PERCEPTIONS AND FACTORS INFLUENCING LECTURERS' PARTICIPATION IN PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITIES AT A TERTIARY INSTITUTION IN GUYANA

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Abstract: This research used a non-experimental research method to engage full-time lecturers of a tertiary institution in Guyana in a study of perception of factors that influenced their participation in professional development activities. A questionnaire survey was conducted and responses were measured using a modified Likert scale. Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyse the data. The results showed that most of the factors perceived to influence staff members' participation in professional development activities were intra-institutional. There was a significant relationship (χ^2 (3) = 9.092, p < 0.05) between gender and lecturers' interest in professional development activities but no statistically significant relationship (χ^2 (3) = 1.405, p > 0.05) between gender and the opinion of respondents about finances (χ^2 (3) = 1.795, p > 0.05), lack of motivation (χ^2 (3) = 1. 562, p > 0.05) and inadequate rewards and incentives for participating in professional development activities (χ^2 (3) = 5.134, p > 0.05). Implications for the institution were discussed and some recommendations were made.

Keywords: Professional development, factors, full-time academic staff, Guyana.

INTRODUCTION

Given the dynamic nature of the working environment individuals need to constantly improve their professional competence through engaging in professional development (PD) either by improving their academic qualifications, seeking professional certification or participating in workshops and conferences among other learning opportunities. While staff involvement in development programmes is often voluntary it does not always have the participation of those who most need it (Papastamatis, Panitsidou, Giavrimis & Papanis, 2009).

The University of Guyana has a responsibility to play a major role in meeting Guyana's national educational and developmental needs while producing socially responsible graduates. It is therefore essential that as the only national tertiary institution, it must constantly elevate the level and quality of its teaching, learning and research outputs. To do so therefore requires a dynamic, progressive and relevant professional development

programme that recognizes the needs of individuals, the institution and the country. By paying attention to the needs of academic staff, the institution could realize its goals through the provision of professional development (PD) programmes that are accepted by staff and which are supported with the necessary resources.

This study was intended to provide a basis for understanding the factors that influenced full-time academic staff members' participation in professional development activities at the University of Guyana. It was anticipated that the results could serve as a basis for making recommendations to improve the current institutional PD practices.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

A non-experimental research method was used to conduct this study while allowing for a descriptive and exploratory research. The variables studied included gender, academic rank, experience, individual perceptions and the highest level of formal education completed by the staff member. The study population comprised of all two hundred and forty one full-time academic staff from both campuses of the University of Guyana.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study aimed to answer the following questions:

(i)   What are the PD activities that full-time academic staff members deemed to be important?

(ii)   What are the factors that affect the participation of full-time academic staff in PD activities at the University of Guyana?

NULL HYPOTHESIS TESTED

There is no relationship between gender and perception about the factors that affect the participation of University of Guyana academic staff in PD activities.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Questionnaires were distributed to all 241 full-time lecturers using both paper and electronic formats. Follow-up with staff members to collect completed questionnaires took the form of telephone calls, email exchanges and direct visits to staff members' offices. One hundred and seventy-seven (177) or seventy-three percent (73%) of the questionnaires were returned. The questionnaire had instructions to facilitate easy self-administration and was divided into sections as follows: bio-data of academic staff, activities perceived by lecturers to be important to their professional development and factors which were thought to hinder lecturers from participating in PD activities. Responses were measured using a modified Likert scale. The data were entered in the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS)

programme to be analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Cross-tabulation and the Chi Square test of independence at the 0.05 level of significance were used to investigate relationships that existed between variables. A measure of significance, using the student t-test at the 5% level was also conducted. The discussion of results is presented in the following sections.

