Understanding Continuous Professional Development Networks

OER Africa Desktop Review

Background

Continuous Professional Development (CPD) networks can provide a useful platform to share knowledge, improve professional praxis, and facilitate collaboration and peer support. As part of its current grant, OER Africa aims to advance the professional competences and skills of stakeholders in African higher education institutions. A key aspect of this is the development of a CPD network, which will provide a platform for institutional stakeholders to engage in meaningful dialogue about their CPD practices, share valuable insights and lessons learned, and offer ongoing peer support. By facilitating the exchange of knowledge and experiences, OER Africa's CPD network will endeavour to enhance the professional growth of its members – academics, academic librarians, and senior managers in Africa universities – driving innovation and excellence in educational practices across the network. There is a significant opportunity for a network of this kind, as our desktop review suggests that nothing similar appears to exist within the African context for this target audience.

The desktop review that follows, developed from the available literature, seeks to distil key considerations for setting up a CPD network. It also provides a list of current CPD networks around the world, their focus, and their contact details, with the intention of selecting a small group of these networks to contact for interviews about their experiences of establishing and maintaining their networks.

Definitions of the term 'CPD' vary and are sometimes contested in higher education settings. Madden and Mitchell in Mashile (2002) describe CPD as:

> The maintenance and enhancement of the knowledge, expertise, and competence of professionals throughout their careers according to a plan formulated with regard to the need of the professional, the employer, the profession and society.'[1]

Conversely, the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development define CPD as 'learning experiences which help you develop and improve your professional practice'.[2] Looking specifically at the higher education environment, the European Commission (2014) notes that the aim of CPD is to:

> offer lifelong learning that contributes to the improvement of the quality of university teaching, research, management and the personal and professional development of each of the members within this group.[3]

For OER Africa's purposes, CPD refers to the ongoing process by which academics, librarians, senior managers, and other higher education staff enhance their skills and competences.

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[1] Mashile, E.O. (2002). Continuous Professional Development of Educators: The State, Professional Councils and Higher Education. South African Journal of Higher Education, Vol. 16(1):175. Retrieved from https://journals.co.za/doi/pdf/10.10520/EJC36873

[2] Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development. (nd). About CPD. Retrieved from https://www.cipd.org/uk/learning/cpd/about/

[3] European Commission. (2024). Teachers and Education Staff: Continuing professional development for academic staff working in Higher Education. Retrieved from https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-education-systems/spain/continuing-professional-development-academic-staff-working-higher

What is consistent across the various definitions presented above is that CPD is a continuous process of improvement and can take several forms, including courses, study groups, workshops, internships, webinars, informal learning, and competence sharing in professional networks.[4]

CPD networks can be organised at different levels. They might take the form of national networks like subject associations or local networks such as hubs, local authority clusters, or specific subject groups.[5] In OER Africa's case, a CPD network is particularly valuable because it offers an opportunity for academics, senior managers, and librarians to access diverse perspectives, accountability mechanisms, and a structured peer support system to receive feedback. Further, this kind of network can facilitate the sharing and critical examination of best practices and CPD challenges among colleagues, whether in similar or differing contexts, thus promoting iterative improvements in approaches.

What Makes an Effective CPD Network?

It is beneficial to think of CPD networks as having a set of commonly held principles that inform how they operate and how members interact with one another. Knowles (1978) presents a series of principles related to adult learning which could be helpful for these purposes. These principles of adult learning theory include that adults are independent and self-directed in their learning; that they use their experiences as valuable learning resources; they have specific learning needs related to their contexts; they focus on problem solving; and they are intrinsically motivated to learn rather than extrinsically.[6]

Considering other aspects of network design, Learning Forward, a professional learning association, outlines three questions with corresponding sub-questions, to help guide the process of designing a network. The authors explain that an important part of the process is for the network creators to consider who is affected by the network and who is involved in the work. The questions they present can be found in the table below.

Table 1   Guiding questions for network designs[7]

Questions	Sub-questions
What are we trying to accomplish?	• Who benefits from the network? • Why is it important?
How will I know if the change is an improvement?	• Who defines what it means to improve? • Whose values are being represented and included?
What change might I introduce and why?	• Whose values are being incorporated? • Who bears the burden and labour of implementing the change?

