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TRAINERS' PERSPECTIVES ON DELIVERING CONTINUOUS PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT (CPD) TRAINING AT THE INSTITUTE OF DIPLOMACY AND FOREIGN RELATIONS (IDFR)

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Abstract:

In the modern, rapidly evolving, and linked global landscape, diplomats must exhibit adaptability, cultural competence, and possess current knowledge to effectively tackle international difficulties. Continuous Professional Development (CPD), especially pre-posting training, is essential for equipping diplomatic officers to meet these demands. Traditional CPD approaches, typically reliant on lecture-based formats, are widely regarded as obsolete and detached from the actual demands of diplomatic practice. Major concerns encompass inconsistent delivery, insufficient institutional support, restricted digital access, and inflexible training frameworks. This study examines the perspectives of trainers at the Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations (IDFR) on the effectiveness of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) programmes, with an emphasis on how adult learning theories are integrated into their design and delivery. This study adopted a qualitative approach through semi-structured interviews conducted with four experienced trainers. The interview findings reveal strong support for learner-centered, experiential, and self-directed learning approaches, grounded in the principles of andragogy and heutagogy. Nevertheless, trainers encounter obstacles including institutional rigidity and constrained resources. This research underscores the importance of integrating adult learning principles into the design of CPD programmes and calls for greater institutional commitment to cultivating flexible, responsive, and collaborative training environments that address the evolving professional development needs of diplomatic officers.

Introduction

A skilled and adaptable diplomatic workforce is essential for achieving national and institutional goals in today's complex and rapidly evolving global environment. The effectiveness of diplomatic institutions increasingly depends on their ability to develop and sustain the knowledge, skills, and attitudes (KSA) of their personnel. However, professional expertise can quickly become outdated due to shifting geopolitical dynamics, evolving diplomatic protocols, and advancements in technology (Cunningham, 2006; Eddy et al., 2005; López-Cabrales et al., 2011; Mugisha, 2009; Udin et al., 2012). To remain effective and credible, diplomats must engage in continuous learning. Research suggests that professional capability is supported not only through formal training, but also through workplace learning and reflective practice. Therefore, fostering a culture of lifelong learning is crucial particularly in diplomacy, where policy negotiation, strategic decision-making, and intercultural engagement require agility and up-to-date competence (Adanu, 2007).

Continuous Professional Development (CPD) serves as a key strategy to support lifelong learning and reduce the risk of professional stagnation. It offers diplomats structured and unstructured opportunities to remain contextually informed and technically competent. CPD encompasses various learning modes, including formal training, field experience, mentoring, and critical self-reflection (Fuller et al., 2003; Garrick, 1998; Thomas & Anderson, 2006). Despite its value, many institutions continue to rely heavily on traditional, lecture-based delivery methods. These approaches are often misaligned with the learning needs of adult professionals, who expect relevant, flexible, and engaging learning experiences that build on their prior knowledge and work contexts (Noe et al., 2014; Smith & Sadler-Smith, 2021; Gould et al., 2021). Time and resource constraints further challenge participation in CPD, as adult learners must balance professional responsibilities with personal and institutional demands (Kauffman et al., 2022).

A central issue in CPD effectiveness is the mismatch between trainers' instructional approaches and the learning preferences of adult professionals. Many trainers continue to use content-heavy, one-way delivery that fails to consider learner diversity and existing experience (Santos-Meneses et al., 2023). This results in disengagement and reduced learning outcomes. Adult learners often prefer experiential, problem-based, and collaborative learning core elements of andragogy (Knowles et al., 2020). Brown and McCracken (2021) argue that active learning approaches significantly enhance adult learners' motivation and retention. However, broader systemic challenges such as limited institutional support, outdated materials, and restricted access to digital infrastructure further limit the effectiveness of CPD, particularly in developing settings (Preston, 2024; Hodges et al., 2020). These challenges point to the need for more flexible, learner-centered approaches grounded in adult learning principles.

Another important yet often overlooked aspect of CPD effectiveness is the trainer–trainee relationship. A positive learning environment relies on trust, respect, and open communication (Garrison et al., 2021). Hierarchical structures and rigid institutional cultures can limit interaction and reduce engagement, especially in bureaucratic settings (Brookfield, 2015). Emerging research supports collaborative learning models in which trainers and trainees co-create knowledge through shared experiences and dialogue (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2020). These models position trainers as facilitators rather than mere information providers.

In Malaysia, the Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations (IDFR) plays a key role in preparing diplomats for overseas postings and strengthening the country's diplomatic capacity. However, the effectiveness of its Continuous Professional Development (CPD) programmes depends not only on the quality of content delivered, but also on how trainers apply appropriate teaching methods within the institution. Many trainers face limitations such as restricted autonomy, outdated training materials, and rigid delivery structures that reduce their ability to adjust content or methods to better suit adult learners (Azman et al., 2020; Tan & Md. Yunus, 2022). These limitations make it difficult to introduce innovative or flexible approaches, which are essential for engaging experienced professionals with diverse learning needs.

Another key challenge is the lack of structured feedback systems and post-training evaluation tools. Trainers often do not receive data on how trainees are progressing, whether they are satisfied with the training, or how well they apply their knowledge in real-world diplomatic settings (Ismail et al., 2023). Without this information, it becomes difficult for trainers to improve their courses or respond to the actual learning needs of participants. This disconnect may result in CPD programmes that are informative but not impactful failing to prepare diplomats for complex tasks such as negotiation under pressure, crisis management, or intercultural engagement in unpredictable environments.

