

Leveraging LinkedIn as a Strategic Channel for Continuous Professional Development of Academic Staff in Higher Education Institutions of Rwanda

By

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the strategic use of LinkedIn as a channel for continuous professional development (CPD) among academic staff in higher education institutions of Rwanda. LinkedIn offers significant advantages, including enhanced professional visibility, expanded networking opportunities, and access to a wide range of learning resources. Despite its benefits, challenges such as digital literacy gaps, time constraints, and privacy concerns can hinder its effective use. As a qualitative study, and through semi-structured interviews and focal group discussions among 30 selected academic staff across 5 public and private higher learning institutions, the study examined the rationale for leveraging LinkedIn, emphasizing its role in professional visibility, networking, and lifelong learning. Practical recommendations are provided to maximize LinkedIn's potential, including maintaining comprehensive profiles, active engagement in professional groups, utilizing LinkedIn Learning, and seeking institutional support. Addressing barriers and fostering a culture of continuous improvement can enable academic staff to harness LinkedIn's full capabilities. Ultimately, this strategic integration of LinkedIn into CPD practices can lead to sustained professional growth, enhanced collaboration, and significant contributions to the academic community, advancing both individual careers and institutional objectives. By leveraging LinkedIn effectively, academic staff can stay at the forefront of educational and industry advancements.

Key Words: Rwanda, LinkedIn, Professional Development, Academic Staff, Higher Education

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Introduction

In the fast-paced and ever-evolving landscape of higher education, continuous professional development (CPD) for academic staff is imperative. LinkedIn, the world's largest professional networking platform, offers a unique and strategic channel for CPD, blending the traditional elements of professional growth with modern digital advantages. As educators are required to adapt to new pedagogical approaches, technological advancements, and industry trends, LinkedIn provides a dynamic and accessible platform for this development. The integration of LinkedIn into CPD practices is not merely a supplementary tool but a transformative approach that can significantly enhance the skills, knowledge, and networks of academic professionals. This study delves into the essence, rationale, and benefits of leveraging LinkedIn for CPD in higher education, offering comprehensive recommendations for academic staff to effectively utilise this powerful platform.

The Study Background

Continuous professional development (CPD) has always been a cornerstone of excellence in higher education. Traditionally, CPD involved attending workshops, conferences, and formal education programs. However, the digital era has revolutionized these practices, introducing platforms like LinkedIn that offer unparalleled opportunities for growth and networking. LinkedIn, with over 700 million users globally, provides a unique intersection of professional networking, content sharing, and learning resources, making it an indispensable tool for academic staff.

In recent years, the context of higher education has shifted dramatically, driven by technological advancements, globalization, and changing students' needs. Educators are now required to continuously update their skills to keep pace with these changes. Traditional CPD methods, while still valuable, often fall short in offering the flexibility and real-time relevance that today's academic professionals need. LinkedIn addresses these gaps by providing a platform where educators can engage with peers, industry leaders, and cutting-edge content.

Furthermore, the platform supports a culture of lifelong learning, enabling academic staff to pursue self-directed professional development. Studies have shown that active engagement on LinkedIn can lead to improved teaching practices, innovative research collaborations, and enhanced career opportunities. Thus, integrating LinkedIn into CPD strategies is not just beneficial but essential for modern educators aiming to thrive in an ever-evolving academic landscape.

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Statement of the Problem

The continuous professional development of academic staff is essential for enhancing teaching quality, research output, and overall institutional performance in higher education. However, in Rwandan higher education institutions, particularly private ones, CPD opportunities are often limited by financial constraints, lack of access to global networks, and insufficient institutional support. LinkedIn, as a professional networking platform, offers a strategic channel for overcoming these barriers by providing access to global academic networks, online learning resources, and opportunities for knowledge exchange. Despite its potential, the utilization of LinkedIn for CPD remains underexplored in Rwandan higher education institutions. This gap poses a challenge to fostering an academically robust and globally competitive teaching workforce. The problem addressed by this study is the limited adoption and strategic use of LinkedIn as a tool for academic staff CPD, which hampers the potential for academic growth, innovation, and the internationalization of higher education in Rwanda

Research Objectives

The current study sought to address the following research objectives:

