



Instructors' workplace learning activities and inhibitors in Ethiopian higher learning institutions: Bahir Dar University in focus



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ABSTRACT

While studies give much attention to the officially introduced Higher Diploma Program practices and effectiveness, little is known about the workplace learning activities and barriers in universities. This study is therefore aimed to capture the learning activities of instructors of Bahir Dar University, and the factors that impede their learning engagements. Accordingly, a total of 117 instructors from six academic units took part in the study. The results show that instructors heavily rely on self-learning activities, and internet searching predominates workplace learning. Formal training opportunities are perceived as inadequate and less relevant to instructors' teaching practices. Generally, the university is found to be weak in promoting favorable conditions for instructors' workplace learning. Furthermore, findings associated with the organizational level and individual-level factors that negatively influence instructors' workplace learning are presented along with suggestions for better practice and further research.

1. Introduction

Driven by the dynamic nature of the world and the need to stay abreast of this change, every individual is expected to develop a culture of learning. Generally seen, literature these days explicates the inadequacy of traditional notions of education in preparing and equipping the workforce for this dynamic world. The shift from education to learning emerged as education obviously limits learning time and place. Haan and Caputo (2012, p. 5) state that "learning in all of its forms is recognized as a major economic driver". An obvious positive relationship between education and social and economic development has also been reported by UNESCO (2004) and the World Bank (2005). Beyond economic development, surviving in this global world requires one to learn and do so continuously. In other words, to be part of today's world system and stay competitive, learning became considerably important.

Changes in society and educational reforms require teachers that they keep adjusting and improving their practice (Hoekstra et al., 2009). In this respect, the last two or three decades have seen an expansion of universities' involvement in the development of the existing workforce (Lester & Costley, 2010). As stated by Boyd, Knox, and Struthers (2003) and Mcewen and Trede (2014), workplace learning has increasingly become an area of interest and is wholeheartedly embraced in universities as a valuable component of educating for professional practices.

Most workplace learning in universities is viewed as a mechanism for connecting the theoretical and practical aspects of professional knowledge and practice of teachers and students (Brennan et al., 2006; Hill, 2008; Mcewen & Trede, 2014).

The term workplace learning, what it should be, and for whom it should be provided made workplace learning to be short of a single agreed-upon definition (Lee et al., 2004). For Vaughan, O'Neil, and Cameron (2011), workplace learning is any learning that occurs in the workplace as opposed to those in educational institutions. Similarly, Naidu, Stanwick, and Frazer (2013) define workplace learning as learning or training which is carried out in the workplace, usually on the job, including on-the-job training, and on-site training, which is conducted away from the work process. On the other hand, Cacciattolo (2015, p. 243) defines workplace learning as "the way in which skills are upgraded and knowledge is acquired at the place of work". The word workplace training is often confused with workplace learning. While the former is a set of planned learning activities that are intended to equip individuals to perform a specific job (Manuti, Pastore, Scardigno, Giancaspro, & Morciano, 2015), the latter is any learning activity (including training) in the workplace.

Literature and study findings demonstrate that the desired benefits of organizations could be achieved through providing opportunities for learning to their workers and is advantageous both for employees and the

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organization itself (Haan & Caputo, 2012). Hence, the benefit of workplace learning could be for the individual and the organization where the individual is working as well. This is so because when individuals in a certain organization developed their skills and widen their knowledge horizon, their competence and confidence will improve which inevitably increases the productivity of the organizations in which they work. However, Tynjälä (2008) posits that workplace learning does not always involve desirable outcomes but may also strengthen the existing negative features of the workplace.

