

Designing a Teaching and Learning Agenda in a University: Key Considerations

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ABSTRACT Teaching and learning are key components of the core business in any university. A teaching and learning agenda that informs teaching and learning in the university should be meticulously designed. In this concept paper the researchers interrogate key considerations in the designing of a university teaching and learning agenda. They start by examining what teaching and learning constitutes. A broad overview of the overall purpose of teaching and learning in higher education is explored. In the paper the researchers also examine what teaching and learning involves by making a historical trace from the transmission models of instruction to transformative ones. Philosophical underpinnings that inform teaching and learning which should inform basis for a teaching and learning agenda are discussed. In this paper the researchers further interrogate key considerations that should be borne in mind when developing a teaching and learning agenda. They argue that in order to meaningfully develop a teaching and learning agenda, there is need to be thoroughly grounded in theory related to teaching and learning. Such theory informs practice and is considered within the broad context of the purpose of higher education in the given context.

INTRODUCTION

The core business of any university involves teaching and learning, research and community engagement. Teaching and learning are important activities of a university as the nature of graduates a university produces testify to the quality of teaching and learning. It is very significant for a university to clearly spell out the way teaching and learning will be carried out. The way individual universities view teaching and learning differ. The need to spell our philosophical underpinnings of the university's approach to teaching and learning is important. The culture of a university is, to some extent, encapsulated in the official teaching and learning policies. Such policies speak to the purpose of and spirit behind teaching and learning.

What is a Teaching and Learning Agenda?

A teaching and learning agenda in a university is synonymous to the teaching and learning strategy a university may adopt. The teaching and learning agenda or strategy informs all

the teaching and learning processes and procedures in the university. The agenda also sets the tone for the way teaching and learning is done in the university and this gives a university an identity that marks its difference from others. A teaching and learning strategy or agenda articulates a university's specific commitments relating to learning and teaching. In showing the importance of teaching and learning agendas, Diamond (2005: 6) observes that such strategies place:

Students' learning and development at the centre of the institution (while the research mission of major universities will remain a priority, it must be balanced with the institution's teaching mission)

The teaching mission of a university is, therefore, articulated in a teaching and learning agenda.

The teaching and learning agenda also spells out the philosophical underpinning of teaching and learning in an institution and also spells out roles and responsibilities. It informs how teaching and learning should be carried out in a university. McAlister (2008: 4) notes that:

Any successful strategy needs the support of staff, students and managers across and within the institution. Like every good strategy its outcome depends on effective implementation.

This shows that all major stakeholders in teaching and learning in an institution are significant in the designing and implementation of

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the teaching and learning agenda or strategy. Understanding and acceptance of the agenda are important for the implementation of the agenda.

A teaching and learning agenda provides objectives and actions that assist in the attainment of the set objectives. Objectives provide a clear focus of a learning agenda and also ensure that the success of the agenda can be measured against the set objectives. Objectives are conceptions of desired ends (Scott 2003). If one of the objectives of a teaching agenda is to ensure the use of available ICTs in teaching and learning, this will provide a clear focus on use of ICTs and evaluation of an agenda with such an objective is made against specific standards.

A teaching and learning agenda spells out the context in which teaching and learning shall be conducted. Context has a bearing on enabling and constraining cultural, structural and agential conditions for the effective implementation of the agenda (Archer 1996). A teaching and learning agenda that does not consider the context may face challenges in effective implementation. An example is a teaching and learning agenda that may be too ambitious and difficult to implement because of infrastructure, financial, material and human resource constraints.

A teaching and learning agenda should also align with the overall mission and vision of the institution. A mission, for example, describes the purpose, values and character of an institution (Smith 2005). In a way, missions and visions of institutions contain the 'official' institutional culture. While vision focus on external change, mission articulates the internal workings of an institution (Allison and Kaye 2005). Missions and visions inspire stakeholders, guide decisions and align the way employees execute their duties (Niven 2003). Diamond (2002) argues that an institution's mission statement should be consistent with the institutional values that guide its work. It is, therefore, clear that once the mission and vision of an institution are clearly defined then all other strategies or policies of operation draw from them to ensure alignment.

Roles and responsibilities of key stakeholders in teaching and learning should be clearly spelt out in a teaching and learning agenda. Clear definition of roles and responsibilities allows stakeholders to be aware of their specific duties and ensures accountability in teaching and learning. On underlining the importance of defining roles, Kezar (2005: 1) observes that:

One distinctive characteristic of educationally effective institutions is that various groups share the responsibility for student learning and student success...and are committed to their school's mission, vision, and philosophy.

The above observation alluded to the significance of all role players working together to ensure student success.

