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Administrative Support and Implementation Barriers in University Teacher Professional Development: A Qualitative Case Study in China

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ABSTRACT

This study examined how university administrators support teacher professional development and how implementation barriers shape that support. A qualitative single-case study was conducted at a public university in Zhejiang Province, China, during the 2025–2026 academic year. Twelve purposively selected administrators representing university-level and academic-unit leadership participated. Data were generated through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and document review, and then analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. Three themes were developed. First, the professional development portfolio prioritized activities that were practical, internally deliverable, and immediately applicable, particularly technology integration and the dissemination of educational research and trends; leadership development and international exchange were less prominent. Second, financial provision, protected time, and career-related support were visible and comparatively well established, whereas sustained mentoring and other forms of practice-embedded instructional support were less consistent. Third, misalignment with institutional priorities, difficulty sustaining programs, budget and time constraints, resistance to change, weak monitoring, and limited recognition operated as an interconnected system rather than as isolated problems. The findings suggest that funding and participation opportunities are necessary but insufficient when instructional follow-through, monitoring, and recognition remain fragmented. A coordinated institutional approach that aligns professional development with strategic and teacher needs, protects time and resources, strengthens mentoring, and recognizes professional learning is therefore required.

INTRODUCTION

Professional development is central to the quality of university teaching because it enables teachers to renew disciplinary and pedagogical knowledge, refine instructional practice, and respond to changing student and institutional needs. Rather than a sequence of isolated workshops, effective professional development is sustained, collaborative, content-focused, and connected to teachers' daily work (Sancar *et al.*, 2021; Sims & Fletcher-Wood, 2021). Its value, therefore, depends not only on the activities offered but also on the institutional conditions that enable teachers to participate, apply new learning, and receive follow-through support. These conditions are especially important in Chinese higher education, where university teachers are expected to integrate disciplinary expertise, teaching, research, and service while adapting to digital and blended modes of instruction. Chinese education also has a strong tradition of institution-based collective teacher learning, although much of the empirical evidence on leadership and professional learning has been generated in school settings (Liu & Hallinger, 2021, 2024). In universities, administrators influence professional learning through agenda setting, resource allocation, workload arrangements, instructional guidance, and promotion systems. Their decisions can either connect professional development to institutional improvement or reduce it to episodic participation. Existing studies identify time, funding, relevance, leadership support, and

opportunities for collaboration as recurring conditions of effective professional development (Eroğlu & Donmuş Kaya, 2021; Karacabey, 2021). However, the cited literature largely examines schools, teacher perceptions, or relationships among leadership variables. Less attention has been paid to how university administrators themselves configure different forms of support and to the barriers that limit implementation within a single institutional system. A qualitative case study can illuminate these processes, including how apparently separate barriers reinforce one another in practice. This study therefore examined the professional development practices implemented by administrators, the support they provided, and the challenges they encountered at one Chinese university. It was guided by the following research questions

- What professional development practices do university administrators implement for teachers?
- What forms of administrative support are provided for university teacher professional development?
- What challenges do administrators encounter in implementing professional development?
- How do the identified challenges interact to shape implementation?

LITERATURE REVIEW

University Teacher Professional Development

Professional development is most effective when its components operate as a coherent learning process rather

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than as stand-alone events (Sancar *et al.*, 2021). Sustained duration, active learning, collaboration, subject- or practice-relevance, expert input, and opportunities for feedback are repeatedly associated with stronger professional learning (Sims & Fletcher-Wood, 2021). Digital competence has also become a central area of teacher learning, particularly as institutions expand online and blended provision (Fernández-Batanero *et al.*, 2022). These features imply that participation alone is an inadequate indicator of success; professional development must also be supported through opportunities to apply, discuss, and refine practice.