One significant gap in current CPD reform efforts is the underestimation of the trainer's role in driving change. Trainers are often seen as deliverers of information, but their role is much broader. They act as facilitators of learning, designers of instructional experiences, and influencers of institutional culture. Their day-to-day experiences provide valuable insights into what works in training, what challenges exist, and how improvements can be made (O'Doherty & Ovando, 2020). When trainers are given more freedom to adapt their methods, along with institutional support and professional development opportunities, they are better positioned to enhance the relevance and effectiveness of CPD (Alrabai, 2021; Ismail et al., 2023).

This study addresses a critical gap in the literature on CPD in diplomacy by focusing on the perspectives of trainers at IDFR. By examining their experiences and challenges, the study aims to identify ways to improve how CPD is designed and delivered. It highlights the importance of aligning CPD programmes with well-established adult learning theories, such as andragogy, which emphasizes self-directed and experience-based learning, and heutagogy, which focuses on learner autonomy and adaptability (Blaschke, 2019; Knowles et al., 2020). Without meaningful reform, there is a risk that CPD will continue to provide theoretical knowledge that is not easily translated into practical skills leaving diplomats underprepared for the complex, fast-changing demands of global diplomacy.

This study aims to achieve the following specific objectives:

1. To determine the barriers encountered by trainers during the delivery of CPD programme at IDFR.
2. To identify the current training approaches for delivering CPD programme at IDFR.
   2.1 To recognize how the training approaches for delivering CPD programme are being refined at IDFR.

Literature Review

In the current practice of Continuous Professional Development (CPD) delivery at the Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations (IDFR), many of the training programmes are structured as short-term, intensive courses often spanning two weeks designed to accommodate a wide array of competencies, ranging from diplomatic protocol and negotiation to foreign policy analysis and cross-cultural communication. These sessions are frequently scheduled back-to-back with minimal intervals for rest, reflection, or practical application. While such an arrangement is logistically efficient, it creates an environment where learning is heavily compressed and cognitively taxing for participants. This compressed structure often results in a "crammed classroom" scenario, where content quantity supersedes content assimilation (Sweller, Ayres, & Kalyuga, 2011).

Moreover, the delivery of these sessions tends to rely predominantly on conventional teaching methods such as didactic lectures, PowerPoint-based presentations, and one-way communication from trainer to trainee. These traditional approaches may be familiar and manageable for administrative planning, but they fall short of engaging adult learners, especially professionals who bring their own experiences, expectations, and learning preferences into the training environment. According to Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (2020), adult learners unlike younger students require instructional methods that are self-directed, problem-centred, and immediately applicable to real-world challenges. In the context of diplomatic training, where skills such as negotiation, conflict resolution, and public diplomacy are deeply experiential and situational, passive learning techniques may inhibit the development of critical competencies.

Past studies have shown that adult learners retain and apply knowledge more effectively when exposed to active learning strategies, such as case-based discussions, role-playing, simulations, and peer collaboration (Brookfield, 2017; Santos-Meneses et al., 2023). The mismatch between the current structure of CPD programmes and the principles of adult learning theory suggests a significant gap in pedagogical alignment. Taylor and Hamdy (2018) argue that effective professional development requires not just the transmission of knowledge, but the transformation of thinking and behaviour processes that are unlikely to be achieved through lecture-heavy instruction alone. Similarly, Boud and Falchikov (2007) highlight the importance of reflective practice and feedback cycles in ensuring long-term retention and behavioural change elements often missing in compact, lecture-driven training modules.

Additionally, the intensive nature of such programmes can lead to cognitive overload, whereby the working memory capacity of participants is overwhelmed by excessive information within a short timeframe (Paas & Van Merriënboer, 1994). This compromises not only knowledge retention but also learners' motivation and engagement factors that are critical in ensuring the success of any CPD initiative. Without adequate spacing of content, time for reflection, and opportunities for experiential engagement, the risk is high that participants may emerge from

the training with superficial understanding, unable to internalise or apply the competencies gained.

In summary, the current mode of CPD delivery at IDFR, while structured and content-rich, presents several limitations when evaluated through the lens of adult learning theory and instructional effectiveness. As the demands on diplomatic professionals continue to evolve in complexity, there is an urgent need to re-examine and recalibrate the training approaches used in CPD settings. This includes not only diversifying andragogy approaches but also rethinking course design to balance content delivery with opportunities for application, reflection, and learner engagement.

Theoretical Perspective - Andragogy Theory
In the fast-evolving global environment, diplomats are required to constantly adapt to new challenges, whether in negotiations, policy development, crisis response, or international representation. Continuous Professional Development (CPD) has therefore become essential for enhancing their skills and ensuring they remain effective in their roles. However, for CPD to be truly impactful, it must reflect the nature of adult learning. Andragogical learning theory, introduced by Malcolm Knowles (1973), offers a foundational framework for designing training that respects the characteristics, motivations, and learning styles of adult learners making it particularly relevant to diplomatic CPD.

Andragogy is grounded in the idea that adults learn differently from children. Knowles (1984) identified six key assumptions about adult learners: the need to know, self-concept, prior experience, readiness to learn, orientation to learning, and motivation to learn. These principles support a shift from teacher directed instruction to learner-centred approaches, making andragogy highly suitable for professionals who bring significant work experience and intrinsic motivation to their learning. In diplomatic training, this model helps to ensure that CPD is not just informative but transformative.

