

Research Article

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“We Also Matter”: Investigating Organizational Support and Recognition Mechanisms for Non-Academic Staff in Public Universities

Saifullah Memon ¹ Arabella Bhutto ² Bhawani Shankar Chowdhry ³



Abstract: *The role of non-academic staff in ensuring the effectiveness, efficiency, and smooth functioning of Higher Education Institutions has become increasingly significant, particularly within the context of developing countries like Pakistan. However, in public sector HEIs, the focus on building the capacities of non-academic personnel remains minimal compared to academic staff development initiatives. This qualitative study investigates the current state of capacity building mechanisms for non-academic staff in public sector HEIs of Pakistan, highlighting challenges, existing gaps, and potential strategies. Through in-depth semi-structured interviews with ten non-academic staff members across five major universities, the study employs thematic analysis to identify key themes influencing staff development. The findings reveal systemic neglect, absence of structured training programs, limited career progression pathways, and insufficient institutional commitment. Drawing on best practices and relevant theoretical frameworks, the study proposes a comprehensive model for capacity building aimed at enhancing administrative efficiency, service delivery, and institutional governance. The paper concludes with recommendations for policymakers, higher education administrators, and human resource departments.*

Key Words: Capacity Building Mechanisms, Higher Education Institutions, Pakistan, Non-Academic Staff

Introduction

Higher education institutions (HEIs) in Pakistan have witnessed a phenomenal growth, diversification, and progress in light of the rising demand for higher education, socio-economic development, and far-reaching practices of reforms by various governments (Ahmad et al., 2024). These transformative agendas include strategic initiatives such as the creation of new universities, the formation of specialized academic programs, and the encouragement of research cooperation with international institutions (Rådberg & Löfsten, 2024). However, under this broad reform, the spotlight has been majorly on academic staff and academic output, with little consideration given to the non-academic staff-the administrative, operational, and support personnel- who are the backbone of institutional functioning. Such imbalance provides a huge challenge for the comprehensive and sustainable growth of higher education in Pakistan (Sain et al., 2024).

Non-academic staff are the most critical people in making sure that their functions flow smoothly in money and services. Non-academic staff activities include financial management, counselling students, human resource management, procurement, maintenance, and security of campus facilities, as well as provision of IT, library, and alumni services (Nakimuli, 2023). Non-academic actions influence the academic performance, student satisfaction, institutional image, and community engagement directly or

¹ PhD Scholar, Mehran University Institute of Science, Technology & Development (MU-ISTD) / Director HR, Mehran University of Engineering & Technology, Jamshoro, Sindh, Pakistan. ✉ Saifullah.memon@admin.muuet.edu.pk

² Professor MU-ISTD-MUET / Vice Chancellor Shaheed Allah Buksh Soomro University of Art, Design, and Heritages Jamshoro, Sindh, Pakistan. ✉ arabella.bhutto@faculty.muuet.edu.pk

³ Professor, Emeritus Mehran University of Engineering & Technology, Jamshoro, Sindh, Pakistan.

✉ bhawani.chowdhry@faculty.muuet.edu.pk

• **Corresponding Author:** Saifullah Memon (✉ Saifullah.memon@admin.muuet.edu.pk)

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indirectly. In view of their great importance, non-academic staff in Pakistan's public sector HEIs often work in conditions where structured training programs are scarce and opportunities for professional development are negligible (Babbar & Mehmood, [2024](#)). Several career progression paths are unclear, and most administrative procedures are outdated. The lack of systematic capacity-building limits individual performance and job satisfaction while also negatively affecting institutional efficiency, adaptability, and resilience in response to rapid global competition in education sectors (Dupre & Salehi, [2025](#)).

