A Comparison of Staff Professional Development Programmes at the First Sino-foreign University in Mainland China and the Largest Vocational and Professional Education and Training (VPET) Institution in Hong Kong

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Abstract. It is critical that the management of tertiary level educators is not compromised by the use of uncalibrated practices. Continuing professional development (CPD) requires staff motivation to be effective. This study investigates the influence of two professional development programmes; one operates at a Sino-foreign university in mainland China and another operates at a vocational and professional education and training (VPET) institution in the Hong Kong Special Administration Region, China. The professional development programme at the university in China has both voluntary and mandatory components and is accredited by the UK Higher Educational Academy. The professional development programme in the VPET institution in Hong Kong involves in-house mandatory training that is not externally accredited. This study is unique in that it is able to investigate the effectiveness of a British professional development intervention in an Asian environment by comparing it to a staff capability-building programme developed by a VPET institution in Hong Kong. Through feedback from semi-structured interviews and questionnaires, staff opinion of both professional development interventions yields insights that can be useful for future proactive professional development strategies in institutions expanding their global outreach.

Keywords: Professional Development; Mandatory Training Programmes; Innovative Approaches to Higher Education Management; Vocational and Professional Education and Training (VPET).

1 Introduction

Teaching staff in universities and vocational and professional education and training (VPET) institutions need to be supported in their career-long continuous professional development (CPD). This is not only important with regards to updating and maintaining skills, but CPD has also been argued to improve staff retention through gains in self-confidence (Redman, 2015). This paper reports on a comparison of two

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CPD programmes: one at the first Sino-foreign university in mainland China, the University of Nottingham Ningbo China (UNNC); and the other at the largest VPET institution in Hong Kong, the Vocation Training Council (VTC).

The rest of this paper is laid out as follows: Section 2 presents the professional development structures of both the VTC and UNNC. Section 3 investigates staff opinion of these structures with the discussion and conclusion presented in Section 4.

2   Background

Teachers' professional development and training are common practices for primary school and secondary school teachers. The Department of Education (DoE) requires new teachers in England's primary and secondary schools to be able to "employ a range of strategies appropriate to the age, ability and attainment levels of pupils; present subject content in clear language and in a simulating manner; demonstrate ability to select and use appropriate resources, including information technology" (Prescott, 1995, p. 3). Teachers must fulfil a certain number of CPD hours for the purposes of enhancing teaching skills and *keeping* themselves abreast of the most up-to date pedagogies and initiatives in education. Teacher training has been recognised as a particular and complex stage of teacher learning (OECD, 2005). A well-designed teacher training programme enables teachers to make changes to their daily practices and influences their teaching efficacy. Studies reveal that on-the-job teacher training further enables the practices of theories in order to enhance teaching skills (Avalos, 2011). However, teacher training and professional development are not always well received in higher, tertiary, vocational and professional education. Studies reveal that some university professors, tertiary and vocational education teachers are hesitant to participate in teacher training and reluctant to use new pedagogies and technologies for learning and teaching (Ng and Cheng, 2015). This is because they are experts and trade specialists with goals to advance knowledge by publishing research papers and to master trade-skills through hands-on practices. Furthermore, perceptions, psychological support and mind set changes are hurdles that hinder the implementation of teacher training in higher, tertiary, vocational and professional education (Ng et al., 2012; Ng and Lam, 2015). With an aim to understand the obstacles and the successful factors in teacher training in the aforementioned education sector, this empirical study compares two professional development programmes that operate respectively at a Sino-foreign university in mainland China and a vocational and professional education and training (VPET) institution in the Hong Kong Special Administration Region, China.

