

EMMA LETICIA CANALES RODRÍGUEZ & GABRIELA ABAUNZA CANALES**TEACHING AND LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN MEXICO:
NEW PROPOSALS TO IMPROVE OLD PRACTICES****Abstract**

This paper presents the outcome of an online workshop in Universidad Autónoma del Estado de Hidalgo with professors of seven contrasting Mexican institutions of higher education and two European institutions in England and Latvia respectively. The overall aim was to generate a debate on the proposals and recommendations that international organizations suggest to carry out the teaching likewise learning practices in each country. The debate was focused on the identification from the same of the selected readings and the socialization of what is happening in five Mexican universities and the participating universities.

Introduction

At the beginning of the 21st century, were outlining at worldwide level different suggestions for higher education as a result of both technological changes and globalization. Because of this, it was necessary to deal with issues about relevance, quality, management, financing and internationalization in accordance with the demands of the working world, the sustainable human development, teacher training, the development of new technologies of information and communication, the research and its relation to the responsibilities that would have to take higher education (Tünnermann, 2010).

International institutions such as UNESCO, the World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development, have identified contemporary problems facing higher education globally.

They indicate that the immobility of academic positions is being attacked and disciplines have to prove their value through their contribution to the economy. The fiscal crisis of the State and its resulting budget cuts has generated great confidence in savings or cost reduction strategies and private income sources. This has caused, among other things, deregulation of working conditions, restrictions on enrollment and the growth of private institutions.

UNESCO recommends that responses of higher education to the continuous changes nowadays must be guided by three guiding principles: relevance, quality, and internationalization.

Relevance refers to the role and the place occupied by higher education in society. In terms of quality, it is considered that its strengthening and evaluation require active participation of the teaching staff and research.

About the quality of students, the concern relates to the rapid increase of enrollment, the diversification of curricula and the current funding levels. Finally, the principle of internationalization is very important; it is considered the increase in exchanges among universities in different countries must lead to a wider understanding among cultures and also a widespread of knowledge.

One of the priority tools to achieve quality according to the proposals of UNESCO refers to have quality professors, so it is a priority to address effectively the factors that contribute to teacher training (Irigoyen y col, 2011).

Being a teacher in Higher Education in Mexico

Up to 1970, a higher education Professor was required to have a mastery of the subject they taught. Having a professional degree that backed up the contents was enough to aspire to the position. Currently, teachers are hired per hours, who are the majority, entering to many colleges in the same way, but the new educational trends are demanding them to form from a new approach of knowledge. It requires the integration of external sources of knowledge to perform the review of the curricula as well as the reflection about the widespread dissemination of knowledge and availability. Most of the public universities in the country have innovated their educational model with the proposed of competency-based education, considering the assumptions that underlie it. Zabala and Arnau (2007: 40) indicate that competences consist of “effective interventions in different fields of life through actions in which are simultaneously mobilized at the same time and in interrelated way, attitudinal, procedural and conceptual components”. These authors comment that the definition implies the execution of effective actions to situations and different problems which demand the use of the available resources. The problem consists in which most teachers (part time) do not participate in research managements or technological application of their knowledge so they have few opportunities to convey these experiences of learning in their students. Although the tendency of institutions is to have training courses for teachers, find it difficult to transfer what they have learned in different areas of knowledge in their classrooms with their students. Hence, the increased risk in relation to the competency-based approach has been to assume that describing with new teaching interactions terms, these will be implemented in a relevant way.

Moreover, full time teachers who carry out research activities are faced with diversified demands among organizations that evaluate them and are regularly assigned additional remunerations to reflect their teaching and research activities and/ or management responsibilities. Each organization has important budgets and gives priority to different aspects of educational work. The program of Improvement of the Faculty promotes the collegial work of teachers who have formed academic corps by the line of developing research. For the National System of Researchers individual work has a higher evaluation system and the encouragement of the teacher performance is a resource of the Federal Government oriented to academics whose main activity is teaching in a classroom when they accomplish the requirements of institutional regulation.

