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Success stories: exploring perceptions of former fellows of a global faculty development program for health professions educators

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Abstract

Background Faculty development programs (FDPs) in health professions education (HPE) are instrumental in supporting, promoting, and improving HPE curricula and activities that target individual- and system-level capacity strengthening. FAIMER, a division of Intealth, has been offering FDPs for global health professions educators in HPE and leadership for over two decades through the International FAIMER Institute in the USA and FAIMER Regional Institutes located globally. This paper explores perceptions of former program participants (Fellows) of FAIMER global FDPs by eliciting their success stories.

Methods The study utilized a modified Success Case Method approach. Study participants recruited were 14 FAIMER Fellows nominated as exemplars of success cases by program directors and faculty members from seven global sites, using extreme case sampling technique. Of the 14 Fellows, two were from Africa, nine from Asia and three from Latin America. In-depth interviews were conducted with each Fellow to understand their self-perceived success, and factors from both their local context and FAIMER's FDPs that have contributed to their success. Theoretical thematic analysis method was used to analyze the data.

Results The top three areas of success perceived by Fellows were career advancement & recognition, professional development, and advancement of HPE. Fellows identified both institutional-level factors and personal attributes as contributing to their success. They also reported that FAIMER global FDPs have substantially contributed to their success by expanding professional networks, fostering academic achievement, and enhancing interpersonal development and leadership skills.

Conclusions The findings show that Fellows perceive that there are multiple pathways for them to succeed in advancing the field of HPE. The Fellows' stories highlight the continuing value of FAIMER global FDPs for HPE educators worldwide in professional development and leadership. The study also proposes recommendations for enhancing faculty development activities in HPE.

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Background

Faculty development is an important method of strengthening educational resources and is vital in reforming professional health education to help meet individual and population health needs [1]. Faculty development programs (FDPs) are primarily viewed as a capacity strengthening intervention to improve educators' expertise in teaching, research, scholarship, leadership and management [2–5]. In addition to fostering educational leadership [6, 7], FDPs facilitate meaningful interpersonal collaboration [8]. Despite their ubiquitous adoption, the impact of FDPs and their effectiveness in sustaining global needs has not been thoroughly studied. Though there has been increasing reports of studies on effectiveness of FDPs for health professions educators in the past five years [9–15], most measure shorter term program effectiveness with the current cohort of participants through a pre-post program comparison. Only a few studies have examined the influence of FDPs through gathering the perceptions from former participants or tracking participants longitudinally [16–20], and most of these FDPs are local programs within an institution. Studies on FDPs with an international scope are still limited in the literature [21]. With the rise of FDPs globally [21], examining the impact of global FDPs is an important and desirable area.

Intealth is a private nonprofit organization that advances quality in health care education worldwide in order to improve health care for all. Through strategic integration of its divisions, ECFMG® and FAIMER®, Intealth offers services that enhance and support the education and training of health care professionals, verify their qualifications required to practice, and inform the development of health workforce policies around the world [22]. Intealth through its FAIMER division, provides global faculty development in health professions education to advance its vision and the missions of its divisions [23]. Since 2001, FAIMER has offered a two-year, part-time global FDP in health professions education (HPE) through its International FAIMER Institute (IFI) in the USA and FAIMER Regional Institutes (FRIs) in Brazil, Chile, China, Egypt, India, Indonesia, South Africa and Uganda [24]. Participants who complete the two-year program are known as FAIMER Fellows.

Some of the unique features of FAIMER global FDPs are in the organization design and in the curriculum. FAIMER uses an adapted hub and spokes organizational design to develop FRIs featuring FRIs as spokes relating to each other and to the IFI as hub fostering mutual partnership and collaboration [24]. The FRIs are modeled on the IFI curriculum with adaptation to the local context. The curriculum includes transformational learning experience, community building and experiential learning through implementation of education innovation projects by the Fellows at their home institutions [24, 25]. Through transformational learning experiences, the IFI and FRIs offer the program through the curricular components that include education methods, leadership and management, project management and evaluation, and education research and scholarship [26]. Fellows education innovation projects are the focal point for experiential learning for Fellows to apply what they learned and make changes to their institution, nation and region [24]. The purpose of community of practice (CoP) as described by Wenger and Snyder is to develop members' capabilities and to build and exchange knowledge. Passion, commitment, and identification with the group's expertise holds the community together [27]. Wenger's description of the purpose of CoP and what holds it together is reflected in the FAIMER global CoP. Intentionally building and sustaining a global CoP at the FAIMER global FDPs [27, 28] provides a supportive learning environment and encourages networking and collaboration among Fellows [12, 24, 25].

