

Possibilities and Challenges of providing Continuous Professional Development in Pedagogy for Higher Education Staff in Africa: A case of Makerere University

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Introduction

In recent years, most African governments have reduced their funding of higher education. Makerere University is not an isolated case. For instance, funding from the government has been declining since 1990 and student numbers have escalated. Prior to the 1970s, the university had a small population of about 2000 students. But from 1990, the population rose from less than 10,000 to the current estimated 40,000 students (Planning Department, Makerere University 2003).

This increase in student numbers has created more challenges and attracted public concern about the capacity of Makerere University to provide quality education (Mamdani 2007), given the inadequate facilities, equipment and numbers of teaching staff. This fear points to problems with the curriculum, delivery methods, quality of the teaching staff, as well as the teaching and learning materials.

In an attempt to restructure itself, its paradigm and ways of teaching, Makerere University started offering continuous professional development (CPD) in 2006. This involves changing students' paradigm of learning as well as teachers' paradigm of teaching. Specifically, the training aimed at enabling the teaching staff to accomplish four tasks: (1) gain insights into how people learn in order to structure instruction for optimal learning, (2) formulate course goals/objectives as a starting point for a constructive alignment, (3) choose and structure course content as well as teaching and assessment

methods in relation to course objectives, and (4) choose and adopt interactive teaching methods that stimulate active learning.

Methodology

The data for this paper was drawn from shared experiences of participants and analysis of evaluation forms gathered during CPD workshops. Six CPD workshops involving approximately 200 teaching staff have been conducted for the period 2006-2009. Data from the workshop participants were mainly collected on the first and the last day of the training. In addition, interviews were held with faculty members who missed the training.

Findings

Staff Perception of the Training

The timing of the training was always a problem for the majority of staff due to their busy schedules throughout the year. Four of the training sessions were conducted during students' vacation. However, this is the same period that some staff take annual leave, concentrate on research, and focus on other personal roles.

Second, some teaching staff preferred workshops that are interactive. As one staff member explained: "I have taught for a long time at the university and I have a lot to contribute to the discussion. I do not want a workshop where you sit and listen."

Thus, the training was mainly experiential and interactive. The participants were required to draw on their own experience and also make a systematic literature search so as to gain a deeper understanding on how theory and praxis related to their experience.

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Third, having taught for a long time, some participants felt that training on teaching and student learning was not important. This was evident from the responses of professors. At the beginning of the training, they felt that they already knew what to do. One of the professors commented: "On the first day I thought we were knowledgeable but after the training I discovered I was lacking important skills to deliver my subject matter to the students effectively."

Lynn (2002) suggests that professional development should be provided according to ones' career cycle. This advice suggests that there are variations in needs of experienced and new teaching staff. Nevertheless, with the exception of the last training, newly recruited staff were combined with experienced ones. And during the training, experienced teachers were more willing to share experiences than newly recruited participants.

Discussion of the Lessons Learned and Conclusions:

From workshop experiences, it was clear that teaching staff at Makerere University had good knowledge of the content of their subject areas but many reported problems with the teaching techniques. It was evident that they still have massive training needs. For instance, areas such as e-learning, teachers' ethics and code of conduct in teaching, research supervision skills, and student support were identified. A participant had this to say: "One thing that I would have loved to learn is how to control my emotions and how to handle disrespectful students."

It is also clear that the current training program focused on strengthening teaching is considered less important by the staff because it does not contribute to individual and research development.

Furthermore, the training workshop focused only on what lecturers could do in order to improve quality but not how they can be supported by management to accomplish their work. One participant summarized these concerns as follows: "We do not see lecturer support from management. Where is the input from administrators? Get administrators to attend these trainings."

In the mixed group faculty and staff group, the training ended up acting as a forum for airing out views to the administration. This distracted the training, but it

was an indication that a forum for sharing ideas with the main university administration was lacking.

There were varied reactions on the training's duration. The younger staff preferred a continuous longer period of training while the senior ones wanted shorter periods. While longer trainings would provide time to try out what was learned, it would also require frequent trainings for which resources may not be adequate. Alternatively, trainings could be organized at the faculty level (rather than the university level) where members could share experiences.

There are fewer, if any, professional development courses for university staff compared to teachers at other levels of education. It is probably this tradition that has created a feeling among university staff that professional development courses designed by their university are not important to them. Yet, universities need to organize continuous professional development courses for their staff in order to prepare them for the constant changes. The university should put in place professional development programs and provide them for all newly recruited staff and then periodically to all staff.

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