The first principle, need to know, asserts that adult learners must understand the purpose and benefits of what they are learning. Diplomats are often strategic and goal oriented, they are more likely to engage when the training clearly aligns with real world tasks such as managing conflict zones, engaging in bilateral discussions, or implementing foreign policy (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). CPD should therefore make explicit how each learning module contributes to professional performance and diplomatic impact.

The second principle, self-concept highlights that adult learners desire autonomy and prefer to take ownership of their learning paths. In this context, diplomats value CPD programmes that offer flexibility, self-paced options, and learner involvement in planning or customising content. Such approaches align with heutagogical strategies, which support self-determined learning (Blaschke, 2012), further reinforcing the relevance of adult learning theory in diplomatic training.

The third principle is the role of prior experience. Diplomats often enter training with diverse international backgrounds and extensive exposure to cross cultural contexts, negotiations, and policy development. These experiences should be recognised and integrated into CPD design through peer learning, reflective practice, and case-based discussions (Kolb, 1984). Not only does this validate their expertise, but it also encourages meaningful engagement with new content.

The fourth principle, readiness to learn, suggests that adults are motivated to learn when they encounter life situations that demand new skills or knowledge. For diplomats, this may arise when preparing for a new posting, handling a regional crisis, or transitioning to leadership roles. Timely, needs based training interventions can enhance both relevance and learner motivation (Caffarella & Daffron, 2013).

The fifth principle, orientation to learning states that adults prefer problem-centred learning over subject centred instruction. This is especially important in diplomatic CPD, where experiential learning techniques such as scenario planning, policy simulations, and crisis management exercises are critical for helping diplomats apply new skills in real-world contexts (Brookfield, 2013). Such approaches promote deeper understanding and better retention of knowledge.

Finally, the sixth principle addresses motivation. While external incentives such as promotions or accreditation may encourage participation in CPD, adult learners are more often driven by intrinsic goals such as professional growth, personal satisfaction, and a desire to contribute to national or global causes (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2015). CPD that fosters a sense of purpose and aligns with diplomats' personal and institutional missions is more likely to result in sustained engagement and behavioural change.

Taken together, these andragogical principles provide a strong foundation for the design and delivery of CPD programmes for diplomats. Rather than treating training as a one size fits all process, the andragogical model promotes learner-centred approaches that are adaptable, reflective, and practice driven. When embedded within institutional settings like the Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations (IDFR), this model can transform CPD from a procedural requirement into a strategic tool for developing adaptive, thoughtful, and globally competent diplomatic professionals.

Methodology

Design
This study adopted a qualitative design using semi-structured, in-person interviews to explore the views of trainers involved in designing and implementing CPD programmes at the Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations (IDFR). This method was chosen for its balance between structure and flexibility (Adams, 2015). Guiding questions ensured consistency, while open-ended responses allowed participants to share detailed experiences, examples, and concerns beyond the planned topics.

In-person interviews helped the researcher build rapport and observe non-verbal cues, which added depth to the data. Given that professional training is shaped by institutional culture, teaching beliefs, and organisational dynamics, qualitative interviews are well-suited to uncovering these complex perspectives (Shawahna et al., 2022). This approach is especially valuable for capturing tacit knowledge and reflective insights and elements that are often missed in structured surveys but crucial for improving CPD policies and practices (Nowell & Albrecht, 2020).

Trainer	Gender	Years of Experience	Current Post	Area of Expertise
1.	Female	11–15 years	Head of Delegation (Representative of the Diplomat's Spouse)	Social Etiquette
2.	Female	6–10 years	Lecturer	Cultural Intelligence
3.	Male	6–10 years	Lecturer	Personal Grooming
4.	Female	6–10 years	Language Teacher	Public Speaking

Table 1: Demographic Profile of the Trainers

Setting and Sample

The study was conducted at IDFR, a key training institution under Malaysia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Purposive sampling was employed to ensure the inclusion of participants who were well-positioned to provide rich, relevant data. Four experienced trainers were selected due to their direct involvement in the design, delivery, and evaluation of CPD programmes. These individuals were deemed "information rich cases" capable of offering deep insights into both pedagogical and institutional aspects of CPD delivery. While the number of trainers may seem limited, this aligns with the principle of data saturation, which was considered achieved when no new themes emerged from the interviews. Nevertheless, the small sample size is acknowledged as a limitation. The findings may not be fully generalizable to all trainers or CPD institutions, but they offer a valuable, in-depth understanding of the experiences within IDFR's specific context.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Universiti Pertahanan Nasional Malaysia (UPNM) Research Ethics Committee prior to data collection, with a serial number 18/24. The study adhered to core ethical principles, including voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Each trainer was personally approached and provided with an information sheet and consent form, and all participants voluntarily agreed to take part. Formal permission to conduct the study at the Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations (IDFR) was granted on 13 August 2024. To ensure credibility and trustworthiness, member checking was carried out, and an audit trail comprising field notes and reflective memos was maintained. Rich contextual details supported transferability, while consistent procedures enhanced dependability.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with the selected trainers. The interviews were conducted in private settings at IDFR or via secure online platforms, depending on participant availability and preference. This ensured confidentiality and promoted open, candid discussion. The interview guide was informed by the study objectives and relevant literature. Key areas explored included trainers' roles in curriculum development, perceptions of programme effectiveness, institutional constraints, and the alignment of the CPD programme. Interviews lasted between 45 to 60 minutes, were audio-recorded with consent, and supplemented by field notes to capture non-verbal cues and contextual insights. Data collection occurred between November and December 2024.

