

Professional Learning Communities in Higher Education: The Case of Sultan Qaboos University, Oman

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Abstract

This paper examines the existence of professional learning communities (PLCs) dimensions in Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) from the point of view of its academic staff members. It also investigates the influence of demographic variables: college, nationality, gender and academic rank on the staff assessment of the reality of PLCs characteristics in SQU. A representative sample from three Colleges, Education, Art and Science, was selected. Findings indicated that there are statistically significant differences in the fifth dimension between the Colleges of Arts and Education for the benefit of the College of Arts; and between the Colleges of Education and Science for the benefit of College of Science. However, there are no statistically significant differences in all dimensions in the total score of the existence of the dimensions of PLCs according to academic rank and gender. The nationality variable showed statistically significant differences in only two of the PLCs dimensions.

Keywords: *professional learning communities, Sultan Qaboos University, Oman*

Introduction

Sultan Qaboos University (SQU), established in 1986, is the first and largest government university in the Sultanate of Oman. Because it is an academic institution, the existence of PLC dimensions needs to be assessed and measured. Since its inception, the university has witnessed tremendous quantitative and qualitative development in all aspects. With this growth, and in a rapidly changing environment, SQU faces the challenge of sustainable improvement and capacity building.

Identifying the existence of PLC characteristics in a university is not an easy task. In order to assess and identify practices and effectiveness of PLC, Professional Learning Community Assessment (PLCA) was developed by Olivier, Hipp and Huffman (2003). The PLCA has been used as a tool to measure the dimensions of PLC in schools. The PLCA was refined and developed into Professional Learning Community Assessment (PLCA-R) which serves as a diagnostic tool for identification and enhancement of professional learning institutions. The PLCA-R covers perceptions of staff on five dimensions: shared and supportive leadership, shared values and vision, collective learning and application, shared personal practice, and supportive conditions (Olivier and et.al, 2003).

This paper attempts to answer the following questions:

1. What are the perceptions of SQU academic staff members on the existence of PLCA-R dimensions?
2. Are there any statistically significant differences in the perceptions of SQU academic staff members on the existence of PLCA-R dimensions according to *Colleges*?
3. Are there any statistically significant differences in the perceptions of SQU academic staff members on the existence of PLCA-R dimensions according to *gender*?
4. Are there any statistically significant differences in the perceptions of SQU academic staff members on the existence of PLCA-R dimensions according to *nationality*?
5. Are there any statistically significant differences in the perceptions of SQU academic staff members on the existence of PLCA-R dimensions according to *academic rank*?

Definitions of Professional learning communities:

Hord (1997) defines PLCs as “the professional staff learning together to direct efforts toward improved student learning”. Bolam et al. (2005) define a PLC as a community “with the capacity to promote and sustain the learning of all professionals in the school community with the collective purpose of enhancing student learning”.

Harris and Jones (2010) state that “A professional learning community is a group of connected and engaged professionals who are responsible for driving change and improvement within, between and across schools that will directly benefit learners”.

Based on their research and extensive review of literature, Hipp and Huffm (2010) defined PLCs as “professional educators working collectively and purposefully to create and sustain a culture of learning for all students and adults”. They have also identified five dimensions and common practices of a PLC, as follows:

1. Supportive and shared leadership
2. Shared values and vision
3. Collective learning and application
4. Shared personal practice
5. Supportive conditions (relationships, structure and resources).

Harris and Chrispeels, (2008) view the professional learning community as a powerful staff development approach and a potent strategy for school and system improvement.

Building PLCs is not and should not be the ultimate target. It is rather a means to an end. As Morrissey (2000) states, the goal is not to be a professional learning community. The emphasis should be on school improvement in all aspects. Harris and Jones (2010) stated that: “The whole point of a professional learning community is that the ‘sum is greater than the parts’.

Characteristics of Professional learning communities:

According to Hord (2004), PLCs have five key features, namely:-

1. Shared values and vision, which means that professional community members agree about and focus on the mission of their institution and the values that will shape their behavior as professionals (Robert and Pruitt, 2003). Sharing vision is considered as a particular mental image of what is important to both: the individuals and the organizations.
2. Collective responsibility, which will help in building and sustaining commitment, and result in pressure and accountability on those who do not share their ideas and carry out tasks with their colleagues. Academic staff can, for example, learn from each other through peer assessment of lectures and exchange of personal thoughts and experiences.
3. Reflective personal inquiries, developing PLC requires ongoing conversations about all work related issues and involvement in decision making process.
4. Collaboration and involvement of staff in all activities.
5. Development of group as well as individual learning is promoted. All teachers are learners with their colleagues

Confirming these five characteristics, Stoll et al. (2006) added three others which are: mutual trust, respect and support among staff members and inclusive membership. They have also identified four key operational processes through which PLCs are created, managed and sustained. These are: optimizing resources and structures; promoting individual and collective learning; explicit promotion and sustaining of an EPLC; and leadership and management.