[4] European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training. (nd). Professional Development for Inclusive Teaching and Training. Retrieved from https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/vet-toolkit-tackling-early-leaving/intervention-approaches/professional-development-inclusive-teaching-and-training

[5] Barker, M. (2020). Effective CPD: A Guide to Professional Learning Networks. Sec-Ed. Retrieved from https://www.sec-ed.co.uk/content/best-practice/effective-cpd-a-guide-to-professional-learning-networks

[6] Solomon, M.A., Gebremedhin, A.A. and Tigitsu, K.W. (2023). Continuous Professional Development in Higher Education: A Systematic Review of its Conceptualizations, Trends and Challenges (2011-2020). Bahir Dar Journal of Education, Vol. 23(1). Retrieved from https://www.ajol.info/index.php/bdje/article/view/247602/234196

[7] Hinnant-Crawford in Morgan, N. and Bowman, M (2024). At the outset of network and improvement design, consider who it is truly meant to help. Learning Forward. Retrieved from https://learningforward.org/2024/01/29/at-the-outset-of-network-and-improvement-design-consider-who-it-is-truly-meant-to-help/

Ultimately, these guiding questions reiterate the importance of focusing on the beneficiaries of the CPD network and ensuring that the network is tailored to the needs of those it is meant to serve. This requires staying attuned to members' needs by using mechanisms such as, for example, needs assessments to identify gaps and tailor network offerings accordingly. It also highlights the need for evidence-based design; using evidence to drive decision-making and ensure the broader success of the network.

While other types of learning communities are probably beyond the scope of what OER Africa aims to achieve through its CPD network, useful lessons can still be gleaned from learning communities such as professional learning communities (PLCs)[8] and communities of practice.[9] Burton (2021) outlines four key success factors for learning communities. These elements ensure effective collaboration, trust, and focused efforts towards common goals:

- **Proper levels of access:** Learning communities must be able to meet in person or online on a regular basis. Both quality and quantity of time are important.
- **Strong relationships:** Members should have a strong sense of belonging to the group and trust in one another.
- **Shared vision:** Learning communities should share a similar vision in terms of outcomes and purpose.
- **Organized structures in place:** For example, in a PLC for teachers, the teachers in the group should work in the same grade or work with the same groups of students. And in a PLC in other industries, such as nursing or veterinary medicine, participants in the community should work in the same specialty and work on similar levels professionally.[10]

The same author refers to research which highlights five core elements for a learning community to be effective. These elements are a sense of community, diversity, integration, active learning, and reflection and assessment.[11]

Challenges with CPD provision

There is a dearth of information on the challenges associated with establishing and maintaining CPD networks. However, some have unpacked the challenges that impede higher education stakeholders participating in CPD, which are important to consider when setting up a CPD network. These challenges occur at different levels, from individuals' attitudes to their institutions, to the national policies that govern higher education. Solomon, Gebremedhin and Tigistu (2023) conducted a systematic review of CPD in higher education. The authors conclude that there are three overarching challenges in effective CPD provision:

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[8] PLCs are generally composed of educators who teach the same grade or subject. They tend to focus on improving student learning within a school environment through a variety of methods that include discussion with other members of the PLC, data collection, and inquiry. See https://www.thinkific.com/blog/professional-learning-community/#what-is

[9] CoPs can be found in education, government, and business environments. They refer to a group of people who share a common interest or set of problems and come together to meet individual and group goals. Members support and encourage each other as everyone works to meet the same objectives. See https://www.thinkific.com/blog/professional-learning-community/#what-is

[10] Taken verbatim from Burton, C. (2021). How To Create An Effective Professional Learning Community. Retrieved from https://www.thinkific.com/blog/professional-learning-community/#what-is

[11] Taken verbatim from Burton, C. (2021). How To Create An Effective Professional Learning Community. Retrieved from https://www.thinkific.com/blog/professional-learning-community/#what-is

Table 2   CPD Challenges[12]

Challenge	Description
Individual academic related challenges	• Lack of time for CPD endeavours • Mismatch between academics' need and CPD endeavours
Institutional related challenges	• Lack of institutional support • Demands of CPD are imposed by the different stakeholders (being donor-driven) like policy makers, institutions or institutional leaders • Lack of financial support • Absence of infrastructures required, resources, accountability and incentives for CPD endeavours • Inability of institutions to make CPD relevant to academics work life and higher education context and the training lacks content knowledge • Absence of organizational culture to learn together
Policy related challenges	• Absence of well-articulated policy • Lack of policy provision support for CPD endeavours. That is lack of financial, organizational, and institutional capacity to plan and implement, evaluate effective CPD at higher education context. • Absence of well-established system for academics CPD

The table helps identify critical areas that need attention. Being aware of and sensitive to the abovementioned challenges that higher education stakeholders face is vital as it provides a starting point for key issues that might need to be addressed in enabling institutions to build robust, sustainable CPD networks that promote continuous growth and improve praxis.

