

Building University Frontline Capacity: A Virtual IaH Initiative to Enhance Professional Staff's Email Skills for International Engagement in a Global South context

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Article information	Abstract
Article history: Received: 14 Oct 2024 Last revised: 29 Apr 2026 Accepted: 30 Apr 2026 Available online: 30 Apr 2026	<i>The rapid internationalization of higher education underscores the need for an empowered workforce capable of meeting its emerging demands. Yet, professional development initiatives in most universities often overlook the vital role of professional staff who form the critical human infrastructure of global engagement. To address this gap, this case study examines an 8-week online English training, framed as a Virtual Internationalization at Home (IaH) initiative for a cohort of professional staff at a public university in the Philippines. Taught by a US-based instructor through blended online modalities, the training focused on enhancing the staff's email communication skills and providing them with low stake international exposure. Data from post-program survey revealed participants' high satisfaction on all key dimensions of the program, including content relevance, instruction, accessibility, engagement, and learning outcomes. They also expressed strong acceptance of the international instructor and reported feeling comfortable expressing themselves and seeking clarification in class. Consistent with these positive perceptions, pre- and post-test analyses showed statistically significant self-reported learning gains. These findings suggest that this Virtual IaH model may serve as an equitable and effective mechanism for developing global competencies among professional staff, particularly when travel or physical mobility is constrained due to limited institutional resources and travel funding. However, these promising outcomes should be interpreted in light of the study's limitations, including its reliance on self-reported data, single-institution scope, and participant attrition, underscoring the need for stronger institutional support structures.</i>
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INTRODUCTION

Universities around the world have increasingly transcended their national boundaries in recent years, driven by the rapid internationalization of higher education (Qiang, 2003; Subbarayalu, 2025). This trend is particularly evident in the Asia-Pacific region, where institutions have actively embraced globalization, positioning themselves as dynamic players in the global academic landscape traditionally held by universities in North American and European contexts (Ho et al., 2023; Suntharalingam, 2026; Williams et al., 2021). The forces propelling this drive for internationalization are multifaceted, including strategic goals such as attracting a diverse international student body and globalizing the academic staff, alongside the need for specialized and collaborative research activities, economic incentives, technological advancements, and the rising involvement of the private sector (Qiang, 2003; Subrahmanyam & Kaspard, 2026). More recently, the pursuit of a competitive position in global university rankings has emerged as a key driver of internationalization, as a higher rank is instrumental in attracting both top-tier students and academic talent, while also securing crucial financial support from government and private sources (Hallinger, 2014; Shin & Toutkoushian, 2011).

Although academic and research staff are often viewed as the primary drivers of internationalization in higher education, professional staff, defined in this paper as university employees in administrative, managerial, and technical roles who do not primarily teach or conduct research, play an equally critical role in ensuring smooth university operations (Brandenburg, 2016; Veles et al., 2023). They serve as the backbone for various administrative, logistical, and technical functions, which are critical for sustaining day-to-day campus activities. As universities continue to expand their international reach, professional staff become even more essential, facilitating key processes such as international collaborations, student exchanges, and academic programs, and often acting as initial points of contact (Hunter, 2018). Despite these roles, professional staff frequently receive less priority in terms of professional development compared to their academic counterparts, which may limit their ability to fully contribute to the institution's internationalization goals (Brandenburg, 2016; Hunter, 2018; Jiang, 2010).

One area where professional staff are indispensable in the university's internationalization ecosystem is in managing external communication, particularly through email correspondence. As the first point of contact for stakeholders, their ability to communicate strategically, especially in virtual text-based multicultural settings, is vital for building trust and strengthening the institution's reputation (Brandenburg, 2016). As digital communication continues to dominate international operations, proficiency in email and other online communication platforms has become indispensable for effectively engaging with global partners and stakeholders of internationalization (Conrad & Donaldson, 2011).

Traditional on-site training, however, incurs mobility costs, either for the trainee or the trainer, and is often a less priority by resource-constrained institutions, especially since some professional staff cannot easily be spared from their workstations (Brandenburg, 2016). However, the rise of distance learning and the growing acceptance of online education modalities since the COVID-19 pandemic may offer cost-effective alternatives for the training needs of university professional staff. These methods enable professional staff to enhance their skills without

requiring significant budget allocations or time away from their regular duties, creating a win-win situation for both the university management and the professional staff.

This study examines a formal virtual training program in a Philippine university developed through a strategic partnership between a university's international office and the Regional English Language Office (RELO) of the U.S. Embassy Manila. Marketed as "Mastering Email Excellence: Crafting, Navigating and Conquering Digital Communication for Improved Client Relations," the program was run by the academic writing center affiliated with the international office and funded by the RELO through the provision of a virtual English educator. Conceived as a strategic effort to equip a cohort of professional staff, specifically those managing primary office email accounts, with the essential skills needed for email correspondence as they engaged with international client and partners. With a formal approval and endorsement from the university's top management, this initiative provides a concrete case study of an institution actively building the human resource capacity of historically excluded group of staff necessary to advance its internationalization goals.

