A New Vision of Professional Development for University Teachers in Libya 'It's Not an Event, It Is a Process'

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Abstract   Being a university teacher in the Libya is most of the time described as a challenge. In the case of the current instable situation in Libya, the task is formidable in many cases. This paper investigates the challenges encountered by Alzawia university teachers in four colleges. It attempts to answer the following questions: what are the challenges that university teachers face? What is the scope of professional development? The findings of the study suggests a model of professional development that might help the teachers to deal with the challenges that they face such as the low motivated students and the lack of in service training.

Keywords   Higher Education, Professional Development, Self-development

1. Introduction

Higher education institutions are clearly in the middle of rapid change in response to economic, political transformation, technological and social changes. While there are more opportunities for the development of the higher education currently, there are also significant hurdles. University teachers are facing a number of challenges in their teaching practice. Teachers have increasingly been called on to handle, along with their heavy loads, more classroom disruptions and adjust students needs, [26] What is more, most of the national universities in Libya including Alzawia university, the context of this study, do not provide pre service or in service courses for their teachers. With the assumption that holding a MA/Ph.D degree is enough to be a qualified teacher, university teachers in Libya are left to their own knowledge and experience to design their courses and select the appropriate approaches to teach their students.

Based on this, this research aims to investigate the challenges that Alzawia University teachers face and provides a model of professional development. Before that, an over view of the higher education is given and the key factors identified by literature.

Higher Education in Libya

Higher education in Libya includes three major sections: university education, higher technical and vocational institutions, and higher institutes for training.

When successful students get a secondary school certificate, or in the case of technical schools, a diploma and pass with a high average (65% and above), they may continue their studies in higher education through one of the nine universities, sixteen higher technical and vocational institutions, and seven higher learning institutes[3]. University education includes different fields of study, such as economics, Islamic studies, basic sciences, humanities, languages and literature, engineering, industrial, medical and agricultural sciences, and environmental studies. It lasts four to seven years.

Higher technical and vocational institutions offer programs in fields such as electronics, mechanical engineering, finance, computer studies and medical technology. The qualification awarded after three years at vocational institutes and centers is the Higher Technician Diploma.

Since 1990, the Libyan universities changed their admission requirements. Students must now have a grade average of not less than 65% in order to be admitted to any faculty. Some faculties, such as medicine and engineering, require scores for admission which are more than 75%. Students who have an average below 65% are admitted to the higher training institutes and vocational training centers.

With regard to university teachers, some have ph. D degree, most are Masters Degrees holders. Due to the Libyan government's encouragement of students to study abroad, large numbers of university teachers have their degrees from English speaking countries such as the UK and Canada. Furthermore, because of the insufficient number of Libyan teachers in some areas like medicine and pharmacy, Alzawia University contract a number of Arab and Asian teachers from Iraq, Egypt, Sudan and India.

The Ministry of Higher Education is the highest decision making power in Libya with regard to education. As stated in

its report [22], it is the responsibility of this ministry to provide courses for teachers for 'preparing and developing the skills and knowledge needed to be able to keep pace with global development in the areas of curriculum and teaching methods and the use of modern educational techniques'. However, in contrast with basic and secondary education, the Ministry does not provide consistent material and training courses for university teachers.

This is mainly due to the following reasons. First, since most the university teachers hold MA/PhD degrees, it is widely believed that they are qualified enough to teach, Second, the Libyan culture assumptions that people have about teachers as 'sources of knowledge' perpetuated the idea that teachers do not need further training. As a consequence most Libyan and non Libyan university teachers teach without receiving pre-service or in-service training and are left to their own means of self-development to acquire pedagogical knowledge.

It is within this contextual background that we have designed this study to explore approaches to professional development that might help the teachers to deal with the challenges that they face.

