

Original Research Article

Perception of the learning environment among trainees of the Public Health Supervisor-I Training Program at the University of Community Health, Magway, Myanmar

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ABSTRACT

Background: A positive and supportive learning environment is an important determinant for the academic achievement of trainees in health professional education. In Myanmar, the Public Health Supervisor-I Training Program has recently transitioned to a hybrid model, necessitating an assessment of its learning environment.

Methods: This study used a cross-sectional explanatory sequential mixed-methods design to assess the perceptions of 197 PSH-I trainees regarding their learning environment at the University of Community Health, Magway, using the Dundee Ready Educational Environment Measure (DREEM), and to explore their perspectives on the strengths and weaknesses of the current learning environment.

Results: The overall DREEM score was 152.57/200, indicating an excellent educational environment. The mean scores of five domains were: students' perceptions of learning (35.38/48), students' perceptions of teachers (36.65/44), students' academic self-perceptions (25.53/32), students' perceptions of atmosphere (34.49/48), and students' social self-perceptions (20.52/28). Female students perceived the program more positively than male students ($p=0.249$), with a significant difference in students' perceptions of teachers ($p=0.034$). In-depth interviews with 13 trainees showed transition burden, uneven learning environments, teacher support, academic pressure, peer support, and suggestions for system improvement. Trainees appreciated supportive teaching and peer relationships but experienced stress from the hybrid structure, travel, accommodation issues, crowded classrooms, inconsistency between on-campus and off-campus teaching, and academic pressure.

Conclusions: Overall, the learning environment was perceived positively. However, structural improvements are needed to reduce burdens associated with the hybrid model and create a more supportive, coherent, and learner-centered environment.

Keywords: DREEM, Learning environment, Myanmar, Public Health Supervisor-I Training

INTRODUCTION

Effective health professional education requires a positive, supportive learning environment that supports academic achievement, professional growth, and students' motivation and satisfaction. The learning environment refers to everything that occurs in a

classroom, department, college, or university, and it is essential to the success of undergraduate medical education.¹ Students' perceptions of the learning environment provide insightful input for highlighting areas that require improvement. Although several instruments have been used to assess medical students' perceptions of the learning environment, the Dundee

Ready Educational Environment Measure (DREEM) is a popular, validated tool designed specifically to evaluate the learning environment in health professions education.²

The educational environment includes the physical, social, and psychological context where learning takes place.³ Understanding students' perceptions of the educational environment is critical because the educational environment greatly influences academic success, motivation, and professional development.⁴ The evaluation of an educational environment is a key factor in determining the effectiveness of the medical education program. Therefore, incorporating students' feedback is essential to improving the learning environment.

Public Health Supervisors are on the front lines of the primary health care system in rural areas of Myanmar. They play an essential role not only in delivering primary healthcare services but also in disease surveillance activities. The University of Community Health, Magway (UCH) is the only university that trains Myanmar's community health workforce. Beginning in July 2025, the Ministry of Health restructured the Public Health Supervisor-I (PHS-I) Training Program into a hybrid training model to meet changing public health workforce demands and improve training relevance and quality. This model includes three months of field-based training (Off-campus) at five States and Regional Public Health Departments (such as Yangon Region, Bago Region, Magway Region, Ayeyarwady Region, and Shan (Taunggyi) State) and six months of institutional training (On-campus) at the university. As a result, the learning environment may change. In hybrid programs, learning settings can be more complex, combining classroom training with experiential learning. To ensure high-quality training and identify gaps, it is essential to understand how students view this program.⁵ Therefore, this study aims to assess the perceptions of Public Health Supervisor-I trainees on their learning environment in on-campus training using the DREEM tool.

The recent reform of the PHS-I Training Program into a hybrid model may significantly change the structure, delivery, and context of learning. Moreover, there are no data on the effectiveness of the learning environment in previous training models. It is also necessary to assess trainees' perceptions of how these transitions have affected the learning environment. Without a planned assessment of the learning environment, possible concerns connected to teaching methods, student support, or academic atmosphere may go unexplored. This knowledge gap may make it more challenging for the program to produce qualified and confident Public Health Supervisors.

