

Engaging academics in quality conversations: A bottom-up approach to improving teaching and learning in higher education institutions

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Abstract

Higher education in Tunisia has recently launched a quality enhancement program. Often scant attention is paid to the role of academics in impeding or facilitating change. This paper reports the experience of a group of lecturers who spontaneously engaged in quality conversations and designed collective measures to improve their teaching and learning. The conditions as well as the processes for engaging in such bottom-up experience are reviewed. The outcome of such experience on the academics' theories of teaching and specifically readiness and metaphors for change are discussed. This is compared to the results of previous studies on resistance to change to argue that both top-down and bottom-up approaches are necessary to the implementation and success of a quality culture in higher education.

I. Introduction

The Tunisian university has celebrated its fiftieth birthday in 2008. The “modern university” was officially inaugurated in 1958 two years after the independence thus cutting with the traditional teaching in the Zeytuna mosque founded in A.D. 698 and considered as the first university in the region and the oldest in Africa.

The “modern university” was pretty much modeled after the European one and specially the French. Tracks, degrees and length of study were much like the French system of higher education. After 1987, the Tunisian higher education system developed from an elite into a mass higher education with over 30% of young people aged 21 - 25 estimated to be studying for a university degree. According to the official statistics, 13 universities and 190 institutions serve a student population of over 350000 expected to increase to 500000 students in 2011 (Ministry of Higher Education, Scientific Research). All universities are public institutions and are provided for in the budget. Universities are under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Higher Education, Scientific Research. Until the 1970's, students had unrestricted admission to the universities. Later, student admission was restricted based on the average level of the student's baccalaureate exam. However, a political decision has been made to grant all those who succeed in the national baccalaureate exam a seat in the higher education institutions.

Recently, a number of reforms have been introduced to the Tunisian higher education scene. The

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generalisation of the LMD system to all higher education institutions and a number of quality initiatives are considered among the most important. Tunisia has recently undertaken a number of measures concerning quality such as receiving a loan from the World Bank in June 2006 or issuing an important law in February 2008 mainly aimed at providing the legal framework for a quality enhancement and assurance program. The enactment of this law raised a considerable amount of resistance and argument between academics and the ministry which caused a new model to emerge that divides the academics into “followers” and “dissidents”. The followers are those who support all top management decisions and thus “agree” with the new quality program and the dissidents are those who oppose the management and thus “refuse” the new quality program. Away from a political model that divides academics into two groups, we need to understand first what really motivates academics to engage in educational innovating activities and second how new quality enhancement measures are implemented in the realities of departments, lecture rooms and labs. The challenge in such situations is not just to change the legal framework and structures but also to alter the academics’ underlying belief systems and assumptions.

Tunisian academics seem to be ill-prepared for undertaking a major change in their daily teaching practices. There is currently no professional training requirement for lecturers; as a result, the majority of the lecturers do not have any teaching qualifications, and essentially are required to learn on the job, oftentimes relying on how they were taught themselves. However, there is a growing recognition within the sector for the need for training for lecturers. A new scheme for providing in-service training to newly appointed lecturers was launched two years ago whereby the newly recruited lecturers are required to attend a number of most probably mentoring sessions provided by senior lecturers of the same university. There is no explicit description of this program. Each university is entrusted to design a concomitant program for its newly appointed lecturers which in turn entrusts one of its senior lecturers to design and achieve it. In the lack of a clear learning theory adopted by the institution and the dearth of research on teaching and learning at the Tunisian higher education institution, it is surprising to see any benefit from this program. There is, however, no official program for in-service training for other experienced lecturers. The general tendency is to assume that once you get a PhD in any domain you should figure out how to teach it. The second general belief is that after gaining a number of teaching years at any department, there is little to be learnt. Pedagogy is thought to be at best redundant and at worst ridiculous. The only exception is e-learning as it is believed to require novel and technical knowledge. Educational research on higher education is altogether very thin on the ground and almost inexistent. This is probably due to the unacceptable and inexplicable absence of a faculty of education which would have centrifuged all kinds of research on learning and teaching.

