

Investigating Continuing Professional Development Provided for Egyptian Higher Education Online Tutors

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ABSTRACT

Tutors confront great challenges in their teaching practices, including changes in subject content, new instructional methods, changes laws and procedures and students' needs. In online learning (OL), more changes can be added, namely, the massive and accelerated advance in technology. Therefore, online tutors need to be provided with CPD that develops their skills and experience to improve the effectiveness of their distance learning courses. This paper investigates how Egyptian Higher Education (HE) online tutors are provided with Continuing Professional Development (CPD) to pursue their work. Data for this paper was collected from 20 online tutors from two major Egyptian universities. This paper explores the current situation of CPD provided for HE online tutors with its affordances, limitations, and proposed recommendations that can help to overcome these challenges.

Keywords: Online tutor, professional development, incentives, reflective, collaborative.

1. Introduction

The rationale of this paper stems from the importance of CPD for online tutors to maintain and enhance the knowledge and skills they need to pursue their online teaching practices. In the context of the study there is an evidence of paucity of academic literature dedicated to tutors' training and development in Egypt (El-Gamal, 2014). Consequently, investigating this area can help to highlight the positives about CPD provided to be strengthened and the areas of improvements to be investigated and to discuss the possibilities to overcome these challenges. The paper starts with explaining the current situation in the Egyptian Higher Education (HE) in regards of online tutors training and development provided. Then, an overview of CPD definition(s) in academic literature is explained. The following section is data findings and analysis. In order to triangulate academic literature and data findings, discussion section is explained. Finally, the paper ends with conclusion and recommendations section.

2. Current Situation

Staff members in Egyptian HE: According to Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics (2015), there is more than 109,000 teaching staff in Egyptian higher education system. Leach et al. (2004) summed up the future of online tutor development by highlighting that, in context of developing countries in a continent such as Africa, where the capability to train large numbers of tutors is not possible, computer-supported tutor training may be an essential aspect of the solution. Moreover, according to Richardson (2011), in less developed countries, creating, implementing, and sustaining technology-focused professional development is a relatively recent phenomenon. Recently, El-Gamal (2014) explained that, tutors' competence to use e-learning in terms of getting the training needed is one of the main factors desired for e-course delivery. According to Hyde (2013), efforts dedicated to tutors' training and development in Egypt are still in the infancy stage. In detail, the development rate of science and technology and the increased rate at which new knowledge is created and circulated are faster than the rate of preparing well-informed tutors capable of self-development and the creating of life-long learning.

Tutors' training and development: Regarding the current efforts in this field, one of the major achievements of the Higher Education Enhancement Project (HEEP) is to support HE institutions in training the faculty staff members and their assistants to enhance their educational and research capabilities (OECD, 2010). HEEP's development procedure is a long term plan for 15 years. Since it has started, the first phase (2002-2007) has notable achievements in the Technical Teacher Education Development Programme (TTEDP), such as establishing a comprehensive education engineering database accessible to all HE tutors in all faculties of engineering supported by internet and intranet service (Said, 2001).

According to Abdellah, Taher and Abelrahman (2007), the HEEP project involved 18 faculties of engineering. Its main aim was to create a competitive environment among the faculty staff members, to enhance their educational and research capabilities and to improve their management of resources and administrative structure. Fig. 1 illustrates the HEEP's project to upgrade and redesign the education programmes in the 18 faculties.

