

Navigating Research Engagement: Voices from the Academic Community

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ABSTRACT

Research engagement is a vital component of academic work, contributing to knowledge generation, professional growth, and institutional development; however, many academics struggle to sustain active participation in research. Despite existing policies that promote research productivity, academic staff continue to encounter structural, institutional, and personal challenges that limit consistent research engagement. This study aimed at navigating research engagement in the academic community. Using a qualitative phenomenological design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with academic staff and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed that research engagement is perceived as meaningful yet fragile, often hindered by heavy teaching workloads, administrative demands, lack of protected research time, limited resources, insufficient mentorship, and psychological factors such as self-doubt and fear of criticism. Conversely, mentorship, collaboration, recognition, leadership support, access to resources, and a positive research culture emerged as key enablers that strengthened motivation and persistence. The study concludes that research engagement is shaped by the interaction of individual experiences, institutional policies, and organizational culture. The findings imply that academic institutions should align workload policies, strengthen mentorship and capacity-building initiatives, and cultivate supportive research cultures to foster sustainable and inclusive research engagement.

Keywords: *Academic Staff, Institutional Support, Phenomenological Study, Research Culture, Research Engagement*

INTRODUCTION

Research engagement among academics is widely recognized as a fundamental component of knowledge production, innovation, and institutional reputation. Through sustained research activity, faculty members contribute not only to disciplinary advancement but also to evidence-informed practice and societal development. Despite its importance, many academics encounter substantial challenges that limit their ability to engage consistently and meaningfully in research. These challenges suggest that research engagement is shaped by a complex interplay of personal, institutional, and systemic factors rather than by motivation or interest alone.

Empirical studies have shown that academics experience multiple barriers that constrain their research participation. Aydin et al. (2023), for instance, found that academic staff encounter cognitive, social, physical, and affective barriers to conducting and publishing research. These include difficulties with academic writing in English, competing teaching and family responsibilities, limited time, and fear of rejection. Similarly, Matheson et al. (2025) reported that primary healthcare professionals face negative attitudes toward research, inadequate institutional environments, and system-level constraints that hinder sustained research engagement. Collectively, these findings indicate that barriers to research engagement are pervasive and extend beyond individual willingness to participate in scholarly work.

Persistent barriers to research engagement may also have long-term consequences for academics at different career stages. Ongoing challenges related to time constraints, teaching responsibilities, and limited writing or methodological skills can restrict opportunities for sustained research involvement (Aydin et al., 2023). As a result, research outputs may become less frequent, professional visibility may diminish, and motivation to pursue research may decline. Over time, these patterns can exacerbate inequities within higher education, particularly across disciplines, academic ranks, and linguistic or cultural contexts, thereby contributing to the overall weakening of institutional research cultures.

From an institutional and systemic perspective, insufficient support for academic staff may further limit engagement in research-related activities such as innovation in teaching, successful grant acquisition, and collaborative partnerships. Matheson et al. (2025) emphasized that environments that are not conducive to research undermine engagement and may ultimately hinder the development of evidence-informed practice, particularly in professional fields. Consequently, addressing barriers to research engagement should be understood not only as a matter of individual capacity but also as an issue of equity, institutional responsibility, and sustainable research development.

Recent qualitative and mixed-method studies have increasingly highlighted both barriers and enablers influencing research engagement. In a phenomenological study involving 41 academicians across various roles and contexts, Aydin et al. (2023) identified barriers that were cognitive (e.g., challenges with research structure and academic writing), social (e.g., collaboration difficulties and competing responsibilities), physical (e.g., time management and infrastructural limitations), and affective (e.g., perfectionism, low confidence, and fear of rejection). The study also identified enablers such as meaningful topic selection, support for improving English proficiency, collaboration, and sustained attention and persistence.

Although existing studies provide valuable insights, notable gaps remain in the literature. Much of the current research focuses on specific professional groups, particularly in health-related disciplines, or emphasizes narrow research outcomes such as publication productivity (Aydin et al., 2023; Lee et al., 2024). As a result, the experiences of academics from non-health disciplines, those at different career stages, and those working in diverse cultural and institutional contexts are less well represented. Moreover, while many studies identify barriers and enablers, fewer investigations explicitly foreground the lived experiences and voices of academics as they navigate research engagement within their institutions.

In addition, limited attention has been given to how institutional policies, leadership practices, and structural systems are experienced by academics and how these experiences may either facilitate or inhibit research engagement across disciplines. To address these gaps, there is a need for qualitative inquiry that captures the perspectives of academics and explores how they make sense of the barriers and enablers affecting their research involvement. This study, therefore, aims to examine the lived experiences of academics regarding research engagement, focusing on how cognitive, social, physical, emotional, and institutional factors are perceived and experienced within the academic community. By centering the voices of academics, the study seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of research engagement that extends beyond quantitative indicators and highlights the human and organizational dimensions of scholarly work. Ultimately, the findings are intended to inform institutional efforts to strengthen policies, practices, and research cultures that support meaningful and sustained research engagement among faculty members.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Barriers and Enablers Influencing Research Engagement among Members of the Academic Community

Research engagement within higher education is shaped by a complex interaction of barriers and enablers that influence both individual academic practice and institutional productivity. Previous studies have demonstrated that the presence or absence of supportive conditions can either facilitate sustained research engagement or contribute to disengagement. Lee et al. (2024) identified workload pressures, limited funding, and lengthy ethics approval processes as significant barriers affecting the research journeys of health academics. However, these challenges were found to be mitigated when mentoring relationships and collaborative research opportunities were available, underscoring the relational nature of research support.

