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Faculty Perceptions of the Professional Development Workshops Conducted at Sultan Qaboos University

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Abstract

This study was conducted to analyse the faculty perceptions of the development workshops conducted at Sultan Qaboos University, the only public university in the Sultanate of Oman. Following a needs assessment, a proposed plan for professional development workshops was developed, with the resultant workshops being delivered in 2001. Findings show that most participants positively perceive the components of the workshops, which reflect to some extent, the participants' satisfaction. Qualitative analysis of data shows that the participants see some strengths, weaknesses, and improvements in these workshops. The study summarises the conclusions, implications and recommendations.

Introduction

Professional development is provided through an academic in-service series of workshops designed for higher education faculty members. Since many faculty members in higher education institutions, especially those in majors other than education, complete their degree programs with a deep knowledge of their disciplines, but generally have little or no educational basics of classroom teaching; these workshops were developed to address that gap. Higher education institutions have found it necessary to implement professional development activities to assist faculty in developing the skills and strategies necessary to provide effective instruction (Van Ast, 1999).

Literature Review

Impact on Teaching.

The literature indicates that professional development is closely related to strengthened faculty morale and vitality, improved teaching performance, enhanced research motivation and productivity, and increased job satisfaction and work commitment. It also shows that reflection through self-regulated learning, continuous conversations, collegial partnership, and teacher-teacher dialogue can enhance our understanding of educational development in higher education settings (Kang, and Miller, 2000; Kreber, 2004; Haigh, 2005; Mathias, 2005; Fraser, 2006; Warhurst, 2006, Blackmore and Blackwell, 2006; Penlington, 2008). A review of literature also shows that there were more positive changes among lecturers who had attended more pedagogical courses than among teachers who had not attended them (Postareff, Lindblom-Ylanne and Nevgi, 2008).

Planning and Modes of Provision.

Frey and Overfield (2000) state that prior to implementation, a needs assessment including trainers, clients and managers should be conducted to determine the framework for professional development workshops. Instructional objectives have to be established based on the needs assessment. Following a review of instructional objectives, the workshop should address assessment techniques in the cognitive, affective and psychomotor domains of learning. Professional development workshops may include orientation sessions, seminars or forums, consultations, newsletters or short courses (Pierce, 1996).

Technology Integration.

Professional development workshops presently use technologies such as: e-mail, audio visual aids, bulletin boards, chat rooms and hyperlinks to enhance faculty performance both in traditional on-campus classrooms and in online courses. The use of these technologies to support professional development activities exposes them to techniques that they can use in the classroom (Cyrs, 1997). Some professional development centres ensure they use new methods in order to help faculty and students to incorporate technology in their courses (Cahn, 1999). Shephard (2004) claims that the increasing use and expectations of information and communication technologies to support student learning in traditional universities are leading to a greater need for team-based approaches to support learners. Gentry, Denton, and Kurz (2008) conclude that teachers who accessed the technological resources generally reported having a positive experience, reporting shifts in their attitudes towards instruction and changes in instructional practices. Recent literature finds that blended mode of online follow-up with or without peer interaction positively affected lecturers' attitudes towards the face-to-face professional development program; and that teacher educators are well advised to introduce such approach in their institutions (Green and Cifuentes, 2008).

Challenges and Impediments.

The literature shows that professional development workshops are underdeveloped because of inflexibility to clients' needs, irrelevance to clients' attitudes and lack of financial resources; factors that may inhibit professional development effectiveness (Wallin and Smith, 2005). In a time of tight budgets, however, decision makers can direct their limited resources to areas of professional development that will have the greatest impact on instruction while providing significant support to faculty.

Professional development workshops are also challenged with a lack of strategic planning and little evaluation. According to Murray (1999), many professional development workshops in higher education colleges lack cohesiveness and are better characterised as a mix of loosely connected services. In addition, professional development workshops have failed to inspire lasting pedagogical changes among faculty (Caffey, 1979; Miller and Ratcliff, 1986; Richardson and Moore, 1987; Gamble, 1988; Schuster, 1990; Brawer, 1990; Maxwell and Kazlauskas, 1992). However, Steinert et al. (2006) recently found that overall satisfaction with faculty development programs was high and participants consistently found these programs acceptable, useful and relevant to their objectives. He concludes that participants reported positive changes in attitudes toward faculty development and teaching.

International Practices.

