

Roles of Higher Diploma Programme in Enhancing Internal Quality of Higher Education: The Case of Ambo University, Ethiopia

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Article History: Received: August 18, 2016; Revised: March 23, 2017; Accepted: May 15, 2017

Abstract: Quality of education really matters, because it has direct effect on generating productive citizens. The purpose of the study was to assess roles of HDP in professionalization of higher education instructors. It also aimed at enhancing internal quality of higher education. Semi-structured interview and non-participant classroom teaching observations were used to gather data from participants. The qualitative research method through comparative case study design was used to analyze data. The results of the current study show that HDP plays significant roles in professionalization of instructors and in enhancing internal quality of higher education. Instructors who have been certified in HDP implemented contemporary learner-centered pedagogy through constructivist approach whereas instructors who have not been certified in HDP implemented conventional teacher-centered pedagogy through behavioral approach to deliver their course contents. The study implies that HDP training should be compulsory for every instructor in higher education regardless of academic rank and experience. Furthermore, Ambo University should give due emphasis to the implementation of pedagogical skills obtained from HDP by conducting a follow-up assessment.

Keywords: HDP; Higher education; Internal quality; Professionalization

1. Introduction

One of the main principles of modern education is learner-centered learning, aimed at students' personal potential maximum development (Hannafin, 2012). Thus, the quality of education we deliver to our students really matters, because it has direct effect on generating productive citizens. Internal quality of higher education refers to instructors' proficiency in modern pedagogical knowledge and skills. Internal quality of education related primarily to quality of knowledge, skills, and abilities of instructors (Kalimullin *et al.*, 2016). Instructor's teaching proficiency has been found to be a key factor that influences students' academic achievement, well-being in universities, and development of competent working citizens (Masters, 2015; Timperley, 2008; Hattie, 2009). Great teachers have potentially positive effect on students whereas teachers with poor teaching efficacy are vice-versa. Better prepared teachers can improve quality of education. Hence, instructors need to have competences in contemporary pedagogical skills. Competence is a set of knowledge, skills, and behaviors that must be owned, lived, and controlled by instructors in performing the responsibilities of professionalism (Hapsari, 2017). To achieve these requirements, instructors must have a number of pedagogical competencies. These competencies include task commitment, self-knowledge, having implicit value to knowledge, willingness to demonstrate effective performance, and transmit knowledge to others (Hapsari, 2017).

Higher diploma programme plays significant roles in enhancing internal quality of higher education. This programme is practical training and it takes one academic year to complete. Trainees are also expected to carry out their teaching duty alongside the training (Bogale, 2007). Enhancing instructors who have commitment to do a professional jobs at higher education that meet students' needs and academic standards is among major aims of universities. Committed people work hard towards organizational goal attainment (Mowday *et al.*, 1982). Pedagogues are seeking best practices to prepare educators who can improve students' outcomes, prepare learners for their future, increase students' engagement in learning, and help students to reach their full potential (Schrum *et al.*, 2016). To develop such teachers, different teaching approaches have been attempted from different theoretical perspectives. Constructive theory of learning is the prevailing modern perspective. Constructive theory of learning states that students have previous knowledge, intentions, and learning strategies that filter how the learning context is interpreted and influence their learning. According to the constructivist view, learners are sense makers who construct knowledge (Mayer, 2003). Constructivist teaching processes include discovery learning, problem solving, and related activities that challenge and actively engage students in the learning enterprise (Sternberg, 2003). Vygotsky (1978) suggests that knowledge is socially constructed; hence the learners should be placed at the center in creating meaning through various individual and social activities.

Contrary to constructive theory, behavioral theory of learning states that students learn well when teachers dominate the class by presenting information to students and control learning process. HDP is pedagogical training that relied on constructivist theory of learning.

The aim of the higher diploma programme for teacher educators is to improve the quality of education in Ethiopia through a licensing programme that will develop the skills and professionalism of teacher educators (MoE, 2011). 'Quality first' is the motto of HDP. Most European countries are getting much advantage from high quality education they provide to their nations. Regarding this, High level group (2014) states that providing high quality, relevant, and widely accessible higher education is a fundamental goal of the European higher education. Quality teaching can incorporate both the science of the discipline and the art of applying those skills in the most effective and eloquent fashion to bring about optimal outcomes for the students in a particular context. It develops over time but only with deliberate intent because the acquisition of experience does not automatically denote expertise (Berliner, 2001).