The central issue of this study is the consistent neglect of the professional development needs of non-academic staff in public sector higher education institutions in Pakistan (Gan, [2021](#)). Due to the lack of continuous training and skill enhancement, these employees are unable to cope with rapidly changing technological demands, administrative reforms, quality assurance processes, and students' and stakeholders' ever-changing expectations (Petrychenko et al., [2023](#)). Moreover, other than initiating the upskilling and empowerment of non-academic staff, unless clear strategies are put in place to help them, their institutions will instead develop internal cultures that would resist, be bureaucratically slow to react, and ill-equipped to trigger changes. This capacity gap becomes even more crucial given the realities of global higher education today, where the degree of administration efficiency, service quality, and branding increasingly factor into international rankings, student recruitment, and funding opportunities (Hou et al., [2021](#)).

For successful international competitiveness, research excellence, and community impact, Pakistani HEIs will need to recognize and invest in the professionalization of the entire cadre of their workforce, not just the academic cadre (Manzoor, Farooq & Zafar, [2024](#)). Thus, all HEIs today are preoccupied with human resource management and staff development, which aims to create technically skilled and highly qualified, motivated workers who can fill core positions within the organizations to address international demands (Samo & Junejo, [2020](#)).

It is the urgency of the need to establish a more holistic model of institutional strengthening that has propelled the study to now foreground the voices, experiences, and aspirations of the non-academic staff. The staff's insights into daily operational challenges, systemic inefficiencies, and developmental aspirations are vital for designing effective, context-wise, adaptive, and sustainable capacity-building mechanisms (Meyer et al., [2023](#)). The thrust of the study is, therefore, also to propose a constructive framework for the development of non-academic staff in order to promote institutional cultures that embrace continuous learning, operational excellence, and collaborative governance.

Capacity building of non-academic staff has a wider scope and far-reaching implications beyond educational quality, success, leadership within the organization, and public sector reforms (Genga & Babalola, [2025](#)). A well-established administrative practice and fostering support services can enhance responsiveness of institutions enormously, optimize stakeholder trust, and enable HEIs in fulfilling their educational, social, and economic mandates. In addition, this study holds the potential to contribute to national policy debate on human resource development for education through evidence-based recommendations for integrating non-academic staff training within an overall national reform for higher education. Such a comprehensive approach towards systematically addressing professional development needs for this critical segment of the workforce places HEIs in a better stead to face challenges posed by globalization, technological disruption, and growing public accountability.

Following the above, the interesting point of this study would be to investigate the experiences, challenges, and development needs of public sector non-academic personnel in HEIs in Pakistan and recommend a systematic, sustainable, and contextually relevant mechanism for capacity building. This study has the following specific objectives: (1) objectively analyze the current condition of professional development opportunities available for the non-academic staff; (2) investigate the key barriers and facilitators for their capacity enhancement; (3) explore promising practices and successful models of non-academic staff development from comparable higher education systems; and (4) develop a comprehensive capacity building framework tailored to the socio-cultural, organizational, and policy contexts of public sector HEIs in Pakistan.



Literature Review

Capacity Building in Higher Education

Historically, capacity building in HEIs has remained limited to improving the quality of teaching and research and building physical infrastructures (Omodan, [2024](#)). Academic staff development, research funding, and international partnerships have attracted considerable focus on the spectrum of HEIs' contemporary developments towards knowledge economies. However, as Shipp & Jansen ([2021](#)) noted, sustainable institutional functioning requires a much broader view—one that sees strategic investment in the administration of the operational and student support systems that underpin teaching and research activities. Therefore, capacity building in support of non-academic staff must be seen as very much an insider to the institutional development scenario rather than simply a side (Stage & de Jong, [2023](#)). It becomes, therefore, a crucial vehicle for the success and resilience of HEIs. And this entails continuous professional education, competence training, leadership capacity building, ICT literacy, and a demand for structured career development trajectories.

Higher education institutions with a holistic staff development system gain agility and can provide better services while enjoying higher stakeholder satisfaction (Menon & Suresh, [2021](#)). HEIs are subjected to impressive and contemporary challenges: internationalization, digitalization, and enhanced accountability to the public; these all require the functioning of non-academic personnel who can change and adapt at any instant (Zainab, [2023](#)). Capacity building strategies and system programs are thus to target broader or specific institutional strategic plans and include systematic needs assessments, customized training programs, mentoring, and performance management systems (Maxwell, [2024](#)). In their absence, non-academic staff may impede rather than facilitate institutional excellence. Thus, while the focus of attention has mostly been on academics and researchers, professional developments for non-academics must be treated as equally strategic for accomplishing the wide objectives of higher education reforms and institutional transformation in the context of emerging economies such as Pakistan.

