

Examining Cultural Factors Affecting Academic Developers in Performing Staff Development Functions in Three South African Universities

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ABSTRACT Academic development practitioners in most institutions in South Africa grapple with the issue of identity and establishing themselves in their role of staff developing academics. Informed by Archer's theory of structure, culture and agency, this qualitative study sought to establish cultural factors enabling or constraining academic developers in performing their staff development functions in three historically disadvantaged universities in South Africa. The study utilised a case study design in which a purposive sample of academic development practitioners from three South African universities participated. Data were collected through individual interviews with participants. Content analysis was used to interpret data. The study found that academic staff developers faced a lot of resistance from academic staff members who were themselves resistant to change, held academic development centres with mistrust as they perceived them as managerial units and in some cases were outright uncooperative showing a negative attitude towards staff development efforts by academic developers. The study found that there were enabling cultural factors that included the willingness of new and young staff members to participate in staff development programmes. The study concludes that in some cases it was not easy for academic development practitioners to establish themselves and perform their functions. The study recommends the need for systematic buy-in to ensure mindset change and cooperation from academics.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Academic Development in SA Institutions

The higher education system in South Africa has daunting challenges relating to high drop out and low throughput rates (Scott and Yendry 2005). Such challenges have financial, social and moral implications and concerted efforts and measures have been put in place to assist both staff and students. This explains the existence of Academic Development Units in universities. The main function of such units or centres is to support and enhance the quality of teaching and learning with the view of ensuring that throughput rates are improved.

There has been considerable development in academic development practices from the time when academic support was seen as a way of fixing students with academic problems (Brew 2002). It focused on developing language, study and writing skills (Volbrecht and Boughey 2004). Currently, there is broader understanding of the concept as the understanding has moved from academic support to academic development. This involves the reviewing of curricula, teaching approaches and institutional systems (Boughey 2012). Volbrecht and

Boughey (2004) state that academic development work has now been infused into institutional cultures and is no longer an appendage to the mainstream curriculum. Such an understanding of academic development assists in ensuring that all students are developed academically through services that are integral to their degree programmes.

1.2 The Need for Staff Development

Staff development is generally defined as "any effort to improve teachers' knowledge, skills and attitudes so that they perform their roles effectively" (Gall and Vojtek 1994: 11). The need for staff development programmes in universities is in line with the realisation that staff needs change and staff members need to constantly reflect on their practices to remain relevant in their areas of expertise and in teaching and learning issues. Graham (2011: 175) postulates that:

Changes in external conditions have resulted in pressures within universities. Notably, there has been rapid growth in higher education participation; change in higher education funding and accountability; increasing knowledge and the demand for new discipline....and the transformation of teaching and learning.

The above realisation alludes to the fact that for universities in general and academics in particular, to remain relevant and keep abreast with changes in the world, professional development courses are very important. Craft (2000) and Coaldrake and Stedman (1999) observe that institutions should develop and nurture capacities of the staff members so that they are able to deal with changes imposed on them by external pressures. Kostine (2010) and Fullan (2004) state that staff development programmes are important in ensuring the enhancement of teachers' practice by improving their teaching methods. This shows that for skills enhancement there is need for teachers to undergo continuous staff development.

In a study to establish the need for staff development among teachers, Singh (2011) found that staff development programmes played a pivotal function in ensuring that teacher competencies were enhanced. If staff development programmes are important for teachers in high schools, they are certainly equally, if not more, important for university teachers as well. Villar and Alegre (2007) found online staff development courses very useful in improving skills and expertise of Spanish lecturers as immediate feedback was guaranteed through such staff development sessions.

Graham (2011) points out that knowledge skills, attitudes and performance of staff have a direct impact on the quality and effectiveness of their work in the university. It is, therefore, important to ensure that timely and continuous staff development programs that address knowledge, skills, attitudes and performance gaps should be part of any university strategic planning endeavours. McCrindle (2006) contends that most young staff members in institutions of higher learning are interested in career development. Their interest has to be addressed by ensuring that opportunities for career development thorough training and retraining are made available.

Staff development programmes provide the forum in which academic staff members work together and learn from each other (Hargreaves 2001). The institution becomes a learning community in which members engage in professional development issues, discover difficulties, coin solutions and gain satisfaction of their practice (Pellicer and Anderson 1995).