Workplace learning activities can be influenced by several factors at different levels. These factors can be broadly categorized into governmental, organizational, and individual factors (Atwal, 2013). The first influential factor as pointed by Atwal (2013) is government. The author argues that government pressures will impact the decision institutions make about a particular learning opportunity. Government-imposed priorities will get much emphasis rather than more-creative, teacher-initiated approaches to professional development. Secondly, as Marsick (2009) notes, organizational factors (leadership, structure, culture, systems and practices, and incentives and rewards) influence the climate for learning. For instance, in workplaces where there is no collaboration or reflection upon practice, where teachers are placed in competition with each other, learning in the workplace will not be maximized. Concerning individual factors, Evans, Hodkinson, Rainbird, and Unwin (2006, p. 82) point out that learners bring to their workplaces not only their prior skills and competencies but also their dispositions and attitudes toward learning. Learners' previous and parallel life experiences, such as social and educational backgrounds, financial situation, family life, or prior workplace practices influence and shape their outlooks and dispositions. Atwal (2013) argues that these three levels cannot be considered in isolation when planning opportunities for teachers' learning.

2. Forms of workplace learning

Workplace learning generally could occur formally and informally. According to Marsick and Watkins (2001), formal learning is typically institutionally sponsored, classroom-based, and highly structured learning that takes place 'off the job' and outside of the working environment. On the other hand, informal learning is described as any kind of learning which does not take place within or follow a formally organized learning program or event (Eraut, 2000). Unlike the formal one which is highly controlled and organized, informal learning often happens spontaneously and unconsciously without any a priori stated objectives in terms of learning outcomes (Kyndt, Dochy, & Nijs, 2009, p. 370). Though workplace learning could comprise formal elements, it mostly is informal in nature (Cacciattolo, 2015), and up to 80% of workplace learning occurs informally through self-directed learning, networking, coaching, and mentoring (Yeo, 2008, p. 317). Tynjälä (2008) opines that both forms are equally important for the development of vocational and professional expertise. Formal learning mainly produces explicit knowledge, while informal learning mainly produces tacit or implicit knowledge.

Moreover, Tynjälä (2012) analyzed the diverse field of workplace learning research and identified three modes of workplace learning: Incidental and informal learning (learning activities that take place as a side effect of work); intentional, but semi-formal learning (related to work and involves conscious and intentional actions such as mentoring and coaching); formal learning (on- and off-the-job training, such as trainings and courses). Taking the description provided by Marsick and Watkins (2001), we referred the first two modes of workplace learning as informal and the latter as formal.

3. Workplace learning activities

The question 'how do people learn at work?' has been a key concern for most scholars. Tynjälä (2008) reviewed studies on the ways people acquire knowledge and skill in their workplace. She summarized workers learning activities as follows: (1) by doing the job itself, (2) through

co-operating and interacting with colleagues, (3) through working with clients, (4) by tackling challenging and new tasks, (5) by reflecting on and evaluating one's work experiences, (5) through formal education and (6) through extra-work contexts.

Similarly, Hulsbos, Evers, and Kessels (2015) conducted a literature search based on Tynjälä's (2012) incidental and non-formal modes of workplace learning. The authors found the following incidental learning activities such as cooperative and interactional learning with colleagues, conducting research, experimenting with new ways of doing things in the university, reading newspapers, adapting new demands of teaching, dialogues with colleagues during breaks, etc. They also identified non-formal learning activities such as reflection on own practice, reflection with colleagues, mentoring, experience sharing with colleagues in another university, participating in a learning network, etc. The authors explored these learning activities for their investigation of school leaders' workplace learning experiences. We found these activities are also applicable to the university instructors.

4. Previous studies

Studies have been undertaken to assess the practices and challenges of workplace learning in universities. Most of the research findings revealed that learning in universities mainly takes place in social contexts instead of formal learning activities. For instance, the study undertaken on university teachers' workplace learning practices by Rijst, Baggen, and Sjoer (2019) revealed that colleagues were the most important resource for most participants. Almost none of the teachers referred to formal learning activities, such as professional development training and specialized courses as an important way of learning.

In Ünlühisarcıklı's (2018) study, university employees were found to learn at work by involving in various work practices, collaborating with colleagues and advisors, and meeting new challenges. On the other hand, the majority of Lohman's (2009) study participants search on the internet to learn informally in the workplace. Collin (2002) explored engineers' conceptions of their learning in a work context. The study yielded six categories of learning activities: learning through doing the work itself, learning through co-operation and interaction with colleagues, learning through the evaluation of work experience, learning through taking over something new, learning through formal education and learning from extra work contexts.