Importance of Non-Academic Staff

The significance of non-academic staff in the higher education ecosystem cannot be overemphasized. They are a key component to the student experience, contribute to institutional governance, maintain operational stability, and assist in community engagement (Sipahioglu, [2025](#)). Hence, their effectiveness impacts institutional performance in areas such as admissions management, financial management, human resources management, IT services, security of the campus, legal compliance, and student counseling, among others (Mafindi, [2024](#)). Paton ([2023](#)) states that non-academic staff are the "institutional memory" of universities, providing continuity between leadership succession and academic turnover. Their knowledge of the operations, familiarity with policies, and expertise concerning procedures often make them critical players in ensuring institutional resilience and responsiveness from external pressures (Gilliam, [2024](#)). Their position in regulatory compliance, accreditation, and quality assurance mechanisms lends them strategic importance. They are usually the first point of contact for students, parents, and external stakeholders, forming their initial impression of the professionalism, responsiveness, and organizational culture of the institution (Maiya & Aithal, [2023](#)).

With changing student expectations regarding service quality, digital engagement, and support services, the level of skills and morale of the non-academic staff are becoming critical. International studies show a strong correlation between the efficiency and innovative capacity of HEIs and the professionalization of their non-academic workforce (Avenali et al., [2023](#)). Nevertheless, non-academic staff are often an afterthought during planning for professional development; they are, at best, treated as peripheral players to the institution's mission. Such a recognition of their strategic importance should entail not just sufficient training and capacity building but also efforts toward a higher degree of inclusion in decision-making processes, opportunities for career advancement, and institutional recognition systems (Md, Md Saiful & Jannatul, [2025](#)). Therefore, enhancing non-academic staff training becomes a strategic investment that can directly impact institutional performance, student satisfaction, and brand equity.

Capacity Building Challenges in Pakistan

Structural and systemic barriers exist in regard to the professional development of non-academic staff working in higher education institutions in the public sector (Gan, [2021](#)). A crippling constraint is the chronic underfunding of administrative and operational capacity-building programs. As a rule, public universities use the bulk of their scant resources for fostering the development of teaching staff, projects for developing physical infrastructure, or increasing student enrollment capacity, leaving almost nothing for the training and development of non-academic staff members (Omodan, [2024](#)). With these resource asymmetries lie policy and cultural inclinations that, in the broadest sense, favor academic functions over administrative excellence. This is aggravated by bureaucratic organizational cultures (Huencho & Orellana, [2023](#)). The stiff hierarchies, slow-moving processes, and rigid structures of Pakistani HEIs inhibit innovation and restrict lateral communication, creating an environment (Biswas et al., [2022](#)). Furthermore, the predominant view toward non-academic roles is one that is purely task-oriented, with little recognition of their strategic dimension. Their lack of recognition equates to low satisfaction, a lack of mobility, and a prevalence of stagnation in self-skilling and motivation.

Another major challenge is when training programs are offered. Capacity-building initiatives are often ad hoc, funded from external sources, and not tailor-made to the job-specific needs, competencies, or career stage of the staff involved (Schneider, [2023](#)). Generic workshops on very common topics do not equip the staff with the specific knowledge and skill sets necessary for performing their duties, which are gradually being recognized as more and more complex and complicated. In addition, there is strong resistance to change on the part of both the staff and the leadership of the institution. The organizational inertia, buttressed by fear of new technologies and limited exposure to global best practices, builds significant barriers toward the adoption of much more dynamism and effectiveness in the administrative practices (Ashok et al., [2021](#)). In the absence of a clearly defined and well-resourced strategic plan for non-academic capacity building, the institution will find itself in harm's way with these challenges stymieing its very growth. This will require a paradigmatic change in terms of policy-making, budgeting, leadership vision, and organizational culture to truly embrace the role of non-academic staff as central to ensuring high-quality, globally competitive higher education services.