Higher diploma programme is internationally recognized as instrument for professionalization of higher institution instructors who can produce skilled working forces. In Ethiopia, this programme was first targeted at improving the quality of higher education (Sileshi, 2012). Livingstone *et al.* (as cited in MoE, 2014) stated that HDP was developed as a result of the study into the quality and effectiveness of teacher education in Ethiopia, which identified the needs of teacher educators in Ethiopia. Determining knowledge and skill that contribute to quality in teaching is essential in order to ensure professional learning programmes that focus on developing quality educators who are capable of engendering positive outcomes for all students. This study considers the roles of HDP in enhancing internal quality.

In today's competitive world, quality of higher education is salient modern instrument that is used to equip citizens with richer postmodern mentality, insightful understanding, and skills. This helps generation to stand on right ontology in search for better way to solve problems, learn from error, and not to commit constant failure. Abidin (2015) stated that one of the important determinants of national competitiveness in this global era is the quality of its higher education. If education system matches 21st century demands, it could provide millions of students where they will be able to capitalize on the unprecedented macro-opportunities of the globalization wave, if not; the macro-problems of globalization wave will push millions of students into trap where they ultimately will be crushed by the wave (Ambrose, 2016). Some of macro-opportunities are exponential knowledge growth, cognitive diversity, and unprecedented scientific and artistic networking while resource depletion, environmental devastation, climate change, and dangerous dogmatism are some of macro-problem of globalization (Ambrose, 2016).

Higher education is an institution that has direct effects on societal mental setup and problem-solving ability. It is an important aspect of the absorptive capacity of societies, the degree to which new knowledge is accessed, understood and used. It is a crucial means of realizing the ambition of making nations competitive in knowledge-based innovation. Regarding this, Pleschova *et al.* (2012) stated that higher education is one of the most important routes along which research has an impact on society, knowledge flowing via the heads of people into applications in daily life.

As one of higher education institutions, Ambo University has been playing important roles in producing qualified citizens and disseminating and promoting the use of researches. The goal of professionalizing academics as university instructors is to enhance students' learning. Professionalization plays important roles in improving instructors' instructing proficiency and self-efficacy. Regarding this, Pleschova *et al.* (2012) states that excellent teachers are made, not born; they become excellent through investment in their teaching abilities. In Ethiopia, HDP as sub programme of continuous professional development (CPD) was designed to enhance internal quality of education through professionalization of higher institution instructors. Urgessa (2012) states that HDP has been in place for teacher-educators to enhance their pedagogical skills and knowledge. It is a means in which expertise-based instructors gained contemporary pedagogical skills and come to be professional teacher in higher institutions. Professionalization of higher institution instructors is essential to assure and maintain education quality (Pleschova *et al.*, 2012; Pendergast *et al.*, 2011, & Bekele, 2008).

Quality of higher education is evaluated by the achievement of educational goals, competencies of graduates, and conformity with the standards set. HDP training as quality enhancement tool helps instructors to develop learner-centered pedagogical skills and thoughts. In order to provide quality education for citizens, teachers' pedagogical skills and self-efficacy in teaching are vital components. Regarding this, Pendergast *et al.* (2011: 46) states that:

Teacher self-efficacy is an important motivational construct that shapes teacher's effectiveness in the classroom. Teachers with a high level of teaching self-efficacy have been shown to be more resilient in their teaching and likely to try harder to help all students to reach their potential. In contrast, teachers with a low level of teaching self-efficacy have been found to be less likely to try harder to reach learning needs of all their students.

In modern academia, pedagogical skills are much emphasized. The purpose of teacher development is to help create learning environments that enhance educational quality. In the absence of educational development, teachers in higher education tend to base their teaching on their own experiences. This makes them rely on old teaching methods that focus on the teachers' rather than the students' needs. Dewey (1979) states that if we teach today as the same fashion we had been taught yesterday, we rob our children of tomorrow. This implies that teachers must update their knowledge and skills with dynamic and rapid changes of science and technology. Recently, there have been thoughts and actions to improve instructors' pedagogical thinking and skills via continuous professional developments such as HDP in Ethiopian universities. HDP is compulsory qualification for all teacher educators (MoE, 2014). Although HDP is believed to be instrument that improves internal quality of education, some instructors resist and think that attending HDP training is not mandatory. Some of them may think that HDP is only apt to newly deployed instructors. While HDP catches attention of many instructors who accepted changes in postmodern epistemology, it receives little attention by some instructors who consider themselves as full-fledged expertise after their graduation and resistant to change.