1.3 Models of Staff Development

1.3.1 Expert-Presenter Model: This is a model of staff development in which participants gather to listen to an expert making a presentation on a topic that the expert or the participants would have chosen (Gall and Vojtek 1994). If the participants are responsible for choosing the topic they may be compelled to participate in staff development programmes of this model. It may, however, be quite a challenge if the expert chooses a topic based on assumption of participants' needs without consulting the participants. Participants may not have the zeal to participate. The success of staff development programmes modelled around the expert-presenter depends on the expertise of the presenter and presentation techniques.

1.3.2 Clinical Supervision Model: This model of staff development hinges on a nurturing relationship between the supervisor and supervisee. The relationship is underpinned by joint identification of challenges through pre-conferences, joint establishment of solutions and implementation of solutions by supervisee while the supervisor observes. Post-conferences then serve to evaluate and feed into the process (Tang and Chow 2007). The major strength of this approach is that it empowers the supervisee and allows close cooperation between supervisor and supervisee.

1.3.3 Skills-Training Model: This is based on the view that people require training to learn new skills. In universities, academic staff members may require training in the use of various communication technologies in their teaching. Similarly, when e-learning is introduced, lecturers have to be trained on the function of different learning management systems and their role to make maximum use of the systems. Staff development programmes informed by a skills-training model should present theory underlying the skills to be learnt, demonstrate skills, allow participants to practice and provide feedback on practice (Gall and Vojtek 1994). The need to transfer skills learnt to own context should also be emphasised.

1.3.4 Action- Research Model: According to Benson et al. (2012), academic staff may engage in staff development through action research. Lecturers conduct their own research into challenges encountered in everyday prac-

tice in order to apply solutions to answer felt problems. Gall and Vojtek (1994) argue that action research is more systematic than trial and error. Action research entails planning, acting and reflecting. Solutions that lecturers provide after action research are bound to be ones applicable in their contexts. Action research is also consistent with constructivist approaches to learning which argue that individuals learn best when given responsibility to develop their own knowledge and understanding.

1.3.5 The Organisation-Development Model: This model is premised on the understanding that staff development should not merely seek to change the individual but the whole institution. In this model the formal and informal processes, procedures, norms and structures are changed to ensure a holistic approach to staff development. In the context of a university, staff development programmes may be aimed at all lecturers in a Faculty or department. A department's strengths and weakness are assessed, a plan of action developed, implemented and evaluated. The department members are empowered to solve future problems as a group. In the organisation-development model, the staff developer has multiple roles as consultant, facilitator, mediator, trainer and process observer.

1.3.6 The Change-Process Model: This is generally called a systemic innovation. It involves changing the larger context such as the university system. It involves initiation, implementation and institutionalisation of change. The innovation is advertised and marketed to the consumers by staff developers so that the consumers learn about the innovation. The merit of the innovation has to be proven before the users can accept it hence the need for repeated discussions on it. In implementation, the innovation is put into action while in institutionalisation decisions are taken on its continued use.

1.3.7 Self-directed Professional Development Model: Staron et al. (2006) advocate self-directed professional development in which staff members take responsibility for designing and pursuing their learning to meet their own personal and professional goals and the institution takes a supportive role. Such an approach stands in contrast to the traditional approaches to staff development which are instructor and content-based (Graham 2011). Academic development units in universities should, therefore, work with

academics staff to establish their training needs and design appropriate training programmes. This allows academics to take charge of their own professional development issues with centres playing a facilitatory role. On the need for participant involvement in training issues, Papastamatis et al. (2009: 88) state that,

It is inappropriate to plan a staff development programme for adult learners on a felt needs approach and it is equally unacceptable to plan a programme on needs prescribed by others. Combining felts needs and prescribed needs would seem to be more rational approach. In this way a mutual collaborative teaching-learning environment can result that ensures greater participation and desire to persist and achieve in teaching and learning situation.

Approaches to planning and implementing staff development programmes are, therefore, important in ensuring participation and resultant benefits from such programmes.

2. ACADEMIC STAFF RESPONSE TO STAFF DEVELOPMENT

Quinn (2012) observes that academic staff members in universities generally resist attempts at programmes to professionally enhance their skills in the area of teaching and learning. One of the reasons has to do with change in attitudes.