Human Capital Economic Theory and Its Relevance to Capacity Building

The relevance of Human Capital Economic Theory and its usefulness for the issue of non-academic staff development in HEIs is indeed profound. Originating from the works of Schultz ([1961](#)) and Becker ([1964](#)), the theory states that men's skills, knowledge, and competence are significant forms of capital that can bring about economic and organizational returns if duly educated and trained. Human capital investment, whether formal education, on-the-job training, or professional development, translates into enhanced productivity of employees and thereby contributes to economic growth, institutional efficiency, and societal welfare (Widarni & Bawono, [2021](#)). In relation to public sector HEIs in Pakistan, Human Capital Theory states that the mode of understanding non-academic staff should not be from the point of view of fixed administrative costs (Khattak, [2022](#)) but from that of a dynamic asset whose development can yield measurable benefits with respect to service quality, institutional performance, and innovation capabilities (Saad et al., [2024](#)).

It empowers institutions to strategically invest in staff training and professional development programs. The theory provides justification for the assertion that the cost of not investing in the development of non-academic staff—that is, operational inefficiencies (Iqbal, [2024](#)), failures in the delivery of services, and loss of reputation—far outweighs the cost of regular structured capacity building initiatives. Moreover, Human Capital Theory assumes higher motivation, commitment, and creativity from individuals when they perceive the organization investing in their development (Abbas et al., [2024](#)). This is a significant insight for Pakistani HEIs that have been confronted with low morale and resistance to change from non-academic staff. Investment in the professional development of such staff creates recognition on the part of the institution (Pham, [2021](#)). It reinforces a culture of learning and adaptability and strengthens the institution's defense against outside challenges such as the digital transformation and internationalization pressures (Mohamed Hashim et al., [2022](#)).



In this regard, Human Capital Theory corresponds to round-the-clock management practices that focus on continuous learning, competency-based development, and lifelong employability (Ma, Chen & Diao, 2025). In addition, it is a good avenue to assess the return on investment (ROI) of capacity-building programs to go beyond the ones established on counting the trainings conducted to evaluate real effects on service delivery and operational efficiency, as well as stakeholder satisfaction (Bhat, 2024).

Hence, this study sets off to employ the Human Capital Economic Theory as a guiding framework for understanding how systematic and sustainable capacity building mechanisms may be devised for non-academic staff in public sector HEIs of Pakistan, ensuring their maximum contributions toward institutional growth and national development.

Methodology

Research Design

This qualitative research study was conducted to explore and understand the experiences and perceptions of non-academic staff vis-à-vis capacity building in the public sector universities of Pakistan. Qualitative research was considered to be the most suitable for this study since it allows for the deep exploration of lived experiences, perceptions, and contextual realities that cannot be captured effectively using quantitative methods (Lim, 2024). The interpretivist paradigm underpins the study, insisting on the socially constructed essence of reality and the subjective meanings that individuals give to their experiences. The choice of qualitative design also lets the researcher capture differences among different institutional contexts, dealing with the interplay of individual, organizational, and cultural factors that cause capacity building to be so variable.

Participants

Purposive sampling was used to include individuals with relevant experience and knowledge of the research topic in the study (Beedell, 2021). A total of ten ($n = 10$) non-academic staff members were drawn from five public sector universities in Sindh province. The intention of the representative sample from different provinces was to bring regional differences into the respondents and thus offer a fuller picture of the capacity building situation across different types of institutions. Among the mid- and senior-level administrative positions are Finance, Human Resources, Student Affairs, Information Technology, and General Administration. These departments have been selected for the study since they are vital departments from which most of the day-to-day operations and strategic development emanate in universities.