Successful Networks That Have Operated in the CPD Space

The networks listed below have been selected based on their potential to offer OER Africa insights into setting up a CPD network; most networks provide platforms for members to engage in meaningful dialogue, share their professional insights, and offer peer support. All networks in the list have operated in the education sector. While every effort has been made to include networks that focus on CPD and/or higher education, some fall out of this scope but might still offer useful insights.

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[12] Solomon, M.A., Gebremedhin, A.A. and Tigitsu, K.W. (2023). Continuous Professional Development in Higher Education: A Systematic Review of its Conceptualizations, Trends and Challenges (2011-2020). Bahir Dar Journal of Education, Vol. 23(1). Retrieved from https://www.ajol.info/index.php/bdje/article/view/247602/234196

Table 3   Successful networks that have operated in the CPD space

Network name and contact details	Description	URL
1. Achieving the Dream (ATD) Network network@achievingthedream.org	The ATD Network offers networking opportunities for peers, policymakers, and industry leaders. This includes: • Two registrations to DREAM national convening • One hour of coach time at DREAM • Opportunity to participate in various role- or topic-specific forums • In-Network pricing to attend annual topic-specific events	https://achievingthedream.org/join-the-network/
2. American Association of University Professors (AAUP) aaup@aaup.org Mark Bostic, Director, Department of Organizing and Services mbostic@aaup.org	AAUP has a paid membership model that provides exclusive access to the expertise of AAUP staff, members, and leaders. They offer workshops, webinars, and resources on various topics relevant to faculty development, including teaching methodologies, research support, and career advancement. • Webinars on topics such as strengthening faculty handbooks, good-faith bargaining, working with the media, and other topics of interest. • Toolkits for chapter action that give you the guidelines, sample documents, and other resources you need to advance the faculty voice on your campus. These toolkits will help you organize a stronger chapter, run issue-based campaigns, build a better website, win improvements for faculty collective bargaining agreements, and more. • One Faculty Campaign materials, which equip chapters to advocate for faculty in contingent appointments. • Guidebooks providing in-depth advice about the Family and Medical Leave Act, pregnancy in the academy, and faculty handbooks as enforceable contracts. • A subscription to *Academe*, the quarterly magazine of the AAUP, which analyzes higher education issues from faculty members' perspectives. Feature articles examine tenure, affirmative action, contingent faculty appointments, intellectual property, and other timely academic issues.The summer *Bulletin* issue of *Academe* contains the year's most important reports. Members can opt in or out of the print edition by following the instructions here.	https://www.aaup.org/membership/benefits

Network name and contact details	Description	URL
3. International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (ISSoTL) Contact- See https://issotl.com/contact-us/	ISSoTL has a paid membership model which entitles members to the following benefits: • Opportunities to interact and collaborate with an international scholarly community, such as the following: o Joining any of ISSOTL's Interest Groups, or forming your own, o Becoming a part of ISSOTL's formal structure by putting your name forward for its four standing committees or for any of its elected positions on the Board of Directors o Applying to join, facilitate, or lead ISSOTL's International Collaborative Writing Groups (ICWG) initiative o Serving as a peer reviewer for ISSOTL conference proposals, submissions to its journal *Teaching & Learning Inquiry*, or some of its awards (e.g., Emerging Scholars Fund, Student Presentation and Poster Award) o voting in ISSOTL elections and other organizational business • Access ISSOTL's members-only space for interacting with ISSOTL colleagues and accessing members-only resources • Receive advanced notice of ISSOTL initiatives and news through membership-only emails and the monthly e-newsletter • Attend ISSOTL conferences at a reduced registration rate • Access members-only features of the ISSOTL website, such as submitting blog posts and jobs ads	https://issotl.com/benefits-of-membership/
4. The Association of African Universities (AAU) Nodumo Dhlamini ndhlamini@aau.org (contact for referral to relevant person, potentially Mr. Ransford Okwabi Bekoe?)	One of AAU's objectives is to inter-institutional collaboration and networking. The AFRID Networks & Universities brings together a number of peer African institutions and researchers that are willing to work together, with a view to generating a critical mass that could more effectively support development initiatives on the continent. AAU also continues to mobilize resources for the creation of National Research and Education Networks (NRENs) in African countries where they don't exist.	https://aau.org
5. The POD Network Danielle Gabrielle, Executive Director	The POD Network provides professional development and a community of practice for scholars and practitioners of educational development, and to serve as a leading voice on matters related to teaching and learning in higher education. The POD Network's members are mostly directors and staff from	https://podnetwork.org

