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Thinking global, acting local

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Thinking global, acting local

Ali Gohar Qazi combines global perspectives with local approaches to investigate how mobile technologies can transform the educational landscape in Pakistan.



Ali Gohar

2022 Commonwealth Split-site Scholar

Pakistan

PhD Education

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Ongoing or continuous professional development is essential for teachers to develop and maintain the knowledge base required to produce more powerful learning outcomes among their students. Research has shown that professional development is more effective and meaningful to teachers when it is content focused, involves active learning and collective participation, and when it is sustained in duration, instead of being top-down, episodic, or delivered as ‘one-shot’ training workshops.

In Pakistan, teacher training is still predominantly based on traditional modes of ‘on-off’ and top-down training. This is despite ongoing concerns about the quality of students’ performance. When it comes to mathematics, for example, various research studies have identified ‘low teacher quality’ as the primary factor responsible for low levels of student performance. While many techniques and reforms have been introduced in Pakistan to uplift the quality of teaching, due to various reasons, they have not yet been successful. What is lacking is the provision of continual, on-the-job professional support available to teachers across Pakistan, including in its most rural areas.

My doctoral research is centred around exploring ways to provide professional development to primary-level teachers in rural areas using mobile technologies. As a Split-site Scholar enrolled at the Aga Khan University in Pakistan and at University College London (UCL) in the UK, I hope to combine my IT background and the local expertise collected in liaison with Pakistani education experts and rural primary school teachers with the global perspectives and research offered by UCL’s world-leading education department.

I came across the issues surrounding teacher-training in Pakistan first-hand while working for the education NGO, Development in Literacy, as the officer responsible for teacher training and education projects involving ICT. This exposed me to the costs of in-person training, as well as the limitations it posed. Limitations included issues in reaching out to teachers living in rural areas who often did not have the means or capacity to travel to central training centres. This was particularly true for women teachers. When I thought about employing our teaching methods to improve the quality of teaching in Pakistan at scale, I could see that it just would not be possible to reach out to the thousands and thousands of teachers that make up our educational landscape. This is when I started to explore the idea of using mobile technologies for this purpose. Mobile technologies have become almost ubiquitous, so why not use them to transform educational delivery?

Upon starting my PhD at Aga Khan University, Institute for Educational



Development (AKU-IED), I collaborated with a US-based software company to design a cloud-based mobile delivery system and implemented it among 328 randomly selected primary school teachers at public and private schools in the Sindh province of Pakistan.

As a next step, to deepen my research around ICT-related teacher development and develop an even stronger foundation for my data-related work, I arrived at UCL's Institute of Education in March 2022. At this stage, I had just finished collecting data from the field and was ready to start processing it and writing up my PhD.

Widening my research base

Since arriving at UCL, I have had the opportunity to access high-quality, research-based education, cutting-edge facilities, a vibrant social life, and a global community of researchers and thinkers. UCL is known as London's 'Global University', which means that I have been able to integrate global perspectives into my research that span across the developed and developing world. These perspectives have allowed me to deepen the theoretical understanding and concepts that underpin my PhD research, as well as the recommendations that will come out of it. I feel like I have become a different person with an expanded worldview, enhanced scholarly development, and nurtured leadership qualities.

I have also had the privilege of joining UCL's Knowledge Lab which brings together academics from the fields of mathematics, technology, psychology, design and more, to employ a multidisciplinary lens to solve societal

challenges using media and technology. Working with this diverse group of minds has helped me to unpack and further develop my research base, as well as grow more familiar with the most up to date technological interventions out there, such as artificial intelligence mediated professional development. The connections and knowledge base I have developed here will be vital in ensuring that the interventions I implement remain up to date within our changing world.

Building bridges

The linkages that exist between my home university in Pakistan and UCL are what brought me here to the UK. However, since being here, these connections have stretched and expanded.

The Scholarship has helped me to build bridges with other universities in Pakistan, who have since invited me to contribute to their journals as a reviewer, thanks in large part to the international reputation that UCL holds. This has enabled me to expand my network within the education domain in Pakistan, which I believe will be important when implementing my research. These universities also often ask me about the Commonwealth Split-site Scholarship programme and have since promoted it among their students, thereby laying the groundwork for future collaborations between more universities in Pakistan and the UK.

At the supervisor level, linkages between my home and host university did not exist before my Scholarship, but now all five of my current supervisors in Karachi and London are pulling me in the same direction and collectively helping me to successfully complete my PhD.

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Delivering impact

The contacts I have now built up across UCL and at other UK and Pakistani universities mean that I have more knowledge sources to draw upon once I take my research forward and start implementing it.

My plan is to exit the NGO world and enter government as an advisor on the policy and strategy of Pakistan’s digital innovations in the field of education. I believe that this is where I will be able to make an impact at scale and that the local and global perspectives I have now gained will be key to helping the government make informed policy decisions.

I am of course aware that lots of (technology-mediated) professional development programmes fail. I am also aware that one of the key factors affecting the impact of these technologies and programmes is the design of the interventions. It may be that there is money behind a certain intervention but without the right theoretical principles and research behind it, these technologies are unlikely to create an impact. This means we must be very vigilant while designing the intervention so that the solution is contextually relevant, demand-driven, need-based, collaborative and available anytime, anywhere. This is why I have chosen to focus my PhD research on creating a solution that is underpinned by an expansive knowledge base.

If successful, my research and the resulting mobile learning intervention could be applied far beyond Pakistan’s teachers and beyond the country’s borders itself. This is especially relevant in a post-COVID world, alongside the other challenges which require students to learn online – from Pakistan’s floods to global conflicts. Developing effective ways for teachers and students to continue to learn using technology-driven environments and modalities will be essential to achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4: Quality Education.

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