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# Reflections on Short CPD Training and Long-Term Mentoring Communities of Practice for Public Managers

**Shailen Popat DPhil (Oxon)**, Department of Public Administration and Policy,  
University of Birmingham

Contact: [s.popat@bham.ac.uk](mailto:s.popat@bham.ac.uk)

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## **Abstract**

This reflective essay explores the comparative benefits of short-term Continuing Professional Development (CPD) training and long-term mentoring Communities of Practice (CoPs) for city managers, drawing on two interlinked initiatives between the University of Birmingham and the Ghana Institute of Management and Public Administration (GIMPA). The first initiative involved a three-day CPD workshop in Accra, designed to co-develop a training framework for local government officers. The second was a transnational CoP hosted in Birmingham, which brought together Ghanaian city managers and academics for a week of collaborative learning and institutional exchange. Through these experiences, the essay examines how CPD offers structured, time-efficient learning while CoPs provide sustained, relational, and context-sensitive development. The essay argues that these approaches are not mutually exclusive but can be integrated into a hybrid model that leverages the strengths of both. CPD can serve as an entry point for skill acquisition and mindset shift, while CoPs can deepen learning, foster innovation, and inform future CPD design. The hybrid model is positioned as a dynamic and cyclical learning ecosystem that supports adaptive leadership and institutional transformation. The essay concludes by advocating for universities to play a central role in convening and sustaining such models, particularly in the context of global public sector reform. This reflection contributes to the discourse on professional education by demonstrating how academic institutions can bridge theory and practice through collaborative, international partnerships.

## **Introduction**

As a researcher and practitioner engaged in the professional development of public managers, I have had the opportunity to participate in and help shape two distinct but complementary initiatives aimed at strengthening city management in Ghana. These experiences have deepened my understanding of the comparative value of short-term Continuing Professional Development (CPD) training and long-term mentoring Communities of Practice (CoPs) as mechanisms for building public sector capacity. The first initiative took place in March 2024, when I travelled to the Ghana Institute of Management and Public Administration (GIMPA) to deliver a three-day CPD workshop funded by the University of Birmingham. This workshop brought together over forty senior officers from local government institutions across the Greater Accra Region. Through a series of participatory sessions, we explored themes such as cultural intelligence, organisational culture, and change management. The workshop was designed not only to deliver technical content but also to co-develop a CPD framework that would be contextually relevant and practically useful for Ghanaian public managers.

The second initiative occurred a year later, in March 2025, when a delegation of fourteen Ghanaian city managers, directors, and academics visited the University of Birmingham's Edgbaston campus. This visit marked the formal launch of a transnational Community of Practice, supported by the UK's International Science Partnerships Fund. Over the course of a week, participants engaged in strategic dialogues, institutional visits, and collaborative workshops focused on decentralisation, participatory governance, and urban resilience. The aim was to foster mutual learning, co-produce training materials, and build enduring institutional partnerships between Ghanaian and UK stakeholders (Popat, 2025). In this essay, I reflect on these two initiatives to examine the comparative benefits of CPD and CoPs for city managers. Drawing on both empirical insights and academic literature, I argue that while CPD offers efficiency and targeted skill acquisition, CoPs provide depth, sustainability, and the opportunity for collaborative innovation. I conclude by advocating for a hybrid model that integrates the strengths of both approaches to support adaptive leadership and institutional transformation in public administration.

## **Theoretical Foundations of CPD and CoPs**

Continuing Professional Development (CPD) is a widely adopted framework for ensuring that professionals maintain and enhance their skills throughout their careers. In the public sector, CPD is often used to address competency gaps, introduce new policy frameworks, or support reform agendas (Boud and Hager, 2012). It is typically structured, time-bound, and often mandated by professional bodies or regulatory frameworks. CPD is grounded in adult learning theory, particularly Knowles' (1980) concept of andragogy, which emphasises self-directed learning, relevance to practice, and problem-solving orientation. However, CPD has also been critiqued for its limitations. Fraser et al. (2007) argue that CPD often adopts a transmission model of learning, where knowledge is delivered by experts to passive recipients. This approach can be effective for technical skills but is less suited to the complex, adaptive challenges faced by city managers. Moreover, CPD is frequently evaluated based on attendance or satisfaction rather than long-term impact on practice or organisational change (Kennedy, 2014).

