



Perceived Training Needs of Academic Heads of Department in Higher Education

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Abstract

Due to the complex nature of higher education institutions' activities in achieving institutional strategic goals, there has been a demand to prepare education leaders for their management and leadership roles to ensure effective performance. The literature identifies that academic Heads of Departments (HoDs) who directly deal with students, the direct beneficiaries of higher education, have little or no formal leadership preparation for their roles to deliver their strategic plans. Yet, HoDs have enormous responsibilities to optimise learning, research, and community engagements. This article explored the perceptions of academic HoDs regarding the preparations they deem necessary before assuming duty to ensure success. A case study strategy was used to describe and understand the perceptions of the 16 selected HoDs at a university in Ghana. Semi-structured interviews were used to gather data that was analysed thematically. Findings revealed the kind of preparations, such as preparatory and periodic in-service training and the areas of office and finance management that HoDs wanted to receive to improve their self-efficacy. Recommendations include the need for the case university to structure HoD training programmes based on their needs assessment and to train HoDs on their administrative and leadership roles before they assume office.

Keywords: Academic leaders, Heads of Department, Leadership, Management, Preparation.

1. Introduction

Organisations that want to compete effectively in the 21st-century educational setting require knowledgeable, skilled employees to create and sustain superior performance. Higher educational institutions (HEIs) that function within a marketised space are not exempt. Moreover, intense competition among HEIs to produce graduates who meet the job market's needs, both locally and internationally, calls for effective, committed leaders to remain in the race. Several authors (Avolio, Hannah, 2020; Day et al., 2020; Wang, Howell, 2020; Yukl, Mahsud, 2020) maintained that leadership preparation positively correlates with employee task and creative performance through harmonious passion. Kim and Le (2020) and Smith and Johnson (2021) emphasise the need for employee empowerment through role preparation. They explored how cognitive dimensions such as problem-solving skills, decision-making abilities, and creativity can empower organisational

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employees and also how managers can effectively leverage cognitive characteristics such as emotional intelligence, critical thinking, adaptability, and empowerment to empower their employees (Kim, Lee, 2020; Smith, Johnson, 2021).

According to Spreitzer (2015), trust, commitment, and productivity are enhanced if leaders are empowered with the needed skills and knowledge. As institutions of higher learning try to implement modern practices, concerns have grown regarding the quality of their educational leadership and management. Studies by Hallinger and Heck (1998) and Louis et al. (2010) have shown that influential leaders, including heads of departments (HoDs) [academic], plan and implement policies to attain institutional goals. Therefore, influential educational leaders play a role in ensuring the effective delivery of these leadership and management activities. Leadership preparation for HoDs has been found to equip them with skills in both their leadership and managerial duties, including translating ideas into visions and goals and working with others to pursue those goals (Albrecht, Andretta, 2019).

The literature indicates that most leadership preparation programs are devoid of participants' actual needs, as their organisations plan and determine training needs (Northouse, 2010). For instance, Antel (2013) maintains that a leadership preparation programme should have purpose, direction, and motivation to make it successful. In this case, leaders such as academic HoDs would gain the exact knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to perform effectively if their preparatory programmes are based on a needs assessment. Hence, the perceptions of academic HoDs regarding the desired pre-assumption-of-duty preparation programmes to equip them to be effective and successful leaders are essential.

We adopt the developmental leadership theory proposed by Isaac Mostovitz et al. (2009), which holds that leadership is a developmental process grounded in a leader's choices. The choice always presents leaders with two good options to choose from, based on one's worldview: looking for affiliation (i.e., the Theta worldview) or looking for achievement (i.e., the Lambda worldview). Consequently, leaders need to be mindful of the training they received as they align their worldview with planned organisational activities to achieve good performance. Hence, leadership training should be tailored to their needs. Hammond et al. (2007) and Kakabadse and Kakabadse (1999) explain that the developmental framework presents leadership as grounded in an individual's observations and reflections during the process of interpretation. This leadership preparation framework means a deliberate effort should be made to equip leaders with a deeper understanding of their roles and the challenges they entail. Consequently, academic HoDs who receive tailored preparation are better positioned to fulfil their responsibilities effectively (Avolio, Hannah, 2020). This makes the notion that effective leaders can be developed through systematic preparation and that leaders are cultivated rather than inherently born with such qualities. Individuals who exhibit apparent natural leadership abilities acquired them through learning (Avolio, Hannah, 2020). Therefore, conscious efforts should be made to prepare leaders, though some may be naturally influential.