In section 2.1, the hierarchy and committees of VTC will first be introduced to lay down a clear concept of the reporting system on the professional development structure. The history, aims and the enrolment numbers of the teacher professional development programmes over the years are briefly described. In section 2.2, the professional development structure of the University of Nottingham together with its relationship to its branch campus (UNNC) is described and an explanation of the relevant structures that facilitate CPD are provided.
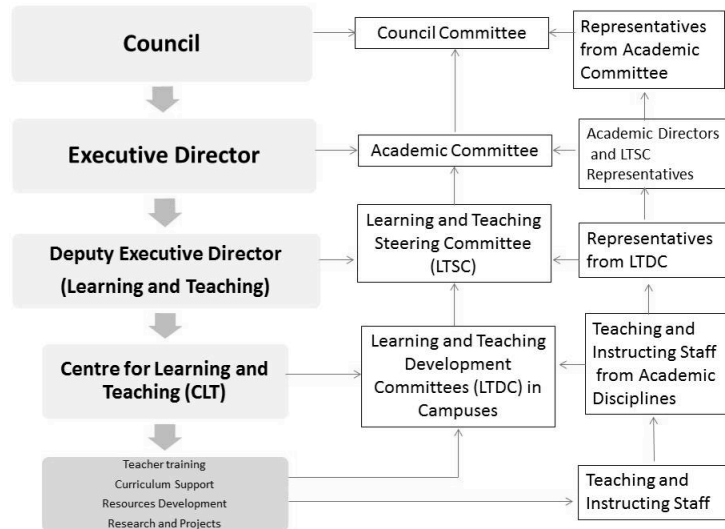
2.1 VTC Professional Development Structure

Council → Council Committee ← Representatives from Academic Committee

Executive Director → Academic Committee ← Academic Directors and LTSC Representatives

Deputy Executive Director (Learning and Teaching) → Learning and Teaching Steering Committee (LTSC) ← Representatives from LTDC

Centre for Learning and Teaching (CLT) → Learning and Teaching Development Committees (LTDC) in Campuses ← Teaching and Instructing Staff from Academic Disciplines

Teacher training
Curriculum Support
Resources Development
Research and Projects → Teaching and Instructing Staff

Fig. 2.1. VTC's Professional Development Structure

2.2.1 VTC's Professional Development Structure

Learning and teaching in VTC is steered by the Deputy Executive Director responsible for learning and teaching. S/he reports to the Executive Director and chairs the Learning and Teaching Steering Committee (LTSC). The learning and teaching initiatives proposed by representatives from the Learning and Teaching Development Committees (LTDC) are endorsed in the LTSC and reported to the Academic Committee for final approval. The Centre for Learning and Teaching (CLT) reports to the Deputy Executive Director responsible for learning and teaching to implement the learning and teaching initiatives. Working closely with LTDCs, CLT provides teacher training, curriculum support, and resource development, and engages in educational research and projects to teach and instruct staff in the VTC. The CLT provides a variety of teaching training programmes that can be categorised as mandatory structured training programmes (including the Introduction to Teaching Programme for New Teachers (ITP) and the Advanced Teaching Programme in Vocational and Professional Education and Training (ATP)), and workshops and seminars on a voluntary basis in the areas of pedagogies and e-Learning amongst others.

2.2.2 Compulsory and Voluntary Professional Development

There are two mandatory teacher training programmes offered by CLT in the VTC. ITP was developed and offered starting from the academic year of 2007/2008. The

programme was offered on a voluntary basis when it was first introduced hence all new teachers were welcome to join the programme. The programme was revised and piloted in the academic year of 2008/2009 to prepare for making it a mandatory requirement. Starting from the academic year of 2009/2010, all new teachers were required to complete the mandatory programme. With a total of 24 notional hours, the six modules in the ITP programmes equips new teachers with the basic teaching, learning and assessment skills to better prepare them for VTC's teaching environment. To further enhance teachers' knowledge in learning and teaching after the ITP, ATP was endorsed at the 24th Learning and Teaching Steering Committee (LTSC) Meeting in January 2017; all newly-recruited full-time teaching and instructing staff from AY2017/18 are required to attend the ATP within the second year of service at VTC, and current teaching and instructing staff with two to five years of teaching experience are required to attend this mandatory programme. ATP is an 18-hour programme that aims to develop an advanced understanding of the pedagogical knowledge and latest developments in vocational and professional education and training (VPET). The ITP and ATP programmes can be regarded as two-year mandatory programmes for VTC's new teachers. There are approximately 200 participants in the two programmes every year. As ITP has been offered for a decade, the survey presented in this study has also served the purpose of a major review for future planning. Hence, feedback on the ITP which focuses on module content and facilitation was analysed.

