






# “Building competence through incentives: Professional identity and self-efficacy among Chinese university teachers”

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# BUILDING COMPETENCE THROUGH INCENTIVES: PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY AND SELF-EFFICACY AMONG CHINESE UNIVERSITY TEACHERS

## Abstract

The increasing emphasis on educational quality in higher vocational colleges has highlighted the importance of teachers' professional development and competence. This study aims to investigate the effect of incentives on teachers' competence, with professional identity serving as a mediator and self-efficacy as a moderator variable. A total of 497 Fu Dao Yuan Chinese university teachers filled out the online questionnaires from July 1 to August 31, 2025. The participants are active and have more than 1 year of teaching experience. Structural equation modeling (SEM) was used to examine research hypotheses. The incentive system has a positive effect on teachers' professional identity and competence. Furthermore, incentives positively affect professional competence both directly and indirectly in relation to professional identity. Moreover, self-efficacy plays an inevitable role as a moderator in the relationship among the incentive system, teachers' professional identity, and competence. The results provide evidence of the beneficial effect of incentives in enhancing the effectiveness and efficiency of the education system, particularly teachers' competence. The findings demonstrated that both economic and social values can significantly enhance teachers' professional competence. Furthermore, the university should offer teacher career development and continuous professional development opportunities to support school growth and improve working conditions by providing essential office resources and logistical support.

## Keywords

teachers, incentive, professional identity, professional competence, HRM

## JEL Classification

L84, M14, M31

## INTRODUCTION

Teachers' professional competence is a pivotal factor affecting the quality of education globally (Althubyani, 2024). Some nations encounter inequalities in teacher qualifications, particularly in rural and impoverished regions where teachers are frequently less trained (Symeonidis et al., 2025). The significance of the surveillance process on the educational system and teachers' professional competence is also substantial, including identifying some factors that influence teachers' professionalism (D'Inverno et al., 2025). Consequently, the professional competency of educators necessitates comprehensive measures encompassing initial teacher education, ongoing professional development, and supportive policies (Guo, 2024). Prior studies highlight that teachers play an important role in supporting students' personal development by guiding the learning process and providing resources for academic success, emotional support, and effective teaching practices.

The professional competency of teachers has garnered considerable attention due to the nation's swift educational expansion and reform initiatives. This relevance becomes paramount for enhancing teach-

ers' and students' performance, as dynamic graduate skills and evolving university conditions intensify the demands for responsible action and transparent employment practices. Furthermore, the conventional focus on rote memorization and assessment outcomes occasionally constrains teachers' capacity to implement new and student-centered pedagogical approaches. It demonstrates that teachers' skills and well-being are crucial for enhancing educational quality and equity in developed and developing countries.

Although some scholars have paid attention to this issue, prior studies have overlooked teachers' qualitative aspects, such as their attitudes and motivations for developing competence. Some studies also highlight the distinctions between urban and rural teachers. This disparity suggests that the unique issues faced by rural teachers, such as limited access to resources, isolation from colleagues, and sociocultural factors, are not adequately explored. Discussions have acknowledged the potential influence of incentive systems on teachers' outcomes. However, empirical research has not yet clarified how teachers' professional identity and self-efficacy internalize and translate responsibility-driven practices into their professional competence. In China, the rapid internationalization of education further amplifies this issue, emphasizing the need to understand how teachers elicit responses that underpin their job performance in environments undergoing institutional and cultural change.

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## 1. LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES

The theoretical foundation of incentive measures centers on the concept of motivation, its various types, and their effects on individual behavior and organizational performance (Bandhu et al., 2024). Motivation can be conceptualized as the stimulation of an individual's intrinsic drive through diverse means, propelling them toward the attainment of specific goals and behavioral modifications that enhance performance (Wood et al., 2023). Motivators serve distinct functions within the workplace and encompass elements that can elevate a teacher's motivation, such as a sense of achievement, job content, and opportunities for growth and development, while motivators include salary, benefits, and work environment (Aljumah, 2023). These primarily influence satisfaction but do not directly augment motivation, as they may fulfill basic needs without inspiring individuals to pursue higher-level goals or personal growth (Rokhayati et al., 2024). The motivation theory identifies the essential tiers of human needs that individuals are required to fulfill, encompassing physiological, safety, social, esteem, and self-actualization needs (Alves & Lourenço, 2023). They effectively identify and meet the evolving needs of teachers' professional development to bolster work motivation and satisfaction, including opportunities for skill enhancement, mentorship, and recognition of achievements.

