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**Can Policy Learn from Practice?**



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# *Alternation*

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**Interdisciplinary Journal for the Study of the  
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## **Can Policy Learn from Practice?**

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*Rubby Dhunpath*  
*Nyna Amin*  
*Thabo Msibi*

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# Editorial: Can Policy Learn from Practice?

**Rubby Dhunpath**

**Nyna Amin**

**Thabo Msibi**

At the best of times, higher education is known to be in a state of unbridled turbulence. That it should be any less so, remains (thankfully) a point of unresolved contention. What we do know from the South African experience, is that during times of discomfort, institutions take refuge in policy formulation, policy reform, and less frequently, policy dialogue. This was evident in the decades preceding what has been typecast as the ‘pre-democratic era’, when education policy units were the heartbeats of universities, some boldly located in the portals of campuses – supported by their university communities, others hovelled in more perilous enclaves, often at the mercy of the state security apparatus. Singularly and collectively, these units exposed the brutality of a divided and divisive education system, characterized by governmentality, geared for social engineering. Policy units envisioned a new future of possibility in which universities nurtured human talent for the greater good.

In the years following ‘liberation’, policy units redirected their energies from activism and advocacy to an evidence-based approach to systemic reform, providing the signposts for reform and identifying benchmarks to measure the success of transformation agendas. During this period, many of the policy units quietly faded into the landscape, being either absorbed into mainstream academia or into government departments. The ensuing period was one of vigorous policy development by government, accompanied by an emerging evaluation culture, often associated with performativity. This was an era characterized by state policy fetish. The new ruling elite, eager to legitimize its existence to its impatient electorate engaged in what Hans Wieler (1990) called ‘compensatory legitimation’: using policy tools and processes which saw education in a perpetual state of reform, in its

attempt to deliver demonstrably new policy symbols. It was a period of policy borrowing, policy re-scripting and policy cascading, much of which was benign, as the policies and reforms lacked coherence and continuity.

The higher education sector, which was hitherto relatively insulated from overt interference from the state, witnessed a significant re-alignment through mergers and closures under the equity and transformation banner. It was a turbulent period for higher education, as the country pinned its hope for tangible change and economic prosperity on the ailing Academy. Yet, universities remained isolated monoliths often in competition with each other – exacerbated by the era of institutional audits and an emerging rankings culture, which privileged individualism over collectivism, and elitism over development.

Institutional audits were critiqued as instruments of accountability rather than as drivers of quality; but there was a tacit acknowledgment by many in the academy, that it was time for universities to shift the gaze onto themselves and to take responsibility for outmoded organisational cultures still locked in 19<sup>th</sup> Century rituals of practice. Herein was a glimmer of hope: that the era of policy fetish was being displaced by policy pragmatism. It was in this spirit that the Council on Higher Education's (CHE) Quality Enhancement Project (QEP) was conceived, with the potential to demystify academic environments, providing opportunities for institutions across the economic, geographic and organisational spectrum to view themselves through the eyes of their peers in open and supportive dialogic spaces. These spaces are now stark reminders that while each institution is a product of an unequal past, it is no longer defensible to bemoan historical 'legacies' when prospects and possibilities for innovation and change abound in the organisational cultures within the country and elsewhere.

However, we need to be clear about the intellectual project underlying the quest for quality enhancement. We need to be clear that this is not an exercise in sustained isomorphism, where institutions mimic each other's organisational models, or where the more articulate ones establish new normative canons of practice, or where the CHE becomes the new de facto coercive agency in organisational control. Through the process of policy dialogue, the QEP can interrupt the imperceptible but pernicious slide towards anti-intellectualism currently being led by the ruling class, which has come to typify civil society. It is not entirely clear what the QEP will ultimately accomplish, but it would be a complete travesty if universities allow mediocrity

to continue to be entrenched as the new standard as envisioned by the ruling elite.

While we cautiously embrace the focus on quality of the new policy landscape where policy peer review is valued over policy legitimisation, we need to pursue an agenda of a counter-rankings-culture which privileges diversity and differentiation and affirms the call of Dr Van Jaarsveld (the new Vice Chancellor of UKZN) for ‘disruptive innovation’ (coined by Clayton Christensen in 1995) as a university’s distinctive competitive edge. We no longer have the luxury of dedicated policy units to drive innovative policy agendas, but we have each other and the dialogic approach to systemic organisational development. Because this systemic approach is organic rather than interventionist, it allows all institutions to articulate their distinctive voices, without having their voices diluted or muted, but modulated - particularly those that have been reluctant to respond to changing realities and changing times.

Some institutions will continue to masquerade their conservatism as preserving academic ‘standards’, and others will indulge in elaborate window dressing to show-case their transformation facades. While academic fashion shows do have their place in the world, universities that adopt a disinterested approach to quality enhancement by relegating the dialogic opportunities to technocrats and staff who have no decisional power and influence, risk squandering a potentially liberating opportunity and will be judged harshly by the emerging precariat (Standing 2011) amongst their students.

The opportunity presented by a dialogic approach to policy development and enactment is that it has the potential to steer the higher education discourse beyond conventional conceptions of policy formulation and policy dialogue, towards reimagining possibilities for policy implementation derived from delegates’ lived experiences of policy as practice to demonstrate that policy can, indeed, learn from practice. Of note here is the watershed policy on institutional mergers and the experience of restructuring to solve problems of duplication, fragmentation and lack of access, and to improve the quality of education in South Africa.

By the start of the new millennium, South Africa began a radical restructuring of the higher education sector with the aim of reducing the number of universities from 36 to 23 through institutional mergers, amidst resistance from some, reluctant to relinquish their individual identities. At the time, academics asked crucial questions such as: Can mergers, in fact, address

iniquities in the higher education system? In what ways do mergers impact on the curriculum of combined institutions? Are certain kinds of mergers (like voluntary mergers) more successful than others? And why do mergers so often fail to meet planning expectations? In addition, the merger process was said to suffer under-theorization and reliance on the facile transfer of lessons learnt from very different international contexts. Ten years on, mergers have impacted higher education in both anticipated and unanticipated ways, with some institutions reporting positively on the process and others now agitating for de-mergers. Yet others bemoan the destruction of a once functional FET sector. It is now prudent to re-visit these questions and ask new ones such as: Has the higher education policy agenda delivered on its promise? What have we gained and what have we lost in this process? What have we learnt and what have we not learnt? What are the imperatives and challenges we now face to advance our gains and cut our losses? The papers in this special issue go some way to disturb, disrupt, surprise and even confirm obliquely or directly, the issues we have raised.

## **The Impact of Mergers of HEIs in South Africa**

In *Taking stock thirteen years later: An investigation into the impact of mergers on institutions in the higher education landscape in South Africa*, Lekhoto investigates the impact of institutional mergers in the South African higher education landscape. Adopting a content analysis approach, the author reviews 30 articles between the year 2002 and 2013 with the aim of understanding how institutional mergers have shaped higher education in South Africa. The reviewed literature suggests a complex set of dynamics resultant from the histories of merged institutions and the complex processes of negotiating new identities and cultures in the newly merged institutions. The paper suggests that South African mergers have had both positive and negative effects in shaping the South African higher education landscape, with challenges resultant from the mergers dominating post-merger discourses and experiences. Such challenges have included staff attrition, quality problems and a confusion in terms of epistemic focus, particularly in cases where the mergers involved traditional universities and technikons. With the complex and challenging dynamics highlighted, the paper shows the critical need for more empirical research in merged institutions.



## **Quality Assurance Systems in Sub-Saharan Africa**

If quality is an enduring, aspirational ethos in academia, and if assuring it enjoys primacy on the developmental agenda at universities, the Ugandan experience is instructive. Nabaho, et al zoom in on the limited literature on quality assurance systems in the context of Sub-Saharan Africa to spotlight the practices and experiences of stakeholders at the student-academic interface in assuring the quality of teaching at Makerere University. The study is anchored in the neo-institutional theory which posits that organisations operate in environments dominated by rules, assumptions, beliefs and procedures about what constitutes appropriate forms and behaviour. Under this gaze, organisations are under pressure to adapt their structures and behaviour to the institutional environment in order to ensure their legitimacy and survival. The authors cite Neo-institutionalism to assert that organisations submit to external influences in adopting to new practices through strategies and practices that are coercive, mimetic and normative in nature.

Employing a case study design and using content analysis, the findings demonstrate that the university employs five practices to assure the quality of teaching, namely, recognition of teaching, student evaluation of teaching, pedagogical training, monitoring and supervision of teaching, competence-based deployment and interfacing. The authors conclude with the caution that when student evaluation is skewed towards the accountability function rather than improvement of teaching, universities in developing countries should be wary of donor-driven and project-managed quality assurance initiatives which undermine the project of internal quality assurance.

## **Innovative Approaches for Enhancing the 21st Century Student Experience**

We can perhaps learn from the experiences of universities abroad. For instance, in order to improve the student experience, Coates *et al.* discuss insights from a project that aimed to bring about sustainable strategic change through improving institutional capacity in Australia. They devised new concepts for understanding Australia's higher education students, identified new data sources and approaches for measuring the student experience, and engaged institutions in enhancement work involving conversations about students. Coates *et al.* propose a model to

reconceptualise qualities of a successful experience. They offer two enhancement strategies developed to seed new practices.

## **First Generation, Disadvantaged Students' Experiences of Higher Education**

If one is to take seriously the narrative emerging from higher education institutions around student quality, one can easily be convinced of a system in crisis and in urgent need of rescuing. So dominant are these narratives of crisis and sustained student failure, that a veiled discourse of racism has prevailed and taken a space of legitimacy. In their paper entitled *Exploring the educational engagement practices of disadvantaged students at a South African university*, Norodien-Fataar *et al.* confront this narrative through their exploration of first generation university students enrolled in an extended curriculum programme offered to students interested in science but who did not attain requisite scores to enter a science bachelors programme directly, in one South African university. Using Bourdieu's concepts of field, habitus and capital, the paper analyses how students engage with university education ('the field'). The paper finds highly agentic students who are not paralysed by their state of disadvantage draw on multiple resources in order to succeed in their university studies. Despite the uneven educational support available at the university, the seven purposively-selected student participants are found to establish productive engagements in order to succeed with their academic endeavours. These include tentative engagement with University support structures, engaging with, and at times challenging, their lecturers and working directly with their peers through study groups. This paper offers an important contribution to the scholarship of teaching and learning in that it looks beyond the deficit gaze, away from the lack of higher education cultural capital, to recognising the multiple resources that disadvantaged students can draw on in order to succeed. The paper also speaks to the need for higher education institutions to intensify their support systems to enable a better accessing of higher education cultures and knowledges by students.

