

Challenges of Libyan Vocational education: a case study of College of Tourism and Hospitality in Tripoli

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a qualitative case study (Yin, 2003) about vocational education challenges. More specifically, it tackles the challenges encountered by teachers and administrative authorities of educational institutions. It also describes some of the hurdles that impede vocational education to achieve its essential objectives. The study was conducted in the College of Tourism and Hospitality as a current situation of vocational education. Semi-structured interviews were employed to collect data. Furthermore, the paper concludes that vocational education still suffers from various hurdles that hinder its development. It also recommends reform of vocational education and pay great consideration to enable this sector to play its basic role in accelerating the development and contribution to the economic activities in Libya.

Key words: higher education, vocational education, challenges, training

1. INTRODUCTION

Vocational and technical higher education institutions are clearly in the middle of rapid change in response to economic, political transformation, technological and social changes (Suwaedl&Rahouma, 2015). There is no doubt that vocational, technical education and training play an important and strategic role in accelerating the wheels of development and progress in any society. It also looks forward to achieving any further contribution in the economic activities in the future. Thus, it is essential to focus on this type of education and to provide support for it in terms of material and human resources.

In Libya, tourism is a key to economic development and diversification beyond oil production. To achieve this, the Libyan Tourism Industry was established and which considers human resource (HR) as important issues (Naama, 2007). Thus, this paper focuses on analysing the challenges of education and training in Libyan vocational institutes represented in the College of Tourism and Hospitality.

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While there are more opportunities for the development of higher education currently, there are also significant hurdles impeding it. Among the hurdles are those encountered by language teachers in their teaching practice and the administrative authorities in some institutions.

In terms of teaching languages in particular, most of the local universities in Libya including the College of Tourism and Hospitality, the context of this study, do not provide pre service or in service training programmes in teaching and learning to their staff (Elhees, 2015; Abusrewel, 2014). This is based on the assumption that holding an MA/Ph.D. degree is considered enough to qualify a professional teacher. Furthermore, most of the academic staff in the Libyan higher education do not receive adequate and effective training programmes in learning and teaching methods, despite being highly qualified in terms of scientific skills (Elhees, 2015; Abused, 2002). Therefore, university teachers/lecturers in Libya are left to their own knowledge and experience to design their courses and select the appropriate approaches and materials for teaching various specializations sometimes (Elabbar, 2011). This is the situation of English language teachers in vocational and technical colleges where English is almost taught for specific purposes such as tourism, hospitality, nursing and accounting...etc (see 2.3). Based on this, this research aims to investigate the challenges that some university lecturers face and the reasons behind such situation. Before that, an over view of higher education is given and the key factors identified by literature.

2. Higher Education in Libya

Higher education in Libya includes three major sections: university education, higher technical and vocational institutions, and higher institutes or colleges for training. Higher technical and vocational institutions offer programmes in fields such as electronics, mechanical engineering, finance, computer studies, medical technology, tourism and hospitality and others. The qualifications awarded after three or four years at vocational institutes or colleges and centres are the higher technician diploma and bachelor degree according to the specialization. Technical and vocational education and training (TVET) is an important sub-sector of the public education system in Libya. Accordingly, during 1990s, some of these institutions were established for the purpose of providing highly qualified human resource to fulfil the requirements of the social and economic development. The need for professional cadres in later years has led Arab countries including Libya to pay more attention to professional education and training, to the extent of establishing specialised institutions in this field.

Libyan higher education institutions clearly experience rapid change in response to economic, political and social changes happening currently. Despite the positive impacts of this expansion on the Libyan society, a number of researchers argue that these institutions have increased in numbers at the expense of qualitative aspects (Al-badree, 2007). Although higher education has more opportunities for development currently, there are also significant hurdles that impede the changes.

2. Literature Review

Vocational and technical education like general education face some hurdles that inhibit achieving the assigned objectives and contributing in any development intended. For instance, Alrashdan (2009) identifies the main challenges that encounter higher education in the Arab world which include the poor quality of higher education programmes and the limited scientific research that might contribute to the improvement of this sector. There are no fixed or pre-arranged curricula for such institutions for teachers to follow.

As mentioned above, vocational education encounters serious hurdles that impede it from achieving its essential goals and contributing in any potential development. The next section discusses some of these hurdles .

