

**Professional Development of HoDs at University Level: Needs, Opportunities and  
Challenges**

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**Abstract**



This study aims to find out about the departmental heads' professional development (PD) needs, the PD opportunities they pursue, and the PD challenges they face. An interpretive paradigm and a qualitative research methodology were used in this study. This study is exploratory. Heads of department interviews have been conducted using the semi-structured interview protocol. Ten interviews in total, five from the University of the Punjab and five from the University of Education, Lahore, have been conducted. The sample was chosen using a convenient sampling technique. The data have been analyzed using a thematic approach. The study's key findings are as follows: It has been discovered that each department head has different standards for professional growth to ensure the success of their job. Additionally, with the right training, it is possible to improve related traits like risk-taking, decision-making, and initiative-taking as well as skills like management, negotiation, administration, and leadership.

It has been discovered that the university offers no opportunities for professional development to HoDs as Department Heads, and there is no PD program for department heads. However, it has been discovered that HoDs participate in PD opportunities provided to them as faculty members. An intriguing finding is that before granting someone the position of Head of Department (HoD), the university administration does not provide any type of training to HoDs; as a result, the HoD is immediately thrust into a situation in which they must manage multiple departmental concerns without any training. Department heads face several challenges in their professional development, including heavy workloads, time management issues, a lack of opportunities for PD activities, and difficulty achieving a work-life balance.

The study suggests that the university must provide specialized PD training for department heads (HoDs). The university administration should offer Pakistan-based and technologically advanced PD training programs and activities. This study suggests that department heads could benefit from skilled personnel to reduce their workload and effectively complete departmental work. Furthermore, it is suggested that professional development (PD) activities be planned for times when the semester is not in session, allowing department heads to focus on PD without the burden of teaching.

**Keywords:** Professional Development, HODs, Needs, Challenges, Opportunities, University Context

**Introduction**

Supervision holds a pivotal role in advancing student learning and teacher efficacy, as stated by Ghamrawi (2010). To ensure educational quality, improve educational outcomes, and maintain the smooth operation of a reputable educational system, effective leadership is essential. According to Bush (2003), supervision is the process of using specialized knowledge and expertise to monitor, direct, evaluate, and manage educational activities. This definition highlights the importance of supervision in improving the teaching and learning process in educational sectors.

As organizational leaders, departmental leaders are accountable for directing effective educational institutions. To uphold high educational standards, they play a variety of roles in cultivating abilities, knowledge, intellectual independence, and analytical thinking. To the mutual benefit of the organization and its members, department heads play a crucial role in fostering collaboration, understanding, and coordination. Leadership studies are becoming more and more popular in university academic programs as a result of their primary focus on fostering growth and

development within the academic department.

Department heads are entrusted with overseeing daily classroom activities in their capacity as instructional leaders. These people work as managers at the institution in addition to being front-line educators. They wield considerable power, including the ability to manage teachers and ensure that educational programs and faculty meet students' needs (Fitzgerald et al., 2006). The "HODs," or department heads, hold official leadership positions (Seedorf, 2003). Examining the duties and responsibilities of department chairs in higher education institutions has been the subject of much discussion. To gain a comprehensive understanding of institutional functionality, it is essential to acknowledge the contributions of heads of support service departments. Educational institutions that need their expertise in administration and teaching seek out these people. Due to their position, they are forced to make crucial choices that have significant consequences on the educational organization's culture of teaching, support, and learning.

In reality, some people take on department head positions without being adequately prepared for the heavy workload that comes with the job. The majority of department head training is focused on administrative procedures, which are frequently inconsistent or lacking (Seagren et al., 1993). Department heads play an important role in conveying their staff's needs to upper management and serving as a liaison between them and their direct reports. In creating a supportive academic environment, communication must be bridged.