The IFI and FRIs have resulted in almost 2000 Fellows from more than 55 countries to form a vibrant global network of health professions educators. Many Fellows chose to become faculty at FAIMER global FDPs after they completed their fellowship, a benefit of capacity strengthening. FAIMER conducted a study in 2017 to explore how institutional leaders perceived that Fellows who participated in a FAIMER global FDP in HPE have contributed to development of successful education at the institutional, national and regional level [29]. Recognizing that the definition of "success" can be multidimensional, this study focused on soliciting success stories perceived by Fellows themselves and exploring factors that have contributed to their success.

This study used the interpretivist framework [30] to look beyond cause and effect and get an in-depth understanding of the Fellows' perspectives on the concept of success in the context of FAIMER global FDPs in HPE. Qualitative methods are integral to the interpretivist approach to education research [31]. Qualitative assessment offers a more flexible approach to understanding the effectiveness of FDPs and provides insights into how and why program outcomes may have been achieved. Case studies have been recommended for studying the impact of FDPs in HPE to better understand the process of change [12].

This study adopted the modified Success Case Method [32, 33] by eliciting stories of success from the former Fellows to (i) understand their perceived success and what factors have contributed to their success; and (ii) propose recommendations for enhancing faculty development activities in HPE.

Methods

Study aims

The aim of this paper was to explore perceptions of former Fellows of FAIMER's global FDPs through an in-depth investigation of a selected cohort of Fellows who have been identified as successful health professions educators/leaders by FAIMER program directors and faculty members. Specifically, we aim to investigate (1) Fellows' perception of success, (2) Contextual factors that have contributed to their success, and 3) Program-related factors that have contributed to their success.

Study design

We adopted modified Success Case Method (SCM) with a case study design for this qualitative evaluation study. Traditionally, SCM analyzes the most and least successful groups to investigate how well an organizational initiative (e.g., a training program) is working along with the causal link from program activities to impact [32, 33]. SCM achieves efficiencies by focusing the bulk of inquiries on relatively few subjects. The underlying notion is outliers, i.e., those subjects who either have been exceptionally successful in applying their learning in their work or have been the least successful, may have some patterns of skills, abilities, and behaviors that we learn best from. However, one of the major limitations of SCM is the difficulty of identifying non-success cases [34]. Therefore, we applied a modification of Brinkerhoff's SCM study approach [32] by only examining the most successful cases. Ethical approval for this study was obtained from Institutional Ethics Committee, Kasturba Medical College, Mangalore (IEC KMC MLR 07–19/287).

Setting and study population

Fellows eligible to participate in this case study were those who had completed a FAIMER global FDP before 2017 and from a FAIMER site that had implemented the FDP for at least 5 years. The rationale for these criteria were to allow time for (a) program stability and sustainability and, (b) Fellows to grow professionally and produce tangible impact in HPE after completing a FAIMER global FDP. Based on these inclusion criteria, seven FAIMER sites were included in this study: IFI, FRIs in India (*n*=3), China, Brazil, and Sub-Saharan Africa. This study was implemented from 2019 to 2021.

Sampling, recruitment, and data collection

Samples were selected using the extreme case sampling technique [35] where the most successful FAIMER Fellows, the "positive deviants" [36], were recruited for the study. Eligible FAIMER Fellows were nominated independently by directors, co-directors, and core faculty (at least five) at each site using a nomination screener that was developed by the study investigators (see Additional file 1). The screener was created based on FAIMER global FDPs' goals and outcomes making the concept of "success" specific to FAIMER global FDPs, to allow an understanding of Fellows' perception of success in the context of FAIMER global FDPs. The screener was also developed to ensure a fair, standardized, common metric to select successful Fellows at all sites. Based on their knowledge of Fellows, nominators used the screener to rate nominees' success on these themes that represent the FAIMER global FDPs' goals and outcomes for the program (a) leadership and change management; (b) role as a health professions educator; (c) research and scholarship productivity, and (d) contribution to faculty development programs. Each site nominated and ranked between 4 and 20 Fellows and the two Fellows who scored the highest from each site were recruited to participate in the study, with a total of 14. All 14 Fellows consented to participate in the study.

