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Makerere Uni er it

Abstract

In the last ten years, Makerere University, Uganda's oldest premier public academic institution has experienced what has been variously referred to as a quiet revolution. With dwindling government funding that has been characteristic of most developing countries, and realizing that she was losing her human resource in the brain drain wave, Makerere University took a bold shift in 1993 by introducing a private students' scheme. The University convinced government for 5% privately sponsored intake. By 1996, the Faculties of Social Sciences, Arts, Education and Law were offering fully fledged Private Evening programmes while other academic units had substantially increased their private students' intake during the day government programme. To-date, almost all academic units in the university are running privately sponsored programmes. The quiet revolution has however not been without challenges. The expansion and refinancing of the university has meant that classes are not only larger but quite diversified in terms of student

The past decade has witnessed a drastic change in the way universities are structured and financed worldwide. Globally, majority of students seeking university education are self-financed. Governments are investing less and less in higher education, leading to emerging private sector-funded universities (Biggs 2003: 1). Like the trend seems to be, Makerere University, a national university in Uganda, has been running fully fledged privately sponsored programmes since 1996. While this

development has widened university education opportunities to the populace, it has got pedagogical implications. Classes have enlarged, and the university has attracted a diverse student population with varied learning abilities, motivation and cultural background. While the brightest and most committed students are still admitted as it has been the case in the past, but alongside these are students with neither strong learning abilities nor strong academic backgrounds. This puts more demands on the university teacher in terms of teaching skills. As appropriately noted by Biggs (ibid., p2), the lecture

method, for example, seemed to be adequate at the time when students were highly selected. With a diverse student populace alternative instructional strategies need to be embraced if all learners are to gain equally from the knowledge and skills being mediated.

practice with a view to making it better. Healey (2000)

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Realising the drastic changes resulting from the self-sponsorship scheme, an effective teaching and learning policy is at the heart of Makerere University's draft quality assurance policy. To achieve this, and consistent with international trends, a professional development programme has been developed albeit as a pilot project in the faculties of law and science to build the capacity of staff. It is believed that promoting better teaching practices through professional development is part of the drive for quality and excellence (Nicoll and Harrison, 2003). The professional development component of the policy avers that teachers need to be supported to gain skills of maintaining and enhancing academic standards, pastoral care and social life of students (Quality Assurance Task Force, 2006: 21).

School of Education working hand in hand with the university's quality assurance unit developed a training programme which not only focussed on the university teacher's teaching role, but also on other roles such as student support, curriculum development and course leadership.

One such training was a 5-day programme for the faculty of science (departments of Zoology and Chemistry).

To make the training meaningful in the professional lives of the science teachers, a reflective practice methodology was embraced. Schon (1983) has described reflective practice as the need for professionals including teachers to reflect when faced with new problems or difficulties for which they have not been specifically trained. Elliott (1991) and Kember and Kelly (1993) have equated reflective practice to action research and/or action learning respectively. The "learning" or "action" refers to the use of reflection to become a better teacher. In other words, reflective practice requires the practitioner to contemplate on his/her current

I have got extensive research experience in my field.

I have been teaching for a long time and therefore experienced.

I am always willing to learn from colleagues.

I have good knowledge of the subject matter of my discipline... even the very difficult stuff.

My supervision of students is effective. They are all able to complete on time.

I am good at Planning for teaching i.e. scope and content.

I am able to complete the planned course content on time.

Even without enough materials I am able to improvise.

I make teaching interesting to the students. I am naturally an artist.

I relate with students very well.

Their weak areas that they felt needed strengthening included the following:

Lowering material to student level-putting a line between undergraduate and graduate level.

How to teach in a resource-constrained environment.

How to engage my students in the lesson.

How to start a course in a way that attracts students' interest

How to set exams.

Getting students to take their work seriously.

Even with the several strengths the science faculty felt they possessed, they expected the professional development training to help them become better teachers on return to their units in the following ways:

I expect to learn methods that can stimulate my students' interest and learning...

I expect to learn how to engage my students actively.

I expect to learn how to lower materials to student level.

I expect to learn how to promote quality learning in a

carrying out a needs assessment prior to the training" to find out exactly what the workshop participants need in order to cater for their specific needs and make them more included". This underscores the importance of locating any professional development programme in the practitioners' praxis.

With the increasingly transforming structure and financing of higher education resulting into a diverse student population, there is no escaping the fact that universities need to invest in preparing their teachers for the change. In addition to teachers possessing a rich body of knowledge in their specialisations, they also need to possess knowledge of how the subjects are best learned and taught (Ramsden, 1992:2).

However, as universities embark or continue with projects of developing the capacity of their teachers, the model of professional development that is based on reflective practice appears to be a desirable approach. Exposing teachers to a whole new range of teaching techniques would be a futile attempt. But allowing them to reflect on their existing practice with a view of identifying gaps and deriving their own solutions albeit with some support from education experts is more meaningful. Allowing the science faculty in Makerere University to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses in their praxis enabled the education faculty to structure the professional development programme in a way that permitted their colleagues to start rethinking their teaching approaches immediately after the training. One week after the training, one of the participants reported via e-mail:

...I am trying to implement some of the things like getting students to discuss a topic in between the lecture but they seemed puzzled by this change in tactic. I guess they are already conditioned to a 1 hr monologue!! But will keep trying for greater involvement.

The science faculty have embarked on a life-long learning journey in which they appear to be ready to learn and improve their practice continuously. Indeed as Biggs (2003: 7) has noted: Learning new techniques for teaching is like the fish that provides a meal today;

reflective practice is the net that provides meals for the rest of your life". What remains now is structuring the professional development project into action research in which the changes that the science faculty have made on to their practice are conscientiously monitored to gauge their success.

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