

Exploring the Influence of Continuous Professional Education in Fostering Leadership Development in Universities

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Abstract

Continuing Professional Education (CPE) program has been in the forefront of Malaysia's government-supported professional development initiative, which aims to encourage all civil servants to make headway in their studies. The study was undertaken to examine the professional development of civil servants at Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM), Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA) and University Putra Malaysia (UPM), with regard to the influence of leadership development, innovation, proficiency and education. Civil servants who partook in the Continuing Professional Education (CPE) program at these Universities were purposely selected for the study. To gather data, we conducted two FGDs involving a total of 12 participants. The insights obtained from the research findings divulged and provided us with a wealth of information. Based on the findings, quest to achieve professional growth innovational culture and leadership development was found to influence the civil servants in joining the CPE.

Keywords: *Civil Servants, Continuing Professional Education, Innovation Learning, Leadership Development, Professional, Malaysia.*

Introduction

Professional development of staff or employees is generally seen as cogent in getting the best among the workforce in terms of creativity, proficiency and resourcefulness. It will therefore be difficult for any organisation or establishment to survive, develop, thrive and as well achieve success without engaging its workforce in continuous training and education (Longo & McMillan, 2015; Javidan & Bowen, 2013; Asmawi et al., 2023a). Thus, the conceptualization of professional development also known as professional learning or continuing education stand around with the main purpose to equip workforce with the requisite ingenuity and know-hows to outshine in their various fields. There is needed to mention here that professional learning goes beyond traditional classroom instruction. In this context, professional development serves as a motivational arrangement for improving the quality of service and productiveness among public officials, who constantly face challenges in an ever-changing environment need to be established. In a nutshell, Klein and Sorra (1996) posited that organizations and institutions that embrace professional development through continuing education anticipate and expect improvements in their overall performance.

Meanwhile, it is crucial gaining an understanding of the key elements of innovation management as well as the common challenges many organizations are grasping with, to the amount of comprehending the factors that determine the level of innovation in the course of implementation phase. Within the Malaysian public service stratum, three specific determinants have been singled out they include: reward system, innovative culture and leadership skills (Ab Rahman and Ismail, 2018; Ariffin et al., 2023a). They found that leaders must not only demonstrate great dedication, pitch into effective communication but also provide unwavering support to employees as long as they want to enhearten them to participate in innovative endeavours. By offering appropriate training, moral support, and granting some autonomy for generating new ideas and exploring new approaches within their assigned tasks, leaders can enhance employees' motivation to innovate (Lacerenza et al., 2017). Adding that leaders should establish an enticing and

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appealing reward system for employees in the direction of making the culture of innovation thrives (Ab Rahman and Ismail, 2018).

It is undisputable that one strategic approach to foster an innovative environment in the public service sector is by implementing policies that promote and encourage a culture of innovation. Moreover, these programs and policies can take the form of regulations, circulars, programs, or activities aimed at enhancing innovation capabilities and performance in public service (Ramli et al., 2017; Ariffin et al., 2023b). In recent years, the Malaysian Government has made efforts to promote an innovation culture through the dissemination of various circulars and enforcement of innovation policies among public servants. In the manner that, the Guidelines to Enhance Culture of Innovation in Public Sector (2010) along with the Guidelines on the Acculturation and Empowerment of Innovation in Public Sector through the New Horizon of Innovative and Creative Circle (2016) are two circulars dole out by the Malaysian Administrative Modernisation and Management Planning Unit which must be implemented to the letter in all government agencies to foster an innovation culture in the public service. For all that, the effectiveness of these circulars has not been thoroughly evaluated or widely reported (Ramli et al., 2017). This flaw has been linked to heedlessness and laxity.