An interview guide developed for the semi-structured interviews measured (1) the ways Fellows perceive their career has been a success; (2) the contextual factors that contributed to their success; and (3) the ways FAIMER experience contributed to their success. The interview guide can be accessed in Additional file 2.

Data was collected via semi-structured interviews with each Fellow, either online using Zoom or via phone calls. To reduce bias that may arise from familiarity with the research topic, all interviews were conducted by three external investigators who were not part of the study. Of the 14 interviews, nine were conducted in English by a trained research assistant based in India, the study implementation site. Three interviews were conducted in Mandarin and two in Portuguese by two trained and experienced local native language-speaking interviewers. Each interview lasted between 40 and 60 min. After obtaining permission, interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed to ensure the views of the Fellows were captured verbatim. The interviews conducted in Mandarin and Portuguese were translated into English before analyses. The transcription was completed within a week of the interview to prevent data distancing from what has been said, understood and documented by the interviewers. For quality assurance, each transcription was shared with and approved by the Fellow interviewee for participant validation. This member checking process was to ensure credibility and trustworthiness of

the data. The two external consultants who conducted the non-English interviews were well trained in qualitative research. To ensure the accuracy of translation, we engaged both consultants from the start of the research. They translated and back translated the interview transcripts to compare translation with the original text for quality and accuracy. One study investigator (S.Y.) speaks Mandarin Chinese and helped validate the translation from Mandarin Chinese to English.

Data analysis
Theoretical thematic analysis was used following the six phases framework described by Braun and Clarke [37]. All investigators read through the transcripts, keeping in mind the evaluation questions. To ensure trustworthiness in coding process, we used a standard approach to reduce bias where two investigators (A.D. and A.R.) led the analysis process, and other investigators of the team reviewed the first draft of coding output. Any discrepancies in coding were resolved by discussions. Efforts were made to select descriptive codes as close as possible to the speech patterns and ideas expressed by the participants. The codes were collated first into subthemes and then into themes. This process was also led by A.D. and A.R. and reviewed by other investigators. The two foreign-language interviewers also helped validate data analysis and interpretation. We used ATLAS.ti software package (Full Version – WIN 7.5) to analyze the interview data.

Reflexivity
The authors have different educational backgrounds. Seven out of the nine authors are medically trained and have previously been or are currently employed in medical schools. Three authors are from the US, and the other five authors from India. All authors have been involved in FAIMER global FDPs in HPE as Fellow and/or Faculty. We were aware that our prior experiences, assumptions, and beliefs will influence how we approach the research and how we interpret the data. Recognizing this, data collection was conducted by three external investigators who were not part of the study. We engaged in critical self-reflection, peer debriefing and critically examining broader context that influences the research process and findings. We met regularly and were engaged in continuous discussion and reflection when conducting data analysis and interpretation that helped balance our past experiences with FAIMER global FDPs and diverse perspectives on the interpretation of Fellows' perception. Research memos documented reflective thoughts, feelings, and reaction of researchers to data analysis. The research memos also enhanced transparency and credibility of the research process.

Results
The qualitative results are summarized in three sections: (1) Fellow's self-perceived success; (2) Contextual factors contributing to Fellows' success, and (3) Program related factors contributing to Fellows' success. The top two or three themes identified by study investigators from each section are reported in this paper.

Fellows' characteristics
Table 1 lists the characteristics of study participants. Eight (57%) of the 14 Fellows are female. two (14%) are from Africa (South Africa), nine (64%) from Asia (China and India) and three (21%) from Latin America (Brazil). Out of the 14 Fellows, 10 (71%) primarily work in teaching, and 4 (29%) in clinical fields. Five (36%) Fellows hold leadership positions at their institutions. Except for three Fellows, all others are faculty in one or more FAIMER global FDP(s).

