



# Higher education challenges in Yemen: Discourses on English teacher education



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## ABSTRACT

We investigated Yemen's higher education challenges by focusing on the English teacher education program. Interpretative analysis of policy statements and interviews revealed several factors that are hindering the quality of the program. Deeply aware of the socio-political dimensions impeding progress, the university lecturers shared convoluted visions for improving higher education and, in reflecting on the mission and realities of their program, voiced their quest for social justice and recognition by university administrators. The administrators acknowledged key problems in teacher education, but proposed no specific corrective measures. The findings highlight the urgent need for systemic change in Yemeni higher education.

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## 1. Introduction

In the last couple of years, reports in the world news media have associated Yemen almost exclusively with conflict, protests, and related clashes. The transnational movements that have been reshaping the socio-political hierarchies (Vertovec, 2009) in many low-income countries have also emerged in Yemen. The quest for democracy and social justice lay at the foundation for the calls for change throughout the country. Higher education has also been an area where existing circumstances are considered to maintain inequities. While these macro shifts in society were growing, we were exploring the state of English teacher education in Yemen (Muthanna, 2011). In this article, we analyze the discourses of both university faculty involved in teacher education and administrators responsible for analyzing and implementing policies on schooling and teachers in Yemen.

In international and comparative education, the need for diversity in conceptual and methodological frames and respect for and inclusion of voices from different world settings are critical (McGrath, 2012). While several studies exploring aspects of higher education and teacher education in Yemen were published in local journals in Arabic, there is a scarcity of studies that address the international scholarly community. Unlike previous studies, rather than exploring survey data or systemic analyses based on statistics

on higher education; in this qualitative study, by analyzing the discourses of a group of Yemeni educators and bureaucrats, we foreground the voices of local stakeholders, who share their narratives of experience. Furthermore, in our review, we highlight key studies conducted by Yemeni researchers. Our investigation explicates how the official strategic plans in Yemen were not reflecting the lived experiences of educators. The next section introduces the research setting.

### 1.1. Yemen: demography and education

Yemen is located in the southern half of the Arabian Peninsula. Situated near Saudi Arabia and Oman, Yemen has coastlines facing the Red Sea, the Arabian Sea, and the Gulf of Aden. According to the United Nations, the surface area of Yemen is 527,968 square kilometers. Today, Yemen has a population of approximately 24 million people, and its constitution promises access to education for all citizens through both formal and non-formal means.

Poverty is among the most serious challenges that the people of Yemen face (Dyer, 2007). Malnutrition, inefficiencies in work, government, and social services, rising illiteracy rates among women, housing crises, high unemployment rates, and declines in agricultural production continue to threaten the possibility of improving the quality of life. Furthermore, while the population figures are rising, economic indicators do not improve at satisfactory rates (Shuga'a Al-Deen, 2010). Investment rates in education in Yemen have been among the lowest as compared to other low-income countries. From 1999 to 2008, while Yemen's

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real GDP annual growth rate modestly increased, education spending decreased (UNESCO, 2011).

According to the Ministry of Education of Yemen, the priorities of the education policy are decreasing illiteracy rates, making education compulsory for all citizens, and establishing new educational programs. There are several strategic plans in different governmental sectors for developing education in Yemen. The *National Basic Education Development Strategy* that will remain in effect until 2015 was endorsed by the Yemeni government in 2003. It involves reforming and developing basic education for all students in the age range of 6–14 years.

Furthermore, the *National Strategy of Secondary Education Development* was announced in 2006. This strategy aimed at providing learners with basic secondary education that would help them continue to higher education or prepare them to work in any government sector. In this regard, the government plans to introduce computer labs in town schools and begin teaching English at the grade 4 level (Ministry of Education, 2008, pp. 4–11). Almost a decade has passed since the announcement of these initiatives. However, no significant progress has been observed in the implementation of these strategies. There are high disparities in learning achievement among Yemeni schools located in different cities. In the low performing Yemeni schools, a focal analysis of fourth grade classes showed that only 42% of teachers had a teaching certificate (UNESCO, 2011).

The focus of this study, higher education and English teacher education in particular, has also been an area in need of extensive development in Yemen. In the next section, we summarize the structural qualities of Yemeni higher education. This is followed by a review of key studies that have investigated the problems encountered at universities.

