivation. Moreover, the fast-paced advancement of technology and rising administrative demands have outstripped the current levels of preparedness within this

workforce, further widening the gap between institutional needs and employee capabilities. Notwithstanding their critical role in university administration, non-academic staff (NAS) in Nigerian universities face numerous challenges that hinder effective institutional functioning (Yusuf and Yahaya, 2022; Agubosim et al., 2021). These challenges include limited support for core institutional goals, and chronic underfunding of human resource development initiatives.

Inadequate financial allocation to university administration has resulted in insufficient infrastructure and a lack of investment in human capital (Badamasi and Utulu, 2021; Jacob et al., 2021; Jacob and Lawan, 2020). Consequently, institutions suffer from understaffing and declining service delivery (Juliet et al., 2019). Further compounding these issues are delayed constrained career advancement opportunities, and high-stress work environments. A persistent disparity in recognition and support between academic and non-academic staff contributes to a sense of marginalization and reduced morale among NAS (Pathiranage et al., 2023; Ziryawulawo, 2023; Nwaopara et al., 2008). Addressing these systemic issues requires that educational policymakers place greater emphasis on the well-being, professional development, and motivation of non-academic staff, whose contributions are essential to the overall administration and sustainability of the higher education system (Abdullah et al., 2021).

Challenges to employee competence in Nigeria

The persistent challenges undermining the performance of non-academic staff in Nigerian higher education is the widening technological gap (Okoye et al., 2023). This gap is evident in disparities related to access and proficiency in digital communication and administrative tools essential for modern university operations (Okocha and Edafewotu, 2022). Many institutions operate in resource-constrained environments, where limited budgets, poor internet connectivity, and inadequate training restrict the effective integration of digital technologies into administrative functions (Olannye-Okonofua, 2023). Consequently, while some staff can navigate digital platforms with ease, others struggle due to a lack of exposure and skills, leading to uneven adoption and performance. This digital divide hampers timely communication, reduces efficiency in service delivery, and weakens collaboration between departments (Bahrain et al 2023). The underutilization of available digital resources further contributes to delays in administrative processes, diminished productivity, and a fragmented institutional structure ultimately affecting the overall performance and reputation of higher education institutions.

Another major challenge to competence development among non-academic staff in Nigerian higher education is inadequate funding. Most universities operate within tight budgetary limits, which severely restrict investments in training programs and the technological infrastructure required for continuous staff development (Lucky Uko, 2024; Adejare et al., 2020). This financial constraint contributes to a growing knowledge gap, as many non-academic employees lack the skills and administrative adaptability needed to meet the evolving demands of 21st-century university operations (Yong and Ling, 2023). Additionally, bureaucratic inefficiencies and the politicization of university governance further delay or derail the implementation of staff development initiatives (Yakubu, 2025; Bot et al., 2022). As digital technologies increasingly redefine administrative expectations, institutions are finding it difficult to equip their staff with the competencies necessary to stay current and efficient (Tee et al.,

2024). This misalignment between institutional goals and employee capabilities hinders both individual performance and broader institutional effectiveness.

Additionally, the organizational climate in many Nigerian universities presents significant obstacles to the development of employee competence among non-academic staff. Poor remuneration, limited prospects for career advancement, and ineffective communication between leadership and staff contribute to low motivation and disengagement (Abiodun and Retta, 2025; Nwankwo et al., 2022). These conditions, compounded by inadequate work environments and insufficient resources, create barriers to skill acquisition and application (Akinwale and George, 2023; Bolan et al., 2021). When staff lack recognition and are excluded from institutional decision-making processes, their sense of professional value diminishes, leading to reduced commitment to performance and growth (Onah et al., 2022). As competence is shaped not only by technical skills but also by workplace support and inclusion, these systemic issues hinder the ability of non-academic employees to meet the evolving demands of university administration. To strengthen staff competence, scholars emphasize the need for inclusive policy frameworks, structured professional development, and improved working conditions that support continuous learning and institutional alignment (Akinwale et al., 2024; Ekpechi and Igwe, 2023).

Understanding how Self-Determination Theory (SDT) can be applied to strengthen employee competence is crucial for improving performance among non-academic staff in higher education. As universities navigate increasing demands for digital transformation, accountability, and operational efficiency, non-academic employees are expected to adapt and perform in complex, evolving roles. However, their development is often overlooked in institutional strategies. This conceptual paper explores the connection between employee competence and performance through the lens of SDT, emphasizing how fulfilling psychological needs particularly competence can enhance intrinsic motivation, professional growth, and institutional effectiveness. By positioning SDT as a framework for staff development, the paper offers insights into how higher education institutions can better support and empower non-academic staff to meet contemporary performance expectations.