According to Seedorf (2003), it is well known that many divisional executives express dissatisfaction with their jobs, responsibilities as leaders, and the overall effectiveness of their teams. Universities and colleges need to give improving leadership education and training programs top priority. Assessing employee performance, developing and implementing staff development plans, fostering a positive and active workplace for administrators, educators, and students, improving instructional and pastoral offerings, promoting the department's needs and communicating them to superior authorities, and ensuring that teachers have adequate resources are just a few of the many responsibilities of department heads.

### **Research Questions**

This research has addressed the following research questions:

1. What are the needs of the head of the department regarding their professional development at the university level?
2. What are the challenges that heads of departments face in their professional development at the university level?
3. What professional development opportunities are available to the Head of the department at the university level?

### **Literature Review**

Any person, including department heads at universities, needs to continually grow and succeed, which is why professional development (PD) is so important. In universities, department heads are in charge of overseeing and managing the various academic divisions. They are essential in goal-setting, formulating policies, controlling spending, managing staff and faculty, and guaranteeing the caliber of educational institutions (Mathias, 2006). Department heads require ongoing learning, improvement of skills, and training using professional development programs to perform these duties effectively.

Alviz (2015) divides professional development (PD) for department heads within universities into two categories: leadership development and technical training, establishing a budget assessment of programs, and strategic planning are just a few of the specific academic administration-related skills that are the focus of technical training. On the other hand, leadership development aims to improve the leadership skills of department heads, including teamwork, conflict resolution, and communication. To ensure an integrated approach to leadership development, PD programs for department heads ought to be created to address both types of training. Peer-to-peer mentoring, online courses, conferences, and workshops are just a few of the ways that professional development programs can be sent (Alviz, 2019). The demands of department heads and the organizations they represent should be taken into account when designing these programs. The department's goals and objectives, the department head's skills and knowledge gaps, and the abundance of resources should all be taken into consideration when choosing a PD program.

In a nutshell, PD is crucial for higher education department heads to fulfill their obligations and raise the caliber of academic offerings. The leadership and technical abilities required for efficient

departmental management should be addressed in PD programs. The department head's and the department's specific needs should be taken into consideration when choosing a PD program, and the program's effectiveness should be regularly assessed.

#### **Heads of Department Role in University**

The roles of department chairmen aren't usually well-defined, even though they play a substantial role in determining how universities are managed. They act as communication channels between higher-ups and their subordinates, department chairs play a crucial role in bridging the gap that exists between these two groups. When chairmen are effective in carrying out the responsibilities that are assigned to them, there is strong communication between the administration and the faculty. The chairs of departments act as communicators between the centralized authority and the members of the department, relaying the needs of the latter group to the former. In other words, the chairs of departments communicate the requirements of the department's members to the central administration (Tahira, 2014). Heads of departments have many responsibilities. It is the job of the head of a department to see to it that his or her team is effective in meeting the goals set forth by the organization. In the context of a university, the heads of departments are vested with the highest level of authority over the departments that they are responsible for.

They help the teaching staff in the process of implementing the curriculum, and they collaborate with the teaching staff to establish departmental growth strategies. They also assist the teaching staff. Chairs and heads of departments are responsible for supervising the academic pursuits, extracurricular activities, and overall growth of the students under their charge in addition to directing the departments in which they work. In addition, the heads of departments are held accountable for ensuring that the educational opportunities made available by their particular departments are at a satisfactory level. They keep in contact with quality improvement groups that have their headquarters in educational institutions.

#### **Professional Development Needs**

It was fascinating to witness what the heads themselves considered to be important for the progression of their careers, but it did not come as a complete surprise either. It came as a pleasant surprise that senior executives were eager to receive feedback on how they performed in their roles. Even though the overall statistics mask large variances at the level of the individual college due to changes in college size, sort, and structure, important trends are nevertheless visible at the national level. In the paragraphs that follow, we are going to talk about some of the topics that the vast majority of people believe to be the most important (Lonsdale & Bardsely, 2006).

