

Quality education improvement: Yemen and the problem of the 'brain drain'

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Abstract

This paper presents an overview of the problems that hinder improvement of the quality of education in Yemen, with a particular focus on higher education institutions. It discusses in particular the problem of the brain drain and why this phenomenon is occurring in Yemen. Semi-structured interviews with three professors at higher education institutions were conducted. Analysis identified two main factors that compel many Yemeni professors to leave the country. The first is associated with lack of fairness and respect among instructors in Yemeni universities; the second is concerned with the instructors' deep dissatisfaction with their financial income. It is argued that unless the university administrators and the government as a whole reconsider the salaries of those in both secondary and higher education institutions, and provide and impose rigorous rules for regulating academic life inside and outside the institutions, many other instructors will leave Yemen, their country of origin, action which will cause further weaknesses in the nation's higher education institutions.

Keywords

Brain drain, higher education, quality education improvement in Yemen

Introduction

Yemen, an Arab country, is known internationally to be one of the poorest countries in the world. It is also a country that faces many conflicts and problems such as insecurity of life, the rising cost and scarcity of basic needs, and the rapid decline in the availability of the public services, in particular health care and education (IDMC and MFA, 2012). In other words, Yemen lacks a strict legal framework aimed at improving the supply of food and water and addressing internal security, economic growth, job creation and education (Al-Ameri and Dokam, 2006; Al-Dughaish and Alturki, 2009; Diehl, 2008; Dyer, 2007; Sharafaldin, 2007; Shuga'a Al-Deen, 2010; Yemen Policy Initiative, 2012). Education is of

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a very low status in Yemen (UNESCO, 2011) and requires much committed effort to achieve improvements; and, in particular, higher education institutions in which students' characters can be better shaped (Karaman and Tochon, 2008). Higher education in Yemen suffers from many complex academic and administrative problems (Muthanna and Karaman, 2011) and other serious difficulties such as the use of personal power, academic injustice and nepotism (Muthanna, 2013), all of which dramatically weaken the quality of education.

Education is internationally considered to be highly effective in 'reconstructing societies and building nations' (Hassan, 2011: 1). It is the present author's personal belief that education is the main – if not the only – factor through which others can be easily revived. Such a belief is supported by the UNESCO Global Monitoring Report *Education for All* which states that education is 'pivotaly important for development in a rapidly changing world' (UNSECO, 2013: 1). Based on such a belief, the administrators in Yemen must, it is argued, first pay most attention to developing the state of education in their country. Such a notion can be seen in practice in many parts of the world, where other dimensions of life have been well-developed.

It is very common that an effective educational process requires committed collaboration from all these involved and continuous self-supervision and reflection. In reality, it starts with the educators themselves, who should be conscientiously devoted to their profession. The same is true of university administrators who need to act correctly without direct supervision from the Higher Education Ministry administrators. In doing so, I believe the quality of education in Yemen will improve, as is the case in Western nations where there are continuing efforts to ensure ongoing improvement. For example, a recent report on government research policy for academic research on higher education in the UK called for a significant re-shaping of the higher education sector (Leathwood and Read, 2013) seemingly despite the fact that many UK higher education institutions are internationally ranked amongst the top two hundred universities in the world. It appears that such continuous improvements in the quality of education lead to improvements in other areas of life. As such, I suggest that more improvements will result in further developments. This is what higher education institutions in Yemen lack: the first, committed stages of improvement.

In Yemen, the educational constitution states that every assistant professor must spend at least four consecutive years of teaching service at university. Only then can they be granted one year off (a sabbatical leave) for conducting research. However, this legal obligation is transgressed by university instructors who travel and stay abroad for four or more consecutive years – and sometimes for the rest of their lives. The law is seemingly also breached by university administrators who allow instructors to move and work outside Yemen while at the same time possibly receiving their salaries in Yemen, despite being absent. Even if these instructors do not receive their salaries, because they are working abroad, they are not permitted to stay for longer than the period allowed; they must otherwise be immediately replaced because all programs in Yemen need instructors and such the absence of instructors is a major obstacle to the development of quality of education in the home country. In fact, every program in Yemen is in exceptional need of instructors/educators, but for several reasons some of those employed leave the country. Furthermore, university administrators do not employ new instructors; and if employment occurs, the use of personal power and nepotism plays a major, if not the entire, role in selection of candidacies (Muthanna, 2013). Yemen needs, but appears currently to fail to offer, quality education, because such education 'promotes tolerance, peace and security, and can support good governance and broader democratic outcomes' (UNESCO, 2013: 4).

