

The Interplay between South African Higher Education Context and Academic Development

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ABSTRACT The design and implementation of pragmatic teaching and learning agenda is fundamental for universities to attain their vision, mission and strategic objectives/plans. It is within this background that this concept paper examines the interplay between the South African Higher Education context and academic development principally at a formerly disadvantaged Black South African university. This concept paper draws predominantly from the review of South African higher education landscape and academic development related literature since 1994, the year in which a democratically elected South African government assumed office. The organisational and analytical framework underpinning this concept paper is informed by the social realist concepts of structure, culture and agency. The concept paper proceeds by discussing the impact of South African Higher Education context on the institution, students and academic staff, the way academic development is conceptualized and structured at the university before concluding and making recommendations. It emerges that the structures of the university need be in place and functional so that different agential roles can be executed amidst several constraints and enablements. The importance of the role of the Centre for Higher Education and other structures in nurturing a culture that enhances the production of graduates with attributes required by the world of business came to the fore.

INTRODUCTION

This concept paper interrogates the relationship between South African Higher Education (henceforth SA HE) context and academic development (henceforth AD) at a formerly disadvantaged predominantly Black SA university. Recent research (Ndebele 2014; Ndebele and Ndlovu 2013; Boughey and Niven 2012; Vorster and Quinn 2012; Machingambi and Wadesango 2011; Makondo 2010, 2012) in the discipline of academic development in South Africa has focused on academic developers, academic staff development and student support. This present research builds on these by having consulted literature on the scope covering the period before and after 1994 in relation to how that context impact on HE institutions and their conceptualization of AD. This concept paper discusses AD in the context of initiatives directed at providing diverse AD support to students and academics. To achieve the aforesaid, the concept paper uses sociological concepts of structure, culture and agency as espoused by Margaret Archer (1996, 2000, 2003) to dissect and understand the

operations of a university system towards offering AD. The concept paper proceeds by discussing the SA HE context, specific transformation imperatives, implications of context for student learning and academic staff development, identities of academics and the institutional conceptualisation of academic development before conclusion and recommendations.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The organisational analytical framework used in this concept paper are the concepts of structure, culture and agency as espoused in the sociological theory by Margret Archer. To begin with, Archer (1995, 2000) regards the social world as comprised of the 'parts' (culture and structure) and the 'people' or agents. Archer (2003) asserts that the structural and cultural contexts in which individuals find themselves shape the situations which they confront as well as how they respond to the objective constraints and enablements from these contexts depending on the nature of their subjective concerns, personal properties and powers which they possess. Within this context, Archer (2003: 5) argues that for something "to exert the power of constraint or an enablement, it has to stand in a relationship

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such that it obstructs or aids the achievement of some specific agential enterprise”.

Furthermore, Archer (1996) regards structure as being about material interests, primarily dependent on physical and human material or resources. The material relations referred to are often legitimated and maintained by ideas from the cultural system. This relationship then suggests that changes in the structure might culminate in changes in the culture of an institution. Therefore, this concept paper contends within this milieu that faculties, deans, HoDs, academic hierarchy, external examining (Boughey 2009), Senate Committee on Teaching and Learning and Deputy Vice-Chancellor (henceforth DVC) of teaching and learning (Quinn 2012: 37-38) among others are structures, this paper contends, that play significant roles in defining the context of AD and roles of educational practitioners in universities.

In addition, the term ‘culture’ is used to describe the ideas, beliefs, theories, values, ideologies and concepts which are manifest through discourses used by particular people at particular times (Archer in Quinn 2012). Discourses, from a social realist position, are part of the cultural system with enabling and constraining causal powers to affect things in the world in general and in HE universities in particular. This is exemplified by Quinn’s (2012: 29-36) discussion of how the transformation discourses, quality assurance discourses and discourses around teaching and learning can be constraining and or enabling factors for professional development activities in HE. Similarly, the need for mindset change for academic excellence to be nurtured (Makondo 2012) in HE cannot be over emphasized.