1. To assess the current utilization of LinkedIn among academic staff in higher education institutions in Rwanda
2. To examine the potential benefits of LinkedIn for enhancing the continuous professional development of academic staff in higher education institutions in Rwanda
3. To determine challenges hindering the effective use of LinkedIn for academic staff CPD in higher education institutions in Rwanda
4. To propose strategic recommendations for leveraging LinkedIn as an effective CPD platform for academic staff

Significance of the Study

The significance of this research lies in its ability to critically assess the current utilization of LinkedIn among academic staff in Rwandan higher education institutions. By determining how academic staff are currently engaging with the platform, the research provided insights into the extent to which LinkedIn is being used for networking, collaboration, and career development. This understanding is crucial for highlighting gaps in adoption and utilization. Additionally, the research examined the potential benefits of LinkedIn for enhancing CPD. As higher education faces increasing globalization, LinkedIn offers a unique platform for accessing global academic networks, peer-reviewed research, and innovative teaching strategies. The study uncovered how LinkedIn can serve as a cost-effective tool for improving academic staff capabilities, enhancing both teaching and research outputs.

Finally, by determining the challenges hindering LinkedIn's effective use for CPD, the research proposed strategic, context-specific recommendations to overcome these barriers. These recommendations were crucial for transforming LinkedIn into a powerful CPD resource that aligns with the strategic vision of higher education institutions.

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Theoretical Framework

The current research was inspired by the Human Capital Development Theory (Crockeer, 2006). Human Capital Development Theory emphasises the investment in individuals' skills, knowledge, and abilities to enhance productivity and foster economic growth. In the context of the current research, LinkedIn serves as a strategic platform that facilitates the continuous professional development of academic staff, enhancing their expertise, teaching capabilities, and research competencies. By using LinkedIn, academic staff in Rwanda can access global networks, resources, and learning opportunities, ultimately improving their human capital. This aligns with the theory by recognizing CPD as an essential investment in academic staff, which contributes to the advancement of higher education quality teaching and improvement of research projects and its publication.

Study Literature Review

a. Essence and usefulness of leveraging LinkedIn Platform

The use of social media platforms, particularly LinkedIn, for continuous professional development in higher education is well-supported by current research. LinkedIn has been recognized as a powerful tool for networking, learning, and professional growth, especially for academic staff seeking to stay updated with the latest developments in their fields.

Knight et al. (2014) emphasise the necessity of ongoing professional development for educators to keep pace with pedagogical innovations and technological advancements. They argue that platforms like LinkedIn provide an accessible means for educators to engage in CPD activities, complementing traditional methods such as workshops and conferences. This is particularly important as the educational landscape continues to evolve rapidly.

Kimmons and Veletsianos (2016) explored the role of social media in professional learning, highlighting LinkedIn's unique ability to support informal learning and professional networking. Their study revealed that LinkedIn facilitates the sharing of resources, ideas, and best practices among educators, fostering a collaborative learning environment that extends beyond geographical boundaries. They also noted that LinkedIn's professional groups and forums serve as valuable spaces for academic discussions and knowledge exchange.

Moreover, Manca and Ranieri (2017) investigated the motivations behind academics' use of LinkedIn, finding that the platform significantly enhances professional networking and collaborative opportunities. Their research indicated that academics who actively use LinkedIn can expand their professional networks, engage in meaningful discussions, and collaborate on research projects. This aligns with the findings of Roblyer et al. (2010), who noted that LinkedIn's professional groups and forums are effective in facilitating knowledge sharing and professional growth.

Furthermore, the literature also points to LinkedIn's role in promoting lifelong learning. LinkedIn Learning offers a vast array of courses and training modules that cater to the diverse needs of academic staff. According to a study by Brown and Adler (2008), lifelong learning is essential in today's knowledge economy, and platforms like LinkedIn provide the tools necessary for educators to engage in continuous learning.

Summing up, the literature strongly supports the use of LinkedIn for CPD in higher education. The platform's ability to facilitate networking, knowledge sharing, and access to

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learning resources makes it an invaluable tool for academic staff. By leveraging LinkedIn, educators can enhance their skills, expand their professional networks, and stay updated with the latest industry trends, ultimately contributing to their professional growth and the advancement of higher education.

b. Academic Staff appearing online through LinkedIn

The significance of academic staff establishing an online presence through LinkedIn for continuous professional development is well-documented. LinkedIn serves as a critical platform for enhancing visibility, facilitating networking, and promoting lifelong learning among academic professionals.

