

Reflections on Higher Diploma Programme (HDP): The Case of St. Mary's University College

Bekalu Atnafu, Lecturer, St. Mary's University College

Abstract

Improving the quality of education should undoubtedly be a focus of attention. Continuing professional development such as in-service training is one of the most pressing of all the factors that affect quality of education. This x-rays that courses taken in higher institutions influence learners very little and any effect may be "washed out" in the first year of teaching (Zeichner and Tabachnik, 1981 cited by Higgins and Leat, 2001). In view of the above points, this study has been designed to explore issues in relation to Higher Diploma Programme (HDP). The study was conducted at St. Mary's University College and twenty-five Higher Diploma Programme candidates, two tutors and one HDP leader took part in the study. Questionnaires and interviews were used to obtain the data. The results of the study showed that the HDP, although relevant, has had some drawbacks. Recommendations are made based on these findings.

Introduction

It was thought to be vital to emphasize that training and teaching were mutually dependent; one does not stop developing as a teacher when one becomes a trainer (Hayes, 2000). The inseparable nature of teaching and training necessitates the emergence of continuing professional development in the realm of teacher education. Professional development takes many forms: graduate degree, collaborative action research projects and teaching academies or in-service days (Sadker and Sadker, 2000).

Continuing professional development is indispensable for the following reasons: first the issue of globalization and complex social changes brings multiple demands on teachers. Thus, a well-educated, flexible, highly competent teaching force is required to handle

these changes and to foster practices which are responsible to the educational needs of all trainers (Dadds, 2001). Second, learning is a continuous process.

Learning does not finish once trainers leave a course; they must continue the process of adapting in their own classrooms (Hayes, 2000). This is because the effect of teacher training institutions up on trainers may be somewhat less than might be hoped, and any effects may be 'washed out' in the first year of teaching (Zeichner and Tabachnik, 1981 cited by Higgins and Leat, 2001). Third, continuing professional development promotes critical dialogue among teachers. Learning is a social experience, so professional growth is usually fostered through exchange, critique, exploration and formulation of new ideas (Dadds, 2001). Furthermore, if teachers allow themselves to become students of their own extraordinary self-education, they would be very well placed to facilitate the self-education of others (Underhill, 1992). This implies that student achievement is dependent on the efforts teachers make to move themselves through various developmental stages. In relation to this, Sadker and Sadker (2000) stated that money spent to increase teacher qualification through professional training improves students' academic performance more than money invested in other areas.

Hayes (2000) continued that the goal of any teacher development must be to give teachers the power to make informed choices about how best to teach in their own classes. To attain this goal, Nunan (1989:112) forwarded the following points, as principles for teacher development program.

1. *"The content and methodology of the program should be perceived as being personally relevant to participants."*
2. *"Theory should be derived from practice."* In other words, teacher should be encouraged to derive theoretical principles from a study of classroom practices, rather than being exposed to a set of principles and being required to apply these
3. *" The approach should be bottom up rather than top down."* This suggests that teacher development program has to be initiated by teachers themselves.

4. *"Teachers should be involved in the structuring of the Professional development program".*
5. *"Teachers should be encouraged to observe, analyze and evaluate their own teaching."*
6. *"Professional development programs should provide a model for teachers of the practices they wish to encourage i.e. they should practice what they preach."*

In line with this, Sadker and Sadker (2000) suggested that the best professional development program should fulfill the following points:

- *Links subject content with teaching skills*
- *Use a problem solving approach*
- *Reflect research findings*
- *Be sustained and supported over time*

In view of the points above, the Higher Diploma Program (HDP) was introduced in 2003 as a compulsory qualification for all teacher educators (MOE, 2003). The program has been assumed to provide teacher educators with a practical program to support their development as effective teachers and reflective practitioners with enhanced professional status (ibid). The HDP candidates were expected to achieve the objectives stated in the HDP handbook. It is believed that the objectives have been achieved through the delivery of four modules and the school experience, each divided into a number of sessions using active learning and continuous assessment.

Thus, the aims of this study are to assess the implementation of the objectives and to evaluate the overall nature of the programme.

Method

At St. Mary's University College the Higher Diploma programme has been given to those lecturers working in the Teacher Education Faculty. The total number of lecturers who have attended the HDP was thirty and they were classed into two groups.

The first group, consisting of eighteen lecturers who started the HDP in September, 2006. The second group, consisting of twelve lecturers, began the HDP in February, 2006.

