Research Article

Making Meritocracy Work: Institutional Barriers, Competence-Performance Gaps, and Lessons for Capacity Building Institutions in Nepal

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Abstract

Contemporary civil services, in principle, operate on the premise that meritocratic recruitment yields competent officials capable of delivering quality public services. However, officials who outperform competitors during selection often struggle to translate competence into effective administrative performance. This study investigates how experienced Nepali civil servants perceive institutional barriers mediating the relationship between entry competence and administrative performance. Anchored in an interpretivist-constructivist paradigm, the study draws on nine in-depth first-person accounts of serving and retired civil servants, analyzed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis. Results indicate that participants consistently describe institutional constraints, misaligned incentives, political-administrative relations, and bureaucratic socialization as systematic mediators of competence enactment. The paper posits that meritocratic recruitment constitutes a necessary but insufficient condition for administrative effectiveness, and that performance emerges as a property of the institutional ecosystems within which competence is exercised. The findings offer lessons for capacity building institutions in Nepal, suggesting they may consider evolving beyond training delivery to embrace institutional engagement as a means to address the competence-performance gap.

Keywords: meritocracy, competence, performance, capacity building, civil service reform, Nepal

Introduction

The idea of modern bureaucratic governance relies on the foundational institutional assumption that merit-based recruitment produces able, rule-abiding, and administratively efficient public employees. Competitive examinations have since the nineteenth-century reforms of civil service in Britain and the United States become the predominant mechanism of bureaucratic selection across most administrative systems. This model is theoretically grounded in the Weberian conception of rational-legal authority, wherein bureaucratic legitimacy derives from technical expertise, formal regulations, and impersonal meritocratic recruitment rather than patronage or hereditary privilege (Weber, 1978). The normative

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appeal of meritocracy finds substantial empirical support. Bureaucracies characterized by merit-based recruitment demonstrate higher administrative capacity, reduced corruption, and improved policy implementation outcomes (Dahlstrom & Lapuente, 2017; Lewis, 2008). Cross-national studies indicate that meritocratic bureaucracies enhance state capacity by improving epistemics in decision-making and facilitating technical implementation of state policy. However, contemporary comparative governance evidence increasingly complicates this linear assumption, particularly in developing bureaucratic systems where formal meritocracy coexists with persistent institutional underperformance.

Nepal provides a compelling case in point. Longitudinal assessment of governance indicators reveals institutional inertia across corruption, bureaucratic effectiveness, and state capacity dimensions, despite formally merit-based civil service recruitment. Over the period 2021-2025, Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) records only minor fluctuations, with Nepal's scores ranging between 33 and 34 points, maintaining position in the lower half of the 180 countries measured, from around 117th in 2021 to approximately 107th-109th in 2025 (Transparency International, 2025). These minor changes reflect statistical variation rather than substantive improvement in public sector integrity, suggesting structural attitudes toward corruption have not substantially changed despite competitive recruitment. Similarly, the World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI), particularly the Government Effectiveness Index, a proxy for bureaucratic quality and policy implementation capacity, reveal consistently negative scores for Nepal throughout the study period, ranging from -0.67 in 2021 to -0.64 in 2025, with observations through 2024 based on the most recent methodological release (World Bank, 2025). This chronic underperformance indicates enduring structural challenges in bureaucratic capacity and state effectiveness. Further, the Chandler Good Government Index (CGGI), measuring broader state capacity including leadership, institutional effectiveness, and public service delivery, consistently ranks Nepal in the bottom half globally, with positions fluctuating between approximately 88th and 95th from 2021-2025 without significant improvement (Chandler Institute of Governance, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024, 2025).

These indicators collectively present a consistent empirical picture: stagnation in Nepal's administrative system across corruption control, state capability, and bureaucratic effectiveness dimensions, despite formally meritocratic recruitment mechanisms. These aggregate indices provide important national governance context, but they do not by themselves establish that competitively selected officials were competent at entry or subsequently underperformed due to institutional constraints. Rather, they suggest a structural disjuncture between bureaucratic selection procedures and actual administrative performance that warrants investigation.

Civil servants entering through highly competitive examinations demonstrate strong cognitive and analytical competence upon entry, yet often appear to struggle in translating these competencies into sustained administrative effectiveness once embedded within

bureaucracies. This apparent competence-performance disjuncture forms the foundation from which the present study departs. This paper investigates how experienced civil servants perceive institutional barriers that mediate the relationship between entry competence and administrative performance, contributing to the explanation of what may be conceptualized as a competence-performance gap in public bureaucracy. The research is guided by the following question: How do civil servants perceive institutional factors that mediate the relationship between their entry competence and administrative performance?

Extensive literature demonstrates that merit-based selection improves bureaucratic quality, state capacity, and governance performance. Classical and contemporary studies consistently show merit-based civil service systems reduce corruption, enhance administrative capability, and strengthen policy implementation (Evans & Rauch, 1999, 2000; Dahlstrom & Lapuente, 2017; Fukuyama, 2013, 2014). This literature builds on Weberian rational-legal bureaucracy assumptions that competitive recruitment yields superior knowledge, technical skills, and administrative abilities enhancing organizational performance (Weber, 1978). However, despite widespread acceptance of this assumption, mechanisms converting competence into performance remain undertheorized. It is generally assumed that meritocratic recruitment produces competent governance, yet institutional mechanisms facilitating, limiting, or reordering competence once individuals enter bureaucracy have received limited scholarly attention.

Organizational behavior and management scholarship has long established that performance reflects not merely ability but also organizational support, motivation, opportunity structures, incentives, and context (Campbell et al., 1993; Campbell & Wiernik, 2015). Likewise, public administration scholarship highlights public service motivation, leadership, organizational culture, and institutional design in shaping bureaucratic behavior (Perry & Wise, 1990; Rainey, 2009). Yet these insights remain insufficiently integrated with work on meritocratic staffing and bureaucratic performance.

Institutional theory further illuminates this gap. Rules, norms, routines, and culturally embedded expectations shape institutional behavior (March & Olsen, 1989; North, 1990; Scott, 2014). Competence is not an independent source of performance but is expressed through institutional structures shaping which actions are legitimate, rewarded, possible, and politically acceptable. However, research on institutional factors shaping competence has given limited attention to how institutional contexts actively reconfigure competence by shaping perceptions of opportunities, risk, and deployment of capabilities in practice.