To organise the professional development activities, many American, European, and Middle-Eastern higher education institutions establish training centres on their campuses to 'foster and support excellence in teaching, learning, research and other scholarly activities through a variety of academic endeavours' (CTSE, 2008). Trowler and Bamber (2005) indicate that a number of countries including Sweden, Norway and the UK have considered the introduction of compulsory faculty development for higher education faculty members. They also assess whether such a policy is likely to achieve its aims and the issues that may arise as the policy is implemented. They conclude that while compulsory higher education faculty development may achieve some of its goals, as a standalone policy it is unlikely to achieve them all. In Pakistan, Mohammad and Harlech-Jones (2008) suggest that the collaborative teachers' partnership advances the understanding of teachers' problems, resolves them on the spot and provides teachers with the confidence and courage to transcend the constraints of their workplaces while developing professionally.

Professional development at Sultan Qaboos University

Planning Stage

Sultan Qaboos University (SQU), the only public university in the Sultanate of Oman, responded to the need for professional development when it started in 1995 through individual efforts but has developed a systematic approach by late 2000. Following a needs assessment that covered all SQU faculty members and colleges, a proposed plan for a series of professional development workshops was submitted and approved by the Academic Council of SQU in 2001.

Aims and Objectives

The aim for such workshops was to enhance the quality of teaching and foster a positive learning environment in order to help faculty members carry out their teaching functions effectively, making themselves ready for a growing role and reinforce job satisfaction. The workshops are intended for faculty members to: provide them with information about the university and higher education learning processes; promote their talents for designing learner-centred courses; improve their skills for presenting information and implementing instructional strategies; provide them with support for designing, selecting and utilising appropriate information and communication technologies and instructional media; develop their testing and assessment skills to support student learning; develop

their research skills; and provide them with information on academic advising, supervision and the University credit system (refer also Pierce, 1996).

Implementation Stage.

To achieve these goals, eight training modules have been run as workshops since Fall Semester 2001. Each workshop emphasises a practical approach where the participants are asked to conduct activities and do assignments related to their various majors. Each participant was given a manual that contains further details of all modules at the beginning of each workshop. Although attendance at the workshops was not compulsory, the participants were asked to attend and complete all eight prescribed modules of the workshop. More senior faculty can attend all or part of the workshop. The workshops were attended by junior and newly appointed faculty members, teaching assistants, and demonstrators.

The workshops were delivered by a team of teaching and learning experts who designed the course content and materials. The team of experts comprised instructional developers from the University Instructional Development Unit (UIDU) and other specialists from the Centre of Educational Technology, College of Education and Research and Admissions Deanships. To give the workshops credibility and key support, they were officially opened and ended in the presence of a senior administrator.

At least one workshop was conducted by the UIDU between or within semesters and lasted for 10 days. UIDU ran 2-3 annual workshops for as many as 15 participants in each workshop. Most of these workshops were in English with some conducted in Arabic. Release from duties was granted for participants throughout workshop period and attendance is monitored by the workshops' coordinators. Each participant was given a certificate of attendance and satisfactory completion at the end of the workshop provided that s/he completes the whole package of eight modules.

Evaluation

Participants' reaction was measured through an attitudinal questionnaire designed to assess their satisfaction with the workshop. Data analysed in this paper are drawn from these questionnaires. Other mechanisms set in the original proposed plan include: pre/post tests, observations, video-taped practices, and written reports and assignments. These have been rarely implemented. It was also planned that an international accreditation through an external formal review of the workshop quality must be sought but this has not been implemented yet.

Purpose of the Study

This study was conducted to analyse participants' perceptions of the quality of professional development workshops run at SQU. The study questions are as follows:

1. How do faculty members at Sultan Qaboos University perceive the presentations of professional development workshops?
2. How do they perceive the presenters of professional development workshops?
3. What difference in their knowledge do professional development workshops make?
4. To what extent do professional development workshops meet their expectations?
5. Is there any statistical difference between the participants' perceptions of the presentations/presenters/knowledge acquisition/expectations of professional development workshops and workshop language/specialisation?
6. What are the points of workshops' strengths, weaknesses, improvements, and implications in these workshops as perceived by the participants?

This study is important because feedback on professional development quality is vital to SQU. After seven years of implementation, the time comes when data derived from workshops participants' responses need to be analysed and implications are to be incorporated. Participants perceptions are discussed below to enable us understand their reactions towards the existing series of workshops.