Administrative Support and Implementation Conditions

Administrators shape teacher learning by establishing priorities, distributing resources, protecting time, creating collaborative structures, and linking development to career pathways (Karacabey, 2021). The literature commonly distinguishes financial, temporal, instructional, and career-related support, but these forms are interdependent. Funding without protected time may not lead to participation, while time without mentoring, feedback, or appropriate resources may not lead to changes in practice. Implementation is further constrained when programs are poorly aligned with teachers' needs, when development is treated as an occasional event, or when workload and budget pressures disrupt continuity (Eroğlu & Donmuş Kaya, 2021; Karacabey, 2021).

Conceptual Framework

The study used an integrated support-process framework. First, professional development was treated as sustained, collaborative, and practice-linked learning rather than as attendance at isolated activities (Sancar *et al.*, 2021; Sims & Fletcher-Wood, 2021). Second, leadership was treated as an enabling condition that shapes resources, time, guidance, collaboration, and recognition (Karacabey, 2021; Liu & Hallinger, 2021). These ideas served as sensitizing concepts rather than a fixed coding scheme. They directed attention to both the formal provision of support and the organizational and motivational conditions that influence whether such support leads to meaningful teacher learning.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Design

A qualitative single-case study design was used to examine administrators' practices, support mechanisms, and implementation challenges as interrelated features within a single bounded institutional context. The design was appropriate because the study sought an in-depth account of how professional development was understood and enacted rather than a measurement of the prevalence of particular practices. The analysis adopted an interpretive orientation in which themes were treated as analytic constructions developed through sustained engagement with the data.

Research Setting

The case was a public, teaching-oriented university in Zhejiang Province, eastern China. The institution has historical roots in teacher education and continues to play a role in professional preparation and teacher development. It is referred to as University Z because the participant group included a small number of senior administrators whose positions could make them identifiable if the institution were named. The setting was information-rich for examining administrative support because professional development was embedded in institutional planning, personnel management, and academic-unit operations.

Participants and Sampling

Purposive maximum-variation sampling was used to recruit administrators with direct responsibility for professional development. The sample comprised 12 participants: three university-level leaders and nine college- or department-level leaders. Variation was sought across administrative level and length of administrative experience. Sample adequacy was judged in relation to the information power of a narrowly bounded case, the specificity of the participants' roles, the quality of the dialogue, and the study's focused analytic aim rather than by claiming that all possible meanings had been exhausted (Braun & Clarke, 2021b; Malterud *et al.*, 2016).

Data Sources and Guides

Three complementary data-generation tools were used: a semi-structured interview guide, a focus group discussion guide, and a document review checklist. The guides contained open-ended prompts concerning the professional development activities implemented, the forms of support provided, and the challenges encountered. A panel of educational management experts reviewed the guides for relevance and clarity, after which the guides were pilot-tested and refined. Relevant institutional documents were reviewed to contextualize and compare participants' accounts.

Data Collection and Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Mariano Marcos State University–University Research Ethics Review Board, and permission was secured from the participating institution. Participants received study information and provided informed consent. Individual interviews lasted approximately 45–60 minutes, were conducted in a private campus office, and were audio-recorded with permission. Recordings were transcribed verbatim, identifying details were removed, and participants were assigned codes such as A1. Participation was voluntary, and electronic data were stored in a password-protected folder accessible only to the researchers.

Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

The data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis. The process involved familiarisation

with the dataset, coding, generating initial themes, developing and reviewing themes, refining and naming themes, and producing the analytic account (Braun & Clarke, 2021a). Coding remained attentive to the research questions while allowing unanticipated patterns to be developed. The researchers moved recursively between transcripts, codes, candidate themes, and the conceptual framework rather than treating the phases as a linear checklist. Trustworthiness was supported through comparisons across interviews, focus group accounts, and documents. A second researcher served as a critical friend by questioning coding decisions, theme boundaries, and alternative interpretations; this dialogue was used to deepen reflexivity rather than to calculate inter-coder agreement. Participants were also invited to

review concise summaries of the preliminary findings and identify factual misinterpretations or missing context. Reporting was guided by the Standards for Reporting Qualitative Research and relevant items from the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (O'Brien *et al.*, 2014; Tong *et al.*, 2007).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Participant Profile

Participants represented both university-level and academic-unit leadership and had varied administrative experience. Detailed job titles were collapsed in the report to reduce deductive disclosure. Table 1 summarises the profile information relevant to the analysis.