Fellows' self-perceived success
The data on Fellow's self-perceived success resulted in identification of three major themes, namely career advancement and recognition, professional development, and advancement of HPE. These themes and subthemes are summarized in Table 2, followed by illustrative quotes.

Career advancement & recognition Most Fellows perceived success as a reflection of their career advancement and recognition. Career growth, particularly promotion at their workplace, assuming leadership roles and having more administrative responsibilities were considered important pathways to success. Fellows also perceived their success following participation in FAIMER global FDPs reflected by being recognized by national bodies

Table 1 Characteristics of study participants (Fellows) (*N*=14)

Characteristics	Women (*n*=8)	Men (*n*=6)	Overall (*N*=14)
Region			
Africa	1	1	2
Asia	6	3	9
Latin America	1	2	3
Academic Rank (current)			
Professor/Associate Professor	3	2	5
Other (e.g. lecturer)	4	5	9
Predominantly working in			
Clinical setting	2	2	4
Teaching	6	4	10
Administrative Role (current)			
Vice Chancellor Dean/Director/President	4	1	5
Head of department	1	0	1
No administrative role	3	5	8
Faculty at a FAIMER Institute	7	4	11

Table 2 Themes and subthemes on fellows' self-perceived success

Themes and subthemes
A. Career advancement & recognition
• Career growth
• Leadership and management
• Global and national recognition
• Mentoring others
B. Professional development
• Formal education/training in HPE
• Scholarship portfolio
C. Advancement of health profession education
• Course/assessment system development
• Curriculum, teaching and/or policy reform

Table 3 Themes and subthemes related to contextual factors contributing to Fellows' success

Themes and subthemes
A. Institutional-level factors
• Robust medical educations units/Support from institutions
• Guide/resources/opportunities provided by mentors
• Institutional stature and influence
• Grants and fundraising availability
• Supportive work culture
B. Personal attributes
• Passion to medical education/Dedication to work
• Willing to make changes
• Being generous and tolerant

for innovation and evaluation reforms in medical education, particularly in resource-constrained settings. Other perceived success as exemplified in professional advancement, including attaining global recognition as faculty, resource persons and experts in HPE outside their own countries, and through collaborations with international agencies including FAIMER. In addition, recognition as mentors for students and faculty at the regional level was considered as an achievement by two Fellows.

> *"Considering my knowledge and expertise in the previous institution, I was appointed as head of examination in the new university which I developed from scratch." (Fellow #8)*
> *"I have been able to progress from just being a lecturer at university, to becoming the Deputy Vice Chancellor for research and innovation … my career as an academic, and in the higher education sector has been successful. (Fellow #14)*

Professional development Professional development, reported by Fellows, included acquiring higher degrees, educational scholarships, individual and collaborative publications. They reported that the FAIMER global FDPs provided a platform to network and exchange ideas with medical educators from different medical schools. They belonged to a global community of health professions educators to learn and grow together. Some Fellows also reported a growing scholarship portfolio through increased number of publications, more English article publications. Fellows were sponsored by FAIMER for advanced degrees in HPE, which was recognized as an important factor in their professional development.

> *"I had an opportunity to complete Master's in Health Professions Education abroad, sponsored by FAIMER." (Fellow #4)*
> *"Since 2009, I have published some Chinese papers, and then I have also started to publish in English…*

> *I was the only one who had SCI [Science Citation Indexed Journal] paper published in medical education." (Fellow #2)*

Advancement of health professions education Fellows reported contributing to HPE in many ways such as developing courses and assessment systems, establishing advanced HPE courses, implementing faculty development programs, and enhancing the visibility of medical education at regional, national, and international level. Other examples of contributing to HPE were module development at the national level under expert mentorship and curriculum and/or policy reform. Some Fellows noted that their success and sense of accomplishment increased because of their involvement in national and international collaborations for curricular reforms.