In contrast, Communities of Practice (CoPs) offer a more relational and situated model of learning. Originating in the work of Lave and Wenger (1991), CoPs are defined as groups of practitioners who engage in collective learning through shared practice. Wenger (1998) later elaborated this concept, identifying three core dimensions: mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire. CoPs are not merely social networks; they are purposeful communities that generate, refine, and apply knowledge in context. The theoretical appeal of CoPs lies in their alignment with constructivist and social learning theories. Learning is seen not as the acquisition of abstract knowledge but as participation in a community of meaning-making (Vygotsky, 1978). In the public sector, CoPs have been used to support policy learning, foster innovation, and build cross-sectoral collaboration (Smith, 2020; Bate and Robert, 2002). They are particularly valuable in addressing “wicked problems” that require adaptive, iterative, and context-sensitive responses (Rittel and Webber, 1973; Ansell and Gash, 2007). Moreover, CoPs align with the principles of collaborative governance, which emphasise shared decision-making, trust-building, and joint problem-solving among diverse stakeholders (Emerson et al., 2012). In this sense, CoPs are not only learning mechanisms but also governance tools that can enhance institutional resilience and responsiveness.

### **Reflections on the GIMPA CPD Workshop**

The GIMPA CPD workshop was designed to be participatory and reflective, drawing on experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984). Participants engaged in syndicate exercises to analyse their own organisations through the lenses of power, roles, rituals, and cultural intelligence. These exercises revealed the often-unspoken dynamics that shape public service delivery in Ghana, including hierarchical decision-making, informal power structures, and resistance to change. One of the most valuable aspects of the workshop was its emphasis on mindset shift. Rather than simply imparting technical skills, the training encouraged participants to reflect on their own assumptions and behaviours. For example, discussions around cultural intelligence (C-Q) helped participants recognise the importance of empathy, adaptability, and self-awareness in leadership. This aligns with recent scholarship that highlights the role of emotional and cultural competencies in effective public management (Grant, 2007). However, the workshop also revealed the limitations of short-term CPD. While participants were enthusiastic and engaged, several expressed concern about the lack of follow-up mechanisms. Without ongoing support, there was a risk that the insights gained during the workshop would not translate into sustained behavioural change. This echoes findings from the literature that CPD, when delivered in isolation, often fails to produce long-term impact (Kennedy, 2014).

### **Reflections on the Ghana CoP Visit to Birmingham**

The Community of Practice initiative, by contrast, was designed to foster sustained engagement and mutual learning. The week-long visit to the University of Birmingham included plenary sessions, thematic workshops, and site visits to institutions such as the West Midlands Combined Authority and the Lord Mayor's Office. These engagements provided participants with a comparative perspective on governance structures, civic leadership, and inter-agency coordination. What distinguished the CoP from the CPD workshop was its emphasis on co-production. Rather than being passive recipients of knowledge, participants were actively involved in designing training materials, sharing case studies, and identifying research priorities. This collaborative approach not only enhanced the relevance of the outputs but also built a sense of ownership and trust among participants (Gaventa and Barrett, 2012). The CoP also had tangible institutional outcomes. It led to the formalisation of partnerships between GIMPA, the Office of the Head of Local Government Service, and the University of Birmingham. Plans were made for joint research projects, staff

exchanges, and future funding applications. These developments illustrate the potential of CoPs to act as incubators for policy innovation and institutional transformation (Nutley et al., 2007).

### **The Case for a Hybrid Model**

While CPD offers efficiency and accessibility, it is often limited in depth and sustainability. CoPs, on the other hand, require more time and resources but offer richer, more transformative learning experiences. The two approaches are not mutually exclusive; rather, they can be integrated to create a more holistic professional development ecosystem.

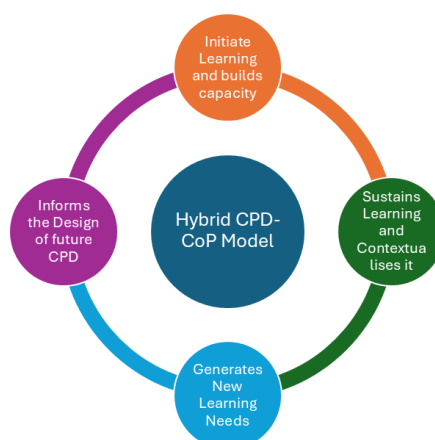
Feature	CPD Workshop	Community of Practice
Duration	3 days	Ongoing
Focus	Skills and mindset	Collaborative learning and policy co-design
Learning Mode	Facilitated training	Peer-to-peer engagement
Outcomes	CPD framework, cultural awareness	Institutional partnerships, co-produced materials
Sustainability	Limited without follow-up	High with continued engagement

*Table 1: The comparative strengths and limitations of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) and Communities of Practice (CoPs)*

The comparative strengths and limitations of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) and Communities of Practice (CoPs) suggest that neither approach alone is sufficient to meet the complex and evolving learning needs of city managers. Rather than viewing them as discrete or competing strategies, I propose a hybrid model in which CPD and CoPs are mutually reinforcing components of a dynamic professional learning ecosystem. This model is not only theoretically grounded but also practically validated by the two Ghanaian initiatives I have been involved in. In this model, CPD serves as a structured entry point into professional development. It introduces foundational concepts, frameworks, and skills in a time-efficient and accessible format. For instance, the GIMPA CPD workshop provided participants with analytical tools to examine organisational culture, power dynamics, and the role of cultural intelligence

in public service delivery. These sessions were instrumental in surfacing latent institutional challenges and building a shared vocabulary among participants. CPD's structured nature makes it particularly effective for addressing immediate training needs, standardising competencies, and aligning practices across diverse jurisdictions (Kennedy, 2014).