Because higher education is known to be the stage at which educators/professors can shape better the characters of the students (Karaman and Tochon, 2008), the Higher Education Ministry together with university administrators should have attended at least to reducing the effects of these problems. Unfortunately, the level of attention, already low, given to higher educational issues by higher education officials and administrators has clearly worsened and given rise to many problems. These problems differ in cause, strength and effect: one of the most damaging is related to the absence of systematic educational policy (Muthanna, 2011) and the failure to enforce existing rules regulating the profession of educators. This problem has resulted in another challenge with regard to improving the quality of education ; that is, the 'brain drain'.

This brain drain problem has taken effect not only in higher academic Yemeni institutions but also in all institutions related to medicine, culture, economy, tourism, etc. Acceleration of the impact of the problem in Yemen is occurring for many reasons. This present study has revealed the most significant: they are related to employees' dissatisfaction with either the job assigned to them, or their (financial) income. Another factor is that many employees in Yemen are displaced job-takers and, as a result, they prefer to work outside the country because they do not work in the preferred institutions. Other factors are the fact that the salary assistant professors receive (US\$1000 per month) is not regarded as sufficient for a comfortable lifestyle or to secure the future of members of their families. Given this, some educators and particularly those affiliated to universities take a sabbatical leave notionally for one or two years but, unfortunately, actually spending four to five years, and sometimes the rest of their lives, abroad. Others leave the country in search for fairness and respect, suitable educational institutions and, most importantly, better sources of income.

However, this paper focuses on the most obvious reasons for the existence of the brain drain which is impeding the development of the quality of education in Yemen. These are: (1) the absence of fairness and respect among university colleagues; and (2) the dissatisfaction of educators with their levels of income.

Research design

Because this study is exploratory and qualitative, the most appropriate data-collection method was interviewing. Semi-structured interviews were used in order to elicit and understand the experiences and beliefs of participants in depth and the implications of their experiences (Seidman, 2006: 10–11). The interviews also helped in developing '...a deeper understating of the interviewees' thinking and perceived values' (Low et al., 2013: 518).

Findings and discussion

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with three different instructors/professors of English who have been teaching abroad (that is, outside Yemen) for at least three years. The interviews were recorded (audio) and the recordings were transcribed for subsequent analysis. The participants were assigned three pseudonyms (Salah, Saleh, and Salem) to protect their anonymity: this enables them to express their feelings freely. Both interpretational and reflective analyses were then used (Gall et al., 2003: 453). The transcriptions enable significant phrases, sentences or text to be segmented and coded. Further review of the coded segments led to the emergence of two major themes relating to the particular problems being studied. The two major themes are discussed below.

Fairness and respect

Yemeni universities unfortunately lack fairness and respect amongst one another in general and within the same institution in particular. Colleagues do not respect each other and sometimes denigrate their colleagues. For example, Saleh stated that:

We strongly suffer from the less respect we receive from our colleagues. They treat you as an ordinary man and sometimes they give you orders... such as 'I am busy this semester and you must teach these courses or you must teach my week's classes and I will give their wages'. I can help in this matter and many other matters and all I need is a good word and treatment.

This illustrates the unhappy feeling of Saleh about the negative treatment some instructors give to their colleagues. It is indeed very sad to learn about how such Yemeni academics deal with one another. The question arises about how they will treat and educate their students if this is how they treat each other as instructors. On this serious issue, Salah offered the view that:

Some colleagues behave in a way showing that they are more important and more knowledgeable than you although, in reality, they are not... They openly state that in front of students... they tell students that they are more qualified and can deal with all courses... they even say more bad expressions about their colleagues... for example, one of my colleagues always complains to me about our colleagues saying... that instructor is not good... although I am better than him but I do not know why students appreciate him that much...

