Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to focus on mapping the ways in which HE institutions enhance faculty members’ professional development. More precisely, by introducing a case from one of the well-established universities in Iran, the authors aim to examine the focus of faculty development (FD) activities and how FD is conducted, with a view to shedding light on the challenges of and disparities between faculty roles and areas of FD in higher education (HE) in Iran as a developing country.

Design/methodology/approach – In order to explore and map the characteristics of FD and analyse the trends that Iranian HE institutions are experiencing in this area, a sequential explanatory multiple sources design, consisting of two distinct phases, was implemented (Creswell, 2012). In this design, the documents regarding the faculty professional development (decisions, agreements, The Job Structure Memorandum, and relevant documents and policies at the Iranian Ministry of Science, Research and Technology and the studied HE institution) were analysed first. Next, field records were collected by means of a series semi-structured interviews with faculty members in the given HE setting.

Findings – The analysis of the collected data brought to the surface three themes, namely, FD: policies and procedures, faculties professional development in practice, and associated challenges and future prospects. These initial findings helped to understand if and how FD activities occur as well as map the challenges and complexities in faculties’ CPD in Iranian HE. Further, it discusses possible solutions to develop relevant and practical professional development.

Research limitations/implications – This case study is partly limited to a group of faculty members’ experiences and reflections on FD in one Iranian HE institution. Conducting additional surveys and observations with a large sample of the faculties and students may verify and consolidate the findings of the study and contribute to further insights on the ways faculties’ professional development can be transformed.

Practical implications – Taking into account the findings of the study, a dynamic framework for continued professional development of faculties in Iran is developed.

Originality/value – The findings of the study present valuable insights into the FD procedures, challenges and paradoxes that seem to shape FD in Iranian HE institutions. Moreover, the findings indicated much-needed structural modifications to simplify and harmonise the policies and procedures to harness profession development. To conclude, the initiatives and action plans that may contribute to FD and reshape the Iranian HE landscape is discussed. The applications and implications are also relevant for similar HE systems in developing countries.

Keywords Higher education, Qualitative research, Continuing professional development, Iran, Educational development, Faculty development

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

By addressing a case, this study provides an overview of the current state of faculty development (FD) in Iran and attempts to map the challenges and changes that have occurred in recent years. Iranian higher education (HE) has been affected by societal...
developments and changes in the globalised world. These changes do not only relate to
globalisation, but also to factors such as the increased demand for accountability, HE
institutions striving for “excellence” while, at the same time, experiencing competitive
pressure to become more efficient, the expansion of student bodies in HE institutions and
emerging information and communication technology-based initiatives. In order to adapt to
and keep abreast of these changes and developments, some Iranian HE institutions have
adopted innovative approaches aimed at empowering their key actors, i.e. faculty members.

The HE system in Iran consists of 2,640 universities and colleges. With 84,540 full-time
faculty members and more than four and half million students, these universities and
university colleges award degrees at various levels, from associate to PhD degrees, in all
academic disciplines. It should be noted that from 2007 to 2014, HE institutions were
strongly encouraged to increase their activities in terms of student enrolment and adding
new fields of studies, which was in line with the Iranian Government’s policies at that time.
Correspondingly, the student body increased from almost 2.8 to 4.8m.

Despite this large boost, the rate of increase in other sectors of the HE system, such as
qualified faculty members and financial resources, has not kept pace with increases in the
student population. The dramatic and rapid increase in the student body has further
challenged the quality of teaching and education and put considerable pressure on faculty
members (Institute for Research and Planning in Higher Education, 2015). Similarly, the
findings of Zahedi and Bazargan (2013) reveal that a significant number of faculty members
in main state universities experience high levels of burnout. Taking into account the local
and global challenges of globalisation and information technology, faculty members are
coming under increasing pressure in teaching, research and service contexts.

The continuous professional development of teachers is accordingly seen as a key
factor for both enhancing and ensuring quality in HE (Tippins, 2003). As a result, a
number of initiatives have been developed to facilitate faculty members’ professional
development. For instance, some of the initiatives have already been conceptualised in
some Iranian medical universities and led to the establishment of Educational
Development Centres (Ahmady et al., 2009). It should be noted that medical education
in Iran has been integrated into the healthcare system to form the Ministry of Health and
Medical Education (Azizi, 1997).