Conceptually guided by the Virtual IaH framework, which focuses on integrating international and intercultural dimensions into domestic learning environments (Beelen & Jones, 2015), this study applies this lens to professional staff development. We argue that Virtual IaH may provide an equitable mechanism for delivering capacity-building programs that align with the university's internationalization goals. A key feature of this approach in this study is the use of a virtual international instructor, which we posit serves as a direct, low-stakes form of intercultural exposure for the professional staff. Thus, this research aims to explore the perceived impact of a virtual professional development program, delivered through blended asynchronous (via Google Classroom) and synchronous (via Zoom) modalities, on the email communication skills of professional staff. It also examines the participants' experiences with their virtual international instructor and investigates how this virtual training model could serve as a blueprint for building human capacity as part of the university's broader internationalization strategy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

University professional staff

In higher education institutions, three main working groups are essential for fulfilling the university mandates: academic staff, research personnel, and professional staff (Holmes, 2020). In this study, "professional staff" refers to employees in administrative, managerial, and technical roles who do not primarily engage in teaching or research, a term adopted for its inclusivity and alignment with contemporary higher education literature (e.g., Sebalj et al., 2012). Historically, professional staff have often been labeled 'non-teaching staff,' a term criticized by labor movements for inadequately reflecting their roles, qualifications, and contributions to overall university operations (Caldwell, 2024; Graham, 2012; Sebalj et al., 2012). As a result, the term 'professional staff' has gained traction, particularly in countries like Australia and the UK, leading to its growing adoption as a more inclusive alternative (Sebalj et al., 2012). This shift not only recognizes the essential contributions of professional staff but

also elevates their status within the institution, highlighting that their roles extend far beyond administrative tasks (de Jong & del Junco, 2024; Veles et al., 2023). By adopting a more inclusive identity, the term fosters a sense of belonging among professional staff, enhancing both morale and job satisfaction, while also reflecting the growing specialization and professionalization of their roles (Sebalj et al., 2012). Although they do not engage directly in teaching or research services, professional staff are critical to university operations, contributing significantly to management, finance, human resources, quality assurance, and learning support (Gordon & Whitchurch, 2007; Graham, 2010; Graham, 2012; Veles et al., 2023). As universities face the demands of a knowledge-based economy and concomitant challenges of university internationalization, the role of professional staff has become increasingly critical (Antiado et al., 2020; Brandenburg, 2016).

University professional staff and campus internationalization

In the context of internationalization, professional staff play a crucial role in both domestic and global initiatives (Brandenburg, 2016; Golubeva, 2019; Paduretu & Capraru, 2023). They are often the first point of contact for international students and partners (Brandenburg, 2016), directly manage exchange programs, and implement services that enhance the international student experience. Despite this crucial role, their contribution has often been overlooked in the conceptualization of internationalization. As Hunter (2018) notes, definitions of internationalization have historically “typically excluded—or made only scant reference to—the administrative function” (p. 1), rendering professional staff “invisible actors” in the broader internationalization narrative.

This conceptual exclusion exists in tension with their practical reality. As international activities increase, various administrative units must navigate diverse procedures and user requests that do not always filter through the international office (Brandenburg et al., 2017). Key skills essential for success in these frontline roles include communication and intercultural competence (Brandenburg et al., 2017), which are crucial for building trust and fostering meaningful international collaborations. Therefore, by combining indispensable administrative expertise with these communication skills, professional staff are, in practice, pivotal to ensuring the success of internationalization initiatives within universities, even if this role has been historically undervalued in strategic discourse.

Professional development needs of professional staff for international communication

Training in English for international communication has been identified as a critical priority for professional staff development, particularly in regions where English is less frequently used in daily interactions or where the domestic staff have limited English proficiency (Brandenburg et al., 2017; Clark & Ackerley, 2019; Nuswantara et al., 2021). However, the training opportunities for professional staff to enhance these vital communication skills in formal university-sponsored contexts remain limited (Clark & Ackerley, 2019; Golubeva, 2019). In addition, professional staff often face challenges in participating in training due to time constraints, existing responsibilities, or a lack of clarity on how these skills directly benefit their roles (Brandenburg, 2016; Jiang, 2010). Critically, even when training is available, its scope could be too narrow.

As Hunter (2018) argues, training for professional staff on internationalization is often “understood as participation in English language courses,” which, while a key skill, is insufficient on its own; staff also need to be “able to communicate in a multicultural environment” (p. 17). This highlights that effective professional development must extend beyond linguistic knowledge to encompass the practical application of skills in specific, high-stakes professional contexts.

While face-to-face training is often preferred for professional development (Brandenburg et al., 2017), the shift to alternative work modalities during the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the huge potential of distance and virtual education as a promising and equitable solution. A notable example is the MOOC English for Non-Academic Staffs [sic] university piloted by an Indonesian university when its staff were required to work offsite during the lockdown period (Nuswantara et al., 2021). The program was specifically designed to enhance workplace English proficiency, focusing on reading comprehension, vocabulary building, and technical writing for emails and social media. It successfully enrolled 110 staff members from diverse administrative units, with a completion rate of 100%, underscoring its appeal and the participants’ commitment. The program’s design was found to align well with the staff’s educational backgrounds and workplace needs.

However, a potential limitation of the MOOC approach was its primarily asynchronous and non-interactive nature. While effective for transmitting knowledge and building foundational skills, its format appeared to offer fewer opportunities for spontaneous, real-time communication practice or personalized feedback, which can be considered critical for developing the nuanced intercultural competencies required for professional email correspondence with global partners or other external stakeholders.

In a similar context, a Malaysian university implemented a MOOC-based program to improve the English skills of its professional staff during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic (Rafiq et al., 2019). The program focused on communicative English for daily administrative tasks, with modules covering greetings, phone conversations, making requests, offering help, giving suggestions, handling complaints, email and letter writing, and delivering presentations. The course was designed for 30 participants and delivered via a mobile learning platform to enhance accessibility. A post-course survey revealed a generally positive attitude among participants, who reported that the flexibility of the MOOC format allowed them to effectively balance their work responsibilities with skill development.

Similar to the initiative in the Indonesian university program, the one in Malaysian university demonstrated the scalability and flexibility of MOOCs. Yet, it could be argued that it shared a similar constraint: the lack of synchronous, relational engagement with an international expert or peers. This absence might have limited opportunities for professional staff to practice navigating the immediate and sometimes ambiguous interactions characteristic of international professional communication, particularly within a text-based medium like email.