During the period 2005 - 2008, I have conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with senior members of staff on their conceptions of “good” teaching (Ben Othman, 2009). The data talked loud of teacher-focused conceptions of teaching excellence, of lack of reflective practice and specially of lack of the right attitude to consider teaching “problems” not as individual instances of failure but as opportunities for department level and institutional learning on how to make teaching and learning better.

This study relates a spontaneous academic development experience where a group of lecturers led by an enthusiastic and energetic head of department engaged in a series of conversations “to get into grips” with the new quality requirements. Armed with a positive attitude to enhance their teaching practices, these lecturers openly discussed various teaching problems and collectively

designed an analysis and a solution for it. Developing, implementing, managing, and refining quality teaching processes is not effortless. This study sheds some light on some of the processes of undertaking change within the realities of a Tunisian higher education institution.

II. Theories of change in higher education

The classical tradition in innovation research regards the development of innovations as a diffusion process. According to this tradition, diffusion occurs between individuals, even though the innovations take place in a geographical and social field, the structure of which influences the diffusion. Diffusion is seen as dependent on geographical communications, on information through social contacts, and individual acceptance occurs through imitation or through some process of intellectual conviction. But, in parallel with diffusion research, there has grown up a research field oriented towards change not merely *within* a system but also *of* a social system. In this setting, there is a greater emphasis on the behaviour of groups and organisations and on interaction within and between groups.

1. Quality assurance and quality enhancement

Harvey and Green (1993) distinguish three definitions of quality that are relevant to the issue of quality assurance (QA): as value for money, as fit for the espoused purpose, and as transforming. *Quality as value for money.* A “quality” institution in this view is one that satisfies the demands of public accountability.

Quality as fit for the purpose. The “purpose” is that of the institution. Universities have several purposes, with teaching and research as the most important.

Quality as transforming. Quality teaching transforms students’ perceptions of their world, and the way they go about applying their knowledge to real world problems; it also transforms teachers’ conceptions of their role as teacher, and the culture of the institution itself.

Harvey and Knight (1996) strongly stress the need to transform higher education if it is to provide a transformative experience for students, so that they will become the change agents for the future society. Central to higher education transformation is to reconceptualise the learning process. There is a need to move the emphasis from teaching to learning; and to see students as participants in a process, who are to be enhanced and empowered. Prosser et al. (1994) have found that helping teachers change their conceptions of teaching would be likely to improve the quality of student learning. Biggs (2001 p. 227) states that quality enhancement ‘is about getting teachers to teach better, which is what staff development is all about’. Carpenter & Tait (2001) define good teaching as having ‘two central features: it is necessarily student centered, and it is ‘innovative’.

2. Academics’ reactions

In recent years, there has developed a substantial literature focused upon strategies for implementing change within universities and the impact of organisational cultures upon the choice and success of change strategies (Thomas, & Willcoxson, 1998). Surprisingly, the approach to strategic change promulgated by most OECD governments and many practitioners assumed that a hard managerialist approach to strategic change was more effective than traditional models of collegial debate and decision-making used in universities. The literature abounds with studies of lecturers’ reactions to quality assurance initiatives in most OECD countries. Different studies mainly conducted in the USA, Australia, the United Kingdom or other European countries have

reported instances of academic staff inertia, compliance or resistance to governments' quality assurance programs. Academics are described as "trapped" (Newton, 2002). Despite a huge expansion in change management education and training, it became increasingly obvious that beliefs held by stakeholders about the identity, purpose, and character of the process, the higher education institution, and its environment strongly affected organisational actions. Teacher beliefs have been seen as being produced and reproduced by social processes and as being significant at the collective or group level, and at the individual level as they form a 'conceptual lens' i.e. the possibilities that were open to the strategic planners (Norton et al., 2005).

