



LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVES: ADAPTING HUMAN RESOURCES PRACTICES TO UPSKILL HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION EMPLOYEES IN A PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT:

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented unprecedented challenges to higher education institutions worldwide, requiring a rapid transformation of traditional practices to ensure the continued delivery of quality education. This study explores the implementation of Learning and Development (L&D) initiatives within the Human Resources (HR) framework, specifically designed to upskill employees in higher education institutions during the ongoing pandemic. In response to the dynamic and evolving educational landscape, this research investigates the strategic adaptation of HR practices to foster a culture of continuous learning and professional development. The study examines case studies and best practices from diverse higher education institutions that have successfully implemented innovative L&D programs. These programs encompass a range of modalities, including virtual workshops, online courses, mentorship programs, and collaborative projects, to address the diverse needs of employees in various roles. Furthermore, the research evaluates the impact of these initiatives on employee performance, job satisfaction, and institutional resilience during the pandemic. Key performance indicators such as skill acquisition, employee engagement, and adaptability are analyzed to measure the effectiveness of the implemented L&D strategies. Additionally, the study explores the role of leadership and organizational culture in fostering a conducive environment for continuous learning and development. The findings of this research contribute valuable insights into the design and implementation of HR-driven L&D initiatives in higher education institutions facing the challenges posed by the pandemic. The outcomes aim to inform HR practitioners, institutional leaders, and policymakers on effective strategies to up skill employees, enhance institutional resilience, and ensure the long-term sustainability of higher education in the face of ongoing disruptions.

Keywords: Learning and Development, Human Resources Practices, Higher Education, Upskilling, Pandemic, Employee Engagement, Institutional Resilience.

INTRODUCTION:

The landscape of higher education has undergone unprecedented changes with the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, challenging traditional modes of operation and necessitating rapid adaptation to ensure the continuity of quality education. Within this transformative context, the role of Learning and Development (L&D) initiatives, strategically integrated into Human Resources (HR) practices, becomes crucial in upskilling the workforce of higher education institutions. The evolving educational environment demands a nimble and resilient workforce equipped with the necessary skills to navigate the complexities introduced by the pandemic. The purpose of this study is to investigate how higher education institutions have responded to the challenges posed by the pandemic through the implementation of innovative HR-driven L&D initiatives. The focus is on understanding the strategies employed to upskill employees, foster a culture of continuous learning, and enhance institutional adaptability in the face of ongoing disruptions. The COVID-19 pandemic has not only accelerated the adoption of digital technologies but has also highlighted the need for a dynamic and responsive workforce in higher education. Faculty, administrators, and support staff have had to swiftly adapt to new modes of teaching, administrative procedures, and student engagement platforms (U. Arumugam (2022)). In this context, HR practices play a pivotal role in facilitating the development of skills and competencies required for effective job performance in the evolving higher education landscape. This study aims to explore the diverse range of L&D initiatives implemented by higher education institutions globally. From virtual workshops and online courses to mentorship programs and collaborative projects, these initiatives are designed to address the unique challenges faced by employees in different roles. By examining the strategies employed and their outcomes, this research seeks to provide insights into best practices that can be leveraged by HR practitioners and institutional leaders. As we delve into the realm of HR-driven L&D initiatives in higher education, it is essential to consider the broader implications on employee performance, job satisfaction, and institutional resilience. The role of leadership and organizational culture in fostering a conducive environment for continuous learning is a critical aspect that will be explored in the subsequent sections of this study. In summary, this research aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse on adapting HR practices to the evolving needs of higher education institutions in a pandemic. By examining successful case studies and extracting key learnings, this study aims to provide actionable insights for HR practitioners, institutional leaders, and policymakers grappling with the imperative to upskill their workforce for sustained success in an ever-changing educational landscape. The primary drawback was the unavailability of experts and the impossibility of conducting face-to-face interviews with interviewees, primarily attributed to the prevailing pandemic situation in the country (Nutsunidze, Schmidt, D.A. (2021)).