Moreover, the inhibitors of workplace learning were identified by some researchers. For instance, Lohman (2009) carried out a survey study with 143 information technology professionals and identified six key factors that constrain their informal learning activities: lack of time, lack of proximity to colleges' work areas, non-supportive organizational culture, lack of easy access to others, inadequate learning facilities, and lack of meeting/workspace. Whereas in Ellinger's (2005) study hindrances were found to be leadership and management not committed to learning, an internal culture of entitlement, lack of work tools and resources, people who disrupt webs of relationships, lack of time because of job pressures and responsibilities and too much change too fast. Moreover, lack of time due to heavy workload, lack of rewards, lack of funds, limited influence on firm's operation, and lack of support from others were identified as inhibitors of informal workplace learning in Wahaba, Saad, and Selamat (2014) study.

5. The present study

The current study is among the first studies in Ethiopia to explore the workplace learning activities of university instructors and factors that inhibit their engagement in various learning activities. Studies in universities mostly focus on the practices and effectiveness of higher diploma program (HDP) which was introduced in 2004. Researchers (e.g. Egne, 2020; Gebru, 2016) have examined the effectiveness of HDP in enhancing the capacity of newly appointed and senior instructors. Hunde (2008) also assessed the instructors' application of teaching skills

acquired during the HDP. These studies report that the HDP program has not been fully effective and instructors were not applying the skills in the classroom to the expected level.

However, there are no published studies on the activities and inhibitors of instructors' workplace learning in Ethiopian higher education. Previous studies were limited to HDP which is among the formal modes of workplace learning. This is congruent with the claims of [Mulder, Eppink, and Akkermans \(2011\)](#) who indicated that there is only limited attention for work-related education and researches in Ethiopian higher education. Accordingly, this research is mainly designed to explore the workplace learning activities of university instructors and identify inhibitors in their learning activities. Traditional literature on the topics of workplace learning focuses almost exclusively on formal learning and training ([Harp, 2012](#)). In this study, both informal and formal workplace learning activities were emphasized.

With these considerations, this study set out to investigate the following research questions:

- 1) What different learning activities do instructors engage in their workplace?
- 2) How is the conduciveness of the organizational culture in stimulating workplace learning?
- 3) What are the major factors inhibiting the workplace learning activities of instructors?

6. Materials and methods

6.1. Design

We employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design which is found to be relevant to the problem ([Creswell, 2012](#)). As the study is aimed to investigate the existing workplace learning activities and barriers in a university, using different sets of data will properly address the research questions. Therefore, as [Creswell \(2012\)](#) suggests we simultaneously gathered and analyzed both quantitative and qualitative data and make a comparison of the result of both to check whether the two data sets go together or not. Moreover, [Spratt, Walker, and Robinson \(2004\)](#) suggest that combining quantitative and qualitative methods sounds like a good idea. Using multiple approaches can capitalize on the strengths of each approach and offset their different weaknesses. It could also provide a more comprehensive approach to finding answers to research questions, going beyond the limitations of a single approach.

6.2. Research participants

The participants in this study were university instructors. Proportionate stratified random sampling technique was employed to select 140 instructors from six academic units (College of Education and Behavioral Sciences, Sport Academy, College of Science, Faculty of Social Sciences, Agriculture and Environmental Sciences, and Institute of Technology). They were provided with a questionnaire and about 105 of them returned (response rate of 75%). In relation to the interview participants, 12 respondents (one instructor and one trainer from each academic unit) were selected purposively. Here, by trainers, we mean instructors who have been offering capacity building trainings and induction and mentoring programs to early-career academics.