Despite these efforts, a large number of HE institutions in developing countries have no
distinct or well-documented plan for developing faculty competencies (cf. Phuong et al.,
2017; Phuong et al., 2015). In those cases where FD centres or FD plans exist, the
development initiatives often consist of occasional, short-term activities that are introduced
through top-down processes (Chaudary, 2011).

It would appear that the professional development of faculty members is a relatively
new phenomenon in HE institutions in developing countries and that its identity,
functions and strategies are still being explored (Phuong et al., 2017; Zahedi and Bazargan,
2013). But what is known about FD in developing countries like Iran? How does the
professional development of faculties function there? Which areas are focussed on, and
how? What informs the professional development actions of academics? To date, very
little research has been conducted on such questions and the ways in which FD activities
are taken into account. In an attempt to bridge this research gap, this paper focusses on
mapping how HE institutions enhance faculty members’ professional development. More
precisely, by introducing the case a of a well-established university in Iran, we aim to
examine the focus of FD activities and how FD is conducted, with a view to shedding light
on the challenges of and disparities between faculty roles and areas of FD in HE in Iran as
a developing country.

The studied HE institution is a graduate university located in the capital city of Iran,
Tehran. It was initially established to educate academic staff and researchers for HE
institutions across Iran. The university, with its 15 faculties, has been consistently ranked as one of the top universities in Iran. The university has about 10,000 registered postgraduate students at master’s and doctoral levels. With more than 690 full-time faculty members, the studied HE institution offers more than 120 graduate programmes.

Studying this university as a case will hopefully contribute to a better understanding of the procedures, challenges and paradoxes that seem to shape FD and quality enhancement in Iranian HE institutions.

Continuing professional development
Continuing professional development, also referred in the literature as “FD”, encompasses a wide range of interventions and activities aimed at improving faculty members’ performances in their different roles as scholars, advisers, designers and evaluators of academic programmes and courses, academic leaders, contributors to public service and participants in institutional decisions, all of which contribute to a college’s or university’s mission (Gaff and Justice, 1978; Gillespie and Robertson, 2010; Groccia, 2010). These categories address the wide range of possible roles that faculty members are expected to fill in HE institutions and, consequently, how their competencies should be developed. Accordingly, CPD is seen as an ongoing process which take place throughout the faculty members academic life.

A faculty’s professional development is therefore “no longer an optional or dispensable ‘add-on’ to the list of benefits available to faculty at universities” (Nathan, 1994, p. 508), but is rather seen as playing a critical role in the promotion of academic excellence. Faculty members’ development is accordingly considered as a key factor for enhancing and ensuring quality and supporting institutional change in HE institutions.

In order to prepare faculty members for their multiple roles, different kinds of FD activities have been developed and pursued. These include formal/informal or planned/incidental activities, such as attending courses, workshops and conferences, networking, learning by doing, mentoring and taking part in online or offline forums (McKinney et al., 2005; Clegg, 2003; Ferman, 2002). Kennedy (2005) characterised nine main CPD models which can define faculty members’ learning opportunities including training, award bearing, deficit, cascade, standards based, coaching/mentoring, community of practice, action research and transformative. Any of these CPD models can inform one or more of the expected roles of the faculty (Phuong et al., 2017).

In order to facilitate faculty members’ professional development and nurture a culture of continuing professional development, a number of teaching and learning centres in HE institutions have been initiated (Roscoe, 2002). These centres are designed to support faculty members in developing the knowledge and skills they will need to conduct their different roles as teachers, researchers, service providers and administrators (Weimer, 2010). However, FD activities in HE institutions have mostly focussed on enhancing faculty members’ pedagogical competencies, e.g. mastering a discipline in order to achieve greater success and student satisfaction (Austin and Sorcinelli, 2013). The professional development of faculties can be characterised as continuing and long-term, contextual, joint and practice-driven initiatives that create formal and informal opportunities to articulate broader qualitative changes in alignment with institutional and personal needs (see Clegg, 2003; Nworie et al., 2013; Saroyan and Frenay, 2010).

