PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF FACILITATORS IN AN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING MODEL: THE CASE FOR THE UNIVERSITY OF SWAZILAND

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Abstract:
The aim of this study was to assess the effectiveness of the professional development offered to the facilitators of the Certificate in Psychosocial Support programme offered by the Institute of Distance Education, University of Swaziland. It also explores the effect this has on the learners being supported. The study was qualitative using open ended questionnaires and focus group discussions to gather data from the facilitators and the mentor supervisor and her assistant. Data was analysed through content analysis applying the Harland and Kinder (2014) model of professional development outcomes. The results show that the professional development offered to facilitators of the Certificate in Psychosocial Support of the UNISWA once every semester has positive results. The facilitators generally agreed that through the professional development they acquire knowledge and skill in handling face-to-face sessions, using modules and other learning materials, motivating learners, psychosocial support principles, approaches and child protection; the delivery model and application of content rather than spoon feeding. These gains are largely to do with the pedagogical approach selected for the programme. The facilitators also acquired new learning/ teaching materials in readiness for a new semester. Each session provided an opportunity for facilitators to interact with the modules coordinators and among themselves. The facilitators were unhappy with the lack of preparation by some module coordinators. The study recommends that IDE reviews the performance of module coordinators and replace those who are no longer performing. IDE should also devise creative ways of offering the professional development so that it continues to be educative and motivating to the facilitators.

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1. Introduction

The Certificate in Psychosocial Support offered by the University of Swaziland through the Institute of Distance (IDE) uses the supported open and distance learning delivery mode in which learners are heavily supported by facilitators (mentors). A critical element of this model is the professional development of the facilitators which takes place at the beginning of every semester and is conducted by module coordinators.

1.1 Background to the study

The Certificate in Psychosocial Support was initiated by the Regional Psychosocial Initiative (REPSSI) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) after observing that in most Southern African countries there were few opportunities for carers to get formal training. REPSSI offered the programme in eight countries as a pilot project centrally managed by the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN). The pilot phase ended in 2010 after which, the University of Swaziland (UNISWA) through the Institute of Distance Education (IDE) offered the programme as one of its distance education programmes. As part of the agreement with REPSSI, IDE retained the delivery approach of the pilot phase. The pedagogical approach for the programme is the supported, situated open and distance learning (SSODL) in which groups of learners of about 10 to fifteen study under the guidance of a facilitator (mentor). These learners have very low educational qualifications and therefore need extra support to succeed in their studies. The groups meet regularly- every fortnight - and work through their study materials in an interactive environment.

When the programme was localised to UNISWA in 2010, responsibilities for the smooth running of the programme were shared between UNISWA and the technical partners, as explained below. REPSSI provides hard copies of the study materials (modules), moderates examination papers for the six REPSSI modules and trains UNISWA module coordinators in the pedagogical approach. UNISWA provides overall programme coordination including the recruitment, training, supervision and support of facilitators and the marking of assignments and examinations. UNISWA also recruits module coordinators whose key responsibility is the continuous professional development of facilitators. The recruitment of learners is a shared responsibility among partners REPSSI, UNISWA and the Department of Social Welfare in the Deputy Prime Minister's office.

The eleven study materials for the programme include six basic modules supplied by REPSSI and five modules added by UNISWA, as shown below:

REPSSI modules:

a) Module 1: Self-management and development;

b) Module 2: Human rights and child protection;

c) Module 3: Child and youth development;

d) Module 4: Care and support of children at risk;

e) Module 5: Integrated development in communities; and

f) Module 6: Service learning.

The additional five UNISWA modules:

a) Professional English 1;

b) Professional English 2;

c) HIV and Aids Prevention, Infection and Management of Aids;

d) Introduction to Computing; and

e) Project Planning and Evaluation.

