

TAU



PROJECT REPORT

Inclusive Strategies for Professional Development of Early Career and Emerging Academics in a
New University in South Africa.

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ABBREVIATIONS

HE:	Higher Education
RSA:	Republic of South Africa
ECAs:	Early Career Academics
SoTL:	Scholarship of Teaching and Learning
CHE:	Council for Higher Education
DHET	Department of Higher Education and Technology
SPU:	Sol Plaatje University
CTLPD	Centre for Teaching and Learning and Programme

1. INTRODUCTION

This project sought bottom-up strategies for professional development of teaching among academics in a small, new university in South Africa, a context where policies and structures are still formative. The context of being new demands the university to establish strong foundations for excellence in teaching as a university begins. This presentation highlights the strategies used in determining the development needs of new academics at SPU. The project identified and worked with 3 focus groups i.e. early career academics, emerging academics and mid-career academics to determine their career development needs. Over 70% of the University's teaching staff are early career academics, all of whom still to complete an advanced degree, while fully engaged in other academic functions particularly in curriculum development, research and teaching. What emerged from the conversations is that the university should adopt strategies/approaches to professional development that assist academics to develop their own academic identities and offer holistic support in career development, rather than isolated interventions targeted at only development of teaching. The 3 groups some common needs but also have needs specific to each group, which demands differentiated approaches to career development- perhaps a combination of formal and informal approaches to developing of teaching. The groups identified in the project are gradually forming themselves into COPs, supported by professional development programmes in the recently (2018) established Centre for Teaching and Learning and Programme Development (CTLPD).

2. PROCESSES/ METHODS

The main methodology for this study was collecting qualitative data through focus group discussions. We identified 3 focus groups in collaboration with the Centre for Teaching, Learning and Programme Development (CTLPD) and collected raw data from open discussions with groups in a workshop format. This involved profiling academics' career paths trajectories across the 4 Schools (Faculties). From the 125 academics 3 focus groups were identified, i.e. (FG1) *Early Career Academics*, (FG2) *Emerging Academics* and (FG3) *Mid-Career Academics*.



Appendix 1: SPU Academics' Profiles

Three focus group discussions were held as part of the CPLTD's Career Path Development Programme in workshop formats facilitated by the CPLTD. The workshops allowed a mix of structured presentations and open discussions with participants. The basic question asked was, what was their personal experience of teaching at the university and what support did they require to develop their

research and teaching capacities? The qualitative data from each session was analysed through deductive thematic analysis- any reference here? A survey of relevant South African literature on academic development, as well as a reading of the institutional (SPU), policy framework and structural set up for teaching and learning was used to contextualise the data collected.

3. CAREER PATH DEVELOPMENT FOR ACADEMICS IN RSA

There is substantial literature that focusses on analysing how professionals learn, particularly in the context of HEIs in RSA where academics join teaching professions without sufficient training in teaching or pedagogy.¹ A 2017 publication by CHE, *Learning to Teach, Professional Development and Professional Learning* – highlights challenges and strategies on how lecturers learn to teach in formal or informal settings.² Literature also suggests that context matters when it comes to professional development of academics in universities.³ The systems (or lack of) in a university influences motivation, while impediments to professional development include heavy teaching loads and lack of institutional support and engrained attitudes, and inherited practices that hinder the professional development. As appropriately highlighted in various readings, in the absence of relevant policy and appropriate teacher development programmes, teachers acquire seemingly indelible imprints from their own experiences as students. Researchers rightly points out a need to expose academics to alternative pedagogies that interrupt their ritualised practices, or else they continue to teach in the same way they were taught by their undergraduate teachers.⁴ National Statistics highlight that lecturers and Senior lecturers constitute 72% of all instructional staff, and that 44% of Senior Lecturers and 82% of lecturers do not have a PhD.⁵ It is crucial for universities, especially new ones to establish effective strategies for professional development, particularly targeting early career and emerging academics.

¹ Subbaye R & R. Dhunpath (2016): Early-career academic support at the University of KwaZulu-Natal: towards a scholarship of teaching, *Studies in Higher Education*,

² Council on Higher Education (CHE) (2017). Learning to Teach in Higher Education in South Africa, *Higher Education Monitor 14*, Council on Higher Education. P4.

³ See Leibowitz, B., Bozalek, V. and Kahn, P. *Theorising Learning to Teach in Higher Education: Sociomaterial, Social practice and Realist approaches*. London: Routledge, 77-92.

⁴ Subbaye & Dhunpath 2016: 5.

⁵ DST, 2018. *A Study On Building a Cadre of Emerging Scholars for Higher Education in South Africa*, DST.

