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Online Teacher Training in Higher Education Institutions of Pakistan: A Qualitative Study of Gaps and Aspirations

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Abstract

This qualitative study investigates the lived experiences of teachers in Pakistan in professional development. Focus group discussions and open-ended survey responses of in-service faculty members at higher education institutions in Southern Punjab, Pakistan were utilized. This was part of a larger mixed-methods doctoral investigation on the preparation of an online teacher training module. Thematic analysis identifies seven interrelated themes that define the teachers' experiences, assessments, and visions of professional development: (1) professional pride and structural frustration; (2) fragmented and passive training landscape; (3) persistent disconnect between training content and classroom realities; (4) top-down design overlooking teachers' voices; (5) superficial incorporation of technology despite self-taught digital adaptation during the pandemic; (6) gendered and rural–urban barriers to participation; and (7) a detailed teacher-generated vision of an ideal online training module. Findings suggest that teachers in Pakistan are reflective and self-aware professionals whose development needs have been systematically neglected by an under-resourced, centrally imposed training system. The study argues that any future professional development intervention, especially one that is delivered online, needs to be co-designed with teachers, delivered in Urdu, optimized for low-bandwidth mobile access, and embedded within a broader policy framework that formally values and incentivizes continuous teacher learning. The implications for policy, practice and future research are discussed.

Keywords: professional development of teachers, qualitative research, focus group discussion, online teacher training, Pakistan, higher education

Introduction

Teacher professional development is central to any serious effort to improve the quality of education, but in much of the developing world the systems created to provide it remain fragmented, underfunded and disconnected from the classrooms they are meant to serve. Pakistan is not an exception. For decades, teacher training in Pakistan has been marked by short, one-off workshops with little follow-up, content that is imported rather than contextualized and a persistent failure to consult the very teachers the training is designed for, despite donor-funded reform initiatives, national policy commitments and periodic curriculum overhauls. The COVID-19 pandemic brought online and distance modalities into sharp focus as a potential solution, highlighting both the promise of digital delivery and the extent of the infrastructural and social



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barriers that stood in its way.

This article presents the qualitative results from a larger doctoral study which aimed to develop an appropriate online teacher training module for in-service teachers in Pakistan. In this article, the qualitative strand of the parent study is isolated and foregrounded. The parent study adopted a mixed-methods design, which combined a structured Teacher Needs Assessment Survey and qualitative inquiry. The qualitative strand comprised seventeen extended focus group discussion (FGD) responses and three open-ended survey questions filled out by faculty members working in higher education institutions (HEIs) across Southern Punjab. We have chosen to separate the qualitative data into its own section, apart from the quantitative, because we feel that numbers cannot bear the emotional weight, contextual nuance, and lived texture of what it means to teach - and to be trained — in under-resourced institutions far from the country's policy centres. Four broad lines of inquiry informed the qualitative strand. These were: teachers' experience of their professional lives and previous training; their views on the strengths and, more extensively, the weaknesses of existing professional development programmes; their assessment of the prospect of online training, including its advantages, barriers, and language requirements; and their views on the ideal content, features, and institutional supports that an online training module should include. The questions were explored using a semi-structured FGD protocol comprising nineteen questions, with open-ended questions integrated into the survey instrument as well. What makes this emphasis on qualitative data meaningful is what it reveals that quantitative scales do not: the specific language a rural mathematics teacher uses to describe a training session about projectors in a school that has no electricity; the repeated complaint of teachers who feel that "no one asks us what we need"; and the subtle, inventive adaptation of teachers who learned to use WhatsApp and YouTube during the pandemic with no formal instruction at all. These details matter because they reveal not just what is missing from Pakistan's teacher training ecosystem, but why it is missing, and what teachers themselves believe would fix it. The remainder of this article is organized as follows: Section 2 provides a literature framing of the study, Section 3 describes the qualitative methodology, Section 4 presents the seven core themes from the thematic analysis, Section 5 discusses the findings in relation to existing scholarship, and Section 6 concludes with implications for policy, practice, and future research.