Theoretical underpinning

Self-determination Theory (SDT) provides a valuable lens for understanding the motivation and performance of non-academic staff in higher education institutions (Ryan and Deci, 2024; Deci and Ryan, 2013). Within SDT, two core mechanisms help explain how individuals become motivated and develop professionally. The first highlights the need to fulfill three basic psychological needs: competence, autonomy, and relatedness, which are essential for psychological well-being, engagement, and productivity (Ryan and Deci, 2024). When non-academic staff feel skilled in their roles (competence), have meaningful connections with colleagues (relatedness), and experience a sense of control over their tasks (autonomy), they are more likely to thrive and contribute positively to institutional goals (Grenier et al., 2024). The second mechanism involves a continuum of motivation, ranging from amotivation (a lack of motivation), through controlled motivation (driven by external pressures), to autonomous motivation (driven by personal values and interests) (Annamalai et al., 2023; Ryan and Deci, 2020). Supporting these psychological needs enables non-academic staff to internalize their roles and responsibilities, fostering intrinsic motivation, commitment, and job satisfaction. In contrast, unmet needs can result in

disengagement, lower morale, and diminished performance (McAnally and Hagger, 2024; Vansteenkiste et al., 2018). In the workplace, Self-Determination Theory (SDT) suggests that employees who view themselves as competent and are provided with opportunities to develop and refine their skills are more likely to exhibit motivation, productivity, and organizational commitment (Aljumah, 2024; Gagné and Deci, 2005). Moreover, work environments that support employee autonomy and cultivate meaningful interpersonal relationships contribute to a more positive motivational climate, ultimately enhancing both individual and organizational outcomes (Deci and Ryan, 2013). In the context of higher education, particularly for non-academic staff, SDT offers a valuable framework for understanding how professional development efforts can promote a stronger sense of competence and intrinsic motivation (Guay, 2021). When institutions actively acknowledge the contributions of non-academic personnel and invest in their continuous development, they not only foster improved job performance but also strengthen institutional adaptability, efficiency, and long-term sustainability (Vasconcellos et al., 2020). When the basic psychological needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness are fulfilled, non-academic staff in Nigerian higher education institutions is more likely to engage in work that aligns with their personal values and institutional goals.

Meeting these needs fosters intrinsic motivation, enhances well-being, and contributes to more consistent and effective performance. However, when these needs are unmet due to limited professional development opportunities, poor recognition, or inadequate support staff may experience heightened stress, reduced job satisfaction, and disengagement from their roles (Hulaj et al., 2020). Research indicates that satisfaction of these SDT-driven needs is crucial for non-academic employees to perceive their work as meaningful, which directly impacts their commitment, job fulfillment, and capacity to contribute to institutional effectiveness (Almagro et al., 2020). The application of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) across various domains has demonstrated valuable outcomes that are equally relevant to non-academic staff in higher education. In educational contexts, incorporating the principles of autonomy, competence, and relatedness has been shown to enhance motivation, engagement, and overall well-being (Iwatsuki et al., 2022; Deci and Ryan, 2013). When applied to university administrative settings, these same principles can help improve the performance and satisfaction of non-academic staff, who are essential to the daily operations and strategic goals of academic institutions. For example, when staff are empowered with decision-making autonomy, provided with opportunities to build and demonstrate competence, and engaged through meaningful workplace relationships, they are more likely to exhibit increased job commitment, efficiency, and institutional loyalty. Such outcomes are especially critical in the Nigerian context, where institutional challenges often limit professional development and recognition of non-academic roles. Leveraging SDT offers a strategic pathway to foster motivation and enhance the overall effectiveness of this vital workforce.

Overall, Self-Determination Theory (SDT) provides a robust framework for understanding human motivation and behavior. By addressing the basic psychological needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness among non-academic staff in Nigerian universities, institutions can foster environments that enhance well-being, engagement, and overall job performance (Sun et al., 2025; Nwoko and Yazdani, 2023; Deci and Ryan, 2013). When these needs are adequately met, non-academic staff are more likely to develop a stronger sense of purpose, commitment, and efficiency in their roles.

Integrating SDT principles into university management and professional development strategies can transform how institutions support this critical workforce. Specifically, SDT highlights how competence functions as a core psychological need that fuels intrinsic motivation. In the context of Nigerian higher education, non-academic employees who feel competent are more inclined to be self-motivated and perform at higher levels.

Theoretical contribution of self-determination theory

SDT has significantly advanced the understanding of human motivation by highlighting the importance of intrinsic motivation and the fulfillment of three fundamental psychological needs: competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Unlike traditional models of motivation that emphasize external rewards and punishments, SDT asserts that individuals have an inherent tendency to grow, perform, and thrive when these psychological needs are satisfied (Ryan and Deci, 2024). Within the context of Nigerian higher education particularly among non-academic staff SDT offers a valuable framework for examining how institutional structures and workplace cultures influence employee motivation and competence. The theory provides a nuanced perspective, suggesting that employee motivation is not solely driven by material incentives, but also by the degree to which staff feel psychologically empowered and supported in their roles. SDT enriches our theoretical understanding of organizational performance by linking the fulfillment of psychological needs to tangible workplace outcomes. In many Nigerian universities, however, systemic challenges such as inadequate funding, limited professional development opportunities, and the marginalization of non-academic staff often create environments where these psychological needs go unmet. SDT offers a valuable lens to explain the resulting disengagement, low morale, and diminished performance. By conceptualizing competence not only as a skill set but also as a fundamental psychological need, SDT provides a foundation for rethinking HR policies and staff development strategies. This perspective promotes a shift from compliance-oriented administrative models toward empowerment-driven cultures that recognize non-academic staff as essential contributors to institutional success (Vasconcellos et al., 2020).