Data Analysis
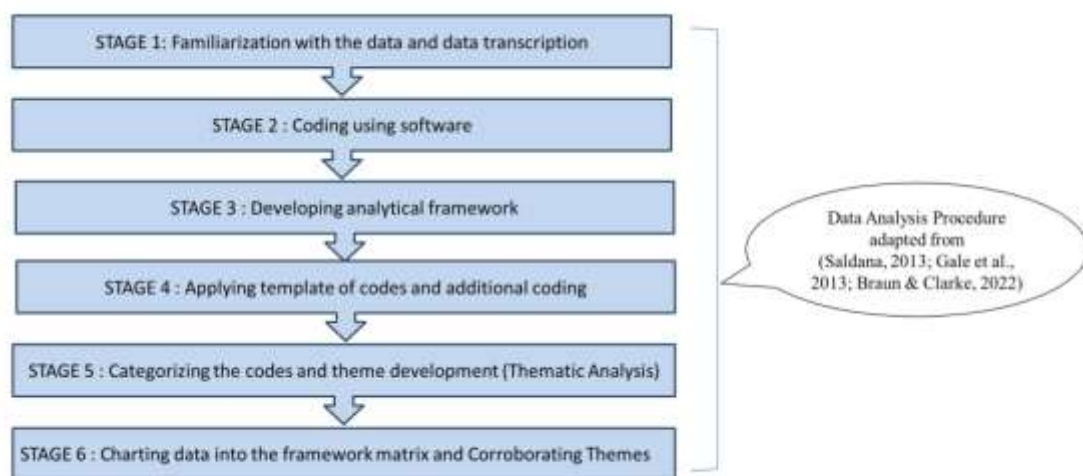
The Analysis Followed By Braun And Clarke's Six-Phase Framework

The data analysis for this study followed a six-stage framework adapted from Saldaña (2021), and Braun and Clarke (2022), which is particularly well-suited for exploring qualitative data such as interviews and focus groups. This framework provided a structured process that enabled the systematic organization and interpretation of data collected from trainers involved in the CPD programme at IDFR.

The interviews were transcribed verbatim to preserve the accuracy and richness of trainer' responses, including their exact words, pauses, and expressions.

The first stage involved familiarization with the data and transcription. Audio recordings of interviews and focus group discussions were transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy and to capture the nuances of trainers' responses. Verbatim transcription is essential in qualitative research to preserve the authenticity of participant narratives and contextual cues (Poland, 2021). The researcher immersed herself in the data by reading and re-reading the transcripts while taking reflective notes. This stage was crucial in developing a deep understanding of trainers' experiences and perspectives related to CPD training (Nowell et al., 2020). For instance, preliminary observations included repeated concerns about the relevance of training content and approaches.

The second stage focused on coding using qualitative data analysis software. Transcripts were imported into a software to facilitate the organization and management of data. Open coding was conducted, during which meaningful segments of text were labelled according to emerging concepts (Saldaña, 2021). In the context of CPD, these codes included references to training design (e.g., participatory vs. lecture-based methods), motivations for attendance (e.g., professional growth, compliance), and perceived impacts (e.g., skill enhancement, confidence in diplomatic negotiations). The use of software enhances the transparency and rigour of the coding process, particularly when dealing with large and complex datasets (Woods, Paulus, Atkins, & Macklin, 2016).

Following initial coding, the third stage involved developing an analytical framework. Codes were reviewed, refined, and organized into a hierarchical structure of categories and subcategories. This process of axial coding helps in building conceptual linkages between codes (Charmaz, 2014). The development of this framework was informed by both inductive insights from the data and deductive guidance from the literature on adult learning theories, such as andragogy and heutagogy (Blaschke, 2012). In particular, the framework captured key dimensions such as training approaches, learner engagement, institutional enablers and constraints, and outcomes of CPD programmes. This analytical scaffolding ensured consistency and coherence in the interpretation of data (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

The fourth stage entailed applying the template of codes and conducting additional coding. The analytical framework was applied to the full dataset to ensure consistency in how data were categorized. As new patterns emerged, the coding scheme was expanded to accommodate additional insights, such as the challenges trainers faced in adapting to learner-driven pedagogies. This process reflects the adaptive and iterative nature of qualitative analysis, which allows the coding system to evolve as understanding deepens. This iterative refinement allowed for the continuous evolution of the coding system while preserving analytical rigour (Nowell et al., 2020).

In the fifth stage, the focus shifted to categorizing the codes and developing overarching themes through thematic analysis. Related codes were grouped to form broader themes that encapsulated the core issues within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2021). For instance, themes such as "perceived disconnect between training and diplomatic realities," and "the shifting role of trainers in a heutagogical model" emerged as key findings. These themes were grounded in trainers' narratives and contextualized within the broader discourse on professional development in the diplomatic field (Lester, 2021).

The final stage involved charting the data into a framework matrix and corroborating themes. This step facilitated cross-case analysis by enabling comparison across different trainers. The use of framework matrices allows for both within- and across-case comparisons and supports systematic theme development. Data were systematically charted into matrices that aligned with the themes developed in the previous stage. This process not only highlighted similarities and divergences in perspectives but also reinforced the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings through triangulation and transparency (Tracy, 2010). Data sources and themes provided a robust basis for interpreting how CPD is perceived, delivered, and experienced within the diplomatic training at IDFR.