6.3. Methods of data collection

The nature of the data gathered for this study was both quantitative and qualitative. The quantitative data was collected through a questionnaire. The questionnaire was comprised of both close-ended and open-ended items and has three components. First, five-point Likert scale items to capture the workplace learning activities of instructors were adapted from [Lohman \(2009\)](#). Second, we developed items to understand the conduciveness of the university context in stimulating workplace

learning. Respondents were provided with options; 1 for 'almost never', 2 for 'rarely', 3 for 'sometimes', 4 for 'very often', 5 for 'almost always'. The third issue addressed in the questionnaire was the inhibitors of workplace learning in which respondents were required to rate 1 for 'not at all a problem', 2 for 'moderate', and 3 for 'serious' problem. Open-ended items were also included so that respondents could identify additional learning activities and constraints.

Furthermore, to gather qualitative data, one-to-one interviews with instructors and trainers (instructors serving as trainers) were employed. This was done to assess mainly the formal learning opportunities and activities of instructors. Different interview protocols were prepared. For instructors, issues such as the nature of formal learning activities, relevance and adequacy of training opportunities, experience sharing and interactional learning, conduciveness of the university culture, and inhibitors of workplace learning were raised. Trainers were asked such issues as the regularity and relevance of training programs, the availability of facilities, the culture of the university, factors that hinder workplace learning were raised. Interviews were conducted by the authors and recorded based on the participants' consent.

6.4. Methods of data analysis

The responses to the closed-ended items in the questionnaire were analyzed using SPSS (version 20). Mean and percentages were computed to identify the most prominent learning activities of instructors, organizational culture, and inhibitors in workplace learning. Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the qualitative data gathered through open-ended questions and one-to-one interviews. We used initial themes such as learning activities, organizational culture, inhibitors as the overarching category to which emerging issues are coded. Therefore, we coded the views and opinions of the participants in these predetermined themes. We also used direct quotes from the participants where necessary. All the names in the paper are pseudonyms, changed to protect the identity of the participants.

7. Results

Three major themes were initially identified that in sum make up the full study. Firstly, workplace learning experiences were explored. In this theme, different forms of learning activities and learning opportunities created by the university were assessed. Secondly, the organizational culture hindering/supporting the learning of instructors was investigated. In this specific issue, instructors were asked if the university or their respective academic unit is supportive enough in their learning. Finally, an attempt was made to identify the major inhibitors of instructors' workplace learning.

7.1. Instructors' workplace learning activities and opportunities

7.1.1. Instructors' workplace learning activities

Teachers use different ways to gain new knowledge and update their existing experiences. In this respect, teachers were presented with sets of items related to learning activities in the workplace. Mean was calculated to check whether teachers engage in the listed learning activities regularly or rarely ([Table 1](#)). It is understood that internet searching is the most dominant way of workplace learning in the university (Mean is found to be 4.37). These days, it is not surprising that teachers are becoming reliant on internet sources to acquire new information about their job. Based on our daily experiences, observations, and informal discussions, it is noticeable that instructors are becoming reliant on the internet. Similarly, instructors very often read books, journals, and magazines related to their profession. Moreover, respondents learn through striving to get solutions for job-related challenges alone.

However, instructors very rarely attend training to enhance their capacity. Therefore, it is possible to say that most of the means of learning are informal in nature. The analysis of qualitative data goes in line with

Table 1
Mean results of workplace learning activities.

No.	Means	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Rank
1	Acquiring new information by searching the internet	105	4.37	0.750	1
2	Working alone to develop solutions to problems	103	3.46	0.802	4
3	Working with others to develop new ideas	103	3.27	1.040	7
4	Asking colleagues for advice	103	3.44	0.977	5
5	Attending a training course	104	2.63	1.071	11
6	Observing or replicating colleagues' strategies to complete a task or solve a problem	103	2.78	1.111	10
7	Finding a better way to do a task by trial and error	104	3.18	1.113	8
8	Reflecting on previous actions	102	3.34	0.884	6
9	Reading professional magazines and journals	104	3.51	1.106	3
10	Reading job related materials	104	3.72	1.083	2
11	Receiving feedback on tasks from work colleagues	103	3.17	1.061	9

this result. Among the learning activities, internet browsing, trial and error, reading books and articles, and attending forums are the most frequently mentioned, and only two of the twelve interviewees mentioned asking colleagues and attending training as means of learning in the workplace. It is noticeable that cooperative and interactional learning among instructors is weaker.