At the institutional level, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2024) emphasized the importance of leadership commitment, adequate resources, and policy alignment in fostering environments where research is valued and sustained. Structural supports such as access to research infrastructure, protected research time, and clear institutional research priorities help position research as a core academic responsibility rather than a peripheral activity. In contrast, weak leadership support and poorly aligned policies may suppress research engagement and reinforce existing barriers. Complementing this perspective, Aydin et al. (2023) highlighted that research engagement is also shaped by personal and psychological factors.

Taken together, the literature demonstrates that barriers and enablers to research engagement operate at multiple levels—personal, institutional, and systemic. Barriers commonly include limited time, inadequate resources, and emotional readiness, while enablers often involve mentorship, supportive policies, and research-oriented institutional cultures. The dynamic interaction between these factors influences whether academics can engage fully in research or maintain only minimal involvement.

Barriers Experienced by Academic Staff in Engaging in Research

Barriers to research engagement are widely recognized as multifaceted and interrelated, with time constraints frequently identified as the most significant challenge. Matheson et al. (2025) found that healthcare professionals consistently cited lack of time, heavy teaching or clinical workloads, and limited access to research training as major impediments to research engagement. Even among academics who expressed strong interest in research, structural constraints often inhibited active participation, illustrating how institutional workload demands can weaken research productivity.

Similarly, Drury et al. (2025) identified administrative burden and lack of protected research time as critical barriers. Their findings revealed that faculty members often contend with extensive bureaucratic requirements, unclear funding processes, and competing institutional demands, which limit opportunities for sustained scholarly engagement. These conditions restrict academics' ability to develop coherent research agendas and contribute to fragmented and inconsistent research activity. Without institutional acknowledgment of these pressures, meaningful engagement in research remains difficult to sustain.

In addition to structural challenges, affective and psychological barriers play a significant role in shaping research engagement. Aydin et al. (2023) emphasized that perfectionism, self-doubt, and fear of criticism can discourage academics from writing, publishing, and collaborating. These affective barriers may persist over time and have a more enduring impact than temporary structural constraints, suggesting that faculty development initiatives must address emotional and psychological readiness alongside technical research skills. Lee et al. (2024) further noted that barriers are intensified in environments characterized by limited mentorship and weak institutional support, where academics may experience isolation and diminished motivation.

Enablers Supporting and Motivating Academic Staff in Conducting Research

Despite the presence of significant barriers, the literature also identifies several factors that support and motivate academics to engage in research. Mentorship has consistently emerged as a critical enabler. Lee et al. (2024) found that working with experienced researchers helped academics navigate institutional processes, develop confidence, and build resilience. Mentorship not only supports skill development but also fosters a sense of belonging and professional identity, which is essential for sustained research engagement.

At the institutional level, the OECD (2024) highlighted the role of systemic supports such as infrastructure, leadership backing, and policy alignment in integrating research into academic culture. Academics are more likely to engage in research when their scholarly efforts are recognized, when they receive funding support, and when research time is respected alongside teaching responsibilities. These findings indicate that motivation is shaped not only by individual interest but also by institutional signals that research is valued.

Aydin et al. (2023) further demonstrated that opportunities for skills development, collaborative learning, and writing-focused workshops enhance faculty motivation and confidence. When academics perceive that their skill gaps are acknowledged and addressed, they are more likely to sustain research activity. Drury et al. (2025) also identified recognition and rewards—such as promotion opportunities, funding, and public acknowledgment—as powerful motivators for continued research engagement.

Institutional Policies and Culture in Shaping Research Engagement

Institutional policies and organizational culture play a central role in shaping how faculty members experience and engage in research. The OECD (2024) emphasized that protected research time, adequate funding, and a clear institutional vision for research create conditions that encourage faculty participation. Institutions that integrate research into faculty development frameworks help normalize research as part of everyday academic practice rather than as an additional burden.

Drury et al. (2025) found that institutions with strong research cultures are more likely to reduce bureaucratic obstacles and create pathways that support academic researchers. Their findings suggest that institutional culture can function both as a barrier and as an enabler, depending on how research is valued and supported. Supportive cultures promote engagement, while unsupportive environments may actively discourage research activity.

Similarly, Lee et al. (2024) demonstrated that collaborative cultures, leadership encouragement, and collegial support foster a sense of shared purpose and sustained engagement in research. However, Aydin et al. (2023) cautioned that policy initiatives alone are insufficient if institutional culture fails to value academic contributions. Academics may disengage from research despite the availability of funding or training programs if they perceive their work as undervalued or unsupported.

Synthesis and Research Gap

The reviewed literature consistently indicates that research engagement in academia is influenced by a complex combination of barriers and enablers. Structural barriers such as time constraints, workload demands, funding limitations, and bureaucratic processes persist across contexts (Matheson et al., 2025; Drury et al., 2025). At the same time, affective barriers—including fear of rejection, low confidence, and perfectionism—significantly shape academics' willingness to engage in research (Aydin et al., 2023). These findings underscore the need for interventions that address both systemic conditions and individual capacity-building.

Enablers such as mentorship, institutional recognition, protected research time, and access to funding have been shown to support sustained research engagement (Lee et al., 2024; OECD, 2024). However, much of the existing literature focuses on specific professional groups, particularly within health and allied health disciplines, limiting the generalizability of findings across the broader academic

community. Moreover, fewer studies explicitly examine how barriers and enablers are experienced and interpreted by academics across disciplines.