Background and Review of Related Literature

The literature has reported the transformation of teacher professional development through digital technologies as one of the most important changes in the way educators learn, but the diffusion of this change has been extremely uneven across the globe. In resource-rich systems, online and blended professional development has evolved into a rich ecosystem of massive open online courses, micro-credentialing, and just-in-time coaching, supported by reliable connectivity and institutional incentive structures. In developing country contexts, and particularly in South Asia, online training has more often been superimposed on pre-existing systems of top-down, supply-driven, workshop-based delivery without a corresponding redesign of governance, content development or evaluation practices.

Adult learning theory helps explain why so much of this training does not result in change in the classroom. Andragogical principles hold that adult learners are maximally engaged when the training is problem-centered, builds on prior experience, and is self-directed to a certain degree — all systematically missing from the residential, lecture-based training formats that are common in Pakistan. Constructivist and social learning perspectives also stress the active engagement of teachers with new pedagogical knowledge through reflection and dialogue with peers rather than passive reception of content, and frameworks such as Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK) stress that effective technology integration training needs to develop content knowledge, pedagogical skill and technological fluency in parallel rather than as a separate, add-on module for online literacy.

Specifically, research in Pakistan has depicted a landscape of teacher training marked by fragmentation between federal and provincial jurisdictions, a lack of coordination between pre-service teacher education and in-service professional development, and persistent barriers of language, geography and gender that disproportionately exclude rural and female teachers from meaningful participation. The ambitions for teacher quality laid out in national policy instruments



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like the Single National Curriculum and successive National Education Policies have not been matched by a correspondingly re-engineered professional development infrastructure. Many of the numerous faculty development initiatives of the Higher Education Commission have often been critiqued as echoing the global discourse and the priorities of the donors rather than the felt needs of the Pakistani faculty themselves.

Research on online and blended teacher training in other resource-constrained contexts has identified common structural barriers including connectivity, device access, electronic literacy, and language of instruction, but has also documented the flexibility, cost-efficiency and geographic reach that online delivery can provide when those barriers are overcome. What is relatively under-researched in Pakistani context is a rich teacher-voiced account of how faculty in higher education institutions – as opposed to school teachers – experience and evaluate professional development, and what they themselves think an effective online training module should contain. This gap is the particular space the present qualitative study attempts to fill.

Indeed, methodologically speaking, qualitative and mixed methods approaches are being more and more acknowledged as necessary complements to survey-based needs assessments in research on teacher professional development, precisely because they are able to provide insight into the contextual reasoning, emotional stakes, and lived barriers that quantitative scales tend to reduce to a single numeric score. In particular, focus group discussion has been widely used in educational research to capture the socially constructed, negotiated nature of professional opinion. It allows participants to build upon, qualify and sometimes contest one another's accounts in ways that individual interviews or surveys cannot. This methodological rationale directly informed the design of the qualitative strand reported in this article, which was not simply intended to confirm quantitative findings but to explain, contextualize and where relevant complicate them through sustained engagement with teachers' own words.

Purpose and Objectives

This study investigates the lived experiences of teachers and administrators in Pakistani higher education institutions with existing online teacher training programmes to identify the gaps between the current provision and the professional development teachers actually need. The article aims to (1) explore faculty perceptions of the accessibility, relevance, and design of existing online training offerings; (2) identify the pedagogical, technological, and institutional barriers to effective participation and technology integration; (3) examine the role of gender and rural-urban disparities in unequal access to professional development opportunities; and (4) articulate, based on participants' own accounts, a practice-based vision of what an effective, contextually appropriate online training module would look like. This article, which focuses on the qualitative strand of a larger mixed-methods study, seeks to move beyond deficit documentation and generate an evidence-grounded design brief that can help inform the creation of more responsive, equitable and sustainable teacher training models in Pakistan's higher education sector.

Research Methodology

This article describes the qualitative component of a larger convergent mixed-methods doctoral study. The qualitative strand used a descriptive-interpretive design, consisting of semi-structured focus group discussions and open-ended survey items to elicit rich, contextually grounded data on teachers' professional development experiences, perceived gaps and preferences for online training. We chose this design because the end goal of this study – development of a contextually appropriate online training module – required not only identifying statistically prevalent needs, but also understanding the meanings, emotions, and lived realities that underlie those needs.