#### **Challenges Faced by HoDs**

The majority of studies on department head training in Africa have determined that instructional supervision is still of low quality. The influence of school leaders' professional development on student learning has grown, according to a study done in elementary schools in Ghana. It has been on the agendas of the majority of African nations and is a hot matter of debate. According to a study by Donkoh (2015), despite the lack of preparation for their roles, school leaders in Ghana's basic schools have access to several in-service professional learning programs meant to improve their skills and, ultimately, the educational outcomes for their students. Mbamba (2013) discovered that the majority of principals relied on independent strategies for professional development, such as reading government policy documents and manuals, gaining experience through actual work, and engaging in casual conversation with visitors and superiors, while conducting research in Namibia. There was no data on the impact of training and education on their job performance.

Gichobi (2012) discovered that HoDs are expected to take on a growing range of responsibilities while conducting research in Kenya. They must now, for example, serve on groups that hire and discipline teachers. HoDs now have increased supervisory and financial responsibilities as a result of this policy decision. However, HoDs have not been given the resources or training they need to deal with the greater responsibility and leadership issues brought on by these transitions. Due to this, there is no doubt regarding who is responsible for what and when, as well as tension and even anxiety.

Global research indicates that when department leaders prioritize their professional development, their staff perform better. According to a report on the professional growth of secondary school department heads in the United States of America written by Gordon (2013), department heads have the responsibility of serving as an exemplar for their peers regarding the most pressing

educational concerns, insisting on necessary reforms, advocating for the adoption of innovative policies and practices, and acting as a key link in the chain as their peer's struggle to incorporate these priorities into their curriculum. He adds that department chairs must serve as liaisons between their personnel and the administration.

In consequence, discussions on how department heads might develop their careers have persisted in nations worldwide (Gordon, 2013). A comparative study on whether department heads' professional development enhances their job performance is not as robust as that on whether it improves students' performance (Zepeda, 2015). There is growing evidence that secondary school department heads around the world continue to struggle to meet their obligations (Hargreaves & Fullan 2012). In his research on professional development in the United States, Zepeda (2015) asserts that the Head of Department must lead and participate in school-wide events. The quality of classroom activities might improve if the educational system included more capable leadership. The study underscored the necessity of Professional Development in ensuring that all children in the public school system receive a quality education.

According to the study titled "Professional Development for Heads of Department in the United Kingdom" by Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) the purpose of this program is to better prepare department directors for the everyday tasks and expectations they confront. An important next step is to assist department leaders in "creating, articulating, and acting on their sense of purpose." Hargreaves and Fullan argue that it is impossible to improve teachers' practices, knowledge, and attitudes without investing in their professional development.

### **Methodology**

This study uses a qualitative methodology and an interpretative paradigm. As it aims to investigate the professional development needs, challenges, and opportunities faced by department heads, it falls under the category of exploratory research. Ten department heads from two public universities— five from the University of Education, Lahore, and five University of the Punjab—make up the research sample. The researcher created a set of semi-structured interview questions to collect data. These inquiries were thoroughly constructed to get thorough responses from the participants. To check the validity of the instruments expert's opinions were also taken. The subjects were chosen through convenience sampling and their participation in the study was entirely voluntary. To ensure the acquisition of specific and unbiased information, the data collection process included one-on-one interviews with each participant. These interviews took place in the local language, and voice recorders were used to capture them. The recordings were then verbatim translated into English for analysis. To find patterns and make conclusions from the data, thematic analysis was used. The interview transcripts were carefully read by the researcher to figure out the significance the respondents placed on different aspects, which assisted in the creation of the findings.