BIODATA AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITIES LECTURERS DEEMED TO BE IMPORTANT

A summary of the biodata and lecturing experience of respondents is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Biodata and lecturing experience of respondents based on gender

Gender	Experience (Years of experience)			
	1-3 years	4-6 years	7-10 years	>10 years
Female Respondent Count	28	26	17	17
Percentage within category	15.8%	14.7%	9.6%	9.6%
Male Respondent Count	23	12	22	32
Percentage within category	13%	6.8%	12.4%	18.1%
Total Frequency (177)	**51**	**38**	**39**	**49**
Total Percentage (100%)	**28.8%**	**21.5%**	**22%**	**27.7%**

Table 2 indicates respondents' perceptions of activities they deemed important for professional development (PD). The results showed that lecturers displayed a positive attitude towards the identified factors with a Grand Mean and Grand Standard Deviation (M = 2.52; SD = 0.594).

Table 2. Frequencies and descriptive statistics for responses regarding PD activities that full-time academic staff members deemed to be important

Factor	Not important	Important	Very important	Mean	Standard Deviation
1. Sharing experiences and seeking help	.6%	18.6%	80.8%	2.80	.413
2. Peer observation	3.4%	55.4%	41.2%	2.38	.552
3. Observation by Heads of Departments	15.8%	58.2%	26.0%	2.10	.640
4. In-service training (without certification)	2.3%	53.7%	44.1%	2.42	.539
5. Reflective practices	0.6%	13.6%	85.8%	2.85	.371
6. Training programmes (with certification)	4.5%	27.1%	68.4%	2.64	.568

7.	Mentoring	2.3%	20.3%	77.4%	2.75	.483
8.	Team teaching	11.9%	55.4%	32.7%	2.21	.636
Number of respondents for each factor: 177					**Grand Mean**	**Grand Standard Deviation**
					2.52	**0.594**

The results from this study showed that most respondents were of the opinion that reflective practices (M = 2.85; SD = .371), sharing experiences and seeking help from colleagues (M = 2.80; SD = .413) and mentoring of junior faculty by senior faculty (M = 2.75; SD = .483) were very important PD activities. These results are supported by Hoy & Miskel (2008) and Sergiovanni & Starrat (2002) who recognized staff development as an ongoing, intentional and systematic process that has the potential to promote professional growth. Also, Gerard, Varma, Corliss & Linn (2011) reported that time for reflection and refinement, mentoring and collaboration are crucial for successful professional development. Further support is garnered from Gerard, et al 2011, since 176 (99.4%) of respondents felt that collaboration through sharing experiences and seeking help and engaging in reflective practices were important. Team teaching of courses is seen as a form of collaboration. Sharing experiences, peer observation, reflective practices, in-service training, mentoring and team teaching have also previously been identified by Fishman, Marx, Best & Tal (2003) and Penuel, Fishman, Yamaguchi & Gallagher (2007) as 'site-based' or 'curriculum-linked' factors that are important to PD. In addition, reform oriented PD appears to be more effective since it is more in-depth and includes mentoring, coaching, study group activities and internships (Loucks-Horsley, 1998; Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001; and Penuel, et al 2007).

Further, Penuel, et al (2007) and Veenman & Denessen (2001) have recognized that site based PD provides assistance while integrating the use of coaching. The results showed that 171 (96.6%) of respondents deemed peer observation as important and 149 (84.2%) of respondents deemed the process of observation by Heads of Departments as important. This is supported by the work of Sullivan, Buckle, Nicky, & Atkinson (2012) who noted that the value of peer observation is realized largely because it is seen as non-threatening, enhancing the quality of teaching, critical for Faculty development. It may therefore be concluded that collaboration provides an opportunity for individuals to get help from persons who are more knowledgeable and in the process build trust, support relationships, improve collegial interactions and motivate through problem solving and practice (Penuel, et al 2007).