A study by Carroll (2010) suggested that to lead effectively, leaders need significant preparation to develop the necessary knowledge, attitudes, and skills, and that this preparation should address their leadership and management needs, enabling them to acquire the required competencies. In the context of academic HoDs, they play a critical role in managing and leading their respective departments effectively. Authors (Agyekum, Agyekum, 2020; Ansong, Acheampong, 2020) confirmed a similar idea raised by Carroll (2010). This article will address an understudied area in the literature and one that has not been examined in the case study university: the intersection of the desired area of preparation and leadership development. This article seeks to understand the perceptions of academic HoDs at a university in Ghana and identify their preferred areas of preparation to equip them to perform their roles effectively. We address the following questions:

1. What kind of preparations do academic HoDs need to make them effective in discharging their roles?
2. What knowledge, skills, and experiences do HoDs identify as required to perform their duties effectively?

Drawing insights from this article will inspire the university management to ensure that conscious efforts to prepare academic HoDs are based on their needs assessment. Findings would help address Sustainable Development Goal 4, which promotes sustainability, equity, and inclusion in higher education management.

2. Methodology

Research Design and Study Setting

The authors adopted an interpretative phenomenological design, using one case study institution to capture the subjective meanings of the rich experiences of the HoDs (Larkin et al., 2020; Smith, 2020) regarding their perceptions of the training needs for their roles. The authors deemed this design appropriate, as it is the first study in a post-secondary setting to explore HoDs' perceptions of their training needs for their roles in Ghana.

Sample and Sampling Size

We adopted a purposive sampling technique to select participants for the study, considering the following inclusion criteria: (a) HoDs who have been in the position for one month to four years, (b) from various colleges, and (c) from different fields of study. Academic HoDs who did not meet the above exclusion criteria were excluded from the study.

Instrument

A researcher-developed semi-structured interview guide based on the extant literature was used to collect relevant qualitative data for the study (Merriam, Tisdell, 2009). The interview protocol consisted of two sections, A and B. Section A focused on participants' demographics, including years of experience in their current role, rank, and area of study. Section B sought to elicit information related to the following research questions: (1) What kind of preparation would you need to be effective in your role as HoD? (2) What knowledge and skills do you need to perform your duties effectively? In addition to several probes during the interview sessions, the researchers endeavoured to take notes during each interview.

Data Collection

After obtaining ethical clearance from the Institutional Review Board of the University of Cape Coast, the principal investigator contacted the target participants face-to-face to explain the research purpose and the need for their involvement, and then conducted individual interviews with 16 eligible academic HoDs. Data saturation and information power were observed with the 14th participant, but additional interviews were conducted to verify the quality of the data saturation, as recommended by Sarfo et al. (2021). All interviews were conducted face-to-face, mostly in participants' offices, with three opting that they be interviewed in their homes. Also, reflexivity was maintained throughout the study by the researchers (Sarfo, Attigah, 2025). Each interview session was audio-recorded with participants' consent and lasted 1 to 2 hours. The interviews were conducted from February 2023 to June 2023.

Data Analysis

Three of the authors conducted a manual analysis of the interview data using Braun and Clark's (2024) six-step thematic analysis. This approach permitted us to do recursive and iterative analysis. Again, the approach enabled reflexivity in the production of knowledge from participants' narratives. According to Braun and Clarke (2024), the six steps in qualitative data analysis include: familiarising with the data; generating initial codes; generating themes; reviewing potential themes; defining and naming themes; and producing the report. Hence, the recorded interviews were played back several times and transcribed letter-perfect from audio to text. Each researcher was independently familiarised with the data by actively reading it repeatedly whilst listening to the audio concurrently to confirm the transcription's accuracy. We adopted member-checking and debriefing sessions to ensure the credibility of the transcribed data. We generated initial codes by identifying common, relevant words, phrases, and sentences. Subsequently, similar codes were summarised into groups based on frequency of occurrence, which were then sorted and refined to generate participant themes and sub-themes. Upon agreement among three of the authors on what should constitute the themes, we refined the emergent themes to guide the final analysis, based on confirmed congruence and an audit trail to capture important details, facilitating reader understanding and the ease of applying the adopted approach to similar analyses, thereby ensuring transferability.