Evaluating the learning environment is essential to ensure the effectiveness of educational programs and to support students' academic achievement and well-being.¹ As Myanmar's PHS-I Training Program has changed to a hybrid model, assessing trainees' perceptions of the new

learning environment is timely and relevant. Although hybrid training methods that combine classroom instruction with field placements are becoming more popular worldwide, little research has examined how they affect the educational environment in DREEM. PHS-I Training Program is a unique hybrid that takes place in a public health setting with limited resources and low income. The combination of university education and field-based experiences may produce unique perspectives worth documenting. Although DREEM is widely used in medical, nursing, and allied health training, it is rarely applied in public health training programs. Most studies focus on specific clinical settings or undergraduate medical students. This study aimed to assess trainees' perceptions of the learning environment in the Public Health Supervisor-I Training Program using the DREEM-based assessment at the University of Community Health, Magway. The findings are expected to help educators and policymakers understand the strengths and weaknesses of the newly implemented training model. This can direct improvements in instructional methods, curriculum design, and student support systems, and ultimately encourage the growth of skilled and competent public health supervisors.

METHODS

A cross-sectional study with an explanatory sequential mixed-methods approach was applied. The first cohort at the University of Community Health, Magway, enrolled 203 PHS-I trainees. All the trainees willing to participate were included in the study, while those absent during data collection or without consent were excluded. The study period was from August 2025 to March 2026, with permission from the Department of Human Resources for Health and ethical approval from the Ethical Review Committee of the Ministry of Health.

Data collection and analysis

Data were collected during the last month of on-campus training using a validated Myanmar version of the DREEM questionnaire. The instrument included demographic characteristics and five DREEM domains: perceptions of learning, perceptions of teachers, academic self-perceptions, perceptions of atmosphere, and social self-perceptions. An orientation session was conducted to explain the study objectives, procedures, voluntary participation, and confidentiality. Written informed consent was obtained before data collection. Data were collected using a guided, self-administered questionnaire. Data were analyzed using SPSS version 25. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were used to summarize participant characteristics and DREEM scores.

Responses to individual items in the DREEM questionnaire were scored on a five-point Likert scale from "4" (strongly agree) to "0" (strongly disagree), with nine negative statements reverse-scored. Items with a

mean score of 3.5 or above indicated positive perception, scores between 2 and 3 suggested areas for improvement, while a mean of 2 or less was identified as a problematic area requiring further investigation. The scores were summed up to derive each domain score and the overall DREEM. The overall score was interpreted as very poor (0-50), plenty of problems (51-100), more positive than negative (101-150), and excellent (151-200), with 200 representing an ideal educational environment. Statistical significance was determined using independent-samples t-tests and one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA), with a p-value of less than 0.05 indicating significance. Moreover, in-depth interviews were conducted with selected trainees using an interview guide derived from themes uncovered during the quantitative analysis, allowing deeper exploration of trainees' perceptions of the current learning environment; these interviews were analyzed thematically.

RESULTS

Quantitative finding

Background information of the trainees

A total of 197 trainees completed the questionnaire, giving a response rate of 97.04%. Non-response was due to trainees being absent on the day of data collection. The mean age was 31.03 (± 3.189) years. Most trainees were female (73.1%), single (53.8%), from urban areas (62.9%), and nearly all lived in rented accommodation during training (96.3%) (Table 1).

DREEM scores

The overall DREEM score was 152.57/200 (76% of the maximum score), indicating an excellent educational environment. The mean scores for the five domains were SPL (35.38/48), SPT (36.65/44), SASP (25.53/32), SPA (34.49/48), and SSSP (20.52/28) (Table 2).

At the item level, trainees consistently gave high ratings to teachers' knowledge, preparation, feedback, and communication skills. They also reported positive

academic self-perceptions, especially confidence about passing the year and the course's relevance to their profession. However, weaker areas included overemphasis on factual learning, limited relaxation during lectures and field training, reduced enjoyment relative to stress, accommodation concerns, and inadequate support for stressed trainees.

Table 3 shows responses to all items, and trainees scored less than 2 on 2 items (Item 25: The teaching over-emphasizes factual learning and Item 17: Cheating is a problem in this course). The mean score was between 2 and 3 for 12 items (Item 48, 27, 23, 42, 36, 11, 35, 3, 4, 14, 46, and 28), and 3.5 or above was for 2 items (Item 2: The teachers are knowledgeable and Item 10: I am confident about passing this year).

Table 1: Background information of the trainees (n=197).