Population and Sampling

Participants were drawn from the faculty members working in degree colleges and universities in the districts of Southern Punjab like Bahawalpur, Multan, Dera Ghazi Khan, Rahim Yar Khan and Muzaffargarh. Participants were selected using a purposive sampling strategy to ensure diversity in terms of gender, discipline, type of institution (public and private) and rural-urban setting, and who had direct and varied experience of teacher training programmes. This sampling strategy focused on the richness of information, not statistical representativeness, which is in line with traditional qualitative inquiry.



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Instruments and Data Collection

Qualitative data were gathered from two sources. A Focus Group Discussion Protocol (FGDP) with nineteen semi-structured questions was employed in a series of focus group sessions that covered topics such as the teachers' overall experience in teaching, prior training history, perceived relevance and quality of existing programmes, strengths and weaknesses of the existing system, experiences with technology integration, involvement in designing training programmes, and detailed preferences for an ideal online module in terms of content, features, language, and institutional support needs. Secondly, three open-ended questions were incorporated in the quantitative Teacher Needs Assessment Survey (TNAS) to encourage respondents to describe in their own words what professional skills they felt they most lacked, what they saw as the biggest gap in currently available training programmes, and what features they would like to see in an ideal online training module. Focus group sessions were conducted in a semi-structured conversational format, which enabled the moderator to probe emerging themes while covering the entire protocol.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using the six-step thematic analysis approach outlined by Braun and Clarke. The process began with a repeated close reading of FGD transcripts and open-ended survey responses to become familiarized with the data set. Subsequently, systematic line-by-line initial coding was performed using both descriptive and interpretive codes to capture the surface content and underlying meaning. The codes were then grouped into possible themes, which were iteratively compared against the coded data and the entire data set to ensure internal consistency and clear differentiation of the themes. Themes were then refined, named and defined. The final stage was to produce an analytic narrative combining thematic description and illustrative data extracts. The development of themes and coding was iterative rather than linear. As the analysis deepened the researcher's understanding of the data, earlier phases were revisited.

Credibility and Ethics

Trustworthiness was sought through prolonged engagement with the dataset, attention to negative and disconfirming cases, and thick, contextually rich description of participant accounts including specific references to districts, institution types, and demographic subgroups where these informed participants' experiences. Informed consent was obtained from all participants who were also informed of the study purpose and assured of confidentiality. No participants are identified by name in the reporting of findings. Prior to data collection the research was approved by the ethics committee of the researcher's institution.

Results

The analysis of the focus group discussions and open-ended survey responses identified seven major interrelated themes. These are presented below, in an order that mirrors the emotional and logical flow of the data itself: starting with teachers' perceptions of their profession, moving through their critique of existing training, and ending with their constructive vision of what an online training module should become.

Theme One: Pride in Profession Despite Structural Frustration

When asked to describe their overall experience as teachers in Pakistan, participants were not quick to complain. They started with pride. Many saw teaching as a calling based on religious and cultural duty, often citing the high status of teachers in the Islamic tradition, and had a strong and lasting belief that education is the most powerful lever for national development. But this sense of vocation was constantly in tension with the material and structural conditions of their work: overcrowded classrooms, deficient teaching materials, irregular salary disbursement in rural postings, and an expectation that teachers absorb administrative and clerical duties well beyond their instructional role.

The tension was not evenly spread. Participants from Southern Punjab reported a unique feeling of professional isolation; some had not had any meaningful professional development or interaction with peers for years. The women described an additional, compounding strain: a dual burden of domestic responsibility and professional duty that left little time or energy for self-directed learning. Nevertheless, participants were remarkably consistent in their affirmation of commitment to their students. This mix of resilience and frustration creates the emotional



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environment in which all other themes in this study have to be read: teachers are not disengaged with their profession, but are professionally exhausted by a system that has not returned their investment.

Theme Two: Disconnected and Passive Training Landscape

Participants were asked to describe the professional development programmes they had taken part in during the previous three years. The picture that emerged was of a training landscape that was patchy, short-lived and heavily dependent on the type of institution and the province. The most commonly cited programmes included short-term workshops run by provincial higher education departments or non-governmental organizations and faculty development initiatives linked to the Higher Education Commission and Allama Iqbal Open University. There were less participants describing the online sessions delivered over Zoom and WhatsApp in the COVID-19 period.