The need to constantly review teaching and learning strategies should be taken in line with the realisation of the changes in higher education, which institutions should respond to. Swail (2002: 16) states that:

Higher education is going through significant changes stimulated by the rapid growth of the internet, the increasing globalization of higher education, and the ever-pressing question of institutional quality. New modes of educational delivery through virtual networks are breaking the traditional mode of instructional provision. New players, new pedagogies, and new paradigms are redefining higher education. The rules are changing, and there is increased pressure on institutions of higher education to evolve, adapt, or desist.

The above observation underlines the importance of responsive higher education systems in terms of teaching and learning approaches.

What is Teaching and Learning?

Teaching and learning are what learners experience in the classrooms and outside. It is by this complex process that learners acquire the knowledge, skills, values and beliefs that constitute a good education. This implies that the process of teaching and learning cannot just happen, students should be taught and learn. Teaching and learning in HE can be seen as an interactive system that depends on the characteristics of the student, the specific nature of the subject matter and the whole teaching learning process (Biggs 2003).

Different theories view teaching and learning differently. For example, socio-cultural theories view teaching and learning as enabling participation in knowing (Wells 1999; Wells and Claxton 2002). Knowledge is seen as constituted in the flow of meaning produced between the more knowledgeable people when they communicate with the less knowledgeable. This implies that teaching and learning are an interaction between individuals (teacher to students).

McKeachie (2002) notes that quality learning is learning by doing and that it is problem-centred and experiential learning. Students in universities should, therefore, largely learn by doing and such learning approaches are only possible if they are captured and clearly pronounced in a university's teaching and learning agenda. Deliberate attempts should be made to bring awareness to all academic staff members of the agenda and undertake teaching within the confines of the agenda in order to minimise the disparity between policy and practice.

The term 'teaching and learning' encompasses the activities of teaching and learning in the classrooms of higher education institution (HEI's). It further explains that teaching and learning encompasses policies, strategies, plans and infrastructure both at higher education system level, and at institutional level, to support these activities. This means that teaching and learning becomes the integral part of higher education institutions. It is therefore critical that in any institution, there should be policies in place so that all the structures in the institutions should have a common understanding about teaching and learning. It is being argued that the scope of teaching and learning is broad 'drawing within its ambit all those frameworks and arrangements at both levels-that support curriculum development for knowledge currently and contextual relevance; the development of teaching and learning methodologies that are appropriate to different knowledge forms, take into account experiential learning where appropriate and are adapted to technological changes; strategies for student access, assessment in other areas (CHE 2004: 94).

A pattern has emerged ranging from 'transmissive' conceptions, where teaching is seen as imparting information, to 'facilitative' conceptions where the lecturer is concerned with promoting conceptual change in students. Prosser and Trigwell (1999), for example, identify different conceptions of teaching – from 'teaching as transmitting concepts of the syllabus' to 'helping students change conceptions' (Prosser and Trigwell 1999: 144). Teaching should result in learning as Hunt et al. (2003: 20) state that "... there's no point teaching unless learning takes place, just as there's no point producing goods that nobody wants to buy". The usefulness of the product of a teaching endeavour is also an important consideration.

Dunkin and Precians (1992) define dimensions of teaching as beliefs about the most important ways of enhancing student learning revealed by individuals in talking about effective teaching and propose a related set of categories. Although there is some debate amongst these researchers as to the number of categories, the location of some of them in relation to the teacher-centred as opposed to student-centred poles, and the possibility – or not – of having a transitional category of 'facilitating learning' (Samuelowicz and Bain 2001). This body of research has clearly established a consensus around the existence of a number of conceptions spread on a continuum between transmissive and facilitative conceptions, and the related teacher-centred versus student centred approaches to teaching.

'Conceptions' of teaching describing lecturers' experiences of teaching remain an intellectualised expression of a restricted, highly situated, specific experience which tends to understate context. Prosser and Trigwell (1999: 159) for example define a teaching context as follows:

[University teachers] enter teaching and learning contexts with a range of prior experiences of teaching and learning and ways of conceiving teaching and learning. The context itself evokes certain kinds of prior experiences which then situate the university teachers in those contexts.

Of importance in the above assertion is the realisation that university teachers have different conceptions about teaching and learning. A university's teaching and learning agenda should assist in harmonising these conceptions such that all teachers have common understanding of how teaching and learning happens in the university, taking into account the context. In underlining the importance of teaching that should be spelt out in a teaching and learning agenda Trigwell (2003: 23) states that:

Teaching involves much more than what happens in a classroom or online: It is oriented towards, and is related to, high quality student learning, and includes planning, compatibility with the context, content knowledge, being a learner, and above all, a way of thinking about teaching and learning. Improving teaching involves all these elements.

Such a view alludes to the fact that a teaching and learning agenda should articulate the institution's view of worthwhile knowledge, the

nature of students in the university, methods of teaching and the context in which teaching and learning takes place.

What is the Purpose of Teaching and Learning in a University?

