

# Challenges of Using Online Professional Development for Teachers in Saudi Arabia

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## Summary

The study examines barriers to using online professional development. This is a qualitative study with a sample of 421 teachers working in the Mecca school district in Saudi Arabia. The results showed that technical issues, administrative barriers and personal issues were the biggest difficulties participants faced when using online professional development. The study concluded with a number of recommendations to improve the Saudi environment.

## Keywords:

*Online Professional Development (OPD), Teachers in Saudi Arabia*

## Literature Reviews

Even though OPD offers many advantages as shown in the literature, it has disadvantages as well, which could cause teachers to avoid making use of OPD programs. Online training programs may fail if the available technology is poor [1]. According to Qi, Chen, and Ding [2], quality is essential to encourage participation in online training. In Saudi Arabia, both teachers are in agreement that OPD programs face challenges in terms of equipment and information technology [3,4,5,6].

In addition, in OPD, technology issues are one of the primary problems that users encounter. Kowalczyk [7] carried out a study to investigate the difficulties of providing online courses. One of the results was the shortage of technicians able to resolve problems that users encountered. In the Saudi context, many studies concluded that technology problems are a major hindrance and suggested that the MOE should provide sufficient technicians to help teachers using OPD [3,4,5].

The shortage of online training is another barrier to using OPD. Kowalczyk [7] reported that the lack of technology training was the main issue hindering the participants' use of online courses. Likewise, Ziyadah [8] stated that the insufficiency of online training programs provided by the Saudi MOE could cause OPD to be more difficult to use. Therefore, the MOE should provide

teachers with sufficient training to acquire self-confidence when using OPD [9].

Infrastructure can also hinder OPD. Baran and Caglitay [1] conducted a study to examine motivational factors and other barriers to the development of online communities of practice for teachers' professional development. One hindrance participants reported was the difficulty of accessing the Internet and lack of computer availability. Similarly, in the Saudi context, Alshehri [10] investigated the current and future development and challenges of e-learning. The participants considered the limited availability of the Internet to be an obstacle to e-learning.

Furthermore, administrative issues could pose a difficulty to using OPD. Kowalczyk [7] concluded that the shortage of administrative support affected the delivery of online courses. In the Saudi context, Alshehri [10] indicated that administration restrictions can be a hindrance to e-learning. One such issue is that there are currently no professional rewards, such as financial rewards or promotions, for those who use online learning [11]. Saudi researchers interested in online learning have been aware of this obstacle and called on the MOE to support the administrative and financial aspects of online learning [4,11,12].

Some Saudi teachers might resist using OPD because of a lack of self-confidence. Alghufairi [4] conducted a study to determine the problems involved in using e-learning technologies according to teachers' viewpoints. The findings show that the participants who have less self-confidence face difficulties when utilizing e-learning technologies.

## Methodology and Participants

The method that was conducted in this study is phenomenological studies which is a design of qualitative research designs. In this design, the researcher identifies the essence of human experiences about a phenomenon as

described by participants in a study [13]. Participants was 421 teachers who working in Makkah District in Saudi Arabia.

## Results

The dominant theme reported by participants is technical issues, which represents 63.58% of respondents. This theme contains two codes: infrastructure issues and a lack of technicians. Infrastructure issues was the most frequently mentioned obstacle as reported by 193 subjects, which represent 54.06% of the participants (see Table 1). For instance, one commented, "Many places do not provide Internet service, or the quality of the service is poor. I believe this a big issue we face." Another example is, "I am living in a village and face problems when downloading or uploading files." One commented, "The Internet is frequently disconnected, and I believe that using OPD under these circumstances is difficult." Another participant wrote, "I do not have a computer, so I avoid attending OPD programs."

Another code that emerged was a lack of technicians. Thirty-four participants, which represents 9.52%, reported that the shortage of technology specialists might prevent them from using OPD programs. For instance, a respondent commented, "I attended an OPD program. During the program, we encountered some technical issues, which is common when using technology. However, we were unable to locate a technician to resolve the problems. Therefore, I believe that the ministry should provide a sufficient number of qualified online technicians who can help participants and coaches solve problems they might encounter."

Although administration was reported as a motivational factor for using OPD, it also could be a hindrance. Eighty-six participants, or 24.09%, believed that administration could hinder teachers using OPD (see Table 1). Recognition was reported as a form of administrative support that could encourage teachers to use OPD. Nevertheless, it was also seen as an obstacle that teachers reported with regard to administrative support. For instance, one participant commented that "OPD programs are not recognized by the Ministry of Education, and I cannot get a promotion by participating in such programs." Other examples are "OPD is not trusted by the administration I work with," and "The OPD programs I have attended have not counted toward anything. Therefore, ODP does not offer me any benefit toward promotion."

Another code that emerged was a lack of qualified trainers. Twenty participants, or 5.60%, indicated the importance of trainers. For example, a participant wrote, "I attended an OPD program. The coach was a teacher. I believe that the deliverer should be a coach with adequate experience in the content instead of a teacher." Another example is "The Ministry of Education should provide a specialist to answer questions that I posed in the discussion board after the program."

A lack of OPD programs is another code that emerged under administrative hindrances. Approximately 3.0% of participants believed that there are not enough OPD programs provided by the Ministry of Education. For instance, a participant wrote, "The Ministry of Education does not provide many OPD programs." Another participant commented, "I have skills that I want to improve, but the Ministry of Education has not provided OPD programs that address those skills."