In terms of agency, Archer (1995: 198) asserts that the most important property possessed by people is that they have “intentionality” which enables them to “entertain projects and design strategies to accomplish them”. It also emerges that the systemic context shapes the situations in which individuals find themselves and creates “strategic guidance” (Archer 1995: 210) for people which predisposes them to act in certain ways. Agency is also taken to mean the ability which individuals possess to make difference through their actions (Chambers 2005). Archer (1995, 2000) proceeds by identifying primary agents as collectivities sharing the same life chances and corporate agents as groups who are aware of what they want, can articulate it to

themselves and others and can organise in order to get it, can engage in concerted action to reshape or retain the structural or cultural feature in question. Furthermore, the ability of primary agents to transform into corporate agents and the ability to exercise their power, are either enabled or constrained by the nature of the systemic (cultural and structural) context in which they find themselves in (Archer in Quinn 2012). Within the Archerian discourse, agent refers to groups of people (for example, academics) while actor refers to individual people (for example, academic staff development practitioners).

Within the present scope, it suffices to note that according to Archer (2003: 130), an individual’s identity is influenced “by their individual configuration of concerns”. Quinn (2012: 44) then postulates that “academic identity contributes to this personal identity in complex ways, as roles of disciplinary research, professional, outreach activity, income generation, administration and teaching may all give rise to potentially conflicting concerns”. Archer (2000) invokes reflexivity, also referred to as the ‘adult’ internal or inner conversation or critical self-awareness of one’s predispositions, relationships and interactions in the forming of knowledge (Chambers 2005: 108) to be used by individuals to balance the private and social and the competing roles within each.

SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION CONTEXT

In this section, attention shifts to relating the concepts of structure, culture and agency to an analysis of the changing international and South African Higher Education (SA HE) context. Within the sociological theory propounded by Archer, one notes that structure plays a major role in influencing the HE context internationally and nationally. In addition, all of the contemporary pressures on HE, from the pressures of massification (Altbach 2004) to the growth of the private sector, are the results of globalization (Moloi et al. 2009) which have massive structural effects. The modern world is ‘super complex’ (Hassan 2011) and has given rise to an “age of super complexity, marked by new accounts of the world, new images, new technologies, new texts, new discourses, new forms of professional life” (Barnett 2000: 417). HE has to respond to this ‘super complex’ world and pedagogies are required that would provide the

knowledge and skills for coping with super complexity. As Maharaj (2011) notes, this has seen top South African universities, including the universities of the Cape Town, Kwa-Zulu Natal, Pretoria, Rhodes and Witwatersrand hosting a significant proportion of overseas students, a good indication of the extent of internationalization of a university.

Furthermore, the impact of structure of the changing SA HE is exemplified by Motala (2001) who declares that educational transformation and change in South Africa have emphasised form and structure and the use of legislation and regulatory frameworks to put systems in place while neglecting the actual principles and processes of teaching and learning. One of the biggest challenges is certainly the institutional culture which needs to change to an increase in research outputs, different ways of curriculum and delivering postgraduate students (Moraka and Hay 2007: 218).

In this concept paper, the concept of culture is regarded to be prevalent in the 'disruption discourse' (Quinn 2012) that entails the adoption of stances of questioning, challenging and critiquing taken-for-granted ways of doing things in SA HE,

...the job of the educator at all levels of education...[is] 'to question over and over again what is postulated as self-evident, to disturb people's mental habits, the way we do and think things, to dissipate what is familiar and accepted, to re-examine rules and institutions' (Foucault 1988: 265 in Zembylas 2012: 14).

It emerges that "it is not the person who needs changing but the role and role relationship they are playing within institutional structures" (D'Andre and Gosling 2005: 179). In this context, development and or professionalization imply a process which is "proactive and not reactive" thereby making work with academic staff a process of 'naming and claiming instead of blaming and shaming' colleagues. This discussion also draws from the Britain perspective that points out that the "craft practices of teaching, which had been capable of sustaining elite education [are] severely strained by mass education" (Clegg 2009: 408). This led Scott et al. (2007: viii) to contend that "building education expertise in the sector to enable the development and implementation of teaching approaches that will be effective in catering for student diversity" is one of the ways of addressing the risk of failure and

ensuring greater success for more students in SA HE. To achieve this, academic staff development would need to be a priority for the SA HE sector.

