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An Evaluation of a 2017 Summer Institute on Social Justice in Ahmedabad, India

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Abstract

Short-term training programs have emerged as a common strategy for building research capacity among early-career scholars in low- and middle-income countries. This study evaluates a 2017 Summer Institute on Social Justice held in Ahmedabad, India, designed to enhance participants' methodological skills and theoretical engagement with social justice. Thirty-nine participants completed a mixed-methods survey. This analysis focuses on qualitative responses using a thematic-phenomenological approach. Findings revealed a predominantly positive reception, with participants emphasizing gains in research skills, confidence, and professional networking. The institute was also perceived as fostering collaborative learning and contributing to the early formation of scholarly identity. However, participants identified several areas for improvement, including variability in teaching effectiveness, the need for stronger thematic integration, and a preference for more applied, skills-based instruction. Logistical concerns were also noted. Overall, the institute appears to be an effective model for capacity building, though refinements in pedagogical coherence and delivery may enhance its impact in future iterations.

Keywords: Research Capacity Development, Communities of Practice, Qualitative Evaluation, Health Workforce Development, India

1. Introduction

The global demand for rigorous, equity-oriented social science research has grown considerably in recent decades, driven in part by the recognition that sustainable development and effective policy-making require robust empirical foundations and a strong cadre of locally trained scholars. (Naal et al., 2020) In low- and middle-income countries, intensive, short-term programs designed to equip emerging scholars with the skills necessary for independent scholarly work have emerged as a popular and promising educational venture. (Ojifinni et al., 2024)

In the summer of 2017, scholars from the University of Ottawa and the University of Saskatchewan offered an 11-day institute in Ahmedabad, India, to graduate and post-graduate scholars across multiple domains. The focus of the institute was social justice, both its theoretical frameworks and the research methodologies that scholars could

apply within this subject area. Specific topics included geographic information systems, methods for measuring poverty, survey design, quantitative analysis, theories of social justice, social network analysis, mixed methods, systematic literature reviews, writing workshops, interview techniques, and discussion of multiple case studies. The breadth of this curriculum reflected an intentional effort to expose participants not only to technical skills but to the conceptual and ethical dimensions of socially engaged research.

The intent of the institute was to improve the capacity of the new generation of India's professional social science scholars to produce independent, high-quality scholarly work. Evaluating such programs is methodologically challenging: outcome measures that rely solely on post-program knowledge assessments may miss important dimensions of participant experience, including perceived relevance and motivational impact. Qualitative approaches, by contrast, can surface nuanced participant perspectives and reveal unanticipated program effects that quantitative measures may obscure. This study presents a qualitative analysis of participants' impressions of the institute, with the dual aim of assessing the program's perceived value and providing actionable evidence to guide future iterations of similar capacity-building initiatives.

2. Method

The 39 participants in the workshop completed a 19-question survey: six open-ended, eight multiple-choice, four short-answer, and one Likert-type scale. Questions concerned participant demographics, initial and concluding skills and capacities, and perceived relevance of workshops' content. Responses were analyzed using a mixed methods approach. Textual survey responses were analyzed using thematic phenomenological analysis, while quantitative survey data were analyzed using descriptive and bivariate analyses in SPSS version 20. Only the qualitative results are reported in this paper.

3. Results

Analysis of participant comments from open-ended improvement questions and testimonial responses revealed seven major themes.

3.1 Overall positive experience and perceived value

Participants overwhelmingly described the summer institute as a valuable and impactful experience, particularly for those attending their first formal research training program. Testimonials frequently emphasized the program as "very good," "productive," and "an amazing experience," suggesting strong overall satisfaction.

Participants also highlighted the institute as a formative academic experience, with several noting its importance in shaping their research trajectories and professional development.

3.2 Skill development and research capacity gains

A dominant theme was the institute's role in enhancing research-related competencies. Participants reported gains in academic writing and publishing, exposure to research methodologies (e.g., systematic reviews, GIS, social network analysis), and quantitative and analytical skills. Many comments framed the program as an opportunity to "explore abilities" and develop confidence in conducting research. This aligns strongly with the intended goal of capacity building, particularly among early-career scholars.

3.3 Networking and collaborative learning environment

Participants frequently emphasized the value of peer interaction and networking opportunities. The institute was described as useful in fostering connections with "fellow researchers and young faculties" and in providing a supportive and approachable learning environment. This suggests that, beyond formal instruction, the program contributed to community-building and professional identity formation, key outcomes of successful capacity-building initiatives.