Furthermore, this reveals that such academicians perhaps need to reeducate themselves further, for instance with regard to human behavior. Moreover, the colleague as quoted by Salah has apparently been promoted and given a new post, despite the fact that Salah is seemingly better qualified. Salah stated that he is an associate professor while the colleague who was promoted was still an assistant professor; that is, Salah had spent more time in teaching service than his colleague. This is a matter of fairness, a quality that appears to be almost totally absent in Yemeni universities (Muthanna, 2013). Many qualified individuals are educating students while, somewhat surprisingly, those less qualified administer the overall education process. These latter become the education policy makers, and this might result in very poor education policy being produced. In other words, such a reversal of roles is dangerous in the educational process because it can lead to low quality education.

Salem confessed that some colleagues stated that '...although this is not my specialty area... I can teach it in a better way than my colleague [Salem] does', and this might be regarded as reflecting the hatred, envy, lower level of knowledge, disrespect or the conceit of the colleague. In addition, the absence of positive words or treatment and the existence of negative expressions will have negative motivational effects in an institution (Low et al., 2013). Such negative motivation can convince the employees of the institution either to leave or deal with others in the same manner. Whatever the reaction, both have a negative effect on improvement of the quality of education in any institution.

To conclude, this serious issue of lack of fairness and respect is dangerous with regard to the process of education. The absence of fairness and respect in the Yemeni universities forces some instructors to search for places where these qualities exist: that is why many instructors have travelled abroad. Whether instructors travel abroad or stay in their institution with such a negative treatment, there is no possibility for improving the educational process in Yemen. Fairness and respect are essential in life and, it can be

argued, needed much more in academia: education should be based on respect and fairness among the educators themselves and among the educators and their students at any level of study.

Dissatisfaction with income

Income is indeed a very significant matter across the globe: it is the decoration of this life. In the Holy Quran there is a verse that emphasizes this point: it reads 'Wealth and children are the adornment of the life of this world . . .' (Holy Quran, Al-Kahf, 46) and this verse can be interpreted as emphasizing the fact that the possession of money takes precedence over having children. In reality, having children without a good source of income is a problem: the parents cannot educate properly and well, rejoice, or even feed their children without financial resources. Regardless of other crises, the educational problem is serious and demands a good source of finance. Such a source helps the parents to realize the educational ambitions of their family members.

Despite the fact that university instructors in Yemen have a better level of income than employees in all other institutions, they still continue to complain about their salaries. They always complain that their income (around US\$1000 per month) is insufficient to meet their needs. Given this dissatisfaction with salary levels, university instructors tend to seek better sources of income: they apply for teaching vacancies in the Gulf countries and sometimes in other parts of the world. According to one of the Higher Education Ministry administrators, most of the Yemeni instructors (those who are currently abroad), have travelled to the Gulf countries, in fact. Such countries still need instructors and because they are rich they pay at least five times the salary the Yemeni instructors receive in their homeland. Unsurprisingly, such a financial incentive has caused Yemeni university instructors to travel abroad, leaving their country behind: this is the challenge of the 'brain drain'. This is a very serious problem that hinders the development of the quality of higher education in Yemen.

Salah stated that his salary was not sufficient for his basic needs. It did not enable him to educate his family well or support his relatives in a proper manner. He also explained that even if he spent all his life in Yemen, he would not be able to secure the future of his family members. As such, he was obliged to travel abroad and seek an income that would meet his needs and those of his family members. He commented:

I have been teaching in the university [in Yemen] for more than ten years and I am not able to buy even a small piece of land on which I can dream of building a small flat for my family. I am just hiring a flat for US\$200 every month . . . I have five sons and daughters and need much money for their education . . . and many other things . . . also my parents and some of my relatives live on my salary . . . it does not suffice my basic needs actually . . . that is why I left my country.