MATERIALS & METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research design using a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of academic staff regarding the barriers and enablers that influenced their engagement in research. Phenomenology was appropriate because the study sought to understand how academics perceived, interpreted, and made meaning of their research experiences within their institutional and personal contexts. Rather than measuring research productivity or evaluating institutional performance, the inquiry focused on the meanings academics attached to engaging—or struggling to engage—in research. By centering participants' narratives, the study aimed to capture the essence of how barriers and enablers were experienced, internalized, and negotiated, allowing institutional policies, structures, and research cultures to be examined as they were lived rather than externally assessed.

The study was conducted across selected higher education institutions, with participants selected through purposive sampling. Faculty members with direct experience in research engagement—including active participation, limited involvement, or attempts to engage in research—were invited to participate. A total of fifteen (15) faculty members from St. Michael's College of Iligan, Inc. (SMCII) took part in the study, allowing for in-depth exploration of lived experiences while ensuring variation in academic discipline, rank, and length of service. Data were collected primarily through semi-structured, in-depth interviews using open-ended questions that encouraged participants to describe their experiences, motivations, challenges, and perceptions of institutional support. Interviews lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes, were audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim. Where appropriate, focus group discussions were also conducted to facilitate shared reflection on collective research experiences.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

What are the lived experiences of academics regarding the barriers and enablers that influence their engagement in research within the academic community?

What the Journey Looked Like

Research engagement, as lived by the participants, unfolded as a meaningful yet fragile academic journey. Rather than being experienced as a stable or routine responsibility, research was described as something deeply valued but constantly vulnerable to disruption. Much like walking across a suspension bridge, engagement in research was purposeful and transformative, yet easily destabilized when support weakened or competing demands intensified. Participants consistently described research as central to their professional identity, growth, and contribution to the academic community, while also narrating how emotional fatigue, workload pressures, and limited institutional reinforcement shaped their ability to remain engaged.

What preceded sustained engagement were moments of uncertainty, strain, and negotiation. Participants entered the research journey with motivation and purpose, yet this commitment was repeatedly tested by everyday academic realities.

Entering the Journey: Fulfillment Entwined with Strain

Across narratives, participants framed research as a source of fulfillment, intellectual growth, and professional identity. At the same time, they spoke openly of exhaustion, inconsistency, and emotional strain. One participant shared, *“My experience with research has been both fulfilling and exhausting. Naay times nga supportive kaayo ang department, pero naa pud moments nga lisod kaayo i-manage tungod sa teaching ug admin work”* (P1). This account reflects how fulfillment and fatigue coexisted within the same lived experience.

Other participants similarly expressed that research brought satisfaction when its impact was visible, yet became draining in the absence of clear institutional support (P7). For some, research was closely tied to personal and professional growth but constrained by the lack of protected time (P10). These accounts illustrate how research engagement was experienced not as purely motivating or discouraging, but as a tension-filled journey where meaning and strain were inseparable.

Shifting Ground: Sustaining Engagement Amid Competing Demands

Most participants described research engagement as valuable but difficult to sustain over time. Research was often associated with purpose and professional development, reflected in statements such as *“research is a source of professional growth”* (P5) and *“overall, research is meaningful to me”* (P15). However, this sense of meaning was frequently interrupted by heavy workloads, burnout, and competing academic roles.

Participants narrated periods when they had to disengage due to exhaustion (P9) and described research as particularly draining when expectations were high but institutional support was limited (P14). These shared experiences suggest that research engagement was not continuous, but conditional—maintained only when personal motivation was reinforced by enabling environments.

Walking the Narrow Path: Negotiating Support and Constraint

Beyond overall experience, participants described research engagement as a continual act of balancing. Engagement advanced when mentoring, recognition, structure, and access to resources were present, yet quickly faltered when constraints intensified. One participant explained, *“The balance is always shifting for me. Kung naay mentoring ug clear guidance, research becomes manageable, pero kung puno kaayo ang load, lisod gyud”* (P1). Another noted that motivation gained from training and collaboration often diminished once daily work pressures resumed (P2).

Several participants emphasized that structural barriers frequently outweighed personal motivation. One shared, *“I feel encouraged when I receive recognition. However, time constraints often outweigh the motivation”* (P3). Another described research engagement as a persistent struggle between passion and exhaustion (P6). These narratives demonstrate that willingness alone was insufficient when workload demands remained unaddressed.

Most participants identified mentoring, recognition, access to resources, and structured schedules as factors that enabled engagement, reflected in statements such as *“mentoring really helps me stay engaged”* (P8) and *“research becomes easier when I have deadlines and structure”* (P5). Despite this, teaching and administrative responsibilities consistently took precedence. Participants explained that administrative work often displaced research (P4) and that research was “the first thing to suffer” during periods of overload (P7).

In contrast, a smaller group indicated that balance was more attainable when institutional conditions were supportive and recognition was present. Some participants noted that research felt achievable in supportive environments (P13), while others emphasized that acknowledgment and confidence helped sustain engagement (P12; P14). These variations show that institutional validation and self-efficacy moderated how constraints were experienced and negotiated.

Becoming a Researcher: Evolving Meanings Over Time

Over time, participants described a shift in the meanings they attached to research engagement. Early experiences were often characterized by compliance, uncertainty, or intimidation, while later stages reflected ownership, purpose, and identity. One participant shared, *“Research means professional growth for me. Over time, I realized nga dili lang siya requirement but a way to contribute knowledge”* (P1). Another noted, *“I used to see research as compliance. Karon, nakita nako siya as part of my identity as an academic”* (P2).

Participants further articulated that research gradually became associated with credibility, relevance, and personal fulfillment rather than mere institutional expectation (P3; P9). Many described research as a continuous process of growth and learning, reflected in statements such as *“research gives meaning to my academic work”* (P7), *“research engagement reflects commitment to the profession”* (P13), and *“research now means lifelong learning”* (P15). Others emphasized that research expanded their role beyond teaching, describing it as *“learning in action”* (P12) and a way of sustaining professional relevance (P5).