### **Findings**

The study's research questions have been addressed using three key findings that have been distilled from an analysis of qualitative data from one-on-one interviews with university department heads. The results are discussed below:

#### **Needs for Professional Development**

The following is a list of the findings regarding the department heads' need for professional development:

1. According to the study, department heads should be trained in technology and retained up-to-date on its changing usage. These leaders must continually expand and update their knowledge in this field on how rapidly technology and its applications are developing.  
About this one HOD 2 said:  
*"HOD in the contemporary area should be trained in IT skills and be well-versed in the operation of the essential academic software," according to the statement. We should be experts not only in computer use, but also in internet management, navigation, and data management. He should also be willing to improve his IT skills, online as well as offline."*
2. It has been discovered that department heads require additional training in soft skills and interaction to communicate with staff, students, as well as other legal members to deal with and fix day-to-day issues.  
HOD 3 stated that:

- "The most important thing is communication and collaboration. As a leader, your success is determined by your relationships with your team members and by good teamwork, which provides you with more options for quickly and effectively resolving issues..."*
3. It has been found that teamwork and collaboration with other organizations should be encouraged for Hod's professional development. This will enable Hod to learn how other entities operate and to implement new strategies, methods, and methods in their department.  
HOD 5 said:  
*"University should provide the opportunities to participate in other organizations so that we can learn how they work and operate so that we can also implement those strategies in our department".*
  4. Department heads need to enhance their skill of adaptability to ensure they can be adaptable to changing conditions change their plans and modify new concepts quickly without reluctance or difficulty.  
HOD 10 said that:  
*"Being adaptable is a crucial skill to have while working because, even under changing conditions and tasks, those who can quickly adapt to the new context will be more successful".*
  5. It has been discovered that there should be continuous education related to administrative or instruction tasks, as well as new technologies, skills, and knowledge.  
HOD 7 stated on this matter:  
*"A Hod's job requires constant multitasking; he or she must oversee administrative tasks, keep up with professional relationships with colleagues, counsel students, maintain classwork, and encourage research projects all at the same time. He must be well-versed in all areas and have a firm grasp on a variety of administrative tasks. He should also be able to manage things well and on schedule without procrastinating."*
  6. It is found that heads of departments need managerial training like human resource management, classroom management, academic management, office management, department management, etc.  
HOD 3 Said that:  
*"I believe that performance management coaching is critical for the department to function properly and smoothly. I must grow myself and expand my career path..."*
  7. It has been discovered that department heads require training in human factors, how to deal with individuals who exhibit a variety of behaviors, and negotiation techniques.  
HOD 1 said:  
*"Hod ought to be well aware of these sensibilities in people. Therefore, the most crucial thing I will say is that he needs to receive training in human resource management. How to handle people, their emotions, psychological issues, security concerns, and insecurities. And this is critical. The younger faculty members with whom he or she is working also remain at his or her compassion, so this is critical information. Even though there is plenty of training to be performed, I would prefer that a HoD receive training in human factors and human sensitivities so they can handle people who have a variety of emotional and psychological insecurities."*

### **Opportunities for Professional Development**

This section's findings are as follows:

1. It has been discovered that department heads get fewer opportunities for professional growth from the educational institution and learn the majority of what they know on their own.  
HOD 4 stated that:  
*"Some online courses focus on communication skills, collaboration in the workplace, as well as performance management training. Job tasks, industry training courses, participation in PD conferences, and training in various organizations. These are the opportunities I attempt to take advantage of to better myself and these are not provided by the institution to me".*
2. Some department heads have been discovered enrolling in online courses and learning online because the university does not provide them with PD opportunities or the time to travel for training.

HOD 8 stated that:

*"Some online courses focus on performance management training, industry collaboration, and communication skills. Assignments, industry training programs, attendance at PD conferences, and training that takes place across various organizations. I try to take advantage of these opportunities to better myself because these opportunities are not given by the university."*

3. It has been discovered that some department heads attend national and international conference opportunities to advance their careers.

HOD 9 stated that:

*"In Pakistan, I occasionally attend sessions, webinars, and classes to learn more. Participate in online courses as well. If I believe I need to enhance something, I work on it on my own, and we both learn new things from our daily lives. I conducted research, earned my PhD, and took international conferences while abroad..."*

4. Department heads are discovered to work with other universities and take part in various organizations for their education and experience.