Although compensation and reward-punishment systems are significant, it is vital to emphasize the development of non-material incentive strategies that effectively enhance intrinsic motivation among educators (Vega-Díaz et al., 2024). These intangible incentives encompass professional development training programs and organized recognition systems that offer distinct prospects for career progression (Chi et al., 2023). These metrics not only augment instructors' competencies but also cultivate a more robust professional identity and heightened self-efficacy, which are essential for enhancing teaching quality (Fitzgerald et al., 2024). The incentive mechanism necessitates the integration of theoretical viewpoints and scientific rigor coherence (Hu et al., 2024). Furthermore, the essence of incentive systems can cultivate a motivated, skilled, and professionally fulfilled teaching staff to implement a comprehensive incentive strategy.

Incentives and remuneration are essential elements of motivational frameworks in educational institutions (Li et al., 2022). It is a concrete, practical incentive that satisfies fundamental economic requirements and ensures financial stability. Compensation is frequently considered a principal extrinsic motivator, directly influencing educators' job satisfaction and retention rates (Belay & Melesse, 2024). Attractive pay can draw skilled educators to the teaching profession and diminish turnover rates, thus ensuring a steady and sea-

soned workforce (Paredes & Sevilla, 2024). It can encompass both tangible (e.g., bonuses and promotions) and intangible (e.g., professional development opportunities, recognition, and career growth) elements. Incentives seek to enhance teachers' motivation to satisfy psychological demands, including competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Groenewald & Arnold, 2024). Moreover, effective reward systems acknowledge teachers' contributions, promote ongoing education, and offer avenues for professional advancement, thereby increasing their engagement and dedication.

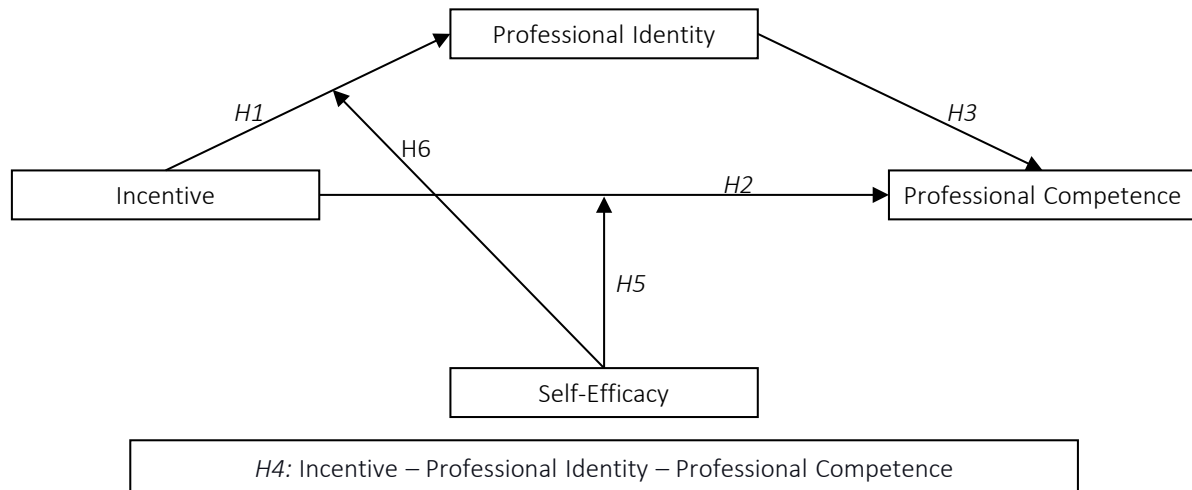
Professional identity pertains to educators' self-perception within their vocational job, encompassing their values, beliefs, and sense of affiliation with the educational community (Zubeidat et al., 2025). The remuneration system promotes a sense of worth and respect, bolstering teachers' self-efficacy and professional identity (Ye et al., 2025). Simultaneously, non-material incentives such as recognition and opportunities for career advancement enhance professional identity by affirming teachers' skills and commitment (Jiang & Ma, 2025). Professional development programs, frequently included in incentive schemes, provide educators with contemporary instructional strategies and subject matter proficiency (Çam & Koç, 2024). This ongoing learning process enhances teaching quality and elevates teachers' confidence and self-efficacy. Salary stability establishes a crucial basis for educators to concentrate on their professional development, free from the concerns of financial instability (Donath et al., 2023).