Of the total number, twenty-five candidates participated in the study. The majority of the candidates (80%) were MA holders whereas the remaining 20% were first-degree holders. Again, the majority of the candidates (75%) had an education background. In addition to the candidates, one higher diploma leader and two tutors took part in the study.

In order to obtain the candidates' reflection on the HDP training, a questionnaire which had two sections was developed by the researcher. The first section of the questionnaire, which contained sixteen items, was designed to assess the objectives of the programme. The second section of the questionnaire, which had twelve items, was prepared in order to explore the candidates' evaluation about the overall programme. In addition to the questionnaire, the Higher Diploma leader and two tutors were also interviewed.

Lastly, all data was coded, categorized, organized and carefully analyzed. In analyzing the data descriptive methods were used.

Results and Discussion

Handbook

As outlined above, in order to assess the candidates' evaluation of the programme, sixteen items were used along with the objectives of the HDP programme.

Candidates were asked to respond to the aspects of the objective of the program on a five point Likert_ type scale having numerical values as follows: 4_ very good; 3_ good; 2- average; 1-poor; and 0_very poor. Mean responses were tabulated and used to indicate the evaluations of the candidates on the components of the required objectives, based on the following interpretive scale established by the researcher: 3.5 or more= very good; 2.51 to 3.49= good; 2.50 to 1.49= average; and 1.48 or less =poor/ weak. The table below shows this:

Table1: Candidates' Evaluation of the HDP as Per the Objectives Set in the HDP

The program enabled me to;	Mean	Standard Deviation
Provide a high quality experience for student teachers	3.1	0.65
Have high standards of professional ethics and values	3.2	0.76
Become a role model of good practice	3.0	1.02
Use active learning and student centered teaching method	3.7	0.65
Promote good citizenship	1.2	0.34
Help school teachers be more effective in their own teaching	2.9	1.05
Be involved in action research	3.0	0.35
Plan my own professional development and career	3.1	0.76
Play on active part in institutional development	2.6	0.51
play on active part in community development	1.38	0.65
support disadvantaged students in the institution	2.5	0.14
Address gender issues	2.4	0.4
Develop team working skills	3.3	0.21
Identify my own needs and become a reflective teacher educator	3.4	0.60
Support the implementation of the TESO programme	1.39	1.35
Develop teaching as a skill, based on sound theoretical knowledge and experience	2.6	0.54
<i>Total Mean</i>	2.66	0.34

As the table reveals *"using active learning and student centered teaching method"* was rated "very good" (3.70). This portrayed that the programme helped candidates use active learning methods and student centered.

As it can be seen from the table, in most aspects of the objectives, candidates' evaluation of the programme was found to be "good" (the mean scores were found between 2.51-3.49). That is, with few exceptions, candidates felt that the components of the objectives had been met.

However, two objectives, addressing gender issues and supporting disadvantaged students were rated "average" (the mean scores were 2.4 and 2.5 respectively).

Furthermore, three objectives of the programme, promoting good citizenship, playing an active part in community development and supporting the implementation of the TESO programme were rated "poor" (the mean scores were found to be below 1.48).

This suggests that the programme did not enable candidates to meet the three objectives mentioned.

In view of the discussion above, it is possible to say that most objectives of the HDP were addressed.

Table 2: Responses of the Subjects Whether or not the HDP Training Have Had a Significant Effect on the Candidates' Teaching Practice.

Great extent		Some extent		Limited extent		Not at all	
N0.	%	N0.	%	N0.	%	N0.	%
15	60	7	28	3	12	-	

As shown in the table above, the great majority of the subjects (60% +28%=88%) stated that the Higher Diploma Programme helped them to "a great extent" and "some extent" respectively.

In other words, the program has had a significant effect on the candidates teaching practice. This suggests that the HDP does not have inherent problem if it is properly managed. Thus, it is reasonable to provide such on going support to the teaching force;

not just for new teachers but also for all teachers—continuing professional development should be an integral part of a teacher's life (Sadker and Sadker, 2000).

Table 3: Candidates' Evaluation of the HDP Training

Items	Rating scale							
	Great extent		Some extent		Limited extent		Not at all	
	N0.	%	N0.	%	N0.	%	N0.	%
The program is interesting	2	8	5	20	3	12	15	60
The program is relevant	12	48	9	36	1	4	3	12
The program is participatory	19	76	5	20	-	-	1	4
The program is feasible	16	64	4	16	-	-	3	12

As the table above reveals, 84% (48% +36%) of the subjects noted that the HDP is relevant to a "great extent" and to "some extent" respectively.