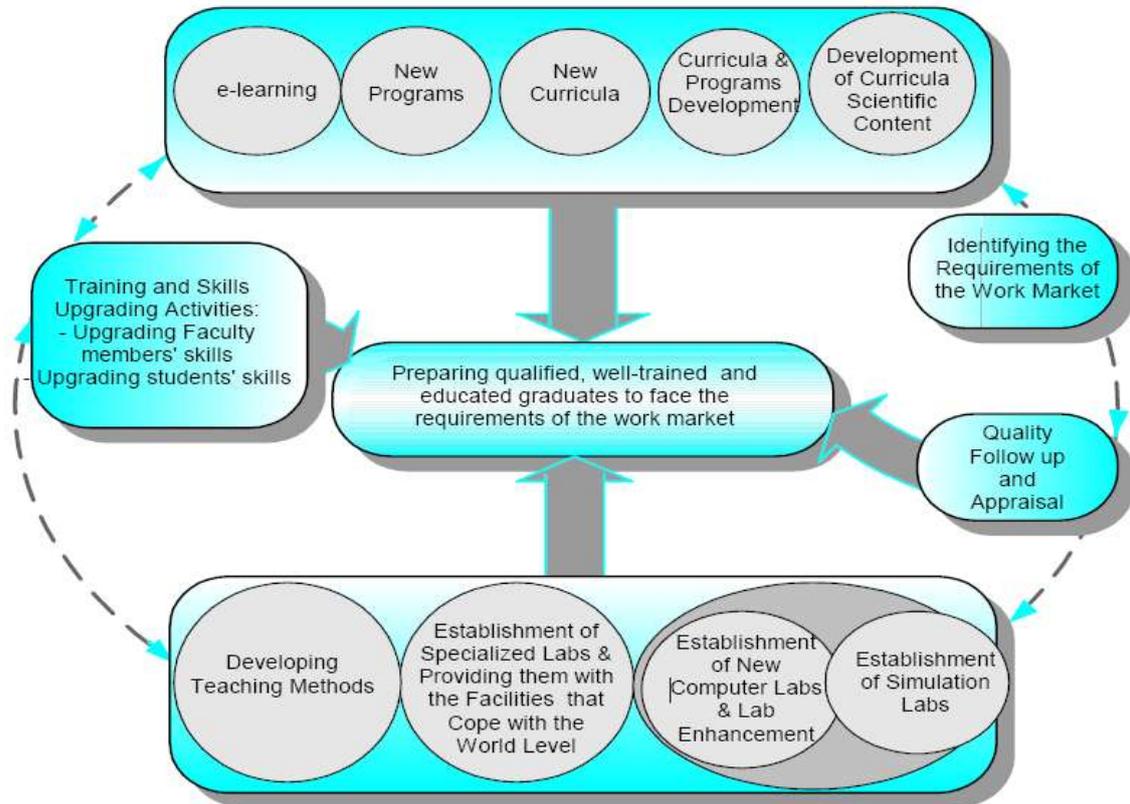


Figure 1: Overview of the HE enhancement system of the HEEP projects (Abdellah et al. 2007)

From the authors' views, the HEEP project can be significantly effective in Egyptian HE if e-learning is expanded and becomes the main part of the educational system. It is to note that, the quality assurance mechanisms and monitoring systems are embedded in the HEEP project. Moreover, students' perspective can be added to this project by embedding the standard assessment of student achievement through defining student learning outcomes. Then, measuring if the programme or service implemented to facilitate such learning was effective.

Tutors' perceptions of e-learning in education: According to Afifi (2011), it has been observed that academics generally believe that the advantages of e-learning outweigh its disadvantages. Surprisingly, some university tutors prefer to use pen and paper and face-to-face instruction than e-learning technologies (EL-Seoud et al, 2014). Afifi (2011) adds that there are some concepts still used as synonyms without clear meaning, such as open learning, e-learning and computer-based learning. Consequently, some tutors still consider e-learning as an educational practice, being formed from two steps: firstly, transforming the course content into downloadable files through the internet; and subsequently focusing on the delivery of information whilst not providing the environment within which social and cultural learning can take place. The last point about the HE academic staff explains the actual application of e-learning in education. Most Egyptian colleges that claim to be applying e-learning are actually using blended learning techniques, that is, a combination of e-learning and face-to-face learning (Elliott, 2002 and Elwady's, 2010). Regarding e-learning, according to Afifi (2011), the majority of the e-learning materials utilized are asynchronous (non-real time) in nature, whilst less common is synchronous (real time) learning materials. Worth to mention that, one of the disadvantages of asynchronous mode of learning is its limited interactivity and efficient collaborative learning between student and tutor. Accordingly, a student who does not feel connected with the class or instructor may lose motivation (Croft, Dalton and Grant, 2010). The overall situation reflects that there is an evidence of significant activity and increased attention by the Egyptian government in order to support OL in HE. However, OL appears to be in the relatively early stages of development. In detail, OL in HE in Egypt is still in its infancy, with more need to CPD to be provided by academic institutions. Moreover, tutors are required to incorporate technology in learning. Consequently, more educational programmes are needed to be geared towards preparing future tutors, in order to deliver technology-rich experiences throughout all aspects of training.