The present study contributes to institutionalist explanations of bureaucratic performance by introducing a multidimensional framework for understanding performance as a phenomenon mediated by systems rather than a straightforward function of individual competence. The study presents the following analytical formulation as a sensitizing framework: Performance is a function of Ability, Motivation, Opportunity, Incentives, and Institutional Environment. This formulation is presented as a conceptual heuristic to illustrate the interaction among

multiple determinants of performance, not as an empirically tested or mathematically proven relationship. Competence represents unexpressed potential entering bureaucratic organization, but develops only in response to motivational forces, opportunity structures, incentive systems, and larger institutional contexts. Bureaucratic effectiveness thus emerges not as a summation of individual effectiveness but as an emergent property of organizational and institutional arrangements.

Methodologically, the study employs an interpretivist approach exploring the lived experiences of serving and retired civil servants using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019). This approach reveals how bureaucratic actors perceive, interpret, negotiate, and respond to institutional contexts in daily administrative work. The study makes three contributions to existing scholarship. First, it reconceptualizes bureaucratic performance as a systemic product rather than individual competence, challenging linear and ability-based explanations of bureaucratic effectiveness. Second, it outlines institutional mechanisms that participants describe as mediating the conversion of competence into outcomes. Third, it introduces the notion of institutionally rational underperformance, suggesting actions typically viewed as inefficient may, under specific institutional conditions, represent rational adaptations to environments with asymmetric risk, limited performance autonomy, and low-performance incentives.

Literature Review

Reframing Meritocracy: Beyond Competence-Performance Linearity

Contemporary bureaucratic systems normatively ground themselves in meritocracy, assuming competitive recruitment identifies individuals with high cognitive ability, technical knowledge, and administrative potential. Existing literature identifies merit-based recruitment as among the most effective approaches for achieving better governance outcomes including reduced corruption, increased administrative capacity, and more effective policy implementation (Dahlstrom & Lapuente, 2017; Evans & Rauch, 2000). This tradition rests on an unquestioned assumption that competence, once selected, translates into performance through organizational deployment. This linear assumption is rooted in Weberian rational-legal bureaucracy theory, wherein rule-based structure and hierarchy facilitate predictable and efficient administration (Weber, 1978). Yet accumulating empirical evidence challenges this assumption. Even where meritocratic systems enhance input quality, equally effective outputs do not necessarily follow. Existing literature typically interprets this discrepancy as implementation deficit, thus under-theorizing what constitutes a more fundamental conceptual problem. This paper argues that the competence-performance relationship is neither linear nor contextually contingent, requiring reconceptualization beyond input-centric explanations.

Ontological and Epistemological Foundations of Bureaucratic Competence

Understanding the competence-performance gap requires engagement with philosophical foundations of bureaucratic organization. Bureaucracy ontologically constitutes an

institutionalized social order determined through rules, hierarchies, and embedded normative structures. While Weber's approach emphasizes formal rationality and predictability, subsequent organizational scholarship demonstrates bureaucracies operate through complex interrelationships between formal procedures, informal practices, and culturally embedded expectations. Organizational outcomes thus emerge from relational and systemic processes rather than individual ability alone. Epistemologically, existing recruitment frameworks prioritize codified, cognitive knowledge such as law, economics, and policy analysis as proxies for competence. However, knowledge forms not easily captured by examination-based evaluation, including tacit and experiential knowledge, political judgment and situational awareness, leadership and coordination capacity, negotiation and conflict management skills, remain critical to administrative performance. This constitutes a fundamental dimension of the gap, suggesting epistemic reductionism in bureaucratic selection systems.

Bureaucratic Rationality and Institutional Reconstitution of Action

Organizational scholarships have long recognized limitations of bureaucratic rationality. Weber himself acknowledged formal rationality underlying bureaucratic organizations can generate rigidity inhibiting adaptive action and context sensitivity. Following this understanding, the logic of appropriateness, where action is guided not by instrumental calculation but by conformity to institutional norms and roles, conceptualizes organizational behavior (March & Olsen, 1989). Modern scholarship develops this criticism, demonstrating bureaucracy often prioritizes procedural legitimacy over substantive performance, yielding rule-bound inertia and compliance-oriented behavior (Olsen, 2010; Peters, 2002). Nevertheless, critical analytical gaps remain. Existing literature largely views institutions as background to action without sufficiently describing how institutional settings transform the meaning of competence itself and its relationship to performance. The present research contributes by demonstrating how institutional contexts do not simply limit behavior but reconstitute competence into procedural conformity, thereby altering its operational relevance for performance construction.

Performance in Organizations: Towards Multidimensional Systemic Framework

Organizational behavior literature has consistently criticized ability-based performance models. Campbell et al. (1993) conceptualize performance as a function of multiple interacting determinants including knowledge, skills, motivation, and contextual conditions. Subsequent performance theory development supports this multidimensional perspective (Campbell & Wiernik, 2015). Simultaneously, public administration scholarship highlights motivational principles of bureaucratic conduct. Public service motivation (PSM) research demonstrates intrinsic drivers like commitment to public values significantly influence performance (Perry & Wise, 1990). However, empirical research indicates this motivation remains contingent on environment and attenuates where incentives, autonomy, and procedural flexibility are absent (Perry et al., 2010; Belle, 2013). Evidence increasingly

demonstrates importance of contextual and structural facilitators beyond ability and motivation. Research in public management and organization theory identifies influence of opportunity structures such as discretion, resource access, and decision-making space in translating competence into action (Boyne, 2003; Rainey, 2009). Similarly, performance management literature highlights incentives, feedback mechanisms, and organizational climate in shaping behavioral responses and outcomes (Nielsen, 2014; Moynihan & Pandey, 2007). Despite these developments, literature remains analytically fragmented, with explanatory variables typically examined in isolation rather than as interacting components of broader systems.

Organizational Socialization and Professional Identity Transformation

Substantial literature examines processes by which individuals adapt to organizational settings. Van Maanen and Schein (1979) define socialization as internalization of norms, values, and attitudes. Ashforth et al. (2007) highlight how values, informal norms, peer relations, and cultural expectations shape behavioral norms. Such processes typically create alignment between individual behavior and organizational expectations, often at cost of innovation and discretionary initiative. Bourdieu's concept of habitus provides analytically penetrating theorization of how actors come to perceive and act their roles (Bourdieu, 1990). In bureaucracy, this means conformity becomes not merely strategic but is enshrined as taken-for-granted practice, predisposing actors to system-congruent action and reproducing institutional logics through routine action. This study extends literature by demonstrating administrative socialization does not simply align behavior but reconstitutes competence toward conformity, thus limiting effective use of capability. Street-level bureaucracy scholarship similarly examines how frontline officials exercise discretion and cope with resource constraints, often developing coping mechanisms that deviate from formal policy intentions (Lipsky, 1980). This literature is particularly relevant to findings on constrained agency and strategic effort adjustment.