## **University Sexual Violence Policy Silence and its Impact**

Sexual violence remains one of the most pressing challenges in post-apartheid

higher education spaces. This challenge has emphatically been brought into public discourse through the recent bra-less student demonstrations at Rhodes University, as part of the Fallist movement. The problem, as has also been seen in the recent string of lawsuits and urgent institutional reforms in American higher education institutions, is not peculiar to the South African higher landscape; it also happens to be wider in reach. Responses from higher education institutions have been particularly criticized given the defensive tone and the ‘soft’ approach institutions have had towards perpetrators. The article by Singh *et al.* on the perspectives of students in so far as policy on the prevention of sexual assault on campus is concerned is therefore a very important and timely contribution to the scholarship and research on teaching and learning in higher education.

The paper draws on survey data from 265 undergraduate students from the School of Education at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. While the authors are clear that though not representative, the data generated suggests an urgent need for the institution to introduce more policies with a particular focus on sexual assault. The data shows an endemic and normalised culture of violence and assault on students, with the majority of students (72%) arguing for the need to introduce a dedicated policy focusing on sexual assault within the institution.

If there exists this compelling need for sexual assault policies in South African higher education institutions, what then are the implications for teaching and learning within such higher education spaces? This question is minimally explored in the paper, suggesting more research on the responsibilities of teachers (higher education educators) within institutional settings rife with gendered violence. The paper opens an important avenue for dialogue and serious introspection, not only for the managers who have to develop the policies, but also equally for the teachers and students, who are also implicated in the violence and aggression ingrained in South African higher education institutional cultures.

## **The Persistence of Post-truth Politics about Women Leaders in Higher Education**

The article by Ramohai revisits an issue that is extensively researched, viz., about the ways in which the ‘second sex’ (Beauvoir 2011/1949) is *othered*, marginalised, vilified, made invisible, exploited and oppressed. The

description, ‘second sex’, belies the violence and vulnerabilities that females court on account of social reinvention that deem them inferior, emotional and illogical beings fit for nurturing, care-giving, housekeeping work at home and as substandard and lesser associates or labourers in the workplace. Although it may seem to be an overworked scholarly endeavour, it remains a critical focus that needs to be constantly monitored, highlighted and reported, especially in the light of recent events in the United States of America, which is a reminder that the rights women have fought for and gained can be swiftly lost. The election of a president in that country this year (2016) serves as a nodal point to examine the treatment, reception and acceptance of the incumbents, a female (Hillary Clinton) and a male (Donald Trump). It became clear that a deep, well-hidden patriarchal disposition was in operation, pitting a vitriolic misogynist against a woman regarded as ‘nasty’ because she displayed competence and, rational and logical thinking that were interpreted as too masculine and unbecoming. We should point out that these are the same attributes that are valued in men and yet, if a woman displays them, then the interpretation that she should not be trusted emerges.

We conclude, therefore, that the present state of post-truth politics (recurrent assertions of falsehoods in the face of contradictory evidence) is particularly vicious to women, and services agendas aimed at keeping them out of high office in the political arena and elsewhere, and most importantly, to deprive them of power. It is against the aforementioned background that one should read Ramohai’s study on the experiences of women in senior positions in higher education institutions. The findings are not unexpected; the women face enormous challenges in the workplace because of distortions that stereotype them as unsuitable for higher education leadership, dishonest constructions of their leadership styles and mistreatment by male peers. The study serves as a fact-checker against truths that are ignored and the flow of fabrications that are repeated countless times. Thus duplicate evidence from countless studies is needed to reverse the insurgency of untruths. It means, too, that the scholarship on women in higher education needs to be intensified until we reach the point of post-distortion women politics. Ramohai’s study is instructive in that vein.

## **Linguistic Discrimination in Higher Education**

Symbolic violence in various forms and guises continues to be an intractable

feature in higher education, especially as it relates to the continued denial of linguistic rights or what Skutnabb-Kangas (1995: 1) calls linguicism. Linguistic discrimination is enacted through 'ideologies and structures that are used to legitimate, effectuate and reproduce an unequal division of power and resources between groups which are defined on the basis of language'. Students' language of learning, language policy, personal preferences, and professional identity are brought into the spotlight by Ted Sommerville in this volume as he explores medical students' preference to study in English rather than their home language as an index of identity formation at the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

An analysis of their class's assessment marks according to demographic characteristics showed a statistical and sustained difference between first- and second-language English speakers. However, the latter preferred English as their medium of teaching and learning. They saw terminology as being more problematic than language, stated that their own languages did not have sufficient technical vocabulary, and felt that their professional interactions would be conducted largely in English. The author concludes that language influences, and is influenced by an individual's identity. Professional identity is a powerful shaping force in young adulthood when one's personal identity is being de- and re-constructed. The status of English, and the developmental state of other South African languages, are also salient factors. While these findings support policies to develop the technical vocabularies of indigenous languages, they also signal the ways in which language use may be constrained by students' personal perceptions and professional goals.

## **Indigenous Knowledge as Transgressive Knowledge**

It is alleged that the scholarship of teaching and learning in higher education has been slow to engage seriously with the question of transgressive pedagogies and knowledges. It is argued that higher education continues to be dominated by western narratives of teaching, which privilege particular types of pedagogies and epistemologies. In the article entitled *Engaging Indigenous Knowledge Holders in Teaching Preservice Teachers in IKS Food Production and Practices: Implications for Higher Education*, Govender *et al.* initiate an important conversation about the role of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) and Indigenous Knowledge Holders in higher education.

Through a study that uses critical multilogicality as a framework, the paper reflects on a study involving 49 purposively selected preservice educators who were introduced to two IK holders in a project that explored the role of IKS in food production and environmental sustainability. Through inviting two knowledge holders, individuals defined by the writers as ‘intellectual fringe dwellers’ (borrowing from Dudgeon & Fielder 2006) within the academy, the authors initiate a serious attempt to trouble the rigid ways in which higher education epistemes and pedagogies are thought of and engaged with. The authors draw on data from questionnaires and written essays from students reflecting on their experiences of being engaged with by IK holders. The paper showcases the benefits of exposing students to transgressive knowledge, i.e. knowledge that goes beyond established Western conventions, and highlights the innovative ways in which such knowledges can be passed on. In the context of the persisting calls for a decolonised education, the paper is an important contribution that offers practical ways in which both the curriculum and pedagogies can be decolonised in higher education institutions.

## **Re-thinking Community Engagement**

A crucial dimension in addressing the phenomenon of the intellectual fringe dwellers is, potentially, linking it to the domain of university community engagement (CE), which has been the subject of a conceptual re-think, particularly over the past 15 years. Its origins lie in the tradition of many university cultures which share three missions – teaching, research and service. Preece, in exploration of *the porous university: re-thinking community engagement*, attempts to stimulate a conceptual re-think around the nature of community engagement in higher education by outlining the evolution of community engagement. It questions some of the ideological rhetoric of the construct in which the university is presented as a collaborative partner and co-creator of knowledge, particularly through strategies such as service-learning. The paper highlights issues of power relations, ownership of the engagement process and knowledge generation. It offers a theoretical framework for community engagement, drawing on the capabilities approach, asset based community development and dialogue. The framework is then presented as a heuristic which can be used as an evaluative tool for assessing how metaphorically porous university boundaries can facilitate a more mutually accessible relationship between community and university. In this way, she

argues, the engagement relationship can build on community assets, rather than following a deficit model of intervention which is premised on community need.

A key imperative in the community engagement discourse is to elevate it to more than volunteering in episodic project interventions designed to tick compliance boxes. Community engagement is meaningful and generative when the pursuit of learning opportunities is fueled by a pedagogy of possibility, where the university is the catalyst for interdisciplinary commitments that seek to engender a more authentic approach to knowledge generation. Authentic explorations in rapidly changing knowledge landscapes must, of necessity, transcend arbitrary disciplinary boundaries which bear little semblance to the realities of inter-disciplinary living. This purview of knowledge generation calls for an epistemological revolution which values contradiction, uncertainty and multiplicity as expressions of authentic living. This suggests that our research agendas too can no longer be sanitised to bracket out conflict as a symptom and expression of the (post) human condition. A key challenge in this endeavor is constructing interdisciplinary conceptual frames that are simultaneously durable and pliable to accommodate harmony and affirm multiplicity.

## **A Conceptual Framework for Interdisciplinary Teaching and Learning**

An example of interdisciplinary explorations that transcend prosaic disciplinary enclaves is the work of Burch *et al.*, who reflect on their incursions into developing a *conceptual framework for interdisciplinary teaching and learning dialogues in higher education*. In this article, Teaching Advancement at Universities (TAU) Fellows and their mentor reflect on the development and early validation of a conceptual framework for learning-centred teaching. In this exploratory project, six academics, each representing a different higher education institution and a different discipline use a grounded theory approach to construct the framework. Its potential utility value was explored through the use of six teaching innovation projects conducted in undergraduate South African university programmes in law, medicine, education, and the arts. The project revealed that interdisciplinary dialogic spaces can be initiated and nurtured through opportunities offered by communities of practice such as the TAU Fellowship when academics suspend their exclusive disciplinary

preoccupations to open up possibilities for a generative, emancipatory scholarship. The authors argue that the conceptual framework is useful to facilitate and promote dialogues across and between the multiple discipline specific ontologies, epistemologies and methodologies offered in higher education.