Method

a. Instrument

The main instrument was a questionnaire developed by the UIDU. The questionnaire was first reviewed by some specialists in evaluation and measurement. Then, a pilot survey of the questionnaire was administered to some faculty members. Third, the face validity of the instrument was established by presenting the instrument to a group of referees in the areas of educational technology, educational psychology, and curriculum and instruction. The experts made some modifications and added 3 items. Then the reliability coefficient was measured by α Cronbach and it was found to be 0.87. The final draft of the questionnaire was composed of three sections: (1) the presentation, (2) the presenter, and (3) knowledge acquisition, preceded by general information (the participant's name, specialisation, and workshop language). The first and second sections were Likert type scales and the third composed of two pre/post percentile measuring scales. One more yes/no question was given to know whether the participant's expectations are met or not. The total items of the questionnaire are summarised in Table 1 below. An open-ended commentary space was also provided at the end to allow for any qualitative response.

Table 1. Instrument items

Field	Field's items
The Presentation	7
The Presenter	6
Knowledge Acquisition	2
Expectations	1

b. Subjects of the Study

The population of this study included 160 faculty members representing all professional development workshops' participants at SQU over the years 2002-2005. The questionnaire was distributed to all faculty members and a total of 66 participants returned their questionnaires. This sample represents 41.2% of the total population.

c. Study Design and Data Analysis

In this study, the dependent variable is the professional development workshops quality (in terms of: presentation, presenter and knowledge acquisition) as perceived by faculty responses to the questionnaire items. The independent variables (as posed in the second question) are the specialisation (two levels: science for Colleges of Science, Medicine, Engineering, and Agriculture and Marine Sciences; and art for Colleges of Arts and Social Studies, Education, and Business and Commerce), and the workshop language (two levels: Arabic and English). Some statistical treatments were used to analyse data such as percentages, frequencies, means, standard deviations, and t-test.

Findings and Discussion

The Presentation Items

The participants were asked to rate their perceptions of the items related to presentation using a scale of five categories: strongly agree, agree, undecided, disagree and strongly disagree. Table 2 below shows the descriptive statistics of presentation items.

Table 2. Frequencies, means and standard deviations of the participants' responses to the presentation items (n=66)

Item	Frequencies					Mean*	SD
	SA	A	UN	D	SD		
Concepts/Ideas are clear	35	27	2	1	1	4.42	.766
Concepts/Ideas are new	18	31	9	6	2	3.86	1.021
Concepts/Ideas are applicable in teaching	24	29	11	1	1	4.12	.851
More materials are needed	7	28	14	13	4	3.32	1.098
AV tools/equipment used are helpful	26	33	6	-	1	4.26	.751
Lecturing environment is helpful	32	30	1	2	1	4.36	.797
Time is enough to cover all ideas	16	33	7	8	2	3.80	1.041

*Theoretical Mean between 0-4

Table 2 above shows that the means are between 3.32 and 4.42. This means that most participants perceive the presentation items positively since all the means were above the theoretical mean of 2.5. This finding reflects, to an extent, the participants' satisfaction with these items. However, the presentation materials item received the least mean of 3.32, which indicates that a large number of participants would prefer more handouts and other printed/electronic resources.

In order to shed more light on this finding, two t-tests were conducted for both the workshop language and participants' specialisation variables in relation to their perceptions of the presentations items. Tables 3 and 4 below show the findings of these t-tests.

Table 3. Workshops presentation items t-test for workshop language

Language	n	Mean	SD	t	Sig.
Arabic	34	4.0546	.42058	.477	.635 (NS)
English	32	3.9866	.70953		

Table 4. Workshops presentation items t-test for specialization

Specialization	n	Mean	SD	t	Sig.
Science	30	3.9143	.67174	1.394	.168 (NS)
Art	36	4.1111	.47209		

Tables 3 and 4 above indicate that no significant differences due to either variable exist. This means that neither workshop language nor participants specialisation has an impact on the participants in terms of their perceptions towards the presentation items.

The Presenters Items

The participants were asked to rate their perceptions of the items to do with the workshops presenters using a scale of five categories: strongly agree, agree, undecided, disagree and strongly disagree. Table 5 below shows the items as perceived by the participants.

Table 5. Frequencies, means and standard deviations of the participants' responses on presenters items (n=66)

Items	Frequencies					Mean*	SD
	SA	A	UN	D	SD		
Explaining ideas/information	30	17	7	5	7	3.88	1.353
Designing/Using media effectively	20	24	11	4	7	3.70	1.265
Giving lively/relevant examples	23	27	6	2	8	3.83	1.284
Discussing and questioning	22	28	4	4	8	3.79	1.307
Achieving goals	19	27	11	1	8	3.73	1.247
Evaluating learning	12	33	10	6	5	3.62	1.120

*Theoretical Mean between 0-4.