The positive reception of these online professional development programs in Asian university contexts is echoed in European university contexts. For instance, Beaven and Davies (2021) reported positive outcomes from a 4-week online training for administrative and teaching staff on implementing virtual exchange projects, highlighting the modality’s effectiveness across

different cultural and institutional settings. Beaven and Davies' (2021) study importantly incorporated interactive elements; however, it focused on training staff to facilitate virtual exchanges for students. This contrasts with the present study's aim of directly enhancing staff's own professional communication competencies, such as the critical skill of email correspondence.

A key structural advantage illuminated by these examples is the ability of online learning to facilitate a virtual IaH model for the professional staff. This non-face-to-face approach could potentially allow institutions to engage international resource persons directly, tapping into global expertise without the logistical costs of in-person training (Bruhn-Zass, 2022; Woicolesco et al., 2022). It could create opportunities to enhance staff intercultural competence through interactions with international counterparts, leveraging the online space for cultural exchange and professional growth (Beaven & Davies, 2021). For university professional staff, who often have fewer professional development opportunities and face time or travel constraints (Brandenburg, 2016; Jiang, 2010), this model represents a potentially promising shift towards a more sustainable, flexible, and equitable approach to skill enhancement.

While prior studies establish the viability of online professional development, they predominantly utilize MOOC formats, which often lack not only real-time interaction but also sustained opportunities for direct consultation and engagement with an instructor. The literature thus reveals a gap in existing virtual models for professional staff: a lack of programs designed to develop the specific communication skills required for globalized university operations through sustained, low-stakes intercultural engagement, rather than mere knowledge transmission. This study therefore explores a virtual IaH model designed to address these limitations through a blended synchronous-asynchronous format, using Zoom and Google Classroom to facilitate sustained relational engagement with an international instructor and provide a space for real-time practice and personalized feedback.

Conceptual framework

This study is grounded in a conceptual framework that adapts and operationalizes Virtual IaH for the professional development of university staff. Traditionally, IaH has been defined as "the purposeful integration of international and intercultural dimensions into the formal and informal curriculum for all students within domestic learning environments" (Beelen & Jones, 2015, p. 69). Virtual IaH extends this concept by leveraging digital technology to create international and intercultural learning experiences through online collaboration (Bruhn-Zass, 2022; Woicolesco et al., 2022), underpinned by principles of purposeful integration, equity, and meaningful intercultural interaction (Finardi & Aşık, 2024).

This study demonstrates that these principles can be effectively recalibrated to include professional staff, who form the essential human infrastructure of internationalization but are historically excluded from such initiatives. To address this gap, the study employs a task-centered Virtual IaH model, moving beyond broad cultural exposure to focus on the direct application of intercultural skills to core job functions. This framework is built upon two interconnected components, which were designed to translate theoretical IaH principles into tangible staff capacity:

Component 1: Task-Specific Integration. This component enacts the IaH principle of purposeful integration by embedding intercultural and international dimensions directly into a high-frequency, high-stakes task: professional email communication with global partners. This approach transforms a routine administrative duty into a site for deliberate global practice, building competence in the specific skills (e.g., formal language, nuanced tone, managing difficult messages) that ensure efficient transactions and project a professional institutional image.

Component 2: Sustained Relational Engagement. This component leverages the IaH principles of meaningful interaction and equity by creating a structured, sustained partnership with an international expert. Through a blend of synchronous and asynchronous activities with a U.S.-based instructor, the program facilitated more than knowledge transfer; it provided a microcosm of international collaboration. This design offered participants a form of virtual mobility, fostering the cross-cultural confidence and relational trust necessary for effective global engagement.

By applying this task-centered framework, the study investigates how a targeted Virtual IaH intervention can build the foundational competence and confidence of professional staff, thereby strengthening the university's overall human infrastructure for internationalization and creating a more inclusive and sustainable pathway to institutional global engagement.

METHODS

Context and training design

The design of this virtual professional development program emerged in direct response to a strategic shift in communication protocols at the case university. The institution was transitioning from a reliance on informal channels and individual academic contacts toward a structured, institutional approach centered on a new, dedicated email domain. This initiative provided every administrative unit with an official account, which rapidly became the *de facto* primary channel for external correspondence. While the management of these accounts was entrusted to professional staff, direct observation by the first author in their role as an international officer revealed a significant skills gap. This was evidenced by a recurring pattern where staff, uncertain how to proceed, would forward international emails internally without sending a substantive interim response to the original sender, often replying with only a perfunctory "We have received your message," leaving the communication loop unresolved for extended periods, or providing no response at all. This practice highlighted a critical need for training in the nuances of professional email communication within an international context.

To address this identified need, the university's international office, with funding support from the Regional English Language Office of the U.S. Embassy Manila, launched the 8-week online English program "Mastering Email Excellence: Crafting, Navigating and Conquering Digital Communication for Improved Client Relations." The funding grant secured by the first author

afforded the provision of a US-based training instructor with support from the local staff of the university's academic writing center. The program received formal endorsement from senior management, with staff nominated by their respective office heads. This strategic, top-down support framed the program as a direct capacity-building intervention, aligning with the Virtual IaH principle of equitable access and targeting the specific competencies required to support university's internationalization goals.

The online program was facilitated by an experienced, U.S.-based instructor specializing in teaching English to speakers of other languages. Instructional support was provided by two local staff from the university's academic writing center. These local facilitators offered crucial cultural and contextual guidance to the international instructor, helping to navigate class dynamics and monitor participant engagement. This collaborative approach ensured the course remains responsive to learners' needs and allowed for the prompt resolution of any cultural or contextual issues that might arise.

The program adopted a blended learning approach, combining self-paced and synchronous components over eight weeks. Participants accessed reading materials and instructor feedback through Google Classroom. To minimize disruption to participants' regular duties, synchronous sessions were scheduled weekly on Fridays from 4:00 to 5:00 PM, the final hour of the workweek, when urgent client or supervisor requests were less likely. The pre-training needs assessment was administered post-enrollment to inform the training syllabus. The post-program evaluation survey, a mandatory requirement for the issuance of a completion certificate, was distributed online to assess the program effectiveness and self-reported learning gains.