Criteria indicated that one should have at least three years of continuous service in an institution to make sure he or she has ample experience in the organization to comment meaningfully on it. Besides, the participants were also required to be currently involved in administrative decision-making or implementation processes to ensure the study was relevant to capacity building themes. However, all the participants were volunteers, and the individuals were informed completely about the objectives, methodologies, and ethical issues involved in the study before giving their consent. This study, targeting participants with a long history in the institution and varying departmental backgrounds, intended to provide a holistic and multi-faceted view of non-academic staff development within the public higher educational sector. The purposive selection approach, therefore, increased credibility in and relevance of the findings, since the voices captured can be said to have been embedded within the realities of operation in Pakistani universities (Afzal, Khalil & Saleem, 2024).

Data Collection

Participant data collection was conducted in semi-structured interviews because this method is uniquely flexible in order to allow participants to present their views in depth and to provide contextually rich data (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). Each interview was 45–60 minutes long, allowing substantial time for an in-depth examination of participants' experiences, impressions, and suggestions. These interviews were conducted both face-to-face and virtually, considering geographical and logistical challenges faced by participants based in remote or distant sites. The semi-structured interviews enabled the researcher to maintain a broad thematic framework for the interviews while allowing for fruitful insights or directions

that may be introduced by the participants (Karatsareas, 2022). The structure for the interviews was developed according to the study-specific objectives and targets, namely: training and development experience, perceived challenges toward career development, institutional support mechanism effectiveness, and recommendations toward improvement of capacity building initiatives.

Open-ended questions allowed the participants to express their views in response and provide their own personal or institutional examples (Glazier, Boydston & Feezell, 2021). Consent was obtained from participants to audio-record all interviews for accuracy and enhanced analysis. To assure confidentiality, recordings and transcripts were anonymized, and all data were stored in a secure location. The importance of the quality in participants' language, emotional qualities, and emphatic qualities was kept for analysis, being transcribed verbatim. To carry out interviews across different institutions and regions provided the researcher access to a broader range of experiences and perspectives, allowing the depth of study findings and their transferability to be enhanced.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed in a systematic and rigorous manner for analyzing the interview data, as explicated by Braun and Clarke (2006). This method is explicitly chosen for its flexibility as well as for the ability to identify, analyze, and report on patterns ("themes") within qualitative data. The first process of analysis was familiarization. It involved the researcher immersing himself in the data by reading and re-reading transcripts with notes of initial observations/ reflections. This was followed by the generation of the first codes, done systematically across the data set. Coding was both inductive, enabling themes to emerge from data itself, and deductive, guided by research questions and a theoretical framework. Once there was a full set of codes, potential themes were identified by collating related codes with identifying patterns of meaning across participants' narratives. The themes were revised and refined for internal coherence and distinctiveness concerning research objectives. Each theme was defined and proposed with feature quotations from the data for a dynamic connection between the analysis and the voices of the participants.

The theorists have exercised reliability in analysis with various techniques. Such peer debriefing discussions have been scheduled with experienced colleagues in qualitative research to test and refine the developing interpretations. An audit trail has been maintained throughout the research process, recording coding decisions, development of themes, and analytic reflections for added transparency and replicability. The analysis was carried out systematically as per the six-phased framework of Braun & Clarke (2006), so that the findings end up being deeply embedded in participants' experiences while also offering theoretical and practical insights into capacity building for non-academic staff in public sector HEIs in Pakistan.

Findings

Overview of the Chapter

The results of the ten semi-structured interviews among non-academic staff from five public sector universities in the different provinces of Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Baluchistan are found in this paper. Their experience and perception regarding capacity building initiatives were sought from them. Thematic analysis revealed five main themes: (1) Lack of Structured Training Programs; (2) Insufficient Institutional Support; (3) Motivation and Career Growth; (4) Desire for Relevant, Role-Based Training; and (5) Barriers to Capacity Building. Each of these themes has been elaborated upon in the following sections, citing verbatim quotes from the participants to make sure that the findings are both authentic and rich. The summary of participant characteristics is included in Table 1.