2. Key Factors Identified by Literature

According to Alrashdan [1], the main challenges that face higher education in the Arab world are the poor quality of higher education programs and the limited scientific research. Essa and Siddiek [7] add another set of problems that influence the higher education in most of the Arab universities, and Libya is not an exception, such as the use of traditional methods of teaching. Students are not encouraged to be innovative, think critically, or mix theoretical knowledge with scientific application.

In research on the Chinese context, Barkhuzian and Wette [4] investigated the Chinese University teachers' experience. They pointed out problems related to the teaching contexts such as large classes, low proficiency and instrumental motivation. Also some teachers mention the effect of fixed syllabus and heavy workloads that include correcting the papers and lesson preparation which are time consuming for teachers out of class time.

To deal with such factors, there is urgent need to provide professional development opportunities for both new as well as experienced teachers who tend to overly use lectures in their courses. According to Kim [10], these opportunities will help the teachers in developing various skills in order to reach every student in their class. McKinney, etal [13] mentioned that professional development refers to the opportunities for teacher learning and it includes formal experiences such as workshops, meetings and informal experiences that the teachers accumulate as part of their work. Wenger [25] suggests providing teachers with opportunities to discuss the challenges that they face and to engage in communities of practice. Seferoglu [16] adds that 'teachers need opportunities to share what they know, discuss

what they want to learn, and connect new concepts and strategies to their own unique contexts'. The context in which the professional development is delivered is one of the fundamental parts that make it successful. Professional development can mostly succeed in contexts that support it and consider it important, [8].

One of the important characteristic of contexts that support professional development is that they have a shared sense of the need for change. For example, simply telling teachers that they must improve their syllabuses is not enough to generate the sense of urgency that institutional change requires. if the teachers in a given sitting have shared understanding about a problem and solutions, the change is possible. On the other hand, when they disagree, the scope of change is limited [8].

Teachers' beliefs about their roles and the methods that they use play a significant role in teaching efficacy [24]. Therefore, teachers' beliefs can be the most difficult barriers for professional development to overcome, since in many cases they have evolved through years of teaching experience. This is why professional development often fails to produce its intended results: When the knowledge presented via professional development contradict the teachers' beliefs, the teachers usually go back to what they had been doing i.e teachers modify and adapt the new knowledge according to what they believe is good for their students, [15].

However, teachers are more likely to change their beliefs in contexts that consider learning a 'communal activity' [9]. In these contexts, teachers interact with each other, discuss teaching and help one another to use new teaching strategies. According to Shamahara [17], interaction with colleagues play an essential role in changing teachers' beliefs about teaching.

Another important characteristic of professional development is the content. According to the National Commission on Mathematics and Science Teaching report , professional development should (1) deepen teachers' knowledge of the subjects being taught; (2) enhance teachers' teaching skills;(3 and (5) increase the ability to evaluate students' work, in order to provide constructive feedback to students, [21].

According to Harwell, [8] the content of professional development should focus on subject matter knowledge, pedagogical weaknesses within the organization, measurement of student performance, and research regarding challenges that are relevant to the setting in which the professional development is delivered. By staying within this frame of reference, teacher professional development can focus on real issues and avoid providing information that may not benefit the participants.

Thus, it becomes necessary to investigate research gaps addressing the challenges in relation to institutional, students, and curricula issues. Moreover, a study of challenges alone would be incomplete without an exploration of possible solutions to overcome those challenges. The present study aims to address this gap.

This study is built on a previous study conducted by the researchers at the EFL Departments, College of Arts, Al zawia University. It was a qualitative study that investigated the challenges that English language teachers face. The findings of the study revealed that teachers face challenges such as the lack of consistent materials and students' low level and motivation, [20].

However, the participants of this study were limited to English language teachers. Thus, the researchers decided to explore the challenges that may face Alzawia university teachers in other departments and colleges since the university does not provide professional development opportunities. The researchers also aim at suggesting a model of professional development for the teachers. A study that identifies the challenges and provides possible solutions and strategies might go a long way towards supporting teacher to enhance and improve their teaching skills.

