

Academic Advising in Universities: Concept Paper

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ABSTRACT The need for sustained academic advising and support for students and lecturers in universities in South Africa is on the rise. The initiative draws from the sad reality that the South African higher education system is characterised with low success, retention and throughput rates. It is within this context that this concept paper interrogates what strategic advisory roles academic/educational/curriculum practitioners/specialists could execute towards ameliorating the situation. This paper draws from academic development literature, institutional self-evaluation, Higher Education Quality Committee audit reports and reflections from experience gathered from lecturing and academic advising. It emerged that academic development advisors need be properly qualified, experienced for them to strategically be visible, design and offer as well as popularise discourse on curriculum design and review, teaching, learning and assessment services among others. Educational practitioners need to execute different agential roles meant to ensure that requisite enabling teaching and learning policies are in place and well popularized. This calls for the nurturing of an institutional culture that foregrounds discourses on academic support, academic excellence and mindset change for the enhancement of the university teaching and learning agenda.

INTRODUCTION

Since the demise of apartheid in 1994, a lot of changes have occurred in the South African higher education landscape. The Education White Paper 3 (1997) is one such policy that played a significant role by spelling out the envisaged pathway for the higher education (henceforth HE). This concept paper is premised on the Education White Paper 3 (1997: 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*. This means that the university teaching staff need be equipped with requisite skills to be able to produce university students who engage in complex higher order thinking which is non-algorithmic.

Internationally, according to the Council of Higher Education (2004: 14) the importance of HE is well established, being:

founded on recognising that countries which have managed to sustain high levels of economic growth with significant improvements in the living standards of the masses of their populations are those which have given pri-

ority to excellent education and training, and to HE and training in particular as an agent of socio-economic change and development.

Similarly, Wilson (2011) notes that offering a high quality education to all United States of America students and building the educational system to support their teachers are topics of much concern and investment, passion and critique. As President Barack Obama (2010) puts it,

We know that from the moment students enter a school [university], the most important factor in their success is not the color of their skin or the income of their parents— it is the teacher standing at the front of the classroom.

Indeed, South Africa post-apartheid era needs a performing HE that equips students with skills that can make them better citizens. Alas the South Africa HE, based on the,

evidence of the output patterns, is failing to help produce solutions to the educational problems of the contemporary context—such as the challenge of developing students from highly diverse educational and linguistic backgrounds or the growing demand for learning... call for research-based and scholarly approaches to be brought to bear on the teaching-and-learning practice in areas where craft knowledge is not sufficient (Scott et al. 2007: 61).

Having identified these challenges, this paper proceeds to outline its objective, methodol-

ogy and discussion of the means to ameliorate the situation.

Objectives

This concept paper seeks to:

- i) Identify why teaching staff might be failing to attain acceptable success rate.
- ii) Explore ways educational developers could assist university teaching staff improves their modules/subjects/courses success rates.

METHODOLOGY

This paper is based on the review of relevant literature on academic development in South Africa and abroad. The consulted literature includes Higher Education Quality Committee audit report, Institutional self-evaluation report, HE policy documents and secondary sources. In addition, the paper draws from the researcher's reflections on experience drawn from academic advising from four South African and three Zimbabwean universities. Thematic framing informs the paper's discussion of ways academic developers can best assist teaching staff members and academic administrators/managers.

Nomenclature

This paper uses the phrase academic developers synonymously with educational advisors, educational practitioners, curriculum advisors, quality assurance personnel (in some instances) and curriculum specialists. At the same time centres for higher education is used interchangeably with academic development centre, centre for excellence in learning and teaching, centre for higher education research, learning and teaching and centre for higher education teaching and learning among others. Also, by academic managers this paper refers to heads of department, directors, deans or deputy-vice chancellors for academic.

OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

The discussion section is broadly categorised into the how and when. In these sections space is afforded to in-depth examination of what is academic development, theories, needs analysis, professional development, staff induction,

scholarship of teaching, collaboration/integration and capacity development policies among others.