7.1.2. Formal learning opportunities, adequacy, and relevance

In the workplace, adequate training opportunities need to be provided to instructors to enhance their capacity. This benefits both instructors and the university and ultimately improves students learning. A question was posed to find out if sample instructors got involved in any form of training for the last three years. It is found that out of 105 instructors, 75 (71%) were involved in different forms of training. However, what is surprising is that nearly 30% of the respondents did not participate in any training. This implies that they are pursuing their teaching profession without relevant training for the last three years.

Based on the analysis of interviews and open-ended items, different forms of training offered to instructors are identified. These formal training can be broadly categorized into 1) Research, 2) Teaching, and 3) Reform tools. Concerning research, the most repeatedly mentioned issues were SPSS training, qualitative and quantitative data analysis techniques, and advanced statistics. These training opportunities are provided to enhance instructors' research capacity. Most of such trainings were organized by the Capacity Building Center of the University. Secondly, the training aimed at enhancing the teaching capacity of instructors is revealed. Higher Diploma Program (HDP) offered across all campuses is the most dominant one. Moreover, teaching methodology training (continuous assessment, active learning, and classroom management) were other opportunities for instructors. Induction training was also equally important training provided for newly employed staff. Thirdly, training opportunities on different educational reform tools such as Balanced Scorecard (BSC) and Kaizen (introduced for quality and resource management strategies in higher education, and Deliverology (endorsed in Ethiopian universities in the last three years and aimed to manage the quality of teaching-learning that improves graduates' employability).

However, it was found that training provided so far were not adequate in terms of providing what instructors practically need. During the interview, Gebeyehu, serving as a trainer, argues that the training providers provided were not adequate, and it is difficult to tell about the impacts they have brought about. One of the instructors also bitterly spoke that "... even those limited training end without adequately addressing our teaching and research gaps".

Analyzing the training needs of trainees is the most important stage that must be considered while organizing training. This is vital, particularly where trainees are adults who seek to know what they are going to learn and fill their gaps. Contrarily, the university does not conduct a systematic training needs assessment. In this regard, all the interviewees have reflected similar stances that no consideration is given to needs assessment. This implies the training provided so far lack relevance to the job demand of instructors. Haile, a trainer, mentioned:

I have never assessed or participated to do so when I design training. I just observe and design training on the gaps I feel relevant to instructors. I don't think the academic units which invite me to give training make needs assessment either.

The views of Hailu are consistent with Rahel, an instructor, whom she affirmed she was not part of any needs assessment before taking the training. She noted:

No need assessment is conducted to identify specific issues that are relevant to me or my colleagues. Trainings are not provided in a way we can use them for our work. In several instances, trainers come with their preparation without knowing who the trainees are. For instance, once I had experienced this: a trainer arranged the training on SPSS and talked about descriptive statistics for the whole day. Trainees were complaining that they could have done this in a short time on their own. And the next day almost all did not show up as they were disappointed and found nothing from the previous day's training.

Atnafu, a trainer, on the other hand, shared the above views and explained the limitation of addressing the needs of trainees taking HDP, a training program targeting instructors:

I don't dare to say the training and the materials such as modules in the case of HDP are up to the expected level when seen against the needs of the trainees and the roles expected from them. Though recently it was said to be updated, it does not reflect current issues that are relevant to the work of the teachers.

The above views, in general, portray learning opportunities provided in the university are not need-based and are random in their selection of contents and selection of participants as well as trainers. Moreover, trainers are assigned not based on the expertise they have but, in most cases, they are assigned based on their experiences in life. The views of Gebre, a trainer, sum up all the views reflected by many of the participants. He mentioned:

For instance, if the training is organized on disability, rather than assigning people who have studied and published on the matter, they assign a trainer from an unrelated field. The same is true when training is arranged on gender issues. There is a tendency of assigning solely women for the training. I don't mean that they cannot train but they should have the proper expertise of the subject.