Leadership and Its Innovative Styles

Scholars have studied and identified several forms of leadership approaches (Meyer and Slechta, 2002; Day et al., 2009; Northouse, 2012; Md Rami et al., 2023a). However, the idea given (Liao et al., 2017) is of top priority. The pentad leadership styles outlined including democratic leadership, laissez-faire leadership, team leadership, authentic leadership, transformational leadership, and all create an environment where innovative thinking and problem-solving thrive. Meanwhile, Xie et al. (2018) and Hashim et al. (2019) suggested that by adopting and implementing these leadership styles, leaders can empower their team members to think differently, take risks, and generate ground-breaking ideas that propel the organization forward. Different approaches to leadership can promote and encourage innovation within a team or organization (Cleveland and Cleveland, 2020). Keller (1992), House et al. (2004) and Miscenko et al. (2017) indicated that these various leadership styles create an environment where creativity, risk-taking, and collaboration flourish, ultimately leading to ground-breaking ideas and advancements.

One of the distinctive leadership styles according to Chaubey and Sahoo (2018) and Xie et al. (2018) that contribute to effective leadership process, including the ability to create action plans, develop blueprint, instil self-assurance and trust, establish specific objectives, and inspire positive perspectives among team members is the known as democratic leadership style. Categorically, democratic leaders carry along their team in the managing process, involving in wide consultation exploring and seeking their suggestions and ideas. By encouraging active participation and engagement, democratic leaders bring into being a sense of belonging and inclusion amid the team members, which fuels their motivation and creativity. This leadership style fosters innovation by valuing and leveraging the diverse perspectives and expertise of the team, giving room for a far reaching and comprehensive approach to problem-solving (Miscenko et al., 2017; Asmawi et al., 2023b). Additionally, the democratic leadership style can also be effective in cultivating innovation. Servant leadership approach is another distinct leadership style that promotes innovation.

Servant leaders prioritize the needs and well-being of their team members above their own. They focus on creating a supportive and nurturing environment where individuals feel valued, respected, and empowered to take risks and experiment. By fostering a culture of empathy and compassion, servant leaders encourage their team members to think creatively and explore new possibilities (Nauman, 2017; Ruderman & Clerkin, 2020; Md Rami et al., 2023b). This leadership style also emphasizes collaboration and teamwork, as servant leaders understand that diverse perspectives and collective efforts are essential for generating innovative ideas. Another leadership style that fosters innovation is the transformational leadership approach. Transformational leaders inspire and motivate their team members by setting high expectations, providing a clear vision, and encouraging personal growth and development (Engwall and Eriksson, 2012; Amat Simin et al., 2015). This leadership style fosters innovation by empowering individuals to take ownership of their work and providing them with the autonomy and support they need to explore new ideas and concepts.

Transformational leaders also create a culture of trust and open communication, allowing team members to freely share their innovative thoughts and opinions without fear of judgment or retribution.

Lastly, the laissez-faire leadership style can also foster innovation. Laissez-faire leaders provide their team members with a high degree of autonomy and independence, allowing them to freely pursue and experiment with new ideas. This leadership style encourages self-direction and self-motivation, as individuals are given the freedom to explore their own innovative solutions (Li et al., 2018; Chen et al., 2019; Villaluz and Hechanova, 2019). While laissez-faire leadership requires a high level of trust and confidence in team members, it can be highly effective in promoting innovation by unleashing the full creative potential of individuals. By understanding and implementing these leadership styles, leaders can effectively inspire their team members to think outside the box, challenge the status quo, and generate innovative solutions to complex problems.

Underscoring the Role of Continuing Professional Education

For instance, Cervero and Daley (2016) asserted that many professional experts in various fields such as law, medicine, nursing, social work, and others have always emphasized the importance of staying updated with the latest knowledge and skills. The aim of CPE is to enhance the performance of professionals and ultimately improve the quality of services provided to the public. In recent times, there has been a noticeable increase in the number of institutions offering remote education to professionals (Knobloch, 2021). Alongside this, collaborations between different institutions and companies have become more important and frequent. This growing trend has proven to be beneficial for civil servants, as it helps to enhance their skills. The prime importance of this phenomenon becomes apparent when we consider that the education of professionals often fails to meet the needs of individuals, society, and the nation as a whole. As a result, all professions have recognized the importance of Continuing Professional Education (CPE) as a vital tool for further enhancing professionals' education. The continuous growth of professional practice and skills is seen as a way to ensure the delivery of excellent professional services to people.