Research method
A sequential, explanatory, multiple sources design consisting of two distinct phases was used to explore and map the characteristics of FD and to analyse the present trends of Iranian HE institutions (Creswell, 2012). Documents relating to a faculty’s professional development (decisions, agreements, Job Structure Memorandum and other relevant
documents and policies at the Iranian Ministry of Science, Research and Technology and the studied HE institution) were analysed first. Next, field records were collected by means of semi-structured interviews with faculty members in the given HE setting (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990). The audio-recorded interviews were then analysed and used to help to explain and elaborate on the data obtained from the analysis of the documents and policies.

Participants
A purposive sample of 14 prominent faculty members was chosen for semi-structured interviews. The participants were selected on the basis of their contributions to the university’s academic achievements and recommendations (the Vice Chancellor for Education and the head of the Strategic Planning Office). The participants, all of which had diverse professional backgrounds, were drawn from the following faculties: Mechanical Engineering, Arts, Mining and Metallurgy, Agriculture, Basic Sciences, Humanities, Natural Resources and Marine Sciences, Law, Mathematical Sciences, Biological Sciences, Management and Economics, Electrical and Computer Engineering and Chemical Engineering. All the participants were male, with teaching experiences ranging from 10 to 30 years and had occupied different positions in the institutional hierarchy, e.g. head of department, head of school and influential professors in their fields.

Collected data and procedure
Initially, related government policy documents at national and local levels (the latter from the studied HE institution) were collected. Only those documents that addressed FD were included in the review and analysis. The documents that were collected included policies, strategic plans, legislation, reports, decisions and the Job Structure Memorandum and were accessed via personal contact and several different online sources, including search engines and sites hosted by the Iranian Ministry of Science, Research and Technology.

The semi-structured interviews lasted between 60 and 90 min, were audio-taped and took place in the interviewees’ offices. The interviews focused on how the participants explained their experiences of and reasoning around FD. In particular, they were asked about the process and key factors in their professional development at the studied institution, the faculty’s development goals and procedures at the studied institution, the process of developing new faculty competencies, the development of programmes/activities to promote faculty competencies and the challenges of and possible suggestions for professional development in the various faculties. All the interviews were later transcribed and analysed.

Data analysis
In order to gain a deeper understanding of the studied phenomenon, the data were analysed using content analysis in an iterative process (as described in Creswell, 2012). Content analysis provided a systematic approach to organising the qualitative data (Schreier, 2012). This enables us to “quantitative analysis of seemingly qualitative data” (Smith et al., 1996, p. 355).

More specifically, the following steps were taken in the analysis of the data.

The collected documents were read in order to structure the data and to differentiate between different meaningful segments of it. The identified meaningful segments were then coded and categorised based on their particular focus (Schreier, 2012). The content analysis of the documents served to map the undertaken initiatives and procedures in the implementation of the continuing development of faculties in Iranian HE institutions.

The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed and the transcriptions were read carefully in order to discern the main lines of reasoning and to create a coding scheme.
In this process, relevant keywords or phrases that aligned with the aims of the study were identified, and then emerged themes were coded. The emerged codes were placed under relevant sub-categories and categories. Next, in a second coding cycle, the interview transcripts and codes were re-read and checked by another independent-researcher to verify and reconfigure the key themes. Representative examples from each theme were then selected and excerpts from the faculties’ original response extracted as evidence. The interviews were carried out in Persian and were partly translated into English by the first author.

Findings

The analysis of the collected data led to the emergence of the following three themes: FD: policies and procedures, faculties’ professional development in practice, and associated challenges and future prospects. These initial findings helped us to understand whether and how FD activities occurred and enabled us to map the challenges and complexities in faculties’ CPD in Iranian HE. Further, the analysis highlighted possible solutions for developing a relevant and practical professional development.

**FD: policies and procedures**

The continued professional development of teachers is acknowledged in the analysed policy documents (Ministry of Science Research and Technology, 2015a,b; Tarbiat Modares University, 2012a). The Job Structure Memorandum especially emphasises the importance of developing faculties’ educational and research competencies. Initiated by the need to obtain and disseminate more systematic knowledge about how Iranian HE institutions approach FD at the strategic and practical levels, the documents recommend the establishment of a systematic approach to FD (Ministry of Science Research and Technology, 2015a,b). For instance, the Job Structure Memorandum emphasises the “importance of taking a more structured approach to faculty development” (see pages 15 and 18).