2.2.3 Voluntary Professional Development

CLT also provides voluntary professional development training for VTC's teaching and instructing staff. The seminars and workshops are in the areas of VPET pedagogies, assessment, e-Learning and Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL). Overseas speakers and guest facilitators are also invited on occasion to deliver current news, information and knowledge in VPET. The seminars and workshops are well received with an average of 5,000 attendees each year.

2.2   UNNC Professional Development Structure

Figure 2.2 shows organisational structure of the University of Nottingham and its branch campus, UNNC. Boxes with broken lines indicate structures that exist on the branch campus.
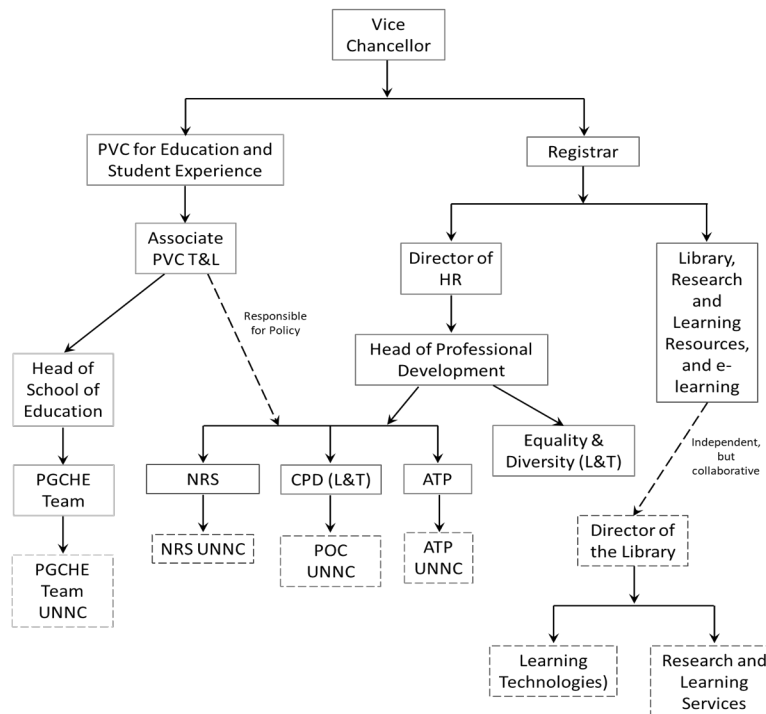
Vice Chancellor

PVC for Education and Student Experience

Registrar

Associate PVC T&L

Director of HR

Library, Research and Learning Resources, and e-learning

Responsible for Policy

Head of School of Education

Head of Professional Development

Independent, but collaborative

PGCHE Team

NRS

CPD (L&T)

ATP

Equality & Diversity (L&T)

Director of the Library

PGCHE Team UNNC

NRS UNNC

POC UNNC

ATP UNNC

Learning Technologies)

Research and Learning Services

Fig. 2.2. University of Nottingham Organisational Structure

2.2.1 UNNC Professional Development Structure

Figure 2.2 shows that the organisational structure depends upon both the Registrar and the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (PVC) for Education and the Student Experience. Under the PVC, sits her associate and the School of Education who supervise a team of academics and administrative staff to deliver the University's Postgraduate Certificate of Higher Education (PGCHE) on both the main campus and at UNNC.