Table 1: Profile of Participants (N = 12)

Category	Subgroup	n
Administrative level	University-level leadership	3
	Academic-unit leadership	9
Years in administration	Less than 5 years	3
	5–10 years	5
	More than 10 years	4

Theme1: Practical and Internally Deliverable Development Dominated the Portfolio

Administrators described a broad portfolio of professional development, but the most prominent activities were those that could be organized internally and applied quickly. Technology integration and the dissemination of educational research and teaching trends were repeatedly emphasized.

“Once teaching moved online, digital skills became something we work on constantly, not a one-off workshop.” (A2) *“We make a point of bringing the latest research and teaching trends to our staff regularly, because keeping people current is one of the most cost-effective things we can do.” (A10)*

Classroom management, curriculum development, and teacher well-being were also common. Participants linked their prominence to practical relevance and ease of internal delivery.

“Things like classroom management and curriculum work are practical; teachers can use them the next week, so they are easier for us to organize and sustain.” (A5)

By contrast, leadership development and international exchange were less prominent because they depended more heavily on external expertise, travel, funding, and scheduling.

“Exchange abroad is limited; the cost and scheduling make it hard for most.” (A7)

Theme 2: Formal Support Was Visible, but Practice-Embedded Instructional Support Was Uneven

Four forms of support were evident across the accounts: financial provision, time allocation, instructional support, and career advancement. Financial support was the most

visible, as it could be formalized through budget lines and program allocations.

“A clear budget line for development protects it from being the first thing cut when money is tight.” (A1)

Time allocation involved adjusting schedules or protecting periods for participation. Administrators described this as necessary because teaching and meeting demands otherwise displaced professional learning.

“We try to protect time in the timetable for development; if we do not, it simply does not happen amid teaching and meetings.” (A8)

Career-related support linked professional development to promotion, further study, and research opportunities, providing a visible incentive for participation.

“We link development directly to promotion and further study, so teachers can see that the effort they put in actually advances their careers.” (A11)

Instructional support included resources, mentoring, and collaborative platforms. Although participants regarded these as important for applying new learning, their day-to-day provision was less consistent than financial or scheduling support.

“We provide resources and mentors, but day-to-day guidance is the hardest to keep consistent.” (A4)

Theme 3: Implementation Barriers Formed a Reinforcing System

Seven challenges were identified: misalignment with institutional priorities, difficulty sustaining programs, budget restrictions, time constraints, resistance to change, difficulty monitoring progress, and limited recognition. Participants' accounts indicated that these barriers were connected rather than independent.

“A program borrowed from elsewhere can fail simply because it does not fit our teachers’ real problems.” (A3)

When programs were perceived as weakly aligned with teachers’ or institutions’ needs, participation and follow-through declined. Budget and time constraints then narrowed access and made continuity difficult.

“When funds are tight we must choose which programs to support, and some teachers miss out.” (A9)

Resistance to change and limited recognition further

weakened engagement, while resource-intensive monitoring made it difficult to demonstrate progress and sustain institutional attention.

“Some teachers are comfortable with what they know and doubt new methods, so getting them to take part is half the battle.” (A4)

“When good work in development is not acknowledged, people quietly stop sharing what they have learned.” (A11) *“Tracking progress means repeated assessment and feedback, which takes real time and people.” (A6)*