Network name and contact details	Description	URL
executivedirector@podnetwork.org Gaye Webb, Administrative Manager gayewebb@podnetwork.org	teaching & learning centres, department chairs, faculty, graduate students, deans, student services staff, chief academic officers, and educational consultants from across the United States and Canada. Like many professional associations, the POD Network facilitates the exchange of information and ideas, the development of professional skills, the exploration and debate of educational issues, and the sharing of expertise and resources. However, POD connections have an added dimension. From the beginning, the POD Network has recognized that its members seek new ideas and fresh perspectives, but they also seek affiliation and support, and colleagues with whom to collaborate. Thus, the POD Network connects people with people more effectively than do most other professional organizations.	
6. The Active Learning Network activelearningnetwork@gmail.com	The Active Learning Network is a group of people from around the world who share an interest in active approaches to learning. This site is designed to be a collaborative platform to showcase active learning projects, research and discussion taking place nationally and internationally.	https://activelearningnetwork.com
7. Association for Learning Development in Higher Education admin@aldinhe.ac.uk	Founded in 2003, ALDinHE supports and champions the work of learning developers through community building and practice-sharing, facilitating research and dissemination, and providing professional development opportunities. They also connect and collaborate with other like-minded organizations around the world who share these goals.	https://aldinhe.ac.uk/networking/
8. National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement – Public Engagement Professional's Network (PEP) pepnetwork@uwe.ac.uk	Supporting engagement professionals across the UK working in higher education and research to access CPD, peer support and the latest thinking on engagement. Joining the Public Engagement Professionals Network will allow you to: • Stay connected to fellow alumni of NCCPE programmes and training • Foster new connections and collaborations with sector peers • Share intelligence about the latest thinking, good practice and policy development related to public engagement • Share solutions and problems and support each other • Take advantage of relevant low-cost CPD and training for PEPs at various stages of your career	https://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/public-engagement-professionals-network

Network name and contact details	Description	URL
9. Regional Universities Forum for Capacity Building in Agriculture secretariat@ruforum.org communications@ruforum.org	RUFORUM's Network: • Links member universities with one another and helps them network to solve common problems related to higher and tertiary education, research, science, technology and innovation in agriculture and related disciplines. • Links member universities with communities and private sector to adopt technologies • Promotes networking outside the African continent	http://www.ruforum.org/networking-and-coordination
10. Learn4Dev learn4dev@enabel.be	Learn4dev is an international network of development organisations from different backgrounds. These organisations work together to provide better learning opportunities for staff and partners. The network is not formalised nor has its own staff or secretariat. The network currently has 36 member organisations including bilateral donor organisations, multilateral organisations and international training and research centres. The network's mission is to add value as a facilitator of joint learning, open to different stakeholders, in areas of high priority for development cooperation, by: • Facilitating knowledge sharing and the exchange of experiences on effective approaches to training and learning between member organisations; • Facilitating networking and collaboration between members around specific topics linked to learning and training (thematic or geographical topics, challenges, etc.); • Facilitating the development and delivery of joint learning activities and resources; • Offering a space for members to promote and share open courses and learning opportunities.	https://learn4dev.eu/vision-mission/
11. DVC/PVC Network https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/contact-us	The Advance Higher Education DVC/PVC Network is an invitation-only community of Pro Vice-Chancellors, Vice-Principals and Deputy Vice-Chancellors, and equivalent senior leaders with the brief for learning and teaching, education, or the student experience at member institutions. It is a unique forum to share successful strategies for enhancing HE teaching and learning. It focuses on peer learning, collaboration, and addressing sector-wide issues. The network offers events, discussions, and resources that	https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/programmes-events/events/pvc-network