The Registrar's department provides a range of professional administrative services to the University and includes both the departments of Human Resources and Libraries, Research and Library Resources. Within Human Resources, the Professional Development department has oversight over the Nottingham Recognition Scheme (NRS), CPD in Learning and Teaching, the Associate Teachers Program (ATP) and the Equality and Diversity training unit. While the NRS, CPD and ATP initiatives are managed by the Professional Development department they work to the policy and strategy set by the PVC for Education and the Student Experience and are directed by the associate PVC. In each of these cases, UNNC academics collaborate with academics on the UK campus thereby following a coherent strategy.

2.2.2 Compulsory Professional Development

The University of Nottingham expects all newly appointed or promoted teaching staff to gain a qualification recognised by the UK Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). Generally, this will require that staff complete two out of a possible four modules of the PGCHE programme (unless exempt in which case they may voluntarily choose to complete professional development training).

HESA recognised qualifications include qualifications that are accredited against the UK Professional Standards Framework (HEA, 2011) that is maintained by the UK Higher Education Academy[†] (HEA). In 2010, Lord Browne, with a view to enhancing the student experience of higher education in the UK, recommended that all academics with teaching responsibilities undertake teaching qualifications accredited by the HEA and that the option to gain such a qualification be made available to all staff (Browne, 2010). Hence the University of Nottingham aims to align all its professional development with the UK Professional Standards Framework.

2.2.3 Voluntary Professional Development

In addition to completing the entire PGCHE, staff have a number of other options for voluntary professional development, including participating in the Associate Teachers' Programme (ATP), the Nottingham Recognition Scheme (NRS) and the Peer Observation College (POC).

The ATP is open to any member of staff who is teaching on degree programs for at least 30 hours per year, including PhD students. This programme is a taught programme where participants attend multiple workshops that gradually improve their teaching proficiency. The programme is assessed by asking participants to complete a 3000-word teaching development report. It is accredited by the HEA and participants who complete are awarded the title of Associate Fellow of the HEA.

The NRS is a platform that allows staff to follow their own self-directed career professional development and claim recognition. This internal recognition scheme was created to overcome a perceived deficit in the recognition of good teaching practice at the university. Candidates make a claim by submitting either a reflective report or a presentation. The scheme is accredited by the Higher Education Academy and those who make a successful claim will be recognised as Fellows or Senior Fellows, depending upon their expertise, scholarship and scope of impact.

The POC provides benefits to both the university and individuals. It assists schools and faculties in encouraging staff to reflect on the effectiveness of their teaching and supports individuals who wish to develop their teaching to a higher level of proficiency. There is a distinct difference between the operation of the POC at the larger UK campus and at the smaller campus in China. Due to the smaller size of the

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[†] The primary aim of this framework is to: "support the initial and continuing professional development of staff engaged in teaching and supporting learning" (UKPSF, 2011). The framework is part of an ongoing sector wide professionalisation of teaching and learning in the UK.

campus, the POC at UNNC was found to place an unfairly high workload on staff who were requested to be observers due to their competence. Hence, the UNNC POC encourages interschool reciprocal observations where the emphasis is on both parties learning from each other.

2.3   Summary

It can be seen that the VTC and UNNC have very different professional development programmes and supporting structures. The VTC has a more circular structure with substantial avenues for feedback where decision making is facilitated through the use of a number of committees before initiatives are implemented. UNNC relies heavily on guidelines from the UK HEA and utilises expertise from the UK campus; however, initiatives are contextualised to ensure congruence within the smaller campus.