Teachers can enhance the quality of education by improving the learning process (Ahiaku et al., 2025). The teaching incentive mechanism can maximize the potential of college teachers, mobilize their enthusiasm, and improve their teaching input, ultimately leading to enhanced educational outcomes for students (Meng & Briscioli, 2024). Professional competence is the complete set of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors that teachers need to do their jobs well and with confidence (Hämäläinen et al., 2021). It includes a range of skills, such as being an expert in the subject matter, using effective teaching methods, managing a classroom, communicating well, and meeting the needs of diverse students in changing educational settings (Ye et al., 2025). Such skills

ensure that teachers can create learning experiences that are interesting, welcoming, and beneficial, which helps students do well and feel positive.

Professional identity encompasses how people see themselves and how they reflect on their roles, values, beliefs, and responsibilities in their jobs (Sun et al., 2025). For teachers, professional identity encompasses how they see themselves as teachers, how committed they are to their work, how they feel they belong in the educational community, and how they adhere to ethical and professional standards (Ulla et al., 2024). The emphasis is on individual experiences, social interactions, institutional culture, and ongoing professional development that changes as teachers gain experience, reflect on their work, and adjust educational environments (Groenewald & Arnold, 2024). Building a strong professional identity is important because it affects how teachers feel, what drives them, and how they act in their jobs (Shi et al., 2025). A strong and clear sense of professional identity among teachers helps them be more confident, dedicated, and able to handle the challenges of their jobs. This sense of identity sets the stage for continuous learning and adaptation, which are essential for maintaining high standards in teaching.

Professional identity has an essential role in influencing teachers' professional competence, which is the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors that teachers need to do their jobs well (Pi et al., 2024). A well-defined professional identity enhances comprehension of the teacher's role and responsibilities, encouraging educators to cultivate and enhance their competencies (Han & Yao, 2024). Teachers who have a strong sense of identity with their job are more likely to take part in professional development activities, ask for feedback, and think critically about how they teach (Simon, 2024). This proactive approach enhances instructional strategies, classroom management, and student engagement (Zubeidat et al., 2025), ultimately leading to improved student outcomes and a more positive learning environment. Teachers' professional identity influences their perception of their own abilities, often correlating with self-efficacy (Sun et al., 2025). Teachers who think of themselves as competent professionals are more likely to take the lead in meeting the needs of all their students and trying out new ways of teach-



**Figure 1.** Research framework

ing, which can include implementing innovative instructional methods and actively seeking professional development opportunities. Professional identity and competence are interdependent (Ye et al., 2025). This fosters lifelong learning and professional development, essential for adapting to changing educational requirements (Sun et al., 2022). Professional identity is a key factor in teachers' success because it shapes their motivation, self-efficacy, and desire to keep improving.

Self-efficacy denotes a person's conviction in their ability to effectively execute specific tasks in designated contexts (Sun et al., 2025). This construct directly affects a person's motivation to learn, ability to control their emotions, and choices about how to act (Ulla et al., 2024). In the field of career development, self-efficacy is acknowledged as a pivotal element affecting both career advancement and the improvement of professional skills (Zubeidat et al., 2025). Teachers with high self-efficacy usually stay positive when things become tough, look for ways to solve problems, and are more creative and flexible in their work (Wang et al., 2025). Self-efficacy reflects a person's belief in their capabilities and directly influences their performance on specific tasks (Honicke et al., 2023). Self-efficacy has become a prominent focus of research within the realm of professional development. Wang et al. (2025) and Wood et al. (2023) found that refining mechanisms can significantly boost teachers' self-efficacy and professional competence. Furthermore, Li and Ma (2025) emphasized that self-efficacy

has an essential role in enhancing educational and teachers' performance. This suggests that self-efficacy plays a multifaceted supportive role in professional development. Teachers who have a lot of confidence in themselves are more likely to see rewards as meaningful and possible, which boosts their motivation and strengthens their sense of professional identity.