Study design

This study employed a case study evaluation design. Data were collected through two pre-program instruments: a targeted needs assessment that directly informed the syllabus, and a separate pre-training survey that established initial levels of confidence and competence. A post-program survey then measured outcomes against this pre-training baseline.

Participants

Initially, 42 professional staff who secured their supervisors' endorsements were enrolled in the program. While only 23 (54.8%) fulfilled the requirements for certification, all participants retained access to the learning materials, acknowledging that development can be impactful even without formal completion. The reasons for attrition were not captured through a formal exit survey; however, informal feedback from some non-completers indicated that unforeseen, ad-hoc tasks were the primary reason for withdrawal. This experience underscores a key methodological challenge. Future studies would benefit from a more systematic approach, though this is contingent on the Learning Management System (LMS). Platforms like Google Classroom lack a built-in feature for triggered exit surveys. A viable workaround would be to use an LMS that can deploy a mandatory, one-question survey upon course withdrawal or to proactively administer a simplified exit form at a strategic midpoint to better capture this critical attrition data.

Data collection and instruments

Data collection employed a multi-stage process to inform the program's design and evaluate its outcomes. Two pre-program instruments were utilized: a targeted needs assessment to establish learning priorities and a pre-test to baseline specific skill competencies. A post-program survey then measured outcomes against this baseline.

Pre-training needs assessment

A pre-training needs assessment was conducted immediately after enrollment to identify specific learning needs and directly inform the syllabus. The survey comprised quantitative and qualitative components. Quantitatively, participants rated their proficiency in five key areas of email communication on a 5-point scale (1 = very limited knowledge to 5 = expert knowledge): (a) email writing skills and grammar, (b) email etiquette, (c) client communication via email, (d) email organization and management, and (e) email efficiency. Qualitatively, three open-ended questions prompted participants to specify desired skills, challenges faced, and additional expectations. The results were shared with the international instructor to tailor the course syllabus, ensuring alignment with participants' needs. The resulting curriculum addressed seven key areas, which were subsequently operationalized into 21 discrete, measurable skills.

To measure perceived learning, a pre- and post-test design was implemented for the 21 module-specific skills. A pre-test was administered before training began, in which participants rated their competency for each of the 21 skills on a 4-point scale (1 = Not Competent to 4 = Highly Competent). The identical instrument was administered as a post-test within the final evaluation survey, providing directly comparable data to assess shifts in self-assessed competency for each skill covered. The post-program survey gathered data on the course's effectiveness and was structured into three sections: (1) overall course evaluation, with six closed-ended items rated on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 4 = Strongly Agree) assessing course relevance, delivery, learning outcomes, instructor effectiveness, platform accessibility, and overall satisfaction; (2) instructor evaluation, with five closed-ended items on a 4-point Likert scale evaluating participants' comfort with the international instructor's presence, accent, speech speed, communication style, and ease of seeking clarification, followed by an open-ended item for qualitative feedback; and (3) post-test, including the post-test ratings for the 21 skills, with an open-ended item in this section enabling qualitative triangulation of perceived skill development. The survey concluded with an open-ended suggestions section.

Data analysis

Quantitative data from the post-program survey were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequency counts, percentages, and means. The statistical significance of the perceived learning gains was assessed using a paired Wilcoxon signed-rank test on the pre- and post-training competency ratings. This non-parametric test was selected for its appropriateness for ordinal data and paired measurements. Qualitative data from open-ended items were analyzed thematically. Data from the pre-training needs assessment were used solely to inform the training syllabus and were not included in the formal statistical analysis.

FINDINGS

The effectiveness of this virtual professional development program was evaluated by analyzing a post-program survey on participant satisfaction of the training and perception of their international instructor, alongside pre-test/post-test data measuring perceived learning gains.

The first part included metrics on course relevance, delivery and engagement, learning outcomes, instructor effectiveness, course accessibility, and overall satisfaction. The analysis revealed exceptionally high levels of participant satisfaction across all measured criteria. Participant responses indicated unanimous satisfaction regarding the utility and quality of the training. Specifically, 100% of participants strongly agreed that the course content was highly relevant to their professional responsibilities and directly applicable to day-to-day tasks (course relevance: $M = 4.00$, $SD = 0.00$). Similarly, the instructor effectiveness was rated perfectly, with all participants strongly agreeing that the instructor effectively conveyed course material and provided valuable support and guidance (instructor effectiveness: $M = 4.00$, $SD = 0.00$). In addition, the participants strongly agreed that the online platform was user-friendly and that the course materials were easily accessible and navigable (course accessibility: $M = 4.00$, $SD = 0.00$). All but one also strongly agreed that the online materials and interactive elements significantly contributed to their engagement and learning (delivery and engagement, $M = 3.96$, $SD = 0.21$) and that the training notably improved their professional skills and that they felt confident applying the knowledge at work (learning outcomes, $M = 3.96$, $SD = 0.21$). When asked to describe their overall course satisfactory, all participants strongly agreed that it was of high quality and that they would recommend it for the professional development of other non-teaching staff.

