MANAGING ACADEMIC DEVELOPMENT IN CONSTRAINED CONTEXTS: CASE STUDY OF A UNIVERSITY SATELLITE CAMPUS IN NAMIBIA

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ABSTRACT: *This ethnographic case study explored the challenges besetting academic development (AD) at a satellite campus of a leading university in Namibia. It sought to establish and proffer suggestions on how AD should evolve at the institution, being mindful of any enabling or constraining cultural, structural and agential factors. Three research questions guided the study. The study sample was purposefully selected and comprised the acting head of campus, two Heads of Department, three academic coordinators, the Quality Assurance Coordinator, the student support officer and the Student Counsellor. The findings of the study revealed that this relatively new professional field of academic development has not received the best of receptions by a significantly large portion of academic staff members, including some key agents. The study found that there was a general apathy and reluctance to afford the AD practitioners the space and 'license' to exercise their practice. Based on the forgoing findings, the study recommended that the AD practitioners in the constrained contexts be accorded recognition and support by the key agents in the institution and that innovative interventions be put in place to promote AD processes.*

KEY WORDS: academic development, culture, structure, agency, morphogenetic

INTRODUCTION

Academic Development can be defined as a transparent set of practices designed to improve the quality of higher education teaching and learning through the integration of staff, students, the curriculum, research and institutional development, (Volbrecht & Boughey, 2005). Academic Development, just like any other budding, independent professional field, has been received with a mixture of suspicion, scepticism and unwarranted tension by some sections in some institutions of higher education. This has virtually rendered the tasks of academic development extremely difficult and, in some extreme cases, literally insurmountable. The provision of quality higher education forms the foundation for any nation's development and it is the onerous responsibility of universities to manage higher education by putting in place enabling structures. Universities need to reassure the public that the standard and quality of education provided meet acceptable international standards and also respond adequately to local needs. At the satellite Campus under study, AD functions are vaguely and ambiguously

integrated in remotely related units or departments. This has led to an untenable opportunity for non-accountability by these units and/or departments.

This study was motivated by the principal researcher's' involvement and leadership of the one of the academic departments. The researcher has had to deal with some functions that should ordinarily not fall under his purview as Head of Department (HOD) but which should be the functions of academic developers. Despite the fact that, of late, AD in higher education teaching and learning has become topical, there is little or no research conducted on the subject in Namibia.

Objectives of the study

The objectives of this study were;

- To identify challenges of academic development in constrained contexts
- to establish how academic development at KMC is modelled and managed
- to suggest the most appropriate approaches to academic development in the context of KMC

In the absence of a 'critical mass' of previous studies concerning constrained institutions in available literature, the current study, therefore, has the potential to make vital contributions to define and expand existing knowledge on the management of academic development in constrained higher education institutions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Frick and Kapp (2009) explain that HEI's are experiencing a tremendous information boom which demands a correspondingly significant transformation of the system. They note that the new institutions that have emerged have new academic programmes, new learning paradigms, accompanied with new technology. All these have led to the questioning of the traditional ways universities have operated. However, Levine (2000) maintains that in spite of the 'soul' of the university being radically transformed, academic lecturers still need to continue with teaching, research and community service unhindered. Their functions are discipline-specific and require educational expertise. As a new area of practice, academic development in higher education has emerged. This field of practice serves to help academic staff to adapt and keep abreast of the transformational challenges that may accrue.

Boughey (2007) argues that for academic developers to positively influence and manage the teaching and learning practices in institutions of higher learning, they need a complex array of different kinds of knowledge. The focus areas in the field of AD include staff development, student development, curriculum development at programme and course /module level,

institutional development, and so on. It is the AD practitioners who are usually called upon to make strategic institutional decisions.

Frick and Kapp (2009) observe that the digital and technological revolution within the South African higher education context, the introduction of the Higher Education Qualifications Framework, and the adoption of outcome based education were the initial drivers that formed part of the changing higher education context. More importantly, Kobouridis and Link, (2001) argue that the need of AD is not just to keep abreast of latest developments in higher education, but also serves to improve the employability of professionals. According to Challis (1999), AD is vital because firstly, it helps to update and upgrade existing knowledge and skills in new areas of practice; secondly, it prepares the institution for the new organisational roles and responsibilities and thirdly, it increases professional and personal competences in a wider context. Overall, it improves practice in higher education teaching and learning.

Academic development at the University of Pretoria (UP) spans the entire period when the student enters the university and ends when they graduate. Support is provided to students who have been identified as requiring assistance to succeed in the first year of study. The process is facilitated by working with the Departments of Student Affairs and the Teaching and Learning Committees in different faculties. The focus is on the first-year experience of students, who are taken through study skills and time-management workshops. Students who are performing poorly are identified and to invited so as to address their challenges. Research is carried out to inform student development, retention and success so that well-tested and innovative strategies are applied to their academic development. Newly appointed academic staff members are supported through consulted that are hired to conduct an Induction Programme twice a year. Staff members are given the opportunity to update their skills in assessment through workshops.