Almost all the reports shared a common structural pattern, with training delivered in a passive, lecture-based format, in a fixed location at a fixed time, with little or no practical component, and even less follow-up. Those who valued certain sessions – an activity-based learning workshop that helped one teacher redesign her science lessons with low-cost materials and a storytelling-based workshop that improved another's instruction of Urdu – said these were the exception, not the rule. The experience was of disparate, episodic training events, not a coherent, cumulative system of professional learning. One common phrase had it that teachers would go, listen, go back to their classrooms and forget. It would be training with no lasting effect because nothing in the system was set up to sustain it.

Of note, participants did not use exclusively negative language when specifically asked about the strengths of the current system. Several attributed it to increased government commitment to teacher development, as seen in reform programs like the Single National Curriculum and the National Education Policy, and appreciated that some programmes had introduced them to concepts such as student-centred learning, formative assessment and inclusive education that had not been part of their pre-service training. In particular, participants from Punjab cited efforts by the Punjab Education Foundation and provincial education departments to engage large numbers of teachers through structured programming. Teachers from private institutions valued the brief but real exposure to modern methodology provided by their employers. The social and collegial value of training events – the chance to meet and exchange ideas with teachers from other institutions and districts – was repeatedly mentioned as professionally stimulating in its own right. Similarly, the use of Urdu as a medium of instruction in some existing programmes was described by participants as meaningfully increasing the accessibility of content. These recognised strengths are important as they indicate existing foundations – political will, emerging pedagogical awareness, peer networking and precedent for vernacular delivery – on which a future online module could be built rather than constructed from scratch.

Theme Three: The Continual disconnect between training and classroom reality

A theme that came up over and over again, with particular intensity, was the gap between what training programmes teach and what teachers actually face in their classrooms. The participants described trainers presenting idealized classroom scenes: quiet rooms, small classes, functioning projectors, which bore little relationship to the under-resourced, over-crowded, multi-lingual contexts in which most Southern Punjab faculty teach. One mathematics teacher from a rural Sindh school provided an especially striking example: training workshops regularly mentioned the use of projectors and digital content, but his school had no electricity for most of the school day and the suggested approaches were completely impracticable.

This disconnect also extended to subject-specific and student-population-specific gaps. Teacher's spoke of being expected to manage classes of forty to seventy students, meet the needs of students from diverse linguistic backgrounds and respond to behavioural difficulties based in poverty and domestic instability – none of which were addressed in the training they received. Female participants highlighted other gender-specific challenges not addressed in existing programmes, such as managing mixed-gender classes in conservative communities or the lack of basic sanitation facilities for female staff and students. The participants unanimously agreed that training should not be designed in the abstract and delivered downwards, but needs-based and



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context-sensitive, and directly informed by those who will use it.

Theme Four: Top-Down Design and the Marginalization of Teacher Voice

The most structurally significant theme to emerge was perhaps the near-unanimous account of having no meaningful role in shaping the content, format, timing or delivery of the training programmes they were required to attend. Most reported receiving a notification from an institution head or education officer instructing them to attend a workshop on a specified date without any prior discussion about their needs, availability or preferences. Several participants said that although they handed out feedback forms at the end of sessions, they had little confidence that the feedback was ever read or used to inform future programming. One senior teacher from Multan said that he had attended the same basic pedagogical workshop three times over seven years, with almost the same content each time.

Participants situated this exclusion within a broader institutional culture, in which teachers are positioned as executors of policy decisions rather than as professionals who have the power to shape their own development. This pattern was found to be structurally embedded in the federal Higher Education Commission, the provincial education departments and the donor-funded reform initiatives all following a supply-driven logic where policy makers and curriculum specialists decide content with little or no direct consultation of the teachers for whom it is intended. Compounding this exclusion was the residential, multi-day workshop format, which is seldom flexible enough to accommodate individual teachers' family responsibilities or institutional workloads—rigidity that participants noted is particularly punishing for female faculty in conservative districts, for whom extended travel and overnight stays pose serious social and logistical barriers to participation.