Papastamatis et al. (2009: 84) allude to the fact that in dealing with issues of professional development, universities have to take cognisance of 'professionals' ethos, values, beliefs, characterized by conservatism, presentism and isolation and consequently resistance to change.' It is clear that there are cultural factors that affect the work of those that seek to coordinate and facilitate staff development workshops. These are factors based mainly on values and beliefs, which often make it difficult for academics to be susceptible to change.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study is underpinned by Archer's (1996) socialist realist theory on morphogenetic/morphostatic methodology which provided the lens with which to view the interplay between structure, culture and agency insofar as they enabled and constrained academic developers' staff development functions. In terms of 'struc-

tures' Archer takes them as literal structures that include Faculties, Departments as well policies (in the university set-up) and these determine, constrain and oppress our activities (O'Neill 1999). Cultural issues include ideas, beliefs, ideologies, values and theories held by different people in the university and agency has to do with the role players themselves. This study sought to establish the cultural factors and how they promoted or hindered academic development operations as perceived by academic development practitioners.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research Paradigm

Hays and Singh (2011) observe that research paradigms are belief systems based on core philosophies of science such as ontology, epistemology, axiology, rhetoric and methodology (Hays and Wood 2011). The study followed a qualitative research paradigm. Ngulube et al. (2009: 106) note that qualitative research is naturalistic, constructivist or interpretive where reality is socially constructed and context-sensitive, the knower and the known are inseparable..." In this study the researcher sought to understand enabling and constraining cultural factors from the point of view of academic developers hence the adoption of the qualitative research paradigm. This was in line with Shank's (2002) contention that in qualitative studies researchers try to understand how others make sense of their experience

4.2 Research Design

A research design is the logic that links the data to be collected and the conclusions to be drawn to the initial questions of study (McKenney and Thomas 2012). A case study design was utilized in the study. Yin (2003) states that a case study design should be considered when the focus of the study is to answer the 'how' and 'why' questions. This was precisely the purpose of this study which sought to understand how and why academic developers operated in the way they were operating by attempting to establish cultural constraints and enablers in institutions. Case studies are also suitable if the intention is to 'cover contextual conditions you believe are relevant to the phe-

nomenon under study' (Baxter and Jack 2008: 545). The study intended to establish factors affecting academic development operations from the contextual conditions of the academic developers serving in universities.

4.3 Sampling

A purposive sample of eight academic development practitioners from three rural based universities in South Africa participated in the study. A purposive sample was meant to carefully select and information-rich sources (Creswell 2000). This is in line with Maphosa's and others' (2007) idea of obtaining in-depth data from a small sample of participants. Academic developers targeted had more than three years' experience in academic development work in universities.

4.4 Instrumentation

Data for the study was solicited through in-depth, semi-structured interviews (Fontana and Frey 2003). Analysis and interpretation was informed by the work of Silverman (2004) on interview, narrative and content analysis and Attride-Stirling (2001) on thematic network analysis. The researcher interviewed eight academic developers.

4.5 Trustworthiness

Member checking was employed as a measure to check the trustworthiness of data collected.

4.6 Data Analysis

Qualitative thematic analysis was employed by the researcher and the approach followed the general guidelines of analysing the data for significant phrases, developing meanings and clustering them into themes and presenting a description of the themes (Creswell 2007).

4.7 Ethical Issues

As data for the discussion forum was solicited participants were advised that data would be used for research purposes yet their identity and the identity of their institutions would be protected.

5. RESULTS

5.1 Enabling and Constraining Cultural Factors

5.1.1 Enabling Cultural Factors

As Table 1 shows, some of the participants indicated that enabling factors included willingness to develop skills in teaching in learning, willingness to share ideas and practices as well as appreciation for the need to learn more in view of changes./ Some of the verbatim quotations by participants included the following;

Participant O

Most of the young lecturers in our universities are willing to learn and always attend out short-term staff development workshops

Participant P

Some staff members always make inquiries on how they can study for a qualification in teaching. This shows that they appreciate the need for such a qualification.

Participant Q

Moderator and assessor courses are very popular with most staff members in the university.

Participant R

Many lecturers in the university now understand and appreciate the existence of our centre (teaching and learning centre). This is a shift from initial responses where lecturers did not understand the mandate of the centre.

tre (teaching and learning centre). This is a shift from initial responses where lecturers did not understand the mandate of the centre.

5.1.2 Constraining Cultural Factors

Table 1 also shows participants' views on constraining cultural factors and these included unwillingness to learn new skills, mistrust of teaching and learning centres and history of reluctance and mediocrity.

Participant O

The main problem at the university is staff attitude. People are used to the way they have been doing things over the years.