The professional learning communities as described by Harris and Jones (2010) are characterized by teachers participating in decision-making, having a sense of purpose, engaging in collaborative work and accepting joint responsibility for the outcomes of their work. Harris and Jones (2010) also noted that in successful professional learning communities certain features are needed to be effective, including: respect and trust among colleagues; possession of an appropriate cognitive and skill base that enables effective pedagogy and leads to effective learning; supportive leadership; norms of continuous critical inquiry and continuous improvement; a shared vision or sense of purpose; involvement in decision-making; collegial relationships among teachers; and focus upon impact and outcomes for learners. Stoll and Seashore (2007) also found that effective PLCs also tend to be characterized by shared values; a focus on student learning; reflective dialogue and action enquiry.

Newmann et al. (1996) reiterated this when they mentioned that shared values, focus on student learning, dialogue among teachers and collaboration are essential characteristics of PLCs. In addition, Huffman and Jacobson (2003); Lewis and Andrews (2004) found that in PLCs, there is evidence of more satisfaction, higher morale, and lower rates of absenteeism among teachers. They mentioned that teachers who are part of a professional learning community tend to be more effective in the classroom and achieve better student outcomes.

Louis and Kruse (1995) concluded that the key features for PLCs are smaller school size and planning time, involvement of teachers in the decision process, and availability of resources needed for professional development.

Hord (1997) also found peer observations are being practiced by teachers in PLCs. They regularly visit each other's classrooms and exchange views, give feedback and make suggestions on how to improve and/or learn lean instructional strategies. No doubt, such practice can contribute to professional development of the teaching staff.

Development of PLCs characteristics is a challenging task. Harris and Jones (2010) found some challenges in building professional communities in schools. These challenges can be summarized as follows:-

1. Structural challenges, in which the structures of the school and subject boundaries can be barriers in building whole school learning communities. Work load such as lesson preparation and classroom management tasks often reduce time available for enquiry and collaborative activity.
2. Cultural challenges, where the school culture can either support or undermine innovation and change.
3. External environment challenges, where schools face many external pressures from inspections, new initiatives and other strategies.

Bolam et al (2005) have also identified four key operational processes through which PLCs are created, managed and sustained. These are “optimizing resources and structures; promoting individual and collective learning; explicit promotion and sustaining of an EPLC; and leadership and management”.

DuFour (2004) states that “to create a professional learning community, focus on learning rather than teaching, work collaboratively, and hold yourself accountable for results”. He emphasized that the mission of PLCs is not simply to ensure that students are taught but to ensure that they learn.

Research Method (*Instrument and Sample*)

Instrument:

A quantitative approach is employed in this study. A questionnaire named “The Professional Learning Communities Assessment – Revised (PLCA-R)”, developed by Olivier, Hipp & Huffman (2010) was used as data collection instrument. The researchers made a request to and were granted permission from Dr. Diane Olivier to use the PLCA-R questionnaire in this study.

For the use of Arabic Language speaking participants, the PLCA-R questionnaire was translated into Arabic language. The translated Arabic version was constructed in the same format as the English version and was given to two language experts for back translation. The final Arabic language version of the PLCA-R questionnaire was administered to SQU academic staff members.

The PLCA-R provides perceptions of the staff relating to specific practices observed at the university level with regard to five dimensions: shared and supportive leadership, shared values and vision, collective learning and application, shared personal practice, and supportive conditions, including both relationships and structures. The PLCA-R utilizes a four-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 4 = Strongly Agree. The statements of the survey are categorized into representative groups (Olivier, Hipp & Huffman, 2010):

- Items 1-11 focus on the attributes supporting Shared and Supportive Leadership.
- Items 12-20 assess Shared Values and Vision.
- Items 21-30 determine participants’ perceptions regarding Collective Learning.
- Items 31-37 assess the Shared Personal Practice.
- Items 38-42 pertain to Supportive Conditions- Relationships.
- Items 43-52 pertain to Supportive Conditions- Structures.

The internal consistency of the variables was analyzed using Cronbach’s alpha and Pearson’s Correlations. Table (1) below illustrates the results of internal consistency analysis in the Arabic version of the PLCA-R. There is a strong and significant link between the five dimensions on one hand and between the dimensions and the total score of the scale on the other hand. This indicates that the internal consistency and the values of reliability are high in all dimensions.