For a smaller group, positive meanings emerged only after overcoming early fear or self-doubt. One participant reflected that research initially felt overwhelming but later symbolized confidence and professional maturity (P8), while another viewed research as a platform for voice even when outcomes were imperfect (P6). These varied pathways highlight that while meanings eventually deepened, the journey toward these meanings differed across individuals.

Making Sense of the Lived Experience

From a phenomenological perspective, these narratives reveal research engagement as a lived, evolving phenomenon rather than a fixed academic role. Participants continually interpreted their engagement through emotional states, professional identity, and institutional context. Meaning was constructed and reconstructed as academics reflected on their struggles, achievements, and changing circumstances.

Viewed through an etic lens, these experiences align with social cognitive theory, particularly the interaction of self-efficacy, motivation, and environmental conditions. Confidence strengthened through mastery experiences, encouragement, and collaboration, while fatigue, time pressure, and lack of recognition weakened sustained engagement. Organizational culture further shaped this experience, as institutional norms, recognition practices, and workload expectations either supported or undermined research engagement.

Taken together, the lived experiences of academics reveal research engagement as a meaningful yet fragile journey—one sustained through alignment between personal purpose, relational support, and institutional care, and disrupted when such alignment is absent.

What barriers do academic staff experience that hinder their engagement in research?**What the Barriers Felt Like**

Barriers to research engagement were experienced not as isolated obstacles, but as an accumulation of pressures that gradually weighed down participants’ ability to move forward. Rather than a single hindrance, research engagement was described as being constrained by layers of responsibility, internal struggle, and structural limitation. Participants likened the experience to attempting to move forward while being pulled in multiple directions at once—where effort was present, but momentum was repeatedly interrupted.

Across narratives, barriers were lived both externally and internally. Workload and time constraints imposed immediate limitations, while psychological struggles and insufficient institutional support further complicated participants' capacity to sustain research engagement.

Pulled by Demands: Workload and Time Scarcity

Participants consistently described workload overload and time scarcity as the most immediate and persistent barriers to research engagement. Heavy teaching loads, administrative duties, committee work, and student-related responsibilities repeatedly displaced research, even when participants recognized its importance. One participant shared, *"There were semesters nga puno kaayo akong teaching load, plus committee work, mao nga wala na gyud koy time mag-focus sa research. Usahay, magsugod ko pero dili nako mahuman tungod sa deadline sa klase ug reports"* (P1). Another participant emphasized that during peak academic periods, teaching and meetings took precedence, making research nearly impossible to sustain (P5).

Time scarcity extended beyond official working hours, resulting in physical and mental exhaustion. Several participants recounted attempting to work on research after office hours, only to find themselves too fatigued to focus (P3). Others emphasized the difficulty of finding uninterrupted time due to constant meetings and paperwork (P10). These experiences show that research engagement was constrained not only by the volume of work, but by the fragmented nature of academic time.

Most participants described research as repeatedly postponed or interrupted. Teaching and administrative responsibilities consistently took priority, leading participants to frame research as secondary or optional in practice, even when its value was acknowledged. One participant noted, *"murag research mahimong optional bisan kabalo ko nga importante siya"* (P6). Others described recurring loss of momentum, explaining that once research was interrupted, it became difficult to resume (P2; P9).

While workload overload was a shared experience, participants internalized its effects differently. Some expressed guilt when choosing research over teaching responsibilities, feeling that research was difficult to justify amid classroom demands (P7). Others described avoidance and discouragement, explaining that fear of being unable to complete research prevented them from initiating it in the first place (P13). These varied emotional responses reveal how workload pressure was lived not only as exhaustion, but also as guilt and hesitation.

The Inner Weight: Psychological Barriers and Self-Doubt

Beyond external demands, participants described psychological barriers as invisible yet powerful constraints on research engagement. Even when skills and interest were present, self-doubt, fear of criticism, fluctuating motivation, and emotional exhaustion shaped their willingness to initiate, continue, or submit research.

Participants frequently expressed doubts about their academic writing and research competence. One shared, *"There were times nga nagduda ko sa akong writing skills. Mahadlok ko nga basin dili acceptable akong work"* (P1). Another explained that fear of reviewers' comments often caused them to pause or stop their research efforts (P2). Anticipated judgment, even before formal feedback, influenced engagement decisions.

Experiences of rejection and social comparison intensified these struggles. Participants described how rejection triggered self-questioning and diminished confidence, reflected in statements such as *"Murag maka-question ka sa imong capacity as a researcher"* (P3). Others shared feeling discouraged when comparing themselves with more experienced researchers, leading to feelings of inadequacy and falling behind (P10).

Many participants identified perfectionism as a major barrier, explaining that dissatisfaction with their work delayed submission because it never felt “good enough” (P4; P7). Others described how rejection and lack of recognition temporarily weakened motivation (P5; P11). These experiences highlight the emotional labor involved in research engagement, where internal validation and reassurance became essential for persistence.

For some participants, these psychological barriers gradually eased with experience and support. One shared that confidence developed slowly over time, even though fear initially made it difficult to begin research (P12). Others described anxiety as situational, particularly during presentations where fear of judgment from senior academics was most pronounced (P6). These variations show that while self-doubt was widespread, its intensity and duration differed across individuals.

Walking Without Support: Institutional and Structural Constraints

Participants also described insufficient institutional support and resources as structural barriers that constrained their ability to engage meaningfully in research. Even when motivation was present, limited funding, restricted access to tools, unclear policies, and weak mentoring structures made research engagement fragile.