Network name and contact details	Description	URL
	support ongoing professional growth and knowledge sharing among higher education leaders	
12. International Consortium for Education Development **ICED President** Donna Ellis donnae@uwaterloo.ca **ICED Administrator / ICED Office** Rosalind Grimmitt roz.grimmitt@icedonline.net	ICED promotes educational development (ED) in higher education worldwide. Educational developers work with individuals, groups, and institutions to enhance the practice, theory, and quality of teaching in support of student learning. ED is also known as academic, faculty, or staff development. As a network of networks, ICED's members are national, transnational, and independent ED organisations. Members can: • Access a network of experts in the theory and practice of educational development in higher education globally. • Contribute to an international community of practice (face to face and online) by exchanging ideas, practices, and challenges. • Develop and maintain effective partnerships with other educational development network organisations. • Receive updates about ICED's online resources and a discount on the International Journal for Academic Development (IJAD). • Participate in educational development advocacy by encouraging and supporting the emergence of new networks globally. • Contribute to shaping and setting ICED's directions and activities.	https://icedonline.net
13. The Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia (HERDSA) office@herdsa.org.au	HERDSA is a scholarly society for people committed to the advancement of higher and tertiary education. Its mission is to bring together and support those people who are engaged in teaching in higher education, in the study of learning, teaching and policy in higher education, and in the continuous improvement of higher education. Their aims include: • Encouraging collaboration and the development of professional communities in higher and tertiary education; and • Assisting members in their ongoing professional development.	https://www.herdsa.org.au

Network name and contact details	Description	URL
14. The Network for Staff and Educational Development (NetSED) Prof. Santosh Panda spanda.ignou@gmail.com spanda@ignou.ac.in	NetSED is a voluntary non-profit making international forum committed to improve teaching, learning and training at all levels, and the quality of processes and products associated with these. It provides a forum for networking institutions, associations, federations, groups and individuals and their activities on staff training/development, and educational development, and thereby facilitates learning from each other. NetSED has a variety of interest areas and operations, including the improvement of the quality of teaching and learning within higher education and the quality of human resource development in education and industry.	http://www.netsed.net
15. Teacher Development Trust	The Teacher Development Trust Expert Schools Network Membership provides evidence informed professional learning, knowledge sharing and research. It aims to foster collaboration and networking opportunities among teachers, school and system leaders, and educational organizations. Their offerings include: • **TDT Learn:** Online training modules to guide professionals through understanding and implementing effective approaches to school improvement through people development. • **TDT Diagnostic Review Tool:** Supports educators to conduct a self-review, a staff survey and gather evidence in preparation for a TDT led Diagnostic Review, and in time, to conduct their own internal Diagnostic Review • **Membership Resources:** Curated additional reading, resources, research and recordings of past network events to support continued professional growth. Access to the Teachers Working Environments Survey.	https://tdtrust.org/expert-schools-membership/

Questions to guide interviews with network representatives

Given the insights provided in this desktop review, below is a list of questions to guide discussions with representatives of select networks.

1. Please provide a brief background of your network (*Probes: purpose and size, how it is funded, target audience*)
2. What functions need to be fulfilled to sustain the network and who is responsible for each of these functions (e.g., coordination)?
3. How has the network been sustained (both in terms of resources and motivation)?
4. What are the main challenges the network has faced?
5. *If relevant:* What key challenges have network partners identified regarding CPD delivery? How, if at all, has the network sought to address these challenges? (*Probes: Individual academic related challenges e.g., time, institutional challenges, policy related challenges*)
6. How does the network gauge its success and impact?
7. What partnerships or collaborations does the network have (if any)? How do these partnerships/collaborations support the network?
8. What strategies does the network use to engage and retain members?
9. What mechanisms are in place for knowledge sharing and dissemination?
10. What, if any, incentives are offered to network members to encourage active participation?
11. What key learnings or insights have you gained from establishing and operating your network? Please include specific examples of what has worked well, and any lessons learned from challenges encountered.