2.1. The Absence of Training Programmes

Training programmes in universities are important sectors of the public education system in Libya. The literature review has shown that there is very little attention paid covering the problems and issues related to training programmes in Libya, particularly at Higher Education (HE) level. (Elhees, 2015; Elzalitani, 2008; Hamad, 2006, Al-Badree, 2007). Also, the United Nations Development Programme UNDP (2002), points out that Arab countries' progress including Libya in the areas of scientific research, technological development and information communication technology is weak. This is attributed to political and social reasons of relevance to each country individually. The need to have cadres in different sectors compel higher institutions to focus on quantity more than quality sometimes (Elhees, 2015).

2.2. Limitation of Syllabi

There are very limited specific syllabi prepared for the various specialization assigned by the higher education authority. For instance, these syllabi are very limited in terms of time and contents. They are also neither available to teachers nor students easily. Teachers have to prepare them, use them and hand them to the students respectively. These vocational colleges do not have the specialised syllabi that serve each field separately sometimes. This is left to the teacher's responsibility most of the time (Elhees, 2015).

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2.3. English for Specific Purposes

The syllabi at higher education institutions are kinds of ESP that present information for different specialty to students. The ESP focal point is that English is not taught as a subject separated from the students' real world (or wishes); instead, it is integrated into a subject matter area important to the learners. It prepares a specific group of learners differently from those learning general English, because they need English for specific purposes rather than using it in daily life (Dudley-Evans, 1998). Having such preparation qualifies the students to learn the language in order to communicate a set of professional skills and to perform particular job-related functions. Another important point is teacher training which means that teachers teaching ESP courses should obtain special training in order to teach such courses because “they are not only teaching English but also special technical terms according to different subjects”(Bracaj, 2014, p. 41)

The current situation of the country contributes to unavailability of sources related to specific specializations in many of the colleges because of fund. Moreover, if teachers have got their own materials, they find difficulties in printing or photocopying such materials to their students. Such condition affects teachers’ successful implementation of change in their own teaching/learning contexts. Respectively, students are unable to find such sources because their budget does not help them.

In addition to the lack of teaching materials, these colleges do not have any practical facilities that support lecturers diversify their teaching and offer other means of learning. This also leads staff to resort to traditional methods of teaching which have negative impact on the learning outcome (Elabbar, 2011). All the mentioned reasons have their direct impacts on both lecturers and students in many colleges particularly under vocational education.

2.4. Qualifying teachers in higher education

Teachers themselves sometimes are not prepared to teach technical English and they have not often taken any courses or training before tackling such courses (Abusrewel, 2014; Elhees, 2015). Thus, they resort to traditional methods such as lectures and tutorials in which there is little interaction with students. Consequently this does not contribute to the students’ skills development and affects their productivity.

2.5. Lack of permanent staff for these institutions

Many of the staff at some colleges are part time teachers and many come for one semester or two. Some live in somehow remote places and some of these lecturers are employees at other organizations. This affects the teaching–learning processes, particularly the choice of materials and the intention of contribution to any developmental plans of such courses. It also inhibits the institutions where they work in terms of planning any activities aiming at training or developing these staff. The need to make educational processes continue in many colleges enforces them to appoint part-time staff despite the problems associated with them.

2.6. Lack of facilities

Another obstacle encountering teachers is the lack of facilities (Elhees, 2015; Abusrewel, 2014) such as (language laboratories, overhead projectors, and other facilities). Such conditions inhabit teachers from carrying out their lectures as they should be. Language lecturers often could not for example, find audio-visual facilities in classes. Listening materials usually are not used in class if the lecturer does not bring a Laptop himself/herself. This lack affects the students' abilities to listen to English by native speakers in various contexts which is not available to the majority outside colleges. The impact affects students' listening abilities for the long term. Such lack inhibits teachers to diversify their teaching and does not help students to learn effectively.

2.7. Time allocated to teaching

The time devoted to teaching English, in particular, is insufficient to prepare and qualify the graduates to meet the demand of the market. For instance, two/three hours weekly do not help the teachers to present materials that can qualify the students to meet the requirement of the market. This assigned time does not assist teachers to vary the activities and give students chances to practice the language orally or in written forms. Such a case leads students to care for passing exams more than developing their skills. It is a hurdle to both teachers and students.