Several participants described concrete experiences of limited funding and access to research tools. One shared, “*There was a time nga wala koy access sa research funds. Lisod kaayo magpadayon kung ikaw ra tanan mag-gasto*” (P1), while another explained that even basic tools for data analysis were difficult to access (P3). Financial burden and lack of resources often led to stalled or discontinued research efforts (P8).

Beyond material constraints, the absence of mentorship emerged as a significant barrier. Participants described feeling lost without guidance, particularly during publication and early research stages. One explained, “*Lack of mentorship made me feel lost. Walay mutudlo unsaon pag-navigate sa research process*” (P2), while another emphasized difficulty publishing without senior support (P6).

Participants further described how institutional neglect and lack of recognition weakened motivation. Some perceived that institutional priorities favored teaching over research, making research feel secondary in practice (P11). Others expressed discouragement when research outputs were not recognized, stating that their efforts felt undervalued (P9). Early-career academics particularly felt this absence of support, describing research as a solitary endeavor without clear institutional direction (P4).

Leadership-related barriers also surfaced. Participants described minimal encouragement from leadership (P13) and difficulty sustaining collaboration without institutional backing (P14). Even those who did not explicitly mention funding or mentorship issues described research engagement as constrained by broader institutional conditions, including unclear expectations and limited recognition.

Making Sense of the Barriers

From a phenomenological perspective, these barriers were not experienced as abstract limitations, but as lived realities marked by exhaustion, frustration, hesitation, and diminished confidence. Workload overload, psychological struggle, and insufficient institutional support were felt emotionally and embodied in everyday academic life, shaping how research engagement was understood and sustained.

Viewed through an etic lens, these experiences align with social cognitive theory, particularly the interaction between environmental constraints, self-efficacy, and motivation. Persistent overload, fear of criticism, and lack of support weakened confidence and self-regulation, illustrating how environmental pressures can override personal intention and commitment.

Organizational culture theory further explains how institutional norms and priorities shaped these experiences. When teaching and administrative work were implicitly valued over research, and when

support systems were unclear or absent, academics internalized the message that research was optional or expendable. Together, these perspectives demonstrate that barriers to research engagement are systemic, emotional, and structural—requiring more than individual motivation to overcome.

Essence of the Experience

Taken together, the lived experiences of academic staff reveal that barriers to research engagement are not singular or temporary obstacles, but interconnected pressures that continuously shape participation. Research engagement was hindered not by lack of interest, but by environments that constrained time, confidence, and support. Understanding these barriers requires attention to how academics live through workload, doubt, and institutional limitations in their everyday academic worlds.

What enablers do academic staff experience that support and motivate their engagement in research?

What Enabled the Journey to Continue

Enablers of research engagement were experienced by participants as sustaining forces that transformed research from an isolating and demanding task into a guided, shared, and achievable academic practice. Rather than moving forward alone, participants described moments when research felt supported—when guidance, encouragement, and institutional backing acted as steady ground along an otherwise demanding path. These enabling experiences strengthened motivation, restored confidence, and allowed participants to persist despite challenges.

Across narratives, research engagement was not sustained by individual effort alone. Instead, it flourished when academics felt accompanied—through mentorship, collegial support, training opportunities, material resources, and visible institutional validation.

Walking with Support: Academic Environments that Sustained Engagement

Participants frequently described how supportive academic environments encouraged them to pursue and continue engaging in research. Formal training initiatives, such as research seminars and writing workshops, were often identified as turning points that reduced feelings of isolation and renewed motivation. One participant shared, *“What really encouraged me was when the department organized research trainings and writing workshops. Maka-feel ko nga dili ko nag-inusara ug naa koy gi-guide-an”* (P1). Another similarly noted that institutional research seminars refreshed both confidence and interest in research (P3).

Beyond formal programs, everyday collegial support emerged as a powerful enabler. Participants described how encouragement from colleagues—through idea sharing, informal conversations, and moral support—helped sustain engagement. One participant explained, *“Support from colleagues motivated me a lot. Kanang simple encouragement or sharing of ideas, dako na kaayo siya nga tabang”* (P2). These interactions made research feel less solitary and more embedded within the academic community.

Leadership support further reinforced research engagement. Participants expressed that supportive leadership validated their efforts and signaled that research was valued. One participant reflected, *“Supportive leadership encouraged me to continue researching. Murag gi-value gyud nila ang research effort”* (P12). Others emphasized collaboration as a key enabler, noting that being part of a research team reduced stress and made research more manageable (P4; P13). Sharing responsibility allowed participants to balance research with other academic roles more effectively.

Participants also highlighted the importance of feedback and senior encouragement. Simple feedback and acknowledgment were often described as motivating forces that normalized struggle and

reinforced confidence. One participant shared that *“simple feedback made a big difference”* (P8), while another noted that encouragement from senior faculty inspired continued engagement despite challenges (P14). These experiences illustrate how recognition—formal or informal—helped sustain motivation.

Practical and material enablers were likewise emphasized. Flexible schedules during research periods allowed participants to better manage competing responsibilities (P10), while research grants reduced financial strain and made participation more feasible (P15). These supports eased external pressures and created space for sustained engagement.

Guided Growth: Mentorship, Collaboration, and Professional Development

Mentorship, collaboration, and professional development were experienced as empowering forces that transformed research from an intimidating task into a guided and achievable process. Participants consistently described mentorship as crucial in building confidence and providing structure. One participant shared, *“I had a mentor who guided me step by step. Tungod niya, mas confident ko sa research process”* (P1). Others echoed this experience, noting that mentors provided direction, belief in their potential, and reassurance during uncertain moments (P4; P15).