Table 1
Participants' evaluation of the virtual email training

Criteria	Strongly Agree	Agree	mean	SD
	n (%)	n (%)		
a. Course relevance	23 (100.00)	0 (0.00)	4.00	0.00
b. Delivery and engagement	22 (95.65)	1 (4.35)	3.96	0.21
c. Learning outcomes	22 (95.65)	1 (4.35)	3.96	0.21
d. Instructor effectiveness	23 (100.00)	0 (0.00)	4.00	0.00
e. Course accessibility	23 (100.00)	0 (0.00)	4.00	0.00
f. Overall satisfaction	23 (100.00)	0 (0.00)	4.00	0.00

Following the overall satisfaction metrics, participants' perception of the international instructor was assessed in the second part of the post-program survey (Table 2). The results demonstrated a high level of acceptance across all attributes measured. A large majority of participants (78.26%, $n = 18$) reported being highly comfortable with the general presence of an international instructor in the course ($M = 3.78$, $SD = 0.42$). The highest mean score was observed for the instructor's communication attributes, specifically the clarity and effectiveness of the communication style ($M = 3.91$, $SD = 0.29$), with 91.30% of participants reporting high comfort. Similarly, the perception of the speech rate demonstrated strong acceptance ($M = 3.87$, $SD = 0.34$), with 86.96% reporting high comfort, and the acceptability of the accent and pronunciation was also high ($M = 3.83$, $SD = 0.39$). This high level of acceptance further

extended to interactional factors, with the majority of participants (78.26%) reporting high comfort when expressing oneself and seeking clarification from the instructor ($M = 3.78$, $SD = 0.42$).

Table 2
Participants' perception of the international instructor

Statement	Very Comfortable	Comfortable	mean	SD
	n (%)	n (%)		
a. Having an international teacher in the course	18 (78.26)	5 (21.74)	3.78	0.42
b. Accent and pronunciation of the international instructor	19 (82.61)	4 (17.39)	3.83	0.39
c. Speech speed of the international instructor	20 (86.96)	3 (13.04)	3.87	0.34
d. Communication style of the international instructor	21 (91.30)	2 (8.70)	3.91	0.29
e. Expressing oneself and seeking clarification from an international instructor	18 (78.26)	5 (21.74)	3.78	0.42

The general sentiment in the survey responses is further echoed by the written feedback provided by participants after the program, highlighting the positive impact of the instructor on their self-reported overall learning experience. A number of participants praised the instructor's responsiveness and attentiveness in dealing with their questions which could have contributed largely to their course satisfaction. One participant described the instructor as "... great and really listening to everyone" illustrating how the instructor's engagement during synchronous sessions and in the Google Classroom have fostered open communication and encouraged active participation among the students.

The participants also commended the learning management and communication skills of the instructors, both crucial in managing courses and encouraging student participation in distance learning modalities. These skills were captured in the participant's feedback on how "organized, responsive, and able to clearly explain complex topics" the instructor was during the program. This explicit participant feedback reflects the instructors' ability to efficiently manage the content of the 8-week course and simplify challenging concepts for the administrative staff. The course was organized into four main tabs: (1) class notes, (2) resources, (3) formative assessments, and (4) assignments. Using Google Classroom as the learning management system allowed the instructor to curate materials, create assignment drop boxes, and provide asynchronous written feedback. In connection with the provision of additional learning materials via the Google Classroom, the participants explicitly mentioned how these documents became useful for them. Consequently, these affordances helped students navigate the asynchronous components of the course more efficiently.

In the weekly synchronous sessions, the participants took notice of the instructor's interactive teaching approach. They appreciated the active exchanges between them and the instructor during real-time online sessions every Friday. This approach enabled the participants to actively take part in class activities rather than attend as a passive listener absorbing information from the instructor. They also described the instructor as "being knowledgeable on every topic" and "well-versed in the topic," highlighting her expertise to facilitate the virtual

program. Consequently, the quality exhibited by the instructor matched her educational qualifications and teaching experiences across cultures and across modalities. The quality of instruction matched her educational qualifications and teaching experience across different cultures and modalities. More so, they also emphasized her accommodating nature as key contributors to their positive learning experience. Several students described the instructor as “very accommodating” and “approachable.” Furthermore, students emphasized her accommodating nature as a significant factor contributing to their positive learning experience. Many described the instructor as “very accommodating” and “approachable.”

The instructor’s depth of knowledge, combined with her engaging teaching style and open demeanor, greatly enhanced the overall positive assessment of the program. This experience underscored the importance of disciplinary expertise, effective instructional approaches, and approachability in virtual professional development initiatives.

The third part of the post-program survey covered the self-reported changes in skill levels of the participants before and after the virtual training. The survey questions covered the seven key topics of the syllabus including: (a) difference between formal and informal language usage, (b) composing clear and concise emails, (c) setting appropriate tones in emails, (d) efficiently managing email correspondence, (e) arranging meetings via email, (f) crafting emails for challenging situations and (g) identifying and rectifying common grammar and spelling errors.

The analysis of self-reported skill levels before and after the intervention demonstrates a statistically significant increase in perceived proficiency across all seven topics covered in the training program (Table 3). A paired Wilcoxon Test confirmed that the self-reported skill levels from pre-test to post-test was statistically significant for every topic ($p < 0.0001$ for all comparisons). Mean scores increased substantially across all items, indicating a strong positive perceived impact. The largest gains were observed in “composing clear and concise emails” (from $M = 3.06$ to $M = 3.93$) and “composing difficult emails” (from $M = 3.07$ to $M = 3.88$).

Table 3
Comparison of the participants’ self-reported level of skills in the topics covered before and after the training

Topics Covered	Intervention				Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test	
	Before		After		z	sig.
	mean	SD	mean	SD		
a. Formal and informal language	3.24	0.58	3.99	0.12	3.638	<0.0001
b. Composing clear and concise emails	3.06	0.62	3.93	0.26	3.945	<0.0001
c. Setting tones in email	3.07	0.71	3.91	0.33	4.025	<0.0001
d. Managing emails	2.92	0.77	3.88	0.32	3.824	<0.0001
e. Making meeting arrangements via email	3.17	0.59	3.96	0.21	3.69	<0.0001
f. Composing difficult emails	3.07	0.65	3.88	0.37	4.146	<0.0001
g. Common grammar and spelling mistakes	3.13	0.66	3.91	0.28	3.626	<0.0001

When asked about their suggestions for a future run of this professional development course for professional staff and other possible courses, participants highlighted several

considerations. A recurring theme emphasized by three participants focused on the feasibility of condensing the synchronous sessions into one or two straight sessions such as this one. As articulated by one participant: "May I suggest to compress the training in a day or two rather [than] 1hr for 8 weeks." Despite the expression of preference for shorter but longer training sessions, the participants did not provide any elaboration behind their suggestion except for one who wrote: "...so that continuity of the knowledge is still intact." One participant, however, conversely expressed a divergent point of view and mentioned the preference for the existing arrangement: "I cannot suggest any other day of the week as for me, Friday is the best day. The last hour of the las[t] day of work is always anticipated to practice our [E]nglish speaking and writing." Also, one participant wishes to have face-to-face training to "allow for more interaction." In terms of future topics, the participants indicated their interest in professional development courses centered on enhancing their oral proficiency in English and refining skills in writing business letters.