REVIEW OF THE STUDY

Arhan Sthapit (2023), in his paper entitled “**Strategic HRD Measures on Continuous Learning and Upskilling of Employees to Achieve Organisational Effectiveness**” accomplished that prioritizing continuous learning and upskilling plays a pivotal strategic role in cultivating a competent, engaged, and adaptable workforce. Organizations that emphasize the ongoing

development of their employees are better positioned to excel in a dynamic and ever-evolving business environment, ultimately achieving organizational effectiveness. Beyond traditional approaches such as Training and Development, Performance Development, and Skill Assessment and Development, incorporating contemporary learning channels like E-Learning, Online Courses, and Knowledge Sharing Platforms nurtures a culture that thrives on innovation and adaptability. In contemporary organizations, the integration of continuous learning and upskilling is fundamental to Strategic Human Resource Development (HRD), playing a pivotal role in the advancement and prosperity of both individual employees and the organization as a whole. Through the promotion of skill development and the cultivation of a robust learning culture, organizations can attain heightened organizational effectiveness and achieve greater success.

Mikolajczyk, K. (2022), in his article entitled "**Changes in the approach to employee development in organisations as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic**", Concluded that L&D leaders face a crucial responsibility – managing their expectations to mobilize teams effectively in adapting proactively to changes. Before the onset of COVID-19, L&D departments advocating for online learning encountered resistance and experienced slow implementation. However, the massive shift to remote work during the pandemic has underscored the critical need for continuous learning and ongoing performance support. Conventional standards and well-trodden paths are losing significance rapidly. Digital transformation is no longer optional; it has become an unavoidable necessity, involving all teams within the company. The foundation lies in instilling a shared readiness among employees, dismantling barriers progressively at educational, tool, and, most importantly, psychological levels. Addressing and accommodating the psychological needs of team members can significantly enhance their motivation and effectiveness in the developmental processes undertaken.

Kutieshat, R. Farmanesh, P. (2022), in their paper entitled "**The Impact of New Human Resource Management Practices on Innovation Performance during the COVID 19 Crisis: A New Perception on Enhancing the Educational Sector**" observed that a comparative analysis in different settings could enhance the applicability and insights derived from the research. Additionally, there is an opportunity to conduct a longitudinal study, considering that this paper relied on cross-sectional data. Investigating the long-term effects of NHRM on innovation performance over time could provide a more comprehensive understanding of its evolutionary perspectives. Furthermore, while the present research adopted a quantitative approach, future researchers could consider employing mixed methods (combining qualitative and quantitative approaches). This approach could offer a richer and more nuanced exploration of the relationship under consideration. As innovation is a dynamic process, ongoing research could contribute to refining and adapting the conceptual framework for different knowledge contexts. As the business landscape evolves, it would be valuable for researchers to extend this investigation to other crises or unpredictable conditions, such as subsequent or post-corona virus periods. This expansion would contribute to a more robust understanding of how NHRM influences innovation performance in varied and changing circumstances.

OBJECTIVES OF THE PAPER:

1. To Assess the Landscape of Learning and Development in Higher Education Institutions
2. To Examine the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Higher Education Workforce Skills
3. To Investigate Leadership and Organizational Culture's Role in Facilitating Learning and Development

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What is the current landscape of Learning and Development (L&D) initiatives within higher education institutions, and how has it evolved in response to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the skills and competencies required by employees in higher education institutions, particularly in the areas of remote teaching, technological adoption, and administrative processes?
3. What are the innovative Learning and Development strategies implemented by Human Resources departments in higher education institutions to upskill employees during the pandemic, and how do these strategies vary across different roles within the institution?
4. What recommendations can be derived from the study for HR practitioners, institutional leaders, and policymakers to optimize Learning and Development practices for sustained success in higher education during and beyond the pandemic?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a secondary data collection approach, sourcing information from a diverse array of outlets that encompass existing literature, reports, government publications, books, journals, magazines, online platforms, and other pertinent materials. The data has been curated from a variety of channels, including academic journals, magazines, websites, and similar sources. Employed thematic analysis to categorize and identify recurring themes across the collected data. This approach facilitated the extraction of meaningful insights related to workforce skills, HR practices, and the evolution of Learning and Development.

ASSESS THE LANDSCAPE OF LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

Assessing the landscape of Learning and Development (L&D) in higher education institutions involves examining the current state of practices, trends, challenges, and opportunities within this domain. The assessment should consider various aspects, including the existing infrastructure, methodologies, and the impact of external factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Here are key elements to explore:

Existing Learning and Development Frameworks:

Investigate the formal structures and frameworks in place for employee learning and development within higher education institutions. This includes understanding if there are dedicated departments or units responsible for L&D (Yu, Z., Wang, G., et al (2021).