Findings and Discussions

These are the findings for Objective 1:

To Determine the Barriers Encountered by Trainers During the Delivery of The CPD Programme At IDFR.

i) Navigating Barriers in Delivering Training

Trainers discussed the design and delivery of the CPD programme at IDFR, highlighting both the complexity and significance of their teaching roles. They described the work as demanding, particularly when covering extensive components of the SPKM programme (Wilson & Peterson, 2020). A clear and organised approach was seen as essential to ensure that all training areas are properly addressed (Zhang & West, 2022).

Although the training focuses on specific topics such as fine dining, social etiquette, grooming, cultural communication, and public speaking, trainers noted that delivering these sessions requires considerable preparation and effort (Taylor & Francis, 2021). These modules play a vital role in building core skills for diplomatic officers, especially those who are new to the service. As a result, trainers must carefully balance depth and coverage in their teaching (Nguyen & Matthews, 2019).

"For instance, the fine dining etiquette, we can teach all this, but what if after the session they don't put it into practise? So, was that a waste of money to do the session? Because I heard it's very pricey, expensive. That's the bulk of the cost.

So how do you overcome that to make sure that it's not that they just came there for free makan. I mean, no insult to the trainees, but some of them said, I'm not going to attend any formal events, why am I asked to do this? So, I'm not going to host any, but they are required to do it at their level, whether they are an officer or the head of their agency. So, if not how, basically through food is where we mingle and enhance our relationship." -Trainer 1

Trainers also highlighted the difficulty of tailoring lessons to meet the diverse needs of trainees while working within tight time constraints (Zhang & West, 2022). They must design sessions that are both interactive and engaging, while ensuring that essential theoretical and practical content for diplomatic work is fully covered (Nguyen & Matthews, 2019). Despite these challenges, trainers remain dedicated to delivering high-quality training that reflects the well-structured and comprehensive nature of IDFR's CPD programme (Taylor & Francis, 2021). Their commitment underscores the vital role they play in preparing trainees to meet the evolving demands of global diplomacy.

ii) Engagement Challenges with Mandated Trainees

One of the main challenges faced by trainers is keeping trainees engaged, especially when participants are required to attend the CPD programme but are not personally interested. Many join the training sessions simply because it is mandatory, not because they see value in it (Kennedy, 2014). This lack of genuine interest often results in low motivation, limited participation, and reduced enthusiasm during the sessions. This issue is most noticeable in mandatory trainings, where participants tend to view the course as just another task to complete, rather than an important opportunity to improve their professional skills (Meyer et al., 2021).

"Sometimes the participants themselves don't want to be there... they don't believe in the benefits of the course." -Trainer 1

As a result, the overall impact of the training is weakened, and the intended learning outcomes may not be fully achieved. This presents a significant barrier to effective CPD delivery, as trainers must find ways to engage participants who may not be motivated to learn.

Trainers also have noted that monotonous content delivery exacerbates this issue. To address this, innovative strategies such as interactive activities, real-world scenarios, and the use of humour have been employed to maintain trainees' interest (Taylor & Hamdy, 2018; Tofade, Khandoobhai, & Leadon, 2021).

"When I do hosting and attending, sometimes all the do's and don'ts get a bit too monotonous. I will have break-up sessions for group work or case study. So, then they become involved, and they are more refreshed." -Trainer 1

However, challenges remain in ensuring that trainees apply the skills learned, as highlighted by Trainer 1,

"For instance, the fine dining etiquette, we can teach all this, but what if after the session they don't put it into practice? So, was that a waste of money to do the session?"

ii) Limited use of technology

Another significant challenge in delivering CPD programmes is the limited use of advanced technology. Although basic tools like PowerPoint slides, microphones, and video presentations are commonly used, many trainers believe that technology could offer much more in improving the learning experience. However, this potential is not fully realised, as most training still depends on traditional, lecture-based methods (Langer-Crame et al., 2019).

"I normally integrate some pictures, videos, PowerPoint slides. Those are the materials that I use. You know, it would just be the right time that I need to use to at least theoretically address certain important issues within intercultural communication." -Trainer 2

Despite the availability of more advanced technologies such as virtual reality (VR), gamified platforms, and interactive simulations, budget constraints and limited infrastructure prevent their use (Lee & Hannafin, 2016; Mystakidis et al., 2021). These limitations mean that trainers are often forced to rely on basic tools, which may not be as effective in meeting the diverse learning needs of today's trainees.

Incorporating more interactive and immersive technologies could make CPD sessions more engaging, personalised, and reflective of real-world diplomatic scenarios. However, doing so would require greater investment in technological resources, as well as training for facilitators to confidently integrate these tools into their teaching. Until then, the CPD programme remains constrained by its reliance on conventional teaching approaches, which may limit its impact in preparing officers for the complexities of modern diplomacy.

iii) No Access to the Feedbacks

Feedback mechanisms are also a major challenge in improving CPD programmes. Trainers often receive limited or no structured feedback after conducting their sessions, which makes it

hard for them to evaluate their own performance or make improvements (van der Vleuten et al., 2019). Without clear input from participants or the institution, trainers lack the information needed to adjust their teaching strategies or better meet the needs of trainees.

"This one could be the barriers at which the trainers didn't get the feedback. Maybe there's some reason that it's not shared with us. Because we don't have that feedback, we really don't know how else we can improve." -Trainer 1

Similarly, Trainer 2 emphasized the importance of feedback for professional growth,

"I find that it's really helpful because sometimes, you know, we need the other pairs of eyes to tell us that there are certain things that we should improve."