Background information	Frequency	Percent
Age (years)		
≤ 30	97	49.2
>30	100	50.8
Gender		
Male	53	26.9
Female	144	73.1
Marital status		
Single	106	53.8
Married	81	41.1
Others	10	5.1
Residence		
Urban	73	37.1
Rural	124	62.9
Off-campus training center		
Ayeyarwady	40	20.3
Bago	33	16.8
Magway	62	31.5
Taunggyi	19	9.6
Yangon	43	21.8
Accommodation		
Own house/living with relatives	7	3.7
Renting	190	96.3

Table 2: Mean scores of five domains of DREEM (n=197).

Domain	Mean	SD	Range	Interpretation
Students' Perceptions of Learning (SPL)	35.38	5.407	32	More positive approach
Students' Perceptions of Teachers (SPT)	36.65	5.498	24	Model teachers
Students' Academic Self-Perceptions (SASP)	25.53	3.987	23	Confident
Students' Perceptions of Atmosphere (SPA)	34.49	6.778	39	More positive atmosphere
Students' Social Self-Perceptions (SSSP)	20.52	4.075	20	Not very bad
Total score	152.57	21.026	117	Excellent

The study assessed differences in DREEM scores by trainees' characteristics. Mean DREEM scores did not differ significantly by age or marital status ($p=0.454$ and

$p=0.961$). Female trainees had slightly more positive overall perceptions than males (153.62 ± 21.20 vs 149.72 ± 20.47); however, the total score difference was not statistically significant ($p=0.249$), while SPT scores

differed significantly by gender (35.28 ± 5.39 vs 37.15 ± 5.47 , $p=0.034$). Trainees from rural areas reported more positive perceptions across all domains and a higher

total DREEM score than those from urban areas (156.92 ± 19.98 vs 145.18 ± 20.82), with a statistically significant difference ($p<0.001$).

Table 3: Individual mean scores of DREEM (n=197).

Item	Statement	Mean
Students' Perceptions of Learning (SPL)		
1	I am encouraged to participate in teaching sessions	3.28
21	The teaching is sufficiently concerned to develop my confidence	3.25
44	The teaching encourages me to be an active learner	3.31
20	The teaching is well focused	3.25
16	The teaching is sufficiently concerned to develop my competence	3.17
38	I am clear about the learning objectives of the course	3.21
7	The teaching is often stimulating	3.25
24	The teaching time is put to good use	3.27
13	The teaching is trainees centered	3.22
47	Long-term learning is emphasized over short-term	3.04
48	The teaching is too teacher-centered	2.09
25	The teaching over-emphasizes factual learning	1.03
Students' Perceptions of Teachers (SPT)		
29	The teachers are good at providing feedback to trainees	3.40
18	The teachers have good communication skills with community	3.39
2	The teachers are knowledgeable	3.59
37	The teachers give clear examples	3.36
40	The teachers are well prepared for their teaching sessions	3.40
32	The teachers provide constructive criticism here	3.36
8	The teachers ridicule the trainees	3.30
39	The teachers get angry in teaching sessions	3.37
9	The teachers are authoritarian	3.35
6	The teachers are patient with community	3.10
50	The trainees irritate the teachers	3.04
Students' Academic Self-Perceptions (SASP)		
27	I am able to memorize all I need	2.47
45	Much of what I have to learn seems relevant to a career of my profession	3.26
22	I feel I am being well prepared for my profession	3.28
26	Last year's work has been a good preparation for this year's work	3.17
41	My problem-solving skills are being well developed here	3.10
10	I am confident about passing this year	3.59
31	I have learned a lot about empathy in my profession	3.32
5	Learning strategies which worked for me before continue to work for me now	3.33
Students' Perceptions of Atmosphere (SPA)		
23	The atmosphere is relaxed during lectures	2.71
49	I feel able to ask the questions I want	3.06
33	I feel comfortable in teaching sessions socially	3.13
30	There are opportunities for me to develop interpersonal skills	3.17
34	The atmosphere is relaxed during seminars/tutorials	3.03
42	The enjoyment outweighs the stress of studying for my profession	2.47
43	The atmosphere motivates me as a learner	3.03
36	I am able to concentrate well	2.98
11	The atmosphere is relaxed during field training	2.89
12	This course is well timetabled	3.30
35	I find the experience disappointing	2.85
17	Cheating is a problem in this course	1.88
Students' Social Self-Perceptions (SSSP)		
15	I have good friends in this course	3.29

Continued.

