

Institutional TAU Project: Exploring the impact of the PGDipE(HE) on the academic practice and SoTL engagement of graduates

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Abstract: Changes in the scale, scope and participation in Higher Education (HE) worldwide has led to a global focus on developing academic faculty as teachers. The South African Higher Education Sector has supported this through policy and projects (such as TAU), with individual HE Institutions responding through various policies, structures and initiatives. The PGDipE(HE) was introduced at Wits in 2015 as a means through which to empower academics as knowledgeable teachers, and a growing number of Wits academic staff have either completed or are currently registered for this. This research project focused on understanding the impact of the PGDipE(HE) on the practices of academics and any subsequent engagement in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL). Questionnaires and focus groups were undertaken with these staff members, and the data analysed using a social realist framework, considering structure, culture and agency. Results found that the majority of respondents had undertaken changes in their academic practice, and that several had made significant contributions in the SoTL arena. However, it is clear that in general, the impact of the PGDipE(HE) is at a micro level and that the broader University and HE sector are not benefitting generally from the knowledge and expertise of these academic staff.

Introduction

I am currently employed in a non-academic position as the Head of Academic Quality at Wits Business School. I am therefore not in an active teaching role, and so decided to focus my project on professional staff development. In a previous role as Assistant Dean: Teaching and Learning and having completed an MEd in Tertiary Teaching, I had been involved in some of the initial work related to the design of the PGDipE(HE) at Wits. I had also taken on a role as mentor for 4 academic participants during their PGDipE(HE) studies. Two of these

academics, Agata McGregor and Danie (both from within the same faculty as me) went on to do very interesting work in the teaching and learning space – both winning the VC Team Teaching Award for work they had done post the PGDipE(HE). My collaboration with both had continued beyond the period of mentorship and I shared the VC Team teaching award with Agata for our work in innovative assessment approaches. It was interesting to the three of us, that while we were aware of some of the work done by other graduates of the PGDipE(HE), in many instances we had no idea who had actually undertaken the PGDipE(HE) even within our own faculty and schools. For us this suggested that little use or effect of their new expertise was being experienced outside of their own practice, creating missed opportunities for their schools, faculties, the University and HE sector.

I therefore decided to undertake research into the impact of the PGDipE(HE) on the academic practice and SoTL engagement of graduates. Agata and Danie were interested in this question based on their current roles at Wits, and therefore agreed to join the research project. We decided to apply for funding to undertake the project under a UCDG umbrella project hosted at Wits: the Teaching Development and Research Grant for Staff 2021. We were awarded R24600 funding for 2021 and received a further R12000 to continue our work in 2022. The funding supported data collection (focus groups, data capture and transcription), data analysis (feedback to participants, small group consultation and discussion with PGDipE(HE) academic staff), institutional events to share and discuss our project (one online and one in-person), and editing and publication fees.

Aim and Processes / Methods

The aim of this project was to explore the impact that the PGDipE(HE) has had on the practices of academics and any subsequent engagement in SoTL. The long-term purpose of the project would be to capitalise on this untapped expertise and interest, by enabling collaboration, support and visibility through CoPs and other mechanisms within our faculty and across the University. The professionalisation of teaching and learning across the HE sector is underpinned by social justice; without knowledgeable academics who understand how best to support student success through curriculum design and informed teaching approaches, and HEIs with governance and support mechanisms involving expert teachers, student success will not advance at the rate needed in South Africa.

The research undertook an examination of the graduates and current PGDipE(HE) participants, to understand staff motivations for undertaking the PGDipE(HE) and to document their self-reported experiences of their studies. Further we sought to identify any influence and benefits it has had on their subsequent practice, SoTL engagement and work within their Faculty and University. Identifying and understanding PGDipE(HE) participants and alumni is a starting point to creating structures like CoPs within the University, of like-minded individuals who have an interest (and theoretical background) in teaching and learning. While many of these individuals may already be changing their own practice or supporting the development and change in others' practice, many find themselves isolated within their school or discipline. This is a potentially untapped wealth of expertise, enthusiasm and agents who collectively can influence and support change, if they themselves are supported and enabled in developing confidence and agency. It is hoped that over time, such CoPs will stimulate enhanced professionalisation of T&L and growing engagement with SoTL within our faculty and across the University.

The project undertook the following activities:

- Project conceptualisation, funding application and ethics approval
- An initial questionnaire sent out to all PGDipE(HE) alumni and current participants registered for the programme, to analyse their motivations, experiences and resulting impact on academic practice and/or SoTL.
- Initial data analysis from the questionnaires led to follow-up interviews and focus groups to establish the sphere of influence these staff members have had in their schools and more broadly within their faculties and the University since completing the PGDipE(HE). We explored questions like:
 - What T&L developments have they undertaken in their own practice and schools?
 - What T&L related committees, initiatives or activities have they engaged in? Is this by invitation or their own initiative?
 - Have they been involved in any collaborative efforts between like-minded individuals within their schools?