3.4 Importance of teaching quality and relational engagement

A recurring critical theme concerned variation in teaching effectiveness. While some instructors were praised for being engaging and approachable, others were perceived as less effective in connecting with participants. Participants emphasized that effective learning depended on strong instructor-participant relationships and that teaching needed to be contextually grounded, particularly in the Indian social justice context. This reflects a broader insight that delivery style and relational pedagogy are as important as content in short-term intensive training programs.

3.5. Need for clearer thematic focus and conceptual coherence

Several participants expressed difficulty grasping the central theme of social justice, noting that the “gist of the theme” was sometimes unclear and that the sessions lacked sufficient integration or an explicit rationale. This suggests a need for stronger conceptual scaffolding and a clearer articulation of how individual sessions connect to overarching program goals. The issue appears to be not content insufficiency but integration and framing.

3.6. Demand for more structured and applied training

Participants expressed a desire for more training-oriented and practical sessions and a greater emphasis on applied research skills. This aligns with comments requesting more “training-based lectures” and indicates a preference for hands-on, skills-focused pedagogy over purely conceptual instruction.

3.7 Logistical and environmental considerations

A smaller but notable theme concerned logistical issues, including accommodation conditions (e.g., cleanliness concerns) and general physical infrastructure. While not central to learning outcomes, these factors were perceived as affecting the overall participant experience.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the summer institute was broadly successful in achieving its primary aim of enhancing research capacity and fostering engagement with social justice concepts. Participants particularly valued the opportunity to develop skills and network. However, the program's effectiveness was moderated by variability in instructional delivery, the need for clearer thematic integration, and a preference for more applied, skills-based learning. Addressing these areas may enhance the impact and coherence of future iterations of the institute.

4. Discussion

The findings from this qualitative analysis illuminate both the promise and the limitations of short-term intensive research training institutes as a model for capacity building among early-career social science scholars. The themes identified suggest that the institute succeeded in its core objective of introducing scholars to a broad range of research methods and theoretical frameworks, while also revealing important areas for pedagogical refinement.

The strong positive reception reported by participants (in particular the emphasis on skill development and professional network formation) is consistent with findings from evaluations of comparable short-term training programs in global health and development research contexts. (Gao et al., 2020) Such programs appear to offer particular value to scholars who have had limited prior access to formal methodological instruction and for whom concentrated exposure to diverse tools and frameworks constitutes a genuinely transformative academic experience. The frequency with which participants cited networking and peer learning as outcomes of the institute aligns with a growing body of literature emphasizing the role of communities of practice as informal, ongoing networks that facilitate knowledge sharing, collaboration, and sustained professional development. (James-McAlpine et al., 2023; Silverstein et al., 2022; Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015)

However, the critical themes emerging from participant responses warrant attention. The breadth of content that makes such institutes attractive to a diverse cohort of scholars can simultaneously undermine the thematic

integration that gives that content meaning. For future iterations of this institute, dedicating time at the outset and close of each session to connecting the day's content to the overarching social justice framework may substantially improve participants' sense of coherence.

Participants clearly distinguished between instructors who were perceived as contextually sensitive and relationally engaged and those who were not, suggesting that disciplinary expertise alone is an insufficient qualification for teaching in cross-cultural, applied settings

Participants' preference for applied, skills-based learning over purely conceptual instruction reflects a pragmatic orientation that is common among early-career researchers who are simultaneously navigating thesis completion, academic job markets, and publication pressures. Practical workshops, structured peer feedback sessions, and case studies drawn from the Indian social science context could effectively serve this purpose.

This study has several limitations. The data are drawn from a single cohort at a single institute, limiting the generalizability of the findings. The exclusive reliance on participant self-report introduces the possibility of social desirability bias, and the absence of longitudinal follow-up prevents assessing whether the skills and networks participants described have translated into sustained changes in scholarly productivity or research practice.

4. Conclusion

This study evaluated participants' experiences with a short-term, intensive research capacity-building institute offered to graduate and postgraduate scholars in Ahmedabad, India. Qualitative analysis of participant survey responses identified seven major themes, reflecting a predominantly positive reception, along with specific and actionable areas for improvement.

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