Item	Statement	Mean
3	There is a good support system for trainees who get stressed	2.89
4	I am too tired to enjoy this course	2.68
14	I am rarely bored on this course	2.93
46	My accommodation is pleasant	2.90
19	My social life is good	3.09
28	I seldom feel lonely	2.73

Qualitative finding

To explore trainees' expectations, experiences, and perceptions of the current learning environment, in-depth interviews were conducted with 13 trainees using a semi-structured interview guide. Participants were aged 28 to 43 years, with a mean age of 32.38 ± 4.29 years. Nine participants (69%) were female, and four (31%) were male. The service duration ranged from 9 to 18 years, with a mean of 11.67 ± 2.46 years.

Theme 1: Transition burden

Many trainees described the transition between off-campus and on-campus training sites as challenging, particularly those from distant states and regions. Frequent travel, relocation, accommodation, food expenses, and the need to transport personal belongings and learning materials created additional burdens. One trainee reported that moving between training sites was particularly difficult because of limited local social support and initial difficulties in finding suitable accommodation.

"In two training sites, we were unfamiliar with anyone, so the main difficulties were related to accommodation, food, and daily living" (Female, 30 years, 12 years of service).

Theme 2: Uneven learning environments

Trainees described several limitations in the on-campus learning environment. Classrooms were often crowded, noisy, and hot, with limited space. Weak sound systems, limited visibility for trainees seated at the back, and unclear reprinted learning materials affected trainees' ability to concentrate. In contrast, off-campus learning was generally perceived as more practical, informal, and closely connected to workplace experiences. Trainees more often described on-campus learning as theoretical, formal, and examination-oriented. These differences contributed to variations in trainees' learning experiences across training sites.

"What we learn there was different from what we learn here. There, it was more practical and field-based learning; here, there is more theory, we had to study a lot and memorize everything carefully" (Female, 36 years, 13 years of service).

Theme 3: Teacher support

Teacher support was consistently identified as a major strength of the program. Trainees described university teachers as knowledgeable, approachable, patient, and willing to explain difficult concepts repeatedly. Trainees appreciated the opportunity to consult teachers outside formal teaching sessions and reported that teachers' encouragement increased their confidence and motivation to complete the program.

"The teachers are kind and helpful. They always encourage us and tell us that we can understand the lessons and do well" (Female, 30 years old, 12 years of service).

However, some trainees perceived differences in teaching quality across training sites, particularly when off-campus sessions were conducted by less experienced or non-specialist trainers. Trainees suggested that courses should be delivered by trainers with appropriate subject-specific expertise and practical experience.

"Here, the teachers are well-experienced teachers, so I do not have much to complain about." *"Off campus, some newly graduated teachers were assigned to teach us. They were young, so they seemed shy teaching us."* *"For some important subjects, their teaching was still weak, so there was a bit of a gap between the teachers and us in terms of understanding"* (Female, 30 years old, 12 years of service).

Theme 4: Academic pressure

Academic workload was reported as the main source of stress during the program. Trainees frequently reported difficulties with presentations, examinations, proposal development, and thesis writing, especially because of the tight schedule.

Despite these challenges, many reported that daily learning activities were enjoyable when academic stress was manageable. This suggests that academic workload, rather than the overall learning experience, was the primary source of stress.

"Mainly, I think the stress came from examinations. The research component was also very stressful because we had very limited time. Thesis writing, exams, and the viva all caused stress. But apart from those, during regular

learning sessions, I was happy” (Male, 31 years, 10 years of service).

Theme 5: Peer support

Peer support was another important strength identified by trainees. Trainees described helping one another with academic lessons, transportation, group assignments, and personal or emotional difficulties. Such mutual support reduced stress, strengthened a sense of belonging, and contributed to a more positive learning experience.

“The students helped each other, even when we did not know each other well in the group. Everyone encouraged and supported one another a lot” (Female, 30 years, 12 years of service).

Theme 6: Suggestions for system improvement

Trainees generally recommended practical improvements rather than major changes to the overall program structure. Key suggestions included improving classroom facilities, sound systems, seating arrangements, and the quality of learning materials, including providing hostel accommodation or transportation support, and strengthening coordination between training sites.

“The hostel fees and transportation costs are very expensive for us. In the future, I would like the university to provide on-campus hostel accommodation. If that is not possible, I would like the university to arrange transportation for trainees” (Female, 28 years old, 10 years of service).

DISCUSSION

The quantitative findings show that trainees generally perceived the learning environment as positive, with a total DREEM score in the excellent range.