Baume & Baume (2013) argue that academic development has risen from a peripheral activity to an almost central and highly valued activity, and is highly likely to achieve its apotheosis. Academic development is now central to higher education as a field of practice to every lecturer, in every course and every department, every faculty and every HEI. However, this assertion turns a blind eye on constrained contexts where the entire teaching and learning function is pivoted around the lecturer.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

This study was underpinned by Archer's morphogenetic framework. According to Archer (1995, 1996), the study of structure, culture and agency is pivotal to understanding the social world. Archer explains that structure relates to material interests and to the interrelationship between different elements of society or to recurring patterns of social behaviour. Therefore, structure would relate to such concepts such gender, social class, race, marital status, and so

on. Culture would be understood to concern beliefs, ideas, ideologies and values. These two aspects, structure and culture are vital to social life. Although each is independent of the other, they both co-exist in parallel. Agency, on the other hand, refers to the capacity people have to act in a voluntary way and relates to the psychological and social psychological make up of individuals.

Using Archer's framework, the researchers explored the experiences of students, academics and other stakeholders in their empirical engagement with teaching and learning in higher education. These experiences were understood to be relative and were constructed through personal and social circumstances, because each individual experienced higher education in different ways.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study was based on the following research questions:

   a) How is academic development at KMC modelled and managed?
   b) Which aspects of KMC impact on teaching and learning?
   c) What are the most appropriate approaches to academic development can KMC apply for optimum effect?

METHODOLOGY

The researchers elected to use an interpretive paradigm in their endeavour to understand the subjective ambit of human behaviour and experiences as they related to academic development. This was informed by the perspectives of symbolic interactionism, which are founded on three premises, (Blumer, 1969). The first premise postulates that, in addition to internal or external stimuli, people act or behave in accordance and conformity to the meanings that they attach to objects and events. The second premise posits that such meanings arise from the processes of interaction. Meanings are formulated, modified and developed through social interaction and not only through pre-set or established roles. The third premise suggests that meanings are a product of the interpretive procedures which actors within the interaction processes use. "By taking the role of the other, actors interpret the meanings and intention of the other. By means of 'the mechanism of self-interaction', individuals modify, or change their definition of the situation, rehearse, alternative course of action and consider their possible consequences" Haralambos and Holbron (2008; p883).

Research approach

The researchers used an ethnographic approach to investigate the management of teaching and learning experiences and realities through sustained contact with the staff and students in their natural environment in an effort to produce rich, descriptive data that enabled them to understand those experiences. The study sought to understand academic development at KMC

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by gaining a native perspective where they looked around while within, rather than from outside looking inward. They did so by keeping in the participants' environment to observe events, artefacts, and symbols that defined the institution's structure, culture and agency so as to give it meaning, (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Selection of participants

Non-probability purposive sampling was used to select individuals who have the knowledge of the phenomena under investigation and which were deemed to be potentially information-rich. Therefore, in this study, the researchers selected the following individuals who have the 'lived experience': Assistant Pro-Vice Chancellor (campus head), Heads of Department [2], Academic Coordinators [3], Quality Assurance Coordinator, Student support officers, Student Counsellor, students and lecturers. The research site was KMC.

METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

The primary methods of data collection in this study were semi-structured in-depth interviews, questionnaires and document analyses. Interviews were administered to collect data from campus management and academic developers. Focus group discussions were done with lecturers and students. Data were gathered from documents such as the policy statements, prospectuses and handbooks.

DATA ANALYSIS

The interviews were transcribed and analysed by the processes of data reduction, data display and then by the drawing and verification of conclusions, (Miles and Huberman, 1994). In the data reduction phase, interview were organised and simplified into manageable parts. First-level and second-level coding techniques (Punch 1998) were used. Kerlinger (1970) as quoted in Cohen, et al (2011; 559) defines coding as "the translation of question responses and respondent information to specific categories from the purpose of analysis".

First-level coding was used to examine small and discreet parts of the interview as well as to identify the concepts that were mentioned therein. Interview transcripts were broken down into sentences or groups of sentences which were examined and assigned descriptive labels. Further simplification of data followed in the second-level coding by examining the first level codes and placing similarly coded units into categories which were assigned a conceptual label for second-level (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Further simplification was done at the third-level coding where similar conceptual categories were clustered and assigned a third –level conceptual label.

After that, the data display phase was used to map second and third-level categories on a simplified chart to provide a visual representation of the relationships among the categories and to enable identification of emergent key themes from each of the interviews that were

carried out. A further chart was drawn to map key themes which will emerge from each interview transcript analysis to enable the researchers to make comparisons across cases.

The last phase of conclusion drawing and verification was used to establish emerging themes from the analysed interview transcripts and to draw emergent similarities and differences from the comparisons across cases. In reality, the three phases of the Miles and Huberman approach were done concurrently.

Finally, during the data collection and analysis processes, feedback from participants was solicited concerning emerging themes. A comparative technique to the phases of data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing and verification were used so as to reinforce the findings (Miles and Huberman, 1994)

Limitations

The study was limited to KMC, which is only one of the University of Namibia's eleven campuses across the country. This has an implication on issues of generalizability of the eventual findings.