The purpose of teaching and learning in a university should be looked at in the broader context of the 'knowledge economy.' Markwell (2003) argues that the knowledge and skills of a nation's people will significantly determine the country's well-being. In defining knowledge economy, Powell and Snellman (2001: 199) state that:

We define the knowledge economy as production and services based on knowledge-intensive activities that contribute to an accelerated pace of technical and scientific advance, as well as rapid obsolescence.

In this view, any country's economic development should be hinged on skilled manpower so that the various sectors of the economy are driven by specialists in their fields. The role of higher education, in this regard, is to ensure that relevant knowledge, skills and values are imparted to students so that by the time they leave university they will be fully functional individuals.

Powell and Snellman (2001) further observe that in knowledge economy there is more reliance on intellectual capabilities than on physical inputs or natural resources. This means that skilled personnel are responsible for working on raw material provided by a country's natural resources to add value to them. Trade on finished products is bound to be more beneficial to a country that trade in raw materials and later import finished products from the very raw materials that they would have exported cheaply. Investment in skilled personnel through vibrant and responsive higher education systems results in industrial expansion which, invariably, addresses issue of unemployment.

The purpose of teaching and learning at higher education is to produce students who can think effectively and critically. Such students would have achieved depth in some field of knowledge and have critical appreciation of the ways in which we gain knowledge and understanding of the universe, of society and of ourselves (Boulton and Lucas 2008). In designing a teaching agenda, teaching methods should focus on the need to ensure that graduates are

able to apply knowledge and skills in the actual world of work. Acquisition of knowledge for knowledge's sake may not be very useful.

Higher education should also inculcate the requisite values and attitudes in students to ensure that they fit in society in line with the idea of democratic citizenship and to cultivation of humanity (Nussbaum 2006). A fully functional citizen is one who is aware of his or her rights and responsibilities. An all-rounded graduate who is a good citizen is an important outcome of a worthwhile education system. Such is a personally responsible, participatory and justice-oriented citizen (Westheimer and Joseph 2002). A personally responsible citizen, for example, acts responsibly and obeys laws whilst a justice-oriented citizen always seeks to address all areas of injustice. Of importance in democratic citizenship is that an individual's knowledge and skills without 'character' may be a problem.

Therefore, issues of honesty, integrity, self-discipline, hard work, treating others with respect, anger management, valuing human life and consideration for the feelings of others are important values of a university graduate (Lickona 1993). The importance of character cannot be overemphasised and a teaching and learning agenda should ensure that such values are inculcated in students.

Curricula in higher education should constantly be reviewed for relevance. HESA (2006: 7) points out that:

... university and academics cannot rest on their laurels... and simply teach the same curricula year after year with minor changes and presume that this is sufficient. If the demands made on students by a fast changing world are greater, so too are the demands on lecturers and researchers.

Constant engagement with content, teaching approaches, assessment methods and students' needs ensure that teaching and learning is timeously reviewed in order to be responsive to changes in micro and macro society. It is imperative for higher education institutions to be clear as to what to teach and for which purpose in order to equip the students with the necessary skills to compete in the changing world.

Philosophical Underpinnings of Teaching and Learning

Constructivism: Constructivism as a paradigm or worldview posits that learning is an ac-

tive, constructive process (Christie 2005). The learner is an information constructor. People actively construct or create their own subjective representations of objective reality (Brooks and Brooks 1999). New information is linked to prior knowledge, thus mental representations are subjective. Knowledge is constructed based on personal experiences and hypotheses of the environment. Learners continuously test these hypotheses through social negotiation. Each person has a different interpretation and construction of knowledge process. The learner is not a blank slate (*tabula rasa*) but brings past experiences and cultural factors to a situation. In designing a teaching and learning agenda it is imperative to spell out the philosophical underpinnings of teaching and learning done in a university. The way the university views knowledge and students informs the teaching and learning approaches to be utilized. In constructivism, for example, the lecture method of instruction is depressed or displaced for more student centred and active learning methodologies (Maphosa and Kalenga 2012).

Cognitive Constructivism: Cognitive constructivism revolves around the work of Piaget and stands in contrast to behaviorism. It postulates that human beings cannot be “given” information which they immediately understand and use. Humans have to construct their own knowledge (Driscoll 2000). They build their knowledge through experience. Experiences enable them to create schemas - mental models in their heads. These schemas are changed, enlarged, and made more sophisticated through two complimentary processes of accommodation and assimilation (Schunk 2000). A teaching agenda based on cognitive constructivism allows students to construct own knowledge as opposed to being passive listeners in lectures. Students grapple with content to make meaning of it. Through active learning students create the necessary schemas and construct knowledge.