2.8. Absence of motivation

One of the factors that impedes teaching or learning English at some colleges is lacking motivation (Dörnyei, 2003). It has been widely accepted as a key factor which influences the rate and success of second or foreign language learning (Purdie, 2003). Lack of motivation can present a very complicated environment to develop learning English or develop any skills. It also influences the teachers' choices of materials and tasks.

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Many of the students mentioned that they do not apply to other colleges because of English. This lack might be related to their previous studies or other personal reasons. Such lack disturbs teachers and hinders them from implementing any activities that might contribute to students' development. Despite the great need to English language, many students are not motivated to improve it for the long term.

2.9. Lack of training (staff and students)

Lack of training leads teachers to rely on implementing teacher-centred methods which do not help students learn how to think or infer. Teachers, for instance, have little experience of using modern educational methods that assist students to develop new skills or raise motivation for better building of knowledge. It can be noticed that teacher education programmes failed to qualify EFL teachers and provide them with the professional preparation they need in their profession (Abusrewel, 2014; Elhees, 2015). Teachers are neither involved in the process of designing any curriculum (Orafi& Borg, 2009) nor are they offered any training to develop their teaching (Abusrewel, 2014). Such cases require serious reform of teacher education at all levels in Libya. Staff training and development still seem far from decision-making at higher level education. Libyan institutions of higher education do not offer training to its staff and could not benefit from offers provided by other institutions.

2.10. Country instability

The instable situation in Libya affects all sectors of life. Study has to be suspended for many days and sometimes weeks in some cases. Students are unable to come to their colleges or university. This affects their attendance, understanding their lessons in addition to the anxiety they have all the time concerning coming and going back. The impact of the current situation also hinders lecturers from coming, giving lectures and participating in other activities in their universities or other institutions.

3.1. The Research Approach

A qualitative case study approach (Yin, 2003), was selected to explore teachers' views about the challenges that they face in teaching of English in vocational education institutions. It also investigates the management perceptions with reference to the college of Tourism and Hospitality in Tripoli. The participants included 10 lecturers at vocational institutions in addition to the management staff of the college of Tourism and Hospitality. The research incorporates semi-structured interview with college principals, and academic staff at the college of Tourism and Hospitality.

3.2. The Study Context

This study was conducted in the College of Tourism and Hospitality in Tripoli which is the first and main institution that supplies the Libyan Market with highly qualified human resource to fulfil the requirements of the socio-economic development plans in the field of tourism and hospitality. Studying tourism and hospitality at this college lasts four years (8 semesters) divided between the theoretical courses and the field work. Among the most important subjects studied at this college are languages (English and French) as a key stone in the field of tourism and hospitality. Other subjects can be described as fulfilling the objectives assigned in their inclusion in the syllabi of the courses taught at the college, because they are taught in Arabic. Teaching English is still beyond the extent to qualify competent employees who can cover the demand of the market.

4.1. Results and Discussion

This part summarizes the result of this research. It tackles the most important issues of great relevance to technical and vocational education that is obtained from analysing the data of the interviews with lecturers and staff in college of Tourism and hospitably. The interviewees referred to the problems encountered making links between them.

4.2. The Absence of Research and Training Programmes in Libyan Universities

As mentioned above, the problem is not new (Alhees, 2015; Abusrewel, 2014; Elzalitani, 2008; Naama, 2007; Hamad, 2006). Currently training programmes at universities are almost dormant due to the political and economic situations of the country. The budget allotted to these institutions impede conducting any scientific research or participating in any potential activities. Individuals on their turns are unable to participate in any potential training locally or internationally. One lecturer mentioned some reasons that led her not to think of any training or research stating,

Fatma1: Participating in training or a conference has become a dream. University offers no fund and individuals are unable financially to manage that. I do not want to be unrealistic. Let us have a stable country first!

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All the interviewees (lecturers and the head of the college) have the same view despite their ways of conveying the message. Such views reflect their frustration of the current situation which affects the whole sectors of life in the Libyan context. This also mirrors the impact of the conflict and its consequences on conditions of research and training at universities. The situation also hinders universities from collaboration with international universities in terms of training programmes and twinning of universities to which the head of the college referred:

Because of the current situation, we are unable to plan and accept offers from other institutions to share programmes, exchange experience and conduct training or research.

He added that the current situation contributes to missing changes of development and benefit from other international institutions' experience in the field of tourism. This effect can be noticed in the plan for development in comparison with what is internationally going on in this field.