FACTORS INFLUENCING ACADEMIC STAFF PARTICIPATION IN PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITIES

In responding to the items relating to factors affecting participation in professional development (PD) activities respondents used a 4-point scale and the results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Descriptive statistics for factors influencing participation in PD activities

Factors affecting professional development	Mean	Standard Deviation
1. Limited personal finances	3.71	.537
2. Limited institutional finances	3.71	.537
3. Large class sizes	3.27	.787
4. Limited collaboration among lecturers	3.06	.716
5. Lack of self-motivation	2.74	.866
6. Limited opportunities locally for presentation of research findings	3.02	.808
7. Limited opportunities to participate in international conferences/seminars	3.38	.698
8. Limited institutional support for professional development	3.30	.653
9. Lack of interest in professional development by lecturers	2.31	1.016
10. Lack of mentoring for junior lecturers	3.21	.674
11. Failure to engage in reflective practices.	2.82	.847
12. Inadequate student feedback	3.14	.796
13. Inadequate time for professional development activities	3.12	.759
14. Inadequate rewards and incentives	3.30	.743
15. Limited opportunities for lecturers to participate in professional development activities	3.31	.684
	Grand Mean	**Grand Standard Deviation**
Number of respondents for each item: 177	**3.16**	**0.824**

Statistically, lecturers displayed a positive attitude (agreement) towards all of the items as was indicated by the Grand Mean and Grand Standard Deviation (M = 3.16; SD = 0.824). What is interesting to note is the fact that Item 1 and Item 3 both had similar and high means (M = 3.71; SD = .537) making it clear that respondents felt that finances, both personal and institutional, were very important factors. Limited institutional support was indicated by 90.3% of all respondents and may have been because if the institution has limited finances

then it may be constrained in providing financial support for such activities and for staff participation in local or overseas conferences and workshops. This therefore may have translated into staff members' perception that there were limited opportunities (89.2%) and inadequate rewards and incentives (87.5%), thus adding credence to what was referred to by Diaz-Maggioli (2004) that inaccessibility of professional development opportunities is a factor that hinders participation in professional development activities.

Opfer & Pedder (2011) recognized that, in relation to professional development, time is needed by teachers to "develop, absorb, discuss and practice new knowledge" (p. 384). They alluded to the fact that teachers need time for reflection and refinement of ideas. These ideas may help to understand why some respondents identified inadequate time for professional development (84.7%) as a hindering factor. The results also seemed to suggest that large class sizes (81.3%) was another important factor that hindered staff participation in PD activities. The workload associated with teaching and managing large class sizes may have been responsible for staff members not having adequate time to participate in PD activities. However, one might say that the term 'large' could be considered relative and probably needed to be further defined when the question was being asked. Further, traditional formats of PD activities such as one-time conferences and workshops may not necessarily have been effective since they may not have provided the sustained and intensive effort required by staff members (Opfer & Pedder, 2011; Guskey, 2000).

Limited collaboration (79.7%) and limited mentoring opportunities and programmes (88.1%) were also identified as important factors and 101 (57%) of the respondents strongly disagreed/disagreed that there was a lack of interest by lecturers in professional development. This is noteworthy because for professional development efforts to be successful and meaningful lecturers have to want to be involved (Gerard et al, 2011; Opfer & Pedder, 2011). Further, although lecturers were interested and willing to be involved in PD activities, inadequate rewards and incentives (87.5%) and limited opportunities 89.2% seemed to hinder their participation. Therefore there may be need for greater motivational efforts to be introduced to encourage lecturers. Generally, barriers to professional development can be either institutional or individual (Duke, 1993). In this study most of the factors that were perceived as hindering participation in PD activities were mainly intra-institutional. Factors with low means could also be interpreted to mean that although lecturers may be motivated and have an interest in PD activities there were other factors which were greater hindrances to their participation.

GENDER AND FACTORS INFLUENCING STAFF PARTICIPATION IN PROFESSIONL DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITIES

Analysis of the data revealed that there was a significant relationship (χ^2 (3) = 9.092, p < 0.05) between gender and lecturers' interest in professional development (Table 4). Given this fact, the Null Hypothesis was rejected and the Alternative Hypothesis was accepted. Further analysis of the data showed that there was a significant relationship (χ^2 (3) = 8.336, p < 0.05) between gender and lecturers' perception that lack of mentoring opportunities was a hindering factor in professional development.