Establishing an online presence on LinkedIn is crucial for academic staff aiming to increase their professional visibility. According to Kimmons and Veletsianos (2016), an active LinkedIn profile allows educators to showcase their achievements, publications, and skills to a global audience. This increased visibility can lead to greater recognition within their academic communities and beyond, opening doors to collaborative opportunities and career advancements.

In addition, networking is another significant benefit of maintaining a robust LinkedIn presence. Manca and Ranieri (2017) highlighted that LinkedIn enables academic staff to connect with peers, industry leaders, and potential collaborators worldwide. The platform's networking capabilities support the exchange of ideas, best practices, and research findings, fostering a collaborative environment that transcends geographical boundaries. This networking is essential for academic staff to stay current with industry trends and innovations, as noted by Knight et al. (2014).

Moreover, LinkedIn also plays a vital role in promoting lifelong learning, a key component of CPD. LinkedIn Learning offers a vast array of courses and training modules tailored to the professional development needs of educators. Brown and Adler (2008) emphasised that lifelong learning is essential in today's knowledge economy, and platforms like LinkedIn provide the tools necessary for educators to engage in continuous learning. This ongoing professional development is critical for academic staff to remain competitive and effective in their roles.

In a nutshell, the literature strongly supports the significance of academic staff establishing an online presence through LinkedIn. By leveraging the platform's capabilities for visibility, networking, and lifelong learning, educators can enhance their professional development, contribute to their academic fields, and advance their careers.

c. LinkedIn vs Continuous Professional Development for academic staff

The professional development of academic staff in higher learning institutions has become increasingly multifaceted with the advent of digital platforms like LinkedIn, offering new avenues for career growth and networking. Continuous professional development remains a key structured approach, but LinkedIn, as a professional networking platform, provides more informal, self-directed options. This section examines the complementary and competing roles of LinkedIn and CPD in fostering academic staff development, drawing on relevant literature.

Continuous professional development is a structured, ongoing process of learning designed to maintain and enhance the professional skills and competencies of academic staff.

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CPD for faculty typically includes formal training programs, workshops, seminars, and participation in research activities. It emphasises sustained engagement with evolving educational trends and pedagogical practices, ensuring that academic professionals can meet the ever-changing demands of higher education (Kennedy, 2014). In this context, CPD is often driven by institutional objectives, with academic staff required to participate in learning activities that align with strategic goals, such as enhancing teaching quality, research outputs, and leadership capacity (Craft, 2012).

One key advantage of CPD is that it provides structured development pathways, allowing for targeted skill-building. Furthermore, research suggests that CPD activities can lead to higher job satisfaction and professional identity among academic staff (De Rijdt et al., 2013). However, CPD can be critiqued for being time-consuming and sometimes disconnected from the immediate, practical needs of staff in dynamic educational environments.

On the other hand, LinkedIn offers a contrasting, informal form of professional development that allows academic staff to engage in self-directed learning, build networks, and increase their visibility within the global academic community. LinkedIn facilitates knowledge exchange and collaboration, which are key components of professional growth. Academic staff can follow thought leaders, join professional groups, and access real-time discussions on educational trends, thereby fostering continuous learning outside formal institutional structures (Kietzmann et al., 2011).

Besides, studies have shown that LinkedIn can complement traditional CPD by expanding opportunities for networking and showcasing achievements (Skeels & Grudin, 2009). It promotes a personalized professional brand and allows for career development beyond the confines of a single institution. However, it lacks the depth and rigor of formal CPD programs and may not always align with institutional priorities or lead to accredited learning outcomes.

Summing up, both LinkedIn and CPD play important but distinct roles in the professional development of academic staff. CPD provides structured, institutionalized growth, while LinkedIn offers flexible, informal opportunities for professional networking and knowledge acquisition. Leveraging both platforms could result in a more holistic approach to academic staff development, balancing formal skill-building with self-directed career management.

d. Advantages and benefits of using LinkedIn as academic staff in higher education

In recent years, LinkedIn has emerged as a powerful tool for professionals across various sectors, including higher education. For academic staff, the platform offers significant opportunities to enhance visibility, network with peers, and engage with a global audience. This section examines the advantages and benefits of using LinkedIn, emphasizing its potential to support professional development, collaboration, and career advancement within higher education institutions.