## **A Meta-analysis of Writing Retreats**

In recent times, there has been a narrow focus at some higher education institutions to pursue improved rankings as research-driven entities. As a result, the push to improve qualifications and to increase publications has been on the rise, particularly the latter as it is a source of much-needed income. Additionally, the losses incurred and the damage to university infrastructure by the *#FeesMustFall* movement in the 2015-16 period has intensified institutional resolve to disrupt the ascent of anti-intellectualism and to reassert the traditional roles of the academy. The aim has been thwarted somewhat by large numbers of employees without doctorates and low research outputs by those who, seemingly, prefer teaching to research. The consequence has been a proliferation of writing for publication endeavours and doctoral support programmes and concomitantly, an increase in researching these endeavours and programmes as exemplified by The Castle and Keane article which reports on the outcomes of one institution's unexpected boons from writing for publication ventures. Using a methodologically sound approach, the authors investigated the outcomes of writing retreats undertaken over a five-year period. The positive outcomes (increased collegiality, improved writing ability, enriched writerly identity and enhanced agency) can be attributed to the judicious selection of the retreat as opposed to say, seminars, workshops or colloquia. The outcomes of writing retreats, we surmise, could not have been noticeable had just a single case-study been offered. Indeed, the meta-analysis of email-generated data of 27 retreats revealed its hidden benefits. The article suggests that the narrow *publish or perish* agenda can be positively subverted by making wise choices in respect of professional development activities.

## **Assessing Integrated Learning from the Legitimate Code Theory Concept of Autonomy**

Of late, there has been much interest, and even scrutiny, from the public in the



role, value and relevance of institutions of higher education pertaining to increased student aspirations to acquire higher qualifications and issues of affordability, curriculum relevance and contextual realities. There are also intense desires by government and industry for universities to produce a workforce with abilities that are commensurate with employment goals and industry needs to stymie rising discontent and political unrest. Of special interest are qualifications that involve internships, work experience and placements during the period of study and assessment of the efficacy of such learning opportunities and activities. The coherence and intersection of the needs of potential employees and prospective employers is paramount to harmonise employee-employer relationships. In view of the potential for industry to lose faith in the programmes of institutions of higher learning, lecturers cannot risk assuming that students will make connections between theoretical learning and its application in the workplace. Careful and thorough evaluation of work placements should thus be rigorously tracked.

The article by Garraway and Reddy is an exemplar of research rigour. Integrated learning, a career-focused education, forms the heart of their inquiry which compares the impact of the university and industry on the kind of integrated learning that occurs in the fields of Environmental Studies, Chemical/Biological Sciences, Mathematical Sciences and Agricultural Studies from lecturers' perspectives. The usefulness of the study is the deployment of the Legitimation Code Theory concept of Autonomy for the purposes of analyzing the connections students make between place of study and place of work as it is judged by lecturers. Fine-grained analysis revealed some integration, and a surprise, that writing and presentation skills has the potential to be 'integrated with science learning'.

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*Rubby Dhunpath, Nyna Amin & Thabo Msibi*

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# **Taking Stock Thirteen Years Later: An Investigation into the Impact of Mergers on Institutions in the Higher Education Landscape in South Africa**

**Mankolo Lethoko**

## **Abstract**

This article intends to investigate the post-merger impact of the merged institutions and the lessons learnt in the higher education landscape in South Africa. This article will focus on the following questions: Who initiated the mergers and the effects thereof? How were the mergers constituted? What are the successes and the challenges that the merger process experienced according to literature. The article used content analysis of available literature in relation to mergers in South Africa dating from 2002 until 2014. The paper concludes that there are more failures than success stories in relation to mergers in higher education in South Africa. The post-merger phase in South Africa has taken longer than anticipated. Some institutions merged successfully, with some unable to successfully go through the merger stage itself, some have de-merged whilst others have been put under administration as a way to avoid a de-merger. This implies that there have been both positive and negative impacts of mergers in South Africa. There have also been lessons learnt from the literature in terms of the aspects which can affect mergers such as organisational culture, impact on the human resources, curriculum and quality assurance amongst others.

**Keywords:** post-merger, merger successes, merger failures, merger challenges

## **Introduction and Background**

Many countries have been affected by mergers which are mostly common in

the private sector. Mergers and acquisitions play a significant role in the industrial sector of any economy (Muninarayanappa & Amaladas 2013). In the education sector, drivers for mergers have been many and varied in various countries and some of these drivers include the following:

- Increase efficiency and effectiveness, especially in coping with rapid and substantial growth in students numbers which in turn brings heavier demands to institutions;
- Dealing with problems of non-viable institutions and institutional fragmentation;
- Widening student access and implementation of more broad scale equity strategies;
- Differentiation of course offerings to cater for greater student diversity and to improve the quality of graduates;
- An increase of government control of the overall direction of higher education systems especially to ensure that higher education institutions serve more directly national and regional economic and social objectives (Harman & Meek 2002: 1).

In the South African situation, the rationale for mergers or incorporation of colleges into universities was led by the quest for the post-apartheid government to rid the education system of the apartheid past (Sehooile 2005). In addition, Jansen (2002) purports that there was a past to be resolved through the creation of a single, co-ordinated system of higher education that purposively dissolves the racial inequalities that exist among institutions. There was also another motivation for mergers which was the need to incorporate the South African higher education system within the fast-changing, technology-driven and information –based economies described under the rubric of globalisation (South African Students Congress (SASCO) 2009).

Therefore, this article seeks to answer the following questions: who initiated the mergers in the South African higher education landscape and the effects thereof? How were the mergers constituted? What are the successes and the challenges that the merger process has experienced according to literature.

## **Problem Statement**

The South African Higher Education System underwent a restructuring process

of merging universities, technikons, faculties and colleges during the period 2001 to 2007. According to Paul and Berry (2013), mergers are a significant life event for both the organisation and its employees. As a result, mergers have an impact on both the people involved in the merger and the merging institutions as entities. There have been various challenges, disappointments, arguments and unfulfilled promises to both employees and institutions involved in the mergers.

This assertion is supported by various studies which focused on the impact of *mergers on employees*; these studies focused on the following variables: human resource competencies (Schultz 2010; Arnolds, Stofile & Lillah, 2013); conditions of service, harmonisation of salaries, new organisational structure and staff equity profile (Nel & Stumpf 2007); importance of executive leadership (Paul & Berry 2013); racial differences (Robus & MacLeod 2006); job satisfaction, job security and employment relationships after the merger (Linde & Schalk 2006); and staff perceptions with regards to the merger (Hay & Fourie 2002). In addition, mergers also have an impact on the *merged organisations* and the following studies have been conducted in South Africa: Goal clarity, trust in management and perceptions of organisational readiness (May & Mason 2007); development of identity of the merged institutions, the branding and the positioning of the new entity (Bresler 2007) and the political role in mergers (Jansen 2002).

On the other hand, there have been a few success stories in the mergers in South Africa in terms of transformative legislation which improved access to higher education for the previously disadvantaged communities; a differentiated system constituting of universities, universities of technology, comprehensive universities and others, a more diverse student body including international students; national quality assurance framework and a new goal-oriented funding framework through the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (SASCO 2009).

The next section will discuss the theoretical framework linked to the article.

## **Theoretical Framework: Systems Theory**

In South Africa, the transition from an apartheid state to a post-apartheid democracy created conditions for fundamental changes to all levels of

education including higher education. In February 2001, the South African Cabinet approved the National Plan for Higher Education (Ministry of Education 2001). Subsequently, the National Working Group appointed to act as an advisory committee to the Minister of Education, proposed the reduction of the number of higher education institutions from 36 to 21 through mergers and incorporations (Ministry of Education 2001). Mergers are an attempt to overhaul the entire education system as part of the broader national reform movement aimed at overcoming inequities and polarisation caused by the apartheid regime. As Sedgwick (2004: pages unnumbered) states:

For more than 40 years, the country's majority black population chafed under a system of racial separation that bolstered white supremacy and denied blacks the right to vote, access to free basic education and freedom of movement.

As a result, the first mergers took place from 2004. Unlike in countries such as Australia whereby institutions were merged in order to increase efficiency, in the South African situation, mergers were driven more by political change aspirations rather than on efficiency (Arnolds *et al.* 2013). The consultation process for mergers was very short and the process did not follow through the steps and checklists of issues to be considered in mergers. This is where the systems theory comes into place. According to Lazslo and Krippner (1998), systems theory is a trans- disciplinary article of abstract organisation of a phenomena and it attempts to view the world in terms of irreducibly integrated systems. It focuses on the whole as well as complex interrelationships among constituent parts. In the case of mergers, the constituent parts include the staff members, management, students, infrastructure, funding, institutional culture and many more.

## **Research Methodology**

This article has utilised a content analysis of the available literature on mergers in the South African context in the form of an in-depth article and analysis of the content of these articles in relation to the effects of mergers on management and staff. Welman, Kruger and Mitchell (2005: 221) define content analysis as 'a qualitative analysis of qualitative data'. The basic technique involves

counting the frequencies and sequencing of particular words, phrases and concepts in order to identify key words and themes. Babbie and Mouton (2012: 491) define content analysis as:

a research method which examines words or phrases within a wide range of texts including books, book chapters, essays, interviews, speeches and informal conversations. By examining the presence of repetition of certain words and phrases in these texts, a researcher is able to make inferences about the philosophical assumptions of a writer, a written piece, the audience to which the piece was written and even the culture and the time in which the text is embedded.

For this article, the author analysed 30 articles which were published between 2002 and 2013. The focus of these articles was on the effects of mergers on management, merged institutions and staff members of the merged institutions. The articles were classified according to the content that they dealt with. The following issues were prominent in terms of the effects on *employees*:

1. Political role of government in the mergers (Jansen 2002; Schoole 2005).
2. Racial implications such as white excellence and black failure (Robus & MacLeod 2006).
3. Readiness of the institutions to merge and succeed in the merger (May & Mason 2007).
4. Conditions of service, harmonisation of salary scales and staff equity profiles (Nel & Stumpf 2007).
5. Psychological experiences of staff in terms of job security, job satisfaction, etc (Hay & Fourie 2002);
6. Human resource motivation (Ramdhani & Nkoane 2010).
7. Employment relationships in the merged institutions (Linde & Schalk 2006).

The following issues were raised in the literature with respect to the *merged institutions*:

1. Quality assurance – whose quality standards will be used in the merged institutions (Kistan 2005).

2. Development of the institutional identity of the new institution; image as an indicator of quality and reputation (Bresler 2007).
3. Designing a new organisational culture (Nel & Stumpf 2007).
4. Resultant curricula of the merged institutions (Mfusi 2004).

The following issues were raised in the literature in terms of *the management* of merged institutions:

1. Goal clarity and trust in management (May & Mason 2007).
2. Effectiveness of executive leadership to create a post-merger organisational culture (Paul & Berry 2013).
3. Strategic management, organisational commitment and merger goals.