DATA PRESENTATIONS AND DISCUSSION

How AD is modelled and managed at KMC

On the question of how academic development at KMC was modelled and managed, the Assistant Pro-Vice Chancellor (Acting), explained in detail the structures that are in place to support students, such as the office of the Dean of Students which has a student counsellor to attend to social, economic and personal issues. The office is manned by a trained practitioner with the requisite counselling and guidance skills. Her office operates on an 'open door policy'. She operates on invitation or when there are any reasonable grounds for suspicion that a student is having some social or problems but they do not own up. There is also an office of a student support officer who assists students on mainly social affairs on campus, such as sporting and social amenities. He works in liaison with Student Representative to run and manage the entertainment spheres of student life on campus. The third and final office related to academic development is that of the Quality Assurance Coordinator. This office deals with all matters on campus, whether academic or non-academic, whether they involve staff of students, where they are goods or services. This was not the ideal scenario, according to the APVC. He pointed out that there was no clear model around which the campus managed its AD functions. The main constraint to effective AD processes was lack of resources.

Both Heads of Department professed that they had nothing to do with students' social life, besides ensuring that students are 'taught'. The three academic coordinators similarly said that they had no role in students' social life on campus. The Quality Assurance Coordinator, in contrast, said that his office looks at all quality related aspects of campus affairs. He supports students by identifying challenges in the quality of service they receive, as core clients of the university. These are then taken up with relevant authorities or offices for redress. However he

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revealed that he has no authority beyond engaging with the relevant offices. He also ensures that the quality of teaching and learning meet international standards and that he is the custodian of all quality issues for the whole campus.

On their part, lecturers and students similarly claimed that they were merely passive recipients of what was on the table. They had no voice to demand anything more. By implication, there was very little they could do to change the status quo. In the view of the researcher, this was a polite admission that the concept of academic development was alien and yet to be fully understood and appreciated.

AD practices that impact on teaching and learning at KMC

When asked about which aspects of KMC AD practices impact on teaching and learning, the APVC, both HoDs and ACs pointed out to constraints in procuring of teaching and recreational resources, hiring additional AD staff, or sending staff for workshops and retraining due to what most of the respondents attributed to effects of the financial crunch which they justified as affecting not only Namibia, but the whole world.

Student support officer, students' counsellor, lecturers and students did not mince their words when confronted with the same question and laid the blame squarely on campus top management for "with-*holding the necessary funding and   lack of the necessary desire to solve problems on campus"*.

Appropriate approaches to Academic Development

The APVC and HoDs were non-committal when asked about what they would suggest as the best models to follow in the AD practices at the institution. Their responses during the interview seemed identical, but the following sums it up, *"you see, I cannot give any preferred model when there is none at my disposal."*

In sharp contrast, lecturers and students, in separate focus group discussions were more forthcoming and suggested what they claimed was prevailing at other institutions, such as where 'specialists' were hired to offer academic literacy support, career guidance and thorough orientation for new students. No suggestions were forwarded for staff support from an academic development point of view. Suggestions close to that were for funding   for further studies. This suggestion was beyond the purview of academic developers. Lecturers showed no desire to have academic developers to share with them latest trends in higher education teaching and learning. There was a strong feeling that their disciplinary expertise equips them well enough to teach at university. It was a disdainful viewpoint on the part of lecturers.

The student support officer and the student counsellor did not think that there was anything more they could do in addition to what they were already doing. However, this shared viewpoint betrayed their lack of understanding of the roles of academic developers responsible

for students. The QA coordinator indicated a desire to engage staff more in matters that were quality linked. He decried the lack of lecturer and student responses when requested to fill in online questionnaires. He wished he could engage more with staff and students so as to fulfil his functions as per job description.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As a professional field, Academic development is ever-growing and becoming an indispensable component in the higher education context. It is against this backdrop that institutions ought to take an extra mile to remain relevant by keeping abreast of international trends in higher education and support these emerging academic fields. In concluding, we wish to reaffirm that AD practitioners can effectively do their work if university authorities render them the desired recognition and support in terms of revamping some of the constraining structures and hostile cultural inclinations. These emerging practitioners ought to be accorded an equal footing with their counterparts in the lecture-rooms and not be regards derisively as 'support' staff. The following quote form Saroyan aptly expresses this viewpoint.

> *When ADs share the same rank, status, or responsibilities with faculty, they are more likely to have the confidence to articulate a point of view that is different from others and their contribution may be valued more. Conversely, if they do not share status, their contribution may be regarded as unimportant. If faculty do not consider them as peers, they may show less willingness and even resistance to taking on board the suggestions put forward by ADs (Saroyan 2014:59).*

On their part, the AD practitioners should make an effort to prove themselves as competent 'knowers' in their own field so as to win over the trust of academic staff. They should model their agency in ways that will not create tension with the institutional strategic position but rather use their expertise as irrefutable and effective tools to influence cultural direction the institution takes. In constrained contexts, the key agents should consider innovative and creative interventions where, for example, existing academic and support staff can fill in the gaps AD processes on a rotational basis.

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