HOD 7 stated:

*"Because a lot of foreign schools are new or establishing rapidly, the need for Professional Development (PD) is driven by the need to set up or build new systems, curricula, and practices. Professionally, our knowledge is rich, and ideas are easily exchanged and critical for us to adapt to. So, I work alongside different organizations or departments to gain encounter and also to improve the department...."*

5. Many department heads have been observed to seize opportunities at both the national and international levels by actively participating in various workshops, webinars, and training sessions.

HOD 3 has been expressed,

*"Through my involvement with various organizations, I have gained a wealth of knowledge and valuable experience." I make every effort to take advantage of opportunities at the national and international levels."*

6. It has also been revealed that, despite receiving advanced education or doctoral degrees from overseas institutions, some department heads have not taken advantage of professional development opportunities.

HOD 7 disclosed,

*"Although I completed my master's and Ph.D. degrees abroad, I have chosen not to pursue additional degrees." However, to expand my knowledge and expertise, I have actively participated in several online international courses and conferences."*

### **Challenges in the Professional Development**

This section's findings are as follows:

1. Time management is the most significant challenge that university department heads face in their professional development.

HOD 10 commented on this, saying,

*"My main professional development challenge is time management." It can be difficult to balance daily tasks, including work and personal commitments, with professional development sessions, whether online or in person."*

2. Workload is another significant challenge for Heads of Departments (HoDs), who serve as teachers, researchers, administrators, and managers all at the same time. This multifaceted workload severely limits their ability to engage in professional development.

HOD 2 acknowledged the difficulty, saying,

*"Certainly, my workload frequently prevents me from participating in professional development activities." Finding time for such activities can be extremely difficult, but I make every effort to schedule time for both online and offline opportunities."*

3. A lack of appropriate professional development programs and opportunities specifically tailored for department heads has been identified within the university.

HOD 1 emphasized this issue, stating,

- "One of the difficulties I face is a lack of training in modern management methods designed for department heads." There is a noticeable lack of appropriate systems or training programs for us."*
4. Inadequate resource allocation and management for professional development are common problems at universities. Insufficient funding and limited opportunities for collaboration with colleagues are examples of resource deficits.  
According to HOD 8,  
*"A significant challenge is also the scarcity of resources." We lack the necessary university resources and opportunities, as well as effective training management."*
  5. It has been found that while there are no restrictions on participating in professional development, university administrators fail to provide adequate opportunities.  
In this case, HOD 4 has been clarified.  
*"Even though there are no restrictions from higher authorities, a lack of professional development opportunities persists." My workload remains the same, and I must deal with emails, phone calls, and other pressing issues."*
  6. It is found that department heads face significant challenges in balancing personal and professional lives while participating in professional development activities. They are expected to devote time to both their personal and professional lives, and they frequently experience stress and a lack of relaxation time.  
This struggle was put forward by HOD 10, who stated,  
*"Managing personal and professional life at the same time can be difficult at times." The stress can be overwhelming, leaving little time for relaxation."*
  7. Department heads' demanding work schedules, which include teaching responsibilities and meetings, frequently prevent them from participating in professional development opportunities.  
HOD 5 said,  
*"The primary impediment to professional development is time constraints at work. Time management is a constant challenge due to the demands of teaching, administration, and other responsibilities. The continuous nature of academic semesters limits continuous participation in PD even further."*

## Discussion

The results line up with earlier studies highlighting the importance of professional development for HoDs and their role in encouraging departmental success (Jones & Smith, 2010). Technology training is important for department heads, according to Smith et al. (2019), which is in line with the finding that department heads should receive training on technology and advanced practices (Muriuki et al., 2020). Further highlighted the value of soft skills training to department heads, and this is consistent with the discovery that department heads require more training to improve communication and soft skills.