Table 1: Consistency & Reliability for the Arabic Version of PLCA-R

PLCA-R Subscales	Mean	SD	Cronbach Alphas	1	2	3	4	5(a)	5(b)	Total
1-Shared and Supportive Leadership	3.14	0.54	0.811	1						
2-Shared Values and Vision	3.24	0.46	0.763	.325**	1					
3-Collective Learning and Application	3.21	0.50	0.784	.316**	.519**	1				
4-Shared Personal Practice	2.92	0.60	0.744	.353**	.569**	.671**	1			
5(a)-Supportive Conditions-Relationships	3.38	0.45	0.712	.511**	.571**	.542**	.610**	1		
5(b)Supportive Conditions-Structures	3.18	0.46	0.738	.466**	.312**	.329**	.330**	.379**	1	
Overall	3.17	0.36	0.911	.720**	.695**	.768**	.785**	.773**	.636**	1

The study sample:

The population of this study is composed of the academic staff members in SQU, Sultanate of Oman. From this population, a study sample of (107) subjects were selected randomly from three colleges: (18) from the College of Education, (32) from the College of Arts and (22) from the College of Science as table 2 show. In order to obtain a representative sample of variables considered in the study, the selected sample included male and female, Omani and Non Omani, Assistant Professor, Professor and Associate Professor.

Table 2: The Study Sample

Variable	Class	Education	Arts	Science	Total
Gender	Male	18	32	22	72
	Female	16	10	9	35
Nationality	Omani	21	7	16	44
	Non Omani	13	35	15	63
Rank	Assistant	24	29	17	70
	Associate or Prof.	10	13	14	37
	Total	34	42	31	107
	Percent	32%	39%	29%	100%

Data Analysis and discussion

In order to answer the first question: *what are the perceptions of SQU academic staff on the existence of PLCA-R dimensions?* the means and standard deviations were calculated. As table 3 below shows, three dimensions of the PLC are in the high range in terms of the degree of the existence of PLCA-R dimensions from the total sample perspectives, namely: fifth dimension, second and third dimension respectively. The other two, first and fourth dimensions, fall in the medium range. In addition, dimension five, which is related to the support system, scores highest; while dimension four, which is related to individual practices, scores lowest.

Table 3: SQU Academic Staff Perceptions on the Existence of PLCA-R Dimensions

Dimensions of (PLCA-R)	Mean	SD	Cronbach Alphas	1	2	3	4	5	Total
1.	3.14	0.54	0.811	1					
2.	3.24	0.46	0.763	.325**	1				
3.	3.21	0.50	0.784	.316**	.519**	1			
4.	2.92	0.60	0.744	.353**	.569**	.671**	1		
5.	3.25	0.39	0.763	.563**	.365**	.468**	.495**	1	
Total	3.17	0.36	0.911	.720**	.695**	.768**	.785**	.799**	1

In order to answer the second question: *Are there any statistically significant differences in the perceptions of SQU academic staff members on the existence of PLCA-R dimensions according to college?* means, standard deviation, and a One-way ANOVA for PLCA-R by college were all calculated and are illustrated in table 4 below.

Table 4: Means and Standard Deviation for PLCA-R by Colleges

Dimension	College	N	Mean	SD	F- value	Df	P
1-Shared and Supportive Leadership	Education	34	3.06	0.60	0.59	2	0.56
	Arts	42	3.20	0.54			
	Science	31	3.13	0.46			
2-Shared Values and Vision	Education	34	3.30	0.47	0.59	2	0.56
	Arts	42	3.25	0.43			
	Science	31	3.18	0.49			
3-Collective Learning and Application	Education	34	3.13	0.49	2.83	2	0.06
	Arts	42	3.14	0.48			
	Science	31	3.38	0.49			
4-Shared Personal Practice	Education	34	2.84	0.63	1.07	2	0.35
	Arts	42	2.88	0.57			
	Science	31	3.05	0.59			
5(a)Supportive Conditions Relationships	Education	34	3.28	0.41	1.54	2	0.22
	Arts	42	3.38	0.44			
	Science	31	3.48	0.49			
5(b)Supportive Conditions Structures	Education	34	2.99	0.50	4.70	2	0.01
	Arts	42	3.30	0.37			
	Science	31	3.23	0.48			
Overall	Education	34	3.09	0.38	1.24	2	0.29
	Arts	42	3.19	0.36			
	Science	31	3.23	0.34			

Note: * Significant at 0.05

Table 4 above shows no statistically significant differences in the total score of the existence of the dimensions of PLCA-R, nor in any sub- dimensions, with the exception of the fifth dimension of the supporting system. However, post test analyzes indicated that there are statistically significant differences in the fifth dimension between the Colleges of Arts and Education to the benefit of the College of Arts; and between the Colleges of Education and Science to the benefit of College of Science.