III. Methodology

1. The context of the study

This institute which we are going to call the Tunis Institute of Finance (TIF)² is a relatively young institute providing undergraduate and graduate education in accountancy, finance and ICT related fields.

I have been approached by the head of department to give what she termed a "hands-on" workshop on quality as she thinks that she as well as her colleagues needed a good "technical" introduction on what quality is. The intended workshop developed into six 3 to 4 hours meetings which were attended by an average number of 24 lecturers and took place at the TIF over the period between May and June 2007. The meetings were discussions of "issues" described by lecturers as unacceptable or problematic.

When the head of department approached me in April 2007, I have just finished a study on academics' resistance to quality where academics' questionnaires and interviews revealed a great deal of inertia, lack of information and lack of understanding of what quality is and a general mistrust of the real motives behind the government's quality program (Ben Othman, 2007). Understandably, I found it interesting that a group of academics genuinely expressed the need to understand what quality is about. I haven't, then, envisaged any research plans for this particular event. I have kept a diary as I wanted to maximize my own learning opportunities from this quite unusual practice in the Tunisian higher education scene. At the same period, and just accidentally, I have been approached by four different institutions for the same reason. The other three institutions did not really achieve much. In one of them, the members of staff did not simply turn up either to the first or the second announced meetings probably to assert group inertia or "disobedience" to the director's "invitation". The second institution first meeting was good but the second one was interrupted by a real unfortunate struggle for power between the head of department and a senior lecturer which made any kind of "professional" discussion simply impossible. The third head of department was not really interested in understanding quality. All that he wanted was someone to fill in the quality tender on his behalf. Thus, I quickly called the TIF my "best quality group" but still with no planned intention to research this experience. I decided to look at this experience with a research lens only when I started receiving requests from this group to attend their classes and give them feedback. Peer observation is locally rated as one of the most "hated" and least "trusted" reflective practice routines by academics and very often equated with basic and secondary education culture where inspection is carried through classroom observations. To me, these requests which were largely unexpected and unmediated witness critical moments in the change of the lecturers' beliefs and conceptions of their work

² A pseudo-name is given to the institute at the request of the TIF quality group.

and of ways to enhance it. Further instances came during the round-up session which took place nearly a year after the first meetings and where different lecturers showed their own rated success of how they enhanced their instructional routines.

The quality conversations with the TIF group evolved as follows:

Table 1: Types of quality conversations

Quality conversations	Period
Six meetings The last one is a round-up session	May-June 2007
1 day seminar entitled "motivating students is the responsibility of the teachers"	October, 24 th 2007
One final round up session	May 2008

During the meetings, the group engaged in processes of reflection and dialogue. My aim was to challenge their otherwise taken-for-granted beliefs and assumptions regarding teaching and learning with a view to broadening their perceptions. The aim of such an exercise is to help lecturers attain the requisite variety in their mental models necessary to face the requirements of a student-centered culture.

The meetings evolved around a number of activities prepared in advance and a battery of questions that emerged spontaneously during the discussion. The aim of the sessions was to help this group of lecturers perceive, understand and act upon the teaching and learning events that occur in their daily lives and design a collective understanding and solutions for any events that they describe as problematic. It is often the case that the solution is given by a member of the team either as something he has already tried out or as a plan of action that he thinks can help. My role was often to confront the team with information scenarios and questions that challenge both individual and collective cognitions that have come to prevail within the Tunisian higher education culture.