3. Results

Demographics

Sixteen academic HoDs (pseudonyms represent their names) were interviewed. Table 1 summarises the demographic characteristics of the participants. Two of the HoDs were females, and fourteen were males. Four were from College A, four from College B, two from College C, four from College D and two from College E. Regarding their ranks, two were professors (P), three were associate

professors (AP), seven were senior lecturers (SL), and four were lecturers (L). The minimum and maximum years of being in the position ranged from less than 1 year to nearly 4 years.

Table 1. Demographic profile of the participants (n = 16)

College	Participants	Gender	Rank	Years as an HoD
B	Akwasi	Male	Senior Lecturer	6 months
A	Kwadwo	Male	Associate Professor	1 and half
A	Kwame	Male	Senior Lecturer	1 and half
B	Yaw	Male	Associate Professor	Less than one year
A	Grace	Female	Lecturer	6 months
D	Effa	Male	Senior Lecturer	1 and half
B	Boat	Male	Senior Lecturer	Less than one year
A	Felicia	Female	Senior Lecturer	7 months
E	Opoku	Male	Lecturer	Less than one year
D	Emmanuel	Male	Professor	Less than a year
C	Eric	Male	Senior Lecturer	More than 2 years
D	Turkson	Male	Senior Lecturer	Nearly 4years
B	Ofori	Male	Lecturer	5 months
D	Bando	Male	Lecturer	Less than one
C	Nicholas	Male	Associate Professor	2 years
E	Abeka	Male	Professor	Less than 1 year
Total	16			

Emergent themes and sub-themes

Based on the results, the researchers identified a general theme in the perceptions of the academic HoDs regarding their training needs, organised into three categories and several subcategories. From the data, the three categories include: “type of training needs”, “Succession Planning” and “areas of training needs. Subcategories were generated under each category. These subcategories were 7 in all. A summary of the categories, their corresponding subcategories and respective selected quotes is shown in [Table 2](#).

Table 2. Summary of themes and sub-themes from transcribed data

Categories	Subcategories	Sample quotations
1. Type of training needs	Preparatory training	<i>Training should be provided to individuals before they assume the HoD role, following their identification for the position (Yaw)</i> <i>“...In the three months leading up to the handover, it is essential to invite the incoming individual to all meetings to ensure they are well-informed about ongoing activities (Akwasi)</i>
	Periodic in-service training	<i>...then, there should be the same thing in your second year. They must take it seriously because the department will be left behind if the HoD does not behave well (Ofori)</i> <i>Employees should undergo continuous training during their time at the office, with training sessions scheduled every six months (Kwadwo)</i>
2. Succession planning	University-wide grooming	<i>Practical training sessions should be conducted for individuals likely to assume such roles to</i>

Categories	Subcategories	Sample quotations
		<i>manage when they reach HoD positions (Felicia) ... The university should provide training for all lecturers rather than limiting the selection process to a few individuals for the HoD role. This approach ensures that when any lecturer is appointed to lead the department, they are well-prepared to begin their responsibilities immediately (Emmanuel)</i>
	Peer-to-peer and departmental grooming	<i>...those they have in mind to be appointed HoDs should be identified earlier and learn about the roles so as not to struggle when their time comes (Boat) ...at least, there should be a succession plan for potential HoDs to be trained by their respective HoDs so that they will be well equipped to stand in for them in their absence...even before their actual appointments come (Grace)</i>
3. Areas of training needs	Training in office management procedures	<i>It is essential for HoDs to have a clear grasp of the administrative processes involved in their roles, such as to how do you handle correspondence if there is some so as not to depend on your administrative staff (Abeka) "The training program should incorporate essential administrative skills, such as document management, correspondence drafting, arranging letters, and everything else (Terkson)</i>
	Finance management	<i>... "Training in university financial administration systems is crucial for effectively carrying out one's duties (Effa) Training on the department's monetary issues is what I want (Boat)</i>
	Leadership training	<i>I would suggest that leadership training be organised for all academics to give us an understanding of how to optimise the use of both human resources, such as employees, and non-human resources, including equipment, technology, and finance (Kwame)</i>