3. The Research Approach

A qualitative approach was selected to explore university teachers' views about professional development and the challenges that they face in teaching. Semi structured interview was used to ask the participants about their views of professional development and whether they are interested to attend workshops and training courses. Semi structured interviews were selected because those interviews have structured framework but they are flexible for more follow up of responses [12].

3.1. The Study Context

Al Zawia University was constructed in 1988. This university includes 32 faculties and 29 campuses spread in 9 cities and towns. ZU provides a bachelor programs in Sports, Engineering, Arts, Science, Economics and Political Science, Education, Medical Technology, Dental, Medicine, Pharmacy, Nursery, Law and Natural Resources and Information Technology. ZU has (47000) undergraduate students and (1800) postgraduate students, with (3300) faculty members and (3400) non-academic staff, and three general educational hospitals located in three cities (Zawia-Surman- Sabrata). ZU is a member of Arabic, Islamic and African Universities Associations. In addition, different master programs are provided in Science, Art and Education, Economics, Law and Engineering.

3.1.1. Participants

The findings reported below are based on data gathered from semi structured interviews with 20 teachers working in the Arts, Science, Engineering and Medical colleges. The population of the study consists of 4 females and 16 males. Their experience ranges from 1- 18 years of teaching.

3.1.2. Data Collection Process

The first step taken was to get approval for conducting the research. This initial phase required meeting the teachers in order to explain and clarify the procedures of the data collection. Before the interview, we have explained the research ethical issues such as the aims of the research and the issues explored and the confidentiality of the research.

3.1.3. Data Analysis Procedures

The interview data were analyzed with reference to the main themes of the research mentioned above. During the analysis we looked for answers related to the teachers' views about professional development as well as the challenges that they face. Interview data were initially coded under the broad heading then gradually modified into sub-categories referring, for example, to different types of professional development the teachers mentioned.

4. Findings

The analysis of the collected data brought to the surface four themes. These findings helped to design practical professional development form that is relevant to the Libyan context.

4.1. Dissatisfaction

Analysis of the participants' answers reflects teachers' dissatisfaction about the opportunities that they get for professional development. Opfer et al [14], points out that 'the more dissatisfied an individual is, the more likely it is that the individual will seek out new understandings and new ideas'. In their answers to questions about the professional development courses, most of the participants mentioned that they did not receive any pre service or in service training. In addition, the opportunities to attend professional development courses are very limited. The only form of training that they mentioned was attending workshops during their postgraduate studies. All the participants who have medical and engineering background have never taken a course or studied theories involving pedagogy or teaching methodology.

In a follow up question about if they interested to attend workshops about teaching methodology, most of the participants mentioned that they are interested to attend workshops or courses to know more about teaching methods, and to improve their teaching practice.

4.2. Contextual Factors

The participants mentioned different factors that influence their teaching. The first type of factors is related to the higher education such as the rapid expansion in students' enrolment which is considered as one of the main issues on most of the higher education contexts not just in Libya but in other African Universities such as Tanzania, Uganda, Kenya and Nigeria, [11]. In addition, the interviewed teachers complained about the lack of consistent syllabus and the

criteria of selecting new students and teachers. A lack of sequencing of syllabus can even contribute to a classroom learning at a mixed level as even students in the same year might study different books if they are taught by different teachers.

Other difficulties that the participants discussed were related to students. Most of interviewed teachers showed dissatisfaction about their students' level. They said that they lack the basic skills in research and academic writing. What is more, students' number in most classes is really large and their motivation to study is very low. These factors influence the teachers' choices of materials and tasks. This is consistent with the research findings in Namibia, in which the large number of classes influences students' motivation, providing feedback, and classroom management, [11].

In addition, the participants mentioned other factors that are related to infrastructure such as the lack of facilities such as the teaching aids, the poor internet connection, the lack of Journals and resources. Desai mentions similar situation in India, where not all the higher education institutes have good resources, infrastructure and faculty programs of teaching, [6].