A key component of this pedagogical approach is the continuous professional development of the facilitators which takes place a few days before the beginning of each semester to ensure that the facilitators understand the pedagogical approach and the learning materials. All facilitators, new and old, have to undergo this training. UNISWA prioritises the professional development of the facilitators because most of the facilitators are from conventional educational backgrounds and need to be oriented to distance education. The professional development offered addresses the gap in their understanding of the SSODL delivery mode. At the heart of the UNISWA, professional development for facilitators is student learning, as it acknowledges that the success of the learners on the Certificate programme is closely linked to the performance of the facilitators. The regular on-going professional development is valuable because there are constant developments in the pedagogical approach and regular reviews of the learning materials, so there is almost always something new for the facilitators to learn at each training session.

Professional development can be defined as all the learning experiences one undertakes from the beginning of a career to retirement (Fullan (1991). In a similar vein, Guskey (1990) and Hassell (1999) view professional development as a process that is intentional and systematic whose aim is to improve employee skills and competencies and bring about change. Mizell (2010) views professional development as all the types of educational experiences which a person undergoes and are related to their individual work. Therefore, professional development has to be a deliberately planned programme undertaken to improve and expand employee skills, knowledge, attitude and social

behaviour. In the IDE case, the training is conducted by senior university lecturers responsible for particular modules and senior personnel from the technical partners. Professional development is also referred to as staff development or in-service training. Thaker (2016) views the purposes of in-service training as improving the quality of employees for greater organisational profitability, keeping employees up-to-date with new developments thereby securing their jobs, assisting new employees to get accustomed to new methods, new technologies and new work culture and helping to improve employee accuracy and perfection in meeting set targets. He goes on to argue that such training is usually conducted by key members of the organisation.

Mizell (2010) argues that formal professional development may take place in conferences, seminars, workshops and the participants learn collaboratively. In education, the purposes are to give participants the opportunity to learn new skills, new knowledge, new methods and approaches of working and new understanding of content and teaching resources. In the UNISWA case, professional development focuses on specific modules and the pedagogical approach to help facilitators acquire and renew the requisite knowledge and skills to facilitate learning in their different groups.

Darling-Hammond (2010) argues that professional development is effective to the extent that it addresses the needs and concerns of educators. Therefore, such professional development should improve the skills and abilities of the educators (Lieberman and Darling-Hammond. Similarly, Fullan (1991) goes on to argue that professional development is effective when most participants adopt the positive meaning and changes advocated by the professional development. In other words, most participants have to find the professional development valuable to their practice. In a similar vein, Sparks (2002) contends that professional development is effective when it is ongoing, deepens the content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge of participants and includes coaching, study teams and peer support. In education, such professional development addresses the needs of the educators as well as those of the learners they are responsible for.

Guskey (2000) underlines the importance of professional development by arguing that notable improvement in education is closely linked to effective professional development. On a different note, Gulamhussein (2013) argues that professional development conducted as workshops is not effective, as in most cases participants fail to implement what they learn.

In an effort to contribute towards a deeper understanding of professional development, Harland and Kinder (2014) propose a nine-fold typology of continuous professional development outcomes which are as follows:

i. Materials provisionary outcomes which refer to provision of the physical resources required for classroom practice after the professional development, such as new learning materials, markers, flipcharts, etc.

ii. Informational outcomes which refer to the knowledge of background facts about the curriculum covered in the professional development activity and management development and how these affect performance.

iii. New awareness outcomes refer to changes in perception and understanding in content and the delivery of particular content.

iv. Value congruence outcomes refer to how participants adopt meaning and value of the change advocated, which may be change in beliefs, pedagogical approaches and theories underlying particular policies and paradigms. This will determine how they implement the lessons learnt during professional development.

v. Affective outcomes refer to the emotional experience of the participants during the professional development activities and which result in changes in excitement about new approaches and increased confidence. However, there may also be negative affective outcomes.

vi. Motivational and attitudinal outcomes refer to changes in participants' preparedness to implement new ideas learnt. Participants need to be highly motivated and enthusiastic to implement the new ideas received during training. These may include changes in self-perception and their professional identity. These outcomes are necessary for effective implementation of the acquired knowledge and skills.

vii. Knowledge and skills outcomes which refer to deeper levels of understanding, improved reflexivity, self-knowledge and awareness of learning processes;

viii. Institutional outcomes which refer to shared meanings, collaboration and mutual support resulting from the professional development activity.

ix. Impact on practice which refers to changes in practice, and transfer of learning.