Methodology

It was organized a workshop called “Teaching and Learning around the world” online with a length of 45 hours. Five sessions were organized online for 5 weeks in order to perform a comparative exercise on the formation of higher education professor of the participating institutions in the workshop. These tasks were done in

order to enrich the debate on the proposals and recommendations about teaching practices and learning that suggest the international organizations.

Eleven Mexican higher education teachers participated in the workshop. Those universities function through three different modalities: eight teachers participated from 3 public universities on an autonomous basis, two teachers who work in a Technological University and a teacher of a private university. Two colleagues from European institutions formed part of the Group: an institution in England and one in Latvia.

For each working session specific readings by UNESCO, International Academy of Education and OECD were suggested. The topics focused on international recommendations for the recruitment and training of teachers in higher education. The program was accompanied by a broad suggestion of documents to support the written participations in 5 forums and verbal interaction in 5 online meetings. Practical exercises were also carried out they involved the application of two instruments one for teachers and another for students in order to explore the teaching strategies used by them.

Results of the workshop debate

Analysis of the workshop participants' approaches suggest that comments were focused on the lack of clarity that exists in Mexican teachers about the type of man who needs to be trained for what is happening in today's society. On the other hand teachers are required to perform activities that are linked with national organisms that provide supplementary funding to their salaries. This situation suggest a gap between what is proposed in international and national policies as it happens every day in the academic life scenes of students and teachers in public and private, autonomous, federal and/or technological universities.

Implications and highlight aspects

It was clear from the discussion that Higher Education Institutions around the world face similar problems, although operating from various economic and financial points of reference. Implement changes in teachers with traditional teaching practices is a difficult task that is increased by the lack of clarity about the changes occurring in the economic model in which we are embedded.

One emergent pertinent issue relate to the students' perspectives, clearly demonstrated that there is a mismatch between what some lectures claim and what they practice, commented the English colleague.

Teachers require a strong background in different areas such as: pedagogical training, evaluation; knowledge of individual differences in their students and their learning styles, because they are insufficient.

Universities have taken up the issues that are found on the educational policies diary since the 21st century started such as coverage, equity, quality, drop out rate, internationalization even national and international certifications. Moreover, the different disciplinary approaches related to teaching and learning have opted for competency-based approach. They face major theoretical limitations and in the practice you can observe deep-rooted traditional attitudes and beliefs that focus learning programs and are unrelated to the technological and scientific changes that

occur in the social, economic and political context. The experts mentioned that, defining competences without reference to the linguistic context (functional scope of performance) implies the exercise of routine skills that have nothing to do with professional performance and much less are organized according to the criteria of relevance and effectiveness that defines taught-learning discipline (Padilla, 2008).

Another aspect in which the debate was focused on relate to the tour in the timeline between yesterday and today. It was mentioned that the times where teaching focused on the transmission of knowledge are left behind. Now it is about, as stated Freire (1996) to “create the possibilities of production and construction”, while teaching involves and requires from teachers skills for research, development of reflective and critical thinking as well as respect for others who have different approaches to ours.

Conclusions

Considering the globalization challenges, it could be warn during the workshop that the challenges today take place in institutions of higher education somehow obey similar processes to those that occur in other developing countries. The recommendations that were found in the revised documents and what is happening in seven Mexican and two foreign institutions agree on the approach to restructure this section of the higher education in a direction that seems to be in tone with the growing needs of the market and the State (Alcántara, 2000). The difference would be the concept that in Mexican institutions lives to bureaucratic and administrative level, whereas the real demands for the hiring of part time teachers.