3. CONTINUING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

CPD is defined and explained in literature by many academic such as Kennedy (2005), Gusky (2000) and Ur (1997). The following section highlights some aspects of CPD in regards of CPD reflective and social perspectives. Also, it explains Kennedy's (2005) model of CPD training.

Reflective CPD: The process of defining CPD starts by examining the literature that defines it with regard to learning in general, without specifying it to be directed towards either a face-to-face tutor or an online tutor. According to Gusky (2000), a tutor's professional development is normally associated with in-service courses or programmes that are provided by an educational institution. Ur (1997) defined it as the training that is related to what tutors do for their own personal development, with special importance given to reflection. Pollard and Collins (2005) highlighted the importance of training tutors is to be reflective in their teaching. According to Meighan (1981), tutors are sometimes affected by their students' gender, social class or even their names. Therefore, that may have an impact on tutors to treat their students differently. Consequently, students may respond differently as they may have feeling of considerable social injustice. According to Pollard and Collins (2005) reflective tutor needs to examine evidence which conceptions for each learner are based. Moreover, CPD for reflective teaching should imply a more systematic process of collecting, recording and analyzing tutors' thoughts and observations of their students. The expected result of providing this CPD that it helps tutors to Identify and explore their own practices and underlying beliefs. Consequently, it leads to changes and improvements in their teaching.

Collaborative CPD: Vygotsky (1984) considers social constructivism in learning and its impact on the community of learning (tutor-student-peers) in constructing its knowledge. Online tutors' personal effectiveness to communicate and collaborate with online students' learning needs and objectives to be focused in their CPD. Limited knowledge of tutor-student online communication can lead to a struggle to communicate with learners, and consequently disengage them. In OL, different technologies in communication such as email and social network applications facilitate a consideration of the social perspective in learning (Doyle, 2011). Therefore, it is suggested that the use of technology to achieve the pedagogical objectives be weaved into CPD. Gusky (2000) and Ur (1997) added the social perspective in CPD and the importance of embedding collaboration and communication in it. Therefore, Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin (1995) suggested that traditional notions of in-service training need to be replaced by opportunities for "knowledge sharing" based in real situations. They added that tutors should be provided with opportunities to share what they know, discuss what they want to learn, and connect new concepts and strategies to their own unique contexts.

Practical implementation: Kennedy identifies nine key models of CPD; each model of training is classified in relation to its capacity for supporting professional autonomy and transformative practice (See Table 1).

Table 1: Model of Professional Training and Development (Kennedy, 2005)

Training name	Training aim
Training model	That provides teachers with the opportunity to update their skills in order to be able to demonstrate their competence.
Award-bearing model	That emphasizes the completion of award-bearing programmes of study, validated by universities.
Deficit model	That addresses a perceived deficit in teachers' performance.
Cascade model	That involves individual teachers attending training events and then disseminating, the information to colleagues.
Standards-based model	That represents a trend to create a system of teaching and teacher education
Coaching/mentoring model:	That targets one-to-one relationship between two tutors
Community of practice model:	That involves more than two
Action research model	The that allows teachers to ask critical questions of their practice
Transformative model	That combines practices and conditions which support a transformative agenda.