FD practices are influenced by an individual university’s policies and (sub-)strategies. Some universities, such as Tarbiat Modares University (TMU) and Shahid Beheshti University, emphasise teachers’ professional development in their Strategic Change Plan (Tarbiat Modares University, 2012a). According to the TMU’s Strategic Change Plan, a centre with specific responsibility for FD activities should be developed in order to support faculty members in the different stages of their careers. At a policy level, the professional development of faculty members is supported by the TMU University Staff Policy. The analysis of documents at the national and local level reveals contradictions in terms of what an empowered university teacher looks like and how teachers’ competencies should be measured and developed. The latest circulars from the Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution, the highest decision-making body for HE, on FD and promotion clearly state two sets of aims: ideological and pedagogical development. The faculty promotion document also stresses the importance of taking part in such activities (Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution, 2012). However, dominant policies like these are not popular with faculty members who are eager to define the means and ends of their development.

The collected data also show that the ways in which these policies are translated into practice are patchy. According to the interviewed faculty members, some of the policies and strategies reflect wishful thinking on the part of policymakers and have not yet been put into practice, partly because they would not be quantifiable. As one participant commented:

[…] taking part in such initiatives is not so useful, it is waste of time sitting and listening to something that is either irrelevant to what we do or too general to apply in practice.

This can generate tension between contradictory educational ideals based on political ideologies and faculty members’ normative expectations associated with what they are expected to do. Such contradictory policies and trends seem to cancel each other out.
Similarly, another participant emphasised the importance of establishing a framework for FD and outlined how such a framework should be mapped out:

The university should set a vital framework to promote faculty members’ skills. The framework should not encourage publishing and teaching, but should scaffold a context to publish and teach effectively.

The importance of establishing a framework for continuing FD was further emphasised by the interviewed faculty members. There was a widespread belief among the participants that developing a comprehensive plan for CPD could enhance the effectiveness and quality of their activities.

However, faculty members are implicitly expected to have and develop their own range of professional skills, including pedagogical competencies. Mastering such competencies appears to be taken for granted in Iranian HE. This is reflected in the following quote from one of the interviewees:

There is no established framework for faculty professional development, everyone should explore his own ways of development.

Many of the interviewees addressed this in the context of their own development processes. It was generally assumed that each faculty member would themselves explore how they should develop their competencies and what these should be. In view of this, FD is largely based on individual faculty members’ initiatives, rather than structured institutional programmes designed to develop professional skills in general and pedagogical competencies in particular. The lack of centres/units for developing faculty members’ competencies in the majority of HE institutions is further evidence of this approach.

Iranian HE institutions do not offer post-tenured FD programmes and new faculty members enter teaching environments directly after completing their doctoral studies, which further illustrates the reliance on individual development initiatives:

[...] in the recruiting of new faculty members, the focus is totally on the applicants’ research achievements and publications, rather than their educational experiences.

Additionally, PhD programmes in Iran are mostly research-centred and do not usually require students to develop pedagogical competencies. In practice, research in subject areas does not automatically provide insights into the teaching and learning of these areas, although research that involves reflections on learning and teaching processes does. Thus, post-tenured faculty members often learn to teach by a long process of trial and error and by using their own teachers as role models.

However, there is evidence to suggest that some initiatives to embed FD institutionally, as in TMU, are in place. The development of faculty members’ teaching competencies has also been given particular attention by providing educational workshops and courses. Despite this, many of the interviewed faculty members were not convinced of the effectiveness of such courses, and instead argued that subject-oriented teaching that enabled them to explore ways of teaching and development could be more productive.

Faculties’ professional development in practice
According to the interviewees, their professional development was mostly based on self-directed and ad hoc activities. The participants had thus considered their development as a set of self-directed learning that was informed by environmental and ecological factors. A participant explained the importance of ecological aspects in professional development:

At the start of my career we had a newly established department. I was appointed as head of department having opportunities to pursue professional passions. There wasn’t so much competition for departmental roles. Then I received a research grant. The trust invested in me and
the circumstances around it scaffolded my ways of development. But, unfortunately, such opportunities and surrounding circumstances are not available to newly recruited faculty members nowadays. There is so much competition for roles and positions.

The interviewees argued that their individual characters and endeavours had provided them with unique opportunities to develop their competencies. For instance, one of the interviewees mapped his professional development as an:

[…] endless trial and error to adapt myself to the academic world’s expectations and by taking my best teachers as role models.