Political-Administrative Relations and Conditionality of Performance

Bureaucratic-political system relationships have long been central to public administration theory. Evans' concept of embedded autonomy reflects dual bureaucratic imperative: professional competence combined with responsiveness to political authority. Contemporary literature emphasizes bureaucratic action as relational and negotiated, predetermined by political expectations, power structures, and institutional forms (Peters, 2002; Fukuyama, 2013). Empirical research confirms political interference, ambiguity, and shifting priorities can severely limit bureaucratic decision-making (Yang & Pandey, 2008; Meyer-Sahling & Mikkelsen, 2016). While this literature effectively captures political conditioning of bureaucratic action, it has not effectively interrogated interaction of such dynamics on competence and performance realization. This study contributes by demonstrating political environment structures opportunity conditions, thereby determining whether competence is operationalized or remains dormant.

Risk, Accountability, and Structural Production of Defensive Bureaucracy

Growing literature examines role of accountability regimes and risk environments in shaping bureaucratic behavior. Hood (1991, 2011) highlights unintended side effects of increased accountability including risk aversion and defensive administrative behavior. Subsequent studies of defensive bureaucracy imply civil servants choose courses of action minimizing blame exposure (Moynihan, 2012). Principal-agent theory similarly describes impact of asymmetric incentives in promoting risk-averse or risk-minimizing behavior. This study enhances discussion by introducing Accountability-Induced Risk Asymmetry, asserting bureaucratic systems often feature insignificant punishments for non-performance combined with significant but uncertain punitive measures for proactive or innovative performance. This imbalance yields rational behavioral response of risk avoidance, producing institutionally rational underperformance. The concept of institutionally rational underperformance extends the literature on blame avoidance and defensive bureaucracy by specifically highlighting the structural asymmetry between the costs of action and inaction. While blame avoidance focuses on agent behavior, risk asymmetry draws attention to the institutional design that systematically punishes innovation while tolerating non-performance. Risk asymmetry is thus not merely a perceptual phenomenon but a structural feature of accountability systems that can be redesigned.

Comparative Administrative Practices: Institutional Diversity and Performance

Comparative administrative evidence supports this study's central analytical claim: competence-performance relationships are not fixed but highly contingent on institutional configurations. High-performing bureaucracies demonstrate that while meritocratic entry is necessary, effectiveness requires integration with complementary systems: incentives, accountability, and organizational learning. Singapore's civil service exemplifies systematic reinforcement of meritocracy through competitive compensation, rigorous performance evaluation, anti-corruption enforcement, and institutionalized excellence culture, consistently translating competence into high administrative performance (Quah, 2011; Neo & Chen, 2007). What made Singapore's model particularly effective was the alignment of career progression with demonstrated performance, the creation of dedicated administrative service cadre with elite status, and the institutionalization of continuous learning and adaptation. Similarly, New Zealand and Canada prioritize performance management, adaptive learning, and calibrated accountability, enhancing bureaucratic effort-policy performance connections (Schick, 1996; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017).

East Asian developmental patterns provide further testimony to active institutional design for bureaucratic competence realization. South Korea's transformation from weak bureaucracy to effective developmental apparatus during the 1960s-1980s illustrates how insulating technocratic agencies, aligning career progression with developmental achievement, and maintaining strong state-led economic vision can transform previously weak bureaucracies (Evans, 1995; Kim, 2011). Rwanda's post-1994 administrative reforms emphasize performance contracts, technology-enabled monitoring, and centralized

performance discipline in producing rapid state capacity improvements, albeit in highly controlled political environments (Chemouni, 2014; World Bank, 2020). Georgia's post-2003 reforms highlight transformative potential of radical institutional restructuring including dismantling established bureaucratic networks, streamlining procedures, and enforcing strict anti-corruption measures (Bennet, 2011). These cases suggest that coherently aligned institutional environments can activate, maintain, and convert competence into measurable results, although the specific political conditions enabling such reforms vary considerably across contexts.

Comparative evidence from South Asia and other developing settings offers cautionary insights. India, for instance, attracts highly capable individuals through competitive civil service examinations, yet scholarly analyses document persistent bureaucratic challenges attributed to procedural rigidity, politicization, and misaligned incentives (Mangla, 2022). Similar patterns of administrative constraint appear elsewhere, with research on Eastern European civil services highlighting how politicization can undermine merit-based recruitment (Meyer-Sahling & Mikkelsen, 2016). Bangladesh exhibits hybrid conditions with significant sectoral achievements including digital governance initiatives and girls' education improvements often achieved through arrangements partially bypassing traditional bureaucratic routes, thereby compensating for systemic constraints (Mahmud et al., 2008; World Bank, 2016). These patterns indicate competence alone does not ensure effectiveness; performance depends on institutional arrangements enabling or bypassing structural bottlenecks. Less successful reform initiatives demonstrate pitfalls of excessive focus on formal institutional redesign without considering established informal norms and behavioral logics, yielding implementation gaps despite formal compliance (Andrews, 2013). Overload from simultaneous interventions often reduces focus and overburdens administrative systems. Furthermore, technocratic reforms planned outside political realities fail to take root, while donor-driven agendas lacking local ownership produce shallow or temporary effects (Grindle, 2004; Pritchett et al., 2013). These issues convey important lessons: institutional change is technical, political, and context dependent.

Collectively, comparative views enhance this study's theoretical statement. Meritocratic recruitment is necessary but insufficient; it depends on the broader institutional environment. When incentives align, accountability calibrates, and organizational environments enable, competence activates and translates into performance. Conversely, where institutional conditions create constraint, misalignment, and risk asymmetry, systematic competence attenuation occurs. Comparative evidence suggests that the competence-performance gap can be addressed through comprehensive redesign of institutional architecture governing bureaucratic action, although the specific reforms required will vary by context.