The literature has indicated that there are more articles written on the effects of mergers on the staff of the merged institutions. The next section focuses on who initiated the mergers in South African higher education.

## **Who Proposed the Mergers in South Africa Higher Education?**

In the case of South African mergers, the mergers were initiated by the government through then Ministry of Education. The merger process followed the following chronology:

1. Promulgation of Education White Paper 3: A programme for Transformation of Higher Education – 1997.
2. Promulgation of Higher Education Act – 1997.
3. The then Minister of Education, Prof. Kadar Asmal prepared a document called Call for action: mobilising citizens to build a South African education and training system for the 21st century – 1999.
4. Appointment of Task Team working with the Council for Higher Education – 1999.
5. The Task Team released the following documents in 2000 – *Towards a framework and strategy for reconfiguring the higher education system in South Africa* and *towards a new higher education landscape: meeting the equity, quality and social development imperatives - 2000*.



## *The Impact of Mergers on Institutions in the Higher Education Landscape*

6. Promulgation of the National Plan for Higher Education – 2001.
7. Approval of the restructuring process by Cabinet in November - 2002.
8. Ministry of Education developed guidelines for mergers and incorporations – 2003.
9. The Minister of Education wrote to the Councils of affected institutions requesting that they indicate by no later than June 2003 their preferred name of the institution, preferred official address, preferred date of the establishment of the new institution and nominees for appointment of the interim council.

As noted above, the merger process was championed by the Ministry of Education and government agencies such as the Council on Higher Education. There was a sporadic instance of consultation but it was not enough. As Kistan (2005) puts it, the challenge of merging Institutions, especially when instituted by an external agency can become complex and unpredictable. Botha (2001) adds that most higher education institutions did not have a choice of their merger partner. The Guidelines for mergers and incorporations (Ministry of Education 2003) had an appendix 1 entitled 'restructuring proposals and new institutional landscape' which listed all the mergers and incorporations in 2004 and 2005 with no further accompanying detail in terms of the merging process.

Skodvin (1999) differentiates between forced mergers and voluntary mergers. Voluntary mergers are defined as mergers whereby the institutions themselves have initiated the mergers, whilst a forced merger is when the instigator of the merger is external to the institutions (Skodvin 1999; Botha 2001). Another scenario is whereby an institution is not given a chance to choose their merging partner and as Skodvin (1999: 70) states, 'the degree of voluntariness on the part of the institutions also plays part in mergers'. International experiences have shown that voluntary mergers are usually more successful than forced mergers, for instance, mergers in countries such as the Netherlands, Finland, Norway, Australia, UK and Canada are good examples (Harman 1996; Harman & Meek 2002). The next section discusses different types of mergers to shed light on how the mergers in South Africa were conducted.

## **Merged Institutions in South Africa**

Mergers and acquisitions are more common in the private sector. According to

Weber, Tarba and Oberg (2014), mergers refer generally to a merger between equals, and acquisition refers to a situation in which the management of the acquiring company controls the acquired company. Botha (2001) mentions that there are various forms of mergers which include the following: *a merger or an incorporation* which is a combination of two firms into a single firm; *consolidation* which is a combination of two or more firms to form a completely new corporation; a *take-over* which is a hostile merger.

The Minister of Education announced the Government's final proposals for the restructuring of higher education sector on 9 December 2002 (Ministry of Education 2003). The announcement reduced the number of higher education institutions from 36 to 21 through mergers and incorporations. Table 1 illustrates how the university mergers were configured:

**Table 1: Merger and incorporation configurations for universities**

<b>Institution 1</b>	<b>Institution 2</b>	<b>Institution 3</b>	<b>Merged institution</b>
1. Potchefstroom University of Christian Education	University of the North West	Sebokeng campus of Vista University	North West University
2. University of Natal	University of Durban-Westville		University of Kwa-Zulu Natal
3. University of Pretoria	Vista University – Mamelodi campus		University of Pretoria
4. University of the Orange Free State	University of the North – Qwa-Qwa campus	Vista University – Vista campus	University of Free State
5. Rand Afrikaans University	Vista University - East Rand campus	Vista University – Soweto campus	University of Johannesburg

*The Impact of Mergers on Institutions in the Higher Education Landscape*

6. Dental Faculty of University of Stellenbosch	University of the Western Cape		University of Western Cape
7. University of Fort Hare	Rhodes University – East London campus		University of Fort Hare
8. University of Port Elizabeth	Port Elizabeth Technikon	Vista University - Port Elizabeth campus	Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University
9. Medical University of South Africa	University of the North		University of Limpopo
10. University of South Africa	Technikon South Africa	Vista University Distance Education campus	University of South Africa
11. Johannesburg College of Education	University of Witwatersrand		University of Witwatersrand
12. Giyani College of Education	University of Venda		University of Venda

*Source: Ministry of Education (2003)*

According to table 1, the mergers and incorporations of the various institutions took different routes and paths. The configurations were as follows:

- a) Mergers between *a university and another university* like in the case of the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal and the University of Limpopo;
- b) Mergers between a university and a campus or faculty of another university such as in the case of the University of Pretoria, University of Fort Hare and the University of the Western Cape;
- c) Mergers between *a university and 2 other institutions* such as another university, a technikon, a campus of another university or a college such as North West University, University of Orange Free State,

University of Johannesburg, Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University and University of South Africa;

- d) Merger between a university and a college like in the case of the University of Witwatersrand and the University of Venda.

From the above discussion, it can be seen that the mergers did not have a specific formula as to ‘which merger partner would be more suitable’? The then Ministry of Education issued an instruction on which institutions or parts of institutions would merge with which institution. The mergers were involuntary as they were driven by an outside forces and mostly horizontal in nature (Harman & Meek 2002). According to Botha (2001) Gitman (2001) and Greengard (2007), the type of a merger determines the outcome of the final product, whether the merger will be successful or not. Table 2 discusses the mergers involving the technikons.

**Table 2: Merger and incorporation configurations for technikons**

<b>Institution 1</b>	<b>Institution 2</b>	<b>Institution 3</b>	<b>Merged institution</b>
1. Pretoria Technikon	Technikon Northern Gauteng	North West Technikon	Tshwane University of Technology
2. Cape Technikon	Peninsula Technikon		Cape Peninsula University of Technology
3. Technikon Natal	University of Zululand, Umlazi campus	ML Sultan technikon	Durban Institute of Technology
4. Vaal Triangle Technikon	Vista University, Sebokeng campus		Vaal University of Technology
5. University of Transkei	Border Technikon	Eastern Cape Technikon	Walter Sisulu University of Technology

*Source: Ministry of Education (2003)*

## *The Impact of Mergers on Institutions in the Higher Education Landscape*

According to Table 2, the mergers for the 4 universities of technology also followed the pattern that the universities took to a certain extent. The configurations were as follows:

- a) Merger between 3 technikons such as in the case of Tshwane University of Technology;
- b) Merger between two technikons to form the Cape Peninsula University of Technology;
- c) Merger between two technikons and a university campus to form the Durban Institute of Technology and Walter Sisulu University.

Tables 1 and 2 draw a clear picture of how the mergers in the South African higher education were configured. According to SASCO (2009), universities and technikons had a similar framework under the auspices of the Ministry of Education, they nevertheless had distinct functions with the universities' role being a mixture of research and teaching while technikons focused primarily on career preparatory and technologically oriented education. This implies that the mergers in Tables 1 and 2 in some cases involved institutions which did not have the same strategic focus.

Lastly, the University of Cape Town is the only university which was not involved in the merger process. The universities of Zululand, Rhodes, Stellenbosch and Mangosuthu University of Technology had a faculty or campus taken away and merged with other institutions. However, they retained their status as unmerged institutions. There was also a merger of the Veterinary faculty of the University of Pretoria and MEDUNSA which took place in 2002.

Various authors have raised concerns in terms of mergers which include entities which do not have the same strategic focus, such as in the case of universities and technikons (Drowley Lewis & Brooks 2013; Ripoll-Soler & de Miguel-Molina 2013; Weber Oberg & Tarba 2014). The next section focuses on two case studies of the merger between the University of the North and MEDUNSA before the unbundling process in 2015. The second case study will focus on the merger involving the University of Transkei, Border Technikon and Eastern Cape Technikon to form the Walter Sisulu University.

### ***University of the North and MEDUNSA Merger: ‘A Failed Marriage’***

In 2005 during Minister Kader Asmal’s sweeping reconfiguration of the higher education system, MEDUNSA was merged with the University of the North some 300km plus away to form the University of Limpopo. The two main policy documents which orchestrated the merger process did not explain the rationale for the merger nor any other merger in tables 1 and 2. The two documents are the National Plan for Higher Education (Ministry of Education 2001) and the Higher Education Restructuring and Transformation: Guidelines for mergers and incorporation (Ministry of Education 2003). The Guidelines for mergers and incorporation had a list of mergers and incorporations of the institutions as an Appendix 1 to the document. The list was produced by the Council on Higher Education’s (CHE) Task force which was put in place by the then Minister in 1999. There was no extensive consultation of the institutions themselves except that the National Plan for Higher Education (Ministry of Education 2001: 6.4.1, citing the Council on Higher Education 2000) made it clear that ‘no public institution should believe that it is exempted from combination, from the need to change fundamentally and from contributing to achieving a new higher education landscape’. Therefore, all the institutions waited for instructions on when to merged and how. The Ministry of Education provided guidelines which institutions could use to guide their own processes.

As Ncayiyana (2011: 1) puts it, ‘the merger raised many eyebrows and was widely seen as irrational and ill-conceived. Indeed the arranged marriage seemed to be extremely difficult with too many irreconcilable differences’. Phakathi (2013) points out that the merger was met with scepticism among various stakeholders and the government set up a task team to review the issue in 2010, which is five years after the merger. According to the Task Teams report, the Limpopo health department, students and other university employees were opposed to the continued relationship with MEDUNSA. The report further stated that the only benefit which MEDUNSA got from the merger was the R50 million subsidy it received from the University of Limpopo (Sidimba 2011). The challenges which plagued this merger were as follows:

- After the merger, the number of medical graduates dropped from 200 to 134 in 2011 (Sidimba 2011);

## *The Impact of Mergers on Institutions in the Higher Education Landscape*

- This divorce would be complex and costly and would require a carefully planned and soberly managed transition particularly with regard to the untangling of governance and financial interdependencies, the setting up of new administration and the re-ordering of systems such as Information and Communication Technology (ICT), academic regulations and staff conditions of service (Ncayiyana 2011; Phakathi 2013);
- In 2011, MEDUNSA had 3500 students which made it the smallest university in South Africa. This situation implied that its funding formula had to be different from the existing funding formula whereby students were funded according to their student intake, their graduation output, research output and other variables. Therefore, there was a looming threat to its financial sustainability after the de-merger;
- The Task team also made startling revelations in the sense that neighbouring universities of Tshwane and North West were not keen to merge with MEDUNSA. MEDUNSA staff also opposed the merger with the University of Pretoria which had a medical faculty, mainly because the previous merger of their veterinary faculties impacted negatively on producing black veterinarians earlier on (Sidimba 2011; Phakathi 2011).