Finally, the instable situation in Libya affects the teaching and was mentioned by most participants. Study has to be suspended for many days and sometimes weeks in some colleges. The wide spread of weapon makes the teachers carful about their way of testing and their evaluation.

4.3. Self-development

In discussing how the participants deal with the above mentioned factors, the participants mentioned different resources. The main resources were learning by doing i.e. they learn to teach by practicing teaching and reflection on their teaching. Through teaching they come to know what works with their students so they keep using it. According to Tomlinson [23], this is important for teachers to improve their teaching practice. Furthermore, some teachers mentioned using new techniques mentioned in books or the internet or watching videos about teaching. The use of these resources varies from one teacher to another depending on their beliefs about their teaching and the goals that they try to achieve.

Crandall pointed out that, for teachers to enhance their teaching skills, there are in service courses, journals and books, colleagues to talk with and observe, classroom research to conduct, and workshops to attend. This range of professional development opportunities helps teachers to develop a personal professional development plan. Crandall [5] adds that organisations may offer or support professional development but teachers must make personal plan to their own professional growth.

Discussion

The interviews with the participants highlighted a range of contextual factors that influence their teaching. Part of these challenges is related to higher education policy such as the lack of pre service and in service training. In addition, in contrast with basic and secondary education, there is no consistent syllabus to teach in higher education. The other challenges are related to students' background education such as the lack of research skills. This is consistent with Alrshdan's findings in which he mentioned that there is no link between what students learn in basic and secondary education and university education. As a result, most of the components are new to students and most of the time they will find them difficult to understand [1].

The findings indicated that the participants depend on their previous learning experience and professional development methods such as using the internet and reading books to deal with these challenges. Using these resources reflected teachers' interest to improve their teaching skills.

A close investigation of the gathered data and the familiarity with the Libyan context brought to the surface the theme of 'shared practice'. Sharing what the teachers know and might help them find solutions to the challenges that they face. According to Seferoglue teachers should be encouraged to share ideas and help each other through discussions and reflection on their teaching. This is due to the fact that the sense of community and the supportive environment are powerful means to encourage teachers deal with the challenges that they face and use new teaching strategies, [16], [18].

5. A Model of Effective Professional Development

In this section, based on the findings of this research, we used the themes to generate a model for professional development for university teachers in Libya. Shown in figure 1, this model is dynamic and effective.

Explanation

On the part of university teachers, as suggested by Wenger [25], providing teachers with opportunities to discuss the challenges that they face and understanding the need for improvement is essential not only to find ways to do it but also to think about sharing their experience and ideas with others. Seferoglu [14] adds that 'teachers need opportunities to share what they know, discuss what they want to learn, and connect new concepts and strategies to their own unique contexts'.

Understanding the need for improvement is essential not only to find ways to do it but also to think about sharing their experience and ideas with others. Through regular meetings and peer teaching in their working context, teachers might discuss their methods and activities, reflect on their teaching practice and enhance their ability to learn from their own and one another's experience [19]. Alongside sharing learning and teaching experience with their colleagues, teachers should continue to use the internet, books

Furthermore, a support from the department and the

faculty is essential to foster the growth of development culture within their working space and to foster a disposition in teachers as continuing learners. By organizing conferences, workshops and positive environment, faculties will help the teachers to share their teaching practice, [2].

Finally, on the part of University administration, although the university has significant challenges, yet the university has significant resources to draw upon in upgrading its colleges, and teaching resources. In addition to the few conferences and seminars that have been organized by the university, providing formal and informal forums of professional development to which all teachers have access is essential to support teachers in their efforts to improve their teaching skills and deal with the challenges that they face.