4. Discussion

Using the interpretative phenomenological design, we explored the subjective meanings of HoDs' perceived training needs at a selected university in Ghana. Guided by the developmental theoretical framework by Isaac Mostovicz et al. (2009) and Kakabadse and Kakabadse (1999), we conducted a thematic analysis following the framework by Braun and Clarke, (2024) and the research questions, three main themes were discovered following our analysis: "type of training needs", "succession planning and "areas of training needs" The developmental leadership theory holds leadership is a developmental process, which is based on the type of choice a leader makes. The choice always presents leaders with two good options that align with one's worldview regarding affiliation (i.e., the Theta worldview) or achievement (i.e., the Lambda worldview). Consequently, leaders need to align their worldview and planned organisational activities to achieve good performance. Hence, their training should be based on their needs assessment to enable them to make sense of their roles.

Academic HoDs often identify specific training needs, yet their own suggestions may inadvertently reveal gaps in their existing knowledge, potentially hindering their effectiveness in

driving university modernisation initiatives. Survey participants emphasised the importance of providing formal training to academic HoDs before their official appointment. Specifically, they recommended that this preparatory training be conducted several months (e.g., two to three) in advance of assuming their responsibilities. Such pre-appointment training would serve as a vital foundation, familiarising them with the diverse expectations of students, faculty, and university administration. Ultimately, this initial preparation aims to equip HoDs with a clear understanding of their forthcoming duties and to instil the confidence needed to assume their leadership positions effectively.

Again, proper preparation is crucial for individuals taking on new roles, particularly for academic HoDs. The initial training will enable them to avoid mistakes and be well-prepared for their responsibilities. This is because foundational knowledge acquired through formal preparation can significantly impact their performance. The HoDs indicated that comprehensive training before assuming a role contributes substantially to success in that role. For instance, a study (Boyd et al., 2009) found that effective teacher preparation before they begin their duties largely contributes to student achievement. Similarly, identifying and training prospective senior members of the university can lead to sustainable and vibrant departments, with HoDs effectively discharging their duties.

The academic HoDs held varying opinions on the ideal duration for role-specific training. Still, they concurred that regular in-service training was essential for refreshing their skills and enhancing their responsiveness to their responsibilities. This ongoing training would enable them to assess their current knowledge, identify gaps, and acquire the necessary skills to perform their duties effectively. Furthermore, periodic training is vital for keeping HoDs up to date on the latest practices and for addressing emerging challenges. As they navigate their roles, new issues arise, and continuous training provides them with the knowledge needed to tackle these challenges. Several studies underscore the importance of continuous professional development for academic leaders. Effective training programs can significantly enhance their ability to perform their roles.

The study revealed that the HoDs did not have a succession plan, so they asked for one. Through succession planning, some HoDs preferred that the institution groom all lecturers for HoD roles, whereas others opted for peer-to-peer and department-based grooming by their respective HoDs. University-wide grooming is seen as a conscious effort taken by the university management to prepare all the faculty members before they become HoDs. McCall (1998) argues that leadership development is a gradual process that cannot be rushed, so identifying and training potential leaders to take on future roles is essential and proactive. Grooming those likely to be HoDs helps ensure continuity, so there will always be someone to fill the position in times of vacancy. Furthermore, every lecturer groomed would gain insights into the HoDs' roles and play them well whenever appointed as an HoD. The idea of succession planning aligns with what scholars (Wiesman, 2012) suggested: to develop an effective succession plan, leaders must have a deep understanding of their team, the current situation, and the key players involved. This enables them to place the right individuals in the appropriate positions at the optimal time. In a university setting, identifying and grooming potential HoDs is vital to ensuring the long-term sustainability and vitality of departments, as HoDs play a pivotal role in discharging their duties effectively.