Therefore, the question is, where to from here? On the 16<sup>th</sup> May 2014, the Minister of Higher Education, Dr. Blade Nzimande gave a media statement that Government had attained an important milestone on its journey towards establishing a new health and allied sciences in Gauteng province (Department of Higher Education and Training 2014). When he made this announcement there was a commitment from the Department that it would open the doors for learning at the beginning of 2015 academic year. The new institution is called Sefako Makgatho Health Sciences University and the department has appointed its interim Council already. This statement confirmed that a new institution is on its way to being established to replace MEDUNSA.

The new institution is already dodged with speculation of problems already. Ncayiyana (2011) lists the following eminent problems:

- The new institution must mitigate its funding conundrum by broadening the spread of its offerings in the health sciences, increasing

student intakes across all professional programmes, significantly improving its research output and increasing its postgraduate capacity;

- Another catch lies in being able to attract and retain staff with solid academic and research credentials;
- Student boycotts and strikes have been a ritual at MEDUNSA; therefore, the new institution has to agree on institutional hierarchies and boundaries, and agreed protocols for disputes;
- The new institution has to start with a new lease of life by a series of stakeholder engagements, critically review the past and sketch the future.

In conclusion, the discussion above depicts a picture of a failed merger and how the government saved the situation. The new Sefako Makgatho Health Science University started operation in 2015. The University of Limpopo also proceeded to operate on its own after the demerger.

### ***The Case of the Walter Sisulu University: ‘A False Start’***

Walter Sisulu University (WSU) was established as a comprehensive university on 1 July 2005 through the merger of the Border Technikon, the Eastern Cape Technikon and the University of Transkei. It offers tuition on four campuses—Mthatha (its administrative seat), Butterworth, East London and Queenstown - with eleven delivery sites covering a radius of approximately 1000km (CHE 2011). In 2011 which is 5 years after the merger, the university was declared ‘technically bankrupt’ by the Minister of Education, Dr. Blade Nzimande. As Davis (2013: 1) puts it ‘from the get-go, the university was beset with problems: lack of infrastructure, too few quality lecturers and reportedly more students than its government subsidy. By November 2011, the Minister of Education appointed an administrator for 24 months (November 2011 until November 2013) named Prof. Lourens van Staden, to address the situation. Amongst the problems which were identified by the administration team were that the universities’ salary bill took 80% of the university’s funds whilst the salary bill for other universities is around 55% - 62%, their graduation rates were the lowest in the entire country whilst its employees were the highest paid in the country and the province (Skinner 2011). In addition, some of the problems included the following:



## *The Impact of Mergers on Institutions in the Higher Education Landscape*

- The merger was set up to fail because the process was underfunded by government;
- Before the merger, the University of Transkei was at the brink of being closed down by the former Minister Prof. Kadar Asmal – there was an exodus of highly qualified lecturers and it was merged whilst crawling on its knees (Ngcukana 2013).

As a result, the merged university started on a deficit and was running on an overdraft for some time. As Ngcukana (2013) puts it at one point, the institution had 27, 000 students whilst it had a subsidy for 18, 000.

By June 2013 the administrator had stabilised the situation at the university by achieving the following: Student debt had been reduced from R271 million to R40 million, all creditors were paid off, staff salaries were secured, backlogs were cleared, break-even budget was tabled for 2013 and staff's salary bills reduced to 75% (Davis 2013). By 23 November 2013 the Minister of Higher Education increased the term for the administrator with 6 more months so as to afford him a chance to finalise the work (Department of Higher Education and Training 2013).

The administrator's contract ended on the 30<sup>th</sup> April 2014. Presently the university is being run by its own management and it is a situation of 'wait and see' for now. The next section discusses some successes achieved with regards to the mergers.

### **Successes in the Merged Institutions**

According to SASCO (2009) the following successes have been achieved with regards to mergers in the South Africa higher education landscape:

1. Transformative legislative and policy frameworks which promote access to higher education;
2. The foundations have been laid for a new higher education landscape constituted by a single, co-ordinated and differentiated system constituting of universities, universities of technology, comprehensive institutions, contact and distance institutions and various kinds of colleges;
3. There has been a welcome internationalisation of student body overall and at various institutions;

4. Teaching and learning, community engagement and research has improved overall;
5. A national quality assurance framework and infrastructure has been established and policies, mechanisms and initiatives with respect to institutional audit, programme accreditation and quality promotion have been established;
6. A new-goal oriented funding framework has been instituted through the National Student Financial Aid Scheme.

While there appears to be generic successes which are particularly linked to the national sphere of government, there are challenges that exist within individual institutions and in some cases the problems overlap to other institutions. Limited literature sources focused on the success stories of mergers in South Africa. Instead there has been a plethora of literature which focuses on the challenges which various institutions have encountered to date. The next session discusses the challenges in detail.

## **Challenges in the Merged Institutions**

There is abundant literature on South African mergers of higher education institutions and various authors have listed various challenges faced by these institutions. These challenges are briefly discussed below:

1. In the case of three comprehensive universities, the employees' commitment was strongly related to perceptions about how fairly they are treated in terms of their workload (Arnolds *et al.* 2013);
2. Curriculum challenges – the curriculum of the stronger institution dominated the merged institution at the veterinary sciences faculty of the University of Pretoria (Mfusi 2004);
3. In the case of the University of Fort Hare and Rhodes University merger, it was a case of white excellence and black failure – the institutional racial differences became a challenge (Robus & MacLeod 2006);
4. At the University of Johannesburg which was a result of a merger between Rand Afrikaans University, Technikon Witwatersrand and Vista University, the issues around the brand, image and corporate identity of the merged institution became a contested terrain whereby

the presence of Vista in the merger is a corporate identity and image 'threat' (Bresler 2007);

5. At the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, the design of the academic profile and a qualifications structure for a comprehensive university identity becoming a challenge because the merger was between the University of Port Elizabeth, Port Elizabeth Technikon and Port Elizabeth campus of Vista University (Nel & Stumpf 2007);
6. The merger between the University of Durban-Westville and University of Natal brought about quality assurance challenges since the former is a historically disadvantaged institution whilst the latter is a historically advantaged institution (Kistan 2005);
7. At the Durban Institute of Technology which is a merger between ML Sultan and Natal technikons were faced with challenges of goal clarity and perceptions of organisational readiness by the staff of the merged institution (May & Mason 2007);
8. At the North West University, the employees experienced a negative employment relationship after the merger especially in terms of job satisfaction, job security, psychological contract and severe depression (Linde & Schalk 2006);
9. At the University of Johannesburg, the institution faced a challenge of staff motivation as the employees as a result of workplace discontentment and a lack of rewards received for good performance (Ramdhani & Nkoane 2010).

The above discussion suggests that mergers have had challenges as they unfolded. There have been few success stories as compared to the challenges and the failures experienced by the merged institutions. The following section will discuss the recommendations as per the literature reviewed.

### **General Observations Emerging from the Literature Review**

Various authors have listed main issues and considerations which could be taken care of before a merger is constituted. This sub-section discusses some salient highlights pertaining to these and other related issues.

### ***Organisational Cultural Aspects of the Mergers***

According to Heidrich and Chandler (2011), in mergers and acquisitions, two

or more cultures are combined and issues such as cultural audits, cultural fit and cultural distance come into play. This is supported by Kistan (2005) who purport that compatibility of cultures is a key issue when choosing a partner to merge with. In higher education, organisational culture is seen as a situation whereby institutions see themselves as carriers of intellectual, academic and national traditions of an institution. In the merger which produced the University of Johannesburg, according to Bresler (2007), their biggest challenge was for the university to identify critical associations that moulded consumers' perceptions about the then Rand Afrikaans University, Technikon Witwatersrand and Vista University. They worried about their branding, the image and the identity of the new institution.

Furthermore, in the situation of mergers in higher education institutions, this was a highly contested terrain as stated by Bresler (2007: 195) that 'specific attributes of merger candidates are evaluated to form basis for selecting the right partners, to assess the strategic fit before any merger takes place'. As it has been discussed in the earlier sections, the mergers were instituted by the Ministry of Education; they were involuntary and politically motivated. As a result, the issue of selecting merger partners was out of question. As Drowley *et al.* (2013: 206) purport: 'organisational culture and identity have often been described as perpetually contested social phenomena which for some it amounts to the struggle for the life and soul of the institution to which they were deeply committed'. In the case of the University of Fort Hare and Rhodes University merger, the merged institution battled with politics of 'white excellence' for Rhodes University which is a historically white institution and 'black failure' linked to the University of Fort Hare (Robus & MacLeod 2006). The issue of cultural dimensions is concluded by Kistan (2005: 249) when he purports that 'the challenge of merging institutions, particularly when instituted by an external agency can become complex and invariably unpredictable especially when the two institutions come from historical and cultural backgrounds that are different'. In this case, the merger partners were chosen by the Ministry of Education and the issues of clashing personal and institutional cultures was not taken into consideration.

### ***Human Resources Aspects of the Mergers***

During times of change such as mergers, challenges like anxiety, low morale, work errors and loss of motivation are challenges that face Human Resources

departments in most institutions (Schultz 2010). In addition, Ramdhani and Nkoane (2010) also add that the level of motivation directly influences the performance of employees and their own culture of self-worth within the merged institution. In the case of South African mergers, thousands of university employees found themselves in trying and uncertain times during the merger process of various institutions. There were worries of job losses, loss of posts; job security and uncertainty especially because the mergers were pushed from outside and the institutions were not given a chance to choose their own partners.