The absence of a formal system for sharing feedback creates challenges for trainers in adjusting and improving their sessions. Without structured input from participants, trainers find it difficult to make informed changes such as adjusting the pace of lessons, adding more interactive activities, or providing extra learning materials to support different learning needs. In addition, there are no proper follow-up mechanisms to assess whether trainees understand and apply what they have learned. This makes it difficult to evaluate how effective the CPD programme truly is (Kolomitro et al., 2020).

"If we get the feedback, maybe they feel that this is not what they expected out of this. They wanted to know more about some other part which we are not addressing. So at least if we know, we will be able to cater for that in the future."

These are the findings for the Objective 2:

To Identify the Current Training Approaches for Delivering CPD Programme at IDFR.
i) Comprehensive Approaches in the Design and Delivery of CPD Training
Trainers at IDFR recognise the challenges involved in designing and delivering the CPD programme, especially when covering the wide-ranging content of SPKM training. The programme is structured to give trainees a well-rounded experience in essential diplomatic skills. It includes diverse topics such as fine dining etiquette, personal grooming, cultural communication, and public speaking and all of which reflect a holistic approach to developing diplomatic competencies (Kennedy, 2014; Megginson & Whitaker, 2007). Trainers also stress the need to balance depth and breadth in their teaching so that trainees can gain the right mix of practical and professional skills, in line with Knowles' adult learning principles (Knowles et al., 2020).

"IDFR is actually putting a lot of thought into the programme. And it's really because I'm involved with the SPKM and a little bit in the Department of Diplomacy. So, I find that it's very tough, they try to cover as much as they can within the scope of the programme." - Trainer 1

Subsequently, trainers pointed out the difficulty of tailoring their teaching to suit all trainees within a short timeframe which is an issue often faced in adult learning, where participants have varied backgrounds and learning needs (Santos-Meneses et al., 2023). They aim to make

each session both interactive and engaging, while also balancing theory with practical application. This reflects recommended practices in CPD, which emphasise adaptable and learner-centred approaches (Boud & Hager, 2012). Although these challenges exist, trainers stay dedicated to delivering high-quality training in line with the design of IDFR's CPD programme.

"Its CPD programme consists of a combination of modules, for example, leadership communication, negotiating techniques, and presentation skills, all of which include public speaking." - Trainer 4

ii) Trainer-Led Adaptability and Self-Directed Updates

One major challenge identified is the lack of consistent updates to CPD training materials. Some trainers observed that the slides and modules used do not always reflect current diplomatic priorities or global developments (Noe et al., 2014). This can reduce the programme's ability to fully prepare trainees for today's diplomatic landscape (Gould et al., 2021). However, many trainers address this issue by taking their own initiative that they include real-world case studies, recent events, and relevant policy changes in their sessions (Knowles et al., 2020; Santos-Meneses et al., 2023), helping ensure that trainees stay informed about the latest trends and issues in diplomacy.

"So far, in terms of presentation, it's still very much the same as what we've been doing in the past 5–10 years." Trainer 1

"As a trainer, I've consistently delivered the same core content in my classes over the years. However, I make it a point to tailor my presentations to align with the latest government directives, such as updates from official circulars or guidelines (pekeliling). This ensures that the trainees and officers not only grasp the foundational concepts but also stay informed about current policies and practices relevant to their roles." - Trainer 3

In the absence of a formal system for regularly updating training content, many CPD trainers take the initiative to update their knowledge through self-directed learning. This approach aligns with heutagogical principles, where the trainers themselves decide what, how, and when to learn to improve their teaching practices (Blaschke, 2012). It also reflects professional autonomy, as trainers build their expertise by combining formal knowledge with practical, experience-based insights (Boud & Hager, 2012). Moreover, peer learning and collaborative reflection allow trainers to benchmark their approaches against emerging trends, enhancing both the depth and relevance of the content they deliver (Webster-Wright, 2009).

"I keep myself updated as well. By watching, taking up some online programmes, courses" -Trainer 1

Some trainers with academic backgrounds actively engage in research and academic activities to stay informed about the latest trends. This allows them to ensure that their training sessions remain relevant and aligned with the evolving landscape of diplomacy.

"Our class lectures, for example, are supposed to reflect the current trends and requirements. And normally, how do we get to know the trends, requirements, whatnot? It's

through the research that we do. So, to me, it's my academic activities, research, papers, publications, and all that." - Trainer 2

Upon identifying the barriers to implementing the CPD training, the trainers also provided suggestions to improve the training approaches. These suggestions address Research Objective 2.1 and the findings are as follows:

To Recognize How the Training Approaches for Delivering CPD Programme Are Being Refined At IDFR.

i) Inclusivity and Accessibility in the CPD Programme

IDFR's programme is currently exclusive, as it is primarily designed for officers preparing for overseas postings. However, there is a need for a more inclusive and accessible learning environment that incorporates gender-neutral materials, bilingual support, and flexible learning formats to meet the diverse needs of trainees (UNESCO, 2015; Santos-Meneses et al., 2023). Some trainers recommended increasing the frequency of training sessions, rather than limiting them to pre-posting periods. Offering more regular sessions would help ensure that all individuals such as remote learners and diplomats' spouses have equal access to the training opportunities.