## 1.2. Higher education in Yemen

Several branches of government in Yemen have the authority to intervene in higher education.<sup>1</sup> Among these, the *Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research*, which was established in 1990, directly oversaw the administration of universities until it was abolished in 1994 and its responsibilities were given to the *Ministry of Education*. Later, the administration acknowledged the need for an independent ministry to regulate higher education and re-established the *Ministry of Higher Studies and Scientific Research* in 2001 (Ministry of Higher Studies and Scientific Research, 2006).

Until 1990, there were only two universities in Yemen: Sana'a University and Aden University. Combined, these two universities included 19 colleges, and these colleges offered 108 majors. By 2007, the number of Yemeni universities had risen to eight, including 95 colleges in which 448 courses in applied sciences and 325 courses in human sciences were offered. At this time, there were approximately 195,023 students, both male and female, in state universities. Further, there were about 2578 faculty members with doctoral degrees and 2456 faculty members with master's and bachelor's degrees (Ministry of Education, 2008). These statistics point to the shortage of advanced degree holders among the university faculty in Yemen.

The *National Strategy of Higher Education*, which was announced in 2006, primarily underscored the need for high quality programs at universities. It was argued that such programs would also contribute to the quality of life in society. The aims of this strategic plan were to reform the curricula of the eight state universities, restructure the ministry itself, develop the teaching-learning

processes, provide all universities with language labs and electronic-system libraries, and encourage the translation and publication processes (Ministry of Education, 2008).

In our review of studies on higher education programs in Yemen, we found that there was a strong emphasis on the various problems encountered in higher education programs and the need for reform. While national education strategy documents emphasize the right of all qualified citizens to be admitted to a university, the limited resources at Yemeni universities lead to restrictions in admissions. The academic opportunities provided to those admitted are also constrained due to limited budgets. Furthermore, many university faculty members acknowledge that there is a need to thoroughly plan and offer knowledge and scientific experiences that would promote the skills needed for successful participation in the professional sectors. The administration officials in Yemen clearly need to put more emphasis on fostering scientific research and supporting researchers (Al-Majeedi, 2007).

According to Al-Majeedi (2007), all stakeholders in the Yemeni higher education sector should be involved in the reform process. With the establishment of committees whose participants represent diverse social interest groups, it is more likely that there would be a sustainable systemic transformation. Administrative bodies and local communities must work together for the betterment of their institutions of higher education. The inclusion of local organizations and individuals in the framing of various university projects would help foster a sense of pride and satisfaction with the universities among citizens.

Another recent study investigating the quality of the programs and satisfaction level of instructors, administrators, and students at Sana'a University found that most participants were dissatisfied with the services provided at the university. Areas of dissatisfaction included the curriculum, teaching staff, the library, employees, admission and registration, student characteristics, and the image of the university (Shiryani, 2009). However, the challenges that this major university in the Yemeni capital face are not unique; they are also encountered at other institutions of higher education across the country.

It is beyond the scope of this study to explore the challenges faced by all university programs in Yemen. Therefore, we concentrate on a specific program. The next section details the objectives of this inquiry, focusing on English language teacher education in Yemen and its importance.

## 1.3. The importance of English language teacher preparation in Yemen

Focusing on English teacher preparation at Yemeni universities, in this study, we attempt to answer the following research questions: What are the beliefs and experiences of Yemeni teacher educators in relation to their programs and universities? How do Yemeni bureaucrats in the education sector view the English teacher education programs? What are the most important challenges for these teacher education programs according to educators and administrators?

The rise of English as an international language has been associated with the 'homogenization' of world cultures. While, for some, the homogenization process is desirable, others evaluate it as a risk in relation to diversity of world societies (McKay, 2010). Global spread of English has also been described as an imperial apparatus of the neoliberal empire (Phillipson, 2008). In response, it has been argued that individuals across borders have the agency to negotiate and resist linguistic imperialism (McKay, 2010). In the Arab world, English has also become the most commonly taught foreign language. The medium of instruction for some university programs is also English. Arab countries such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Jordan have emphasized developing English language proficiency among their populations. This is

<sup>1</sup> Ministry of Higher Studies and Scientific Research, Ministry of Vocational Education and Professional Training, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health and Population, Ministry of Civil Service, Ministry of National Development and Planning, Ministry of Finance, and Ministry of Social Affairs.

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