As illustrated in Table1, the training model, the award-bearing model, the deficit model, and the cascade model, are transmission. The standards-based model, the coaching/mentoring model, and the community of practice model, are transitional. The action research model and the transformative mode are transformative. Cruz-Yeh (2011) proposed a model of CPD that follows 6 sequential steps. These steps are: training, observation, evaluation, and feedback assessment, involvement in an improvement process, inquiry/collaborative action research, individually guided or self-directed, and mentoring or developmental coaching. From the authors' views, Kennedy's model (2005) lacks the training that can guide tutors to make sure that CPD is effective and achieve its objectives such as the standards of measuring

quality and feedback. Therefore, merging between Kennedy's (2005) and Cruz-Yeh's (2011) models can help to increase the effectiveness of CPD that depends on how tutors perceive, plan, think, reflect, and implement it. In summary, CPD is recommended to be reflective and cooperative. That drives to the need to flexible and Individualised CPD. Moreover, from the previous overview of literature for CPD, it can be concluded that, there are two views of CPD: the narrow and the broad. The narrow view considers CPD as acquiring of some specific sets of skills and/ or knowledge in order to deal with some specific new requirements (new syllabus of the curriculum). The broad view considers CPD as a much deeper process, in which CPD continuously enhance not only tutors' knowledge and skills, but also their thinking, understanding and reflecting. In details, tutors' development is not restricted to their work roles, but may also extend to new roles and responsibilities.

A. Continuing Professional Development in Online Learning

The online environment (OL) poses more challenges to tutors (Ruth and Houghton, 2009). In OL, due to their physical absence, tutors may need to implement strategies and practices that overcome this absence to keep learners engaged and motivated (Anderson, 2008). Online learners are from different places in the world different cultures, and addressing their own development needs (Elliot, 2007). Tutors thus need to provide guidance and support to students so they can interact and collaborate with peers of different social and cultural backgrounds (Ravitch, 2011). In addition, it is the online tutor's role to balance the diverse needs of individuals with the curriculum demands and the goals of the larger group (Hammerness et al. 2005). Also, technology that is used in OL which is constantly updatable provides online tutors with endless possibilities for innovative approaches in facilitating the studied course (Elliott, 2007). For example, tutors can select between e-mails or forum chats to communicate with their students. Moreover, to deliver the online course, a tutor can select between the two modes of real time (synchronous) or previously recorded (asynchronous). According to Hrastinski, (2008), each learning mode has its own objectives, advantages and disadvantages. Consequently, training tutors in OL is different from training them for a face-to-face learning environment (Elliot, 2007). It can be observed that, types of knowledge that online tutors have to be aware of vary between: content, technological, and pedagogical knowledge (Shulman, 1986).

B. Barriers of Continuing Professional Development

The National Centre for Education Statistics (NCES) (2001) conducted a survey to examine CPD, main survey results that 80% of tutors thought that the CPD was not linked (to a great extent) to their teaching activities (Synder, 2002). More recently in 2007, the National Academy of Science (NAS) listed some potential barriers of CPD as:

- a) Lack of knowledge about online technology and its affordance.
- b) Lack of support from administrators.
- c) Teachers' beliefs and practices about the lack of effectiveness of online technology in learning (Scott, 2008).

The report quoted one tutor as saying: "Many of my colleagues do not take advantage of professional development opportunities because they see it as something that they really don't need or it's not interesting to them" (NATAC (2007), cited in Scott (2008, p.15). This highlights the notion that CPD in general needs to include: tutors' knowledge, beliefs and attitudes (Cruz-Yeh, 2011). Turner-Bisset (2001) added other aspects in her model, they are: Knowledge for self, as it is important in shaping the way that tutors' perceive their identity and critical to reflection on personal teaching practice. Also, Pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) which is knowledge of self in relation to subject knowledge and pedagogy, and knowledge of educational aims, purposes and values. The inference of including tutors' beliefs and attitudes in CPD is explained by Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2010), as understanding tutors' beliefs and attitudes have an impact on understanding and improving educational processes. In detail, these attitudes are linked to tutors' strategies for coping with challenges in their daily professional life. Consequently, they shape students' learning environment. According to Cruz-Yeh (2011), and Vrasidas and Glass (2004), there is missing ground in literature to provide directions to creating and evaluating CPD. They also argued that CPD has been traditionally formed from the top level (Ministries and departments of education) down (tutors and students). According to Cruz-Yeh (2011), that leads to developing a CPD that is not connected to the tutors' context of practice and may not achieve tutor's individual goals.