> *"I introduced a whole region to medical education - very geographically wide like the Eastern Mediterranean region… I have 3 distance learning programs that reach out to scholars, national, regional and international wide." (Fellow #10)*
> *"We implemented the (TBL) methodology in this class and we created an instrument for the students to evaluate the teaching and learning process. The results of this evaluation generated a paper…. So, we started getting out from our school, from our university and we disseminated this methodology to other institutions." (Fellow #13)*

Contextual factors contributing to fellows' success
Two major themes (See Table 3): institutional-level factors and personal attributes were identified as contextual factors that have contributed to Fellow's success following participating in FAIMER global FDPs.

Institutional-level factors Fellows stated that working in institutions with strong medical education units was a key catalyst for success. Institutions offered strong support to Fellows in executing innovative ideas and

put emphasis on medical education while giving prime importance to patient care. Fellows were grateful to have mentors guiding them in multiple ways, opening opportunities for research and scholarship, training and providing constructive feedback. Success was also attributed to having mentors who displayed admirable leadership traits. Success was significantly influenced by institutional prominence and influence. The credibility of the institution and working in highly influential medical schools and universities was cited as helpful by Fellows. One Fellow indicated that increased visibility in the field of HPE was noticed by the Ministry of Higher Education resulting in being funded by upgrading medical education.

"A Robust medical education existed in my institution at the time of joining [FAIMER Fellowship program], which called for recruiting faculty members who can give inputs to program." (Fellow #7)
"My mentor involved me as a facilitator in training sessions, in an open atmosphere with lot of interactions and feedback." (Fellow #6)

Personal attributes Having the power to act and the ability to seize opportunities were cited by a few Fellows as contributors to success. Passion for medical education, willing to make changes, dedication to work, continuously seeking for self-improvement, being generous and tolerant, self-confidence and perseverance were other personal attributes listed.

"I think that was the major thing behind my success - passion to medical education. This is one thing. The other thing is that I was honest with myself and with everything, with everyone around me, honesty." (Fellow #10)
"I think I had an important role with the dedication I put into implementing the changes: I created working groups and learned to share tasks, since I would not be able to do all by myself." (Fellow #12)

Table 4 Themes and subthemes related to program related factors contributing to fellows' success

Themes and subthemes
A. Expand professional network
• Platform for networking
• Broaden/widen communication
• Increase opportunity to connect
B. Foster academic achievement
• Publications
• Advanced degree and qualification
• Recognition of expertise
C. Enhance interpersonal development and leadership skills
• Ability to self-reflect
• Understand self and others
• Leadership skills

Program related factors contributing to fellows' success
Three themes were identified from analyzing the descriptions of Fellows about program related factors contributing to their success - expanding professional network, fostering academic achievement, and enhancing interpersonal development and leadership skills (see Table 4).

Expand professional network Fellows reported that FAIMER global FDPs facilitated the expansion of their professional network. They acknowledged that FAIMER provided an international platform that helped with networking, communication and connectivity. Fellows appreciated that the program directors, faculty, advisors and peer Fellows were approachable. They were encouraged to seek help from this network of educators without hesitation. This growing network promoted peer to peer mentoring, and fostered collaboration.

"FAIMER´s inclusion of all health professionals and development of our abilities are two things that comes to my mind...Plurality and interdisciplinarity. And collaboration! Collaboration is the most fantastic thing from FAIMER. The collaboration network is unbelievable!" (Fellow #13)

Foster academic achievement FAIMER's contributions to fostering academic achievement was defined by an increase in educational research studies and publications, sponsorship for advanced degree and education. For example, one Fellow reported that his FAIMER project stood out as one of the few indexed publications on meta-analysis. Another Fellow appreciated that the FAIMER global FDP provided motivation to publish in high impact journals. Receiving recognition as an expert and resource person in HPE because of FAIMER qualification was also commented.

"FAIMER stimulated and inspired me to do educational research." (Fellow #3)
"I am now in a position to transform our curriculum with my FAIMER qualification." (Fellow #5)

Enhance interpersonal development and leadership skills Fellows highlighted interpersonal development, such as the ability to self-reflect, and understand people. Leadership skills enhancement was another program related factor contributing to their success. Through learning at FAIMER's global FDP, Fellows gained a better understanding of people with whom they are working. For example, change management and force field analysis in the curriculum provided Fellows with a better insight on the strengths and limitations of members in the team.