In the present study, SPT was the strongest domain, while SSSP was the weakest. The highest SPT score suggests that trainees viewed teachers as knowledgeable, supportive, well-prepared, and willing to provide feedback and guidance. The item-level findings reinforce these findings. Trainees rated teachers’ knowledge, preparation, communication, and feedback highly, consistent with positive patterns reported in medical and health-profession settings, where teacher quality is often the strongest part of the educational environment.⁶⁻⁸ This was supported by qualitative findings. In in-depth interviews, trainees repeatedly described teachers as approachable, patient, encouraging, and willing to explain again when needed. The convergence of the quantitative and qualitative findings suggests that the PHS-I Training Program’s key strength appears to be teacher support.

In contrast, SSSP was the lowest-scoring domain. Lower scores related to accommodation, enjoyment, relaxation, and support for stressed trainees suggest that the program

may provide less support for trainees’ social and emotional well-being than for their academic learning. This finding is consistent with previous DREEM studies, which have often reported lower scores for items related to stress, tiredness, social support, and opportunities for relaxation compared with teacher-related domains.⁹⁻¹¹

These weaker areas are explained by the qualitative findings. Crowded classrooms, inadequate sound systems, poor visibility and hearing from the back rows, and physically uncomfortable learning environments were also frequently cited by trainees. These issues matter because the educational environment includes the physical, social, and psychological context in which learning takes place, in addition to the quality of teaching.^{1,4,5} Therefore, improvements in classroom facilities and the physical learning environment may help strengthen the overall educational experience.

The hybrid training model was another important issue identified in this study. Trainees appreciated the combination of university-based theoretical learning and practical, field-based experience. However, traveling between on-campus and off-campus training sites created several financial, practical, and emotional challenges. Participants frequently reported difficulties with accommodation, transportation costs, relocating personal belongings, and coordinating between training sites. Previous studies have suggested that hybrid learning models can be effective when learning activities are well coordinated and adequate support is provided to learners.^{12,13} In the present program, the hybrid model appeared to provide important educational benefits, but stronger logistical planning and better integration between training sites may be needed.

Academic workload was also identified as a major source of stress. Trainees reported difficulties with thesis writing, protocol development, presentations, examinations, and limited time to complete research activities. These findings may help explain the lower DREEM scores related to enjoyment, tiredness, and support for stressed trainees. Similar concerns have been reported among health-professions students in Myanmar and other settings, where academic pressure remains an important challenge despite generally positive teacher–student relationships.^{11,14,15}

Peer support appeared to reduce some of these challenges. Trainees described supporting one another academically, emotionally, and practically. This included helping with lessons, sharing transportation, working together on academic tasks, and supporting one another during stressful periods. Such peer relationships may contribute to a stronger sense of belonging and help trainees manage the demands of the program.

Based on these findings, several areas may be considered for improving the PHS-I Training Program. These include strengthening mentoring and psychosocial support,

improving accommodation and transportation arrangements, upgrading classroom facilities, and improving coordination between on-campus and off-campus training sites. Providing sufficient time for research and thesis completion may also help reduce academic pressure. In addition, greater use of learner-centered teaching approaches and less emphasis on factual memorization may further improve trainees' engagement and satisfaction with the learning environment.

This study has few limitations. This study included only PHS-I trainees. Therefore, the findings may not be generalizable to other courses and should be interpreted within the specific context of the PHS-I programme. Furthermore, the qualitative component exclusively relied on in-depth interviews with trainees and did not include the perspectives of teachers or other educational providers. Future research should therefore incorporate the views of teachers and other relevant stakeholders to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the learning environment.

CONCLUSION

The findings demonstrated an overall positive educational experience within the PHS-I Training Program, with the total DREEM score in the excellent range. The strongest aspect of the educational environment was teachers' support, while the weakest areas involved social self-perception, stress-related support, accommodation, and aspects of the learning atmosphere. These findings indicate that the program is educationally strong, but that trainees' welfare and the physical learning context require more attention.

The qualitative findings further showed that the program was valued for its supportive teachers, helpful peers, and meaningful blend of academic and practical learning. Nevertheless, the hybrid structure created real burdens, particularly in relation to travel, accommodation, coordination between on-campus and off-campus sites, classroom crowding, and academic pressure. Overall, the program has a strong educational foundation, but it needs structural and organizational improvements to create a more comfortable, supportive, coherent, and learner-centered training environment.

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