Table 1

Participant Information

| Participant ID | Gender | Department | Years of Experience | University Location |
|----------------|--------|-----------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| P1 | Male | Finance | 5 | Punjab |
| P2 | Female | Human Resources | 8 | Sindh |
| P3 | Male | Student Affairs | 6 | Khyber Pakhtunkhwa |
| P4 | Female | IT | 10 | Balochistan |
| P5 | Male | Administration | 7 | Punjab |
| P6 | Female | Finance | 4 | Sindh |



| Participant ID | Gender | Department | Years of Experience | University Location |
|----------------|--------|-----------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| P7 | Male | Human Resources | 9 | Khyber Pakhtunkhwa |
| P8 | Female | Student Affairs | 3 | Balochistan |
| P9 | Male | IT | 11 | Punjab |
| P10 | Female | Administration | 5 | Sindh |

Theme 1: Lack of Structured Training Programs

The majority of participants have noted that there were no structured training programs in use within their institutions. Training opportunities were rare, funded mostly from outside the institution, and often poorly linked to the functions of staff. Many participants said that the training programs they encountered seemed to offer little in terms of developing relevant, practical skills. Participants describe learning mostly informally by colleagues, personal research, or trial and error, rather than formally through institution-driven programs that would enhance their skills in a systematic manner.

P1 shared, *“In the finance department, we hardly receive any training. We are expected to figure things out ourselves”*. This sentiment was echoed across several interviews, indicating that new hires and existing staff alike often navigated their roles without adequate preparatory support. Similarly, P6 added, *“Training sessions, if they happen, are very random and have little to do with my actual responsibilities”*. Such observations highlight a clear disconnect between the professional development opportunities provided and the specific needs of non-academic staff.

On the contrary, unsystematic training frameworks make for inefficient skill acquisition and thereby deter the potential professional growth of non-academic staff. Non-systematic design of the learning pathways leaves employees with the opportunity for ad hoc competence development, often resulting in discrepancies in performance and the loss of opportunities for institutional enhancement.

Theme 2: Insufficient Institutional Support

One recurrent issue that most people brought up was the lack of commitment to the organization's professional development. Many employees considered the development of their skills to be an individual duty without any proactive assistance from their universities. A lack of institutional support was evident in various dimensions, especially in the performance management system, where staff growth was never integrated or neglected entirely. Performance planning was not built into annual evaluations, with the result that an employee was evaluated based on task fulfilment rather than on development or career advancement.

P2 expressed, *“HR only gets involved when there’s a vacancy to fill. Otherwise, they don’t care about how we grow professionally”*. This means that institutional involvement in staff development is largely reactive because human resources departments are consulted only where employment or administrative matters are concerned. Similarly, P7 reflected, *“Professional development discussions never happen during evaluations. It’s all about how many tasks you completed, not about your future”*. In essence, the comment expresses the deep frustration of the non-academic staff who felt their educational growth path was being sacrificed for more immediate, task-oriented goals.

This perception eventually results in a culture that, in workplaces, will not appreciate ongoing professional development. Because of non-academic staff, advancement is viewed not as part of the vision of the organization, and apathy exists coupled with disengagement when these people get neither action nor motivation. Such growth would be deliberate and would deepen the stagnancy regarding career progression.

Theme 3: Motivation and Career Growth

Many voiced frustration concerning limitations on career advancement opportunities, with promotions long thought to be more a function of the length of service than of merit or professional achievement. The result was a sense of staleness and disillusionment, with staff members feeling that their hard work and dedication, and the skills they had improved on, were neither recognized nor rewarded. Many said that despite holding higher responsibilities and showing competence throughout, they were denied opportunities for career growth.

P5 stated, *"I have been handling higher-level responsibilities for years without any promotion. It feels like experience and extra effort are not rewarded"*. This sentiment was echoed by other participants who felt their contributions were undervalued in the absence of tangible career progression. Similarly, P8 remarked, *"Advancement seems to depend more on how long you've stayed, not how well you perform or improve your skills"*. This observation highlighted the frustration that arises when tenure becomes a more important factor than actual performance and development, contributing to a sense of unfairness and neglect.