Conceptual Framework, Research Gap, and Positioning

Extensive literature addresses institutional constraints, motivation, organizational socialization, politics, and accountability systems. However, analytical gaps persist in three

important aspects. First, existing work lacks integrated frameworks explaining how these factors interrelate to produce performance outcomes. Second, it inadequately theorizes competence transformation in institutional settings. Third, it insufficiently develops risk asymmetry as a systemic cause of underperformance. This paper fills these gaps by incorporating theoretical strands into a multidimensional performance framework, empirically investigating lived experiences of civil servants through reflexive thematic analysis, introducing institutionally rational underperformance as conceptual contribution, and reframing competence-performance relationships as systemically mediated rather than individually determined.

Drawing on these theoretical strands, this study develops the following multidimensional framework as a sensitizing means for qualitative analysis. The ability component encompasses cognitive, attitudinal, behavioral, and technical competencies recruited through meritocratic selection. Motivation denotes inclination to activate this capacity, potentially intrinsic (public service motivation, professional values) or extrinsic (career advancement, recognition). Opportunity represents scope of action in institutional contexts such as formal discretion, resource access, and informal space for initiative. Incentives include reward-sanction structures shaping behavior through formal mechanisms (promotion, appraisal) or informal cues (peer recognition, blame avoidance). Environment encompasses organizational and political context including administrative culture, leadership orientation, and extent of political interference. Performance emerges from the interaction of these components rather than from individual competence alone. The framework is not intended as a testable model or an empirically established relationship but serves to focus analytical attention on the institutional mechanisms that participants describe as shaping their experiences.

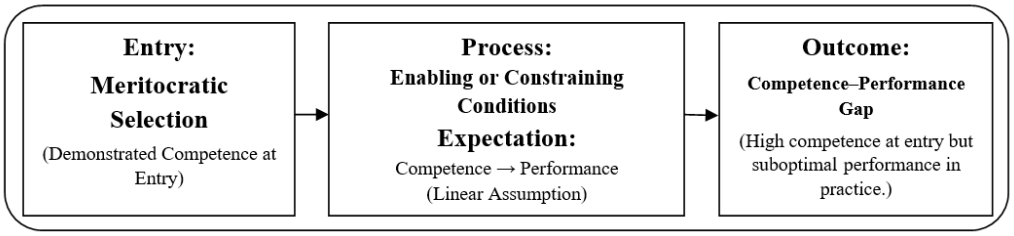

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework Source: Author, 2026

As illustrated in Figure 1, the conceptual framework shows the pathway from meritocratic selection through enabling or constraining institutional conditions to the competence-performance gap. The framework guided the empirical investigation by directing attention to the institutional conditions that participants described as mediating their professional experiences. The enabling or constraining conditions identified through literature and refined through analysis include procedural reconstitution, incentive misalignment, administrative socialization, political conditioning, constrained agency, structural inertia, effort-outcome decoupling, and accountability-induced risk asymmetry.

Study Methods

Philosophical and Methodological Positioning

This study is situated within an interpretivist-constructivist paradigm assuming organizational realities are not objective entities existing independently of actors but are social constructs through interaction, meaning-making, and institutional embeddedness. Bureaucratic performance is treated not as purely measurable output but as experienced, interpreted, and contextually mediated phenomenon influenced by institutional norms, organizational expectations, and political environments. Epistemologically, knowledge is seen as co-construction between researchers and participants. Narratives analyzed are discussed not as objective descriptions of reality but as situated interpretations of experiences. This stance aligns with reflexive orientation described by Braun and Clarke (2019), emphasizing qualitative analysis as interpretive process involving researcher engagement in meaning-making.

Strategy of Inquiry: Reflexive Thematic Analysis

The research employs Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) as formulated by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019). RTA is not mechanistic coding but reflexive, theoretically informed analytic process enabling systematic interpretation of meaning patterns within qualitative data. RTA is selected methodologically for its theoretical flexibility, prefiguration of researcher reflexivity where themes are actively created rather than passively identified, and facilitation of depth analysis enabling exploration of both semantic content and latent meaning structures within participant narratives. Unlike coding reliability techniques prioritizing inter-coder consistency and procedural uniformity, RTA values conceptual consistency, interpretive richness, and analytic transparency.

Ethical Considerations

In accordance with established ethical guidelines for qualitative research, the study adhered to rigorous ethical protocols despite not requiring formal institutional review board approval, as the research topic did not involve vulnerable populations, sensitive personal data, or interventions that would necessitate prior ethical clearance. Nevertheless, all participants were provided with informed consent, which detailed the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, measures to protect confidentiality through composite narratives, and participants' right to withdraw at any time. Given the politically sensitive nature of the topic, additional measures were implemented to safeguard anonymity, including the construction of composite narratives, the removal of identifying details from all accounts, providing participants with the opportunity to review their interview transcripts and request redactions, and securing data storage accessibility only to the research team.

Data Construction and Sampling

Empirical data comprises nine in-depth first-person narratives of civil servants including both serving and retired individuals. Participants were recruited through professional networks and snowball sampling, with initial contacts made through professional associations and personal connections in the civil service. The sample includes five serving officers in mid-level and senior positions and four retired senior bureaucrats with extensive administrative experience. The sample size of nine participants prioritizes depth over breadth and seeks analytical rather than statistical generalization. Participants were purposively selected for their extensive experience and diverse institutional exposure rather than to represent the entire Nepali bureaucracy. The study's findings are therefore presented as analytically generalizable insights that may inform understanding of similar bureaucratic contexts, not as empirically generalizable conclusions about the entire Nepali bureaucracy.

Interviews were conducted in English, with occasional code-switching to Nepali for nuanced expression, and transcribed verbatim. Each participant engaged in 2-3 interview sessions, with each session lasting approximately 90 minutes, allowing for deep exploration of experiences and follow-up clarification. Narratives were constructed through repeated engagement with participants who worked in various administrative settings including district administration, federal and provincial ministries, and policy formulation and implementation positions. Environments feature dense procedural environments, hierarchical decision-making structures, and sustained political engagement.

The semi-structured interview guide included questions such as: How would you describe your experience of transitioning from training to actual administrative practice? What factors enable or constrain your ability to implement what you know? How does the incentive system affect your work motivation? What role do political considerations play in administrative decision-making? How does the accountability system affect your willingness to take initiative?