4. METHODOLOGY

The purpose of conducting this research is explanatory and descriptive to investigate how Egyptian online tutors are provided with CPD covering affordances, challenges, government support and tutors' perceptions to CPD provided. Therefore, an interpretive attitude of thinking which understands meaning and interaction between these elements is the philosophical perspective for this research. Also, research design is phenomenological interpretive. It starts with descriptions of lived experience. Then, reflecting on and analysing these descriptions. This point of view is supported by many scholars such as Van Manen (1990) and Wertz (2005). In regards of sampling participants, the recruitment of participants for this study were conducted among online tutors in HE who have delivered or are delivering online courses

in any subject. Data for this paper was collected from 20 online tutors at two major Egyptian universities both in focus groups and in individual semi-structured interviews. Finally, the selected approach to analyse the collected data is the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). According to Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2010), IPA is an approach to analyse data in a qualitative research with an idiographic focus, which means it involves the study of individuals.

5. FINDING AND DATA ANALYSIS

Tutors explained some of the characteristics that they believed their importance with CPD provided to help them to pursue their online teaching. These characteristics are: workshops, follow-up tutors' learning within the course, course personalisation, CPD planning, course feedback, course assessment, frequency and durations of course timing and tutor's incentives. Tutors discussed some of the deficiencies with which they were confronted with respect to CPD sessions they had attended in the past. The challenges they regarded as hindering them from achieving satisfying outcomes from attending CPD sessions that CPD does not facilitate the basics for the tutors to understand their online learners or to develop their own personal skills. Also, the lack of computer application in CPD sessions and limited tutor's financial affordances for the tutor are other challenges, have been reported. Finally, tutors reported their opinions on what topics and subjects they thought were needed to be dealt with in CPD courses. They are: soft skills, authoring e-content and online tools.

6. DISCUSSION

In the Egyptian context, according to Ibrahim (2011), there is little literature that focuses on CPD that is planned and organized by the academic institution. According to Sukariya (2010) and Maharat (2012), there are many issues concerning CPD for HE tutors such as the planning and organisational shortcomings in the number of training programmes and courses provided for tutors. According to the study findings, tutors agree that there is a lack of planning and interactive delivery in the training sessions. Moreover, tutors also listed further challenges such as that CPD does not help them to understand the online learners' needs, abilities and expectations and a lack of the practical up-to-date application of computers. Additionally, tutors highlighted that if they want to overcome these challenges by paying for them to subscribe or attend online courses as a personal development plan, the limitations of their financial affordance is an obstacle to achieve their development plan. Consequences of the aforementioned limitations, explained by the interviewees, that these hinders in CPD lead to reluctance by tutors to attend training courses and missing any sense of the importance to the development of their technical skill. Moreover, some interviewees added that tutors need to be paid as an extrinsic incentive to attend training. Tanaka (2010) explained that poor wages are a factor that contributes to a lower degree of commitment to the profession in African countries, indicating that tutors need incentives for professional development. Oxford University Press English Language Teaching (2012) highlighted the enquiry, in an online forum, about whether tutors should be paid to attend CPD sessions. Many tutors from different European countries such as Malta, Greece and Ukraine, replied "Yes". Some tutors in this forum highlighted that some tutors do not seem to realize that organizing training is consuming time, financial and human resources. On the other hand, others explained that CPD is a win-win agreement for both administration and tutors whose professional career knowledge and experience are enriched by CPD. In response to this need for tutors to be paid to attend CPD sessions, Sukariyah (2010) explains that, the government in Egypt is offering scholarships, teaching grants and job guarantees to boost the number of applicants on preparation programmes.