Personal concerns were reported as one of the difficulties that could be encountered preventing participants from using OPD. Forty-four respondents, or 12.32%, brought up individual issues the might prevent teachers from attending OPD programs. One of the codes that emerged after analyzing these responses was trust in online information; about 4.20% said they do not trust online information (see Table 1). For instance, a subject stated, "I do not trust information I find on the Internet since anyone can post information without proving their credibility." Another comment was "Sometimes I'm hesitant to share with my student's information I got from the Internet."

Self-confidence is another of the difficulties in using OPD. Fourteen of the respondents, or 3.92%, reported that they do not have enough confidence to participate in OPD programs (see Table 1). For instance, one stated, "I do not have very much experience in using the Internet." Another example is "I do not have sufficient skills for using the Internet. Therefore, I am worried about attending OPD programs. I feel it will be useless."

A lack of interaction was also a hindrance reported by 2.24% of the participants. They believed that trainer-trainee and trainee-trainee interactions will be difficult (see Table 1). For example, one commented, "I attended some OPD programs. Some of the programs were boring because there were no activities to motivate me to interact with my colleagues." Another participant commented, "Some trainers do not differ their methods between face-to-face and online instruction. I believe that ODP

programs should offer methods that prompt participants to interact with each other.”

The last difficulty reported by participants is health problems. Only a small percentage of the sample, 1.96%, were concerned that health problems could result from participating in OPD (see Table 1). For instance, one wrote, “Sitting on front of the computer for a long time has a negative effect on health”. Another example is “In my experience, I know that computers might cause eye problems. I want to keep my eyes in a good condition by avoiding repeated use of computers.”

Table 1: Hindrance Factors for Saudi Teachers and Supervisors in Using OPD

The Difficulty		Frequency	Percentage
Technical Issues		227	63.58
	Infrastructure Issues	193	54.06
	A Lack of Technicians	34	9.52
		86	24.09
Administrative Hindrances	Recognition	55	15.41
	A Lack of Qualified Trainers	20	5.60
	A Lack of OPD Programs	11	3.08
		44	12.32
Personal Concerns	Trust in Online Information	15	4.20

issue that the ministry should address. Other studies are in agreement with this study [4, 12].

Another administrative difficulty is the shortage of qualified trainers. The results indicate that the ministry has

Self-confidence	14	3.92
Lack of Interaction	8	2.24
Health Problems	7	1.96
Total	357	100

Discussion

The results point to three major factors that could inhibit Saudi teachers and supervisors from using OPD: technical issues, administrative hindrances, and personal concerns. With respect to technical issues, the participants pointed to two key aspects: infrastructure issues and a lack of technicians.

The most technically inhibiting factor, based on the responses, is infrastructure issues, such as frequent Internet outages. Some areas of Saudi Arabia, especially those far outside the cities, have low data speed or no Internet coverage. Teachers and supervisors who work in these areas are confronted with such problems when using the Internet. This conclusion is supported by other studies [1, 5, 10].

Another technical issue is the shortage of technicians that might play a role in the avoidance of OPD programs. Technicians should be provided by the institutes desiring to deliver OPD programs to ensure that participants will be able to resolve the technical issues they may face. This conclusion is consistent with other studies [3,4,5,7].

The participants also indicated that administrative difficulties are a hindrance. This conclusion is compatible with other studies [7,10,12]. The three major aspects based on participants’ views are recognition, a lack of qualified trainers, and a lack of OPD programs.

With respect to recognition, the respondents pointed out that the MOE does not recognize online programs. Participants stated they prefer not to engage in ODP since it does offer any credit toward promotion. This conclusion is supported by Alsaidi’s [11] research, which concluded that recognition is an

not provided a sufficient number of qualified trainers. Instead, the ministry allows for teachers to lead training programs for others, a situation that is common in the Saudi educational context. The challenge is that some trainers do

not have adequate skills or knowledge to train others. As a result, teachers and supervisors might avoid attending OPD programs because they do not meet their expectations.

In addition, a lack of OPD programs is an administrative hindrance that should be addressed. In other words, the participants reported that there are not enough OPD programs provided by the MOE. This conclusion is consistent with Ziyadah's [8] study. He concluded that lack of offerings in online training programs by the MOE might mean difficulty in finding appropriate ODP programs to attend.

The results show another inhibitor for using OPD is personal concerns. The participants indicated the personal issues of trust in online information, self-confidence, lack of interaction, and health problems.

With regard to trust in online information, some participants reported that information they find on the Internet may not be reliable, which might cause them to avoid using OPD. This may be due to the shortage of training programs that should explain the importance of the Internet and how important being able to navigate it is to acquiring knowledge. In addition, a lack of Arabic language research sites might be the cause of this problem since teachers and supervisors may not have access to reliable sites from where to gather credible information.

Another personal issue that could hinder teachers and supervisors from using OPD is lack of self-confidence. In other words, some teachers and supervisors do not have adequate computer skills so they tend to avoid using OPD. This conclusion is supported by other studies [4, 10, 14]. Alghufairi [4] concluded that lack of self-confidence can inhibit teachers from using e-learning technologies.

In addition, the participants pointed out that OPD could lead to a lack of interaction between peers and trainers. This is connected to how OPD programs are delivered, or it might be due to preconceived stereotypes about OPD. This is consistent with Kowalczyk's [7] study, which concluded that online education could be avoided if there is a shortage of interaction among participants.

The last personal concern that emerged based on the participants' responses is health problems. Participants believe that using OPD could result in eye and back problems. This conclusion is supported by Alghufairi's [4] study, which concluded that the participants reported that e-learning technologies cause eye problems.

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