Participant P

If we advertise staff development workshops on teaching and learning very few people turn up. It's like they are just not interested.

Participant Q

Some lecturers say the centre expect them to do more work when they are already overloaded in teaching many modules and large classes.

Participant R

Some take the centre as a management structure meant to police them and ensure that they work hard so there is general mistrust.

6. DISCUSSION

The study established that new and young academics were willing to learn new things in

Table 1: Enabling and constraining cultural factors

	Enabling factors	Constraining factors
Cultural Factors	- Enthusiasm to learn new skills by mostly young academics - Understanding the work of teaching and learning centres. - Requesting assistance from centre of teaching and learning - Understanding the need to improve teaching and learning - Willingness to take up skills to develop teaching skills - Beliefs in expertise in others of different disciplines - Willingness to share ideas and practices - Awareness of developments due to globalisation	- Viewing teaching and learning centres as management units. - Resistance to change mostly by older academics. - Lack of appreciation of the role of teaching and learning centres - Lack of understanding of the existence of teaching and learning centres. - History of reluctance and mediocrity - Unwillingness to learn new skills and practices - Belief in own discipline superiority - Belief that no new knowledge is offered by teaching and learning centres

teaching and learning and this was an enabling condition. It assisted academic developers to do their work well as they had to deal with academics who were eager to learn. The finding confirms Scribner et al.'s (1999) that staff development programmes are easier to plan and implement in an environment where staff members are eager to learn.

The study also established that some academics believed that there was nothing new that they would learn from teaching and learning centres and this finding confirms the views of Papastamatis et al. (2009) that external persons should not prescribe what academics should do in staff development programmes. An attempt should be made to reach out to the academics to establish their training needs and they want training programmes conducted. Such an approach may deal with some of the constraining cultural factors.

It also emerged from the study that resistance to change evidenced by unwillingness to participate in staff development programmes negatively affected academic developers in their staff development functions. This finding is consistent with Papastamatis et al.'s (2009) observation that through long established ethos and belief systems, academic staff members may be unwilling to change. The same view of resistance is shared by Quinn (2012). Where resistance to change is rife, the work of academic developers is certainly made very difficult.

It also emerged from the study that young and new academics in universities were generally willing to take up staff development opportunities and learn new skills. Such a finding confirms findings by McCrindle (2006) that staff members in the formative years of their careers are always open to opportunities that promote career advancement. This may also be attributed to the fact that they are establishing new cultures compared to older members who already have ways of operating which they deem the best and will not easily open up to new ways.

The study also established that some academic staff members understood the need to improve skills and teaching and learning and participated in staff development programmes. This was an enabling factor in the work of academic developers. This finding corroborates observations by Kostine (2010) and Fullan (2004) that staff development programmes were important in ensuring the enhancement of teach-

ers' practice by improving their teaching methods. Craft (2000) further observes that changes in the world force universities to change accordingly.

The study also established that willingness to share ideas and practices was an enabling factor in academic developers' functions. The finding confirms the view by Pellicer and Anderson (1995) that a university should be a learning community in which academic staff members have a platform to talk about their practice, identify areas of inadequacies and develop solutions. In this view, action research as a staff development model becomes very useful (Benson et al. 2012).

7. CONCLUSION

The study concludes that there were numerous issues related to staff attitudes and beliefs that either enabled or constrained academic developers in the staff development functions in universities. Apart from dealing with structural constraints, academic development officers have to deal with cultural constraints as well.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

Against the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

Academic development officers need to find affective ways of ensuring buy-in to their staff development programmes. Dealing with change of attitudes does not necessarily result in positive outcomes after a short time but requires time and patience.

There is need for academics to emphasise need for development on academics so that academics understand and appreciate the role of teaching and learning centres as meant to assist academics develop as teachers.

In coming up with issues for staff development, the staff developers need to work closely with academics so that they identify their own training needs and suggests ways they want to be assisted. Such an approach will ensure that staff development programmes answer the real needs of lecturers.

Presentation approaches in staff development programmes should allow involvement of lecturers as discipline experts. Such involvement allows them to take ownership of programmes and, invariably, results in implementation and

institutionalisation of innovations and interventions.

Innovations planned for Faculties and Departments should ideally come from the Faculties and Department themselves hence the need to inculcate a culture of action research and communities of scholars. Reflecting on daily practices by systematically examining inadequacies is a sure way of ensuring the implementation of solutions relevant to context.

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