Theme Five: Integration of Surface Technology and Self-Taught Digital Adaptation

There was unanimity among participants that current training programmes have done very little to prepare them for meaningful technology integration in the classroom. Technology was presented as a topic referred to in training rather than a skill acquired through it. Trainers would list tools including projectors, educational applications and digital platforms, but they would not show how to use them or give any chance for hands-on practice. Primary school teachers in Multan, Dera Ghazi Khan and Rahim Yar Khan reported a one-month HEC training programme where all the content on technology integration was squeezed into a one-hour slide presentation on concepts of e-learning. No tool was demonstrated and no opportunity was given to any participant to practice any of it.

Participants also noted a compounding factor of trainers themselves often lacking the digital competence to model technology-integrated teaching, breaking the pedagogical chain at its source: if a trainer cannot model a skill, a teacher cannot observe it; if a teacher cannot observe it, they cannot replicate it; and without replication, no meaningful learning transfer occurs, regardless of how polished the session materials may appear. Participants also pointed to a deeper structural irrelevance in rural Southern Punjab, where many institutions do not have computers, stable internet, and reliable electricity. Infrastructure-dependent training designs, therefore, were disconnected from teachers lived realities from the outset.

This institutional failure was one side of the coin. The other side was a remarkable and under-recognized finding. The pandemic had forced many teachers to explore WhatsApp, YouTube and other platforms as makeshift instructional resources, sending voice notes, creating groups for assignments and pointing students towards video content — all without any formal guidance. This self-taught adaptation shows that smartphone-based teaching is not only feasible in this context, but is also already being practiced, even without any pedagogical framework or institutional support. The participants bemoaned the fact that this organic digital competence went unacknowledged and unconsolidated when schools reopened, which was a major lost opportunity to build formal training on an existing base of practical adaptation. The advice was uniform: training on future technology should start with basic electronic literacy on the devices teachers already own, mainly Android phones, and not expecting access to laptops or computer labs that most teachers in rural Southern Punjab have never had access to and are unlikely to have access to in the foreseeable future.

Theme Six: Barriers to Participation: Gendered and Rural-Urban



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For almost every question in the discussion protocol, participants described barriers that were unevenly distributed across gender and geography. Unreliable and expensive internet access was the most commonly cited practical barrier to online training especially in rural and semi-urban districts such as Dera Ghazi Khan, Rahim Yar Khan and Bahawalpur. Frequent load-shedding further makes sustained online engagement unpredictable regardless of a teacher's motivation. Device constraints, low online literacy (especially among teachers over forty and those posted in rural areas) and severe time poverty due to heavy instructional, administrative and domestic workloads further narrowed the practical space for participation.

Language was a particularly significant and underappreciated barrier: most of the internationally produced and HEC-aligned training materials are delivered in English, a language many Southern Punjab faculty do not read or understand with the fluency needed for deep conceptual engagement. Training that assumed an English proficiency that participants did not have resulted in intellectual marginalization, with participants sometimes misapplying or abandoning pedagogical concepts they did not fully understand. The female participants faced a different set of constraints: social restrictions on independent mobility, disproportionate burden of care giving, cultural expectations limiting participation in mixed-gender training contexts, and a near absence of female-specific mentoring networks and role models in the professional development ecosystem. The participants made it clear that breaking down these barriers requires more than good instructional design; it requires coordinated policy investment in rural connectivity, subsidized devices, and institutional incentive structures.

Theme Seven: Teachers' Vision of an Ideal Online Training Module

Participants provided a surprisingly detailed, constructive and convergent view of what an effective online training module should be, despite – or perhaps because of – the depth of their critique. The most requested area of content was modern, active pedagogy: practical strategies for student-centered, inquiry-based and collaborative learning that could be realistically implemented in large, under-resourced classrooms. Close priorities identified included classroom management for large and behaviorally diverse groups, formative assessment and rubric design, basic online literacy (with a focus on Android smartphones), and lesson planning aligned to modern curriculum frameworks. Participants also requested dedicated content on students' social and emotional health, inclusive teaching for students with diverse needs, subject-specific pedagogy, professional ethics and community partnership building.