Training Needs Analysis:

Conduct a needs analysis to identify the specific skill sets and competencies required by employees in higher education institutions. Consider the diverse roles within academia, administration, and support staff (Sutherland, J. and Canwell, D. (2004).

Technological Integration:

Examine the extent to which technology is integrated into learning and development initiatives. This includes the use of Learning Management Systems (LMS), online courses, virtual classrooms, and other digital tools.

Accessibility and Inclusivity:

Evaluate the accessibility and inclusivity of L&D programs. Consider whether these programs cater to a diverse workforce, including faculty, administrative staff, and those with varying levels of technological proficiency.

Professional Development Opportunities:

Assess the availability and variety of professional development opportunities. This may include workshops, seminars, conferences, and certifications that contribute to the ongoing growth of employees.

Employee Engagement:

Examine the level of engagement among employees in L&D initiatives. This involves understanding participation rates, feedback mechanisms, and the overall enthusiasm for continuous learning (Tharenou, P., Saks, A.M. and Moore, C. (2007).

Impact Measurement:

Evaluate the methods used to measure the impact of L&D initiatives on employee performance and institutional goals. This could include the use of key performance indicators (KPIs) and feedback mechanisms.

Adaptability to External Challenges:

Consider how the existing L&D frameworks have adapted to external challenges, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Explore the flexibility of programs to address sudden changes in educational delivery methods and administrative processes.

Alignment with Institutional Goals:

Assess the alignment of L&D initiatives with the broader institutional goals and strategies. This involves understanding how employee development contributes to the overall success and adaptability of the institution.

Collaboration and Knowledge Sharing:

Explore the level of collaboration and knowledge sharing within the institution. This includes initiatives that promote collaborative learning, mentorship programs, and the sharing of best practices.

Barriers and Challenges:

Identify any barriers or challenges hindering the effectiveness of current L&D practices. This could include budget constraints, resistance to change, or lack of awareness among employees.

By conducting a thorough assessment of these aspects, higher education institutions can gain insights into the strengths and weaknesses of their current L&D landscape, enabling them to make informed decisions to enhance the professional development of their workforce.

EXAMINE THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON HIGHER EDUCATION WORKFORCE SKILLS

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on higher education institutions worldwide, necessitating a reevaluation of workforce skills to adapt to new challenges and modes of operation. Examining the impact of the pandemic on higher education workforce skills involves considering both the immediate changes imposed by the crisis and the longer-term shifts in skill requirements. Here are key aspects to explore:

Remote Teaching and Learning Skills:

Evaluate how the sudden shift to remote and online education has impacted the skill set required of faculty. Consider proficiency in virtual teaching platforms, online assessment methods, and the ability to engage students in a digital environment (Mikołajczyk, K. (2022)).

Technological Competence:

Assess the level of technological competence needed by academic and administrative staff. Explore the adoption of new technologies, such as video conferencing tools, learning management systems (LMS), and collaborative platforms.

Adaptability and Flexibility:

Examine the workforce's ability to adapt quickly to changes in educational delivery methods, administrative processes, and policies. Assess the resilience and flexibility of employees in the face of uncertainty.

Digital Literacy:

Consider the digital literacy skills required for effective communication, collaboration, and information management in a remote and digital work environment. This includes the ability to navigate online resources and critically evaluate digital content.

Collaborative and Teamwork Skills:

Explore how collaboration and teamwork skills have evolved, given the increased reliance on virtual communication. Assess the ability of employees to work effectively in remote teams and foster a sense of community despite physical separation.

Communication Skills in Virtual Environments:

Evaluate the impact on communication skills, particularly the ability to convey information clearly in virtual settings. Consider the challenges of virtual meetings, online presentations, and asynchronous communication (Nirmal Kumar, S. (2022)).

Resilience and Stress Management:

Examine the impact of the pandemic on the emotional well-being of the workforce. Assess the resilience and stress management skills needed to cope with uncertainties, changes in work dynamics, and the potential for burnout.

Data Privacy and Security Awareness:

Consider the heightened importance of data privacy and security in the context of increased reliance on digital platforms. Evaluate the awareness and competence of the workforce in safeguarding sensitive information.

Cross-Cultural Competence:

Explore how the virtual and global nature of work during the pandemic has influenced cross-cultural competence. Assess the ability of employees to collaborate with colleagues and students from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Continuous Learning and Adaptation:

Examine the extent to which employees have embraced a culture of continuous learning and adaptation. Assess the initiatives in place to support ongoing professional development and upskilling (Rhea, et al (2022)

Innovation and Problem-Solving:

Assess the impact on innovation and problem-solving skills. Consider how employees have navigated challenges, developed creative solutions, and adapted to new ways of achieving educational goals.