Furthermore, its significance is evident in the increasing certification requirements for employees, including civil servants. Thus, it is crucial and go a long way in equipping employees with needed dexterity to cater or provide clients with the highest level of performance. In the words of Chong (2013) and Cervero and Daley (2016) CPE is gradually shifting towards a more systematic approach to professional education and learning for practice. To create the necessary infrastructure for this, there must be extensive collaboration between CPE educators and professionals practicing in their respective fields. The ultimate goal is to establish systems that can deliver high-quality professional services for the greater good of the public (Wilson and Cervero, 2014). In order to fulfil their roles effectively, civil servants need to be well-informed and possess a service-oriented mindset. They play a crucial role in motivating change and maintaining the public's confidence in the system. This is why it is vital to adopt Continuous Professional Education (CPE), which is currently being developed and made accessible to professionals.

However, the success of CPE in enhancing and boosting professional performance and public perception remains a significant concern. As the social, political, and organizational landscape continues to evolve, CPE will need to adapt to the changing agendas and frameworks that shape it in order to remain effective in the future. In this regard Dietz and Schroeder (2012), underscored the crucial role of critical thinking in enabling individuals to look beyond their biases and approach issues with innovative solutions. In the case of civil servants, they emphasized on dynamism and utilizing intrinsic techniques to bring to the ground the complex problems that confront societies. Additionally, they asserted that civil servants are entrusted with the responsibility of serving the public interest, making them responsible for driving change and ensuring the stability of the socio-political system (Veale, 2014).

Methodology

The researchers adopted qualitative methodology for this study in data collection and analysis. Scholars such as Oppong (2014) and (Creswell and Poth, 2018) also suggested qualitative methodology for social scientists, especially anthropologists and sociologists. The study was conducted in three (3) universities in

Malaysia, namely Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA), Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM) and University Putra Malaysia (UPM). The population for this study comprised Malaysian civil servants that had successfully undertaken the Continuing Professional Education (CPE) program. The impetus for this selected population is to investigate the performance and how far innovation culture has gone in the Malaysian public service in regard to leadership development.

Moreover, the use of a qualitative approach allows for open discussions with informants, enabling them to share their experiences and providing the researcher with a deeper understanding of their perspectives (Bell and Bryman, 2005). To ensure that the participants contribute rich and comprehensive information related to the study, purposive sampling was employed (Palys, 2008; Oppong, 2013; Ary et al., 2019). This method ensures that informed individuals who possess valuable insights are selected as participants. Stake (1995) recommended that individuals who have significant expertise and familiarity with the particular phenomenon being examined in a study are more likely to offer comprehensive and enlightening descriptions pertaining to that phenomenon. This implies that their in-depth knowledge and understanding enable them to provide valuable insights and nuanced perspectives, which can greatly enhance the research findings and in the long way avail the researchers with deeper understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Lau (2017)). Thus, special attention was given to those individuals who had expressed their viewpoints or perspectives regarding the incorporation of an innovation culture within the Malaysian public service. In total, 12 participants took part in two focus group discussions, allowing for the collection of all relevant information and the sharing of diverse perspectives without the need to reach a consensus. Earlier consent was taken from all the participants. Hence for the study, the participants were chosen with the following specific criteria:

Consent of participation in the interviews and the ability to understand.

Have participated in CPE programme or postgraduate courses.

Be in Grade 44 and beyond.

Assigned leadership position

Thematic Data Analysis

The data analysis for this study utilized thematic analysis, specifically employing a deductive approach with the aid of NVivo software. During the thematic analysis, the collected data was categorized into various themes. These themes were derived from existing literature as well as emerging themes that were discovered from the acquired data. The researcher not only described these themes but also delved into exploring the connections and relationships between them.