This helped Fellows use individual characteristics towards achieving a common goal. One Fellow reported that the FAIMER's global FDP and all the learning process contributed for the leadership roles the Fellow took over in the process of restructuring the curriculum.

> *"FAIMER taught me to reflect on my strengths and weakness which helped me personally." (Fellow #1)*
> *"In addition, through FAIMER, I learned some specific skills. For example, the one that has a great impact on me is leadership." (Fellow #11)*

Discussion

In the current study, we used the SCM approach to examine the impact of FAIMER's global FDPs by eliciting success stories from Fellows in three aspects: (1) Fellows' perception of success; (2) Contextual factors that have contributed to their success; and (3) Program related factors that have contributed to their success.

First, regarding the ways in which Fellows perceived themselves successful following participation in the FAIMER global FDP, the top reported successes were career advancement & recognition, professional development, and advancement of HPE. These findings indicate that advancing the field of HPE can be achieved through multiple pathways. Findings in the current study validated those in the 15-year impact study of FAIMER global FDP that was conducted in 2017, in which 15 leaders of Fellows' institution were interviewed on how these Fellows have been successful in improving HPE [29]. It also shows that the "success" perceived by Fellows following participation in global faculty development in HPE, is not limited to improving HPE, but is multidimensional that also includes own career growth and professional development. These findings also imply the ripple effect of program impact from individual-level growth to driving system-level change.

Second, regarding the contextual factors to Fellows' success following participation in FAIMER global FDPs, both personal attributes and institutional-level factors were reported to play essential roles. The findings were closely aligned with the career-success model for physician-scientists by Rubio and colleagues [38], which showed that both personal factors and organizational factors contribute to career success. Working in institutions with strong medical education units and institutional support are pivotal for educators to foster innovative ideas and dedicate time and effort to advancing medical education. The lack of institutional support is known to be a barrier to faculty development [39]. Therefore, it is critically important that programs and individuals leverage institutional support and align with institutional needs, as faculty development can facilitate

organizational change and development, such as institutional policies, leadership and management promotions in HPE, and moving organizations forward [21, 40, 41].

This study has validated the impact of FAIMER on Fellows by fostering mutual partnership and collaboration with local institutions in developing its FRIs around the world [24]. In addition, as a focal point for the application of learning during the FDP, Fellows develop and implement an education innovation project that is endorsed by their institutions. FAIMER also leverages institutional support by soliciting a letter of support from the institution leadership for the Fellows' participation in the FAIMER program. The findings from our study corroborate the findings from other studies [21, 38–41] that personal attributes (e.g. willingness to change, dedication to work) and institutional support are critical contextual factors for Fellows to apply what they learned from the FAIMER global FDPs and be successful in both their career in HPE and in improving HPE.

Third, regarding the program related factors that contributed to Fellows' success, Fellows acknowledged the contributions of the FAIMER global FDPs to their success through expanding professional networks. This factor is supported by literature showing that FDPs are essential in developing CoPs and that educators benefit professionally through belonging to such communities [12, 21, 42]. In another study, Baker et al. [43] highlighted the collaborative network structure in facilitating the participation of members who are geographically distributed. Wenger and Snyder have described CoPs "as group of people informally bound together by shared expertise and passion for a joint enterprise" [27]. One of the principles of FAIMER global FDPs in alignment with Wenger's description of CoP is to build and sustain an online CoP for global health professions educators to foster networking, exchanging ideas and collaborations [24, 44]. During their inception, each FAIMER global FDP had their own local online CoP through listservs. Fortuitously, the COVID-19 pandemic offered opportunities for education innovation [45]. FAIMER transitioned from individual CoPs into a new online community "FAIMER Connect" designed to facilitate, accelerate, support and sustain the connections that form among all FAIMER Fellows globally [46]. In addition, since 2021, by partnering with the FRIs, FAIMER has organized a 2-day virtual annual conference "FAIMER Global Forum". FAIMER Fellows now have a platform to network and discuss topics related to HPE and workforce development.