Some higher education instructors may hold a teaching position without having good pedagogical skills. They may get employed on the basis of their high academic achievement of grade point average in their major fields of studies upon their graduation. Postareff *et al.* (2007) state that in traditional institutions, the expertise in one's own discipline has been the most respected feature of a university teacher. This may put instructors in challenges of preparing appropriate instructional plan, selecting appropriate teaching methods, using assessment for learning and assessment of learning, engaging students in learning tasks, and communicating contents effectively. For these reasons, professionalization of instructors through higher diploma programme and other continuous professional development (CPD) are indispensable.

Although professional training through HDP has impacts on instructors' teaching effectiveness and teaching approaches, some instructors do not show interest to participate in HDP. Regarding this, Sileshi (2012) states that teachers, in principle agree that HDP can help improve the quality of education, however, they also confirm that teachers are not implementing many of the HDP principles in the real classroom situation as it has to be, due to different reasons and hence failed to meet the purpose for which it is intended. Anchored in the conventional teacher dominated classroom ideals, Ethiopian teacher educators failed to form spearhead in educational development endeavor (TESO, 2003). Absence of well-organized follow-up that enforces or reinforces instructors to attain and to use pedagogical skills gained from training is another factor that drags back the implementation of HDP. Regarding this, Bekele (2008) states that lack of follow-up support is among bottlenecks for implementation of skills gained from HDP.

Recently, there is widespread discontent over quality of education in Ethiopia. The new education and training policy (NETP) of Ethiopian states that our education is entangled with complex problems of relevance, quality, accessibility, and equity (MoE, 1994). The significant expansion in tertiary education has resulted in the need for more trained teacher educators to guarantee the quality, achieve the sector goals, and meet the demand for the HDP (MoE, 2014). According to Jebessa (2006), the current upturn in Ethiopian higher education institutions' enrolment is accompanied by concerns about threats to quality and standards. Ethiopian universities are responsible to solve the quality issues of education. Ambo University is among the concerned universities to play tremendous roles in producing graduates that have knowledge and skills to deal with practical problems in modern world. Unless universities are dedicated to big national missions in relation to producing capable human resources, economic growth and transformation of nation is not realized.

The purposes of this study were to assess roles of HDP training in enhancing internal quality of instructors' pedagogical skills and to compare the implementation level of learner-centered pedagogy between instructors who were certified and not certified in HDP. To deal with these objectives of the current study, the following research questions were addressed. These are: (a) what are the roles of HDP in enhancing pedagogical proficiency of instructors? (b) What are the differences

between instructors who were certified and not trained in HDP on providing quality education?

2. Research Methods

2.1. Research Design

In order to facilitate the extraction of data that would most satisfactorily addresses the above research questions, the researcher used comparative case investigation approach. According to Yin (2004), comparative case study methodology is a distinctive means of empirical enquiry particularly suitable for exploring the implementation process within a real-life context. A qualitative comparative case study design was used in this study to extract evidence from cases (case1-instructors who were certified in HDP and case 2-instructors who were not certified in HDP). In this study the term ‘case’ refers to instructors at Ambo University. The unit of analysis in this study was Ambo University. The unit of variation in this study was instructors’ differences in using learner-centered teaching approaches in the above two cases. Contemporary pedagogical skills were the themes for units of comparison. Hence, the comparative case study design is appropriate for this research.

2.2. Participants

The participants of this study were eight volunteer instructors at Ambo University. All of the participants have above five years teaching experience. Considering the instructors’ understanding of HDP training, participants were purposefully selected from five colleges (2 from health, 2 from agriculture, 2 from computational and natural sciences, 1 from education and behavioral sciences and 1 from social science and humanity). The study was geographically limited to Ambo University, main and Guder campuses. Ambo University is located in Ambo, the capital of West Shewa Zone of Oromia Regional State, 112 km West from Finfinnee (Addis Ababa), the capital of both Oromia Regional State and Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia.

2.3. Instruments

Semi-structured interview and non-participatory classroom teaching observation were conducted to collect data. Semi-structured interview with each instructor was lasted 30-40min. The central focus of the interview was on roles of HDP training in enhancing instructors’teaching proficiency. The interview was taped and transcribed. Receiving permission from participants, classroom-teaching observations were made to determine the extent to which HDP training is being implemented and compared instructors’ level of engagement with their students in learning tasks. Classroom-teaching observation checklist was developed from HDP training manual in the way that is suitable to compare instructors’ teaching effectiveness and reflectiveness.