As the table also showed 76% of the subjects reported that the HDP was participatory. And 64% of the respondent also revealed that the HDP was feasible in the Ethiopia context. In short, the majority of the subjected reported that the HDP was relevant, participatory and feasible.

However, this programme was found to be uninteresting. As the table shows 60% of the subjects reported that the program was not interesting. In the open-ended responses too, (90%) of the subjects identified the following points as major drawbacks of the programme:

- *The duration of the programme is too long*
- *There was lots of repetition*

Based on the points stated above, it could be possible to say that the duration and repetition of items might be factors for lack of interest on the part of the candidates.

This implied that Higher Diploma Programme seemed not to acknowledge the qualifications, background and experience of adult learners.

The method of delivering content might be a barrier for the absence of interest on the part of some of the candidates, too. In relation to this, Hayes (2000) stated that the method of conducting the training must be experiential and reflective rather than Transmissive.

Furthermore, most candidates of the HDP have an education background and some of the points raised in the program might not be new to them.

The background of the Higher Diploma Leaders and the tutors could also be another factor for the recipients' absence of interest. The majority of the candidates (89%) in the open-ended response stated that training should be given by experts in the field of education and not by volunteers who do not have the required knowledge of the program. Furthermore, candidates noted that:

- *Some leaders and tutors do not have professional training*
- *The programme is boring; and it doesn't acknowledge the ability of adult learners.*

The interview held with the tutors was in line with this issue. The HDP leader noted the following as shortcomings of the programme.

- *Lack of comprehensive training on the HDP leaders*
- *Absence of committed HDP leaders*
- *Lack of solid standardization and moderation across the country*

In addition to this, all (100%) the Higher Diploma Programme tutors stated that they were recruited based on participation they exhibited in the first session of the programme. In view of the above points, it can be said that HDP leaders might fail to show the value of the HDP and discharge their responsibility. Higher Diploma Programme tutors did not have special skills, background and knowledge (different from candidates) that enable them to run HDP sessions and to cover the role of the Higher Diploma Programme leader.

This might happen due to the fact that HDP leaders have been recruited as leaders on the basis of availability as volunteers instead of competence or academic background and

HDP tutors were elected arbitrarily without considering their background. This might be a factor that makes candidates find no interest in the HDP.

Table 4: Aspects of the HDP'S Module and their Importance in order (from high to low)

Components of the program	<i>Rating scale</i>							
	Great extent		Some extent		Limited extent		Not at all	
	N0.	%	N0.	%	N0.	%	N0.	%
Developing active learning	18	72	4	16	3	12	-	-
Action research	14	56	6	24	4	16	1	4
Improving Assessment	17	68	6	24	2	8	-	-
Reflective teacher education	6	24	7	28	8	32	4	16
School Placement	-	-	-	-	3	12	22	88

Developing active learning was rated first in the priority list of importance. It accounted for 72%. This showed that Developing Active Learning was an essential component of the programme. As shown in the table, improving assessment was ranked second 68%, and Action research was rated third 56%.

Reflective teacher educator, which was rated 4th (24%), seemed to be less important. Contrary to this, the HDP leader rated reflective teacher education first since, according to the respondent, it enabled candidates to show behavioral change.

The majority of the subjects (88%) noted that school placement is not an important part of the program. In line with this, the HDP leader also rated school placement as less important.

Although it was found to be less essential, the HDP leaders reported that its presence was important for two reasons. It creates links between higher education institutions and local schools and it enlightened candidates about the school environment.

According to the table above, it can be said that developing active learning, action research, improving assessment and reflective teacher education were found to be

important aspects of the programme. But school, placement appeared to be less important.

Instead of school placement, most subjects (76%) identified points which should have been incorporated in the programme. As a result, the following points were proposed.

1. *Managing large class size*
2. *Teaching ethics*
3. *Utilization and production of teaching materials.*

The above findings revealed that the HDP might miss content that should have been part of an HDP module.