This study adopts the Harland and Kinder (2014) model above to assess the effectiveness of the professional development offered to facilitators of the UNISWA Certificate in Psychosocial Support.

2. Statement of the problem

The Certificate in Psychosocial Support has been on offer since 2011 and the facilitators have been receiving professional development twice a year since then. There is need to find out how effective the training is in achieving the goals for which it is conducted.

The problem is: To what extent has the professional development offered to facilitators of the IDE Certificate in Psychosocial Support achieved the goals for which it was designed?

The objectives of the study are to:

i.   identify the purposes for which the training is conducted;

ii.   determine if the facilitators' needs are met in the professional development activities;

iii. establish the knowledge and skills the facilitators gain from the professional development; and

iv.   assess the changes in facilitation that result from the knowledge and skills gained from the professional development.

3. Materials and methods

The study intended to generate intensive and in-depth data on how IDE facilitators of the Certificate in Psychosocial Programme experience and make sense of the professional development offered by IDE. Consequently, it used qualitative methodology and the interpretivist philosophical perspective. Qualitative research enabled me to study professional development of IDE facilitators in the natural settings in which they operate. It also made it possible for me to understand professional development from the point of view of the facilitators and some of the children under the care of the student whom they are responsible for (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). In addition, through qualitative research, I was able to probe deeply into perceptions and experiences of the facilitators with regards to the professional development mounted by the IDE (Creswell and Piano-Clark, 2007).

The study adopted the case study design, with the case being the professional development offered by IDE. Elements analysed were its effectiveness with regards to facilitators' gains and students' learning.

Two data generation techniques were used so as to confirm and cross validate data from different techniques (Olsen, 2004). This was done to triangulate and corroborate the data and ensure the production of a comprehensive well developed report on the professional development of the facilitators. Convenience sampling was used to select eight participants out of the forty (40) facilitators of the programme. These were believed to be able to participate fully and offer critical insights into the professional development offered by IDE.

Care was taken to ensure that such ethical issues as voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity were taken into consideration

(Trochim, 2006). Participants did so willingly after the researcher explained what the research was about, how it was going to be carried out, whether it was going to affect them in any way, and what the results were going to be used for (informed consent) (Trochim, 2006.). I assured the participants that their names and the names of their organisations would not be revealed and pseudonyms would be used where names were required.

4. Data generation and analysis

An open - ended questionnaire was administered to all eight facilitators. In addition, 4 of the participant facilitators were conveniently sampled to take part in a focus group discussion. Data for the study had to be viewed from the perspectives of the participants in line with the interpretivist philosophical perspective. Data was triangulated to ensure that it was consistent, well-developed and comprehensive (Biddix, undated).

From the inception of data generation, I used content analysis to analyse data, making reflexive field notes, as I reviewed questionnaire responses and transcripts of the focus group discussions prioritising meanings participants placed on the data (Schutt, 2011). Ratner (2002) contends that in qualitative research participants can express their perceptions of the phenomenon under investigation from their subjective understanding of it. I used the Harland and Kinder (2014) professional development outcomes model to evaluate the effectiveness of the professional development. I watched out for patterns and relationships across data from different sources and participants and used the Harland and Kinder (2014) typology of continuous professional development outcomes categories to present the data. Qualitative data analysis is iterative so I had to go over all the data again and again to ensure that I did not lose any meaningful data. The result was a thick description of how participants perceive the professional development mounted for them.

5. Results

The study used the Harland and Kinder (2014) professional development outcomes model to assess the professional development offered to facilitators of the Certificate in Psychosocial Support of the Institute of Distance Education (IDE), University of Swaziland. It was noted that the data generated did not fall into all the nine categories of the model. In addition, the facilitators' experience of the professional development activities differed significantly. In general, all participants agreed that the professional

development sessions achieve the objectives for which they were set as well as the facilitators' objectives.