The purpose of this study is to provide insights into how incentives shape professional identity and competence among Chinese vocational school teachers, emphasizing the moderating roles of self-efficacy. Investigating educators' perceptions and the development of competence in diverse contexts theoretically enriches existing models of teacher professionalism by incorporating socio-cultural and contextual dimensions that are often overlooked in current frameworks. Additionally, including factors like school leadership and policies in the analysis improves models of teacher competency, showing how personal and environmental factors work together. Figure 1 presents the theoretical research model and the proposed research hypotheses.

- H1: Incentive has a positive effect on teachers' professional identity.*
- H2: Incentive has a positive effect on teachers' professional competence.*
- H3: Professional identity has a positive effect on teachers' professional competence.*

- H4: *Professional identity has a positive effect in mediating the relationship between incentive and teachers' professional competence.*
- H5: *Incentive has a positive effect on teachers' professional identity, which is associated with self-efficacy.*
- H6: *Incentive has a positive effect on teachers' professional competence, which is associated with self-efficacy.*

## 2. METHODOLOGY

### 2.1. Research design

Quantitative approach was employed to address the research hypotheses (Figure 1). The study used purposive sampling to collect data from participants who were active and had at least one year of experience as a teacher in a Chinese university from July 1 to August 31, 2025. Respondents were asked to complete a questionnaire with 29 statements designed to gather their perceptions of teachers' incentive system, professional identity, self-efficacy, and professionalism competence. Subsequently, we employed CB-SEM procedures, beginning with the development of research instruments based on theoretical constructs, followed by content validation to ensure that data collection was in accordance with the sampling criteria (Hair et al., 2019). The measurement model was assessed through indicator loadings, composite reliability, Cronbach's alpha, AVE, and discriminant validity using CR.

### 2.2. Measurement development

To ensure validity and reliability, the study adopted statement items from previous research. The teachers' incentive system was adapted from Alkandi et al. (2023); teachers' professional identity from Yan et al. (2023); and teachers' professional competence from Epstein and Hundert (2002). Teachers' self-efficacy was adopted from Klassen et al. (2009). All statements were based on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Four control variables were used: gender, age, experience, and academic qualification. These control variables were included

to gain more specific and detailed comparisons of the results.

Interview transcripts are available from the corresponding author for researchers who meet the criteria for access to confidential data.

Table 1 shows the participants' demographics, which were compiled to ensure transparency and representativeness.

**Table 1.** Frequency analysis results

Demographic Items	Participants Demographic	Frequency	%
Gender	Male	230	46.28
	Female	267	53.72
Age	18–25 years old	5	1.01
	26–30 years old	158	31.79
	31–35 years old	231	46.48
	36–40 years old	58	11.67
	41 years old and above	45	9.05
The number of years you have worked as a Fu Dao Yuan	0–1 year	41	8.25
	2–3 years	97	19.52
	4–5 years	121	24.35
	6–7 years	127	25.55
	8–9 years	37	7.44
	10 years or more	74	14.89
Academic qualification	Bachelor's Degree	138	27.77
	Master's Degree	350	70.42
	Doctoral Degree	9	1.81
Occupation	None	96	19.32
	Assistant Teacher	88	17.71
	Lecturer	276	55.53
	Associate Professor	29	5.84
	Professor	8	1.61

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

All constructs demonstrated significant positive correlations (Table 2); this proves that professional competence, incentive measure, self-efficacy and professional identity have causality direction (Hair Jr et al., 2019).

**Table 2.** Correlation matrix for measurement scales

Constructs	Mean	SD	PS	IM	SE	PI
IC	4.46	0.63	0.784			
PI	4.56	0.74	0.362**	0.796		
SE	4.54	0.67	0.322**	0.417**	0.848	
PC	4.51	0.71	0.360**	0.488**	0.359**	0.791

Note: IC: Incentive; Professional Identity; SE: Self-Efficacy; PC: Professional Competence.

The measurement model (Table 3) was assessed using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to ensure construct validity and reliability. The results demonstrated strong factor loadings for all items (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Cronbach's alpha composite reliability (CR) values were also above 0.800 for each construct, and the average variance extracted (AVE) was all above 0.500, confirming convergent validity. Discriminant validity was evaluated by comparing the square roots of AVE with the inter-construct correlations. The measurement model also demonstrated a good fit to the data with

the following indices:  $\chi^2/df = 2.850$ , CFI = 0.945, TLI = 0.927, and RMSEA = 0.062. These results confirm that the measurement scales were both reliable and valid for further structural analysis.