However, as the workshop participants themselves noted, the impact of CPD is often limited without mechanisms for follow-up and contextual adaptation. This is where CoPs become essential. The Ghana City Managers CoP, launched a year later, provided a sustained and relational space for participants to revisit and deepen the insights gained during the CPD workshop. Through collaborative workshops, site visits, and strategic dialogues, participants were able to reflect on their experiences, share challenges, and co-develop solutions. The CoP thus functioned not only as a continuation of the learning journey but also as a platform for identifying new learning needs. Crucially, the CoP helped determine the direction of future CPD. For example, discussions around digital governance, urban resilience, and inter-agency coordination revealed specific technical gaps that could be addressed through targeted CPD modules. Thus, the relationship between CPD and CoPs becomes cyclical and generative with CPD initiating learning and building capacity followed by a CoP that sustains that learning, contextualises it, and generates new learning needs. These needs then inform the design of future CPD. This feedback loop aligns with the principles of learning organisations (Senge, 1990) and adaptive governance (Emerson et al., 2012).



*Figure 1: The Cyclical Generative Process of a Hybrid CPD-CoP Approach*

This hybrid model also reflects broader shifts in public sector professionalism. Noordegraaf (2015) argues for a move from “pure” professionalism - based on technical expertise and autonomy - toward “hybrid” professionalism, which integrates managerial, collaborative, and contextual competencies. In this view, professionals must navigate ambiguous environments through both formal training and informal learning networks. The integration of CPD and CoPs supports this hybridity by combining structured skill development with relational and reflective practice. Moreover, this model addresses the limitations of each approach. CPD’s tendency toward abstraction and standardisation is balanced by the CoP’s emphasis on contextualisation and co-production. Conversely, the informal and sometimes diffuse nature of CoPs is anchored by the structure and accountability of CPD. Together, they offer a more holistic, sustainable, and responsive approach to professional development.

This model also has important implications for institutional design and policy. Rather than treating CPD and CoPs as separate or sequential initiatives, they should be integrated into a coherent strategy. For example, CPD modules could be co-designed by CoP members to ensure relevance and ownership. Participation in CoPs could be formally recognised as part of CPD requirements. Evaluation frameworks should capture both the immediate outcomes of CPD and the longer-term impacts of CoPs on practice, policy, and institutional culture.

In the Ghanaian context, where local government reform is ongoing and capacity gaps are unevenly distributed, this hybrid model is particularly relevant. CPD can help build baseline competencies and introduce reform agendas, while CoPs can support the deeper cultural and systemic changes required for sustainable transformation. The two initiatives I participated in - one focused on structured training, the other on collaborative learning - demonstrate the feasibility and value of this integrated approach.

## **Conclusions**

Reflecting on these two initiatives has reinforced my belief that universities must play a more strategic and sustained role in shaping the future of professional education. The CPD workshop in Accra and the Community of Practice in Birmingham were not isolated events; they were part of a broader learning journey that exemplifies how academic institutions can act as conveners, facilitators, and co-creators of public



sector innovation. In the context of university professional education, the hybrid model I propose is not just a pedagogical preference but a necessity. CPD alone, while efficient and scalable, often lacks the depth and contextual sensitivity required for meaningful change. CoPs, on the other hand, offer the reflective space and relational infrastructure needed to embed learning into practice. When combined, these approaches create a feedback loop: CPD introduces new ideas and skills, while CoPs provide the environment to test, adapt, and refine them. This cyclical relationship ensures that professional development is not only continuous but also responsive to real-world challenges.

Universities are well-positioned to support this model. They possess the research capacity to generate evidence-based content, the credibility to convene diverse stakeholders, and the infrastructure to sustain long-term engagement. However, this requires a shift in how universities conceptualise their role in professional education. Rather than delivering knowledge from a distance, they must embed themselves within the ecosystems they seek to influence. This means co-designing curricula with practitioners, facilitating peer learning across borders, and evaluating impact not just in terms of knowledge acquisition but in terms of institutional transformation. The Ghana initiatives demonstrate what is possible when universities embrace this role. The CPD workshop catalysed a shift in mindset among participants, while the CoP fostered enduring partnerships and co-produced tools for governance reform. Together, they created a professional learning ecosystem that is both grounded in local realities and enriched by global perspectives. As we face increasingly complex governance challenges, such as climate change, urbanisation, digital transformation etc., the need for adaptive, collaborative, and context-sensitive leadership has never been greater. Universities must rise to this challenge by reimagining professional education as a shared, iterative, and relational endeavour. The hybrid model of CPD and CoPs offers a compelling blueprint for this transformation.

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