Academic Development

Volbrecht and Boughey (2004) define academic development (hereafter AD) as an open set of practices concerned with improving the quality (include commitments to social justice, excellence, effectiveness and efficiency) of teaching and learning in higher education through integrating student, staff, curriculum, institutional and research development. In addition, Gosling (2009) notes that AD work encompasses more than professional development of staff. It can include support for and development of learning technologies, the production of learning materials (on-line or in hard copy), support for students (career advice, counselling, wellness programmes) and students' learning development (academic literacy, numeracy, study skills), quality assurance and enhancement, and many other specialist functions. This identifies the core strategic supportive roles AD should execute to materialize 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 ought to be availed to academics in HE (Education White Paper 1997).

Also, HEQC audit report (2011) recommendation 17 reads,

initiate a comprehensive process of external programme reviews focusing on teaching and learning issues, and that it take the necessary steps to develop capacity and provide resources at school and departmental level in curriculum design and programme development.

The HEQC (2011) audit recommends that the 'University management....consider the development of appropriate evaluation systems and mechanisms to measure the impact of the various academic support programmes provided to staff and students'. With reference to assessment, during HEQC audit interviews with a range of academics, 'the Panel heard of inconsistent implementation of the assessment processes and procedures across schools and departments'. Also, in compliance with recommendation 19,

'that sufficient examining capacity and adherence to procedures exist to guarantee that high success rates match actual student competencies'. The Centre responsible for academic development should also engage external service providers from sister universities that have developed capacity like Centre for Higher education research, teaching and learning at the Rhodes University to provide assessment and moderation workshops alongside the on-going internal university assessment workshops facilitated by academic practitioners. This is meant to ensure consistency in the implementation of assessment and moderation processes and procedures.

Related to assessment, educational practitioners could play pivotal roles in ensuring that there is response to *'numerous instances in which students were not given timely feedback on completed work'* (HEQC 2011) audit report. There are many reasons that give rise to this unfortunate development namely; failure to manage the giving of formative tasks in large classes, failure to handle marking in large classes and lack of proper know how on assessment (Makondo 2010) dynamics. In liaison with Heads of departments/Deans, curriculum developers should be proactive by ensuring that university lecturers are trained on the design and handling of assessment activities in ways that do not compromise on quality. Assessment, properly done, helps the students and lecturers gauge the level of mastery of the expected material before summative assessment, thereby giving sufficient room for interventions to be made where needed. This speaks of academic advisors executing key roles towards attainment of the national desire to improve on student success—here simply understood as *'getting students into and through college to a degree or certificate'* (Ewell and Wellman 2007).

In addition, AD centres need be proactive by advocating for the mounting, say of the need to have newly appointed lecturers attend modules on assessment and university teaching during their probation year(s) (Moraka and Hay 2007) or considered for promotion purposes. The promulgation of policies or capacity development policies (Moraka and Mapesela 2007) meant to enhance the learning and teaching agenda are necessary structures to inculcate culture change in some institutions where apathy towards AD activities prevails. Also, academics need be

made aware of the Teaching and learning grant that is available to fund these teaching and learning capacity building projects intended to contribute towards enhancement of throughput rates.

The How?

Theories

As AD has continued to develop, it is paramount that the work of academic practitioners be informed by grounded theories and practice. The preferred theories, concepts and methodologies should derive from and be nourished by African [western] historical conditions and socio-cultural practices and imperatives (Lebakeng et al. 2006). According to Palmer (1998) and Taylor (2005), in AD, as in teaching, it is essential to know yourself, your discipline and your community. This would allow materialization of *'development words'* – empowerment, accountability, ownership, partnership, participation and transparency – gives valuable perspective on the role which individuals play in facilitating development (Chambers 2005). Then, as McKenna (2013) notes, staff development practitioners can conceptualise themselves as deeply committed activists who provide the spaces for academics to theorise their contexts, make sense of their norms and develop their ability to provide students with access to the ways of making knowledge that the discipline demands. In this conception of staff development, identifying the mission and vision of the university and committing oneself to the academic project becomes a nuanced endeavour with which we as a community are collectively involved.