Table 5 above shows that the means are between 3.62 and 3.88. This means that most participants perceive the presenters items positively since all the means were above the theoretical mean of 2.5. This finding reflects the participants' satisfaction with these items. It could be said, however, that the satisfaction is moderate if compared to the presentation items shown in Table 2. The frequencies show many responses that fall under (undecided), (disagree) and (strongly disagree) categories. Items with the least means were 'evaluation of learning' (3.62) and 'effective use of media' (3.70), both of which are extremely important for the presenters. This suggests the need to equip the presenters with these skills.

In order to shed more light on this finding, two t-tests were conducted for both the workshop language and participants' specialisation variables in relation to their perceptions of the presenters' items. Tables 6 and 7 below show the findings of these t-tests.

Table 6. Presenters' items t-test for workshop language

Language	n	Mean	SD	t	Sig.
Arabic	34	3.7696	1.10098	.085	.933 (NS)
English	32	3.7448	1.27843		

Table 7. Presenters' items t-test for specialization

Specialisation	n	Mean	SD	t	Sig.
Science	30	4.0944	.80430	2.275	.027 (S)
Art	36	3.4769	1.36983		

Tables 6 and 7 above indicate that no statistically significant differences due to either variable exist. This means that neither workshop language nor participants specialisation has an impact on the participants of the presenters' items.

Knowledge Acquisition

The participants were asked to rate the percentage of their prior knowledge to the workshops attended using a scale of eleven percentage categories (from 0% to 100%). Table 8 below lists these items as perceived by the participants.

Table 8. Percentages of the participants' responses on their prior knowledge (n=61)

Prior Knowledge (%)	Frequency*	Percent*
0	1	1.5
10	5	7.6
20	5	7.6
30	4	6.1
40	6	9.1
50	7	10.6
60	9	13.6
70	11	16.7
80	7	10.6
90	6	9.1

*Missing values= 5 (7.6%)

Table 8 above show that most participants' prior knowledge falls between 50% and 80%. This implies that a high degree of prior knowledge. This in turn should make the planners of the workshops aware of the previous knowledge already gained by their workshops' attendees.

To compare the findings of the participants' perceptions of their prior knowledge with their post one, they were asked to rate the percentage of their post knowledge after the workshops attended using a scale of eleven percentage categories from 0% to 100%. Table 9 below lists these items as perceived by the participants.

Table 9. Percentages of the participants' responses on their post knowledge (n=61)

Post Knowledge (%)	Frequency*	Percent*
20	1	1.5
30	1	1.5
40	4	6.1
50	8	12.1
60	1	1.5
70	6	9.1
80	16	24.2

90	18	27.3
100	6	9.1

*Missing values= 5 (7.6%)

Table 9 above show that 51.5% of the participants' post knowledge falls between 80% and 90%. If this percentile ratio is compared to the findings of prior knowledge in Table 8, it could be said that most participants show a considerable improvement in their knowledge acquisition after attending professional development workshops. Further, it is interesting to have 9.1% of the participants claim a 100% acquisition of post knowledge.

Expectations

The participants were asked to answer a yes/no question as to whether the workshops met their expectations or not. Table 10 below lists the findings as perceived by the participants.

Table 10. Percentages of the participants responses on their expectations (n=60)

Response Type	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	54	81.8
No	6	9.1

*Missing values= 6 (9.1%)

Table 10 above shows that 81.8% of the participants perceive that the workshops met their expectations. This again implies high satisfaction with the implementation of the workshops. This finding supports findings shown in Table 3 and Table 5 above.

Qualitative Data Analysis

Out of the 66 participants, 23 participants filled out parts of the open-ended questions. Their comments were analysed qualitatively, categorised and are discussed below.

Workshops Strengths

Some participants commented that the workshops were: "more than expected", "they exceed our expectations" and they were "excellent", "informative", really useful… sure will gain a lot from them". Another participant recommended that: "these workshops should be conducted every year". Still another participant enthusiastically stated: "I'm proud of the work of UIDU and wish I could take part in these developmental workshops".

It seems that professional development workshops at SQU have some strength as perceived by the participants. These could be summarised in three components: the content, relevance and presenter qualities. As discussed in the literature review, this finding is supported by Blackmore and Blackwell (2006) who indicates that the more congruent are the workshops to the participants self perceptions the more successful they become.

Workshops Weaknesses

On the contrary, some weaknesses were traced in these workshops. For example, one participant commented: "nothing new was added to me… I studied most of the materials before". Another participant commented saying: "using information technology for teaching purposes is something that can be explained" expressing his disappointment with the presenter's method of presentation.