One of the primary benefits of LinkedIn for academic staff is its ability to facilitate professional networking on a global scale. LinkedIn connects individuals across different geographical locations, disciplines, and institutions, allowing academic professionals to engage with a diverse range of scholars, thought leaders, and industry experts (Kietzmann et al., 2011). By joining specialized groups, following institutions, and connecting with other professionals, academic staff can broaden their professional circles, leading to opportunities for collaborative

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research, joint publications, and conference participation (O'Bannon et al., 2013). Networking through LinkedIn also fosters the sharing of resources and best practices, contributing to continuous professional learning.

In addition, LinkedIn enhances the visibility of academic staff, allowing them to showcase their expertise, research output, and achievements. The platform functions as a digital portfolio where faculty members can display their publications, grants, projects, and teaching experience (Griffin & Haynie, 2012). This not only positions them as thought leaders within their respective fields but also increases the likelihood of being approached for speaking engagements, editorial roles, or consultancy work. Furthermore, LinkedIn's job search tools and career development resources are invaluable for academics seeking career transitions or advancement within HEIs. LinkedIn allows faculty members to stay informed about institutional trends, vacancies, and professional opportunities, thus fostering proactive career management.

Moreover, LinkedIn is a hub for ongoing professional development, offering access to a variety of resources, such as online courses, webinars, and industry-related content. Through LinkedIn Learning, academic staff can engage in self-directed learning on topics ranging from pedagogical strategies to research methods and leadership development (Skeels & Grudin, 2009). Such access to continuous learning is crucial in an era of rapid technological and pedagogical advancements, enabling faculty to stay current in their fields. The platform also allows educators to follow thought leaders and engage in discussions on contemporary issues, thus fostering reflective practice and growth.

Furthermore, beyond the confines of academia, LinkedIn allows academic staff to connect with professionals in industry and government, facilitating cross-sector collaboration. Such partnerships are vital for institutions aiming to foster innovation, research commercialization, and community engagement (Donelan, 2016). Academics can leverage these networks to develop interdisciplinary projects, apply for collaborative grants, and promote knowledge transfer between the academic and non-academic sectors.

As a way of conclusion, LinkedIn offers academic staff in higher education numerous advantages, including enhanced networking opportunities, visibility, professional development, and cross-sector collaboration. As higher education becomes increasingly interconnected with global and industry trends, LinkedIn serves as a versatile platform for academic professionals to engage in meaningful interactions, thereby advancing their careers and contributing to the broader academic community.

e. Challenges and gaps

Despite the significant advantages and benefits of using LinkedIn for continuous professional development among academic staff in higher education, several barriers, gaps, and challenges exist that can hinder its effective utilization.

One major barrier is the lack of digital literacy among some academic staff. Knight et al. (2014) noted that while younger faculty members may be more adept at using social media platforms, more senior educators might struggle with the technological aspects of LinkedIn. This digital divide can limit the ability of some academic staff to fully leverage the platform's features for professional development.

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Another challenge is the perception of LinkedIn as merely a networking tool rather than a comprehensive resource for CPD. Manca and Ranieri (2017) found that some educators view LinkedIn primarily as a platform for job seekers rather than a space for professional growth and learning. This perception can prevent academic staff from exploring and utilizing LinkedIn's full potential for CPD, including its learning resources and collaborative opportunities.

Moreover, time constraints also pose a significant challenge. Academic staff often have demanding schedules filled with teaching, research, and administrative duties, leaving little time for engaging with LinkedIn. Roblyer et al. (2010) emphasise that the integration of LinkedIn into daily routines requires a considerable investment of time, which can be a deterrent for busy educators.

Furthermore, privacy and security concerns also act as barriers to the use of LinkedIn. Some academic staff may be hesitant to share professional information online due to fears of data breaches or misuse of their personal information. Kimmons and Veletsianos (2016) highlighted that these concerns can limit the extent to which educators are willing to engage with the platform.

Additionally, there is a gap in institutional support for leveraging LinkedIn for CPD. Brown and Adler (2008) argued that higher education institutions often lack formal policies or training programs to encourage and guide the use of LinkedIn for professional development. Without institutional backing, academic staff may not have the necessary resources or motivation to utilize LinkedIn effectively.

In summary, while LinkedIn offers substantial benefits for CPD, barriers such as digital literacy, time constraints, privacy concerns, and lack of institutional support need to be addressed to maximize its potential among academic staff in higher education.