Besides, according to Dison (1997), a number of AD practitioners have been influenced by the sociocultural theories which articulate well with the conceptions of teaching, learning and knowledge construction. Boughey (1994), working in the field of academic literacy and writing development, for example, recognises that not all students' prior learning experiences prepare them for the type of learning required by universities. Conversely, Ramsden (1998) suggests that one of the most effective leadership practices in enabling academic change in HE involves modelling the way for others. This speaks of the need of academic developers who are properly qualified, experienced and abreast with trends

in global and national HE for them to be able to strategically advise academics on curriculum, teaching, learning, assessment, e-learning and provision of student support among others.

Furthermore, the examination of theories related to the role of academic developers alongside the teaching and learning practices is premised on the observation that 'efforts to change teaching and improve learning are essentially battles over institutional values, rewards and behaviors' (Lazerson et al. 2000). According to Taylor (2005), as academic communities welcome greater diversity among students and faculty, forms of scholarship and teaching and learning strategies, expectations of the academic development role are growing. According to Cook (2001), academic developers should collaborate with colleagues to build teaching and learning capacity not only among individual teachers, but also through curriculum development and the integration of technology in teaching career development (Åkerlind and Quinlan 2001). Increasingly, academic developers are called upon to provide leadership in problem solving and change at the institutional level (Diamond 2005).

Needs Analysis

Academic developers need to conduct needs analysis at their universities as a way of getting to know of the requisite needs of their institutions. Equipped with results of needs analysis together with institutional self-evaluation and HEQC audit reports, educational practitioners could now properly plan on the way forward. This approach helps the efforts of AD contribute towards,

making a commitment to improving output, particularly by means of improving the effectiveness of teaching and learning in HE itself, should be a central element of the sector's contribution to transformation and development (Scott et al. 2007: vii).

Drawing from Makondo (2012), below are modified results of needs analysis conducted at one university that later formed the bedrock of the AD strategic interventions for the whole year. The results of the needs analysis were captured as the following questions:

- s How to handle large classes at a university?
- s Request to have staff trained on using Statistical Package for Social Science.

- s How to design different forms of university assessment?
- s How to design teaching-learning materials?
- s How to prepare study guides that meet National Qualifications Framework level descriptors' specifications?
- s How to balance teaching and research needs?
- s How to write for publication?

Generic or Targeted Workshops

Armed with results of needs analysis and audit reports, academic developers can proceed to mount generic (for all teaching staff regardless of discipline) or targeted (upon request by a particular discipline or for a felt need) workshops so that they can begin to contribute towards redressing the identified needs. The experience of mounting and facilitating at these workshops has shown that the targeted workshops are popularly attended. The workshops (McAlpine et al. 2009) could be facilitated by properly qualified and experienced academic practitioners or were subject specific expertise was needed; discipline experts would be requested to offer presentations according to the request specifications. A well informed presenter makes the whole difference towards building the trust and confidence of academics on the services of the AD. Such a presenter helps by convincing the academics that the AD is the office to visit and such agential role execution becomes a great catalyst to build on.

Furthermore, the observation by Lave and Wenger (1991) that individuals learn as they participate by interacting with the community, its history, assumptions and cultural values, rules and patterns of relationship; the tools at hand, including objects, technology, language and images; the moment's activity, its purposes, norms and the practical challenges becomes pertinent. In line with the HEQC (2011: 35) audit report observation that '*there is no evidence that the provision of these workshops is sustainable in the long term or is sufficient to meet the development needs of academic staff*', AD specialist need to continue to upgrade their qualifications and knowledge on their core deliverables. For instance, AD specialists should acquaint themselves fully with the Higher Education Qualification Sub-framework so that when they take their stand to assist teaching staff on such matters, their command earns them respect.