Another factor that can help tutors to invest more of their time in their professional development is to reduce the teaching hours. According to Bennell and Mukyanuzi (2005), reduced burden of teaching hours for tutors help to motivate them to develop themselves and embrace change in the workplace. Therefore, for further research, it is recommended to investigate how online tutors in Egyptian HE realize time to embrace upgrading in their professional career. Moreover, what I would suggest would be to specify the number of CPD hours a tutor should attend to maintain their salary level. Those who are keen on professional development and exceed the specified number should be rewarded by rises in their salaries. With reference to the Kennedy's nine models of CPD (2005) (see table 1), the literature confirms how tutor training and development in Egypt is still in its infancy. In the study findings, it is evident that CPD for online tutors in Egyptian HE needs reform. It is evident in the literature that common features of successful CPD include a variety of methods, confirmed by Simoncini, Lasen and Rocco (2014). CPD is no longer comprised of short courses; tutors need opportunities to reflect, engage in professional dialogue, work with students, and engage in peer observation, coaching and feedback. According to Moore (2013), OL technology affordances, such as access to emails and online forums, offer a possible, promising method to improve teaching practices, since online discussion and sharing projects facilitate tutors to exchange knowledge and experiences.

According to Morrison (2013), CPD is only a first step for professional development; reflection on practice is the next. Specifically, Zeichner and Liston (2013) define CPD as an ongoing, cyclical process of self-directed learning that encompasses planning, action, evaluation and reflection. In the planning stage, tutors need to determine what they need to know, and identify weaknesses and strengths in skills and knowledge. In the pilot study for this research project, tutors did not give a clear answer when asked about their strengths and areas where improvement was needed in their teaching.

In the action phase, tutors need to identify how to learn or develop their skills. According to the study findings and based on the planning stage, many tutors found CPD to be an essential method to develop their professional skills. In the evaluation stage, tutors need to associate learning outcomes with learning objectives. Here the majority of tutors in the study were able to list clear learning objectives for their CPD. However, many of them also listed the challenges and limitations of CPD on the way to achieving these objectives. In addition some tutors, who were dependant on CPD only without focus on a Personal Development Plan (PDP), where tutors create an action plan based on their awareness, values, reflection, goal-setting and planning for personal development within their career. These tutors could not associate learning outcomes with learning objectives. In the reflection stage, tutors need to integrate knowledge into teaching, sharing with others and embedding creativity. According to the findings of the study, limited creativity can minimise reflection on training.

Another point to be highlighted here is that many tutors in the study considered CPD as a solution to the various challenges confronting their teaching practice. For example, many highlighted the need for CPD on the basics of online communication between tutor and student. According to Morrison (2013), attending CPD only for tutor professional development is a 'fixed mind-set'. Dweck (2012) explains that this term reflects the belief that people's basic qualities, such as their intelligence, are fixed traits. Therefore, they spend their time detailing these traits instead of developing them, and regard their most basic abilities as being determined by these fixed qualities. In the study findings, it emerged that many tutors believed that CPD can overcome challenges. According to Dweck (2012), growth in mind-set leads to a change of thinking, as people believe that basic qualities can be developed and intelligence is just a starting point. At this point, they can recognise the other options. Worth mentioning that according to Al-Suleimany (2009) and Business Sweden (2015) explains, in the Egyptian setting the tutors' shift from fixed mind-set to growth mind-set is not an easy task. The reason behind the difficulty are the radical political and educational changes that need to occur first - both these areas need more freedom, flexibility and less bureaucracy. According to Business Sweden (2005), for a change in mind-set in education, the educational systems need to be re-organized from the ground up, and their philosophy, curricula and methods brought into line with the requirements of the age. A final point about CPD is that according to Zeichner and Liston (2013), in CPD, tutors need to apply research to develop their teaching practice and to share this with others. These two ideas of "research" into and "sharing" of professional development practices are recommended for the Egyptian situation. The reason behind this is that these two ideas of "research" and "sharing" of professional development practices, or any similar ideas, were not mentioned at all by the tutors interviewed for this study. That these ideas were not mentioned could be either because of the limited knowledge about their importance for online tutors' professional development practices, or because of existing limitations to implementing them.