Methods

The research adopted a qualitative descriptive design which leveraged the Semi-Structured Interview and Focus-Group Discussion to reach out to 30 Academic Staff from 5 Higher Learning Institutions. Data was analysed through descriptive and thematic analysis as well as contextaul analysis and literature rooting. 30 academic staffs were reached through convenience sampling and upon acceptance to willingly participate to the research though consent signing.

Results

The study revealed that LinkedIn utilization among academic staff in Rwanda's higher education institutions remains relatively underdeveloped, despite its potential for CPD. The majority of academic staff have LinkedIn profiles; however, their engagement with the platform is often passive, with limited interaction beyond basic profile creation and network expansion. Only a small proportion of academic staff actively use LinkedIn for professional learning or career advancement purposes.

The analysis indicates that academic staff are aware of LinkedIn as a professional networking platform, but its broader CPD capabilities, such as access to LinkedIn Learning and academic communities, are not widely recognized or utilized. The absence of institutional promotion and formal policies supporting LinkedIn as part of CPD strategies has contributed to

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this underutilization. Despite this, academic staff know much better that by integrating LinkedIn into CPD initiatives, they can benefit from a more flexible, self-directed approach to professional growth.

Despite its potential, several challenges inhibit the effective use of LinkedIn as a CPD tool among academic staff in Rwanda. One of the primary barriers is limited digital literacy among staff, particularly in leveraging online platforms for professional development. Many academic staff are not fully acquainted with LinkedIn's features beyond the networking function and lack the skills necessary to optimize their profiles for CPD purposes.

Moreover, institutional support for integrating LinkedIn into CPD strategies is minimal. Academic institutions in Rwanda have not widely embraced LinkedIn as a formal tool for professional development, and as a result, there is a lack of clear policies or training programs to encourage its use. This institutional oversight has left many academic staff unaware of how LinkedIn can be effectively used for their professional growth, beyond traditional means of development such as workshops and seminars.

Time constraints also present a significant challenge. Academic staff often have heavy workloads, balancing teaching, research, and administrative duties. As such, finding time to explore LinkedIn's learning resources or engage in meaningful networking on the platform can be difficult. Furthermore, misconceptions about LinkedIn as being primarily for corporate professionals rather than academics further hinder engagement, as some staff may not see its relevance to their specific needs.

Practical recommendations

To maximize LinkedIn's potential for continuous professional development, academic staff should adopt several practical strategies. Firstly, it is essential to create and maintain a comprehensive and up-to-date profile. According to Kimmons and Veletsianos (2016), a detailed profile that includes professional achievements, skills, and publications can significantly enhance visibility and attract potential collaborators and opportunities.

Engaging actively with the LinkedIn community is another key recommendation. Academic staff should join relevant professional groups and participate in discussions to share insights, ask questions, and exchange ideas. Manca and Ranieri (2017) emphasise that such interactions foster networking and knowledge sharing, which are critical components of CPD. Additionally, following thought leaders and organizations in one's field can help stay updated with the latest trends and developments.

Utilizing LinkedIn Learning is crucial for ongoing professional growth. LinkedIn Learning offers a vast array of courses that cater to various professional development needs. Brown and Adler (2008) suggest that academic staff should regularly engage with these resources to acquire new skills and knowledge, ensuring they remain competitive and effective in their roles.

Lastly, institutions should support and encourage the use of LinkedIn through formal training and policies. Providing workshops and resources on how to effectively use LinkedIn can bridge the digital literacy gap and motivate academic staff to leverage the platform. As Knight et al. (2014) note, institutional backing can play a significant role in integrating LinkedIn into the CPD strategies of academic staff.

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By following these practical recommendations, academic staff can effectively utilize LinkedIn to enhance their professional development, expand their networks, and stay at the forefront of educational and industry advancements.

Conclusion

Leveraging LinkedIn as a strategic channel for continuous professional development among academic staff in higher education institutions offers significant benefits, including enhanced professional visibility, expanded networking opportunities, and access to lifelong learning resources. Despite barriers such as digital literacy gaps, time constraints, and privacy concerns, the platform's potential to foster collaboration and knowledge sharing is immense. Practical recommendations, such as maintaining comprehensive profiles, actively engaging with professional groups, utilizing LinkedIn Learning, and institutional support, can help overcome these challenges. By effectively integrating LinkedIn into CPD practices, academic staff can achieve sustained professional growth and contribute meaningfully to their fields, thereby advancing both their careers and the broader academic community.

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