Very much the same, Saleh blames the government leaders for the low level of income they have decided to pay to the university instructors. He states that, 'Our leaders [policy makers] give foreign instructors . . . twice . . . what they give us although we teach more . . . also our leaders have different financial sources; so, they care not about us'. Such a statement shows strong dissatisfaction with the financial policy and its makers. It also implies a call for reform of the policy. Saleh continues, ' . . . they [leaders/policy makers] already know that life is expensive in Yemen and our salaries are not enough to comfortably live on and even if we become very thrifty, we will not be able to settle down in our own houses, have cars . . .'. This indicates clearly that the salary is not regarded as sufficient and that it should be increased.

When the educators are restless, always thinking of how to meet the basic needs of their families, their teaching performances are affected and, with time, may get worse and have a negative effects on improvement of the quality of education.

Salem reflected his views by recalling his past and present experiences in higher education institutions. He also made a comparison between his life in Yemen, seemingly filled with misery and pessimism, and his present life abroad characterized by happiness, contentment and optimism. He explained:

I still remember my sufferance when I was teaching on a part-time process in different higher schools and I was paid almost a dollar for one hour of teaching. After earning a PhD qualification I got appointed at this university and I was receiving around one thousand dollars a month. This income was spent for the house rent and family expenses. I was depriving my own self and my family from many things we wanted. But nowadays, I am very comfortable [abroad] and I satiate all my family's needs. I have also built a nice villa for them and two cars. I cannot leave this job here and go back to my home university.

This clearly shows that the salary Salem was receiving in Yemen was as nothing compared to what he was currently receiving abroad. It reflects Salem's view that he is content to spend the rest of his life teaching abroad and never return to his homeland and indicates that Salem would not be able to fulfill his family's needs, build a nice house or buy cars if he remained working in Yemen. The comments imply that the salaries at Yemeni institutions should be increased; they also highlight the fact that teachers at primary or secondary schools are much more depressed because they only receive between US\$250 and US\$300 a month.

In brief, the responses of the three participants clearly showed their high levels of dissatisfaction with the salaries they were receiving in Yemen. In contrast, they also showed their high level of satisfaction with regard to teaching and living abroad, where their ambitions are being achieved. In this context, Yemen must consider this issue and provide Yemeni instructors with better salaries; failure to do so will, it seems, mean that most of them will leave Yemen and the educational process will get worse.

Conclusions

In this study, three teacher educators reported several factors influencing the decision to leave higher education institutions in Yemen and teach instead in universities abroad. The excessive lack of 'clear-cut standards and program philosophy statements' (Muthanna and Karaman, 2011: 230) in higher education institutions in Yemen has led to the existence of many problems. These administrative and academic problems (Muthanna and Karaman, 2011), the absence of academic justice and use of personal power in academic institutions (Muthanna, 2013) have all also introduced other factors such as lack of respect and fairness among university instructors and instructors' dissatisfaction with their salaries. All of this compels Yemeni professors to travel abroad, where they might teach for the rest of their lives. Such a problem of brain drain is, I believe, also contributing significantly and excessively to the rapid decline of the quality of education in Yemen. Therefore I call upon all the government representatives, particularly education policy-makers, universities principals, program developers and instructors, to reconsider seriously this issue, and many others, in order to improve the quality of education in Yemen. Fair treatment and financial motivation are both necessary for encouraging genuine effort that concentrates on improving the quality of education in Yemen.

Study limits and benefits

This study was limited to a very small number of participants, due to budget and time constraints, and so a further study involving a larger number of participants is therefore recommended. However, this present study is significant in showing the current situation of the quality of education and the instructors' negative treatment of one another in higher education institutions in Yemen. Such negative treatment encourages instructors to leave Yemen and this brain drain problem weakens efforts to improve the quality of education in the country. For a positive outcome is the formulation of a message to leaders, education policy makers, university administrators, program developers and all instructors to rethink how to set the right policy for education in Yemen; how to deal respectfully and respectably with one another; and how to cooperate with one another for the sake of building the 'New Yemen to which every Yemeni citizen aspires to achieve.

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