Collaboration further enabled sustained engagement by reducing stress and increasing accountability. Participants explained that working with colleagues made research more manageable and productive. One participant noted, *“Collaboration with colleagues helped me finish my study. Mas dali ang trabaho kung naa kay kauban”* (P2), while others emphasized that team research reduced stress and improved productivity (P11; P14). Through collaboration, research became a shared endeavor rather than an individual burden.

Professional development opportunities also played a significant role in sustaining engagement. Participants described how workshops and training improved writing skills, clarified research processes, and reduced fear of criticism. One participant shared, *“Professional development workshops improved my writing skills. Nakatabang kaayo siya sa pag-submit sa papers”* (P3), while another noted that such opportunities boosted confidence and eased anxiety related to evaluation (P12). These experiences show that professional development supported both technical competence and emotional readiness.

For many participants, the value of mentorship and collaboration became especially evident after setbacks. One participant shared that encouragement from a mentor following rejection helped restore motivation and sustain engagement (P8). Another emphasized accountability, explaining that knowing someone monitored their progress pushed them to persist (P10). These varied experiences highlight that while supports were broadly beneficial, participants drew strength from them in different ways—through reassurance, direction, or accountability.

Markers Along the Way: Recognition and Institutional Validation

Recognition and institutional validation were experienced as affirming signals that sustained commitment to research. Participants described acknowledgment—through incentives, awards, promotion points, leadership validation, and public recognition—as powerful motivators that reinforced confidence and affirmed the value of their efforts. One participant shared, *“Recognition from the institution boosted my confidence. Maka-feel ka nga worth it imong effort”* (P1). Another noted that research incentives motivated submission, emphasizing that appreciation mattered more than financial reward alone (P2).

Several participants described how recognition gave direction and meaning to their research work. Institutional acknowledgment and promotion-related incentives transformed research into a purposeful and valued activity (P3; P4). Others emphasized that even modest recognition had a significant impact.

One participant shared that recognition during faculty assemblies inspired pride and motivation (P5), while another described public acknowledgment as a source of affirmation (P14).

Participants also highlighted the importance of practical institutional support alongside recognition. Research grants reduced stress and helped sustain projects (P6), while institutional backing provided reassurance and reduced anxiety (P9). These experiences suggest that recognition was most effective when paired with tangible support.

In contrast, some participants emphasized long-term orientation and internal commitment. For these participants, incentives clarified research goals, reinforced the importance of research, or inspired higher aspirations (P11; P13; P15). These perspectives show that recognition functioned not only as immediate motivation, but also as a signal that shaped long-term professional identity and commitment.

Making Sense of the Enablers

From a phenomenological perspective, these enablers were lived as affirming and sustaining experiences that reshaped how academics perceived research engagement. Supportive environments, mentorship, collaboration, professional development, and recognition were not merely external conditions but experiences that transformed research from an isolating burden into a shared and meaningful academic practice.

Viewed through an etic lens, these experiences align with social cognitive theory, particularly the roles of social persuasion, modeling, reinforcement, and mastery experiences in strengthening self-efficacy and motivation. Encouragement, skill development, collaboration, and validation enhanced participants' belief in their research capabilities and sustained engagement.

Organizational culture theory further explains how institutions communicate value through their practices. When research is visibly supported through training, resources, mentoring systems, flexible arrangements, and recognition, institutions create cultures that normalize and sustain research engagement. Together, these perspectives demonstrate that enablers of research engagement are relational, structural, and cultural—serving as foundational forces that allow academics to persist, grow, and remain engaged in research.

Essence of the Experience

Taken together, participants' lived experiences reveal that research engagement is sustained not by individual effort alone, but by environments that guide, affirm, and support academic work. Enablers functioned as steady markers along a demanding journey—providing direction, reassurance, and motivation that allowed academics to continue engaging in research despite challenges.

How do academic staff experience institutional policies and research culture in relation to their research engagement?

What Institutional Life Felt Like

Institutional policies and research culture were experienced by participants as powerful yet often contradictory forces shaping their engagement in research. Rather than functioning as neutral systems, policies and culture were lived as everyday realities that either enabled or constrained participation. Participants frequently likened institutional support to signposts that pointed toward research excellence without always providing a clear or passable path to follow. While policies, incentives, and targets symbolically affirmed the value of research, their practical implementation often fell short within the demands of daily academic life.

Across narratives, participants described a recurring gap between institutional intention and lived experience. Research was encouraged rhetorically, yet constrained structurally by workload pressure, time scarcity, and inconsistent policy enactment.

Reading the Signs: Policies That Encourage but Constrain

Participants commonly acknowledged the existence of institutional policies and incentives that initially conveyed support for research. Many recognized that research targets, incentives, and guidelines provided direction and affirmed the institutional value placed on research. However, these policies were often experienced as difficult to operationalize in practice. One participant shared, *“I experience institutional policies as supportive on paper but challenging in practice. Naay incentives, pero tungod sa heavy workload, lisod gihapon i-prioritize ang research”* (P1). Another emphasized how workload distribution affected engagement, noting, *“Workload distribution affects my research a lot. Kung teaching-heavy ang load, murag research mahimong secondary task ra”* (P2).

Several participants explained that although incentives and targets initially motivated them, this motivation weakened when expectations were not matched by structural support. One participant reflected, *“Research incentives motivated me at first, pero usahay murag dili balanced ang workload ug research expectations”* (P3), while another added that research goals were difficult to achieve without workload adjustment (P10). These accounts show that policies functioned more as aspirational frameworks than as fully enabling mechanisms.