The execution of roles within the HE context has become closely linked to the needs of the economy and the competitive global market which expects universities to inculcate in students the necessary skills to produce employable workers needed by the labour market (Leathwood and Read 2009). According to Ensor (2003) to become an international competitor, the organisation and delivery of education required transformation, and a fragmented education system needed integration. The post-apartheid government executed the greatest agential role as a strong driver of educational transformation, especially in matters such as quality assurance, mergers and the incorporation of HE institutions, the alignment of academic qualifications with the South African National Qualifications Framework (hereafter NQF) (Jansen 2004) and curriculum development.

SPECIFIC TRANSFORMATION IMPERATIVES

This section of the concept paper focuses on explaining the origin of the specific transformation imperatives for SA HE and more broadly, identification of specific policy directives in relation to the imperatives of societal transformation. The coming on of a democratically elected government in 1994 is the first transformation imperative for SA HE. According to Coetzee-Van Rooy (2002), it is expressed as follows in the National Plan for Higher Education (henceforth NPHE) (2001: 2) "the victory over the apartheid state in 1994 set policy makers in all spheres of public life the mammoth task of over-hauling the social, political, economic and cultural institutions to bring them in line with the imperatives of a new democratic order". This brought about, among other things, changes to selection and appointment policies, transformation of Councils, as well as an attempt by SA HE organisations to transform their student bodies to ensure equity.

A second impetus for the transformation imperative for SA HE is the establishment of the South African Qualifications Authority (henceforward SAQA) and the NQF, introduced by the SAQA Act (No. 58 of 1995) and the Higher Edu-

cation Act (No. 101 of 1997), the Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (henceforth HEQSF) and the Higher Education Quality Committee (hereafter HEQC) audit criteria. These acts were also accompanied by the implementation of “outcomes-based education, development and training” (Department of Education 1997:8) in all bands of education and subsequent changes to these projects has already occurred.

Also, transformation has occurred as a result of the national Acts and policies guiding capacity development of staff in South African HE. For instance, The Education White Paper 3.2.33 and 3.2.96 spells out that;

... academic development structures and programmes are needed at all HE institutions to promote the development of teaching skills, curricula, courseware and student support services as a mainstream programme development. Staff development, including academic development that is improved qualifications, professional development and career pathing, instructional (teaching) development, management skills, technological reskilling and appropriate organisational environment and support.

Relatedly, the Skills Development Act, No. 97 of 1998, provides an institutional framework for developing and improving the skills of the South African workforce, thereby improving the quality of life of workers, productivity in the workplace and the competitiveness of employers.

Contrariwise, the Higher Education Act of 1997 regulates HE provision that has established the Council on Higher Education (henceforward CHE) as an independent body that would, among other things, perform quality promotion and assurance functions through its sub-committee, the HEQC as the link between teaching and learning and quality assurance and enhancement has not yet become well understood in South African universities (D’Andrea and Gosling 2005). This is why the 1990s saw a dramatic focus on the assurance of the quality of education as “in all spheres of life quality is becoming increasingly important” (Hay and Fourie 1999: 44). In Britain there was a similar peak in the creation of new units following the announcement of Teaching Quality Enhancement Funding (henceforth TQEF) by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (hereafter HEFCE) in 1999 while the data from Australia and the United States of America (henceforward USA) show that many

units have been formed within five years (Sorcini et al. 2006).

The other origin of the transformation imperative for HE in SA and the world over is the impact of technology. In SA there are major social and economic constraints in relation to the adoption and implementation of Information Computer Technologies for teaching and learning. Alternatively, the impact of the technology boom (Higgs 2000) should be understood within globalisation that has brought with it a blurring of national boundaries and universities increasingly have to respond to international trends (McKenna 2013). This is urgent and imperative as since 1994 SA universities have to respond to global economic developments and the need to address the more local concerns of social reconstruction and equity (Volbrecht and Boughey 2004: 58).