Major Findings and Discussion

The participants unanimously concurred that the factors influencing civil servants' engagement in continuous professional education (CPE) and skilled training are primarily driven by the extant requisitions of their work and the strive for greatness. These demands necessitate employees to be more innovative and capable of presenting novel ideas and experiences. The participants expressed confidence that through their theoretical and practical education at university, they have gained the necessary skills to effectively implement an innovative learning culture in their professional practice. During the discussions, specific emphasis was placed on three key themes: (i) the professional factor, (ii) the work environment factor, and (iii) establishing connections and networking with relevant stakeholders. These three overarching themes, along with their respective sub-themes, emerged as participants recognized the importance of incorporating these elements into their professional development, as they believed it would enhance their leadership abilities (refer to Figure 1 for a visual representation of these themes).

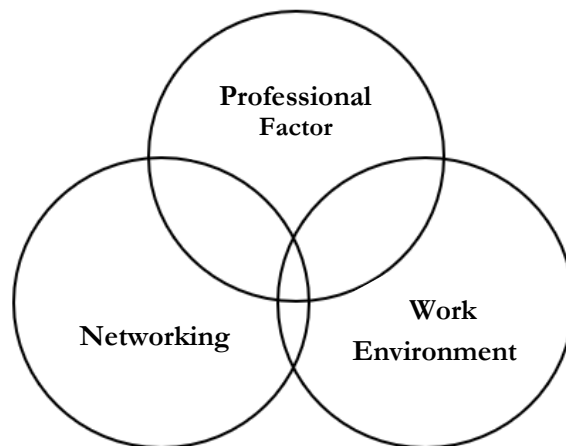


Fig. 1 Emerging Themes of Study

Professional Factor

The study's findings indicate that nearly all participants expressed agreement on the primary motivator for their decision to pursue professional development at public universities (UPM, UniSZA, and UUM). This motivator centred around their desire to enhance their professionalism in the fields of human resources, leadership skills, and innovation, particularly in generating new ideas for their respective practices. Furthermore, they highlighted the benefits of formal education in expanding their knowledge base, fostering idea-sharing, improving their competencies, and cultivating innovative problem-solving abilities. It was widely acknowledged by the participants that this program had a positive impact on their mindset, leading to a greater willingness to adapt and embrace the ever-evolving changes in their field. Not only did their attitudes become more positive, but they also underwent significant personal growth and transformation.

Table 1. Themes and Sub-Themes

Theme	Sub-Themes	Sample Statements
Professional factor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Professional knowledge ❖ Professional attitudes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ "...Formal education offers us a tremendous opportunity to broaden our horizons, enhance our understanding, and propel us towards personal and professional growth. It serves as a foundation upon which we can build our knowledge, enabling us to venture into uncharted territories and explore new realms of expertise ..." ❖ "...In today's ever-evolving and demanding business landscape, effective management necessitates a constant willingness to adapt and evolve. To ensure our future success and enhance our skill set, participating in CPE programs is a

		crucial step in improving our competencies ...”
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Work Environment Factor

With the work environment constantly evolving and becoming more demanding, individuals are compelled to seek out quicker and more effective means of self-improvement, leading them to enrol in Continuous Professional Education (CPE) programs. A variety of factors within the work environment, including management practices, support from colleagues, and opportunities for innovative learning, serve as strong motivations for these individuals to actively engage in professional development initiatives. It is worth noting that the participants of these programs hold prominent leadership positions within diverse ministries, making them indispensable figures to the stakeholders involved. It could rightly be said that the backing and endorsement from upper-level executives, along with the encouragement and backing from peers, served as the impetus that motivated them to actively engage in the program. Additionally, the desire to acquire knowledge and skills in innovation served as a catalyst for them to connect with and participate in various professional development initiatives. In essence, this can be viewed as a form of cultivating and nurturing leadership abilities.