This implies that self-directed activities play an important role in developing faculty members’ professional competencies.

The interviewees also acknowledged the role of ecological factors in their professional development and the inclusion of a variety of environmental and organisational issues, such as being able to work with top few scholars, get involved in projects, participate in educational workshops and conferences, receive administrative positions and supervise doctoral students. This is clearly indicated by one of the interviewees:

Well, […], everything including faculty members’ development is self-directed rather than system oriented. In other words, there is neither a systemic approach to promote faculty competencies nor a functional system to do that. Thus, developing faculty competencies is seen as my own personal task […].

A number of the participants regarded ecological factors as important for their professional development. However, using ecological factors to develop own competencies could be seen as self-directed learning, rather than organisational or pre-planned activity for FD.

Conducting stand-alone courses, workshops or seminars was another aspect that was reflected in many of the conducted interviews. These activities aimed to extend the faculty members’ competencies and cover a variety of issues, such as learning theories, educational technologies and cultural and ideological issues. It was assumed that introducing stand-alone courses or workshops could help faculties to change their ways of being, understanding and teaching. Appreciating the provision of stand-alone courses or workshops, the participants stated that “courses should be closely linked to their educational practices”. However, some of the participants were somewhat negative to workshops or seminars. One participant commented:

I am not very optimistic about the effectiveness of the provided courses and workshops. There isn’t much evidence to support their effectiveness, they may only have marginal effects.

They particularly suggested that the focus of CPD initiatives should be on changing the educational environments, rather than providing general workshops and courses.

The participants also highlighted other aspects of professional development, such as appointing excellent teachers and best researchers. According to them, this would encourage faculties to expand their competencies. They further suggested that conducting CPD initiatives by excellent teachers from diverse disciplines would be helpful.

Associated challenges and future prospects
The analysis of the interviews and policy documents highlighted a number of challenges and dilemmas that could influence faculty members’ professional development. The interviewees also contributed a number of ideas and suggestions for mapping how the continued professional development of teachers could be structured. The challenges and future prospects that were addressed came under three broad headings: “systematic approach to faculty development”, “centralised and hierarchical structure” and “faculties’ economic and livelihood concerns”.


Systematic approach to FD
The lack of well-established systems and structures for developing faculty members’ professional competencies is clearly visible in the collected data. The analysis of the policy documents reveals that there is very little systematic relationship between the university’s different divisions with responsibility for recruitment, rewards, assessments and the promotion of faculties. One participant said:

[…] we have too many regulations and protocols. Some of them are irrelevant to what we are doing […]. it is almost impossible to take into account all of those diverse regulations in practice.

The participants similarly highlighted the lack of transparency and complexity of the procedures. They were of the opinion that “harmonising and simplifying procedures and policies could be of great benefit to the academic profession”. They particularly underlined the importance of developing a contextualised and comprehensive plan for FD in alignment with academic policy decisions, including recruitment, rewards, assessments and promotions. Such a plan could map the continued professional development of faculties and their staff. One participant argued that:

[…] developing a contextualised and comprehensive plan for faculty development could simplify the system and may help faculties to think out of the box, to constantly reevaluate their practices […].

In addition, the participants highlighted the practice of assigning teaching assistants (TA) and developing professional TA programmes. They further indicated that doctoral studies were mostly research-based and that doctoral students were not properly equipped for the different roles and responsibilities they were expected to perform as faculty members. Two of the participants argued for redefining the procedures so that graduate students could be formally integrated as TA. Further, it was felt that the provision of educational activities could enhance their pedagogical competencies in alignment with their subject areas, which would better prepare them for their professional lives.

Cultural barriers in the continuing professional development of faculties
Academic culture and understanding the realities of HE institutions also emerged frequently in the interviews. The participants emphasised the need to understand the realities of academic culture and the potential cultural barriers that may have an impact on faculties’ CPD. As one individual stated, “most of the faculties prefer to do their projects and teaching individually, I think the culture of working together, sharing and collaborating must be enhanced”. Another added that:

[…] newly recruited faculty members usually enter the academic world with thousands of great ideas, but after a while see that they have difficulty getting into the system […].

They thus argued for the development of a culture of collegiality in order to create opportunities for the continuing development of all faculties. As one participant stated:

[…] the sustainable change in the university requires a commitment to support collaborative and community work […]. The group can push individuals to constantly think about how things could be done differently […].