The HoDs emphasised that training in areas they deem necessary would help them overcome the challenges of their roles and enhance their effectiveness. Specifically, in terms of management training, the respondents requested training on routine office tasks, including report writing and correspondence management, to improve their daily operations. Additionally, they advocated training for their departments in financial management, particularly procurement processes and fundraising strategies. The HoDs underscored the significance of mastering daily office management procedures as a crucial aspect of their managerial responsibilities. The administrative responsibilities of academic HoDs encompass a range of tasks, including budget preparation and staff supervision. According to Gmelch and Miskin (2010), these duties involve overseeing both teaching and non-teaching staff through assigned tasks, either individually or through committees. The HoDs highlighted the need for training in administrative tasks, with some HoDs calling for training in letter and report writing. Others have suggested the need for training in document completion and correspondence response. Additionally, some HoDs have expressed the need for training in meeting organisation, procurement procedures, and fund generation. The HoDs require comprehensive training to effectively manage their administrative responsibilities, including budget preparation, staff supervision, document management, and financial administration.

In leadership training, the HoDs maintained that effective leadership is important for the success of any organisation, including academic institutions. To accomplish this, they require training in participatory leadership, which involves collaborating with other members to achieve shared objectives. According to Chu (2012), leaders acquire useful values to work well with people in an enabling environment. This enables other workers to become committed to their work and helps HoDs achieve the departmental organisational goals.

As identified in areas of need, HoDs are expected to provide leadership in departmental activities, guiding other members and ensuring the implementation of purposeful programmes. To achieve this, HoDs require training on collaboration and leadership to maintain vital departmental initiatives (Northouse, 2013). Research by Carroll (2010) revealed that to enhance leadership skills, HoDs should undergo training focused on collaboration and leadership within their departments, as developing leadership capabilities requires a systematic approach that addresses the specific needs of leaders. Academic HoDs can develop the necessary knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, and behaviours to lead and manage when they are adequately prepared before and throughout their tenure. Research has shown that inadequate training can lead to ineffectiveness in their roles. Crow (2006) highlighted the importance of ongoing development opportunities for leaders to update their knowledge and refine their leadership skills. Similarly, Bryman (2008) noted that HODs face complex management and leadership circumstances with little or no orientation.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has contributed to understanding how academic HoDs want to be prepared to be effective in their roles. With the constant shifts in leadership and management practices, coupled with ever evolving higher education landscape and culture in developing countries due to such factors as demands for increased access to higher education, organisational restructuring and provision of a skilled workforce attuned to national development drives, the need to train the academic HoDs to acquire and use evidence-based skills in effectively performing their roles towards improving their departments cannot be underestimated.

This would require that preparation programmes for academic HoDs be well-structured relative to role expectations and performance indicators, prior to their assuming office, to prevent unanticipated surprises associated with initial struggles in role performance. Periodic in-service training is also needed since new developments, including challenges that crop up, would need to be addressed with knowledge and modern approaches from such training. During training sessions, avenues are open for academic HoDs to share their challenges and success stories in their roles. Such opportunities could foster healthy relationships and networks among academic HoDs, which are necessary for improved role performance whenever possible.

Academic HoDs should be trained in their management and leadership roles, including administrative procedures, financial administration, and leadership development. Included in the administrative procedures should be writing and responding to correspondence, as well as attending to day-to-day office activities. For training in financial administration, a focus on income generation, procurement practices, and the management of the department's finances would enhance the effectiveness of academic HoDs. Lastly, leadership training on delegation and on involving others in decision-making could improve the leadership effectiveness and role performance of academic HoDs.

6. Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

The authors declare that all methods used in this project complied with the 2024 revision of the Declaration of Helsinki. Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of the University of Cape Coast. Written and signed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Consent for publication

The authors affirm that study participants provided informed consent for participation and publication. Participants signed informed consent regarding publishing their data.

Availability of data and materials

Data and materials associated with this study are available upon request.

Conflict of interest statement

The authors report no conflicts of interest.

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Author contributions


All authors – GKB, AJA, FRCT, and KBA – conceived the study. GKA collected the qualitative data. All authors analysed the data and wrote the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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