Unmeritorious recognition, on the other hand, hinders motivation. The employee becomes unlikely to engage with more extensive institutional goals when he or she believes that there is no reward or recognition for their work. Disengagement can lead to lower job satisfaction and productivity, which in the long run can affect how well the institution functions and grows.

Theme 4: Desire for Relevant, Role-Based Training

The participants displayed a vigorous and ongoing commitment to training within their specific work roles because of the unique challenges and skills needed for these jobs. The general conclusion from the staff was that they found the present training programs to be either too generic or applicable to their jobs. For most employees, this could mean a waste of time and effort, and what hurt the most regarding this concern was that it did not equip any practical skills that would empower them to perform their jobs better.

P3 explained, *"We need targeted training — for example, project management for admin staff or conflict resolution for student affairs"*. The training is specifically geared toward the day-to-day functions of non-academic jobs and is in demand. For instance, administrative personnel could benefit from project management training that would allow them to handle wide-ranging tasks and improve overall efficiency in organizations. Likewise, student affairs professionals require training in conflict resolution to successfully pursue potential challenges inherent in interactions with students and provide more efficient and supportive service.

P9 highlighted, *"In IT, things are changing fast. We need regular, specialized updates, not just basic computer skills workshops meant for everyone"*. A fast-changing environment in the field of technology forces technical professionals to get specialized and current training pertinent to their jobs. They are no longer interested in basic workshops on computer skills, but require advanced competency-related knowledge that is applicable to their job roles.

Such a desire for position training speaks to the staff's initiative in refining their worth and contributing more meaningfully to their institutions. Non-academic staff appreciate that specific training can upgrade their skills, smooth out some processes, and finally deliver service most efficiently, which serves the institution as a whole. Focused training would thus serve immediate operational requirements while nurturing a culture of continuous professional growth and development.

Theme 5: Barriers to Capacity Building

Intended resources included several barriers hindering effective capacity development in their institutions. The most frequently cited of such barriers included budget constraints, strict schedules, a lack of cooperation between departments, and skepticism from the top management over the value of staff training. These combined factors create an environment where professional development of non-academic staff is often deemed nonessential and makes it easy for opportunities for growth and improvement to be missed.

P4 shared, *"Most of the time, when we request training, we're told there's no budget. Even if the training is important, there's no financial support"*. The vast majority of staff have listed a major challenge on the above lines in the inability to access funding towards training, even when development is considered a crucial activity for improving performance. Budgetary constraints always prefer to consider other expense heads, such as academic faculty development or infrastructural improvements, and so non-academic staff training remains, at best, unfunded, or at worst, entirely neglected.

P10 commented, *"Management doesn't prioritize training for administrative staff. They think it's only important for faculty"*. This statement reflects a deeper institutional culture where training is seen primarily



as a faculty concern, with little recognition of the value of investing in administrative and support staff development. This perception leaves non-academic staff feeling undervalued and overlooked in terms of professional growth opportunities.

Additionally, inflexible work schedules often made it difficult to attend available training. As P7 noted, "If you take a few hours off for a workshop, your regular duties pile up and you're blamed later for delays". Giving consideration to these barriers does have practical implications for achieving the balance between work and professional development. Many of the participants mentioned that taking time off from work to attend training programs caused them to fall behind in their duties; this created additional pressure and discouraged them from taking developmental opportunities.

Discussion

This study highlights a significant gap between the strategic objectives set by provincial governments for public sector HEIs and the very opportunities for development offered to their non-academic staff. Despite the fact that non-academic staff are increasingly expected to shoulder a greater share of difficult responsibilities with the advent of digital technology and new regulatory frameworks directed towards universities, much capacity-building development remains somewhat nebulous and almost absent. Such disparity in expectations versus what the institutions can do to support them necessitates a serious rethink of non-academic staff development in public HEIs in Pakistan.