Table 2. Themes and Sub-Themes

Theme	Sub-Themes	Sample Statements
Work Environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Management factor ❖ Collegial support ❖ Innovation learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ “...By actively engaging in these educational opportunities, we are equipping ourselves with the necessary tools and knowledge to thrive in our professional endeavours...” ❖ “...The encouragement and backing of our superiors and colleagues serve as a driving force for us to constantly enhance our skills and knowledge, leading us to implement a multitude of innovative ideas to adapt to the ever-changing workforce dynamics...” ❖ “...Through formal education, we not only acquire a wealth of knowledge but also develop critical thinking abilities, enabling us to critically analyse situations and approach them with a fresh perspective. It empowers us to think outside the box, challenge conventional wisdom, and push the boundaries of what is possible. In essence, formal education propels us towards excellence, enabling us to enhance our skill set, continuously evolve, and

		make a meaningful impact in our chosen fields...”
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Networking with Other Parties

Expanding one's professional network is a crucial aspect of professional development. When employees feel connected to others, they are less likely to experience feelings of isolation in the workplace and more likely to feel empowered, valued, driven, and motivated. The study has even demonstrated that employee networking can have a positive impact on reducing turnover rates and job-related stress. As a result, organizations looking to enhance their employee engagement efforts should prioritize providing networking opportunities. Additionally, partnering with other professionals through professional development programs can further enhance networking experiences as participants are required to interact and collaborate with one another in various courses. To illustrate the benefits of networking in professional development, a real case study was shared during a lecture, showcasing how participants were able to generate innovative ideas and further develop their leadership skills through collaborative efforts.

Table 3. Themes and Sub-Themes

Theme	Sub-Themes	Sample Statements
Networking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Engagement efforts ❖ Networking opportunities ❖ Partnership 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ “...One way to establish connections with other business professionals is by simply participating in local industry-related events or taking classes, whether in person or online. These events are often offered for free or at a low cost, and they provide employees with opportunities to acquire new knowledge, meet individuals with similar interests, and ignite their professional innovation and creativity...” ❖ “...Through regular discussions and idea sharing, my friends and I have found great value in exchanging ideas and experiences, which have contributed to empowering innovation in each of our respective roles. Each member brings their unique expertise and contributes to the pool of shared ideas, making the process even more captivating...” ❖ “...Moreover, the instructor of our class has also introduced us to various theories and past studies that aim to enhance our understanding, particularly in the field of human resource development ...”

Conclusion

In today's rapidly changing world, the importance of innovation cannot be overstated when it comes to organizations staying relevant (Çetin and Mustafa, 2019). That's why the Malaysian government has implemented numerous plans and initiatives aimed at fostering a culture of innovation among civil servants. The goal is to ensure that public services remain efficient, productive, and able to meet the increasing expectations of customers. This research has shown that leaders in the Malaysian public service are well aware of the significance of professional development and cultivating an innovative learning culture through leadership development. They have demonstrated unwavering support for nurturing an environment that encourages continuous improvement within the organization. The professional factor is crucial in promoting a culture of innovation (Jill, 2020). When employees possess professional knowledge and attitudes, they are more inclined to freely express their constructive ideas and suggestions for the betterment of the organization (Detert and Burris, 2007; Asmawi et al., 2023). Furthermore, the academic community has placed great emphasis on leadership development through professional growth. Effective leaders prioritize the compliance of their employees, ensuring that they dutifully carry out their responsibilities according to the leaders' instructions, and in return, they receive positive rewards such as praise, recognition, and material incentives (Sanchez-Nunez, et al., 2015; Parrish, 2015). Leadership style has been identified as one of the most influential factors when it comes to organizational innovation (Liao et al., 2017). In this study, an effective leadership style that emphasizes effective communication and a certain level of flexibility is considered the most suitable approach for motivating and inspiring employees to be more innovative.

The present study has some limitations. This research project was carried out among the leaders of civil servants who had pursued their academic studies in the Master's program at UPM, UniSZA, and UUM. These leaders were specifically chosen from various central public agencies located throughout peninsular Malaysia. It is important to note that due to the use of informants solely from a single central public agency, the findings of this study may not be applicable to other governmental entities such as ministries or state governments. Additionally, the informants selected for this study were limited to individuals within the Grades 44 to 54 range, which constitutes the management group. The study deliberately excluded participants from the management and professional groups, as well as the support group.

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