Table 5: Activities of the HDP sessions and their rank (from high to low)

Activities of the HDP Sessions	Ranks													
	1		2		3		4		5		6		7	
	N0.	%	N0.	%	N0.	%	N0.	%	N0.	%	N0.	%	N0.	%
Working as a group	14	56	3	12										
Self assessment	8	32	7	28										
Peer assessment	2	8	-	-	3	12								
Participatory learning	10	40	6	24										
Focusing discussions	3	12	8	32										
Presenting research finding	-	-	-	-	2	8	1	4	1	3	-	-	2	8
Peer support and feedback	4	16	9	36	3	12								
Mutual teaching reservati classroom managements	-	-	-	-	1	4								
	-	-	3	12	1	4	1	4						
Skill in using motivation techniques	-	-	1	4	-	-	-	2	8					
Instructional leadership	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	4						
Assessment skills	-	-	-	-	3	12								
Planning skill	1	4	-	-	-	-	3	12	2	8	1	4	-	

As per the data, "working in space groups" was rated the highest- 56% in the priority list. This indicated that candidates in the HDP performed much of the HDP activities in-group. Such activities could enable them to share their experience regarding classroom practice.

According to the table above, "participatory learning" was ranked second (40%) in the list of activities. This showed that lessons/issues delivered in the HDP sessions were participatory. This finding was in line with the data in table 3. That is 76% of the subjects (in table three) stated that the HDP was participatory a "great extent".

As table 5 shows "self assessment" was rated third (32%) in the priority list. This revealed that "self-assessment" was found to be an important activity of the program. In relation to this Underhill (1992) noted that self-assessment is as essential prerequisite for such development. This suggested that HDP helped candidates evaluate themselves.

Furthermore, Britten and O' Deuyer (1995) stated that changes in the assessment of one's teaching leads to other- changes in one's teaching, changes in the perception of one's own classroom etc.). Thus, it is safe to say that HDP might, help candidates concerning assessment.

Table 6: Responses of the Subjects Whether or not the HDP did tie Instructional Activities to real world application

<i>Rating scale</i>									
Strongly agree		Agree		Neutral		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
N0.	%	N0.	%	N0.	%	N0.	%	N0.	%
3	12	12	48	4	16	3	12	1	4

According to the table above 12%+ 48%= 60% of the subjects noted that the HDP did link activities to real world applications. Learning would be effective if the contents of the lesson are highly interrelated with activities of everyday experience.

Table 7: Responses of the Subjects Whether or not the HDP linked Subject Contents

With Subject Area methodology (Teaching Skills)

Rating Scale									
Strongly agree		Agree		Neutral		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
N0.	%	N0.	%	N0.	%	N0.	%	N0.	%
1	4	3	12	3	12	16	64	2	8

As the table showed the majority of the subjects (64%) reported that the HDP sessions were unable to tie contents with subject area methodology. Since candidates came from various fields of specializations, they might require different methods of delivering contents. However, the HDP seemed to fail to address this issue. Effective professional development is directly related to a teacher's work, linking subject content with teaching skills (Sadker and Sadker, 2000).

Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

On the basis of the data collected, the following findings were drawn. According to the data, the Higher Diploma Programme has had a remarkable effect on the teaching practice of the candidates. It has enabled teachers to refine their teaching skills and apply them in the home classroom. However, it was found that the programme did not cover all the objectives stated in the HDP handbook.

Activities carried out in the HDP sessions were mainly presented in a participatory way that enabled the candidates to share experience.

As per the data, developing active learning projects, action research, improving assessment and reflective teacher education were found to be important aspects of the programme. But school placement was rated low on the list of importance.

On the other hand, candidates of the programme stated that managing large class size, teaching ethics, and the utilization and production of teaching materials should have been included in the modules of the Higher Diploma Programme.

Most subjects found no interest in the programme; the factors might be varied. Lots of repetition in each module, absence of special training on the part of some Higher Diploma leaders and tutors, the duration of the programme, and methods of delivering lessons might be factors that make candidates lose interest.

The HDP did not link subject contents with subject area methodology. That is, candidates of the programme came from different specializations but the programme did not consider such variation and it did not take into account subject area methodology.

Recommendations

In view of the conclusions above, the following recommendations, can be incorporated into future programmes of this type.

An attempt should be made to address all the objectives stated in the HDP handbook.

The contents of the programme need to be revised; that is, some contents should be dropped and issues, which are essential to teacher educators, should be included.

Most of the criticism stemming from the implementation of the programme should be thoroughly considered. Higher Diploma leaders and tutors should be recruited based on academic background and experience and they should have special professional training that enable them to run HDP sessions.

The duration of the program should be taken into consideration and the aspects of the program, which have had too much redundant detail, should be avoided.

The HDP should attempt to address all subject methodologies. Alternatively candidates should be classed according to their subject areas.

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