2.4. Research Procedures

Semi-structured interview questions and observation checklist were developed and validated by HDP training leaders. The participants were selected on purposive sampling in which four were for case 1 and the other four were for case 2. The interviews between the researcher and the participants were recorded using audio

digital device. Since this study is conceptually confined to classroom-teaching proficiency of instructors who were certified and who have not yet attained HDP training, the confidentiality of data were maintained and in no way analysis of data directed to identifiable personality of participants.

2.5. Method of Data Analysis

The semi-structured interviews were transcribed for the two cases and classroom-teaching observations relied on indicators of contemporary pedagogy and instructors' proficiency in active learning approach. These indicators are: level of engaging students in learning task, use of formative assessments, and learner-centered pedagogy. Responses for semi-structured interview questions were transcribed and placed in blocked quotations, few bracketing and italics were used to analyze the data. Classroom-teaching observations were crosschecked according to indicators on the checklists and were analyzed qualitatively. The research findings were discussed by comparing with research findings of similar studies on HDP.

3. Results and Discussion

The following results were obtained from analyses of semi-structured interview and non-participant classroom-teaching observations data regarding roles of HDP in enhancing internal quality of higher education.

3.1. Analysis of Semi-Structured Interview

The results of the current study have showed that HDP plays significant roles in professionalization of instructors and enhancing internal quality of higher education. This means, it enables the certified instructors to acquire contemporary professional skills and knowledge of teaching in higher education. This study has found that HDP is among instruments used to assure instructors' teaching proficiency. Internal quality can be assured when instructors' teaching proficiency is assured. One of the professional teaching skills is the use of formative assessment to support students' learning. Participants who were certified in HDP responded that HDP has helped them to use continuous assessment and to provide continuous feedback when they deliver courses and they said it has helped them to conduct [practitioner] research. They responded that HDP has improved their [teaching] profession and teaching-learning processes. These are the expected proficiency that professional instructors should own to assure internal quality at higher education.

Regarding supporting students' learning, one of the interviewees from case 1 replied that:

I use more examples, at the same time, I try to understand the learning style of my students, because it is very important, some of them want to learn by hearing from me, some want to doing assignments and practical activities in the course, some others want to learn through the use of visual materials. So, I change my teaching according to students' learning styles and try to address the needs of students in classroom and reduce confusion they may face in learning the course.

From this response, it is possible to say instructors who attended HDP training endeavor to implement different learning style based on visual, auditory, kinesthetic and tactile (VAKT) model in their lesson delivery. In line with this, Chism (1998)

states that understanding of student learning as a model of the variety of ways in which students learn is expected from graduates after qualified in contemporary pedagogical skills and knowledge.

Student-centered pedagogy is contemporary teaching-learning approach and it is demanding. Engaging students in learning tasks is one of the professional qualities of higher education instructors that enhance students learning. Instructors who were certified in HDP better engaged their students in learning tasks than instructors who were not certified in HDP. The indicators to this theme are they use verbal reinforcement, prepare questions for discussion in pair work, prepare content-relevant independent activities to address contents of the course, select and use appropriate active learning strategies, encourage students by giving more chance to participate, and communicate the content of the lesson. Regarding these, one of the participants from case 1 responded that:

I prefer active learning strategy in my classroom because, when students learn through active learning strategy, their learning has long lasting effects. Students are interested and active when engaged in active learning. It gives opportunity for students to construct their own knowledge, so that my role is supporting their activities by providing them materials on which they construct their knowledge.

Pedagogical skills and subject area expertise are the cornerstones of teaching proficiency that help internal quality of higher education. Regarding this, one of the participants from case 1 responded that:

I was telling rather than teaching in passive and calm classroom before I attained HDP training. I tell to students what are in my mind from my expertise knowledge. In that way of traditional teaching, there is no reflection, no engagement of students, no feedback and no formative assessment. But, after I attained HDP training, I implement different active learning methods, ideas flow forth and back between student-and- student and me, my class is always active. HDP training greatly improved my teaching quality and my confidence.

Regarding the implementation of skills gained from HDP training for assuring internal quality, one of the participants from case 1 explained that:

Though I'm not practicing it at expected level due to factors such as large class-size and lack of instruments, there are a lot of changes I can account. For instance, before I took HDP training, I did not prepare good tests that have content validity. After I took HDP training, I prepare lesson objectives, I prepare items after every session for tests and examinations, I give immediate learning feedback for students, and I used continuous assessment for learning. Above all, I got good attitudinal change about HDP training.

In line with this, Fry (2006) states that to gain accreditation, programmes will need to show how instructors apply the framework of the programmes to their learning outcomes and assessment activities.