Other key program related factors contributed to success, according to FAIMER Fellows, was that the FAIMER global FDP (i) promoted their academic achievement through supporting scholarship and publications and sponsoring advanced degrees and education, and (ii) enhanced leadership skills and interpersonal

development. This is supported by literature on FDPs that HPE Faculty are expected to assume multiple roles in HPE [47]. FAIMER global FDP curriculum and approach prepare Fellows for multiple roles. In addition to enhancing the role of faculty members as teachers and educators, FDPs also broadened the participants' scope in research [18, 48] and leadership development [49–51]. As is reported by other studies, research skills are crucial for academic advancement and promotion for clinical educators [52–54]. FAIMER global FDPs promote HPE educators to be both education scholars and leaders by providing professional development curricula in HPE and leadership [55]. Health professions educators with leadership expertise are critical to leading educational programs [26, 56]. The current study supported the literature in its findings that the curriculum components contributed to Fellows' success in the field of HPE.

Strengths and limitations
We used a modification of Brinkerhoff's success case method (SCM) study design [32, 33] which helped us identify positive deviant samples fitting into the success case definition. Selection of Fellows by extreme (or deviant) case sampling method was well aligned with the nature of research design and study aims. To reduce selection bias, we solicited independent nominations using a standardized screener for identifying, recruiting, and enrolling Fellows from FRIs directors, co-directors, and multiple faculty members from each site. We also obtained endorsement from FRIs directors and/or co-directors for the finalists. Another strength of the study is the analytical approach. The use of theoretical thematic analysis helped investigators to remain focused on the evaluation questions and allow new themes to be identified.

The study had a limitation of using self-reported data, which may be biased by Fellows' appreciation of sponsorship and hesitance in criticizing a potential source of funding or career opportunity, and the desire to provide socially desirable responses to a study conducted by FAIMER. To minimize this bias, all interviews and data collection were conducted by three external interviewers who were not study investigators. The unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic delayed the study processes, as it created more challenges to coordinate and manage the study with team members who were geographically scattered and whose work responsibilities shifted during the pandemic.

Implications for faculty development programs in health professions education
The findings of this study advanced our understanding of both the contextual factors, and the program-related factors of FAIMER global FDPs that can contribute to participants' success and enabled us to propose recommendations for enhancing global faculty development activities to support participants' success. We have summarized these recommendations in Table 5.

Conclusion
In conclusion, findings from this study reveal the impact of FAIMER global FDPs through the lens of Fellows' success in advancing the field of HPE. This paper has an international scope providing perspectives from Brazil, India, China and South Africa. These findings reassure the continuing values of FAIMER global FDPs to strengthen capacity for educators in health professions education and leadership skills. The findings of this study provide insights and recommendations for the development and enhancement of global FDPs in HPE.

Table 5 Recommendations for enhancing global faculty development activities to support participants' success

Recommendations	Description	Examples of activity
Provide professional opportunities for career advancement and support	• Foster partnership and collaboration with institutions • Provide opportunities for engagement, networking, and collaboration • Establish and sustain a community of practice for participants • Provide opportunities for mentoring by international faculty	• Alumni conference for engagement • Sustain a robust alumni network • Provide international platform for networking and connectivity • Solicit institutional support such as a letter of support for faculty participation in faculty development programs
Promote educational research and scholarship outputs	• Integrate educational research and scholarship as key curricular components • Create opportunities for collaborative studies	• Global collaborative research projects and publications by program participants and alumni facilitated by program organizers • Provide resources on advancing research (e.g. webinars by content experts)
Enhance academic accomplishments	• Recognition as expert and resource person in health professions education. • Sponsorship for advanced degree in education	• Invite back some alumni to be program advisors and faculty • Support continuing professional development of program participants
Strengthen leadership and interpersonal skill development	• Develop ability for self-reflection and team work • Enhance competencies in change management and negotiations	• Create intentional teaching-learning sessions on self-reflection and effective teamwork during the program • Teach project management and other leadership and managerial skills in the curriculum

Abbreviations
CoP   Community of Practice
FDP   Faculty Development Program
HPE   Health Professions Education
SCM   Success Case Method

Supplementary Information

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Author contributions

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Data availability

The datasets used and analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on request.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate
This study was approved by the Institutional Ethics Committee of Kasturba Medical College, Mangalore, India (IEC KMC MLR 07–19/287). Written informed consent was obtained from the participants.

Competing interests
The authors declare no competing interests.

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