However, there was no statistically significant relationship between gender and the opinion of respondents about limited finances, personal (χ^2 (3) = 1.405, p > 0.05) and institutional (χ^2 (3) = 1.795, p > 0.05), lack of motivation (χ^2 (3) = 1. 562, p > 0.05) and inadequate rewards and incentives for participating in professional development (χ^2 (3) = 5.134, p > 0.05) as factors that affect the participation of lecturers in professional development activities. This showed that all lecturers, regardless of gender, therefore agreed that financial support, whether personal or institutional, was important. Also all lecturers agreed on the need for effective motivation and adequate rewards and incentives for their participation in PD activities. Table 4 shows the group statistics for the gender perception of identified factors.

Table 4: Group statistics for gender perception of factors hindering staff members' participation in Professional Development activities

Factor	Gender	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Standard Error Mean
1.Limited personal finances	Female	88	3.67	.582	.062
	Male	89	3.74	.489	.052
2. Limited institutional finances	Female	88	3.69	.511	.054
	Male	89	3.72	.564	.060
3. Large class sizes	Female	88	3.28	.787	.084
	Male	89	3.26	.791	.084
4. Limited collaboration	Female	88	3.06	.733	.078
	Male	89	3.07	.704	.075
5. Lack of motivation	Female	88	2.67	.867	.092
	Male	89	2.81	.864	.092
6. Limited opportunities to present research findings (locally)	Female	88	3.10	.743	.079
	Male	89	2.93	.863	.092
7. Limited opportunities to present research findings (internationally)	Female	88	3.38	.748	.080
	Male	89	3.38	.649	.069
8. Limited institutional support	Female	88	3.25	.682	.073
	Male	89	3.35	.623	.066
9. Lack of interest in PD	Female	88	2.22	.903	.096
	Male	89	2.39	1.114	.118

10. Lack of mentoring for staff	Female	88	3.20	.571	.061
	Male	89	3.22	.765	.081
11. Failure to engage in reflective practices	Female	88	2.88	.814	.087
	Male	89	2.76	.879	.093
12. Inadequate student feedback	Female	88	3.16	.786	.084
	Male	89	3.12	.809	.086
13. Inadequate time for PD	Female	88	3.13	.770	.082
	Male	89	3.12	.751	.080
14. Inadequate rewards and incentives	Female	88	3.19	.771	.082
	Male	89	3.40	.703	.074
15. Limited PD opportunities	Female	88	3.39	.651	.069
	Male	89	3.22	.719	.076

Number of respondents for each item: 177

CONCLUSIONS

It could be concluded that although lecturers at the University of Guyana may be willing to participate in professional development activities there are mitigating factors that hinder their participation. Institutional factors were perceived to have a greater hindering effect on staff members' participation in PD activities, thus the institution has much to do in providing better motivating conditions since staff members who are not motivated may not give of their best and may eventually not stay on the job for long periods. Further, if the tertiary institution is to develop effective and practical PD programmes, then careful attention must be paid to staff members' need for adequate time to participate in those programmes and the importance of addressing individual as well as collective needs. Therefore, instead of seeing professional development as a quick fix, it should be viewed as a learning process that takes time and which requires institutional support as much as it needs individual and personal commitment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study the following recommendations are made:

• The institution should make continuous professional development programmes available and accessible for all lecturers.

• Professional development activities should be developed in consultation and collaboration with the academic staff so that programmes will meet the needs and expectations of staff members and the institution.

• Research on the impact and effectiveness of professional development activities on the performance of staff and students should be conducted.

• Research on the perceptions of factors that hinder professional development by part-time academic staff should be conducted.

• A culture of collective participation through developing Professional Learning Communities (PLC) should be pursued.

• The institution should seek to establish a staff development fund for lecturers to access and help finance professional development opportunities.

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