DISCUSSION

Framed by the Virtual IaH framework, this case study evaluates an 8-week virtual English professional development program focused on email communication skills for international engagement. The program targeted university professional staff responsible for managing office email accounts and was delivered by an international virtual educator as a strategic initiative to build human resource capacity for campus internationalization. The findings suggest that targeted virtual programs can empower professional staff, thereby remedying their historical exclusion from the university's internationalization agenda (Brandenburg, 2016; Hunter, 2018).

Instructor-mediated relational engagement in a hybrid virtual space

Operationalizing the Virtual IaH framework requires moving beyond knowledge transmission to create meaningful intercultural encounters for this cohort of professional staff. This program's design embodied this principle through a hybrid environment that contrasted with the static nature of MOOCs (Nuswantara et al., 2021; Rafiq et al., 2019), prioritizing sustained relational engagement with an virtual international instructor. This approach positioned the training not as a "mere English language course" as what Hunter (2018) criticized but as a direct intervention for building practical global engagement skills in English. The sustained engagement with the virtual international instructor served as a low-stakes vehicle for Virtual IaH, providing foundational intercultural exposure for the participants. Consequently, by practicing the specific, high-stakes task of professional email writing with an international facilitator, the professional staff actively navigated the nuances of tone, formality, and directness required for international transaction. Consequently, it transformed the virtual training from a regular English language lesson into a functional microcosm of the university's internationalization ecosystem for the participating professional staff.

The program's blended design established distinct yet complementary practice venues for oral and written skills. Synchronous sessions via Zoom facilitated real-time intercultural negotiation and oral fluency, whereas asynchronous tasks enabled the careful refinement of

written communication skills with structured feedback from the virtual educator. This continuous cycle of practice across modalities cultivated a low-stakes environment for navigating cultural differences. In effect, the virtual classroom became a “safe-to-fail” simulation of global professional interaction, a crucial feature missing from standardized MOOCs.

The efficacy of the relational engagement model is evidenced by participants’ significant comfort with the international instructor. Qualitative data reveal that this comfort stemmed not from general satisfaction, but was directly linked to specific instructor qualities described as “accommodating” and “approachable.” We interpret these traits as foundational to a psychologically safe learning environment that successfully lowered participants’ affective filters, thereby enabling them to take the very risks, of making a linguistic mistake or a cultural misstep, that are essential for authentic intercultural learning and confidence building.

This dynamic was further reinforced by feedback highlighting the instructor’s ability to listen attentively and her organized, responsive approach. This consistent engagement across platforms established a continuous feedback loop, mitigating the asynchronous limitation through timely, personalized guidance absent in standardized MOOC-based courses. The instructor’s organization also rendered the blended learning journey coherent and manageable for busy staff. In essence, these facilitator qualities were not incidental; they were fundamental in transforming the virtual space from a simple content-delivery platform into a space for international collaboration, thereby fulfilling the core Virtual IaH principle of meaningful interaction. This successful navigation is noteworthy, as differing cultural backgrounds between instructor and participants can often pose challenges related to communication style, expectations, or perceived formality. The absence of such issues here can be understood by linking the instructor’s facilitative approach with the participants’ qualitative feedback. The instructor’s method, which included proactively sharing cultural perspectives and inviting reciprocal exchange during live sessions, directly aligns with participant descriptions of an “accommodating” and “approachable” instructor. This alignment suggests that this specific teaching strategy was the active mechanism that transformed the virtual space, making cultural differences a focus of learning rather than a barrier and thereby building the reported trust.

The virtual program’s success must be understood within a specific institutional and cultural context. Traditionally, Philippine offices such as in this case study have prioritized high-contact, face-to-face interaction and informal instant messaging via platforms like Facebook Messenger to build the rapport essential to the local work culture. However, the post-pandemic era triggered a decisive institutional shift towards email as the primary medium for official and international communication. This shift appeared to be especially challenging as it may have represented a change in professional roles; previously, direct engagement with international partners seems to have been often handled by the academic staff through their personal email accounts, bypassing professional staff. This created a potential gap that the professional staff are now tasked with managing official email accounts of their units, likely lacked the specific skills and comfort for this formal, high-stakes communication.

The program’s success in fostering relational engagement is therefore suggested to be particularly significant. It operated within a high-contact culture where trust is traditionally built through

rich, non-verbal cues, a preference perfectly encapsulated by one participant's desire for a "Face to face [sic] lesson to interact more." That this view was an outlier could be interpreted to indicate that the program's structured virtual engagement appeared to effectively simulate meaningful interaction for most. It seemed to provide a viable digital alternative that built the necessary rapport, thereby potentially empowering staff to begin assuming their new frontline role in the university's international communication strategy.