The structural model (Table 4) was tested using SEM to evaluate the hypothesized relationships among variables. The model fit indices indicated a good overall fit to the data ( $\chi^2/df = 2.910$ , CFI = 0.930, TLI = 0.910, RMSEA = 0.065). All hypothesized paths were statistically significant, supporting the proposed conceptual framework.

**Table 3.** Measurement results

Variables Item Scales	Factor Loadings	$\alpha$	CR	AVE
<b>Professional identity</b>				
QS1: The school provides theoretical and knowledge aspects of ideological and political education.	0.722	0.872	0.972	0.502
QS2: The school provides plenty of training opportunities for teachers.	0.882			
QS3: The technical support of the school is very good.	0.702			
QS4: The teaching equipment is good.	0.860			
QS5: The school provides adequate rest and vacation time for the teachers.	0.709			
QS6: I am satisfied with the arrangement of extracurricular activities.	0.717			
QS7: The school attaches great importance to teachers' professional development.	0.688			
<b>Incentive</b>				
IM1: My working environment is good.	0.823	0.837	0.838	0.536
IM2: I am satisfied with the salary.	0.686			
IM3: My workplace has a prominent role.	0.716			
IM4: My major in the workplace is in line with the major of charge.	0.720			
IM5: I get support and affirmation from the student parents.	0.708			
IM6: I have good teamwork in the workplace.	0.744			
IM7: The teachers' interaction and communication are good.	0.748			
<b>Self-Efficacy</b>				
SE1: I have confidence in my ability to solve problems creatively.	0.858	0.857	0.857	0.630
SE2: I am always successful at persuading others to take my suggestions.	0.792			
SE3: I feel confident when I defend an opinion at work.	0.806			
SE4: When I have to do the talking at work, I always feel enthusiastic.	0.768			
SE5: I have excellent persuasion skills and tactics.	0.776			
SE6: I think I cope with change better than most of those with whom I work.	0.795			
SE7: I believe I will perform well in my job situation following an organizational change.	0.778			
SE8: I am always successful at persuading others to take my suggestions.	0.792			
<b>Professional competence</b>				
PI1: My workplace implements and instructs students in their daily ideological and political education and management work.	0.834	0.852	0.853	0.650
PI2: I can actively assist my colleagues in resolving work-related issues or sharing work tasks.	0.710			
PI3: I can take the initiative to learn knowledge, improve work skills, and learn from others.	0.788			
PI4: I can take the initiative to use my spare time to work or help students solve difficulties.	0.689			
PI5: I will solve the difficulties through study or seeking help.	0.737			
PI6: My workplace can realize my life value.	0.714			
PI7: I can accept new, challenging tasks.	0.718			

**Table 4.** Structural result

Effects	Estimate	Hypotheses	Result
Incentive → Professional Identity	0.360***	H1	Supported
Incentive → Professional Competence	0.380***	H2	Supported
Professional Identity → Professional Competence	0.270***	H3	Supported

Note: Significant at \*:  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*:  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*:  $p < 0.001$ .

**Table 5.** Mediation result

Direct effect	B	T	95% CI
Incentive → Professional Competence	0.411	15.725***	(0.197, 0.290)
Indirect effect	B	SE	95% CI
Incentive → Professional Identity → Professional Competence	0.239	0.043	(0.147, 0.425)

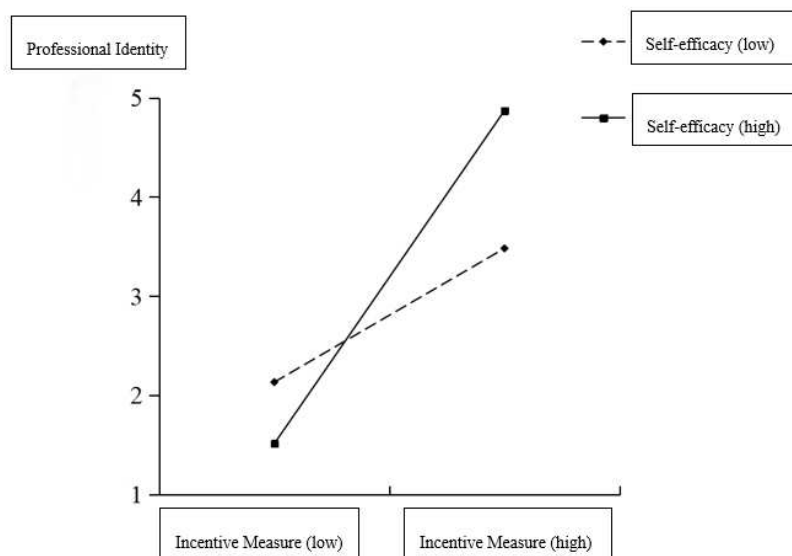
Note: Significant at \*:  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*:  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*:  $p < 0.001$ .