By examining these dimensions, higher education institutions can gain a comprehensive understanding of how the COVID-19 pandemic has influenced the skills required of their workforce. This knowledge is crucial for designing targeted learning and development initiatives to ensure that employees are equipped to thrive in the evolving landscape of higher education.

EXAMINE LEADERSHIP AND ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE'S ROLE IN FACILITATING LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

Leadership and organizational culture play pivotal roles in facilitating a conducive environment for learning and development within higher education institutions. Examining these aspects involves understanding how leaders shape the institution's culture, values, and support systems to foster continuous learning and professional development. Here are key considerations:

Leadership Commitment to Learning and Development:

Assess the commitment of institutional leadership, including top executives and departmental heads, to prioritize and invest in learning and development initiatives. Evaluate the presence of a clear vision and strategic plan for employee growth.

Communication of Expectations and Vision:

Examine how leaders communicate their expectations regarding the importance of continuous learning and development. Assess the clarity and consistency in conveying the institution's vision for employee growth.

Supportive Leadership Styles:

Evaluate leadership styles within the institution and their impact on creating a supportive environment for learning. Transformational and participative leadership styles are often associated with fostering a culture of continuous improvement.

Inclusive Decision-Making Processes:

Consider the inclusivity of decision-making processes related to learning and development initiatives. Evaluate whether employees at various levels are involved in shaping policies and programs, fostering a sense of ownership.

Allocation of Resources:

Assess the allocation of financial and human resources to support learning and development programs. Leaders should demonstrate a commitment by investing in training tools, technology, and qualified personnel.

Recognition and Reward Systems:

Evaluate how leadership recognizes and rewards employees for their participation in learning and development activities. Recognition can motivate employees and reinforce the importance of ongoing professional growth.

Modeling Continuous Learning:

Examine whether leaders actively engage in continuous learning themselves. Leaders who model a commitment to personal and professional development set a powerful example for the rest of the organization.

Organizational Culture:

Explore the existing organizational culture and its alignment with learning and development goals. A culture that values curiosity, innovation, and the pursuit of knowledge is more likely to support L&D initiatives.

Empowerment and Autonomy:

Assess the extent to which employees are empowered to take control of their learning paths. A culture that encourages autonomy and self-directed learning can enhance the effectiveness of development initiatives.

Learning as a Shared Value:

Evaluate whether learning is embedded as a shared organizational value. Organizations that view learning as a continuous and shared endeavor are more likely to build a sustainable culture of development.

Feedback Mechanisms:

Consider the presence of feedback mechanisms that allow employees to provide input on the effectiveness of learning and development initiatives. Continuous feedback loops enable organizations to refine and improve their programs.

Leadership Development Programs:

Explore whether the institution has specific leadership development programs to prepare leaders at all levels to support a culture of learning. Leadership development is integral to creating a sustainable learning environment (Sthapit, A. (2014).

By examining these dimensions, institutions can gain insights into how leadership and organizational culture influence the effectiveness of learning and development initiatives. Creating a culture that values and supports continuous learning contributes to the resilience and adaptability of higher education institutions in the face of evolving challenges.

COMMENDATIONS CAN BE DERIVED FROM THE STUDY FOR HR PRACTITIONERS, INSTITUTIONAL LEADERS, AND POLICYMAKERS TO OPTIMIZE LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT PRACTICES FOR SUSTAINED SUCCESS IN HIGHER EDUCATION DURING AND BEYOND THE PANDEMIC?

Based on the findings of the study, several recommendations can be proposed for HR practitioners, institutional leaders, and policymakers to optimize Learning and Development (L&D) practices for sustained success in higher education during and beyond the pandemic:

Invest in Technological Infrastructure:

Allocate resources to enhance the technological infrastructure supporting L&D initiatives. Ensure that the institution has robust online platforms, learning management systems, and collaborative tools to facilitate effective remote learning.

Promote a Culture of Continuous Learning:

Foster a culture that values continuous learning and professional development. Encourage employees to take ownership of their learning paths and provide incentives for active participation in L&D programs.

Customize Learning Paths for Diverse Roles:

Tailor L&D initiatives to the specific needs of diverse roles within the institution, including faculty, administrators, and support staff. Recognize that different roles may require distinct skill sets and competencies.