3   Staff Opinion of Professional Development Training

3.1   Survey of VTC's ITP

In the 2016/17 academic year, eight intakes of the ITP were completed, with 106 new teaching and instructing staff enrolled in the programme. 87 staff completed the five taught modules and 69 staff finished the entire programme (M1 – M6 (Part A and Part B)). The numbers of intake, enrolment and completion rates between 2014 and 2017 are listed and compared in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1. Comparison of the Completion Rates of the ITP over Three Recent Academic Years

Academic year	Number of intakes	Number of staff enrolled	Number of staff completing the taught modules (M1-M5)	Number of staff completing the whole programme (M1 – M6 (Part A and Part B))
2014/15	8	152	141	125
2015/16	8	159	138	116
2016/17	8	106	87	69

3.2   Teaching Reflection

The 6th module is based upon teaching reflection. It consists of Part A, Extended Learning Activities (ELAs) and Part B, Teaching Reflection. In Part A, two online activities were designed in a Moodle course module to consolidate and extend the contents learned after the completion of the taught modules. In Part B, participants could opt to either submit a reflective journal or arrange a class observation session with the professional staff of CLT.

3.2.1 Quantitative Survey Feedback

Feedback and comments were collected from the ITP participants through the distribution of questionnaires distributed to the participants at the end of each taught module. The five point Likert Scale questionnaire items included 1) the module was well-structured; 2) the content was relevant and achieved its stated learning outcomes; 3) the module was well-facilitated; 4) the programme provided quality materials and resources; and 5) overall, I am satisfied with this module. The total number of surveys distributed for the five modules was 495 and the total number returned was 486, giving a return rate of 98.2%. With ratings from 4.37 to 4.52 on the questionnaire over the five items, the ITP is considered as well accepted by the participants.

3.2.2 Qualitative Survey Feedback

Participants also provided qualitative feedback regarding module content and facilitators. Extracts from the feedback are listed below.

3.2.2.1 Module Content
Appreciation
- Good to have class discussion and exercise to help us to understand the concepts of the Hong Kong Qualification Framework (HKQF)
- Very informative session and active instructor
- Well organised and emphasised
- The class is useful and practical.
- Too much information to digest but well facilitated
- Good information. Practical, useful.
- Good to have videos and games to help us to better understand the discuss
- Good to have role play to give us experience how to approach students with some emotional problems
- Well elaboration of mental health problems
- Successful provided some methods to handle potentially dangerous students who may commit suicide

Suggested Improvements
- Could add the content of "time management" in active classroom teaching. e.g. especially when teacher need to teach a long hour class (e.g. 3-4 hours) but with few teaching content, how to manage the time to make it feel fruitful
- In order to really address the need of teaching in a real classroom situation, I suggest including group discussion activity to design and make assessment to those students who are really weak at study and cannot reach the criteria
- To include one "real case study" such as how exactly we can manage the day discipline. e.g. real case discussion, method sharing, teacher experience sharing
- More information on this module applied to VTC is more desirable. For example, can share more real case examples happened in VTC
- There is too much focus in the background and theoretic part, minimum information is taught about how to deal with problematic students
- Can add some time for colleague to share their teaching experience in management Special Educational Needs (SEN) students in class
- SEN seems to be a more relevant content to teaching staff
- Video sharing should find some updated resources

3.2.2.2 Module Facilitators

Appreciation
- Impressive, the lecturer is cheerful
- Great delivery of knowledge and information
- Good to recap past lectures and had warm-up activity to start the lecture
- The facilitator could focus on interaction and did motivate students to learn
- The speaker is nice and well-prepared for the lecture and give many examples and clear explanation
- Facilitator was helpful and circled back on positive points
- Very clear explanation and well prepare for the lesson

Improvement
- Should have better structure of content and better time management

3.2.3 Summary

The participants' feedback indicates that they generally appreciated the programme. Upon reflecting on the responses, it can be seen that participants were highly satisfied with the programme. Positive comments and suggestions for improvement on module content and facilitation were received. Participants expressed that both the workshop content and the activities were useful to them. However, there were suggestions to enrich the workshop content by adding topics such as time management and special educational needs (SEN). Findings also review that since VPET teachers place more emphasis on practicability, contextualisation of the learning and teaching theories are important to help cater to their specific needs. The comments also indicated that good facilitation is important to motivating and engaging teachers in the training programme. The facilitators also demonstrated themselves as role models for effective teaching through well prepared resources and the use of interactive activities for rapport building. In conclusion, the well-received programme was the result of a few successful factors: 1) appropriate and contextualised contents that suited the needs of VPET teachers; 2) good facilitation skills and preparedness of the facilitators; and 3) the accumulated reputation and credibility of the ITP.