2. Sources of data

Table 2: Sources of data

Type of data	Quantity	Major themes
Researcher diary	6000 words	Problems identified during the discussion Major misconceptions Theoretical input
lecturers' emails	890 words	Individual issues Explicit and implicit feedback on the quality conversations Signs of reflective practice
Summary report of the first meetings	2000 words	Issues, different analyses, solutions and future plans as perceived and agreed on by the group

Course descriptions, handouts and exams	1190 words	Signs of shift from a teaching-focused beliefs to learning focused ones
Task written output	49 instances	New emergent metaphors
Lecturers' oral presentations of their achievements in the round-up sessions	1 power-point presentation and three oral presentations	Self-assessed evaluations of the changes carried by the lecturers in solo or in small groups
Other written sources	Varied articles	The lecturers brought to the meetings short articles and URLs for web pages they found related and important to the issues discussed during the conversation sessions

3. Data analysis

Different types of data have been analysed using the constant comparative method, with its primary aim to identify main categories and patterns in collected qualitative data (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). The method combines inductive category coding with a simultaneous comparison of all units of meaning obtained. Following Strauss & Corbin (1994, 1996) procedures of writing rules of inclusion when rethinking about data which fit into certain category, certain proposed statements have been derived from refined categories revealing the main draft of research outcomes.

Data was sieved to answer the following questions:

1. How did the TIF group engage in enhancing their teaching routines?
2. What were the favourable conditions that helped them do so?

IV. Findings

The TIF group has progressively undergone cycles of upgrading their teaching and learning beliefs and conceptions. The reflective conversations often evolved around the new changes in the work of academics specially those that directly affect teaching and learning. The biggest revelation for the team was to realize that their students are far from being what they used to or what they expect them to be. Massification has often entailed what they termed a "new breed" of students and it took the team cycles of discussions and positive attitude to stop accusing the others for the "low-quality" or "non-quality" aspects of their students' learning and start thinking of possible ways to overcome an unprecedented variability in their institutions' input. The team's positive attitude helped them to attempt to adapt their teaching to the new kind of students they deal with.

In contrast to other faculty education techniques, the "quality conversations" enabled participants to appropriate the process and the output of collective reflection. The enthusiasts would bring to the meeting instances of identified problems and seek collective reflection and advice. Some of the lecturers started individual and systematic reflections that they did not attempt before. Others reported a continuous effort to make sense of their teaching environment in "new ways". One of them reported:

I keep turning everything I see into a series of questions which are why is this happening the way it does? Is my answer/solution correct? And is there still a better way of doing things. I think that the number one lesson that we all learned, thanks to you and to X (name of the head of department) is that there are good and that there are even better ways of teaching and learning. If that's quality, then I am for it. (A/C2 email dated November, 21st 2007)

The quality conversations seemed to respect a number of unspoken rules. The number one rule is that the meetings are to find collective ways to enhance the quality of teaching and learning. Second, the conversations do not take the government's quality program into account. Third, there should be no censoring to questions or to answers.

During the one day seminar, the TIF group seemed more open to theoretical input on motivation, learning, teaching, assessment and related themes as attested in their written statements of what they expect to learn from the seminar. They elaborated detailed expectancies and started collectively thinking of new issues the teaching of generic skills or optimum ways of "combating student forgetting" (A/C 12). The seminar contained several instances of "ahs" that testified to how this group of lecturers turned into active learners, collectively diagnosing, reflecting and making sense of their teaching worlds.

The final round-up session was requested by the group as they wanted to "assess how much they achieved so far" (A/C 1 email dated March 12th 2008). Table 3 below summarizes the types of innovations as reported by the group.

Table 3: Types of innovations as reported by the lecturers

Types of innovation	Frequency
Use of handouts	18
Written course materials	12
Pre-course prior knowledge testing	10
Clear unambiguous exams	8
E-learning resources	6
Other	13

One of the group self assessed the benefits of the new techniques by comparing the results of her present students to those of the previous year. She reported a net 43% increase in students' end of term exam compared to the previous year. She estimated that the assessment of students' prior knowledge and continuous in-class support were the major causes of improvement. Another lecturer described how their efforts as a team of mathematics lecturers in a department which traditionally receives students who are bad in mathematics turned their "boring and deserted" lectures into live and interesting ones where students do not hesitate to ask questions that show real signs of learning and specially motivation to learn. This teacher described the key to success as:

