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

MAPHOSA. C.

University of Fort Hare
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Introduction and Background

- 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.

- Focus is on staff academic support and student academic support.

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Introduction and background

- 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 & 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.

Need for academic 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.

- 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.

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Need for academic development (contd)

- Staff development programmes played a pivotal function in ensuring that teacher competencies were enhanced (Singh, 2011).

- 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 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.

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AD and promotion of scholarly teaching

- Teaching is not common sense business
- Teaching is informed by existing theory, research, and practical ideas about student learning and teaching, instructional design, teaching and learning styles, and methods of assessment.
- Principles of good teaching are encouraged and these include the use of active learning techniques, prompt feedback and use of diverse ways of learning
- There is reflective practice – documenting practice and engaging in critical appraisal of practice.
- Scholarly teachers are armed with the skills and expertise in curriculum adaptation, teaching, learning, assessment, among others and they have sound understanding and appreciation of the diverse needs of students.

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AD and professionalisation of teaching

- there is agreement among scholars about the importance of the teacher and her/his competence in the teaching-learning process and this shows that whoever is hired to teach should be adequately prepared for their facilitation of learning role (Komba & Nkumbi, 2008)

- Galabawa (2001) observes that the teacher is the heart of classroom instruction, which shows that the teacher should be aware of the different teaching approaches and have close understanding of content taught and the students.

- Rogan (2004) and Mosha (2004) state that the effectiveness of the teacher depends on her competence, academically and pedagogically.

- subject or discipline expertise should be matched with knowledge and expertise of how actual teaching and learning takes place.

- AD practitioners have a role in promoting professionalisation of teaching in the university.

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Models of staff development

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).

Clinical Supervision Model

The model 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.

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.

Models of staff development (contd)

Action- Research Model

- Academic staff engage in staff development through research into their own practice.

- Lecturers conduct their own research into challenges encountered in everyday practice in order to apply solutions to answer felt problems.

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

Models of staff development (contd)

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

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).

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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.

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The concept 'culture'

- The concept 'culture' is derived from Archer's (1996) social realism theory 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 'structures' 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 <u>ideas, beliefs, ideologies, values and theories</u> held by different people in the university and agency has to do with the role players themselves.

Research Context

- In an attempt to advance the teaching and learning agenda, the universities from which the participants were drawn had purposefully created teaching and learning centres.

- These were three rural based universities in Limpopo and Eastern Cape Provinces of SA.

- The established teaching and learning centres were staffed by academic developers responsible for both student and staff academic development.

- Academic staff developers' main responsibilities were to plan, organise and implement and evaluate staff development programmes for staff across faculties.

- Status of academic developers differed in universities. In one university they had academic status and in two other universities they were regarded as support staff members.

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Research Objective

The study sought to answer the following research objectives:

- establish the cultural factors and how they promoted or hindered academic development operations as perceived by academic development practitioners.

Research Methodology

Research Paradigm

• Interpretivist – "reality is socially constructed and context-sensitive, the knower and the known are inseparable…"

 Ngulube *et al*. (2009:106)

Research Approach

• Qualitative - understand how others make sense of their experience (Shank, 2002).

Research Design

• Case study – in-depth understanding of phenomenon

Sample

• Purposive sampling – 8 academic development practitioners serving in three rural based SA universities.

Instrumentation

Semi-structured individual interviews

Data Analysis

Content Analysis - coding, theming

Results
Cultural factors

	Enabling factors	Constraining factors
Cultural factors	Enthusiasm to learn new skills by mostly young academics	Viewing teaching and learning centres as management units.
	Understanding the work of teaching and learning centres.	Resistance to change mostly by older academics.
	Requesting assistance from centre of teaching and learning	Lack of appreciation of the role of teaching and learning centres
	Understanding the need to improve teaching and learning	Lack of understanding of the existence of teaching and learning centres.
	Willingness to take up skills to develop teaching skills	History of reluctance and mediocrity
	Beliefs in expertise in others of different disciplines	Unwillingness to learn new skills and practices
	Willingness to share ideas and practices	Belief in own discipline superiority

Enabling cultural factors

Verbatim quotations

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

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.

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

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.

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Constraining cultural factors

Verbatim quotations

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

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

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

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

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Conclusions

Against the findings of the study, the following conclusions are drawn;

- Teaching and learning centres' operations in universities could be negatively affected by academics attitudes towards staff development.

- Young academics are more open to staff development initiatives compared to older ones

- Academic staff members may not appreciate the academic development role of teaching and learning status

- Negative attitude towards teaching and learning may be a result of the low status of academic development practitioners

- Viewing of teaching and learning centres as 'management' units is a challenge in academic development endeavours.

- Apart from dealing with structural constraints, academic development practitioners have to deal with cultural constrains as well.

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Recommendations

- 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 period of 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.

- The status of academic developers should be reviewed in instances where they are taken as support staff.

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