"Instead of waiting for them just before they go for posting to do the programmes, it could be good to do it on a more regular basis. Because those who miss out on this, or for whatever reasons, will not be able to make it due to the scheduled programme time, may be able to attend something that if it was done, let's say, every quarterly. So at least it's easier." - Trainer 1

Another recommendation for enhancing accessibility was the introduction of a hybrid learning model. By offering both offline and online training options simultaneously, trainees could join sessions remotely, removing geographical barriers, a strategy in development settings to support flexibility and inclusivity (Hodges et al., 2020). This flexibility would cater to those with work obligations or living in remote locations which promotes learner autonomy and self-directed learning in diverse contexts (Blaschke, 2012)

"As a trainer, I see the potential benefits of integrating online classes alongside face-to-face training. A simultaneous online option could enhance accessibility, especially for trainees who may have scheduling conflicts or are located far from the training venue. This hybrid approach would provide greater flexibility while maintaining the quality and engagement of our programme, catering to a wider range of trainees." - Trainer 3

ii) Engagement with Senior Diplomats

Involving senior diplomats and field experts is a key strategy to enhance the relevance and quality of the CPD programme. Senior diplomats offer valuable real-world insights based on their diplomatic experience, while field experts bring specialised knowledge in areas such as public speaking, cultural etiquette, and negotiation skills (Jarvis, 2004; Boud & Hager, 2012). Their participation helps close the gap between theory and practice, making the training more practical and relatable for trainees (Kolb, 2014).

For instance, senior diplomats can share their personal experiences such as hosting fine dining events or managing culturally sensitive situations that may seem simple on the surface but are complex and significant. These activities carry symbolic weight, as diplomats represent the image and reputation of their country. A single misstep could draw public attention or even cause diplomatic tensions (Wenger, 1998). Therefore, learning directly from those with first-hand experience helps trainees understand the subtle yet crucial aspects of diplomatic conduct.

"Trainers work with senior diplomats to include real-life case studies and scenarios, ensuring that relevance is maintained. Personally, I often seek guidance from senior diplomats or trainers whenever I face challenges in class. Their extensive experience and in-depth knowledge offer valuable insights that help me navigate complex situations more effectively. Engaging with them provides me with practical advice and alternative perspectives that I might not have considered on my own. This approach not only enhances my understanding but also allows me to learn from their real-life examples and applied strategies. In many ways, this method serves as a form of mentorship, bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application." - Trainer 4

"Somehow I feel the participants become more engaged when I start sharing my experience." -Trainer 1

iii) Simulation and Scenario-Based Learning for Career Readiness

Scenario-based learning reflects the core principles of experiential and self-directed learning, which are central to heutagogical theory. In the context of CPD for diplomatic officers, simulation exercises provide a practical space for participants to apply their knowledge, practise real-life decision-making, and develop critical thinking skills. These competencies are not only essential for effective diplomacy but also contribute to long-term professional growth.

Heutagogy, or self-determined learning, encourages learners to be independent, flexible, and prepared for uncertain or rapidly changing situations (Blaschke, 2012). This approach is particularly relevant for diplomats, who often need to interpret cultural cues, understand subtle diplomatic messages, and make sound decisions under pressure. Simulations support this type of learning by offering an engaging and low-risk environment where trainees can try out different strategies, learn from mistakes, and build sound professional judgement.

As Knowles et al. (2020) point out, adult learners benefit most from problem-solving and hands-on activities that are directly related to their work. Simulations promote collaboration, self-reflection, and emotional intelligence—especially when they include role-playing scenarios based on real diplomatic challenges, such as negotiations, cultural misunderstandings, or formal protocols. These exercises help translate theoretical knowledge into real-world skills, a point reinforced by trainers who stress the importance of understanding the input (theory) before focusing on output (practice). However, the trainer also acknowledges the ongoing challenge of limited time, which can make it difficult to fully explore both theoretical and practical components within a single session.

"I still need the theoretical duration...but if I can have a session with active participation... simulation is a good example." -Trainer 2

This highlights the importance for CPD programme to have instructional content with opportunities for trainees to actively engage, reflect, and demonstrate their skills. According to Boud, Keogh, and Walker (1985), learning is most effective when individuals have time to apply what they have learned and reflect on their experiences, which an essential part of transformative learning theory.

In terms of career development, simulation-based learning does more than just build technical knowledge. It encourages higher-order thinking, such as critical analysis, decision-making, and leadership. For diplomatic officers, skills like managing uncertainty, resolving conflict, and communicating across cultures are vital not only for success in their current roles but also for advancement in future postings. Therefore, simulations support both immediate training needs and long-term professional growth, making them a valuable component of CPD for diplomats.

> *"Simulation is one example... participants have to put themselves in the scenario and think how to manage it." -Trainer 2*

iv) Understanding Trainees' Profiles for Personalised CPD
Understanding trainees' profiles plays an important role in making CPD programmes more effective and relevant. Customising training based on participants' backgrounds is not only key to successful delivery, but also crucial for keeping learners engaged and supporting their professional growth.

In adult learning, it is well established that adults are not passive learners—they bring a range of personal, professional, and cultural experiences that influence how they engage with training (Knowles et al., 2020). When trainers have access to information such as participants' ranks, job roles, learning needs, and prior experience, they are better able to design sessions that are meaningful and relevant to real diplomatic work. As Illeris (2016) suggests, learning is most effective when it connects with the learner's identity, motivation, and lived experiences.

At IDFR, however, the lack of trainee background information can make it difficult for trainers to adapt content to suit specific needs. This often leads to generalised sessions that may not reflect the actual responsibilities or professional goals of the participants. From a constructivist perspective, this weakens the learning experience, as trainees are less likely to relate new information to what they already know (Santos-Meneses et al., 2023).

When training is aligned with trainees' profiles, it supports more targeted skill development especially in critical areas like negotiation, communication, and intercultural awareness. Trainers can adjust their delivery style, use relevant examples, or case studies, and include interactive elements that better match the group's professional context. This not only improves learning in the short term but also helps participants apply what they learn to real diplomatic situations.