Moreover, according to Paul and Berry (2013) the issue on how employees cope with and respond to the merger has a direct impact on the organisation's performance in the short to medium term. In the case of Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, Nel and Stumpf (2007) discussed how the university managed to 'achieve the signing of an agreement with the unions on the harmonisation of conditions of service'. However, there were still challenges in relation to designing a new organisational structure, harmonisation of salaries because the staff members were still being remunerated in terms of their previous institutions, staff equity profile at senior management and academic levels. There has also been a consistent loss of equity candidates in mergers which involve previously white and previously black institutions because of the uncertainty of the merger process (Mfusi 2004; Sehoole 2005; Nel & Stumpf 2007).

### ***Curricula and Quality Assurance Effects***

'One of the critical aspects of the planning stage is the valuation of the target and the expected synergies between the acquirer and the target' (Ferris & Pettitt 2013: 2). In the South African higher education context, the mergers were more politically motivated since the new democratic government wanted to 'unify the fragmented higher education landscape inherited from apartheid. As a result of this situation, institutions were not given a chance to choose their 'partners', there was no consideration of cultures of the institutions, what they offer, how the employees will cope nor the strategic fit. It was a matter of an 'arranged marriage' (SASCO 2009). As a result, it was left to the institutions themselves to re-arrange their own academic offering, decide on which module or qualification to discard and from which merger partner.

In addition, Mfusi (2004) posits that curriculum stands at the heart of

teaching and learning transaction in higher education – it is the core function of what universities are created and established to do. Three scenarios seem to have dominated the merger landscape which involves partial compromise where the merged institutions had to compromise and give a chance to each other although the compromise always favoured the ‘stronger’ partner like in the case of UNISA. The second scenario is the status quo whereby the merged institutions continue to work individually, this was the case of The University of Venda and Giyani College of Education and the University of Witwatersrand (Jansen 2004).

The last scenario is the complete integration where the two institutions merge their curricula. This is an easier exercise if the institutions are within the same field whereby there could be an existing overlap of modules already. This was the case in the merger at University of Pretoria and MEDUNSA veterinary sciences, and also between Technikon Natal and ML Sultan Technikon (Chalufu 2002). As it can be seen in Table 1, in most cases, the mergers were not necessarily amongst institutions which had the same offering, so each institution had to decide on what would work and what would not work.

### ***Leadership and Management Effects***

Paul and Berry (2013) point out that in some instances, the leader has to choose to spend time and money upfront in critically assessing the proposed community, economic and clinical merits of the merger, or spend more time and money trying to fix what should have been figured out before closing the deal. So in essence, this implies that leaders in merged institutions needed to possess business management skills (Arnolds *et al.* 2013).

### ***Distance and Geography Effects: The First Casualty of the Demerger of the University of Limpopo and MEDUNSA***

Geographical distance between the two merged institutions has proven to be a factor in the merger process and the outcome of the mergers (Norgard & Skodvin 2002). As Ahmanvand Heidari & Hosseini (2012) put it, geographical distance can increase the existing cultural, social and academic tensions between the merged institutions. When one looks at Tables 1 and 2, it can be seen that in some cases the distances between the merged institutions made it difficult for the merger to function properly. The case of the University of Lim-

popo and MEDUNSA is an outstanding one whereby the merged institutions were 300 kilometres apart from each other. Hence, 6 years later, the two institutions were de-merged. This was a costly exercise because the merger had cost the tax payers R1, 3 billion (Maponya 2011). This is the first casualty and time will tell if there will be more casualties in the future.

## **Possibilities for Further Research**

This article is based on reviews of both national and international journal articles, government policy documents and relevant academic books on the study topic books. However, there is a need to conduct empirical studies on the effects of mergers. The empirical data will shed more light on the status of the merged institutions as opposed to literature review.

## **Conclusion**

The higher education mergers in South Africa experienced both successes and challenges as discussed in the article. The lessons that can be learnt from the article and the literature consulted are that it is always important for the responsible authorities who institute the merger to assess the strategic fit of the merging institutions; the impact of the merger to the staff involved; plans put in place to assist the survivors to cope with the new establishment and availability of processes to be followed during pre- and post-merger phases amongst others. South African mergers were trial and error. In some cases, the process has been smooth sailing whilst in others the institutions had to de-merge such as the case of the University of Limpopo and MEDUNSA, whereas Walter Sisulu University was put under financial administration due to its merger with Border Technikon, the Eastern Cape Technikon and the University of Transkei.

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*The Impact of Mergers on Institutions in the Higher Education Landscape*

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*The Impact of Mergers on Institutions in the Higher Education Landscape*

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# **Assuring the Quality of Teaching at Makerere University in Uganda: Practices and Experiences of Academics and Students**

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## **Abstract**

Quality is an ethos in academia and assuring it is top of the agenda at many universities. Since the 1990s, substantial research has been conducted on the quality assurance systems of developed countries with advanced higher education systems. However, literature on quality assurance systems in the context of Sub-Saharan Africa is limited. The study examined the practices and experiences of stakeholders at the student-academic interface in assuring the quality of teaching at Makerere University. A case study design was employed and respondents included academics and final-year students. Data was collected through documents review, interviews and focus group discussions. Thematic analysis and content analysis were used to analyse the data. The findings demonstrate that the university employs five practices to assure the quality of teaching, namely, recognition of teaching, student evaluation of teaching, pedagogical training, monitoring and supervision of teaching, competence-based deployment and interfacing. The findings further show that stakeholders had varying experiences of teaching quality assurance practices.

**Keywords:** quality, quality assurance, good teaching, practices

## **Introduction**

Quality assurance has been a topical issue in higher education since the mid-1980s. Nevertheless, formal quality assurance at university level in Sub-

Saharan Africa is a recent phenomenon (Materu 2007; Materu & Righetti 2010; Odhiambo 2014) and is, therefore, under-researched and under-documented (Chiome 2012; Mulu 2012; Singh 2011). Relatedly, Mulu (2012: 19) asserts, 'Quality assurance systems and practices in higher education institutions in the Sub-Saharan African context are rarely addressed'. Therefore, it can be inferred that while there is no shortage of international literature highlighting the history, context, concerns and challenges of quality assurance in higher education in western industrialised nations, in nations of vastly different cultural roots and emerging economies, a dearth of literature exists. Against this backdrop, this study was conducted at Makerere University to answer the following research question: What are the practices and experiences of stakeholders at the student-academic interface in assuring the quality of teaching at Makerere University?

This paper comprises seven sections. After this introductory section, section two provides information on Makerere University. Section three addresses the conceptual and contextual perspectives of the paper. The fourth section presents literature on practices used by universities to assure the quality of teaching and is followed by the methods section. Section six presents the results, while the final section discusses the findings and delineates conclusions.

## **Context of Makerere University**

Makerere University, the oldest public university in Uganda, was established in 1922 as a technical college. In 1949, it became a university college affiliated to the University of London. Under the affiliation arrangement, it offered academic programmes leading to the general degrees of the University of London. It became one of the three constituent colleges of the University of East Africa in 1963 and this marked the end of the affiliation arrangement with the University of London. In 1970, by an Act of Parliament, Makerere became an independent university of the Republic of Uganda. By 2013, Makerere University had a student population of 40,000 undergraduate and 3,000 postgraduate students (Makerere University 2013). The university comprises nine colleges and one independent school. Colleges are structured into schools and teaching departments.

## Conceptual and Theoretical Perspectives

Before defining quality assurance, it is pertinent to unpack the term ‘quality’. In higher education, quality has often been branded as a notoriously elusive (Green 1994; Jonathan 2000) and slippery (Pfeffer & Coote 1991) concept because it is difficult to define. Harvey and Green (1993) offered five discrete definitions of quality: quality as exceptional, quality as perfection, quality as fitness for purpose, quality as value for money, and quality as transformation. The transformation notion of quality is relevant to this study based on the idea that transformation of students (in terms of knowledge, skills and personal attributes) is the object of teaching and presupposes the fundamental purpose of higher education.

As in the case of quality in a general sense, quality assurance defies a single definition. Lim (2001) defines quality assurance as all policies, attitudes, actions and procedures directed towards ensuring the maintenance and enhancement of quality. Harvey and Green (1993: 19) define quality assurance as ‘mechanisms, procedures and processes in place to ensure that the desired quality, however defined and measured, is delivered’. A common thread that runs through these definitions is that quality assurance is concerned with putting in place policies, procedures and practices aimed at maintaining and enhancing quality. Quality assurance in higher education serves two purposes: accountability and improvement of education. Accountability is the *raison d’être* of external quality assurance in higher education while improvement is the purpose of internal quality assurance.

Since quality assurance aims to improve teaching, it is pertinent to unpack ‘good teaching’. It is plausible to emphasise that teaching is not an end in itself but a process of fostering high quality student learning. In fact teaching is fit for purpose if it promotes learning. Teaching quality in higher education is assured through a series of quality assurance practices- institutional arrangements to guarantee the quality of teaching.

## Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored in the neo-institutional theory which was developed by Meyer and Rowan in the 1970s. It posits that organisations operate in environments dominated by rules, requirements, understandings, assumptions, beliefs and procedures about what constitutes appropriate forms and behaviour

(Meyer & Rowan 1977; Oliver 1997). Accordingly, organisations are under constant pressure to adapt their structures and behaviour to the institutional environment in order to ensure their legitimacy and hence their chances of survival (DiMaggio & Powell 1983:50). Neo-institutionalism further postulates that organisations adopt new practices and policies not from internal motivation to innovate and change but from external influence (DiMaggio & Powell 1983; Meyer & Rowan 1977). The transfer of contextual values, ceremonies and symbols onto the structures, strategies and practices of an organisation generates isomorphism, that is, 'a constraining process that forces one unit in the population to resemble other units that face the same set of institutional conditions' (DiMaggio & Powell 1983: 149). Isomorphic change occurs by three fundamental mechanisms: coercive, mimetic and normative (DiMaggio & Powell 1983).

Coercive institutional pressure often takes the form of governmental regulations or laws and stems from actions of regulatory agencies and major providers of resources to organisations. On the other hand, mimetic isomorphism is characterised by the imitation of policies, strategies, structures and technologies already successful in related organisations. Finally, normative isomorphism occurs through professionalisation. Decoupling is another core construct frequently used in the neo-institutional theory. The idea of decoupling suggests that reforms, in terms of policies, practices and structures, can be delinked from what is going on inside of the organisation (Meyer & Rowan 1977).