7.2. Organizational setup in stimulating workplace learning

Sample instructors were requested to rate the existing culture of the university in stimulating workplace learning. As depicted in Table 2, the elements are treated in terms of the instructors and organizational structure, and the mean was computed to check the conduciveness of the organizational setup. From the results, it can be noted that the university is weak in promoting favorable conditions for instructors' workplace learning. For most of the items measuring the organizational culture, the mean results are lower. The university performs least in identifying skill gaps of instructors (with a mean result of 2.16), in providing resources for learning (with a mean result of 2.41), and in rewarding instructors for their successful learning (with a mean result of 2.45). Similarly, the university's condition is found to be overwhelmingly poor in recognizing staff for taking any kind of initiative, giving freedom to use different

Table 2
Mean results of items related to organizational setup.

Aspects	Items	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	
The instructors	Help each other learn	102	3.10	0.990	
	Treat each other with respect	102	3.45	0.971	
	Openly discuss mistakes to learn from them	101	2.88	1.070	
	Can get resources to support their learning	101	2.41	0.929	
	Are given time to support learning	102	2.98	0.944	
	Are rewarded for learning	99	2.45	1.023	
	Give open and honest feedback to each other	102	2.61	1.073	
	Are encouraged to ask why regardless of rank	101	2.72	1.078	
	View problems in their work as an opportunity to learn	101	2.99	0.933	
	Identify the skills they need for future work tasks	102	3.10	1.076	
	The university management	Uses two-way communication regularly	101	2.66	0.993
		Enables people to get needed information at any time	102	2.63	1.080
		Maintains employee skills up to date	101	2.59	1.041
Creates systems to measure skill gaps		99	2.16	1.007	
Recognizes people for taking the initiative		100	2.55	1.067	
Gives people choices in their work assignments		101	2.53	0.986	
Invites people to contribute to the organization's vision		101	2.83	1.049	
Gives people control over the resources they need to accomplish their work		102	2.68	1.082	
Help employees balance work and family	101	2.48	1.110		

resources to accomplish their task, helping instructors to balance their work and family-related matters.

The views of the trainers and instructors are consistent with the quantitative results revealed above. This shows the organizational set up is hardly encouraging. The management is less supportive of workplace learning. For instance, Rahel, a newly employed staff described:

Few pieces of training are carried out not because they are institutionally supported but rather, they all depend on personal interests and initiatives of trainers in most cases. It is not well supported especially by higher management.

This view of the instructor was supported by a trainer, Gebre, who repeatedly criticized the management for not giving workplace learning an appropriate place. He mentioned:

The attention given is not enough. It is on and off. When higher management gives attention, it becomes a hot issue and it diminishes and one even rarely hears people talking about it when those managers divert their attention.

Haile, another trainer, mentioned that:

I would say this is not given attention as it is needed. I doubt if higher management knows the importance of workplace learning for organizational effectiveness. I think there should be a structure that can own, control, and nurture workplace learning.

Gebre further stresses that the trainees associate the training programs with personal monetary benefits rather than as a way to develop

Table 3
Mean results of inhibitors of workplace learning.

No.	Common challenges in the workplace	N	Mean	Std. Dev.
1	Lack of rewards to experienced staffs	103	2.87	1.026
2	Lack of recognition	104	2.76	1.057
3	Lack of monetary rewards	104	2.62	1.046
4	Lack of support from colleges	103	2.30	1.110
5	Low interest of staff to learn	104	2.29	1.228
6	Lack of access to updated learning materials	104	2.25	1.260
7	Lack of time due to heavy workload	105	2.17	1.236
8	Lack of facilities (e.g. computer and internet)	105	2.01	1.362
9	Irrelevance of learning opportunities	101	1.95	1.117
10	Individuals keeping the skills and knowledge acquired to themselves	103	1.94	1.195
11	The distance of learning sites from the office	101	1.56	1.228

their capacity. He noted: *“I also observe problems on the side of the trainees. They list different pretexts to avoid training especially when it has no incentives and when trainers are those they know”.*

He complained:

More than the support expected from the university, instructors should have been eager to get training and learn from each other. But the opposite is happening now. Even if there are supports, I doubt if people really want to be trained. Most assume that once they get training and started working, they assume that they are capable of doing anything and believe they do not need any kind of training and support.