Under the first category *Material and provisionary outcomes*, facilitators noted that they had received new learning materials such as mentor guides, assignments and test items, quizzes, flip charts and markers in preparation for the coming semester.

New awareness. Facilitators indicated that they were reminded once again of the difference between facilitation and teaching, use of participatory methods as opposed to lecturing or teaching and the components of the supported situated open and distance learning delivery mode. They all found the REPSSI presentation on social connectedness an eye opener. They began to see the importance of forming relationships beyond one's social circles and how these affected one's wellbeing. The issues were particularly important as the facilitators had to encourage such relationships and create learning communities among students they were responsible for.

Value congruence outcomes. In this category, facilitators viewed the professional development session as valuable because it provided them an opportunity to learn from the module coordinators. It also kept them up-to-date with developments in the programme and in IDE. Facilitators also appreciated the reminder that the programme is not just about qualifications but more about acquisition of life skills that learners need to face challenges in their daily lives.

Affective outcomes. Facilitators were unhappy that the additional learning materials required for module 2 were not made available to them. They had raised this issue before requesting that additional materials relevant to Swaziland be made available to both facilitators and students. Facilitators felt that the relevant module coordinator should produce handouts to cover such issues as Swazi Law and Child protection which students were expected to know. Facilitators who had served in this capacity for at least three years were discouraged by the lack of preparation on the part of one module coordinator. They felt that attending his sessions was a waste of their time. In addition, newer facilitators felt that for the training to be effective it should be a week long to cover all content meaningfully.

The mentor supervisor lamented the lack of continued UKZN training for module coordinators so that they remain up-to-date with the SODL delivery mode. During the pilot phase, UKZN regularly trained module coordinators to keep them abreast with developments in the learning materials and the programme.

One facilitator wished there could be a review workshop at the end of a semester so that the facilitators can share their experiences and jointly map a way forward that would apply to all groups.

In the *motivational and attitudinal outcomes* category facilitators observed that while the professional development activities were very helpful, module coordinators should prepare adequately and be innovative so that they do not just duplicate material used in earlier training sessions. A number of the facilitators were disappointed with the repetition of the module coordinators who did not bother to prepare adequately and creatively to make the training worthwhile for all facilitators.

Knowledge and skills outcomes. The bulk of the responses fell into this category, as facilitators raised the following gains that had accrued to them as a result of the professional development. They acquired knowledge and skills:

- in the handling of sessions;
- on how to use the modules and mentor guides and other learning materials;
- of psychosocial support principles, approaches and child protection;
- on how to motivate learners;
- on understanding the delivery mode supported open and distance learning;
- on handling learners with different abilities and backgrounds;
- on creating a learning group that shares experiences and resolves learning problems together - social connectedness;
- on facilitation skills in distance education; and
- on application of module content rather than cramming

Most of these gains relate to the pedagogical approach for the programme, which is the major focus of the professional development. Additional issues such as social connectedness broadened their understanding of the need for collaboration among themselves and among the learners.

Institutional outcomes. This is a major outcome for the pedagogical approach adopted for the Certificate programme. Facilitators indicated that they had opportunity to share experiences among themselves and also with the module coordinators. They acquired skills on forming learning groups which are expected to share experiences and resolve problems together.

In the *Impact on practice outcomes* category, facilitators indicated that they were highly committed to implementing the lessons learnt; they were able to guide learners on how to deal with difficult concepts; they were able to use the knowledge and skills learnt such as participatory methods, as proved by the learners' willingness to participate and the good results they achieved. They were successful in implementing action plans agreed on at the professional development session. They admitted that there was noticeable change in their behaviour and most of them indicated that they were able to maintain the change in behaviour.

6. Discussion

It was noted that the data generated did not fall into all the nine categories of the model. In addition, the facilitators' experience of the professional development activities differed significantly (Harland and Kinder, 2014). However, all participants agreed that the professional development sessions achieve the objectives for which they were set as well as the facilitators' objectives. The model used to offer professional development at UNISWA was the centralised approach in which senior university lecturers conducted workshops at the University. All facilitators attended the workshop once every semester just before the beginning of a semester. The lecturers share knowledge and instructional skills with the facilitators face-to-face focusing on new ideas, new ways of facilitating learning and meeting new colleagues.