Transformation has also been fuelled by the government drive to restructure Technikons into universities. A move towards becoming a university brings about a new focus on research, not previously regarded as so important in the Technikon context (Fransman and Rowley 1999: 5). This has seen many Technikons becoming universities and the resultant amalgamation or merger of two or more previously existing institutions have greatly transformed the SA HE context. This has also resulted in a great many challenges for Universities of Technology. It has implications for the kind of teaching and learning and research that is possible at these institutions as well as impacting the operations of AD.

Besides, the increasing interest in the professionalisation and accreditation of teaching in HE and in the professionalisation of AD work has been a source of transformation. Both these trends have led to the growth of national and international AD networks and, to a lesser extent, and variously across national cultures, to the strengthening of a policy discourse around AD at national and institutional levels. An example is the emergence of the International Consortium for Educational Development (hereafter ICED) in 1993 as a network whose members are themselves national organisations or networks concerned with promoting good practice in HE’ (ICED Web-site 2001) and trends in Britain and the USA. South Africa was represented at the second international meeting in 1995, which also drew the presidents or representatives of educational development networks from Australia, Canada, Germany, Britain and the USA to name a

few. South Africa was notably absent in the period from 1997 to 1999, perhaps an indication of the weakening of South African AD in this period. Instead, Higher Education Learning and Teaching Association of Southern Africa (in future HELTASA) is again becoming more involved in ICED. In fact a big collaboration between HELTASA and ICED is being conceptualised at the moment. It therefore comes to the fore that due to different transformation imperatives, policy directives and the resultant societal structural transformation, “the average academic felt overwhelmed by all this information, legislation, recommendations and requirements and did not know what was going on or where to start” (Du Pr 2000: v).

THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN CULTURE, STRUCTURE AND AGENCY

The impact of the interplay between cultural, structural and agential factors on the contextual factors of the university manifests itself in different ways. To begin with, in terms of structures responsible for teaching and learning, the institution has Vice Chancellor and Principal, DVC Academic, deans, directors of schools and heads of departments. The university now has a Senate Committee on Teaching and Learning plus the Senex, University Council and University Senate. However, it seems that several components of the structures here identified seem not fully functioning within the policy specifications of the university. A case in point is the failure of deans/HoDs to induct their teaching staff on assessment issues despite the Teaching and Learning Policy specification. This has resulted in the 2011 HEQC audit report vehemently castigating the lack of consistence in assessment and moderation practices resulting in students being scored highly among others.

Additionally, an examination of a breakdown of qualifications required for the posts versus current qualifications of incumbents at the case study university sadly reveals that the majority of staff occupying designated positions are not ‘properly qualified’ (Makondo 2012) as well as inducted for such offices. The in competencies usually manifest through lack of proper expertise in the design of teaching material, assessment and moderation at the institution of higher learning as pointed out by the 2011 HEQC audit report. This sees the transformation discourses,

quality assurance discourses or discourses around teaching, learning and research (Quinn 2012) being led by staff that has ‘nothing’ to show for it, thereby highlighting lack of sustained culture on academic rigour at the case study university.

The discussion of agency is premised on the Education White Paper 3.1.27.9 that spells out,

the need to produce graduates with the skills and competencies that build the foundations for lifelong learning, including, critical, analytical, problem-solving and communication skills, as well as the ability to deal with change and diversity, in particular, the tolerance of different views and ideas.

Teaching staff, students and academic advisers/practitioners, among others, ought to play key roles in ensuring that universities produce graduates with the above attributes amidst diverse constraining factors. Yet, at the level of corporate agents, the existence of departments staffed with academics without masters and doctorates degrees speak contrary to good practice as exuded in other SA HE institutions. Compounded with this, the staff does not have training in pedagogy and the HEQC audit pointed out that staff from the case study university are ‘side-lined’ from mainstream academic discourses due to their non-participation in conferences and in publication activities. In many cases, the quality of the graduates produced is compromised and it is against this background that this concept paper talks of the need for relevant policies at departmental, school and institutional level to ensure that the gatekeeper roles are ardently observed.

SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION CONTEXT AND STUDENT LEARNING

In terms of contextual factors, the case study university was established to accommodate 5000 students yet currently the enrolment stands at about 11000 students - the majority from poor socio-economic backgrounds. According to Scott et al. (2007), SA HE is characterized with poor throughput rates due to the ‘problems’ experienced by black students rooted in the structure of the institution rather than in individuals (Vilakazi and Tema 1985). This speaks to need for innovative, student centred approaches to teaching and learning that would inculcate in students skills such as self-directed learning, critical and

creative thinking and problem-solving (Candy 2000). Historically, in SA AD has predominantly been “to provide support to historically disadvantaged ...” (Volbrecht and Boughey 2004: 59) or ‘under-prepared’ (Gosling 2009) students while internationally it has been mainly focused on staff development (Brew 2002). The execution of this role requires academics to fully understand, according to Boughey (2007), the potential of their role in contributing to the attainment of the institutional mission.

As of the implications of contextual factors on the practice of academic staff in HE, Makondo (2010) reminds us that many academics have only a rudimentary grasp of the basic principles of teaching and learning since few have studied the educational aspects of their profession. The assertion by Fullan and Stiegelbauer (1991: 309) that “nothing calls into question the reputation of the entire teaching profession as emphatically as the suggestion that anyone with good content knowledge can be prepared for teaching” highlights the shortcomings and criticism levelled at most tertiary institutions which assume that anyone with a degree (masters or doctoral) can teach. Fransman and Rowley (1999: 8) argue that, “...staff needs to be supported in their response to [the] changing priorities [in HE]”.

It is within this background that staff development programmes are designed to enhance the facilitation of teaching, learning and research of academics at the case study university. Wilkerson and Irby (1998), agree that relevant professional development is vital if academics are to be successful at innovation in teaching and learning. Gibbons (1998: 12) also emphasizes the need for continuous professional development and proclaiming that ‘within the context of a learning society life-long study as well as training and re-training become possible’.

IDENTITIES OF ACADEMICS

According to Hassan (2011), as the wave of educational transformation sweeps across the SA HE landscape, few academics have been unaffected by its impact. From Gosling (2009), this explains why at times academic development is referred to as ‘staff development’; ‘skills development’; ‘the promotion of enquiry into professional practice, teaching and learning by academic subject staff’; ‘teaching and learning development’; ‘engaging in research in learning and

teaching in HE’; ‘development and design of new courses’; ‘consultancy’; ‘curriculum development’; ‘instructional design’; ‘academic engagement’; ‘partnerships’ with faculties; ‘new staff induction programmes’ and ‘training in e-learning’.

Also, the study by Gosling established that the provision of Post-graduate courses in learning and teaching in HE, such as a Post-graduate certificate or Masters was thought to be very important. Furthermore, Lebakeng and Payle (2003) reckon that in order to depart from mimetism or intellectual dependency or derivative scholarship, SA HE need a domestic intellectual infrastructural capacity to adapt and translate foreign knowledge for local use by epistemologically jettisoning western epistemological paradigms and mainstreaming indigenous African epistemology into the educational paradigm.

Furthermore, global changes in HE have greatly affected the academic work environment. According to McKenna (2013),

staff development can provide an important disruptive space in which academics can interrogate their identities and negotiate their roles in the academic project. Staff development can encourage academics to reflect on their practices and to theorise their approaches in a shifting terrain.

To do this, those involved in offering staff development need to have strong academic identities themselves and they need to be sensitive to the varied ways in which disciplines and institutions present different contexts with quite different sets of constraints and enablements. This concept paper notes that it calls for, as Salmi (2009) puts it, to interdisciplinary faculty collaboration, blending functional concentrations into the total business process, can produce students who are problem-driven, team-oriented, and appropriately sensitised to the realities of managing global businesses.