4. THE SOL PLAATJE UNIVERSITY CONTEXT

4.1. The History and Implications for Teaching and Learning

The university is part of the one 2 brand new public universities to be built post 1994⁶ as part of the *Development Framework for New Universities in the Northern Cape and Mpumalanga Provinces*.⁷ In 2019, at only 6 years, the University has 4 faculties, offering a range of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes with a student population of about 2000, and an academic staff complement of 156. This has been phenomenal growth, envisaging over 8000 students by 2025. In terms of teaching and academic development, the university is a comprehensive university meant to offer a broad range of academic programmes ranging from higher certificates to PhDs but with a more focus on formative undergraduate studies in niche areas. While ambitious and progressive, the University' inaugural strategic plan envisaged some challenges that the new university would face, saying, "as a new institution...the University has no reputation as yet to attract high quality staff...currently has only fledgling management systems in place that will require ongoing strengthening and improvement to support its future growth. Fit for purpose ICT structures, systems and capacity for internal administration, as well as for teaching, learning and research will need to be rapidly established."⁸ In the plan, SPU also positioned itself as *Teaching-led* university where "over the next five years the SPU should become known for its excellence in teaching and the care with which it constructs the learning experience at the institution." Thus for the first 5 years SPU focussed on its strategic goal of establishing "the foundations of an academic programme of teaching and learning excellence, research development and community engagement through the design and approval of the relevant academic programmes; the development of the enabling policies, capabilities, facilities and infrastructure to ensure good teaching practice; and the delivery of programmes in ways that provide a challenging learning experience and high levels of intellectual achievement"⁹. At the end of its 5 years, the University's new *Draft SPU academic Plan (2019-2024)* still acknowledges that for the new universities "in the area of teaching, perhaps the biggest challenge is that they have to establish their brand and reputation to attract students and experienced academics. Those who have already joined the University as academics are faced with a specific set of expectations, and challenges which set the context in which they work as teachers and researchers"¹⁰ This context is highlighted in the following sections.

⁶ DHET, 2012. *Development Framework for New Universities in the N/Cape and Mpumalanga Provinces*. DHET, Pretoria.

⁷ Deon Kleinsmith & Anele Horn. 2015. Impacts of New universities on Hosting Cities and the implications for Kimberley, Northern Cape, South Africa, *Development Southern Africa*, 32:4, 494-510.

⁸ Sol Plaatje University Strategic Plan 2015-2019. P8

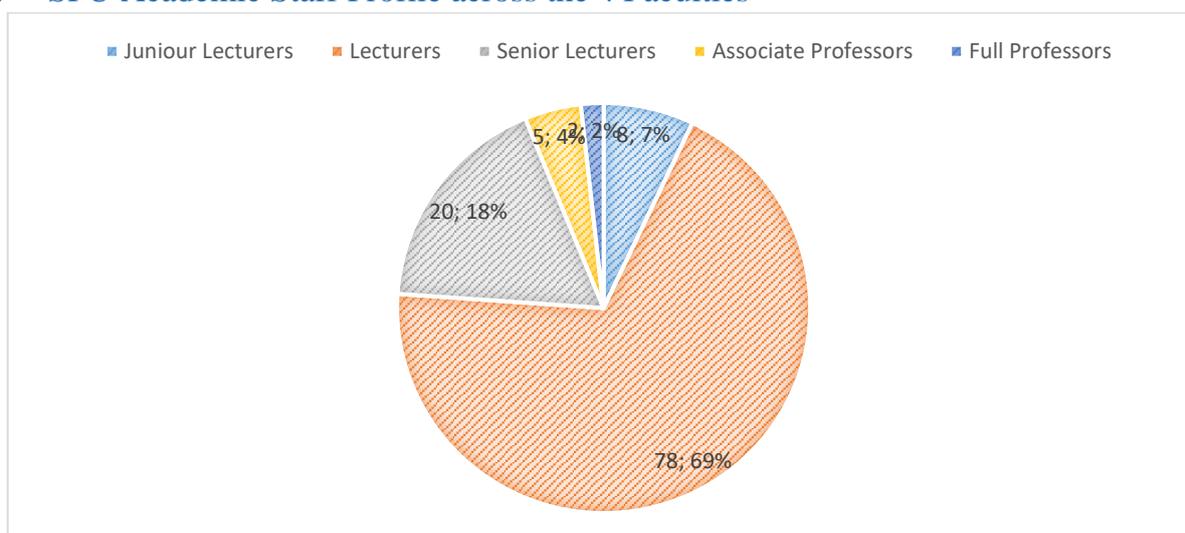
⁹ Sol Plaatje University Strategic Plan 2015-2019.

¹⁰ Sol Plaatje University Draft Academic Plan, 2019-2024.