Another instructor, Atnafu, who is also participating in offering training, is optimistic about the recent measures being taken by the university such as giving attention to capacity building, but he is cautious of the promises and consistency of the training. He explained that:

There are new beginnings in this regard, such as different forums, training organized by capacity building center. However, they lack continuity and follow-ups. In the case of forums, those experienced staff are not encouraged to participate and share experiences.

7.3. Inhibiting factors of workplace learning

There are several hindering factors of workplace learning emanated from different sources. Instructors rated these inhibiting factors as portrayed in Table 3 and the results are presented as follows. In three-point Likert scale items, as a mean score gets greater than 2 the inhibitor is rated as more serious while a mean score lower than 2 is considered vice versa (Wahaba et al., 2014).

Accordingly, the three greatest inhibitors to the learning activities for the instructors were lack of rewards to experienced staffs (M = 2.87, SD = 1.026), lack of recognition of the accomplishments of instructors (M = 2.76, SD = 1.057), and lack of monetary rewards to successful learning (M = 2.62, SD = 1.046). Besides, lack of support from others, the low interest of staff to learn, lack of access to updated learning materials are rated as the major inhibiting factors. On the contrary, the distance of learning sites from instructors' office (M = 1.56, SD = 1.228) and individuals keeping the acquired knowledge and skill to themselves (M = 1.94, SD = 1.195) were not considered as constraining factors of workplace learning.

The results from interviews were consistent with the quantitative results. These are lack of incentives to instructors, lack of knowledge-seeking behavior, lack of conducting a rigorous and proper needs assessment, and work overload of instructors. One of the trainer interviewees, Gebeyehu, raised the presence of a poor culture of consulting experienced people. He stated:

You don't see people interested in seeking knowledge from colleagues except those discussions made on random issues during tea breaks. Instructors rarely come to consult me, but they want me to do the entire job on their behalf instead of taking my advice and do it by themselves.

Other interviewees noted that interactional ways of learning are generally poor, as a result of a lack of knowledge-seeking behavior. According to them, most people don't like to ask others and do not want to reveal their incompetence on some issues, and they assume learning by asking colleagues as a shameful act. As participants mentioned, this is in contradiction to the values of the university. For instance, one of the trainers, Haile, said:

We have this bad culture of covering up what we don't know. We pretend to be knowledgeable. We don't want to confess that we don't know. To hide this, we either stay calm or blindly guess when asked.

This can also be seen from instructor interviewees' remarks. Most of them mentioned that they ask friends for help after wasting most of their time trying for themselves believing that learning from others as a less important means. One of the instructors, Rahel, attests to this:

I don't like to ask colleagues for help. I struggle to solve my problem through trial and error, searching the internet, and other means. I do ask friends after I tried all means and failed to resolve. I am doing this because I feel embarrassed when I expose myself to them as a less knowledgeable person.

Other factors such as lack of consistent criteria for selecting trainers, lack of up-to-date and well-organized training manuals, lack of incentives for trainers, and lack of follow-up of training provided were identified by participants as hindering factors of workplace learning.

8. Discussion

Being a competent and well-performing instructor is one of the most important resources in any educational institution. The instructor is considered as the professional agent and the most directly responsible person in the process of learning; he/she is the one in charge of making/helping students learn and benefit from the quality of his/her teaching (Boudersa, 2016). To this effect, workplace learning opportunities (formal or informal) play an enormous role in equipping university instructors with the subject matter and pedagogic aspect of their teaching. With this contention, we carried out this study to investigate the workplace learning experiences of university instructors and identify factors constraining their engagement in different forms of workplace learning.