This concept paper notes that institutional, departmental and disciplinary communities of practice affect the way academics work in assorted ways. With reference to institutional context and structure, Badat (2009) identifies the crucial roles played by the history of university, the character of university, size, age, vision, mission, nature of commitments, nature of academic culture, admissions requirements, social composition of student body and academic body, geographical location, nature of governance and

management and financial situation. Firstly, these three entities should provide the requisite structures and culture that enable academics to work. According to Schyf (2008), almost every SA University aspires to pursue its scientific mission, to practise scholarly activity competitively at national level and to enjoy international recognition hence – every department (corporate agents in Archerian discourse) and academics (primary agents) must be equally committed. Also, policy specifications should be in place to ensure that unnecessary constraints are removed and enabling environments are created.

The identities of academics, as this concept paper notes, is greatly influenced by the interplay between structure, culture and agents. The overall success of any capacity building, as Moraka and Hay (2007: 231) reckon, is a leadership function and highly dependent on the example senior managers set through their commitment in such initiatives. It is also about creating an institutional culture that values the development of all human capacities within the institution, embedding a lifelong learning organisation and promoting a quality culture not only related to research but also to teaching and learning and community service learning activities. This is only applicable when a university clearly knows what its niche, vision; mission and strategic goals are it is possible to develop effective and the most relevant capacity building initiatives.

In addition, disciplinary communities of practice affect the way academics work especially through conferences (like HELTASA and National Association of Distance Education of South Africa (hereafter NADEOSA), workshops, colloquiums and seminars among others. Gosling (2009: 43) identifies attending conferences, contact with peers, colleagues or ‘experts in the field’ and personal reading as important practices that can enhance academics service delivery. Formal education aimed at a qualification and/or formal training also comes in.

CONCEPTUALIZATION OF ACADEMIC DEVELOPMENT

Shared in this concept paper is a ‘simple model’ of academic development drawn from the case study university where Academic Development (AD) is the responsibility of the Centre for Higher Education that reports to the DVC

academic. The Centre for Higher Education is mandated to ‘providing leadership in teaching and learning’, ‘implementing the university’s strategic direction’, ‘engaging in planning and policy development’ and ‘assisting in planning policy and development’ (Gosling 2009: 10). The Centre for Higher Education has a directorate and three units namely Academic Development Unit (henceforth ADU) and Student Career Counselling Department Unit (SCCDU) and Teaching Technology Unit (TTU). The units popularize the provision of ‘support’, ‘policy’ and ‘capacity’ development discourse (Morphet 1995) to students, staff and university management. As observed by Boughey (2007) ADU practitioners might be called upon for advice in programme development or review processes.

Also, at the case study university AD is moving towards providing ‘a theorised space for interrogating what it is to be an academic in this time and place’ (McKenna 2013). This concept paper submits that the Centre for Higher Education can enhance its role in designing and implementing an enhanced teaching and learning agenda for a university through gleaning information from institutional audit report(s), SA HE teaching and learning related documents/literatures as well as from drawing from best practice examples from sister institutions. The Centre for Higher Education therefore ought to spearhead discourses on new teaching technologies, excellence in teaching and learning, peer and student observation, induction, assessment and design of teaching and learning materials, community engagement and scholarship of teaching and learning among others.

CONCLUSION

This concept paper concludes by submitting lessons for that AD practitioners drawn from the case study university. It emerges that AD operations should be based on collaboration and involvement of all structures and agents identified as deans, HoDs, academic developers, student support, senior management and course designers among others. In addition, the university needs to imbibe cultures that cherish and sustain needs analysis, development and hosting of targeted workshops, teaching-learning symposiums, staff development workshops for academic developers, curriculum design and review interventions, quality assurance, mentorship and tutorship and promotion of scholarship of teach-

ing and learning. This concept paper highlighted the centrality of structural, cultural and agency roles HE context plays in AD. Therefore, AD practitioners need to properly traverse this terrain so that their operations could be well informed by the 'big' issues surrounding SA HE and their university teaching and learning agenda.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This concept paper makes the following recommendations:

- i) There is need for a comparative study to be done that examines trends at two or more universities to have comprehensive understanding of HE context and academic development.
- ii) There is need to explore other theoretical theories to compliment on insights driven from sociological theories in the quest to enhance an understanding of the impact of HE context and AD.

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