As soon as the students were relieved from the burden of taking notes of detailed mathematical equations, they started giving understanding more importance. We used to spend most of the lecture time writing on the board while the students were breathless trying to keep in paste of our writing and of the unfolding of the lecture. No wonder they used to understand little. No wonder that only the very best students used to sit for exams with a minimum comfort. It took us a lot

of work though to prepare the course handouts and basic readings. Fortunately, each of us committed himself or herself to his or her share of work. Still it is a lot of work and we hope that next term we will be relieved. We have had no exam results yet to compare with last year. We frankly think we do not really want to. These comparisons are dangerous. But we have all witnessed a better attitude and motivation from our students. We are very happy for that specially that we didn't expect as much (A/C 6 lecturer)

The rest of the lecturers who attended the round-up session but did not report any explicit change in their instructional routines did not show signs of doubt or disbelief. Some of them declared their intention to invest the necessary time and effort to do so the following term. Others regretted not being able to team up with other colleagues and wondered if they could go solo. None of the lecturers showed any signs of resistance to quality teaching. It simply stopped being part of the ministry's discourse and became part of the "quality group" discourse whether for those who went ahead and carried the necessary changes in their daily teaching or for those who just convinced themselves of doing so some time in the future. Perhaps this second group needs another round of group conversations.

V. Motivating conditions for academics' engagement

Worldwide, the higher education scene has witnessed a number of changes which have varied in nature, provenance and intensity, but which all impact on academic staff and their every day work lives. The literature has reported more instances of resistance or compliance than grass-roots engagement experiences where a group of lecturers genuinely engage in collectively building their own agenda of quality in higher education. Success stories seem to be more related to top-down programs and initiatives rather than bottom-up ones. This study argues that lecturers' engagement can happen and that by providing for a number of positive motivating conditions, it is possible to reduce group inertia. The following section will describe discerned conditions that seemed to favour the success of this "quality group" in enhancing their instructional routines.

1. Building sustainable power

Traditionally, the moral purposefulness of the academy has turned on the notion of academic freedom as 'freedom for academics': their freedom to speak their own minds, to teach in accordance with their own interests, and to develop those interests according to their own research agenda. Academics do not like to be rendered into execution agents, monitored or worse inspected. The changing nature of higher education has made the traditional power boundaries increasingly fuzzy (Barnett, 2000). Recent organizational forces (e.g. new quality programs, LMD systems, accountability) have eroded and redefined traditional academic power and privilege. The TIF lecturers trusted their own ability to diagnose the different issues and build collective and practical solutions to them. They did not expect or accept any tierce body to dictate to them what to do. If there is a growing necessity to attend differently to the needs of their students, academics would like to be given the time and the space to do so.

2. Constructing collective frames for quality teaching and learning

Quality enhancement and assurance programs draw values and paradigms from a number of social values that are neither universal nor objective. Academics' conceptions of the tasks of higher education, of their own roles and identities and of the optimum ways of enhancing

the ways they do normally things for a number of decades are also socially constructed and contextually shaped. The way the TIF academics negotiated and ordered their priorities within the limits of what they think is possible tells so much about their implicit theories of teaching, learning and their selves. Though the TIF lecturers showed a great aptitude to upgrade their teaching constructs and routines, and they did actually attempt to do so to a varying degree, yet there seems to be a limit at what is possible to achieve while upgrading these frames and constructs. However small the academics' success at upgrading their frames of reference is, there seems to be plenty of indications that such success is more sustainable than trying to comply with quality standards and norms without actually changing the way things are done at the core (Newton, 2000; Birtwistle, 2004; Birtwistle, 2006).