The findings of the study indicated that the continuous professional development offered to facilitators of the Certificate in Psychosocial Support is a planned process which is largely effective because it is on-going and through it facilitators acquire necessary competencies and skills to effectively conduct face-to-face sessions (Fullan, 1991). In addition, it largely achieves the objectives for which it is planned and also those of the facilitators. Through it, facilitators acquire new teaching/learning materials, content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge (Sparks 2002) that enable them to effectively guide learners in their studies. These benefits are similar to those highlighted by Lange and Meaney (2013), Thaker (2016), Fullan (1991) and Harland and Kinder (2014). The methodology, participatory approach, used in the professional development was relevant to the delivery mode which facilitators use in the contact sessions. Facilitators were committed to implementing the lessons learnt and were happy with the progress they were making and the results of their learners, an indication that the professional development is effectively changing the way facilitators carried out their responsibilities (Guskey, 2000). In addition, there is continued peer support for the facilitators from the mentor supervisor and her assistant to ensure that facilitators can handle all issues related to their work (Sparks, 2002). These two were found to be very supportive to facilitators and always available when required to give advice on certain problematic issues related to the conduct of face-to-face sessions.

There were issues which negatively affected the facilitators, such as lack of preparation by some module coordinators, inadequate time for the training sessions and lack of UKZN professional development for module coordinators. The lack of preparation is worrying because if it becomes a trend, it would negatively impact facilitators' willingness to attend the professional development sessions mounted for

them. It is possible that the lack of preparation by some module coordinators was due to lack of UKZN training. However, where module coordinators did not conduct their training adequately, the mentor supervisor stepped in to ensure that facilitators received adequate guidance on how to handle the module (s) in question. This means that the facilitators ended up having double sessions in some modules.

Another weakness was the non-availability of additional local learning materials for some facilitators to successfully guide learners in Module 2: Human rights and child protection. For this module, there is need to draft additional material covering the Swazi law and custom and child protection laws, which learners are expected to understand. In his assessment of the Certificate programme, Mndzebele (2014) found that Module 2 and 6 presented challenges to the facilitators.

Use of the Harland and Kinder (2014) model was a good guide to assess the effectiveness of the UNISWA professional development for facilitators. The data, however, did not fall neatly into the different categories but general patterns were evident and these were used for the presentation and discussion of the results.

7. Conclusions

The professional development for facilitators of UNISWA is serving the purposes for which it was planned. Facilitators are equipped with adequate knowledge and pedagogical skills for handling the groups they are responsible for. They also have the opportunity to share experiences during the training sessions, which empowers them for handling their groups of learners. The REPSSI contribution at the training sessions has been found to be relevant to the facilitators, as it extended their understanding of issues beyond the narrow confines of the module and the pedagogical approach. In general, facilitators were committed to implementing the lessons learnt when conducting face-to-face sessions with their groups. They felt that even the good results their learners achieved proved the effectiveness of their facilitation resulting from the professional development activities mounted for them. There was continuing peer support for the facilitators from the mentor supervisor and her assistant. Weaknesses noted by the facilitators with regards to the inadequacies of some module coordinators negatively affected the participation of the facilitators at such training sessions.

8. Recommendations

This study makes the following recommendations: -

- There is need for UNISWA to periodically review the performance of module coordinators to ensure greater commitment to the programme and its requirements. It would be necessary to replace module coordinators who no longer perform to required standards so that facilitators continue to receive required support for the benefit of the Certificate learners.
- UNISWA should also ensure continued UKZN training for module coordinators to keep them abreast with knowledge and skills on the SSODL delivery mode.
- UNISWA should ensure development of additional learning material to ensure that Swazi law and custom and Swazi Child protection laws are made available to learners.
- There is need for further research into the professional development of facilitators to find alternative ways of offering the training in more motivational and creative ways.

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