3.3 Interviews with Staff from UNNC

In an effort to understand staff opinion of their professional development training, semi-structured interviews were conducted after receiving approval from the UNNC Ethics Committee. Two members of staff from each faculty were chosen and the Vice Provost for Teaching and Learning also agreed to be interviewed. Detailed notes were taken throughout the interviews and paraphrases were repeated back to the participants to check for accuracy. Connections and common themes were explored from the collected interviews and it was found that four opinions were prevalent:
- Respondents indicated that they felt that academics are independently minded hence they do not like compulsory professional development.
- Respondents indicated that people are busy and that management need to respect that or they will face resistance to training.
- Respondents indicated that compulsory training can be used for compliance and

not development; however, it was also recognised that teaching staff with fewer qualifications need professional development to be recognised as professionals.
- Compulsory training will not be resented if people believe they require the skills for their job.

These opinions will be elaborated upon below.

3.3.1 Academics are Independently Minded

During the interviews, staff were asked for their experiences engaging with UNNC's professional development and to elaborate on whether the compulsory nature affected their approach to the training. Staff responses to this issue were varied and some expressed strong opinions on the matter:

… I don't like being told what to do, as an academic I want choice over my professional development.

This sentiment was fiercely expressed in some individuals, which was evident when at least one respondent was able to vividly recall being obliged to participate in professional development (that he did not consider relevant) a decade earlier. Being in a managerial position, this informed his current decisions:

… CPD ought to optional, better to push interested people and not push people who are disinterested. This only leads to resentment.

Other respondents who also disagreed with the compulsory nature of the training offered more tempered responses:

… the opportunity of CPD can be seen positively, but it is resented because it is imposed.

Some respondents offered reasons for the resentment of the compulsory training. The most prevalent reason was the waste of time. Either because the training did not seem relevant (see section 3.3.3) or because of constraints on the time required.

… compulsory and therefore resented it because of time constraints. Wants the option to take the training that she wants and needs to prioritise the time.

Some suggestions for improvements were offered by drawing parallels with practices that exist at other universities.

… [anon] university has developmental CPD where each member of staff is given a budget [… this allows…] staff to engage in their own CPD pursuits.

While not every respondent was actively against compulsory CPD, those who had participated in such ventures appeared to hold resentment at having had these experiences and some of these strong feelings had persisted for several years. It was clear that these respondents were not against the idea of professional development; it was considered in a positive light, but they wanted flexibility over how it was implemented and input on how their personal growth could be achieved.

3.3.2 Teaching Staff with Fewer Qualifications need Professional Development

In contrast to the views expressed in the previous section, there were also a number of respondents who held an opposing view.

… The PGCHE ought to be compulsory for everyone […] This helps the individuals and raises the standards of the department.

Here it is seen that the respondent appears to be discounting the personal feelings of the staff involved in the training and focussing on the quality of teaching in the department and the reputation of the course. The sense of duty to the students was also apparent in responses from other members of staff:

> … *Teaching staff with fewer qualifications need CPD in order to be recognised as professionals. This is because teaching is important and because students pay [fees].*

This sense of obligation to improving the quality of practice was apparent in many interviewees and permeated through their responses. However, many staff were firm in their opinions of allowing flexibility in choosing the direction of their professional development. Despite appearing conflicted, some staff appeared to have made an internal compromise on the need for professional development and the flexibility needed to encourage staff to support such initiatives:

> … *CPD ought to be voluntary, but staff ought to be required to do credits every year that are tailored to needs and wants.*

Variations existed between these opinions with some staff proposing a timetable of early compulsory CPD followed by flexible CPD. Generally, staff expressed a feeling that some necessary skill sets are essential to be able to work in a higher education environment and achieving the skill sets ought to be compulsory; however, opinion on the degree of intervention of management when achieving these goals was varied.