Changed Landscape

Forces of globalization, massification of HE, information boom and ever increasing calls for accountability among others has changed the landscape in which university lecturers operate in. The status quo calls for due attention to be given to the variables which also impact on the role of academics and create a need for training and development. The roles are the need for curriculum development and innovation in teaching and learning: the shift to novel curricula such as outcomes-based education and problem-based learning requires a change towards more complex, innovative teaching and learning methodologies (Colliver 2000), with an emphasis on self-directed, life-long learning (Spady 1993). Also, quality assurance discourse has come into fashion in HE as Brennan et al. (1997) mainly because of the demand for value for money and greater accountability for public funds. In addition, the need for information and Communication Technology (Rogers 2000) has seen the changes in roles in HE. To remain relevant, Boughey (2007: 8) argues "... reframing of what already exists" so as to have a 3rd generation of AD practitioners that would link AD with quality management and promotion. This crop of AD should be influenced by Haggis (2003) discourse on the notion of deep versus surface approach to learning. The changes also call for focus on active learning and in methodologies such as the use of small group work (Quinn and Vorster 2004).

Collaboration/Integration

Academic advising efforts should draw cues from the Institutional Self-Evaluation Report observation that '*departments are required to submit to the head of department the names of students who do not perform well and are likely to fail after each test, so that a strategy is developed on how to support such students*'. In terms of staff collaboration and student integration, the academic practitioners should ensure that the lecturers concerned would help identify students they are sure would help their colleagues as peers, mentors or supplemental instructors. These interventions require collaboration and team effort so that lecturers and academic practitioners would make concerted efforts in ensuring that students get the best they

could in-order for them to complete their studies on record time. The provision of feedback by academics to academic practitioners and likewise on the progress or otherwise of concerned participating students must be emphasized upon.

Staff Induction

Academic development practitioners should ensure that comprehensive staff inductions programs are held in their universities over a reasonable timeframe. Building on the HEQC (2011) audit report during which interviewees pointed out that and that '*there is a rather superficial induction programme*' and '*little is happening to support staff*', and that often staff feel that they are '*thrown in at the deep end*' without '*sufficient preparation or support*'. These remarks speak to education as the only profession that assigns its newest hires to handle its most difficult cases (Elmore 2002). It is a known truism that the majority of university teaching staff members are not trained on pedagogical issues (Makondo 2012) yet is hired to demonstrate effectiveness (Lau 2004) in facilitating teaching and learning. It is within this context that a properly planned staff induction should 'catch' and equip the newly appointed staff with requisite university teaching and assessment tools. According to Huling-Austin (1990), induction helps beginning teachers make a successful transition from their teacher preparation experience to being the teacher-of-record in a classroom. Among the common goals of such programs are:

- a) Improving teaching performance.
- b) Increasing the retention of promising beginning teachers.
- c) Promoting the personal and professional wellbeing of beginning teachers.
- d) Satisfying mandated requirements for induction.
- e) Transmitting the culture of the system to beginning teachers.

In addition, properly packaged teaching staff induction programs could include components of mentoring, workshops, coaching or support groups (Arends and Rigazio-DiGilio 2000). The induction program can vary in the duration, level of intensity and content of support offered; and may differ based on the purpose, participants and support providers involved (Smith and Ingersoll 2004). Moreover, Arends and

Rigazio-DiGilio (2000) argue that induction program should help new lecturers to receive various types of support on resources/materials design/procurement, procedural information, instruction, emotional needs, classroom management, organizing the classroom environment and demonstration teaching. Therefore, educational advisors should ensure that through the induction program they have started a professional relationship with the newly appointed lecturers that need to be sustained. This relationship is pivotal to bringing the much needed change in some schools/departments where apathy towards attending academic development initiated interventions prevails.