In short, knowing the profiles of trainees allows trainers to adopt a more learner-centred approach, supported by institutional mechanisms. This approach is consistent with andragogical principles, which emphasise that adults learn best when the content is clearly relevant to their roles and career goals (Knowles et al., 2020).

> *"Understanding your audience is one of the most basic principles in public speaking."*
> *"If we can have that participant profile, that would be fantastic."*

As results, current training approaches at IDFR demonstrate a careful balance between structured design and flexible delivery, particularly within the CPD programme's flagship SPKM module. This module encompasses diverse elements such as cultural etiquette, grooming, fine dining, and public speaking reflecting a holistic and well-rounded curriculum aimed at cultivating comprehensive diplomatic competencies. Trainers at IDFR employ semi structured teaching methods that align with Knowles' adult learning principles, especially in balancing learner autonomy with practical relevance (Knowles et al., 2020). Efforts to engage trainees include interactive techniques and case-based teaching, though the limited duration of sessions often forces trainers to cover too much content in too little time. This challenge reflects a common tension in CPD literature between achieving depth of learning and meeting content requirements (Santos-Meneses et al., 2023).

In response, there is a noticeable shift toward refining CPD delivery to become more inclusive and learner centred. Trainers recommended broadening access beyond the pre posting group by increasing programme frequency and offering hybrid formats, aligning with broader adult learning calls for flexibility and accessibility (UNESCO, 2015; Blaschke, 2012). Scenario based and simulation learning were also highlighted as effective methods to promote self-directed and experiential learning core elements of heutagogy. These approaches allow trainees to apply knowledge in realistic settings, enhancing critical thinking, adaptability, and diplomatic judgement (Kolb, 2014; Boud & Hager, 2012). The inclusion of senior diplomats and domain experts further enriches training sessions, offering mentorship and real-world insights that bridge the gap between theory and practice. Such experience-based learning reinforces the value of reflective and socially situated learning as emphasised by Wenger (1998) and Jarvis (2004).

Despite these strengths, several structural and instructional barriers remain. Trainee disengagement, particularly in mandatory sessions, emerged as a recurring concern. Some participants attend without genuine interest, leading to superficial engagement and limited learning outcomes. This supports existing research suggesting that compulsory CPD often fosters compliance rather than meaningful participation (Kennedy, 2014; Meyer et al., 2021). While trainers have responded with humour and interactive techniques, more systemic solutions such as linking CPD attendance to career progression or performance evaluations may be necessary. In addition, the integration of technology within CPD remains minimal. Basic tools such as PowerPoint and video presentations are common, but immersive technologies like gamification or virtual simulations are rarely used. This gap is largely due to budget constraints and a lack of digital training for facilitators, issues echoed in broader CPD studies (Lee & Hannafin, 2016; Mystakidis et al., 2021). As digital diplomacy becomes increasingly important, upgrading the technological infrastructure of CPD programmes is vital to maintain relevance and enhance learner engagement.

Another notable challenge is the absence of structured feedback mechanisms. Trainers reported receiving little to no feedback after conducting sessions, which limits opportunities for self-reflection, instructional improvement, and learner responsive adjustments. This is at odds with best practices in adult education, where timely and constructive feedback is crucial to both educator and learner development (van der Vleuten et al., 2019; Kolomitro et al., 2020). Without a feedback loop or follow up processes, it becomes difficult to assess training effectiveness or determine whether learning outcomes are being transferred into real-world

diplomatic practice. Compounding this is the lack of access to trainee background information, which significantly affects trainers' ability to tailor content. Trainers indicated that knowing participants' ranks, roles, and prior experience would allow for more relevant and personalised delivery. This aligns with the core andragogical principle that adult learners engage best when training is clearly linked to their specific needs and professional contexts (Knowles et al., 2020; Illeris, 2016). In the absence of such data, trainers often default to generic content delivery, potentially reducing the impact and relevance of the training. Addressing this gap by providing trainers with access to trainee profiles could enable a more learner centred, context aware, and impactful CPD experience.

Conclusion

In conclusion, improving the Continuous Professional Development (CPD) programmes at the Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations (IDFR) is crucial to ensure that diplomats are well-prepared to meet the fast-changing and complex demands of international relations. This study identifies several key challenges faced by trainers, including short training durations, classroom management issues, limited use of technology, low participant engagement, restricted access to training, and insufficient facilities. These issues point to the urgent need for more flexible, innovative, and learner-centred approaches in CPD delivery.

To address these challenges, several strategies are recommended. Extending the length of training sessions could give more time to explore complex topics in greater depth. Improving classroom settings and upgrading facilities would also help create a more supportive learning environment. Making better use of technology—such as online platforms and digital tools could increase access and boost engagement, although financial constraints may limit these options. Trainers' use of interactive activities, real-world examples, and mentorship shows how experiential learning methods can help keep participants engaged and support skill development. Additionally, offering CPD sessions more frequently and through hybrid formats would allow greater flexibility, especially for trainees with different needs and responsibilities.

Ultimately, the success of CPD programmes depends on how well they can adapt to global changes and meet the specific needs of diplomatic professionals. By addressing the challenges outlined in this study and applying the proposed solutions, IDFR can ensure that its CPD programmes remain relevant, inclusive, and effective. These findings not only highlight the practical concerns of trainers but also offer useful insights for policymakers and training institutions seeking to improve CPD frameworks. In doing so, this research contributes to the broader development of diplomatic training and the strengthening of international relations.

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