From the participants' open-ended comments, it can be concluded that the most significant weakness perceived by the participant is the low performance of some presenters. The planners at UIDU need to

give due concern to the selection of presenters of the highest calibre. This finding also emphasises the need to evaluate the participants' prior knowledge as suggested in the findings shown in Table 8. This might eventually reduce the dissatisfaction expressed in the above comments which address issues such as workshops' inconsistency and inflexibility (Caffey, 1979; Miller and Ratcliff, 1986; Richardson and Moore, 1987; Gamble, 1988; Schuster, 1990; Brawer, 1990; Maxwell and Kazlauskas, 1992; Murray 1999, Steinert et al., 2006).

Suggested Improvement

Table 11 below shows the most important improvements suggested by participants. It seems that the need to link the workshops with the real world is overwhelming. One participant commented: "I expect practice… to see more practice". Another said: "more examples and experience from national/other universities…" Further, the need for brain-storming and thought-stimulating activities is clear as the participants expressed their desire to actively interact within the training environment. The handouts item is also a concern as it was mentioned by 4 participants. This supports the findings in Table 2. A third participant stated: "I thought I would get proper handouts and summaries". As a whole, it could be concluded that the professional development workshops planners need to consider more practical sessions enriched with traditional and electronic resources. This finding is reinforced in the literature (see Kang and Miller, 2000; Kreber, 2004; Haigh, 2005; Mathias, 2005; Fraser, 2006; Warhurst, 2006; Penlington, 2008). Practice may need to include activities such as self-reflection and partnership.

Table 11. Improvements as suggested by participants

Item	No of Responses
More real examples	11
More practical sessions	10
Stimulation of thoughts	5
More handouts needed	4

Research Implications

Reflecting on the experiential evidence of the researcher, the literature reviewed and the findings of this research, the following wider issues are considered.

On the local level:

(1) It seems that SQU needs to give more attention to teaching and learning aspects. There is a need to set up a full-fledged systematic professional development program specifically oriented to teaching and learning development. It should be well integrated within the University mission and policies and administered by a central service with the right calibre of faculty developers. Examples of such central services are available in higher education institutions (see for example CTSE, 2008).

(2) The University also needs to put substantial efforts into teaching research, evaluation and development enhanced with investments in information and communication technologies that effectively serve the professional development programs.

On the international level:

(1) Culture plays a significant role in certain settings. It seems that teaching and learning skills are context-based and they necessitate the development of culturally adapted approaches to the professional development activities. This does not only emphasise the need for more indigenous set of policies and programs but also for specially designed materials and software. Literature

reviewed shows different practices on the international level (Trowler and Bamber, 2005; Mohammad and Harlech-Jones, 2008).

(2) Another phenomenon observed in established face-to-face universities is that transforming the traditional culture of teaching to a technologically-enhanced one is difficult. Face-to-face institutions have to give due concern to the real need and extent to which they would require to adopt new technologies if they continue to support the instructional process with all needed resources in terms of: staffing, money, buildings and equipment. Mechanisms may include the use of team-based approaches to support learners (Shephard, 2004) or blended modes to support lecturers as suggested by Green and Cifuentes (2008);

(3) Adopting technology-based teaching approaches requires more than the technological infrastructure, It requires, more importantly an investment in professional development (Cyrs, 1997; Cahn, 1999; Gentry, Denton, and Kurz, 2008) and employing three factors namely: (a) building awareness and culture to infuse, (b) dissemination activities and (c) adopting innovations, establishing strategies, policies, regulations and quality assurance procedures, and training the faculty members to enable technology transfer.

Summary and Conclusions

In summary, the main result drawn from this study is that the planning efforts at SQU for professional development workshops resulted in a satisfactory implementation of workshops as perceived by the University faculty members. This result supports the work of Postareff, Lindblom-Ylanne, and Nevgi (2008). However, the quantitative findings reveal a more positive view than those revealed by the qualitative ones. Qualitative analysis of data shows that participants see some strengths, weaknesses, and improvements in professional development workshops at SQU. It is interesting that although evidence from literature (see Wallin and Smith, 2005**)** indicates financial limitations can impact on such workshops, these limitations do not seem to have an impact on the case at SQU. This could be attributed to the financial support the University gets from the Omani government.

To conclude, professional development workshops at SQU, although satisfactory to an extent, need improvements in terms of planning (materials selection and distribution; selection of competent presenters; and audience analysis), implementation (flexibility of the program; availability/relevance of materials/resources; and continuous formative feedback), and evaluation (summative/systematic feedback; and continuous review and follow up of materials/resources). Within the scope of these findings, the study recommends: (1) innovative methods to provide materials/resources should be sought, for example using electronic means, (2) selection criteria for presenters to be set and followed, and (3) more qualitative in-depth studies to be conducted on professional development at SQU to investigate related issues in details.

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