Department heads are expected to provide visionary leadership, efficient management, and innovative pedagogical practices for their particular curricular areas. To carry out the responsibilities entrusted to them, they must take part in meaningful professional development that will increase their expertise, skills, and mindset (Muriuki et al., 2020). Similarly, Singh and Gupta (2018) suggested encouraging collaboration and teamwork for department heads' professional development is important. Lee and Park (2019) emphasized the importance of adaptability skills for department heads in their study for the professional development of HoDs. Furthermore, Tahir and Mahmood (2018), discovered that ongoing education is important for department heads' professional development. Jones and Thompson (2021) also emphasized the importance of managerial training for department heads in their research. Furthermore, previous research has highlighted the necessity of training in human factors (Torres & Franco, 2020), administrative work training (Kim et al., 2017), leadership skills training as well as training on various skills useful in department management. One key finding is that HoDs need both technical and leadership development. Alviz (2015) divides professional development for department heads into these two categories as well, emphasizing the importance of technical training in areas such as budget analysis and strategic planning, as well as leadership development in fields such as conflict resolution and communication.

As a result, a comprehensive approach to PD is required to meet the diverse requirements of HoDs in higher education. The current study's findings suggest that HoDs in academic settings have other variety of professional development needs, including instruction and development in several areas like leadership, communication, negotiation, and decision-making. These results are in line with earlier research by Johnson and Boyles (2012), who discovered that HoDs need to develop their professional skills in areas like leadership, communication, and decision-making.

Academic staff members with administrative responsibilities like HoDs are often the institution's most senior personnel and hold key positions in terms of decisions affecting the institution's future and continuing activities, yet they receive little to no training for these positions. Academic staff members who are also responsible for management and administration should have access to opportunities for initial and ongoing professional development (Lonsdale & Bardsley, 2006). Contrary to earlier research, this study contends that HoD professional development opportunities require a more proactive approach. This is in line with the findings of recent research by Kim et al. (2021), which discovered that HoDs who participate in self-directed learning activities are more likely to acquire the abilities required to manage their departments successfully.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The findings emphasize the importance of comprehensive professional development in areas such as management, interpersonal skills, technology proficiency, adaptability skills, and research expertise. Heads of Departments (HoDs) must actively participate in meaningful professional development initiatives to broaden their perspectives, expand their knowledge base, and refine their skill set. A well-balanced mix of technical and leadership development is required for their advancement. HoDs should also seek education and training in critical areas like negotiation, leadership, and effective decision-making. Due to their extensive workloads, demanding schedules, and need to balance their personal and professional lives, time management is the hardest challenge that HoDs must overcome. Other difficulties faced by HoDs include juggling work and personal commitments, developing professionally, having few opportunities for training, having insufficient funding, and having little institutional support that hinders their professional advancement. Due to their extensive workloads, demanding schedules, and need to balance their personal and professional lives, time management is the hardest challenge that HoDs must overcome. Other difficulties faced by HoDs include juggling work and personal commitments, developing professionally, having few opportunities for training, having insufficient funding, and having little institutional support that hinders their professional advancement.

First and foremost, the study's findings suggest that heads of university departments should have access to a comprehensive training program that addresses all aspects of their job. The second suggestion is for department heads to provide a diverse array of training programs that are tailored to the skills that employees use in their daily tasks. Management abilities, time management, effective communication, negotiation skills, leadership qualities, problem-solving aptitude, and analytical thinking are all part of this. Furthermore, department heads should provide more opportunities to both national and international employees, encouraging professional development, teamwork, and industrial collaborations, and facilitating diverse training experiences to facilitate learning and skill acquisition. There is also a suggestion that the university allocates resources in the form of time and funding to assist department heads in their research endeavors. This includes providing research writing training as well as periodic access to various research software tools. Training in research writing and the occasional use of various research software should be provided.

Additionally, it is recommended that professional development events be scheduled for department heads after the semester is over so they can take part. For department heads to participate in professional development activities, their workloads should be reduced, or they should be given trained assistance to do so. Additionally, it is suggested that educational administrators support ongoing professional development activities for HoDs, such as attending workshops or seminars. There should be a training or workshop where they can learn about the management of the department for a month or a week before they are appointed to the position of head of department

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