- Is there any evidence of engagement in SoTL activities in terms of active research projects, publications, conference proceedings and/or working papers?
- What difficulties and obstacles they may have encountered in undertaking SoTL, as well as what might enable action and impact.
- Further data analysis of both questionnaires and focus groups. Identification of scholarly feedback opportunities (two book chapters and a special edition in SAJHE).
- Online institutional feedback session: invited teaching and learning interested colleagues from faculty and more broadly in the university including other TAU participants for 2021, TAU advisors and the Senior Director: Academic Affairs and Senior DVC: Academic. This was largely a feedback session with regards to project progress to date.
- Second institutional feedback session: this was an online, full day in-person session which took more of a workshop and consultative approach. We invited the other 2021/22 Wits TAU participants (and their project teams) and those from other institutions who formed part of our respective Enquiry Groups, TAU advisors (attended by one based at Wits), incoming TAU 4 Wits participants, colleagues involved in coordinating and teaching on the PGDipE(HE), PGDip Alumni and current participants and other colleagues interested in teaching and learning. The workshop was very fruitful, and resulted in several collaborative sessions – specifically with the PGDipE(HE) coordinators – who are using anonymised input from the project as part of their PGDipE(HE) review and collaborating on a publication with us for the SAJHE special edition.

Work will continue on the project with plans to feedback formally to the Senior DVC: Academic and Senior Director: Academic Affairs on possible ways forward given some of our findings.

Achievement and Challenges

As described, I was fortunate to work with a project team on my TAU institutional project as well as receive UCDG funding to support our work. This allowed us to engage in the project activities and work towards achieving some real impact.

1. Our work has highlighted some of the achievements and challenges of the PGDipE(HE) with respect to professionalising teaching and learning at Wits and in the HE sector. It is clear the PGDip empowers and inspires alumni to make changes to their practice in support of student learning and success. It has also led to several alumni undertaking SOTL projects and further study including several PhDs. However, challenges include institutional recognition of the knowledge and expertise of the PGDip alumni, and ways in which to involve them in the T&L activities, processes and structures at school, faculty, university and sector levels.
2. We have a full list of PGDipE(HE) alumni and current participants and are working towards involving them more in teaching and learning activities and structures in the university – firstly within our schools and faculty (a sphere within our direct influence) and more broadly within the university work through the Senior DVC: Academic and Senior Director: Academic Affairs. I have already appointed one such alumnus to a curriculum review committee within the school, and invited a second to a teaching and learning sub-committee responsible for writing the new WBS Teaching and Learning Plan for 2022/23.
3. Work continues with the PGDipE(HE) academic team who are using our work to inform their curriculum review.
4. We are also working with the PGDipE(HE) team to create an online portal to showcase SOTL work done by PGDipE(HE) alumni as part of the Wits Centenary Project in the Teaching and Learning space. This is supported by the SENIOR DVC: Academic and Senior Director: Academic Affairs.
5. We hope to raise awareness more generally through several formal academic publications and to contribute to SOTL at Wits. We have three current projects underway:
 - Responded to a call for chapters for a book focused on Student Success. This resulted in the following publication in July 2022: Benvenuti, S., MacGregor, A., & de Klerk, D. (2022). Culture trumps structure in the competitive struggle between teaching and research. In J. Pool, M.M. Fernandes-Martins, & M. Fourie (Eds.) *A Scholarly Approach to Student Success in Higher Education*:

Volume 2. Potchefstroom: Axiom Academic Publishers. 144-175. Available: <https://store.it.si/za/home>. ISBN 978-1-77630-468-4.

- Responded to a call for a Special Issue of the South African Journal of Higher Education (SAJHE), 2022 “Finding a Place to Belong: University Students, Academic Structures and the Processes of Integration.” Our proposal has been accepted and is due for submission 31 August 2022. Our paper has the working title: “Learning to Belong: Navigating liminal spaces between professional and teaching identities”. This paper is being co-authored with two academics involved in the PGDipE(HE).
- Responded to a call for chapters in the edited volume on PGDips (HE) in South African universities. Our proposed chapter is entitled “The transformative influence of a PGDipE(HE): A case of agential morphogenesis”. It is expected that this volume will be published later in 2022 / early 2023.

The timeframe for the TAU programme makes it quite difficult to undertake a meaningful project within the year in which one is a participant. I was fortunate to have a team to work with, funding to support activities such as data capture, transcription and editing costs, and a growing support network of interested parties. We were also able to make progress within the year due to having input and feedback on my proposed project from my TAU advisor prior to the start of the formal programme. This allowed us to undertake ethics applications sufficiently early to enable data gathering to start early in the TAU programme. We were also fortunate to meet funding cycles for the UCDG institutional project.