Despite its popular usage in organisational studies, the neo-institutional theory has received a plethora of criticisms. First, the theory explains homogeneity rather than change (Greenwood & Hinings 1996). Finally, the theory downplays the ability of individual organisational members to respond proactively, creatively and strategically to institutional influences (Ang & Cummings 1997: 235). Despite these conceded limitations, the theory was relevant to the study. It indeed shaped data analysis and discussion of the findings. First, the theory was used to explain the emergence of formal quality assurance practices in teaching at Makerere University. Secondly, neo-institutionalism was used to account for the homogeneity of quality assurance in teaching within universities in Africa and across continents. Finally, the theory was used to explicate any potential nexus or disconnect between formal quality assurance practice in teaching and improvement of teaching.

## **Quality Assurance Practices in Teaching**

Quality assurance of teaching can take various forms. These forms are presented below:

**Student evaluation of teaching (SET)** involves students evaluating teachers using questionnaires. Feedback from student evaluation of teaching is intended to improve the quality of teaching. Student evaluation of teaching staff is a common form of quality assurance of teaching in higher education institutions in Africa (Kadhila 2012; Materu 2007; Mhlanga 2008; Mulu 2012; Utuka 2012; Zerihun 2012). At Cairo University, Alshamy (2011) established that student feedback was not taken seriously by students. He attributed this to the belief by students that their feedback would not make a difference and to the lack of a culture of feedback in earlier stages of their education.

**Peer observation of teaching (POT)** is another quality assurance practice in higher education. It involves academic colleagues giving and receiving feedback on their teaching practice and its effectiveness in promoting student learning (Harris, Farrell, Bell, Devlin & James 2008). The aim of peer observation of teaching is to improve teaching (Blackmore 2005). Mhlanga (2008) established that peer review of teaching was an entrenched quality assurance practice at the universities of the Witwatersrand, Botswana and Zimbabwe. Although informative on this quality assurance mechanism, the study by Mhlanga did not explore the process and experiences of peer reviews in the three higher education institutions.

Another quality assurance practice in teaching is **excellence teaching awards**. Teaching excellence awards often cite two purposes: recognition and celebration of excellent teachers; and the promotion of teaching excellence and enabling dissemination of excellent teaching practices (Gunn & Fisk 2013). In addition, Chism (2006), based on the US experience, identified three purposes of teaching excellence awards as: to symbolically acknowledge support for teaching; to honour excellent teachers; and to create teaching role-models who can motivate other faculty to enhance their own practice.

**Teacher professional development/pedagogical training** is used as a quality assurance practice in teaching. The primary aim of pedagogical courses is to foster a shift from teacher-centred approaches to more student-centred approaches (Postareff *et al.* 2007) and thereby enhance learning.

The literature has revealed some of the mechanisms or practices used at universities to assure the quality of teaching. Most of the literature rarely



delves into experiences of students and academics with the quality assurance practices in teaching.

## **Methods**

The study employed a case study design and aims to ‘optimise understanding of the case rather than to generalise beyond it’ (Stake 1995: 86). Owing to its qualitative nature, the study employed both purposive and convenience sampling techniques. Multi-stage purposive sampling was used to select colleges of Makerere University, schools, departments. Students and lecturers were selected from the departments. The following colleges were selected: College of Education and External Studies (CEES) and College of Humanities and Social Sciences (CHUSS), representing the Arts domain; College of Engineering, Design, Art and Technology (CEDAT) and College of Health Sciences (CHS), representing the sciences domain.

From each college, one school was purposively selected from which two teaching departments were also purposively selected. One academic programme was purposively selected from each of the sampled departments. In the interest of using information-rich participants, purposive sampling was used to select lecturers. The following criteria were used to select academics from each department: a full-time member of staff; a minimum of three years in the university service; and having coordinated or currently coordinating a course.

Between six and seven final-year students undertaking each of the selected academic programmes were selected using the convenience sampling technique; as a result, 50 students were sampled. The main assumption associated with convenience sampling is that the members of the target population are homogeneous (Ross 2005). Homogeneity of students was assumed because all students were enrolled on the same academic programme and in their final year of study. Final-year students were used as respondents because they were in a position to provide information relating to quality assurance since they had spent considerable time at the university. The total number of respondents was 65, comprising 15 academics and 50 final-year students. The sample of academics comprised a full professor, an associate professor, three senior lecturers and heads of department, six lecturers and four assistant lecturers. Table 1 below shows how multi-stage sampling was used to select academics and students.

**Table 1: Sample size and sample selection for academics and students**

College	School	Department	Programme	Number of respondents	
				Academics	Students
CEES	Education	Humanities and Language Education	Bachelor of Arts with Education	3	6
		Science, Technical and Vocational Education	Bachelor of Science with Education	1	6
CHUSS	Liberal and Performing Arts	Philosophy and Development Studies	Bachelor of Development Studies	1	7
		Performing Arts	Bachelor of Arts in Drama and Music	2	7
CEDAT	Engineering	Civil and Environmental Engineering	Bachelor of Science in Civil Engineering	2	6
		Electrical and Computer Engineering	Bachelor of Science in Electrical Engineering	2	6
CHS	Health Sciences	Dentistry	Bachelor of Dental Surgery	2	6
		Nursing	Bachelor of Nursing	2	6
Total				15	50

Data was collected from 1 April to 1 July 2014 using interviews for lecturers and focus group discussions for students and by reviewing documents. Regarding document review, the following documents of the university were reviewed: Phase 111, End of Phase Summative Report of the Makerere

University-Carnegie Corporation (2012), The Policy on Appointment and Promotion of Academic Staff (2009) and the Quality Assurance Policy Framework (2007). Though follow-up questions were asked, data collection was guided by the following questions:

- (a) Can you tell me how Makerere University assures the quality of teaching?
- (b) What would you identify as the main strengths and weaknesses of these systems of quality assurance of teaching?
- (c) If you had the opportunity to alter the ways by which the university assures the quality of teaching, what changes would you make?

Interviews lasted between 45 and 60. On the other hand, each discipline-specific focus group discussion with students lasted 60 to 90 minutes. Data from interviews and focus group discussions was analysed using thematic analysis. Data from documents was analysed using content analysis and excerpts from documents were used to supplement themes from interviews and focus group discussions. To ensure confidentiality of academic respondents, codes were used to identify them based on the discipline followed by a sequence in which the interviews were conducted with 'LAE' standing for Lecturer in Arts Education; 'LBDS' connoting Lecturer in Bachelor of Dental Surgery. Others were 'LDS' representing Lecturer in Development Studies; 'LCE' representing Lecturer in Civil Engineering; 'LEE' symbolising Lecturer in Electrical Engineering; 'LMD' implying Lecturer in Music and Drama; and 'LSE' signifying Lecturer in Science Education.. Finally, the year and programme of study is used to identify students rather than codes.

## **Results**

### ***Teaching Quality Assurance Practices at Makerere University***

In this section, we examine the current architecture of quality assurance of teaching at Makerere University. Six teaching quality assurance practices were evident in the data and are examined below:

### **Recognition of Teaching in Promotion**

There were mixed reactions by academics regarding whether the university recognises teaching in the promotion processes of lecturers. Two respondents were of the view that Makerere University recognises teaching during promotion. Nevertheless, they were concerned that recognition of teaching was predominantly in terms of ‘length of teaching’ rather than ‘quality of teaching’. A lecturer in the Bachelor of Dental Surgery programme argued:

When it comes to teaching, they actually recognise it in terms of the number of years that you have taught, especially when you are being promoted, they emphasise the number of years taught. (LBDS-1)

While making reference to how teaching is treated in the point system evaluation criteria for promotion, a lecturer in Arts Education said: ‘...It is even a bit unfortunate that even when it comes to promotion, for example from lecturer to senior [lecturer], teaching doesn’t count much’ (LAE-1). The preoccupation with tenure could be attributed to the fact that it is easier to measure the length of teaching than the quality of teaching. A lecturer in Bachelor of Dental Surgery alluded to this thus:

When it comes to promotion, teaching may not be given the value it deserves maybe because there is no obvious scale to decide on the quality of teaching whereas for publications and [community] service, it is easy to see. (LBDS-1)

Secondly, the assumption that quality of teaching improves with the length of teaching could be an explanatory factor for the current preoccupation with the length of experience.

Other respondents alluded to failure by the university to recognise teaching in promotion and the skewed attention given to research (and publication). Similarly, the respondents argued that there was lack of parity of esteem between teaching and research in considering applications for promotion from academics. As to whether teaching is recognised in promotion, a lecturer in Electrical Engineering remarked: ‘It looks like teaching time is not relevant for promotion and yet it forms the core aspect of what someone (a lecturer) is doing (sic) at the university’ (LEE-2).

A lecturer in Arts Education corroborated this view by arguing:

‘Promotion is not hinged on...teaching. Promotion is hinged on your own academic progress. Have you researched? Have you published? It is not how many years [that] you have taught’ (LAE-3). A lecturer in Nursing voiced similar sentiments:

Good teaching is not rewarded because...promotions are based on publications .... So you may be a very good teacher, you may religiously teach, you are always prepared [for class], you do everything but without publishing, you will not be promoted. (LDN-1)

Asked about what could be done to improve the quality of teaching, a lecturer in Dental Surgery replied: ‘Provide a carrot and stick. Because right now, the carrot is for [research and] publication; there is no carrot for teaching’ (LBDS-2). In light of the circumstances described above, academics were of the view that concentrating on teaching without research in one’s discipline would thwart the chances of career progression.

Resulting from weaknesses in the current reward practices for teaching, especially in promotion, the respondents were of the view that the university should introduce a teaching-only career route. For example, asked about what could be done to improve teaching, a lecturer in Dental Surgery said:

Provide a carrot for teaching. Let there be two tracks: a teaching track and a [research and] publication track. They say that they recognise both teaching and research but the truth is different. Those [academics] who are in teaching get discouraged if they are not recognised. Those who are in teaching but not doing research are not recognised; they are not promoted. (LBDS-2)

The evaluation criteria were reviewed to identify possible matches or mismatches between the perceptions of respondents and stipulations of the policy. Applications for promotion are evaluated using 11 items (**Table 2**) with each item scoring points out of a total of 100. The eleven items and their corresponding points are shown in Table 2.