There was an agreement on the importance in the academic experiences of teachers' professional life as a significant part of their students and colleagues' formation regret that this is neither considered in the working programs nor in updating programs for teachers that are offered by different institutions. While teachers ignore what is happening in working environment, university courses in which they work are limited, decreasing the possibility of improving the levels of academic performance and quality that are currently required. Education reforms are on one side and the teaching activities on the other. The evaluation concept which underlies the reforms has more implications of work order than pedagogical. Mexico has received statements by the OECD for being one of the countries belonging to this group who invest the higher education budget to pay salaries to their teachers, even though reality shows they are poorly distributed.

Another aspect that requires greater care in the future Mexican professional training refers to the research and application of new proposals to promote autonomous learning in the students.

Being a teacher means recognizing that the demands that the system inquire us it is found in a wide range of requirements such as: teaching in a classroom setting, individualized teaching, cultural diffusion, professional disciplinary training, generation and application of knowledge, academic management and mentoring to students.

Our university teachers in Mexico are formed on the daily practice. Their initial practice focuses on the discipline area in which they were formed as chemistry, engineering, mathematics, geography, psychology or educational sciences. Teacher preparation is reduced to the model in which they were formed at different stages as

a student, but it is far removed from the principles of critical pedagogy and teaching models that are posed in the curricular redesign of 21st century.

Currently it is required of teachers with pedagogical, educational, social and emotional skills, connoisseurs of psychological and pedagogical approaches that underlie the teaching and learning process. The clash of a large group of Mexican teachers between experience throughout their preparation, their poor links to sources of work of their discipline and their precarious knowledge of what is happening in today's society is reflected on a daily basis in the classroom. This translates into daily inevitable tensions among the teacher, student, curricula and authorities. Institutional times and social demands are going in different directions. An important group of teachers goes every day to a different reality to the one required in the educational environment. The teacher ventures into the contradictions posed by institutions in their ongoing attempt to implement "innovative policies" that operate in other countries which is different to our life and development contexts different from ours.

The university teacher forgets to be present in the classroom is completely different from being a teacher in the classroom. As stated Diaz Barriga and Inclan (2001) teaching lost its original mystic spirit, highlighted in the Mexican Revolution, and today many teachers live longer as employees, ignoring the responsibility and commitment that the profession involves. Others are drawn by the instruments of educational policies that are related to the programs linked to the granting of financial incentives such as the encouragement of the teaching performance (1990), the admission to the National Research System (1984) and the program of improvement of teachers (1996) among others.

The richness of the meeting hold in the workshop reveals the already known need to generate particular strategies focused on the specific characteristics of each institution, in order to enrich the permanent training of the teacher. With this, the importance of considering the various educational actors to bring about changes from inside the institutions and thereby involve teachers in making-decision, in designing and implementation of articulated teaching strategies with the contextual reality.

It results invaluable the shared concern by the prevailing need to make a difference in reducing the diversity of educational problems which are shared both at national and international level. Two immediate objectives are carried to reflect: 1) to improve the practice and professional development by teachers; and 2) to optimize the learning process of the students to have an impact on their personal development. Similarly, foreign teachers agree on the importance of the research at the University level, as well as the need to generate inquiries about what is meant nowadays by quality and the central importance that teachers have to encourage students to achieve their academic achievements. It is important to recruit new teachers and retention of those who are operating in a responsible and committed way.

Finally, the developed debate in the workshop generated a number of unanswered questions: How to attract and recruit the right teachers? What should be done to ensure their retention? What are the priority areas for training teachers? How to ensure that the ideas and concerns about teacher training were socialized in the workshop have an impact in short, medium and long term?

Although we do not have answers for everything, we could finish with the comment of the English teacher: "...The last session left me with mixed feelings. On one hand, it was heartwarming to know that I was not alone in my thoughts about how to improve the teacher's pedagogical practices with a view to catering for the needs of students in the twenty-first century. On the other hand, it saddens me to hear that teachers in different parts of the world are experiencing similar teaching-learning problems. This suggests that there is still so much more to be done in order to make a positive difference for teachers and students alike for teachers, their practice and professional growth and for students, their academic progress and overall development..."

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