3.3.3   Training might not be Considered Developmental

Staff who had reservations about the necessity of compulsory training were eager to elaborate on the reasons for their misgivings. The restriction of time reported in section 3.3.1 was explained by three of the respondents; however, some staff particularly objected to being obliged to attend irrelevant training. Understandably, this raised concerns in their minds regarding the reasons why they might be obliged to attend such trainings:

> … *the University doesn't trust its staff, CPD is used for compliance and not development. Participants believe there is a hidden curriculum and this causes resentment.*

Other respondents shared similar sentiments and indicated that this discouraged them from engaging with the university professional development structures:

> … *Compulsory training is just ticking boxes; however, I put more effort into self-directed training because I chose it.*

> … *Sometimes training is given for the sake of training, […] based on other training that I have been to that has been useless.*

Some staff admitted that their approach to the training may have contributed to the limited benefit that they received from it:

> … *Compulsory, did it reluctantly and didn't benefit from it.*

It is interesting to contrast these comments with staff who are more supportive of compulsory CPD or compulsory elements of CPD within a larger and more flexible framework. Staff who did not agree with any form of compulsory professional development suggested that staff ought to engage in self-directed professional development and if they engage in training that is not relevant then they must take responsibility for those decisions. Other staff indicated that they would be more willing to engage in compulsory professional development if it was accompanied by better explanations:

…Compulsory training needs a better explanation about why you are doing it.
…There ought to be compulsory training for technical systems, people don't resent it if they need it for the job.

If staff attend training and it is not useful for them they will question the reasons for their attendance. There is some indication that the prior mindset of participants who are engaging in training influences outcomes. Hence, management initiatives that are implementing professional development programmes need to provide staff with clear and precise explanations on the need for training and be wary of providing training that does not meet the needs of the staff. If training is irrelevant or prior information is not suitably credible, engagement with professional development systems will diminish. It is possible to force attendance; however, attendance does not guarantee participation.

3.3.4 Summary

It is clear that there are several pertinent issues surrounding implementing professional development in higher education institutions. The issue of implementing compulsory or voluntary training seems relevant in light of the responses given here. Some respondents appear to have a deep-seated resentment at being forced to attend training that was both irrelevant and wasteful of their time; other respondents believe that training is essential for improving the quality of education and maintaining standards in an educational institution.

4   Discussion and Conclusion

In interviews presented in Section 3.3, the majority of participants agree that a degree of flexibility must be embedded into a professional development programme with some staff believing that management and staff ought to agree on the professional development needs. Some accommodation of this is clearly present in the VTC training with feedback from prior years informing current practice and participants complimenting the course organisation.

Some UNNC staff members indicated that compulsory development is desirable in the early stages of an academic's career. However, it is clear that information given prior to training or poor quality training has an impact on the staff who engage with these systems. This is possibly reflected in the comments on VTC's training in Section 3.2, where the participants criticised the course for lacking practical advice for implementing theories into actionable strategies.

Staff appear to be amenable to compulsory training if they have flexibility over their own timetable and that the need for the training is made apparent to the attendee.

Ideally, it seems that the outcomes of professional development ought to be made compulsory and the needs of the staff member together with the expected outcomes of their professional development ought to be negotiated in advance and not dictated to the person engaging with these systems. This requires resources to be made available to participants, including funding for short courses if necessary; unfortunately, institutions may be reticent to adopt such ideas.

Acknowledgements

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