Another respondent replied that "Particularly, HDP training is very essential for instructors who are out of college of education." There is no similar view between instructors in case 2. One of the instructors in case 2 shows the tendency to belittle HDP. Regarding this one participant from case 2 responded that "I have been given chances to attain HDP training three times. But, I have no interest to do so. I think there will be no new thing in the training. Unless someone enforced me to attain this training as a mandatory, I will not attain this training." The other three participants from case 2 have different view point from the first one. They responded that

“updating [the mind] knowledge and skills and mental refreshment [awareness] are good. It is necessary to improve our services and our knowledge. So it is good to attain such trainings from time to time.”

3.2. Analysis of Classroom-Teaching Observations

The results of classroom-teaching observations have shown that instructors in case 1 communicated their lesson better than instructors in case 2. Instructors in case 1 used different active learning methods in their lesson and employed formative assessment. They were also better in setting lesson objectives, introducing lesson objectives, presenting, managing and achieving the lesson objectives than instructors in case 2.

Students were more engaged in learning tasks in classrooms of instructors in case 1 than instructors in case 2. Communication was a two-way in case 1 while it was a one-way in case 2. Students in case 2 were silent. In some cases, they were kinking their hairs and holding their chin while instructors were lecturing. Communication was mostly a one-way: from instructor to students (teacher-centered approach). Regarding this, Postareff *et al.* (2007) state in teacher-centred teaching, the transmitted knowledge is gained or constructed by the teacher. Students are considered more or less as passive recipients of that information, and the existing knowledge students have is not taken into account. While instructors in case 1 assessed the learning of their students, instructors in case 2 left classroom without assessing the learning of their students. Contrary to Bekele (2008), instructors in case 1 made more efforts to help students' learning than instructors in case 2. Postareff *et al.* (2007) state that in order to promote students' deep approaches to learning, appropriate assessment must take place.

According to Leroy *et al.* (2007), teachers who set up a controlling climate tend to do most of the talking and allow little time for students to work collaboratively or to participate in class discussions. Hence, they do not address students' needs. Hapsari (2017) states that qualified teachers are a key to generation progress. Therefore, HDP training is necessary in order to employ modern pedagogy to help students reach their maximum potential.

4. Conclusion and Recommendation

4.1. Conclusion

Learning requires learners to play active roles in order to acquire new knowledge. Regarding this, Debele (2006) states that effective learning occurs when students actively participate in learning tasks. The findings of this study show that HDP plays significant roles in enhancing internal quality of higher education. This is in line with the finding by Sileshi (2012) that states all of the respondents agree that HDP is a pretty good training package. This study reveals that encouragement from the university to HDP is limited. The university has not also carried out the necessary follow-up study to judge how useful or successful HDP has been. This is in line with Bekele's (2008) finding that states lack of follow-up is indicated as barrier to HDP training.

Instructors who were certified in HDP depicted competence and professionalism and have many good qualities. They set and introduced lesson objectives, communicated contents, engaged students in learning tasks, managed lessons properly, used different active learning methods, carried out continuous assessments, and achieved the lesson objectives better than instructors who were not certified in HDP. The difference between instructors who have completed a course of training in HDP and those who have not is that the former used a two-way communication while the latter used a one-way communication. The former played mediatory roles to help students learn by themselves. Besides, they engaged learners in learning tasks while the latter thought the conventional lecture method of teaching is the only one way and kept learners in passive situation. They believed students learn better from the presentation of their teachers.

4.2. Recommendation

Emphasis by university's administration to HDP training as it is a tool for internal quality is indispensable. However, there is limitation in enforcing, reinforcing, and assessing implementation of HDP training outcomes to real classroom situations. In order to promote appropriately skilled workforces that fit the challenges of 21st century, the university shall pay more attention to internal quality assurance through professional training such as HDP training. Hence, the university must be committed to encourage and provide effective support to HDP training and incarnate all dimensions that foster quality teaching and teaching proficiency in order to ensure and maintain internal quality education. Regardless of their academic status and experience, instructors have to attain HDP training because expertise and experience without teaching professionalization is meaningless. The university should be ready to act towards internal quality of education by establishing a quality assurance center, so that it is possible to evaluate its implementation.

5. Acknowledgements

The author thanks Mekonnen Kajela and Misgana Jora (both are PhD candidates at Addis Ababa University), Motuma Hirphasa and Bonsa Tola for their great contribution and support to this study. The author also greatly thanks participants of the study for their genuine responses. This study was entirely funded by the researcher. He was inspired to make contribution to the academia.

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