Design and delivery saw participants converge on a short list of clear, practical preferences. They preferred short five-to-ten-minute video lessons over long lectures due to time constraints and limited mobile data. The participants appreciated real classroom footage from Pakistani institutions – large classes, modest furniture, familiar social dynamics – much more than ideal or foreign footage, which they described as professionally irrelevant and socially alien. Lightweight, low-bandwidth, interactive quizzes, structured reflection tasks, and scenario-based activities were well received. Peer interaction through moderated discussion forums or WhatsApp-style group spaces, and mentoring and expert coaching to support translating training content into classroom practice were identified as essential features for closing the implementation gap that had undermined so much of teachers' prior training. Non-negotiable requirements, rather than desirable extras, were a mobile-first architecture optimised for Android smartphones, offline downloadable content to accommodate load-shedding and connectivity gaps, Urdu-medium delivery with culturally familiar presenters and a clean, low-complexity user interface. Finally, participants articulated a clear set of institutional and governmental conditions they believed were necessary for the successful scaling of online training: affordable and reliable internet infrastructure, subsidized or provided for faculty who lack them, nationally recognized certification linked to career progression and appraisal frameworks, active administrative endorsement at the institutional level, and a centralized, continuously-updated national training platform to replace the current fragmented ecosystem of disconnected workshops. Their final thoughts moved beyond instructional design to the chronic undervaluing of the teaching profession, the gendered nature of professional life and the disjunction between pre-service and in-service training as the deeper, systemic conditions that any training intervention, however well designed, must ultimately confront.



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Discussion

All themes together describe a professional development system that, in the words of the participants, has been *done to* teachers rather than *with* them. This finding is highly consistent with andragogical and constructivist theory, both of which hold that adult professional learning succeeds only when it is problem-centred, participatory, and built on learners' existing experience (Knowles, 1984) - precisely the elements that were consistently and specifically absent from the training programmes participants described. The disconnect between what is taught in training and what teachers encounter in the classroom, described in Theme Three, is not simply a design flaw; it is the predictable outcome of a training pipeline in which the people who design content have little structured mechanism for learning what teachers actually need - a pattern participant themselves diagnosed with unusual clarity.

The findings on technology integration in Theme Five are a particularly instructive case study in the distinction between exposure and competence. Teachers have been introduced to the language of educational technology through existing programmes, but without the pedagogical or technical skills to use it, mirroring the wider literature on first- and second-order barriers to technology adoption in education — access and infrastructure on one side, beliefs and skills on the other (Ertmer, 1999). What is unique and pedagogically hopeful about the Pakistani case is the evidence of organic, pandemic-driven digital adaptation on the part of teachers without any formal support whatsoever. This implies that the obstacle to technology-integrated teaching in Southern Punjab is not primarily a lack of motivation or ability, but a training system that has failed to recognize, validate, and build on the competencies teachers have already begun developing for themselves.

The gendered and rural-urban barriers outlined in Theme Six align with a large body of literature on digital and educational equity, which consistently finds that connectivity, device access, and social mobility constraints compound one another rather than operating independently for women in conservative or resource-poor settings (GSMA, 2023). The fact that female participants raised these issues with particular emotional intensity in the study's final discussion indicates that gender-responsive design cannot be treated as a peripheral consideration bolted onto a training module late in its development; it must inform core decisions about format, timing, and delivery channel from the outset.

Perhaps the most theoretically important finding concerns the remarkable specificity and coherence of participants' vision of an ideal module, described in Theme Seven. Participants showed a sophisticated, practice-based understanding of effective adult professional learning — short modular content, authentic contextual examples, embedded practice, and structured mentoring — that closely mirrors the core features of effective professional development established in the scholarly literature: content focus, active learning, coherence with classroom reality, sufficient duration, and collective participation (Desimone, 2009). Far from passively receiving prescriptions, participants converged on this design brief spontaneously. The convergence between teachers' self-generated preferences and established scholarly guidance is a powerful, ready-made design brief: the module Southern Punjab's teachers describe wanting is, in large part, the module international evidence would recommend building. The core design challenge, then, is not to define good online teacher training in the abstract, but to engineer its concrete implementation - language, bandwidth, device compatibility, institutional incentive — in the face of the constraints these teachers face.