Most participants described institutional policies as well-intentioned yet insufficiently supported by practical conditions. Incentives and recognition were appreciated, as reflected in statements such as *“institutional policies recognize research output”* (P9) and *“research incentives helped me financially”* (P6). Despite this, teaching and operational demands continued to dominate daily academic life. Participants pointed out the absence of protected research time (P5) and emphasized that operational demands consistently took precedence (P9). These shared experiences suggest that policies were effective only when accompanied by realistic workload distribution and flexibility.

A smaller group of participants emphasized that policies still provided clarity and initial motivation, even if sustaining engagement remained challenging. One participant noted, *“Policies help set priorities, pero kinahanglan pa gyud ug flexibility para ma-work ang research”* (P12). Others described policies as both motivating and stressful, explaining that they felt pressure to perform despite structural limitations (P14). These contrasting experiences highlight how policies could inspire engagement while simultaneously generating strain.

Living the Culture: Belonging, Motivation, and Isolation

Beyond formal policies, participants described research culture as a lived social environment that shaped their sense of belonging, motivation, and identity as researchers. Research culture was experienced not through documents or metrics alone, but through everyday conversations, collaboration, recognition, and leadership support. When research was openly discussed, celebrated, and practiced collectively, participants felt connected and motivated. One participant shared, *“Research culture influences my motivation significantly. Kung supportive ang environment, mas gana ko mag-research”* (P1). Another explained that open discussion of research fostered a sense of community, making them feel part of a shared research space (P2).

Collaboration and shared practices were repeatedly identified as defining features of a positive research culture. Participants described how collaboration motivated engagement and reduced isolation, noting that a culture of sharing made research easier and more sustaining (P4). Others emphasized the importance of celebrating research outputs, explaining that recognition created a sense of collective achievement (P9).

Most participants described visible and inclusive research cultures as essential to sustaining engagement. Recognition and inclusion strengthened their sense of belonging, as reflected in statements such as *“research culture affects my sense of belonging—kung naay recognition, mas motivated ko”* (P5) and *“I feel included when research is part of institutional conversations”* (P11). Collaboration was also emphasized as central to positive culture, with participants noting that supportive environments encouraged active engagement (P10; P13).

In contrast, a smaller group described a weak or absent research culture as discouraging and isolating. One participant shared, *“Lack of strong research culture makes research difficult—murag ikaw ra usa ang naga-push”* (P7). Others described feeling isolated when research culture was silent or invisible, explaining that a weak culture lowered motivation and made research feel like a low priority (P3; P12). These experiences highlight how the absence of a shared research culture undermined engagement and confidence.

Negotiating Support and Constraint

When reflecting on both policy and culture together, participants described a dual experience in which institutional environments simultaneously enabled and constrained research engagement. Leadership encouragement, incentives, recognition, and collaborative cultures motivated participation, yet these enabling elements were often offset by heavy teaching loads, unclear workload policies, bureaucratic processes, and inconsistent follow-through.

Participants acknowledged supportive leadership and incentives while also pointing to structural constraints that limited their impact. One participant shared, *“Supportive leadership helped my research engagement. However, lack of workload adjustment hindered it”* (P1). Another explained that clear incentives supported motivation, but inconsistent implementation caused frustration (P2). Others described how recognition and collaboration were undermined by workload and administrative pressures (P4; P5).

Most participants described institutional support as conditional—present in intention but constrained in practice. Mentoring cultures, incentives, recognition programs, and collaborative norms were widely acknowledged as motivating (P3; P11), yet consistently offset by workload pressure and administrative demands (P6; P15). These shared experiences suggest that research engagement was institutionally encouraged but structurally limited.

Some participants emphasized that either culture or policy played a stronger role in sustaining their engagement, depending on context. For some, positive research culture motivated engagement even when policy follow-through was weak (P7). Others highlighted policy clarity as helpful but noted that cultural emphasis on teaching reduced research focus (P10; P12). These variations indicate that sustained engagement depends on alignment across policy, culture, and practice.

Making Sense of Institutional Experience

From a phenomenological perspective, institutional policies and research culture were lived as emotionally and socially charged experiences rather than abstract systems. Participants continually interpreted encouragement and constraint through workload pressure, time scarcity, recognition, and belonging. Research engagement emerged as a process of ongoing negotiation between opportunity and limitation.

Viewed through an etic lens, these experiences align with social cognitive theory, particularly the interaction between environmental reinforcement and personal motivation. Incentives, recognition, and leadership encouragement enhanced confidence and commitment, while inconsistent implementation and workload overload weakened sustained engagement.

Organizational culture theory further explains the symbolic–practical disconnect evident in participants’ narratives. Institutions that promote research rhetorically while prioritizing teaching and administrative operations create cultural contradictions that undermine research continuity. Together, these perspectives underscore that meaningful research engagement requires coherent alignment between institutional policies, cultural values, and everyday academic practices.

Essence of the Experience

Taken together, participants’ lived experiences reveal that institutional policies and research culture function as both enablers and constraints. While symbolic support, incentives, and cultural affirmation encouraged engagement, these efforts remained fragile without practical workload alignment and consistent implementation. Research engagement, therefore, was experienced not as a guaranteed outcome of policy but as a negotiated practice shaped by how institutional intentions were lived in everyday academic life.

Based on the lived experiences of academic staff, what recommendations can be proposed to enhance research engagement in academic institutions?