The results in Table 5 present a mediation analysis examining the direct and indirect effects of digital application education and digital literacy on older adults’ life satisfaction toward social connectivity, to assess H4 and H5.

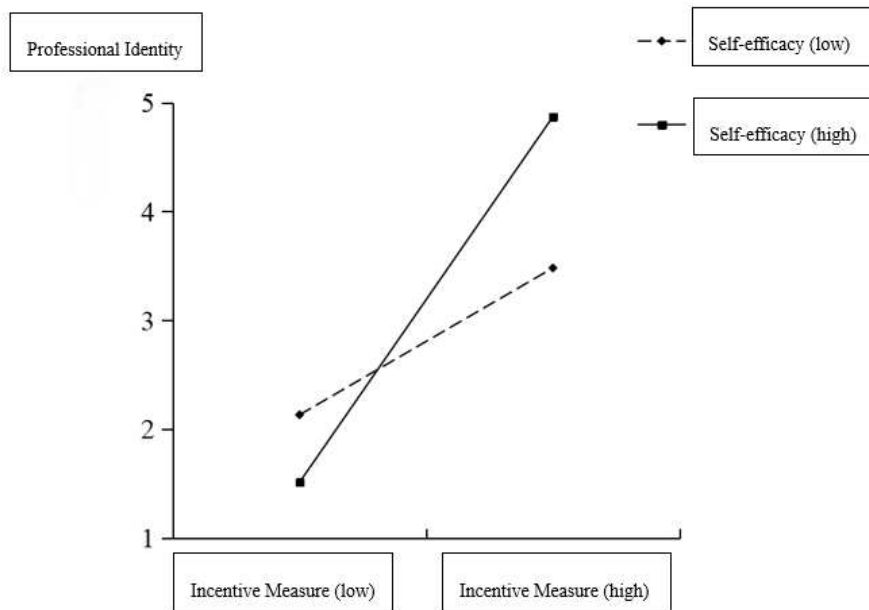
significant positive effect on professional identity ( $\beta = 0.573, p < 0.05$ ). This finding suggests that the incentive system influences professional competence and plays a crucial role in shaping professional identity.

This study constructed two hierarchical regression models (Figures 2 and 3) to examine the moderating effects of self-efficacy on the relationship between incentive and professional competence. Model 1 examined the effect of the incentive. Model 2 added the moderating variable (e.g., self-efficacy). Model 1 found that the incentive measure has a significant positive effect on professional competence ( $\beta = 0.650, p < 0.05$ ), indicating that the incentive system has a statistically significant total effect on professional competence. Model 2 further indicates that the incentive system has a

crucial role in shaping professional identity by influencing teachers’ personal motivations. This result aligns with preliminary studies that found that incentives influence professional identity towards reinforcing the value of professional roles with regard to financial rewards, social recognition, and intrinsic satisfaction (Alves & Lourenço, 2023; Jiang & Ma, 2025; Paredes & Sevilla, 2024; Rokhayati et al., 2024). Furthermore, financial incentives, such as bonuses, salary increases, or promotions, often reinforce the value of professional skills and achievements.



**Figure 2.** Impact of self-efficacy and incentive on professional competence



**Figure 3.** Impact of self-efficacy and incentive on professional identity

When professionals receive tangible rewards for their expertise and performance, it leads to internalizing competence and value. This reinforcement strengthens teachers' professional identity regarding the alignment of self-efficacy and occupational success. Social incentives, including recognition, respect from peers, and opportunities for collaboration, also shape professional identity. Positive feedback and acknowledgment from colleagues and supervisors validate an individual's contributions, fostering a sense of belonging and pride in their profession.