Professional Development

The HEQC (2011) audit report observed ‘*lack of support for academics to professionalise their teaching*’ and ‘*sufficient focus on teaching and learning in the criteria for promotion*’. The South African Council of Higher Education through the HEQC audits among others is working towards the professionalization of teaching. According to Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin (1995: 598), effective PD needs to be structured around the ‘concrete tasks of teaching, assessment, observation and reflection’. Teaching staff need to be encouraged to attend workshops, short courses and register for qualifications in HE so that they could be assisted on how to facilitate ‘active learning, investigative classroom culture and student engagement’ (Mikeska et al. 2011). This has to be facilitated by educational advisors through activities that involve professionals in open and dynamic discussion; mutual problem solving and/or collaborative learning draw the participants into a community of learners (professional cohort) and contribute to an understanding of both theirs and the group’s capabilities (Marlow 2009). Also, academic development practitioners should play advocacy roles for mentoring arrangements to be in place and viable within their respective universities.

Scholarship of Teaching

Drawing from Taylor (2005), it is clear that academic practitioners need to execute diverse leadership roles calculated to design, implement and oversee an enhanced university teaching

and learning agenda. The other dimension is collaborative research that should see education practitioners and teaching staff members presenting collaborated papers thereby building capacity for the university. This should consummate in community of practice that focuses on the attainment of improved teaching-learning through improved scholarship of teaching and learning and the scholarship of research (Ramsden 1998). Atkinson (2001) argues that the scholarship of teaching and learning is at the core of the current transformation in higher education. Therefore, in a knowledge society, the important roles of academics are the production of academically rigorous research outputs, while concomitantly being accomplished and imaginative facilitators of learning in the midst of vast and available knowledge. Enhanced scholarship of teaching should ensure that with reference to students, as Northedge (2003), learning facilitation should give students that ability to ‘crack the code’, intellectual power, through access to the concepts, theories and methods of enquiry and analysis generated within particular specialist discourses, and social power, through membership of knowledge communities which may control decision making, professional practice and employment opportunities. This approach could help universities produce graduates with graduate attributes required by the world of business.

The When?

This paper reckons that interventions by academic practitioners need be on-going and well timed for them to be relevant. For instance, first time lecturers and students should be attended to the moment they arrive at the institutions so that the education practitioners’ assistance becomes pertinent and pragmatic. Induction and pairing of mentors need to be done during these formative stages so that people would begin on informed basis. Also, support on writing and designing teaching-learning materials and when to host capacity building workshops should be done during times when lecturers are not running exams as they would be hard pressed with looming exams due dates.

This paper submits that academic developers should play agential roles (Archer 2000, 2003) meant to ensure that discussions on design of teaching learning materials, teaching/facilitation,

learning, curriculum development and reform, assessment and moderation approaches among others are popular on-going University discourses. The strategic roles academic development roles play in this regard are meant to support Heads of department, Deans, Deputy-Vice Chancellor Academic and other designated stakeholders who are active in the design and implementation of a university teaching and learning agenda. The academic specialist efforts would pragmatically improve on the aforesaid challenges facing the South African HE landscape if maximum cooperation is got from academics and administrators. This calls for academics to join hands with the academic practitioners through joint research and presentations on best teaching-learning and research methodologies characteristic of the 21st century.

CONCLUSION

This paper highlighted the importance of having academic development advisors strategically planning and executing their diverse supportive roles calculated to assist the enhancement of the university teaching and learning agenda. Curriculum specialists need to ensure that their operations are informed by credible data gathered from needs analysis, institutional self-evaluation audit reports as well as HEQC audit reports. In addition, the educational practitioners need to have their operations grounded on sound theory and practice. The agential role of academic practitioners can be strategically exercised through mounting comprehensive staff induction and targeted as well as generic workshop programs. The voices of academic advisors should be heard on curriculum, teaching, learning, assessment, scholarship of teaching, learning and research matters among others. The necessity of academic advisors being properly experienced and qualified cannot be over-emphasized for them to execute key agential roles in advising diverse university academic managers on policies and practice that enhances the university teaching and learning agenda.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper notes that further comparative studies could be done to establish what different institutional audit reports say as a way of

gleaning different roles academic development advisors could execute towards the enhancement of success rates.

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