Proposed Institutional Recommendations to Enhance Research Engagement Based on Lived Experiences of Academic Staff

Rationale

Research engagement is a critical component of academic life, contributing to knowledge production, professional growth, institutional credibility, and societal development. However, the findings of this study revealed that academic staff experience research engagement as meaningful yet fragile—strongly influenced by workload demands, institutional support, research culture, and personal confidence. While many participants expressed intrinsic motivation to engage in research, their ability to sustain this engagement was often hindered by heavy teaching loads, lack of protected research time, inconsistent policy implementation, limited mentorship, insufficient resources, and weak institutional research cultures.

Identified Issue / Barrier	Evidence from Lived Experiences	Proposed Recommendation	Responsible Office / Unit	Expected Outcome
Heavy teaching load and lack of protected research time	Faculty reported research being delayed or abandoned due to teaching, administrative, and committee responsibilities	Implement protected research time and adjust teaching loads during research-active semesters	Academic Affairs Office; Department Chairs	Increased consistency and completion of research outputs
Inconsistent implementation of research policies	Participants noted that policies exist “on paper” but are difficult to implement in practice	Align policy intentions with operational workload adjustments and monitoring mechanisms	Academic Affairs; Human Resource Office	Improved alignment between policy and practice
Limited mentorship and guidance	Academics reported feeling “lost” without senior guidance in writing, publishing, and ethics processes	Establish a formal research mentoring and coaching program	Research Office; Senior Faculty	Improved research confidence, skill development, and publication rates

Fear of criticism, self-doubt, and low research confidence	Participants expressed anxiety, fear of rejection, and perfectionism that hindered engagement	Conduct capacity-building and psychosocial support sessions (writing confidence, reviewer response strategies)	Research Office; Faculty Development Unit	Enhanced self-efficacy and sustained research engagement
Lack of access to resources and funding	Faculty reported difficulty accessing research funds, databases, and tools	Provide small research grants, database access, and research software	Research Office; Library	Improved research quality and feasibility
Administrative and bureaucratic burden	Participants cited delays caused by paperwork and unclear research processes	Streamline research-related procedures (ethics, incentives, reporting)	Research Office; Ethics Committee	Reduced delays and smoother research workflow
Weak or inconsistent research culture	Some faculty felt isolated and unsupported due to limited research conversations and visibility	Institutionalize research forums, colloquia, and sharing sessions	Research Office; Department Heads	Stronger sense of belonging and research identity
Limited recognition of research efforts	Participants reported reduced motivation when efforts were not acknowledged	Implement clear recognition and incentive systems (awards, promotion points, publication incentives)	Administration; HR Office	Increased motivation and research productivity
Emphasis on teaching over research in practice	Faculty perceived research as secondary despite policy emphasis	Balance institutional priorities by integrating research into faculty evaluation systems	Academic Affairs; Quality Assurance	More equitable valuation of teaching and research
Fragmented collaboration opportunities	Academics found research difficult when working alone	Create research clusters and interdisciplinary teams	Research Office; Colleges	Enhanced collaboration and reduced researcher isolation

CONCLUSION

This study examined the lived experiences of academic staff regarding the barriers and enablers that influence their engagement in research within academic institutions using a qualitative phenomenological approach. The findings revealed that research engagement is widely perceived as meaningful, professionally fulfilling, and central to academics' sense of identity and purpose. However, despite its intrinsic value, research engagement was experienced as fragile and highly dependent on institutional conditions, personal confidence, and the presence of supportive research cultures. Academics consistently described heavy teaching workloads, administrative responsibilities, lack of protected research time, and limited access to resources and mentorship as major structural barriers. These constraints were further intensified by psychological and emotional challenges such as self-doubt, fear of criticism, anxiety, and fluctuating motivation, which collectively led to the postponement, interruption, or abandonment of research activities even among motivated faculty members.

Conversely, the study found that research engagement was strengthened when academics experienced consistent mentorship, collaboration, professional development opportunities, recognition, and institutional support. Supportive leadership, access to training and resources, and visible acknowledgment of research efforts enhanced confidence, motivation, and persistence, while a strong and inclusive research culture fostered a sense of belonging and collective academic identity.

Institutional policies and research culture were experienced as having a dual influence: while policies promoting research incentives and productivity symbolically signaled institutional support, their impact was diminished when not aligned with workload realities and daily academic practices. Grounded in Phenomenological Theory, Social Cognitive Theory, and Organizational Culture Theory, this study concludes that research engagement is a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by the interaction of individual experiences, social relationships, and institutional structures. Sustaining meaningful research engagement therefore requires integrated and consistent institutional efforts that align policies, culture, and faculty support systems, enabling academics to contribute effectively to knowledge production, institutional growth, and societal advancement.

Recommendations

Institutionalize Protected Research Time and Balanced Workload Distribution. Academic institutions should allocate protected research time and implement equitable workload policies that balance teaching, research, and administrative responsibilities, ensuring that research engagement is realistically achievable for faculty members.

Strengthen Formal Mentorship and Research Coaching Systems. Institutions should establish structured mentoring and coaching programs that pair novice and experienced researchers to provide continuous guidance in research design, ethics processes, data analysis, writing, and publication.

Expand Capacity-Building and Professional Development Initiatives. Regular training workshops and research development activities should be conducted to enhance faculty research skills while also addressing psychological barriers such as self-doubt, fear of criticism, and research-related burnout.

Enhance Access to Research Resources, Funding, and Infrastructure. Academic institutions should ensure consistent access to research funding, scholarly databases, research tools, and administrative assistance to reduce procedural and resource-related barriers to research engagement.

Cultivate a Supportive and Recognitive Research Culture. Institutional leaders should actively foster a research-oriented culture through recognition programs, collaborative platforms, and visible leadership support that values research as a core academic responsibility.

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