Participant Characteristics

The participant sample comprised of three retired Secretaries, one retired Joint Secretary, three serving Joint Secretaries, one serving Under-Secretary, and one serving Section Officer. Years of service range from 11 to 35 years, with a mean of approximately 21 years. Two participants were female and seven were male and the functional sectors they represented include Home Affairs, Finance, Education, Health, Agriculture, Energy, and Federal Affairs. This diversity of rank, experience, functional areas, and gender ensures exposure to varied bureaucratic experiences while maintaining analytical focus on common institutional dynamics. Table 1 summarizes participant characteristics:

Table 1: Characteristics of Participants

Participant	Rank	Years of Service	Gender
P1	Under-Secretary	13	Male
P2	Under-Secretary	14	Female
P3	Joint Secretary	18	Male
P4	Joint Secretary	16	Male
P5	Section Officer	11	Male
P6	Secretary	22	Female
P7	Former Secretary	32	Male
P8	Former Secretary	30	Male
P9	Former Secretary	35	Male

Constructed Composite Narratives

Given research sensitivity regarding bureaucratic experiences particularly those involving institutional critique and politics, the study employs constructed composite narratives. These accounts synthesize recurring patterns, phrases, and experiences across participant accounts. This methodology serves dual purposes: protecting confidentiality and ethical safeguards enabling participants to express thoughts without fear of identification, and facilitating analytical abstraction capturing structural and recurrent features of bureaucratic experience rather than fragmentary individual accounts.

The composite narratives were constructed through the following procedure. First, all interview transcripts were thoroughly reviewed to identify recurring patterns, phrases, and experiences across participant accounts. Second, specific verbatim excerpts were selected from individual participants that exemplified these patterns. Third, where necessary, these excerpts were minimally edited for clarity and conciseness while preserving authentic meaning. Fourth, analytical framing paragraphs were crafted to synthesize multiple participants' experiences into a coherent narrative that captures the institutional dynamic under discussion. Importantly, no composite narrative attributed a statement to a participant that no individual participant actually expressed. Each quoted statement is a direct verbatim excerpt from a specific participant, identified by their anonymous participant number, rank, and years of service. The composite narratives provide the analytical context for these excerpts but do not fabricate participant voices.

Analytical Procedure

Analytical process followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework of Reflexive Thematic Analysis. Initial familiarization involved immersion in narratives to detect patterns of meaning, tone, and contextual subtlety. Preliminary coding occurred at both semantic and latent levels. Semantic coding addressed explicit statements about bureaucratic experience, while latent coding addressed underlying assumptions, tensions, and institutional logics present in narratives. Theme construction involved grouping codes into larger groups

representing common patterns of meaning based on theoretical sensitivity ensuring alignment with conceptual framework. Reflexive engagement involved critically interrogating, refining, and reconfiguring emerging themes in consideration of empirical evidence and theoretical constructs. Themes were defined and named reflectively of conceptual importance. Analytical writing was integral to interpretive process where themes were expounded, supported, and integrated into theory.

The following coding framework illustrates how seven analytical themes emerged from the data after consolidation. Initial open codes such as 'rule compliance over substance,' 'procedure as end in itself,' and 'file movement priority' were grouped under the category of procedural reconstitution, which informed the theme of Procedural Reconstitution and Constrained Agency. Codes including 'minimal returns to effort,' 'system does not distinguish performance,' and 'effort adjustment over time' formed the category of motivational flattening, yielding the theme of Misalignment of Incentives and Flattening of Motivational Gradients. Codes such as 'idealism to conformity,' 'learning limits,' and 'not challenging system' constituted the category of normative internalization, informing the theme of Administrative Socialization and Production of Bureaucratic Dispositions. This iterative process, moving between data and theoretical constructs, ensured themes were empirically grounded while analytically meaningful.

Participant-by-Theme Matrix

To enhance transparency, the following matrix in Table 2 shows which participants contributed to each theme. The counts are indicative, not definitive, and do not imply statistical generalizability but provide readers with a sense of theme prevalence within the sample.

Table 2 : Participant by theme Matrix

Theme	Participants Contributing
4.2 Procedural Reconstitution and Constrained Agency	P1, P3, P4, P5, P7, P8, P9
4.3 Misalignment of Incentives and Motivational Flattening	P2, P5, P6, P7, P8
4.4 Administrative Socialization and Bureaucratic Dispositions	P4, P6, P7, P8, P9
4.5 Political Conditioning and Relational Performance	P1, P3, P6, P8
4.6 Structural Inertia and Temporal Regulation	P5, P7, P8
4.7 Effort-Outcome Decoupling	P4, P7, P9
4.8 Accountability-Induced Risk Asymmetry	P1, P2, P5, P7, P8, P9

Trustworthiness and Analytical Rigor

Qualitative rigor is achieved through trustworthiness criteria modified for interpretivist paradigm. Credibility is attained through thick description and prolonged engagement with empirical material and literature. Dependability is provided through transparency in analytical process with theme development clearly documented. Confirmability is addressed

through explicit recognition of researcher's interpretive role, foregrounding reflexivity rather than claiming objectivity. Transferability is attained not through statistical generalization but conceptual generalization whereby analytical insights inform knowledge about similar bureaucratic situations beyond immediate empirical context.

Reflexivity is upheld as critical methodological commitment. The researcher acknowledges positionality as a scholar in the public administration field with prior exposure to Nepal's bureaucratic system. This prior knowledge shaped research design and theoretical framing. The researcher had no prior professional relationship with any participant, and participants were recruited through professional networks rather than personal connections. Assumptions about Nepal's bureaucracy, including the expectation that institutional constraints might mediate performance, were held consciously and critically examined throughout the analysis. These assumptions were tested against participant accounts, and themes were developed iteratively to ensure they reflected participant's experiences rather than researcher preconceptions. The researcher's interpretive role is acknowledged as constitutive of the analytical process, and reflexivity is treated as an analytical tool enabling deeper engagement with data and more sophisticated interpretation of meaning.

Results and Discussion

Putting the Empirical Pattern in Frame: Competence as Capacity to Competence as Conditioned Practice

Empirical analysis reveals a consistent and theoretically consequential pattern: competence, although consistently demonstrated at bureaucratic entry, does not function as autonomous driver of performance according to participants' accounts. Instead, participants described how competence is gradually conditioned, mediated, and reconstituted through interaction with institutional structures, incentive regimes, organizational culture, and political environments. Participants did not describe lack of ability but rather systematic recalibration of conditions under which competence can be exercised and whether exercising it is advisable in any given circumstance. This reframing shifts analytical focus from individual capability to institutional mediation, implying the competence-performance relationship is neither linear nor direct and is structurally produced.