Apparently, the TIF lecturers needed the support of the group to attempt individually and collectively to step out of the comfort of teacher-focused paradigm; the status quo of doing things which has become legitimate with time; and step into the uncertain and uncomfortable zone of learner-focused paradigm which is at the basis of quality teaching. There seemed to be an urgent need for a common vision, nonetheless an unofficial one. The conversations helped a lot to construct this common vision. While discussing the relationship between conversations and collective identity and interorganisational collaboration, Hardy et al (2005) argue that interorganizational collaboration can be understood as the product of sets of conversations that draw on existing discourses and that effective collaboration emerges out of a two-stage process. In this process, conversations produce discursive resources that create a collective identity and translate it into effective collaboration. Though Hardy et al (2005) studied the effective collaboration between organizations, their conclusions seem to apply to the collaboration within the same organization as well.

3. Not being afraid of "mistakes"

Individual and collective mistakes were treated with great professionalism. Contrary to the senior lecturers who find it hard to signal any teaching problems even general ones, lecturers in this group did not hesitate to "admit" going wrong and publically analyzed their misconceptions. They were happy to work within a zone of comfort created through a zone of mutual trust and honesty.

One of the lecturers admitted that:

I was wrong to inform my students that only a third of the group could make it and the other two thirds could not. I explicitly told the two thirds to save themselves the hassle of attending. I guess I am wrong. (A/C 1)

4. Persuasive leadership

The head of department firmly believed that there must be better ways of doing things and could convince her colleagues of looking for these ways. She monitored most of the conversations with great ability. She was often described as firm but fair. Some of her colleagues came to the last meeting even without knowing what the meeting was about. They admitted that only "her could bring you to a meeting without even knowing what the meeting was about". The head of department also insisted on getting a report read for everyone's knowledge and circulated it among all members of staff including those who did not show any interest in attending the quality conversation meetings hoping that a written document "would steer up thoughts". She was unanimously reelected as head of department and colleagues started thinking that nobody could actually measure up to the standard she put so high. Discussions often tackled the centralization

of the decision-taking and complained of the disinterest and demotivating measurements of the TIF administration. However, these comments were not put centre stage. The head of department was determined to push things forward and it is not a lazy or complaisant director who is going to stop her or her team.

VI. Discussion

This study aimed at describing the experience of a group of lecturers who found the argument of how to really increase the quality of their teaching more appealing and persuasive than the general discourse of the new ministry quality program. Their indirect resistance to the “official” program has engendered an intuitive and authentic desire to build their “own” definition and understanding of quality teaching and learning.

The experience of the TIF group who genuinely engaged in building their own definitions and metaphors of quality teaching and learning seems to point to the fact that the difficulty in changing from a behavioral pattern these lecturers have been comfortably using to a newer one requires empowerment, collaboration and flexibility. These academics did not resist making the necessary changes once they collectively answered the basic questions of why to change, how and who is going to carry the change. Once they acquired the right attitude, knowledge and metaphor they created new and collective ways of enhancing their instructional routines and were ready to invest the necessary time and effort in order to do so. It seems misleading to assume that those who resist the top management initiatives are resisting quality. They resist the new distribution of power which the quality initiatives seem to enforce. The new quality initiatives treat the institutions as empty entities and the academics as either loyal or disloyal executers. Apparently, quality in higher education is not a plan to be executed. It is a new culture to be constructed primarily by academics who are operating in the front line and who have the great power of “realizing” a quality program.

Ben Othman (2007) has identified a number of defensive avoidance strategies that lecturers have used in order to resist the quality project. The biggest observation, then, was that resistance might be fruitful and even better than inertia. Group inertia and subtle covert resistance ways are often reported in the literature as common and “dangerous”. I think that the biggest challenge for Arab universities is not to “copy” the best quality enhancement and assurance programs but to find ways of turning group inertia into engagement. In relating a successful experience where a group of lecturers turned their resistance to the government’s quality initiatives into a positive attitude through varying forms of individual and collective frames for enhancing the quality of teaching and learning, this study hopes to argue that academics are major actors in the quality enhancement culture and that a number of conditions seem to favour their genuine engagement into designing and realizing better teaching and learning worlds.

