

Building institutional ICT capacity through a professional development programme

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a report of a professional development (PD) programme which the IED-EA embarked on to build institutional ICT capacity for research, teaching and learning. The PD programme builds on recent research into effective teacher PD activities showing that the key elements are shared practice, talking about, and reflecting on, professional practice, a collaborative and critical approach, time for participation in enquiry-based PD, integration of the personal and professional use of technology with requisite equipment and up-to-date software available for long-term skills development, and responsive support for technology skills training (Daly & Pachler, 2008; Pickering, Daly & Pachler 2007). Responding to participants' own motivations and needs (work-based learning) is far more effective than transmission of information and skills) is also important (Preston & Cuthell, 2007). A key message emerging from the literature is that successful activities require a sustained level of commitment from teachers over time rather than one-off workshops by "experts" (*ibid*; Hennessy et al 2008).

The reconnaissance, effected mainly through observation and a baseline SurveyMonkey (online survey software) questionnaire which was completed by 9 faculty, 2 staff and 34 students, helped to define the areas of focus during our intervention. A series of workshops along with PD activities such as ICT team members working with individual faculty members or students were subsequently planned to assist faculty and students to appreciate and effectively use the range of possibilities that ICT offers in research, teaching and learning environments. A post-intervention survey via SurveyMonkey software was completed by 7 faculty, 5 staff and 37 students provided a tool to gauge participants' experiences during the process.

KEY FINDINGS /MESSAGES

Although the programme has not been concluded as yet, preliminary findings seem to indicate that:

- *The professional development activities seem to have acted as a catalyst for faculty and students to want to acquire more ICT knowledge and skills even in the areas that have been covered in the PD sessions as well as new ones.*
- There seems to be a strong belief among faculty and students that *hands-on activities are crucial in enhancing ICT usage*. They therefore considered that the 1.5-2 hours workshop length was too limited as they wanted more time for hands-on practice after the PD sessions (sometimes during PD sessions).
- PD sessions were fitted within the existing Faculty professional development programme yet both faculty and students were *challenged* when it came to honouring their PD commitments due to their tight work schedules.
- PD sessions participants were of the opinion that the *ICT infrastructure was inadequate* in some aspects e.g. internet connectivity.
- *PD sessions were run by ICT-literate Faculty members, not just technical staff*

- The use of ICT in research was particularly highlighted by participants, confirming that the *PD was offered in a way that valued their research goals*, for example they wanted to use tools for data analysis and internet research and they saw the value of ICT to enhance communication with colleagues.

DISSEMINATION PLANS

The outcomes of this project will be presented at Round Table in Dar es Salaam and submitted to the eLearning Africa annual conference in Lusaka, Zambia, May 2010.

The final report of this action research project will be made available to a wider audience electronically by posting it on the IED-EA website. There are plans to write a paper summarizing the main findings of the project, presented at both international and regional conferences with the view of having it published in peer reviewed journals of international repute.

NEXT STEPS

As noted earlier on, this programme has not yet come to an end. Therefore we hope to embark on a second cycle of this study in early September after finalizing the analysis of the data obtained in the first cycle. Professional development activities will be ongoing, addressing not only those ICT aspects which have been identified by respondents as still wanting but also some new areas will be ventured into.

However, the findings seem to suggest that the PD approach may have to be modified so that it is much friendlier to the tight work schedules and that more time for hands-on, minds-on activities will have to be provided to the participants during and after the PD sessions.

We would also like to try out the PD programme (and survey tools) in other teacher education settings in the East African region to learn about their experiences as they engage with ICTs.