Procedural Reconstitution and Constrained Agency

Participants consistently described how the meaning of competent behavior is not merely controlled by institutional arrangements in bureaucracy but is formed by them. Empirical content suggests what is identified and reinforced as competence definition is filtered by procedural architectures prioritizing rule-following over substantive problem-solving. Competence is not a given quality individuals bring to organizations but is created in context of what organizations make visible, acceptable, and actionable. This is clearly illustrated in narratives emphasizing primacy of procedural acceptability over substantive correctness. According to one mid-career civil servant (Participant 3, Joint Secretary, 18

years of service): *'You may have the best idea, but unless it fits within the file movement system and established procedures, it does not move. It is not about what is right; it is about what is acceptable within the process.'* A retired senior official (Participant 7, Former Secretary, over 30 years of service) further clarified evaluative logic: *'Our system hardly rewards initiative; it only rewards correctness. And unfortunately, correctness is defined procedurally, not substantively.'*

Participants further expressed limited discretionary space, demonstrating agency is bounded by structural constraints. A mid-career officer (Participant 1, Under-Secretary, 13 years of service) reflected: *'You may want to push for change, but the system defines how far you can go. And this, I must say, is a bitter reality.'* Another participant (Participant 3, Joint Secretary, 18 years of service) noted: *'By the time your idea passes through approvals, it is no longer your idea.'* These remarks show bureaucratic actions are refracted through multiple authorization systems and procedural vetting, often resulting in sizing, reshaping, or recasting original ideas. Initiative is subject to change processes losing immediacy and ownership. Individual agencies are channeled into organizational structures where individuality and impact are limited.

Theoretically, this pattern is explained by logic of appropriateness where actors in organizations shape behavior according to rule-consistent norms rather than outcome-maximizing calculations (March & Olsen, 1989). Results align with Weber's formal rationality analysis where bureaucratic systems transform rule compliance into value of its own, often unrelated to substantive goals (Weber, 1978). More recent institutional scholarship implies organizations prioritize procedural legitimacy over instrumental effectiveness, shaping both content and expression of action (Olsen, 2010; Peters, 2002). Institutions do not simply restrain behavior but define possible action sets available to actors. Street-level bureaucracy literature similarly emphasizes how frontline officials cope with resource constraints and procedural demands through various adaptation strategies (Lipsky, 1980). Combined, these views illuminate structural transformation where competence is not just restrained but reformulated as compliance. Analytical implication: individuals are not incapable; rather, institutional definition of competent action limits forms in which ability can be legitimately expressed.

Misalignment of Incentives and Flattening of Motivational Gradients

The second dynamic concerns incentive systems and their deficiency in maintaining motivational differentiation in bureaucracy. Incentive systems do not simply influence individual behavior; they shape intensity and differentiation of effort exerted, ultimately determining whether performance is acknowledged and rewarded. Empirical data reveals systematic erosion of motivational gradients where differences between high and low effort are institutionally silenced. Competence will not produce proportional effort since the system hardly provides feedback rewarding greater effort proportionately. This is exhibited in participant experiences reflecting experiential awareness of minimal returns to discretionary extra effort. A serving

officer (Participant 2, Under-Secretary, 14 years of service) reflected: *'Whether you work beyond expectations or just follow routine, the system does not distinguish much. Over time, you adjust your effort accordingly.'* Another participant (Participant 5, Section Officer, 11 years of service) noted: *'I did not find any strong reason to stretch myself. When you repeatedly realize that the system neither penalizes low performance nor significantly rewards high performance, what is the point of putting extra energy?'*

These narratives indicate what can be analytically defined as motivational flattening, where marginal utility of extra effort approaches zero. Competence is not absent but is moderated strategically; people adjust effort levels to conform to institutional cues that do not reward excellence but only penalize minimum compliance. Outcome is rational effort adjustment where high ability combines with deliberately optimized rather than maximized performance. Theoretically, this motivational flattening resonates with Yang and Pandey's (2008) finding that bureaucratic structure negatively affects normative commitment, suggesting that when employees perceive their efforts are neither recognized nor rewarded within rigid hierarchical systems, their psychological attachment to the organization diminishes progressively. This finding extends public service motivation literature by showing intrinsic motivation is institutionally conditioned and prone to attenuation in environments with weak or non-differentiated incentives (Perry & Wise, 1990). This is particularly significant in non-Western contexts where PSM may interact differently with institutional constraints (Vandenabeele, 2011; Ritz et al., 2016). It aligns with broader critiques of public management regimes emphasizing inadequacy of performance differentiation underpinning behavioral responsiveness and effort allocation (Hood, 1991). From organizational view, this dynamic represents failure of effort-reward connection central to performance theory where motivation to continue depends on perceived significance of effort consequences. This implies that competence requires motivational activation, but institutional arrangements systematically dampen activation, leading to underutilization of available capability and normalization of calibrated rather than optimal performance.

Administrative Socialization and Production of Bureaucratic Dispositions

Participants provided accounts of gradual yet significant shift in work orientation characterized by transformation of initial idealism into pragmatic conformity. Administrative socialization is not simply organizational adjustment but process through which bureaucratic dispositions are produced, stabilized, and reproduced over time. Empirical evidence indicates entry-level orientations, often idealistic, creative, and reformist, are gradually but consequentially changed as individuals enter lived realities of bureaucratic practice. This change is gradual, resulting from continuous exposure to institutional demands redefining what is appropriate, feasible, and professionally prudent. This redefinition is expressed in participant reflections capturing experiential turn from aspirational engagement to pragmatic conformity. A retired senior official (Participant 9, Former Secretary, 35 years of service) reflected: *'In training, we were motivated to think outside the box but as soon as you get into the system, you are soon taught what is acceptable and what is not.'* A mid-career officer (Participant 4, Joint

Secretary, 16 years of service) noted: *'You begin with energy and ideas, but over time you understand the limits. You learn not to challenge the system unnecessarily.'*

These accounts reveal behavioral conformity is achieved not only through formal sanctions or hierarchical control but through informal sanctions, modeling, and implicit reinforcement. Bureaucratic actors become oriented toward institutional survival where prudence, caution, and situational awareness are prioritized over initiative and experimentation. Competence is not abandoned but selectively applied within boundaries regarded as safe and legitimate. Theoretically, this dynamic reflects organizational socialization models describing acquisition of norms and expectations needed for effective role performance (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). Findings extend this perspective by engaging with Bourdieu's concept of habitus as system of durable, transposable dispositions structuring perception and practice (Bourdieu, 1990). Bureaucrats do not simply reflect institutional norms but embody them, reproducing system logic in action.