Social Constructivism: Social constructivism contends that knowledge is constructed through social interaction, and is the result of social processes (Gergen 1995). Social interaction plays a pivotal role in knowledge creation. Learners construct their own knowledge in a social context. Constructivism gives students ownership of what they learn, since learning is based on students’ questions and explorations,

and often the students have a hand in designing the assessments as well. The students are also more likely to retain and transfer the new knowledge to real life. A teaching and learning agenda based on social constructivism places a lot of emphasis on the context in which learning takes place. Learning is taken as social phenomenon and students learn better when they share ideas through conversation, debate, and negotiation. Knowledge is tested by explaining it to peers and through discussion and critical engagement concepts are examined, reshaped, and clarified.

Critical Theory: Critical theory focuses on the oppression of the individual, the group, and society by self-imposed or externally imposed influences (Calhoun 1995). To emancipate people on all three levels of oppression, individuals must engage in a critique of the personal, situational, and historical forces which cause oppression (Calhoun 1995). By the exposure of these forces and their juxtaposition against an ideal view of how these forces could be lessened, people become less oppressed and move toward emancipation. It has multidisciplinary knowledge base with the implicit goal of advancing the emancipatory function of knowledge. It approaches this goal by promoting the role of criticism in the search for quality education. Critical theory is the basis of critical pedagogy which is a teaching approach that attempts to help students question and challenge domination, and the beliefs and practices that dominate them (Kincheloe 2008; Kincheloe 2007). It attempts to help students become critically conscious. A teaching agenda which reflects critical pedagogy allows students to develop as critical thinkers and to question everything including their curricula.

Key Considerations in Designing a Teaching and Learning Agenda

Key considerations in designing a teaching and learning agenda have to deal with alignment. Teaching and learning as well as assessment approaches should be clearly spelt out and roles of the different players clarified.

Aligning Agenda to Mission and Vision of the Institution: A teaching and learning agenda should be aligned to the institution’s mission and vision. The agenda assists in the accomplishment of the mission and vision in some way.

A mission statement, for example, explains why the institution exists in terms of its overall purpose (Seltzer 2001). A teaching and learning agenda should be in sync with the purpose of the institution. A vision statement articulates the future of the institution and the teaching and learning agenda should assist in the realisation of the grand future endeavour of the institution. Therefore, teaching and learning is not common sense business. Policies and procedures for teaching and learning in a university should be based on sound theories that inform practice.

Spelling out Teaching and Learning Approaches: Universities have a role in developing appropriate strategies to enhance teaching and learning. Students must be prepared, in a lifelong learning perspective, for a productive career and for citizenship (Gibbs 1999). A teaching and learning agenda should clearly spell out teaching and learning approaches that the university employs in equipping students with the requisite knowledge, skills and values. Teaching and learning approaches should speak to the philosophy of teaching and learning around which the agenda is built. Such approaches should also address, among others, issues of diversity, large classes (in stances of a massified higher education system) and resources.

Assessment Methods: In designing a teaching and learning agenda, assessment practices should be clearly articulated. The issue of assessment in higher education is complex and may be impacted by a number of individual and organisational issues. Assessment serves different purposes and should be an integral part of the teaching and learning process (Ndebele and Maphosa 2013). Assessment can be used by lecturers to inform instruction (Smith 2007). Assessment should not be seen as separate from teaching and learning. It should be viewed as part of the teaching and learning. Both assessment for learning (formative assessment) and assessment of learning (summative assessment) should be clarified on how it is conducted. The most important consideration is for the teaching and learning agenda to show a clear link between learning outcomes, teaching approaches and assessment practices. This is what Biggs (2003) defines as constructive alignment.

Defining Roles and Responsibilities: In a teaching and learning agenda roles and responsibilities should be defined clearly. Lecturers, assistant lecturers, tutors, mentors and other

assistants should have their roles specified. This gives clear directions on what is supposed to be done by the various players in teaching and learning. The roles and responsibilities of students, in line with the teaching and learning philosophy adopted, should also be defined. Learning is for students hence they should be made aware of the expectations the university has on how they should learn.

Martin-Kniep (2007) states that in student-centred approaches, students should be viewed as partners in the teaching and learning process. Students' experiences should be harnessed to enhance teaching and learning. A teaching and learning agenda should, therefore, explicitly state expectations from students in teaching and learning.

CONCLUSION

In this paper the researchers looked at what a teaching and learning agenda in a university entails and how best it can be designed. A teaching and learning agenda encapsulates the teaching and learning philosophy of a university. We also showed the importance of having a teaching and learning agenda which is based on a sound and defensible teaching and learning philosophy and that the philosophy should speak to the mission and vision of the university. Teaching and learning are core business of a university and the way teaching and learning are conceptualised and implemented should be for the furtherance of the university's mission and vision. A teaching and learning agenda should also spell out the roles and responsibilities of major players clarify the teaching and learning approaches in line with the teaching and learning philosophy as well as inform on the assessment practices.

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