Concerning the first research question (workplace learning activities of instructors), the following remarks can be made. First, the results show that most of the learning activities of instructors are informal (Eraut, 2004; Yeo, 2008), and formal training provided so far were inadequate, random, and less relevant to instructors. The majority of the respondents are pursuing their teaching practices without adequate and relevant training. While it is obvious that most of the workplace learning happens informally, it must be noted that formal learning opportunities are equally important. As Slotte, Tynjälä, and Hytönen (2004) argue, formal learning opportunities should not be ignored or undervalued. The authors mention three reasons why informal learning alone is not enough. First, such learning is taken place unconsciously and may result in outcomes that are not desirable. Second, as knowledge is being produced rapidly in today's working life, informal learning alone cannot keep workers abreast of the changes. Lastly, formal learning situations make it possible to exploit informal learning effectively, turn tacit knowledge in to explicit knowledge.

The results also reveal that instructors prefer more independent learning activities than interactive learning activities, such as discussing, cooperating, and sharing resources with colleagues. Among the learning activities of instructors, searching the internet is the most dominant one,

which also aligns with Lohman's (2009) study. Furthermore, trial and error, reading professional publications, and attending forums are also the means for learning. Instructors' reliance on the internet is not surprising as the workplace nowadays is accompanied by changes in computer-related technologies (Pillay, Boulton-Lewis, & Wills, 2004). It is widely known that the internet has the advantages of being independent of location and time. However, it has sometimes negative aspects such as impersonality, loneliness, and problems related to computer crashing (Sambrook, 2006) as well as limiting workers' interaction (Lohman, 2006).

The second research question seeks to analyze the overall organizational context in creating favorable conditions for workplace learning. The study reveals that the university culture in promoting favorable conditions for instructors' learning and regular follow-ups is weak. The university management is seriously criticized for not giving workplace learning appropriate attention. Instructors are rarely encouraged to ask questions to the respective officials; incentive packages for successful learning are not arranged, and facilities that support learning activities are inadequate. It is such environments that Fuller and Unwin (2004) termed as a restrictive learning environment. The restrictive environment is characterized as teachers working in isolation with no explicit focus on teacher learning and few expansive learning opportunities provided for teachers (Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2005).

Our last research question is concerned with inhibitors of workplace learning in the university which we categorized as organizational and individual factors. It is mentioned earlier that the university context (restrictive organizational culture) poses serious challenges for instructors' learning which is in line with Lohman's (2009) study. Specifically, lack of meaningful rewards and recognition to staff members, weak support and follow-up of learning activities, and shortage of training manuals are the most prominent inhibitors of workplace learning. The results are consistent with the findings of several previous studies (e.g. Lohman, 2000, 2006; Sambrook & Stewart, 2000; Wahaba et al., 2014). Regarding inhibitors emanated from instructors, lack of knowledge-seeking behavior is the most repeatedly mentioned problem. That is, learning from colleagues is assumed as a sign of incompetence for most instructors.

9. Concluding remarks

Admittedly, our study has its limitations. We used instructors' perceived experiences and challenges by employing a survey, and we analyzed what they uttered. We could have utilized observational data to substantiate what respondents describe that might provide a better picture of the situation. Given this limitation, the findings from the study give rise to the ensuing useful implications for facilitating workplace learning and research undertakings.

Considering the results presented in the preceding section, it can be concluded that workplace learning should be fundamentally reformed in the university. The university can greatly enhance workplace learning through establishing a conducive learning culture, by increasing the motivation of instructors, and by clarifying responsibilities for learning and providing resources (Sambrook, 2005). Moreover, incentive packages should be established to sustain instructors' learning; mechanisms should be created to put knowledge and skills into practice. As Ashton (2004) cautions with poor incentives and opportunities, individuals will be demotivated as they see no point in learning and acquiring new knowledge and skill. Hence, the university should create conditions that boost the motivation and interest of instructors through different mechanisms (incentives, recognition, special offers etc.). In addition, the university capacity building centers should organize need-based regular training for instructors.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

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Formal analysis, Writing - original draft, Writing - review & editing.
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 Formal analysis, Writing - original draft, Writing - review & editing.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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