The present article is concerned with the qualitative strand, but it is also worth considering these findings alongside the parent study's quantitative results. The structured survey data showed a consistent pattern of low satisfaction with the accessibility, relevance, and currency of existing training programmes, and high demand for technology integration, active pedagogy, and classroom management support — patterns that the qualitative themes reported here do not just echo but substantially explain. The survey showed that 74.2% of teachers felt existing programmes were inaccessible for rural staff, and the focus group data explains how that figure was reached: unreliable electricity, expensive mobile data, residential training formats incompatible with family responsibilities, and a governance structure that never asked rural teachers what timing or format would work for them. This complementarity illustrates why



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mixed-methods designs are especially suited to needs-assessment research aimed at informing concrete interventions, and adds confidence that the seven themes identified here are not idiosyncratic to a small subsample but reflect patterns with broader empirical support across the entire study population.

6. Recommendations

These findings have direct implications for policy makers, institution leaders and instructional designers engaged in teacher professional development in Pakistan and similar contexts. First, there has to be consultation with teachers, not symbolic consultation. Mechanisms for teacher input should be built into needs assessment, content development, selection of delivery format, and post-training evaluation at each stage, rather than just a feedback form collected at the end of a workshop and seldom acted upon.

Second, any online training module that is to be scaled up across Southern Punjab, and by extension similar parts of Pakistan, should be built mobile-first for Android smartphones, delivered mostly in Urdu, broken down into short modular units of five to ten minutes, and available for download offline to address unreliable connectivity and frequent load shedding. Third, content on technology integration should move away from vocabulary-based approaches towards modelled, practised and coached skill-building, starting from the devices and platforms that teachers already use rather than the idealised institutional infrastructure that they do not have.

Fourth, institutional and policy support structures, including certification recognized by the Higher Education Commission, linkage of training completion to promotion and appraisal, subsidized connectivity and devices, and administrative endorsement at the institution level, are preconditions for sustained engagement, not optional accompaniments to good instructional design.

Fifth, gender-responsive design should be a core requirement, not an afterthought, with decisions about format, timing, and delivery channel made with explicit attention to the mobility, caregiving, and social constraints many female faculty members described.

7. Limitations

The findings from this study are based on a purposive sample of faculty members from higher education institutions in Southern Punjab and should be understood as contextually rich rather than statistically generalizable. Teachers from other provinces, other educational levels, or very different institutional settings may report different priorities and constraints. The participants' accounts are, as with all qualitative self-report data, their own perceptions and recollections, not independently verified conditions of the institution. School-level teachers, other provinces and a post-implementation evaluation of any resulting training module in future research would strengthen and extend these findings based on this qualitative study.

8. Conclusions

This study was aimed at contributing qualitative texture and emotional depth to the professional development needs of teachers of Pakistani higher education institutions located in Southern Punjab. What comes through in their focus group discussions and open-ended reflections is not a simple list of deficits, but a coherent, teacher-authored account of a professional development system that has consistently failed to ask teachers what they need before deciding what to give them. Teachers spoke of genuine pride in their vocation, incisive and specific criticism of the training they have received, evidence of resourceful self-directed adaptation in times of crisis and a surprisingly sophisticated, practical vision for what an effective online training module should contain and how it should be delivered. Designing that module, in Urdu, is, on the evidence presented here, less a technical challenge than an act of listening, mobile-first, modular, contextually authentic and backed by institutional recognition and support. The teachers of Southern Punjab have already told researchers, at some length, what they need; the task now is to build it with them, not for them. More broadly, this study contributes to a small but growing body of Pakistani educational research that conceptualizes teachers as primary informants with situated professional knowledge, rather than as passive subjects of policy. The interventions designed on their behalf should be directly shaped by this knowledge. As Pakistan continues to invest in online and blended professional development infrastructure, the seven themes



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documented here provide a concrete, empirically grounded starting point: a training system redesigned around teacher voice, delivered in the language teachers think in, built for the devices teachers already carry, and backed by the institutional recognition their sustained professional growth deserves.

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