Similarly, the participants suggested that instead of creating new structures with ambiguous and modest operandi, the university should empower individual schools and departments to create an environment for continuing development in their respective faculties.

Centralised and hierarchical structure
The interviewees criticised the existing bureaucratic and hierarchical structures because it was felt that they hindered the growth of faculties’ professorial autonomy and participation.
They were of the opinion that such mechanistic and top-down structures left little room for the active participation of faculties in academic decision making. Highlighting the complex bureaucratic controls in HE institutions, one of the interviewees suggested that:

[...] the authorities should make tough decisions [...] the higher education institutions need to be governed by faculties [...].

Another participant added:

The hierarchical structure imposed from the top down makes the higher education system more uniform, but in order to develop, each university should focus on its own needs and potential.

The interviewees suggested that decision-making processes should be decentralised. One of the participants suggested that “young and newly recruited faculty members should be involved in the university’s decision making and decision-making processes e.g. in the university councils”. Academic freedom and institutional autonomy in terms of being sufficiently independent from state control were also underlined by the interviewees and recurred in the conducted interviews:

The autonomy of the university, faculty and department should be granted. For instance, as dean of the faculty I cannot give any rewards to a faculty member who has done a great job!

Another participant noted that:

[...] If we cannot trust our faculty members as elites of the society to run their institutions, then who can we trust? At least they can give the universities and departments the authority to fulfil their predefined visions.

It was thought that the increased politicisation of universities could affect the academic profession and make the professional development of faculties more challenging. The participants accordingly highlighted the protection of academic freedom.

Insufficient resources and livelihood concerns
Another challenge that emerged in the data analysis was limited resources, both in terms of personnel and finances. For instance, the newly recruited faculty members’ economic and livelihood concerns were noted in many of the interviews. By addressing such concerns, a participant indicated that “faculty members are so busy with economic and livelihood concerns, which doesn’t leave any room for developing their competencies”. Another noted that “We should consider the financial needs of new faculty members”. External pressures, followed by uncertainty and economic pressure, were identified as factors that impeded faculty members’ professional development, in that they led to members working extra hours in industry, teaching at other institutions, consulting or working in other sectors. Moreover, limited access to scientific communities, laboratories, resources and the internet in most HE institutions (see Nazarzadeh Zare et al., 2016) hindered faculty members’ professional development. The participants further suggested that the university should create a mechanism to support newly recruited faculty members with adequate salaries and a stable career path.

Discussion and implications for practice
The findings of the study show that self-directed learning and ad hoc activities play a dominant role in FD in Iranian HE institutions. FD is often dependent on the efforts of individual faculty members, rather than planned throughout the organisation, i.e. it is the result of personal, rather than institutional interventions. University teachers are, thus, not required to obtain any pedagogical qualifications. There are also very few FD units or
centres for structuring and systematically providing opportunities to develop faculty members’ competencies. This is consistent with the findings of earlier studies of Asian HE institutions (see Chaudary, 2011; Phuong et al., 2015).

The analysis of the policy documents demonstrates that there are a multitude of regulations and circulars relating to the recruitment, retention, promotion and reward of faculty members, many of which are complex and, in some cases, contradictory. For instance, issues concerning faculty members’ development, rewards and promotion are articulated differently in the circulars. The complexity is also often amplified due to the lack of any systematic relationship between the institutions’ different divisions.

In the analysed documents and the conducted interviews, the promotion of religious ideologies is clearly indicated as an absolute requirement for faculty promotion. This could signify that the professional development of faculty members is broadly linked to initiatives aimed at fostering their religious beliefs and ideological tendencies, and how these can later be strengthened and transferred to students. However, many of these issues may not relate to what faculty members are expected to accomplish.

Further, analysing the policy documents at both national and institutional levels suggests that FD activities are not yet a primary concern in a number of Iranian HE institutions. Despite the described circumstances, the continuing professional development of faculty members in some HE institutions is gradually being taken into consideration (see Tarbiat Modares University’s (2012b) Strategic Change Plan as an example). Nonetheless, there is no comprehensive road map to transform these ambitious policies into practice (Pourkarimi, 2011). This puts considerable pressure on faculties, and especially a new faculty, to cope with a wide array of duties and expectations. In order to address the increasing challenges, such as increased demands for accountability, budgetary concerns, internationalisation and the expansion of information technology (Gillespie and Robertson, 2010), Iranian HE institutions will need to introduce innovative and sustainable approaches that empower their faculty members.