4.2. Student Profile and Academic Performance

Student Profiles	Origin	Kimberley: 35%
		Northern Cape: 39%
		Other Provinces: 26%
		International
	Gender	Women: 58%
		Men: 42%
	Diversity	Predominantly African and Coloured
Student Performance	Past 4 years:	>85% university average course pass rate
	Cohort Graduation	Around 75% cohort students on track to graduate

4.3. SPU Academic Staff Profile across the 4 Faculties



4.4. Focus Groups

Group	Category	Description	Qty
FG1	Early Career Academics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No HE experience before SPU No/some research experience or publication First teaching appointment at SPU Most have recently graduated with Mas and No PhDs- Still to think of a PhD 	20
FG2	Emerging Academics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The group has Some HE experience before SPU No PhD or enrolled for one. Limited research and publications Limited teaching experience 	78
FG3	Mid Career Academics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Considerable experience in the HE Mostly Senior Lecturers. Relevant research and publication Good teaching experience 	22

5. OUTCOMES AND RECOMENDATIONS

What emerged from the 4 focus groups is that academics look at their performance and development as teachers is a holistic way that integrates their academic background, teaching experience (or lack of), the institutional contexts, tied with their personal development as academy.

Focus Groups' Themes: Raw Data

The needs articulated are tied to these and highlight structural issues, social and cultural issues including institutional cultures as highlighted in the following 6 themes;

1. *Helping Academics to Become- Creating Academic Identities:* Given the demographic i.e. a big cohort (over 70%) of early career academics- the need to offer assistance with formation of personal academic identities is key. With emphasis on supporting finishing of PhDs for early careers, establishing research trajectories for mid-level, and institutional supporting/ consolidating current research capacities of established academics.
2. *Building Infrastructure and University Structural Support for Early Career Academics:* Importance of establishment of structures and systems for the support of early career and emerging academics' career development through capacity building activities such as mentorship programmes, academic induction systems and others.
3. *Support for Individual Struggles in Teaching.* Systems and support to address the challenges faced in teaching by early career academics. These include student's delinquency and ill-discipline. Ill prepared students? Other structures for student support e.g. Learner Management Systems, access to resources, laboratories and equipment, library, plagiarism software, reading and writing skills development for students?
4. *Balancing The Research- Teaching Nexus.* The university instituted a workload model and its implementation has created a lot of anxieties among staff, an aspect that may lead to a tick box approach. There is also pressure for research productivity, without this being necessarily linked to individual career development needs.
5. *First Things First- Fulfilling The Rites of Passage:* Attaining an advanced degree (PhD) is universally considered as a minimum requirement for academic performance. Almost two thirds of academics at SPU still have to cross this rite of passage. It is clear that you could not make an excellent teacher out of an academic preoccupied with Finishing PhDs. Thus, there is need for strategy that urgently addresses this attainment of PhDs.
6. *Academic Anonymous, Coping Mechanisms and Safe Zones-:* The experience of being a first time academic in a university can be quite overwhelming for a lot of early career academics. A majority suffer in silence as they try to quietly cope with the rigours and the expectations. There is need for creating "safe" spaces where the fears, anxieties and challenges can be openly articulated, shared and addressed. Mentorship programmes can work but the University has to creatively think about

how to create such safe zones of engagement. For this activity, the Focus groups where academics at the same level, could talk, and openly share is one model that can be utilised for such conversations.

6. CONCLUSION

SPU has laid a solid foundation for good teaching. The formative structures, and systems have good potential to have great effects if they take the academics with. The formative structures of the CPLTD, Teaching and Learning Committees in Faculties offer a chance at creating down-top approaches to assisting early career academics. From this project, there is a realisation that you cannot make a good teacher out of an academic preoccupied with trying to finish an advanced degree. The profiling identified specific needs such as Academic staff are mainly ECAs, needs robust, targeted professional development. In the University sector, though there has been an array of formal programmes, numbers enrolling for these programmes remain small, except where it has become a compulsory requirement for new academic staff.¹¹ According to the CHE, informal staff development activities tend to be better attended than the more demanding formal programmes as they usually require short-term commitments and deal with targeted skills or issues, while allowing academics to “learn from one’s own ongoing practice”.¹² Given the current staff complement at SPU, there is need for a strategy that is a mix of short, informal capacity building workshops, engendering communities of practice and mentoring programmes. Because 2/3rds academics are still studying, formal NQF registered programmes would add to the burdens, hence the strategy should be designed in response to identified needs, as well as individual consultation.¹³ Formative communities of practice and creation of safe zones of engagement that have commenced should be entrenched.

You can use Boud and Brew extensively in section 3 and in the conclusion where you are discussing the emerging themes.

¹¹ Boud, D. and Brew, A. (2017). Learning to teach as the development of practice. In Leibowitz, B., Bozalek, V. and Kahn, P. *Theorising Learning to Teach in Higher Education: Sociomaterial, Social practice and Realist approaches*. London: Routledge, 77-92; Subbaye R & R. Dhunpath (2016): Early-career academic support at the University of KwaZulu-Natal: towards a scholarship of teaching, *Studies in Higher Education*,

¹² Council on Higher Education (CHE) (2017). P15

¹³ Subbaye R & R. Dhunpath (2016)