6. Conclusions

Addressing the challenges that the teachers face is critical

not only for the future of the university but also for that of the higher education institutes at large. As revealed from the findings of this study, University teachers in Alzwia University need sustained support in a new form of professional development that is college based and collaborative. As such, the model presented above gives some structure for the suggested reforms to support and to improve the overall teaching and learning environment.

We believe that the starting point to improve the higher educational system is to support the teachers. Thus, the model suggested will help the teachers who face challenges that affect their work in terms of support and self-learning.

However, taking this forward requires institutional policies on exposing professional development. Further work and research is needed to identify more precisely what challenges each college face. Based on this classification future research could involve case studies and experimentation to test how effective this model of professional development is to address the challenges.
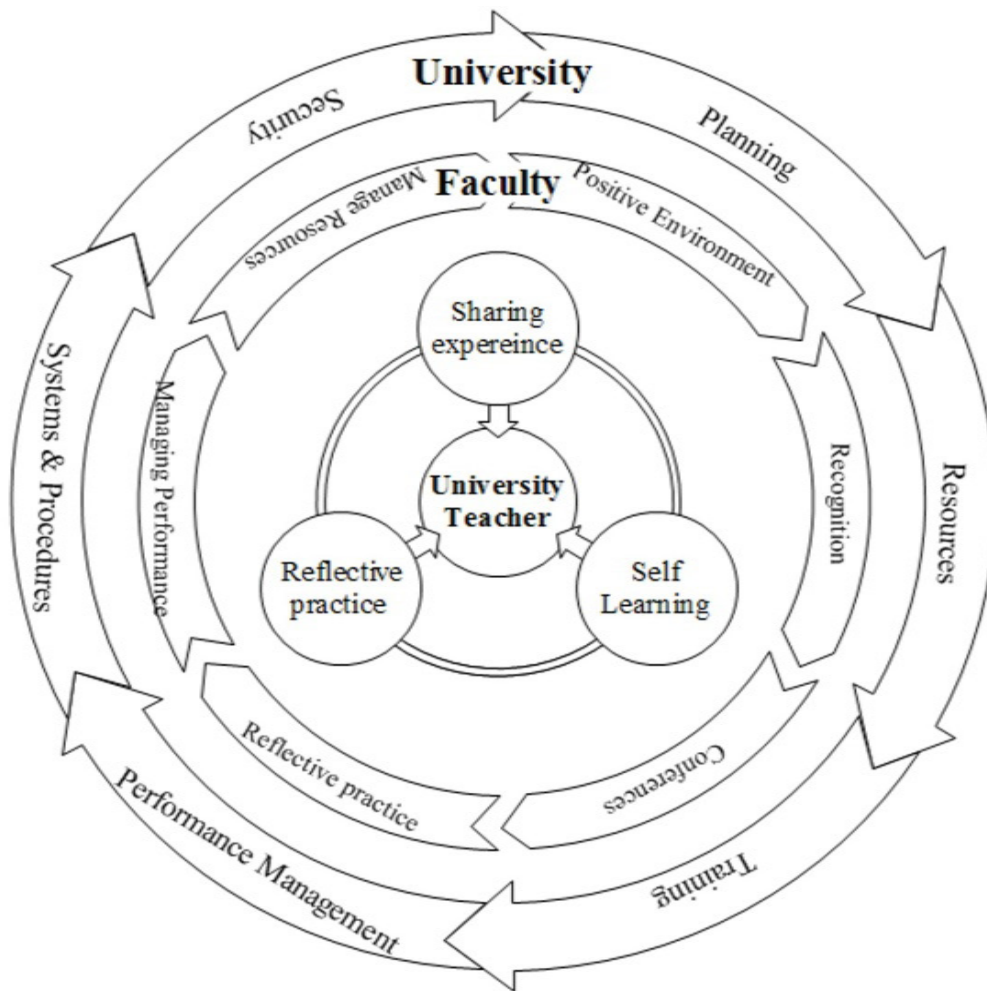

Figure 1.   Model of professional development for Libyan university teachers.

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