This paper wishes to argue that both top-down and bottom-up approaches are needed in the region. Top-down initiatives are crucial in setting the tone for the new changes to be undertaken but bottom-up approaches are indispensable to the lecturers’ efforts to construct sustainable change and a sense of ownership.

Strangely, loyalty has been the number one issue discussed by senior members of staff when describing their professional lives issues and problems (Ben Othman, 2009). They often describe instructional routines as getting worse as the younger generation of lecturers lack the right loyalty to follow the steps of their seniors and carry on the good tradition. It is also the same lack of loyalty that prevents the senior members from imposing their own ways and from interfering

in the process when they notice what they categorize as “misbehavior” on the part of the junior colleagues. The same metaphor which sees “good” teaching as guaranteed through the moral obligation of junior academics to unquestionably copy the model of their senior colleagues and very often teachers, seems to apply with top management expecting the academics to execute their lofty intentions without even asking legitimate questions of “how” or “why” or even “who” is supposed to carry the changes necessary for quality enhancement. Both senior academics and management see questions “from below” to borrow Newton (2004) terms as signs of disobedience. The Arab region policy making in higher education seems to be an area of urgent research and attention in the future.

VII. Ways forward

Research on academics’ reactions to the new changes in their working environments whether these reactions are spontaneous or planned, individual or collective, conscious or unconscious, explicit or implicit is urgently needed in the Arab countries. However good the change programs and policies might be at the onset, academics’ engagement and collaborative work is a key variable in the implementation and success of such policies. Arab countries are in an urgent need to turn their higher education institutions to places where knowledge is produced and not merely consumed. Such an aim cannot be reached without a thorough understanding of the academics’ roles and a better use of the higher education resources. Quality in higher education is basically a western concept rather than a universal one and an appreciation of the context of higher education in the Arab countries as it really is and not as it is thought to be should smoothen the transfer of the quality concepts and thus weave them into the university “fabric” (Adams, 1998).

The implications for policy and professional development are worth noting. The higher education in the Arab region needs to move past its current seesaw regime of endurance and impatience and start applying gentle, but constant, pressure on universities to foster the development of quality learning and teaching. Such an orientation would not be possible without recognition of the role of academics at the front line and a change in position whereby academics are not expected to be execution agents but owners and partners of the change and the success of higher education mission and output. Whether considered as agents or partners, academics need to take a rough and lengthy road to quality teaching and learning. Unless equipped with the right social and cognitive frame, these academics will simply hesitate to undertake such a road. It might be misleading to categorize academics as followers or dissidents and to consider explicit resistance as a challenge and threat to management authority. What this study seems to point to is that academics are either able or not to undertake the road to change and that such ability seems to be negotiated and constructed locally within departments and institutions and NOT outside of them.

VIII. Conclusion

Although this study reports the experience of a small group of lecturers acting within an undoubtedly unique context, it holds clear implications for those who would like to enhance the quality of teaching and learning in higher education departments and institutions. Unlike most predominantly views of top down-managerial conceptions of the changes necessary for quality enhancement, this paper argues in line with (Norton et al. 2005; Brown et al. 2002 and Newton,

2000 & 2002) that sustainable quality enhancement is only possible when a change in the beliefs of academics is achieved.

The Tunisian system of higher education firmly believes in the leading role of senior staff members. As quality enhancement measures of teaching and learning seem to be challenging predominant routines and beliefs, some senior staff might feel that their professional competence is being implicitly challenged, and their perceived capacity to meet the challenge head-on and respond appropriately to it is likely to be less if demands for change relate to relatively undeveloped areas of professional activity. This case study suggests that unless senior staff members are given the opportunity to develop the necessary skills and competence to enhance the quality of teaching and learning, they would go against the quality enhancement program and might attempt to stifle junior staff bottom-up initiatives through the usual channels of power and dissuasion. Apparently, empowering members of staff both “followers” and “dissidents” is a vital condition to the success of local and national quality enhancement programs and initiatives.

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