4.3. Problems connected with teaching of English

Discussing problems related to teaching, all the lecturers seem dissatisfied with the whole issues. For instance, in terms of the availability of teaching materials, they confirmed that they have to manage their own materials. The colleges do not offer any materials to staff. The library if there is one, does not have any sources for lending either to staff or students. Lecturers usually manage their sources in different ways and this is not the scope to write about. When lecturers have their sources, they still find difficulty in making them available to their students. They only make photocopies either for themselves or their students. The copied materials if available lose a lot of its use in terms of audio-visual values. One lecturer put this in a nutshell.

Fadwa: When I decide to teach in any vocational colleges, one thing usually comes to my mind, "Are there any specific materials? Or do I have to search, download it, photocopy it and hand it to the students for photocopying too? How can I manage that, do I need to ask other colleagues? Will they lend me?"

Another issue of great importance, in some vocational colleges such as the context of this study, the syllabi for each specialisation is limited in terms of the time allotted to the subject; that is two or three hours weekly. Such time does not give lecturers the chance to cover items prepared for that semester for instance. Students also do not benefit from that material as it should be. In addition, some hours might be lost for one reason or another. The result affects the outcome of the course in relation to what the lecturers give and how much the students gain. Fatan referred to that stating:

Two hours do not help both teachers and students. I find myself confused of what to teach in terms of its importance and benefits to the students for the long term. I spoke with those in charge of time distribution, they stated that time division is scheduled from the department of curricula, the Ministry of Education and they cannot violate the rule and no way to add extra hours.

One of the researcher's experience is similar to Fatan's where the achievement of the semester is limited and what the students' gain might be more limited than the lecturer's. This issue of limited time leads some lecturers to avoid or limit their cooperation with some colleges where they could not find specified syllabi and materials. In case some accept being part time lecturers, they try to manage that semester and leave without handing copies of the materials to be used with another lecturer later on. The story continues and this happens to the new comers and so on.

This is a serious problem with vocational colleges in which the staff are not permanent most of the time especially for English language. This shortage of permanent staff also contributes to the choice and the availability, development and offer the teaching materials of those specialised colleges. It is noticed that some part time lecturers may not cooperate with the colleges in which they work. They do not leave copies of the materials taught that might be used by another lecturer. This is what can be inferred from what Nada mentioned.

When I started teaching here, the college offered nothing to me. I searched and asked friends even outside Libya to get materials for teaching tourism. I had to depend on myself even in photocopying and giving the students a copy to photocopy too. I could not ask the students to get the materials which were hard for me. As far as I am here, I use my own material and when I leave, the next comers have to manage themselves.

It was something surprising for the researchers at the beginning, but Nada (lecturer) and others have their excuses. No one has helped one of the researcher to manage the material. She asked a colleague in the same college but found no response. The inference that can be made here that mutual engagement is unavailable for one reason or another. Communities of practice which Wenger (1998) considers as sources of mutual engagement that enables members to cooperate does not exist. Evidence of mutual engagement between lecturers as colleagues was relatively limited in this study.

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This can be related to the lack of integration that was exacerbated by the conflict in Libyan situation. The evidence from the data suggests that people are very cautious in interacting with each other and regard each other with suspicion. Both the conflict and the social and cultural situation contributed to hindering the development of mutual engagement. In turn, this affects severely the relationship between members in the same college. What was observed clearly indicates that many lecturers were reserved in their contact with each other as mentioned above.

Other lectures referred to the problems of facilities not only at this college, but at almost all the colleges, all universities particularly at this time. This affects the teaching-learning process. Fatma (2) commented:

Fatma (2): I tried to use different materials that help my students. I bring my PC, but unfortunately, there is no light. I asked the college for data show because the lesson is better seen than long traditional explanation. What do you think I can do?

Fatma (2) was not the only lecturer who referred to that. The researchers heard that in different places. If any lecturer wants to use any materials or any facilities, he/she has to manage that. One cannot blame some lecturers for teaching traditionally and not using some facilities as a means to enhance their teaching. Such situation does not motivate both lecturers and students. Lecturers might stop cooperating with that college or ignore looking for improving teaching at all.

Another issue of great importance is the absence of reward or encouragement for those staff of distinctive teaching. This impedes some teachers to contribute to any programmes for developing teaching or participating in other activities.