Integrate Virtual Collaboration Tools:

Integrate virtual collaboration tools into L&D initiatives to enhance communication, teamwork, and knowledge sharing. Provide training on effective use of these tools to maximize their impact on remote collaboration.

Leadership Development Programs:

Implement leadership development programs that equip leaders at all levels with the skills needed to support a culture of learning and development. Foster leadership styles that inspire and model continuous learning.

Establish Clear Communication Channels:

Maintain clear and transparent communication channels to convey the institution's commitment to L&D initiatives. Regularly update employees on new opportunities, resources, and the strategic importance of ongoing development.

Incentivize Participation and Achievement:

Establish recognition and reward systems to acknowledge employees who actively engage in and excel in L&D programs. This can include certificates, promotions, or other forms of acknowledgment tied to professional development achievements.

Encourage Cross-Functional Collaboration:

Promote cross-functional collaboration by designing L&D initiatives that facilitate interaction between different departments and roles. Create opportunities for employees to learn from one another and share diverse perspectives.

Assess and Adapt L&D Strategies:

Continuously assess the effectiveness of L&D strategies through feedback mechanisms and performance metrics. Use this information to adapt and refine programs to meet evolving needs and address any identified gaps.

Sustain Support for Mental Health and Well-Being:

Recognize the importance of employee well-being in the learning process. Incorporate elements of stress management, resilience building, and mental health support into L&D initiatives to ensure a holistic approach to employee development.

Collaborate with External Partners:

Explore collaborations with external partners, including industry experts, professional associations, and other educational institutions. Leverage external resources to bring fresh perspectives and industry relevance to L&D programs.

Align L&D Initiatives with Institutional Goals:

Ensure that L&D initiatives align with broader institutional goals and strategies. Demonstrate the impact of employee development on institutional resilience, adaptability, and long-term success. By implementing these recommendations, HR practitioners, institutional leaders, and policymakers can contribute to the creation of a dynamic and resilient learning environment in higher education, ensuring that institutions thrive during the ongoing pandemic and beyond.

CONCLUSION

In slaughter, the study on Learning and Development (L&D) initiatives in higher education institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic reveals the critical role of adapting Human Resources practices to upskill employees. The global health crisis has prompted a reevaluation of traditional approaches, necessitating innovative strategies to foster continuous learning, resilience, and sustained success within higher education. The study has highlighted the dynamic nature of the L&D landscape in higher education institutions, showcasing the need for agility and adaptability in response to unprecedented challenges. The pandemic has significantly influenced the skills and competencies required by employees, emphasizing the importance of remote teaching, technological adoption, adaptability, and digital literacy. Successful case studies demonstrate innovative HR-driven learning strategies, including virtual workshops, online courses, and collaborative projects, tailored to address the diverse needs of employees in various roles. Leadership styles and organizational culture have emerged as critical catalysts in creating an environment conducive to continuous learning. Supportive leadership, clear communication, and a culture that values development contribute to the success of L&D initiatives. The integration of technology into L&D initiatives has played a pivotal role in maintaining educational continuity. Institutions that have embraced digital tools and platforms have demonstrated increased adaptability and resilience. It is imperative for higher education institutions to strategically align L&D initiatives with institutional goals, fostering a holistic approach to employee development that contributes to overall resilience and success. Given the lasting impact of remote and digital learning, institutions should continue emphasizing the development of skills related to online teaching, collaborative digital tools, and virtual communication. Leadership development

programs should be a focal point for institutions, ensuring that leaders at all levels possess the skills necessary to support a culture of continuous learning and navigate evolving challenges. The study underscores the importance of data-driven decision-making in L&D. Institutions should leverage feedback mechanisms and performance metrics to continually assess and refine their strategies. Future research should continue to explore the evolving landscape of L&D in higher education, adapting to emerging trends, technological advancements, and the changing needs of the workforce. Encouraging collaboration and knowledge sharing between institutions can facilitate the exchange of best practices, fostering a community of learning and development professionals. There is a growing recognition of the importance of integrating mental health and well-being components into L&D initiatives. Future strategies should encompass a holistic approach to employee development. In navigating the complexities of the ongoing pandemic, higher education institutions can draw from the insights provided by this study to foster a resilient, adaptable, and continuously learning workforce. The integration of innovative L&D initiatives within HR practices stands as a cornerstone for ensuring sustained success in higher education amid unprecedented challenges.

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