With reference to research, Afifi and Wahab (2010) link the idea of research to HE tutors' limitations to conduct expensive research, and cite the increased burden of teaching hours and the importance of content coverage as reasons for the limited contribution to research by HE tutors. Alzaabi (2011) mentions financial incentives and reducing teaching hours for HE tutors who conduct academic research, in order to motivate them in this aspect. According to Lages, Pfajfar and Shoham (2015), they explained further that research is regarded as unimportant by academic institutions in Africa. In detail, universities in Africa focus on teaching and providing consulting; research is a low priority. They spotted two reasons behind paucity of academic literature in the region; limited financial incentives for researchers, which is explained earlier, and the low interest of editors and reviewers of highly ranked journals in publishing local researches about Africa. In Lages et al's views (2015), reasons behind this low interest are; firstly, inapplicability of generalization of the African papers' results, secondly, editors and reviewers have limited knowledge about the region. In the Egyptian context, the starting point for communication and collaboration among staff members is recommended to be the formation of committees to address the issues associated with the needs of society, through research teams headed by a faculty member who provides advice and guidance to team members in order to address the problems of the community. Activities that run in the committee meetings and seminars can initiate, enrich and sustain the interaction between HE tutors. Specifically for the case of OL, Moore (2013) finds this is an environment which presents better opportunities for tutors to interact with each other and develop and enhance their teaching skills than the face-to-face environment. It is notable that, according to Alzaabi (2011), there is a role for government in supporting HE tutors collaborative work, namely that of implementing the theory (collaborative research results) into practice (implementing research results on decision-making and problem solving) as well as in providing funding and financial support for scientific research in general and educational research in particular.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As the purpose of this paper is to explore the current situation of CPD provided for HE online tutors with its affordances and limitations. This paper concludes that there is an evidence of significant activity and increased attention by the Egyptian government in order to support OL in HE. However, efforts dedicated to tutors' training and development in Egypt are still in the infancy stage. According to the concluded fact from this paper that the effectiveness of CPD depends on how tutors conceive, plan, think and reflect not to be based merely on the acquiring of new skills or knowledge to teach new syllabus in the curriculum. This paper recommends form online HE tutors; firstly, to conduct research as part of the professional development not as part of job promotion scheme. Secondly, to share professional development practices amongst them. In detail, this study recommends creating starting points for communication and

collaboration among staff members in two ways - through the formation of committees to address the issues associated with the needs of society, and through seminars for research teams, headed by a faculty member who would provide advice and guidance to team members in order to address the problems of the community. Activities that occur in such committee meetings and seminars can initiate, enrich and sustain the interaction between HE tutors. Moreover, this paper recommends from policy makers; firstly, as incentives for online tutors to contribute and participate in CPD, to create a scheme that specifies the number of CPD hours that tutors should attend to maintain their salary level. Those tutors who are keen on professional development and exceed the specified number should be rewarded by increased salaries or similar incentives. Secondly, as one of the conclusions of this research is the limited governmental funds to facilitate CPD and online tutors' low wages are hindrances for tutors to develop themselves professionally. Therefore, more funding is recommended to be dedicated to online tutors' PDPs. Such funds would help them to afford the requirements of technological tools and services that they need to pursue their online teaching, such as subscription to or purchase of multimedia software. The benefit of such funding would be reflected in two different ways. Firstly, it would help tutors in their personal development plan and increase the feeling of positive acknowledgement and could thus help motivate them. Secondly, a PDP is the starting point of CPD, and an effective PDP means that tutors and administrations can plan for CPD sessions that consider the tutors' existing skills and real needs.

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