Political Conditioning and Relational Nature of Performance

Participants described bureaucratic performance as not merely technical function but relational achievement conditioned by political circumstances. Political conditioning proves constitutive of bureaucratic performance, demonstrating effectiveness is not merely technical facility but relational success negotiated within political environments. Empirical data shows bureaucratic action is constantly reviewed regarding changing political expectations, so decision validity rests not only on technical soundness but political acceptability. This relational dynamic is presented in participant accounts prefiguring need for political calibration in administrative practice. A serving senior official (Participant 6, Secretary, 22 years of service) observed: *'A technically sound decision is not always implementable. You must consider how it will be perceived politically.'* A retired bureaucrat (Participant 8, Former Secretary, 30 years of service) noted: *'Let me be clear to you; administrative decisions must align with political expectations to survive.'*

These accounts show bureaucratic competence must be offset by political ideologies and thought processes. Bureaucrats must foresee reactions, handle sensibilities, and position actions strategically within reasonable political limits. Effectiveness cannot be defined merely by analytical rigor but by possibility of converting analytical rigor into politically feasible forms, often requiring compromise, selective framing, or restraint. Theoretically, this finding is explained by Evans' embedded autonomy theory emphasizing dual demands on bureaucrats: technical capability and political responsiveness (Evans, 1995). Analysis indicates more restrictive form where political considerations do not simply limit action possibilities but play more decisive role. This aligns with broader institutional views conceptualizing bureaucratic behavior as relationally organized and contingent on power relations and governance systems (Peters, 2002; Fukuyama, 2013). Analytical implication: performance becomes conditional rather than intrinsic; competence alone is inadequate and must be transformed into politically acceptable action, strengthening dependency of

bureaucratic performance on interaction between administrative expertise and political context.

Structural Inertia and Temporal Regulation of Performance

A recurring theme concerns temporal limits imposed on bureaucratic action. Structural inertia appears as resistance to change and temporal regime dictating speed and direction of bureaucratic action. Empirical material suggests performance is not necessarily limited by rules or hierarchy but by pace of institutional processes restricting performance. Personal effort is utilized in organizational schedules, mostly independent and resistant to acceleration. This temporal conditioning is defined through participant reflections depicting experiential limit of effort. A retired senior official (Participant 7, Former Secretary, over 30 years of service) offered a vivid metaphor: *'Performance in bureaucracy is like running furiously inside a train running at 40 km per hour. No one can reach the destination ahead of the train, no matter how competent we are.'* A serving officer (Participant 5, Section Officer, 11 years of service) noted: *'You can push things faster, but the system processes them at its own speed.'*

These accounts present organizational decoupling between effort intensity and result speed. Individual acceleration fails to produce proportional system-level acceleration, resulting in temporally limited agency. Theoretically, this resembles literature on path dependency and institutional inertia highlighting established routines and historical tracks creating self-reinforcing constraints on organizational change and responsiveness (North, 1990; Peters, 2002). Institutions build systemic velocity where processes cannot easily accelerate without structural change. Analytical implication: performance is time-limited; competence can increase efforts but cannot exceed institutional system processing capacity.

Effort-Outcome Decoupling and Fragmentation of Causality

Participants reported absence of connection between input and observable outcome, indicating break in assumed cause-effect relationship. Results indicate alleged linearity between effort and outcome is repeatedly violated, suggesting bureaucratic performance is characterized by causal indeterminacy rather than causal predictability. A serving officer (Participant 4, Joint Secretary, 16 years of service) observed: *'Sometimes the most effort goes into work that, in fact, never gets implemented.'* A retired bureaucrat (Participant 9, Former Secretary, 35 years of service) reflected: *'Outcomes depend more on system alignment than individual contribution.'*

These reports reveal scenarios where cause-effect relationships are obscured by intervention of multiple factors including procedural layers, organizational dependencies, and changing political priorities. Individual behavior constitutes one of many outcome causes typically diluted or redirected through system-based processes. Disconnection between input and output does not prevent competence but prevents effective operation. Theoretically, this resembles decoupling theories in organizational literature focusing on gaps between organizational

activities and resulting outcomes in complex institutional situations (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Bromley & Powell, 2012). It also relates to public management literature suggesting public sector performance is explained by multiple contingency factors (Boyne, 2003). Analytical implication: where effort and consequence are loosely coupled, rationality of achieving high performance becomes questionable.

Accountability-Induced Risk Asymmetry and Rationalization of Underperformance

A key finding emerging from participant accounts is the perception of asymmetrical accountability systems that appear to change incentive structures of behavior toward risk management rather than performance orientation. Participants consistently referenced environments where consequences of action outweigh consequences of inaction. A mid-career officer (Participant 2, Under-Secretary, 14 years of service) noted: *'If you do nothing, nothing happens to you. But if you act, you risk being questioned.'* A retired senior official (Participant 8, Former Secretary, 30 years of service) reflected: *'The cost of not performing is almost zero, but performing differently can carry serious consequences.'*

These accounts reveal perceived risk asymmetry where institutional arrangements appear to systematically differentiate risk profiles of action and inaction. Participants perceived that non-performance is practically barred from punishment while active or creative action subjects actors to uncertain and frequently penal treatment. Competence is strategically controlled as people consider visibility costs against limited performance rewards. Theoretically, this dynamic extends defensive bureaucracy and principal-agent literature focusing on how accountability pressures and asymmetric information shape agent behavior (Hood, 1991, 2011; Moynihan, 2012). The findings suggest that risk asymmetry is perceived as institutionally generated rather than merely an individual perception, yielding what may be described as institutionally rational underperformance where abilities are controlled to achieve safety rather than effectiveness. While these findings establish participants' interpretations, documentary, observational, or comparative evidence would be needed to substantiate causation.

Integrative Synthesis: Towards Systemic Understanding of Bureaucratic Performance

Collectively, findings indicate a complete reversal from individualistic to systematic approach to bureaucratic performance. Performance cannot be defined by ability to access some internal trait. Rather, performance results from interaction between various institutions. Competence manifested at bureaucratic entry exists in potential form but does not automatically translate into administrative achievements.

The analysis reveals a sequential and interacting process through which competence is attenuated. At first level, competence is procedurally redefined: institutional regulations and formalized procedures redefine problem-solving ability in compliance-oriented terms.