Taking the findings of the study into account, a dynamic framework for continued professional development of HE faculties and their staff in Iran needs to be developed. It is also clear that no CDP framework/model would fit all HE institutions. An appropriate framework would therefore need to be adopted that took the specific context, culture and unique needs of the HE institutions into account (Austin and Sorcinelli, 2013).

As shown in Figure 1, a CPD framework for faculty members that focusses on re-engineering the procedures and engaging key actors, i.e. faculty members, gatekeepers, external stakeholders and students, in the process could be developed. This framework would aim to situate faculty members’ professional development in their cultural frames of reference (Masoumi and Lindström, 2009). In the CPD framework, the pedagogical aspects would complement others, such as research, mentoring, career advancement and individual development. Initially, it is suggested that all the diverse and puzzling policies, procedures and protocols should be reviewed, simplified and harmonised based on the HE institutions’ missions. In order to foster institutional and individual excellence, the university’s bureaucratic procedures and circulars for FD should be redesigned. A wholesale redesign of the structure could simplify the procedures and facilitate transparency.

Faculties (and even students) should be actively involved in reviewing and re-engineering the university’s circulars, regulations and procedures. How other countries’ top universities structure procedures, strategies and practices may offer insights that could help to change the practices in Iran and other developing countries (Austin and Sorcinelli, 2013; Nworie et al., 2013; Steinert, 2014).

Second, by establishing FD centres, HE institutions could systematically plan, implement and refine CPD initiatives. Such a systematic approach to CPD could help HE institutions to shift from self-directed and ad hoc activities to institutional and systematic initiatives
(Nworie et al., 2013). Obviously, the developed CPD programmes and initiatives should align with the faculties’ recruitment, retention, rewards and promotion policies, measures and procedures. It is expected that faculties will become fully involved in and take responsibility for educational decisions about how such initiatives could be developed, conducted and refined. Taking a multidimensional approach that includes the different yet interrelated measures to promote faculty members’ competencies could significantly contribute to FD as a whole (Groccia, 2010).

Third, a close review and monitoring of the conducted CPD initiatives would help to show how well faculty members’ competencies are transformed and the extent to which the CPD initiatives have transformed HE institutions. Further, the review would provide opportunities to reflect on achievements and continuously promote the CPD activities. The continuing review could focus on assessing “what matters; connect with institutional and centre goals; develop a cohesive system to collect data; embed assessment into regular practice; collaborate strategically; and plan for and use the results” (Fink, 2013, p. 58).

Finally, nurturing a culture of continuing professional development in HE institutions as a social learning system could support institutional change (Wenger and Snyder, 2000). Faculty members’ greater engagement in designing and establishing CPD systems could, accordingly, ensure institutional quality. It could be thus argued that change in an HE institution requires a commitment to approaching a faculty’s continuous professional development as “collaborative, community work within and beyond the institution” (Austin and Sorcinelli, 2013, p. 95). Having a systematic approach to the design and delivery of innovative continuing professional development would ensure that faculties invest in academic growth and excellence.

Likewise, the creation of local and national communities and networks in particular areas would help isolated faculties to link up, share and accumulate their ideas and experiences. Such online and offline communities could offer a wide range of tools and opportunities to develop practitioners’ competencies (see Bowskill et al., 2000; Cherrington et al., 2017). Establishing professional networks at the local and national levels would help Iranian HE institutions to become more professional learning organisations.

The constant changes and developments further suggest that all faculty members, regardless of how long they have been in service, need to continuously engage in FD activities (Nworie et al., 2013). In the same vein, the call to develop teachers’ technological
competencies, innovation, entrepreneurship and intercultural competence is too loud to be ignored. Against this background, universities may need to introduce specific measures to develop teachers’ technological competencies to support contemporary courses and instruction. The outputs and results of performance appraisals and student evaluations, for instance, could help to identify individual faculty members’ educational needs.

This case study is partly limited to a group of faculty members’ experiences and reflections on FD in one Iranian HE institution. Conducting additional surveys and observations with a larger sample may verify and consolidate the findings of the study and contribute to further insights into how faculties’ professional development can be transformed.

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