Incentives significantly influence professional competence by motivating individuals to acquire, develop, and apply skills and knowledge essential for effective job performance. This result aligns with preliminary studies that found incentives have a positive and significant effect on employees' and teachers' professional competence (Althubyani, 2024; Hämäläinen et al., 2021). For instance, when individuals understand that their efforts to develop competence will be rewarded monetarily, they are more likely to invest time and resources in training, education, and skill-building activities. This external motivation helps maintain high levels of professional competence and encourages ongoing learning.

Professional identity serves as a critical mediator in the relationship between incentives and professional competence that shapes how individuals internalize and respond to various motivational factors. This result aligns with preliminary studies that found professional identity plays a positive and significant role in mediating the relationship between financial reward and professional competence (Groenewald & Arnold, 2024; Han & Yao, 2024). Professional identity strengthens teachers' commitment to maintaining and improving competence, as they see skill development as integral to professional competence (Hu et al., 2024; Li et al., 2022; Li et al., 2025). Furthermore, a professional teacher who has motivation and ethical standards may not respond positively to purely financial incentives that seem misaligned with education's core values. It enhances learning, skill acquisition, and application, leading to higher professional competence. When incentives support and reinforce professional identity, teachers effectively motivate individuals to develop and sustain professional competence, highlighting the importance of aligning motivational strategies with identity factors in professional development.

Self-efficacy plays a crucial moderating role in the relationship between incentives, professional identity, and professional competence. This re-

sult aligns with preliminary studies that found that self-efficacy has an essential role in bridging personal attitude and behavior, including employees' and teachers' performance (Pi et al., 2024; Shi et al., 2025; Simon, 2024). This means that the strength and direction of how incentives influence professional identity and competence depend significantly on the level of self-efficacy an individual possesses (Sun et al., 2025; Ulla et al., 2024). High self-efficacy enhances motivation by fostering confidence that one can meet the challenges

required to earn these incentives. Consequently, teachers with strong self-efficacy are more likely to internalize incentives in ways that reinforce their professional identity. Moreover, high self-efficacy encourages teachers' proactive behavior toward skill development and competence enhancement, leading them to seek out professional development opportunities and engage in continuous learning to improve their teaching practices. In other words, an incentive system plays a more significant role in promoting teachers' competence.

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## CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to examine how incentives shape teachers' competence, both directly and indirectly, in relation to their professional identity, and to show how self-efficacy moderates the relationship between incentives and teachers' competence. The findings demonstrate that incentives influence teachers' professional competence by strengthening professional identity and self-efficacy. Incentives are pivotal in shaping teachers' professional identity by influencing personal motivations and reinforcing the value of teachers' professional roles. Financial incentives like bonuses or promotions validate teachers' expertise and achievements, enhancing their sense of competence and value. Moreover, professional identity mediates the relationship between incentives and competence. High self-efficacy makes incentives more meaningful and attainable, boosting motivation to develop competence.

The findings demonstrated that both economic and social values can significantly enhance teachers' professional competence. This study extends the scope of application of professional identity theory. It uncovers the partial mediating effect of professional identity between incentive measures and professional competence, thereby further enriching the theoretical applications. It also highlights its pivotal role in mediating the relationship between incentive measures and professional competence toward incorporating self-efficacy as a moderating variable, thereby further extending the theoretical applications of self-efficacy in vocational settings.

The university should offer teacher career development and continuous professional development opportunities to support school growth and improve working conditions by providing essential office resources and logistical support. Professional identity partially mediates the relationship between incentive measures and professional competence. Therefore, higher vocational colleges should strengthen the development of school professional identity through diverse approaches and enhance their sense of belonging to the profession. In addition, universities should adopt diverse strategies to enhance teachers' self-efficacy and career confidence.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Conceptualization: Yi Yin, Nitipon Putachote.

Data curation: Yi Yin, Nitipon Putachote, Junaidi Junaidi.

Formal analysis: Yi Yin, Nitipon Putachote.

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Project administration: Junaidi Junaidi.

Resources: Yi Yin, Nitipon Putachote, Junaidi Junaidi.

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Visualization: Yi Yin.

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Writing – review & editing: Yi Yin, Nitipon Putachote, Junaidi Junaidi.

## ETHICS STATEMENT

The study involving humans was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Rajamangala University of Technology Krungthep, Thailand. The analysis was conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

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