The inadequacy of training for non-academic staff is not confined to Pakistan only but captures a trend seen across the worldwide spectrum of higher education. As Stage & de Jong (2023) observed, non-academics form the operational backbone of universities; however, professional development of these staff is under-prioritized in favor of faculty training and research funding. This parallels findings from this study, where participants reported a dearth of structured and usable training opportunities, with most learning occurring informally or on-the-job. Training sessions were often "random," if they were ever held, unsuitable for non-academic areas. This goes to substantiate Fioreze & McCowan (2018) asserted that sustainable institutional performance occurs only when all personnel, both academic and non-academic, are equipped with the relevant skill sets appropriate for the institution's mission.

The lack of institutional development of professional skills demonstrated a larger malaise in higher education management. Gander, Girardi & Paull (2019) argued that, in a situation where institutions do not acknowledge the importance of professional development of non-academic staff, such initiatives will seldom attain substantive priority; rather, training will occur through the provision of ad hoc, fragmented programs. In Pakistan specifically, this is so evident, where financial restraints afresh render training as a "luxury" rather than a necessity.

Implications for Practice

The outcomes point to some significant implications for the capacity development of non-academic staff in public higher education institutions in Pakistan. In the first instance, the need to change from an ad hoc system of professional development to something of a more structured and strategic model is apparent. This goes with the recommendations of Knowles (1980) in his Adult Learning Theory regarding self-directed goals, relevant learning experiences, and immediately applicable learning experiences. Non-academic staff members require training that connects with their jobs and builds upon their capacity to adapt to changes in the higher education sector (Suwannatarn & Asavisanu, 2022). Project management and conflict resolution are precisely the skills required for their work, but are mostly ignored in favor of blanket training. A competency-based methodology for training, as has been proposed by Southren (2015), would fulfil these training needs, providing courses that are directly pertinent to their jobs and consistent with the institutional goals.

Secondly, integrating professional development more broadly within the HR policy of HEIs is key in order to foster a continuous learning culture (Owusu-Agyeman, 2024). For this to happen, there would need to be a paradigm shift in terms of how institutions view the role non-academic staff play. According to some participants, HR departments are usually reactive instead of proactive, concentrating primarily on recruitment and rarely concerning themselves with developing their staff. HR policies should also provide possible career development pathways for non-academic staff, which set clear developmental goals as well

as methods to achieve them (Citra, [2023](#)). Besides, it should be attached to the staff effectiveness index in the performance appraisal that professional growth is thus seen as part and parcel of the institutional success rather than a subsequent thought.

Finally, participant-highlighted constraints such as budgetary limitations emphasized the importance of significant funding for professional development (Bell et al., [2024](#)). "Training is usually considered an unnecessary expense for non-academic staff," noted P10; this perception has to change. To work around budget constraints, institutions could try partnering with external training providers and/or developing in-house training programs. Also, an environment where departments share resource training opportunities would help to cushion some of the financial barriers while simultaneously promoting inter-departmental learning.

Conclusion

Institutions of public higher education in Pakistan should contend that the establishment of a comprehensive capacity building mechanism for non-academic staff cannot be considered a luxury. Instead, this is their strategic necessity. As public sector higher education institutions continue to struggle under the increasing pressures for administrative efficiency, ensuring regulatory compliance, and providing better services at all levels, they would ideally underscore the investment in the capacity-building efforts for the non-academic staff. Benefits from the investment in strengthening administrative and support personnel promises to be far-reaching for the institution; Operational efficiency will be enhanced, while the errors will be minimized, and it will also improve service delivery, which is especially vital in the case of rendering support to core functions of teaching and research. Thus, present training of the non-academics, in addition to their positive contributions to a better educational environment as far as effective administrative motions go, will enable students and faculty to concentrate their efforts on academic and research pursuits.

The evidence from this study thus calls on higher education leadership and policymakers as well as the Higher Education Commission (HEC) of Pakistan, to start internalizing the insights vital to seeing non-academics as stakeholders in HEIs and in their success. The first step in the more inclusive and effective strategy would be recognizing the pivotal role these staff play in supporting institutional goals. By systematically investing in their professional growth, HEIs will not only improve internal operations but also better align with their broader academic, administrative, and societal missions, ultimately creating a much stronger and more resilient educational system.



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