Weaving intercultural competence into high-stakes email communication

Beyond creating a conducive environment for learning, the program's perceived value was supported by its direct relevance to the core duties of the selected cohort. The program's perceived value was rooted in its direct relevance to staff duties, a relevance systematically engineered through two key actions: first, the careful selection of frontline staff managing official email accounts, and second, a pre-training needs assessment that pinpointed specific skill gaps. This allowed the curriculum to purposefully integrate intercultural dimensions into the critical daily task of official email communication. Thus, the resulting curriculum covered key areas from formal language use to composing challenging emails, weaving intercultural principles directly into these tasks. This approach redefined the training by moving beyond abstract theory to address concrete, daily challenges, such as structuring emails for clarity, managing a high-volume inbox, setting an appropriate tone with international partners, and composing difficult messages.

The unanimous positive ratings and the significant self-reported skill gains across all measured competencies as reflected in the lesson sequences demonstrate the perceived success of this task-centered approach, effectively moving staff from simply writing emails to engaging in international professional dialogue. We contend that this high degree of perceived relevance directly countered the common lack of clarity on how these skills benefit their roles, making the value of the training valuable for the participants. The high degree of perceived relevance is a key predictor for the transfer of skills because the learning context (the training) and the application context (their email inbox) were virtually identical. This eliminated the common "transfer gap," making the application of new skills the default and most logical action.

Operationalizing an inclusive virtual IaH model for professional staff

This study's most significant contribution lies in demonstrating a practical model for extending the Virtual IaH framework to professional staff. The program served as a direct intervention to address what Hunter (2018) identifies as the historical treatment of administrative staff as "invisible actors" in internationalization. This strategic intent was formalized in a university proposal that explicitly conceived the initiative to build the capacity of "frontline staff in the virtual world," focusing on email communication aligned with internationalization goals. It was thus a concerted effort to build human resource capacity among a historically excluded group, not an isolated intervention.

By providing targeted, high-status training focused on a core strategic task, the program fundamentally shifted the participants' perceived role from passive support staff to active,

visible partners. The formal nomination process, the involvement of the international virtual educator, and the focus on a high-stakes competency collectively signaled an institutional recognition of their value. This shift is evidenced by the high self-reported gains in confidence and competence, which suggest participants are now better equipped to act as decisive agents. As Hunter (2018) argues, universities must move towards a model where administrative staff “play a decisive role in internationalization as equal partners” (p. 17). The competence and confidence fostered here are the very foundations of such a partnership.

By empowering these frontline staff, the initiative strengthens what we term the human infrastructure of internationalization, making the previously invisible, visible and indispensable. Our findings demonstrate one of the appropriate measures for achieving this goal, aligning with Brandenburg’s (2016) assertion that professional staff are “a crucial group, whose performance can significantly improve with the right measures of... well-planned HR development activities” (p. 17). We posit that this strategy builds a more reliable and trustworthy foundation for global engagement, where effective and culturally-appropriate communication acts as a critical enabler for fostering trust and projecting a professional institutional image.

The 54.8% completion rate highlights the persistent challenge of time constraints and existing responsibilities, a key barrier identified in the literature. This attrition underscores that even a well-designed virtual program requires stronger institutional support mechanisms and even incentives. However, the program’s design, virtual, asynchronous, and directly task-based, with only a one-hour live component, was itself a strategic response to these constraints, aiming to integrate the professional development without significant interruption into the existing workflow. As over half the cohort completed the program despite these pressures suggests the model was partially successful in this aim, and an in-person format would likely have resulted in even higher attrition. This points to the critical need to account for the operational realities of under-resourced administrative environments in program design.

In summary, this study provides a practical framework for operationalizing an inclusive Virtual IaH model. We posit that its effective implementation is contingent upon a strategic synthesis of three elements: first, the deliberate targeting of this historically excluded cohort to construct a robust human infrastructure; second, the leveraging of virtual and partnership-based delivery to access global expertise efficiently, a model in this context enabled through a U.S. Embassy partnership that provided a cost-effective alternative to traditional in-person deployment of the international educator; and third, the strategic mitigation of operational constraints through embedded institutional support.

CONCLUSION

This single-context study has examined a virtual English professional development program for a group of professional staff in a Philippine public university through the conceptual lens of Virtual IaH. The findings suggest a potentially viable model for extending internationalization opportunities to professional staff, who form the operational backbone of universities yet are

often excluded from such broader initiatives usually focused on students, academic staff, and research staff. The program's perceived success indicates that the core strategies of Virtual IaH used in this study, the purposeful integration of intercultural learning into core tasks (i.e., email communication) and sustained engagement with an international instructor, can be effectively operationalized to develop a locally-based, yet globally-competent, professional workforce, even in resource-constrained contexts such as universities located in the Global South. However, the model's potential, must be balanced against operational realities, as reflected in the program's attrition rate; this underscores that even well-designed virtual initiatives require embedded and stronger institutional support to fully realize their strategic value.

While the findings are constrained by their reliance on participant perceptions, these nonetheless point to a critical pathway for achieving holistic internationalization. This study therefore posits that globally competent professional staff are an indispensable component of a university's global engagement. By strategically investing in staff who manage key interfaces with the global community, universities could potentially ensure that their internationalization ambitions are more sustainably supported.

Implications and future directions

For universities' top management, human resource departments, and international offices, this single-context study offers more than just findings, it provides a practical blueprint for equitable professional development. However, our evidence suggests that long-term success requires moving beyond ad-hoc projects toward strategic integration in the human resource development program. Based on the implementation challenges and outcomes observed, two strategic priorities emerge.

First, embedding programs within official human resource development frameworks with protected time and recognition appears essential. The 54.8% completion rate serves as a telling indicator of the tension between strategic goals and daily operational realities. This finding aligns with Brandenburg's (2016) contention that internationalization cannot simply "come on top on everything else" but must be integrated into regular work life. Without this institutional commitment even well-designed initiatives may struggle. Furthermore, the institution may consider formal recognition and tangible incentives for completion. Integrating a digital badge or a formal certification into the university's professional development portfolio can validate the acquired skills, signaling their value to the institution and enhancing the staff member's internal mobility and career profile. This transforms participation from an added task into a recognized professional achievement.