Challenges of self-determination theory

While SDT has been widely celebrated for its robust framework in understanding human motivation, its application in real-world organizational settings especially in the Global South faces several critical challenges. One primary limitation lies in the contextual adaptability of the theory. Although SDT posits that autonomy, competence, and relatedness are universal psychological needs (Deci and Ryan, 2013), their expression and prioritization can vary significantly across cultural and institutional contexts (Vansteenkiste et al., 2020; Wuttke, 2020). For example, in collectivist societies such as Nigeria, the notion of autonomy may be interpreted differently from individualist Western contexts where SDT was originally developed. As a result, implementing autonomy-supportive practices without sufficient cultural adaptation can lead to resistance or misalignment with local values and organizational norms (Oruh and Dibia, 2020). Another significant challenge to the practical application of Self-Determination Theory in Nigerian universities stems from institutional and structural constraints. Non-academic staff often operate in environments marked by inadequate

funding, rigid hierarchical systems, and limited access to professional development opportunities (Nwoko and Yazdani, 2023; Adejare et al., 2020). These systemic barriers directly undermine the satisfaction of SDT's core psychological needs. For example, although SDT identifies competence as a key driver of motivation, many non-academic staff lack opportunities for skill acquisition and access to essential technological tools, limiting their ability to grow and perform effectively in their roles (Yusuf and Mohd, 2023). Moreover, the absence of inclusive decision-making structures and institutional support for staff development restricts autonomy and relatedness, further impeding intrinsic motivation. Without deliberate efforts to address these foundational limitations, the application of SDT risks remaining a theoretical ideal rather than a practical strategy for organizational transformation.

Moreover, the practical application and measurement of SDT constructs in organizational settings pose significant methodological challenges. Translating abstract psychological needs such as autonomy, competence, and relatedness into observable workplace behaviors and measurable performance outcomes remains a complex task (Grenier et al., 2024). Within Nigerian higher education, there is a notable lack of empirical research specifically examining how SDT mechanisms operate among non-academic staff, thereby limiting the development of evidence-based strategies for policy and practice. Additionally, the long-term effects of SDT-informed interventions remain underexplored, particularly in institutions affected by political instability, bureaucratic inertia, and shifting administrative priorities (Guay, 2021). These contextual realities raise critical concerns regarding the sustainability, scalability, and practical integration of SDT as a framework for improving employee motivation and institutional effectiveness. While SDT offers a robust framework for understanding and enhancing employee motivation and performance, its effective application within the Nigerian higher education system particularly among non-academic staff requires further empirical exploration and contextual adaptation. Future research should prioritize examining the nuanced interplay between cultural values and employee competence. Given Nigeria's diverse cultural landscape, understanding how local norms, beliefs, and societal expectations influence motivational drivers will enable more culturally responsive applications of SDT. Additionally, there is a pressing need to explore the impact of organizational power dynamics and hierarchical structures on the motivation and performance of non-academic staff. Many Nigerian institutions operate within rigid bureaucratic systems that may stifle autonomy, inhibit competence development, and undermine relatedness all critical components of SDT. Investigating these institutional realities will provide a clearer understanding of the structural challenges that hinder psychological need satisfaction in the workplace.

Comparative research across various sectors such as education, healthcare, and public administration can also offer valuable insights into sector-specific adaptations and outcomes of SDT-based interventions. This would help determine whether certain organizational environments are more conducive to implementing SDT principles effectively. Furthermore, longitudinal studies are needed to evaluate the long-term impact of SDT-informed professional development and motivational strategies on employee commitment and institutional effectiveness. Finally, future research should aim to expand the theoretical and practical boundaries of SDT by examining how its principles can be systematically integrated into human resource policies, leadership practices, and institutional planning. Doing so will not only refine the theory's application in the Nigerian context but also contribute to building more inclusive,

empowered, and high-performing non-academic workforces across the higher education sector.

Conclusion

The application of Self-Determination Theory within the Nigerian context underscores the imperative for culturally attuned and institutionally responsive strategies to enhance employee competence and organizational performance. Given Nigeria's diverse cultural fabric and complex administrative structures, a one-size-fits-all approach to staff motivation is insufficient. Instead, organizations particularly within higher education must adopt context-specific frameworks that uphold the psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Addressing cultural nuances, fostering inclusive communication, and mitigating hierarchical constraints can collectively create environments that support intrinsic motivation and sustained professional growth. As such, the path toward institutional effectiveness in Nigeria hinges on the extent to which SDT principles are operationalized to support meaningful engagement, equitable recognition, and strategic investment in non-academic staff development.

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Conflict of interest

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