Table 2: Implementation Challenges and Their Consequences

Challenge	How it appeared	Evidence	Consequence for implementation
Misalignment	Programmes did not fit institutional priorities or teachers’ immediate problems.	A1, A3; documents	Lower perceived relevance and uptake
Weak continuity	Initiatives lost momentum when priorities shifted after launch.	A3, A5	Episodic rather than sustained learning
Budget restrictions	Limited or uneven funding narrowed access to activities.	A1, A9	Unequal opportunities and reduced reach
Time constraints	Teaching, administrative, and personal demands competed with development.	A2, A8	Reduced participation and follow-through
Resistance to change	Familiar routines and doubts about new methods reduced willingness to engage.	A4, A6	Lower engagement and slower adoption
Monitoring demands	Repeated assessment and feedback required substantial time and staff effort.	A6, A10	Weak evidence of progress and limited adjustment
Limited recognition	Professional learning and knowledge sharing were not consistently acknowledged.	A7, A11	Lower motivation to sustain and share learning

Discussion

The findings show that administrative support was present but unevenly translated into sustained professional learning. The central issue was not simply whether resources or activities existed, but whether support was aligned, connected, and followed through. Four implications are particularly important. First, the dominance of technology integration and research dissemination reflects an institutional preference for development that is immediately useful, internally deliverable, and comparatively economical. These activities can be organized at scale and linked directly to current teaching demands, which helps explain their prominence. This finding is consistent with the growing importance of digital competence in teacher professional development (Fernández-Batanero *et al.*, 2022) and with evidence that relevance to daily practice strengthens professional learning (Sancar *et al.*, 2021; Sims & Fletcher-Wood, 2021). However, a portfolio driven mainly by ease of delivery may underinvest in longer-term leadership development and international learning, even when those areas support institutional renewal. Second, the contrast between visible formal support and uneven instructional support explains why participation does not necessarily lead to changed practice. Budget lines, timetable

adjustments, and promotion criteria can be established through administrative decisions and documented readily. Mentoring, coaching, collaborative inquiry, and feedback require continuous relational work that is more difficult to standardize and sustain. The forms of support most closely connected to classroom transfer were therefore also the most fragile. This reinforces the argument that effective professional development depends on coherent combinations of time, resources, collaboration, and follow-through rather than on isolated provisions (Karacabey, 2021; Sims & Fletcher-Wood, 2021). Third, the barriers operated as a reinforcing implementation cycle. Misaligned activities were less likely to attract meaningful engagement; weak engagement reduced visible impact; limited evidence of impact made it harder to protect budgets, time, and recognition; and reduced support further weakened continuity and monitoring. This system-level pattern helps explain why a university may provide substantial financial and temporal support while still experiencing fragmented implementation. The contribution of the case is therefore not a new list of barriers, but an account of how familiar barriers combine within an institutional process. Fourth, the findings point to a coordinated governance response. Professional development plans should begin with

institutional priorities and teacher needs, then connect ring-fenced and transparent resourcing with protected time, mentoring or communities of practice, manageable evidence of application, and meaningful recognition. Monitoring should focus less on attendance counts and more on how teachers apply and share learning. These actions position administrators as the link between policy intentions and everyday teaching rather than as providers of discrete training events.

Limitations

The study has several limitations. It examined one institution, so the findings are analytically transferable to comparable settings rather than statistically generalizable. The evidence came primarily from administrators and may therefore present professional development more favorably than teachers would. The small and identifiable leadership population also required that roles be reported in broad categories, reducing contextual detail. Finally, interview accounts may have been affected by social desirability. Future research should compare administrator and teacher perspectives, include multiple universities, and follow professional development initiatives over time to examine how support is converted into changes in teaching practice.

CONCLUSION

This qualitative case study shows that administrative support for university teacher professional development is most effective when financial provision, protected time, instructional follow-through, monitoring, and recognition operate as a coherent system. At University Z, practical and internally deliverable activities were well established, but practice-embedded instructional support was less consistent, and implementation was constrained by mutually reinforcing organizational and motivational barriers. The findings support a shift from event-based provision to an aligned professional learning system that connects institutional priorities, teacher needs, sustained guidance, and recognition. Such coordination is more likely than isolated interventions to convert participation into continuing teacher growth and improved practice.

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