Second, creative partnership models offer a sustainable path forward. The barrier of sourcing international expertise, overcome in this study through a grant from a foreign embassy, suggests the untapped potential in existing institutional agreements. Rather than treating bilateral partnerships as static documents, universities might reimagine them as dynamic exchanges that include training pillars for professional staff development on top of common focus on student and academic staff exchange and research collaboration. Such an approach

could see partners exchanging virtual training to systematically building the very human infrastructure needed to sustain these partnerships.

Finally, to move from measuring participation to demonstrating impact, we recommend integrating a robust evaluation framework into these embedded programs. This should include follow-up assessments 3–6 months after training to measure the sustained application of skills and their perceived impact on daily work. Furthermore, gathering feedback from the participants' supervisors could provide invaluable, external validation of behavioral change and skill transfer, turning these development initiatives from a cost into a demonstrable investment in institutional capacity.

Together, these strategies of institutional embedding and strategic partnerships point toward building the sustainable human infrastructure necessary to make internationalization an institutional reality rather than an abstract ambition. By adopting this integrated approach, universities can ensure that their global ambitions are competently executed by every staff member who interacts with the world.

Limitations

While this study offers a valuable proof-of-concept, its findings must be considered within the context of its methodological design. The analysis relies on participants' self-reported data, which provides crucial insight into perceived gains in competence and confidence but does not constitute an objective measure of behavioral change. Similarly, the development of intercultural confidence was inferred from these perceptions. Consequently, while the findings indicate participant satisfaction and self-assessed growth, their direct connection to broader, systemic internationalization outcomes remains a subject for further inquiry.

Nonetheless, in the context of building institutional capacity, these perceived gains represent a critical, preliminary outcome. They provide evidence of a necessary precursor to holistic internationalization: the development of self-perceived readiness among professional staff. In resource-constrained environments, fostering this foundational confidence is a valuable first step toward enabling staff to effectively support wider institutional goals. Therefore, this study's primary contribution lies in proposing a replicable Virtual IaH model for developing this essential human capacity, a factor we posit is a necessary, though insufficient, precursor to sustained impact. It is plausible that these self-reported improvements signal a shift toward more effective daily practice; verifying this link through future longitudinal research that incorporates direct supervisor feedback and institutional metrics would be a logical and valuable next step.

Finally, as a study situated within a single university context, the quantitative findings are not broadly generalizable. The conceptual framework of the Virtual IaH model itself, however, which integrates a task-centered curriculum with sustained international engagement, demonstrates high potential for transferability to other institutions seeking to build professional staff capacity for internationalization.

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Appendix A Post-Program Survey

I. Overall Course Evaluation

Direction: Kindly indicate your overall assessment of the training on mastering email excellence by selecting the relevant boxes.

Legend: Strongly Agree - 4; Agree - 3; Disagree - 2; Strongly Disagree - 1

Criteria	4	3	2	1
Course Relevance: The course content aligned with my professional responsibilities and directly related to my day-to-day tasks.				
Delivery and Engagement: The online materials and interactive elements significantly contributed to my engagement and learning.				
Learning Outcomes: The course notably improved my professional skills, and I feel confident in applying this knowledge at work.				
Instructor Effectiveness: The instructor effectively conveyed course material, providing valuable support and guidance.				
Course Accessibility: The online platform used was user-friendly, making course materials easily accessible and navigable.				
Overall Satisfaction: I am satisfied with the course's quality and would recommend it for the professional development of non-teaching staff.				

II. Instructor Evaluation

Direction: Kindly indicate your assessment of your instructor based on the parameters below.

Legend: Very comfortable - 4, Comfortable - 3, Uncomfortable - 2, Very uncomfortable - 1

Questions	4	3	2	1
How comfortable were you having an international instructor in this course?				
How comfortable were you with the accent and pronunciation of the international instructor who taught this course?				
How comfortable were you with the speech speed of the international instructor who taught this course?				
How comfortable were you with the communication style of the international instructor in this course?				
How comfortable did you feel expressing yourself and seeking clarification from an international instructor during this email writing course?				

General comment for your instructor

III. Skills Evaluation

Direction After completing this training, kindly rate your skills in the following areas as covered in the class:

Legend: Strongly Agree - 4; Agree - 3; Disagree - 2; Strongly Disagree - 1

Level of competency before the training	Level of competency AFTER THE TRAINING			
Week 1 - Formal and informal language	4	3	2	1
Using professional greetings, introductions, and requests effectively				
Crafting emails that cover the opening, purpose, requests, and closing remarks cohesively				
Concluding emails appropriately with suitable closings				
Week 2 - Composing clear and concise emails	4	3	2	1
Structuring emails visually for enhanced clarity				
Employing "If then" statements effectively in email content				
Creating clear and engaging subject lines for emails				
Week 3 - Setting tones in email	4	3	2	1
Sustaining a positive tone in email communication				
Articulating requests effectively within emails				
Employing proper use of cc and bcc when sending messages				
Week 4 - Managing Emails	4	3	2	1
Efficient time management for processing emails				
Organizing emails using Labels/Folders effectively				
Establishing multiple inboxes for better email prioritization				
Week 5 - Making Meeting Arrangements via Email	4	3	2	1
Arranging meetings through email correspondence				
Including attachments in email communications				
Ensuring effective follow-ups and timely responses				
Week 6 - Composing Difficult Emails	4	3	2	1
Communicating unfavorable news effectively through email				
Addressing and handling complaints via email				
Recalling or retracting sent emails when necessary				
Week 7 - Common Grammar and Spelling Mistakes	4	3	2	1
Identifying frequent grammar and spelling errors				
Activating grammar and spell-check tools				
Employing Gmail's smart compose and reply features				

Suggestions:

What are your specific suggestions or improvements you would propose for future similar courses? [Feel free to answer in Filipino]