So far as statistically significant differences in the perception of SQU academic staff members on the existence of PLCA-R dimensions according to gender (third question), Table 5 below indicates that there is no statistically significant differences in any of the dimensions nor in the total score of the existence of the dimensions of professional learning communities according to gender.

Table 5: Means, Standard Deviation, and T-tests for PLCA-R by Gender

Dimension	Gender	N	Mean	SD	T- value	df	P
Shared and Supportive Leadership	Male	72	3.135	0.544	-0.70	105	0.94
	Female	35	3.143	0.525			
Shared Values and Vision	Male	72	3.230	0.466	-0.49	105	0.62
	Female	35	3.276	0.441			
Collective Learning and Application	Male	72	3.160	0.531	-1.38	105	0.17
	Female	35	3.300	0.402			
Shared Personal Practice	Male	72	2.853	0.640	-1.60	105	0.11
	Female	35	3.049	0.474			
Supportive Conditions Relationships	Male	72	3.353	0.449	-0.82	105	0.42
	Female	35	3.429	0.453			
Supportive Conditions Structures	Male	72	3.183	0.446	0.02	105	0.98
	Female	35	3.186	0.503			
Overall	Male	72	3.149	0.379	-0.94	105	0.35
	Female	35	3.219	0.326			

With regard to statistically significant differences in the perception of SQU academic staff members on the existence of PLCA-R dimensions according to nationalities, Table 6 below indicates that there are statistically significant differences in only two of the PLCs dimensions according to different nationality (Omani and Non-Omani). Namely, the first and the fifth dimensions are in favor of non- Omani; while there are no statistically significant differences in the total score or in the other three dimensions.

Table 6: Means and Standard Deviation for PLCA-R by Nationality

Dimension	Nationality	N	Mean	SD	T- value	Df	P
Shared and Supportive Leadership	Omani	44	2.882	0.544	-4.48	105	0.00**
	Non Omani	63	3.316	0.455			
Shared Values and Vision	Omani	44	3.212	0.525	-0.62	105	0.54
	Non Omani	63	3.268	0.405			
Collective Learning and Application	Omani	44	3.291	0.527	-1.50	105	0.14
	Non Omani	63	3.146	0.466			
Shared Personal Practice	Omani	44	2.942	0.569	-0.35	105	0.73
	Non Omani	63	2.900	0.617			
Supportive Conditions Relationships	Omani	44	3.318	0.534	-1.14	105	0.26
	Non Omani	63	3.419	0.379			
Supportive Conditions Structures	Omani	44	3.014	0.477	-3.33	105	0.01**
	Non Omani	63	3.303	0.416			
Overall	Omani	44	3.093	0.384	-1.90	105	0.06
	Non Omani	63	3.226	0.340			

Note: ** Significant at 0.01

Regarding statistically significant differences in the perception of SQU academic staff members on the existence of PLCA-R dimensions according to academic ranks, Table 7 below shows no statistically significant differences in any of the dimensions or in the total score of the existence of the dimensions of PLCs according to different academic ranks.

Table 7: Means, Standard Deviation, and T-tests for PLCA-R by Rank

Dimension	Rank	N	Mean	SD	T- value	Df	P
Shared and Supportive Leadership	Assistant	70	3.121	0.550	-0.64	105	0.52
	Associate	37	3.198	0.499			
Shared Values and Vision	Assistant	70	3.283	0.443	0.63	105	0.53
	Associate	37	3.218	0.474			
Collective Learning and Application	Assistant	70	3.220	0.506	-0.50	105	0.62
	Associate	37	3.275	0.465			
Shared Personal Practice	Assistant	70	2.947	0.603	0.30	105	0.77
	Associate	37	2.908	0.539			
Supportive Conditions Relationships	Assistant	70	3.400	0.436	0.22	105	0.82
	Associate	37	3.378	0.422			
Supportive Conditions Structures	Assistant	70	3.131	0.505	-1.72	105	0.09
	Associate	37	3.307	0.303			
Overall	Assistant	70	3.173	0.369	-0.52	105	0.60
	Associate	37	3.215	0.351			

Conclusion

These findings of this research study revealed that there are variations between the three colleges (Education, Art and Science) in the fifth dimension of PLCA-R. This means these colleges enjoy different level of Supportive Conditions (relationship and structure), as characteristics of PLCs.

In conclusion, Sultan Qaboos University, as a leading university in Oman, needs to acquire PLC characteristics. Developing professional learning community (PLC) can be an effective means of organizational development and a useful tool in staff capacity building effort. However, promotion of a PLC requires support and commitment of both the university top administration and the staff members. Collective responsibility, shared values and vision, collaboration, networks and partnerships are key components of PLCs.

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