Asking the head of the college about the facilities, he also mentioned almost the same reasons adding that they try to do their best to provide what is offered by higher education or the Ministry of Education. He added:

Now I can ascertain that we try to make students find places to study as possible. We have nothing to hide; we send requests for different facilities, but we receive no reply. What we look for is that the teaching-learning process continues by any means. We have to struggle hard.

The comments of the interviewees reflect the current situation of education regardless their positions. The views also indicate that all sectors of life are influenced by the current situation of the country. However the head of this college seems more optimistic than the other staff despite the challenges.

4.4. Problems related to Qualifying teachers in higher education

Preparing teachers of English at university usually takes place at Faculty of Education. However, graduates of Faculties of Arts and Languages are appointed as teachers at different institutions. In addition, MA and PhD holders are appointed to teach at different colleges. Through interviews, none of the interviewees referred to any training through their university or during their postgraduate studies. They also mentioned that they did not have any courses related to teaching special subject at any level. Moreover, they confirmed having no training before commencing teaching at any institutions. Fatan referred to that stating,

I have never been taught any material related to tourism or hospitality during my study. When I came here, I was too much confused to find any material. Although I had intensive courses, there were nothing to teach what can be known as English for special purposes. I have never had any training. What I do is my own hard work to teach my students here. I depend on myself to manage my teaching.

Issues of training and teacher education programme is something important though it still does not receive the care needed (Elhees, 2015; Abusrewel, 2014, Naama, 2007). To sum up the views, there is a mutual agreement that training and professional development still do not receive great university care. This issue requires reconsideration of the higher education policy.

4.5. Issues related to students

During the interviews, almost all the interviewees referred to students' lack of motivation. They mentioned that many students do not come regularly to lectures. They also added that even those who come on somehow regular basis attend a limited number of lectures. This affects their achievements and can be noticed in the results of each semester.

The reasons behind such lack may be related to the country current situation, personal, something related to traditional teaching and lack of facilities and motivated materials. Aza found excuses to students stating

Aza: I cannot blame the students alone, look how they come here. I listen to their complaints; their burden is heavy. The whole situation does not serve them. They are relatively frustrated.

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The researchers also had short interviews with some students at the College of Tourism and Hospitality and in other institutions. It was an attempt to investigate the reasons behind this issue. It is noticeable that the majority of the students are working and studying at the same time. This has its impact on their achievement in general. They devote little time to their study. The financial situation enforces them to search for jobs though they are still students. This situation also does not help them to get supportive sources. Their concern has become gaining money more than having qualifications. This is basically the impact of the current situation of the country.

4.6. Problems of fund

Fund has become a serious problems to all institutions' authorities. They often repeat the same words "we have no fund to spend on non-essential matters." These institutions almost do not have the ability to any activities or training. Those who are in charge find no answers to inquiries about fund. The notorious bureaucracy and the current situation contribute to exacerbation of all the problems and there is nothing in the horizon referring to comprehensive final solutions to them. The matter exacerbates to include paying salaries of staff particularly part time ones. Such condition adds another challenge to study at some institutions particularly those depending on part time lecturers.

4.7. Issues of relevance to management

While interviewing the dean of the college, he referred to the bureaucracy which stands as a hindrance in carrying out and fulfilling many activities on the level of this institution (Alhess, 2015) He added that they officially present comprehensive plans for improving the quality of education but everything is postponed to unknown date. The current situation also does not help the college to benefits from offer of collaboration with other universities on the international level in terms of training and exchanging staff for training. In addition, the absence of the qualified administrative staff also plays an essential role and contributes to the ineffectiveness of developing the work of the institution. Certainly the current situation affects the productivity of the staff and limitation of any fruitful results.

5. CONCLUSION

There are a number of interrelated issues that challenge the development of vocational education in Libya. However, these issues are exacerbated by some local constraints, which need to be addressed such as the absence of research, training and professional development. However, the political and social issues contribute negatively to improvement of this type of education despite the country's great need to its graduates to satisfy the increase demand of the local market. The quantity and quality of graduates from such sectors and in particular tourism and hospitality are inadequate for the needs of the Libyan tourism and hospitality industries at least currently. In order to achieve the main objectives of establishing vocational education, a fundamental review of curriculum and ongoing evaluation of its fitness for purpose are essential. A reform of plans on the largest extend needs to be carefully reviewed and initiate improvement to this education. Paying great attention to the current challenges and find solutions to them will push vocational education forward and fruitful results will be cultivated.

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