This is followed by motivational attenuation where weak incentive systems flatten returns to effort, undermining willingness to deploy competence beyond minimum thresholds. Simultaneously, normative internalization transforms behavioral orientations as bureaucrats internalize and reproduce organizational expectations toward confirmative rather than initiating behavior. These organizational dynamics are compounded by political conditioning where action viability is conditioned by political expectation alignment. Competence must be redefined to work within relational parameters rather than purely technical terms. Structural bounding restricts individual agency through hierarchy and approval limits diluting direct effect of individual agency. Temporal regulation imposes systemic constraints on action speed and direction. Causal decoupling obscures competence-effort relationships, undermining assumption that competence and effort increase yield proportionate outcomes. All processes culminate in structuring effect of risk asymmetry fundamentally altering action calculus. Where non-performance costs are insignificant and proactive performance risks are significant and uncertain, rational actors are systematically incentivized to avoid risk.

These mechanisms are not isolated but mutually reinforcing. Procedural reconstitution and constrained agency create the institutional environment within which incentives are misaligned, socialization occurs, and risk asymmetry operates. Risk asymmetry compounds the effects of other constraints by making proactive behavior disproportionately costly. The cumulative effect is a systematic transformation of potential competence into institutionally constrained action.

Bureaucratic performance should be thought of as emergent attribute of institutional ecosystem, not direct manifestation of individual ability. The competence-performance gap is not anomalous but structurally generated, reflecting cumulative impact of institutional configurations constraining, reinterpreting, and risk-loading competence enactment.

Conclusion and Implications

This study investigates how experienced Nepali civil servants perceive institutional barriers that mediate the relationship between entry competence and administrative performance. Using an interpretivist-constructivist paradigm and reflexive thematic analysis, the research demonstrates that participants perceive performance not as a natural consequence of individual competence but as a systemically mediated phenomenon shaped by motivation, opportunity, incentives, and institutional environment. Competence is progressively reconstituted through procedural redefinition, motivational attenuation, normative internalization, political conditioning, structural bounding, temporal regulation, causal decoupling, and accountability-induced risk asymmetry. These conditions produce what the study conceptualizes as institutionally rational underperformance, a behavior reflecting rational adaptation to institutional configurations where action risks exceed action rewards rather than individual deficiency. Participants' accounts suggest institutional conditions may

mediate the enactment of competence, and the competence-performance gap is therefore best understood as structurally produced, with bureaucratic performance emerging as a property of institutional arrangements rather than individual capability.

This calls for reorienting bureaucratic performance theorization by challenging linear, ability-based models and proposing a multidimensional interactional framework where performance depends on alignment of institutional variables. The research integrates institutional theory, organizational behavior, and public administration into a unified explanatory framework while introducing accountability-induced risk asymmetry as a theoretical advance linking institutional accountability structures to behavioral outcomes. Conceptualizing underperformance as institutionally rational shifts analytical focus toward structural conditions rather than normative deficiency.

Scholars should pursue comparative and multi-level studies examining how institutional design differences across administrative systems shape competence-performance relationships. Longitudinal studies could illuminate how bureaucratic socialization and institutional incentives influence behavioral trajectories. Risk asymmetry warrants operationalization and empirical testing across accountability regimes. Methodologically, interpretive approaches like reflexive thematic analysis should supplement large-N performance studies.

Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the sample size of nine participants, while appropriate for an in-depth qualitative study, limits the generalizability of findings. The study prioritizes analytical rather than statistical generalization, and findings are presented as insights that may inform understanding of similar contexts rather than as empirically generalizable conclusions about the entire Nepali bureaucracy. Second, the sample is weighted toward senior officials, which may not reflect the experiences of junior civil servants who may face different institutional constraints. Third, the sample includes only two women, limiting gender-based analysis. Fourth, the study is based on a single-country context, and findings may not generalize to other administrative systems with different institutional arrangements. Fifth, the use of composite narratives, while methodologically justified for ethical reasons, limits readers' ability to trace specific claims to specific participants, though the participant-by-theme matrix provides some transparency. Sixth, the study relies on participants' perceptions and recall rather than objective measures of competence or performance. The study has identified perceived institutional mechanisms that participants describe as mediating their professional experiences, but it has not independently measured competence or performance. Finally, the cross-sectional design captures perceptions at a single point in time and cannot establish causal relationships. Future research with longitudinal designs, larger and more diverse samples, and objective performance measures could build on these findings.

Lessons for Capacity Building Institutions

For capacity building institutions in Nepal, the findings suggest several implications. While this study did not directly examine specific training programmes or institutional roles, the evidence on mechanisms that attenuate competence suggests that capacity building institutions may need to expand their focus beyond individual training to include engagement with the broader institutional environment. Participants consistently described how procedural rigidities, incentive misalignments, political pressures, and accountability asymmetries reconstitute competence into constrained action. The findings imply that capacity building institutions could consider a strategic reorientation from training providers to institutional architects across three interconnected domains.

First, in curriculum redesign, institutions might move toward what this study terms institutional literacy, equipping civil servants not merely with technical knowledge but with the capacity to navigate institutional constraints. Drawing on adult learning literature (Knowles et al., 2015), training could incorporate action-learning projects analyzing real constraints, supervisory transfer agreements to enhance workplace application (Baldwin & Ford, 1988), and alumni networks for ongoing peer support. Second, in institutional engagement, institutions might extend beyond individual to systemic capacity building, piloting reforms in incentive structures, accountability regimes, and procedural architectures. Drawing on workplace-support literature (Holton et al., 2000), they could develop coaching and mentoring programs, positioning themselves as laboratories for institutional innovation experimenting with peer recognition systems, performance-based promotions, and feedback mechanisms. Third, in systemic advocacy, institutions might leverage their authority to influence policy dialogue, articulating evidence-based messages that reform efforts narrowly focused on recruitment are insufficient and advocating for comprehensive reform addressing the entire performance ecosystem. The success of capacity building institutions might be measured not by the number trained but by the extent interventions reshape institutional conditions enabling competence to translate into performance, using frameworks including behavioral change assessments and participant tracking (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2006). The competence-performance gap represents a significant governance challenge. The question before capacity building institutions is not whether they can afford transformation, but whether they can afford not to consider this broader institutional role. Even modest steps; institutional diagnostics, alumni networks, or piloting new approaches, could contribute to bridging the gap.

Data Availability Statement

Audit trails data are available upon request, subject to confidentiality and anonymity adherence mentioned in methodology section.

Declaration of Interest

There are no competing interests relevant to this article.

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Declaration of Generative AI Use

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