**Table 2: Points Promotion Criteria of Makerere University**

<b>No.</b>	<b>Criterion</b>	<b>Maximum points</b>
1.	Academic and professional qualifications	20
2.	Publications	25
3.	Teaching ability and experience	13
4.	Research	8
5.	Supervision of students' research	10
6.	Other core academic activities	8
7.	Service to the university and the community	5
8.	Membership of professional bodies	2
9.	Conduct	5
10.	Professional practice/outreach services	2
11.	Innovation	2

Source: Makerere University (2009)

From **Table 2**, we can infer that the three missions of the university (teaching, research and community service) are not given equal weight as far as the evaluation criteria for promotion are concerned. Teaching and the third mission (community service) hold a subordinate position to research and account for 13 points and 8 points, respectively, while research (and publication) accounts for 33 points. This corroborates the perception of academic respondents regarding lack of parity of esteem between teaching and research. The celebrity status accorded to research by the university did not come as a surprise. First, the university seeks to reposition itself as a research-led university where research and teaching are mutually reinforcing. This strategic repositioning is well-articulated in the strategic plan. Secondly, Makerere University is preoccupied with improving her ranking and research forms the bulk of the input into most regional and international ranking schemes. Finally, good teaching, compared to research, is not easy to measure.

### **Student Evaluation of Teaching (SET)**

Student evaluation of teaching features in the quality assurance policy of Makerere University (2007) as a quality assurance practice. However, student

evaluation of teaching is yet to take root in the entire university. Final-year students of Development Studies and Education had never evaluated teaching during their tenure at the university. Asked whether they evaluate lecturers at the end of each course unit, a student of Development Studies replied: ‘We (students) are not even allowed to do that (evaluate lecturers). You try to do that, they (lecturers) will make you fail [the course].’ This statement points to an impediment to students’ motivation to evaluate lecturers, that is, fear of retribution. However, students of Engineering and Music and Drama evaluated teaching during their first year of the university experience.

Online student evaluation of teaching at Makerere University has registered disappointing outcomes. This is evidenced in the implementation gap of student evaluation of teaching. Students’ indifference to evaluating teaching using the online form has been cited by the university to be the major hurdle to student evaluation of teaching. The Makerere University-Carnegie Corporation summative report points to lack of motivation by students to evaluate teaching: ‘...a lot needs to be done to motivate students to carry out the assessment of teaching’ (Makerere University 2012: 38). One factor that dissuades students from filling in the online student evaluation of teaching questionnaire is the perception that university administrators do not take their feedback seriously. Therefore, students regard evaluation of teaching as a mere form-filling or box-ticking exercise and an encroachment on their precious time. A student of Nursing put it thus: ‘...we the students do not really believe that ...our evaluation [of teaching] really counts. So really we pay less attention to such exercises because we are really not sure whether it will count at the end.’

Another student of Nursing echoed:

...we always get this belief that it (student evaluation of teaching) never matters because you say this and you see the same thing over and over again. This one is evident when sometimes we get challenges in the classroom and then we make general complaints... to our head of department, and then you see the same thing happening [again]. So, you get the feeling that it doesn’t matter even if I complained; these people (lecturers) are here to stay.

Based on the above, it can be argued that students are more likely to complete evaluation forms if they perceive value in them.

The poor implementation of student evaluation of teaching ought to be understood against the backdrop of a decade of Carnegie Corporation of New York (CCNY) support to Makerere University (2001-2011). The CCNY support to Makerere University was segmented into three phases: Phase 1 (2001-2004), Phase 2 (2004-2007) and Phase 3 (2008-2011). Development of a quality assurance support mechanism was one of the nine thematic areas or projects of the Carnegie Corporation support. The final phase of the CCNY support to Makerere University (2008-2011) had ‘improv[ing] teaching and learning through student evaluation of lecturers’ as one of its strategic objectives. This phase saw piloting of an online and paper-and-pencil student evaluation-of-teaching tool. The tendency to treat student evaluation of teaching as a ‘project’ or what we have referred to as ‘projectisation’ rather than an institutional issue has had ramifications for the quality assurance mechanism. One consequence of this project-based approach is that student evaluation of teaching tended to be implemented for accountability purposes, that is, to provide accountability for an output in the project documents and the associated funds but not out of a genuine desire to improve teaching. The end of the CCNY support to Makerere University in 2012 plunged student evaluation of teaching into a dormant state. This discourse challenges the view that internal quality assurance serves the improvement rather than accountability function. Depending on context, internal quality assurance can serve an accountability function. The study demonstrates that internal quality assurance can serve the accountability function if treated as a project for which the university has to be accountable to funders. At the institutional level, the implementation gap of student evaluation of teaching demonstrates how, as advanced by the neo-institutional theory, certain reforms can be introduced for symbolic reasons and tend to be detached from the core activities of an institution.

### **Pedagogical Training**

Since 2006, the university has been offering pedagogical training to lecturers. The duration of pedagogical training ranged between four to five days. Data was gathered on the experiences of academics with pedagogical training. Out of the 15 academics who were interviewed, only four had received pedagogical training. The four lecturers voiced mixed experiences. Only two respondents were satisfied with the training and took the trouble to implement what they learnt. One of them said:



## *Assuring the Quality of Teaching at Makerere University in Uganda*

I attended one [pedagogical course]; it must have been at the beginning of 2013. But what they were telling us was like for the future. They were introducing that learner-centred teaching and they were telling us [about] how those guys [in the College of Health Sciences] have done it. I actually liked the approach (student-centred learning) and I applied a few of the things they were telling us. I think that was really good. (LEE-1)

However, a lecturer in Dental Surgery described the pedagogical training she attended as basic: ‘We got some [pedagogical] training some time back. It was quite rudimentary’ (LBDS-1).

Similarly, the pedagogical training did not change the approaches to teaching of a lecturer in Civil Engineering:

I attended one [pedagogical training class]. I learnt something but not to the effect of changing the way I do things. I was invited for a second one but I turned it down because I did not feel it was going to add value to what I do. (LCE-1)

This point of view suggests that while pedagogical training can change a lecturer’s conception of teaching, it does not guarantee that a lecturer will change his or her approach to teaching.

### **Monitoring and Supervision of Teaching**

Monitoring and supervision of teaching by academic administrators is widely used to assure the quality of teaching at Makerere University. Asked about how the quality of teaching is assured in the department, a lecturer who is at the same time a head of department said: ‘Heads of department and deans do the supervision of teaching. We don’t leave it to our colleagues, the lecturers and professors; we go on to supervise [teaching]. We make sure that...people (lecturers) go to class [and teach]’.

Another lecturer corroborated this view: ‘There is monitoring and supervision of...teaching by heads of department [and] the deans. They encourage us to start teaching on time when the semester has just started [and] they can come around and see whether people (lecturers) are actually teaching’ (LAE-2). A lecturer in Music and Drama echoed this view thus: ‘My boss, the

head of department, supervises the teaching and learning at the level of a department...I know that quality has been looked at in terms of: Are lecturers teaching? What are they teaching? Are they teaching in time?’ (LMD-2).

Regardless of the merits of monitoring and supervision of teaching by academic administrators, it can be argued that the quality assurance practice is obsessed with compliance with course outlines, adherence to timetables and physical appearance of teachers in class. Undoubtedly, these can contribute to learning. However, the practice is delinked from the learning; it is more concerned with quality assurance than quality enhancement.

### **Interfacing**

Departments have mechanisms through which students, in some cases students’ representatives, interface with heads of department and course coordinators to provide feedback on teaching. A lecturer in Music and Drama attested to this mechanism: ‘There are also mechanisms...for students to discuss their issues as far as teaching is concerned with the heads of department or even [course or unit] coordinators’ (LMD-2).

One head of department corroborated this view: ‘We also talk to class coordinators and students themselves to find out how teaching is progressing.’

Admittedly, this quality assurance practice is valuable in providing feedback on teaching. However, the challenge may arise when a complaint is brought against the course coordinator or head of department.

### **Competence-based Deployment**

One way of guaranteeing that teaching is fit for purpose is to ensure that the curriculum is implemented by competent academics. Academic units of Makerere University ensure that the competence of lecturers and deployment are in sync. In other words, the deployment of academics to teach course units is informed by the lecturers’ expertise in the area, as attested by a lecturer in Arts Education:

Even when it comes to the teaching load, people (lecturers) do not just pick anyhow. We look at the expertise of the individual; that so and so did a master’s [degree] in .... and therefore he or she can be able to

handle a course which is related to what he or she majored in. (LAE-1).

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

Teaching quality assurance practices at Makerere University bear a strong resemblance to those that were identified by Mhlanga (2008) in universities in Southern Africa and current practices in advanced economies. The homogeneity of quality assurance practices in teaching is a pointer to internationalisation of quality assurance of teaching and can be attributed to isomorphic forces. This lends credence to some assumptions of the neo-institutional theory and specifically those relating to isomorphic change. Nevertheless, student evaluation of teaching appears to be the dominant approach to assuring quality of the teaching in African universities. This approach was identified by Mulu (2012) in Ethiopia, Utuka (2012) in Ghana, Alshamy (2011) in Egypt and Zerihun (2012) in Ethiopia. Makerere University embraced student evaluation of teaching owing to influence by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, a major provider of resources at the time, and out of the desire to comply with the NCHE Quality Assurance Framework which makes it mandatory for universities to provide students with an opportunity to evaluate lecturers. Therefore, coercive isomorphism was the major driving force behind the introduction of student evaluation of teaching.

Data suggests that student evaluation of teaching is not functional at Makerere University and this attests to the challenge of creating and sustaining change in universities. Students' ambivalence towards student evaluation of teaching, in part, accounts for the dismal performance of student evaluation of teaching. This finding is consistent with Alshamy (2011), who established that students in Egyptian universities did not take evaluation of teaching seriously because of the belief that their feedback would not make a difference and the lack of a culture of feedback in earlier stages of their education. Hence, the efficacy of student evaluation of teaching is likely to be enhanced if the university gives feedback to students on how their evaluations are being used in addition to students seeing the feedback as influencing their total learning experience.

Since 2006, Makerere University has been providing pedagogical training to lecturers. Studies conducted in other contexts give insights into how

the efficacy of pedagogical training can be enhanced. The duration of pedagogical training is one of the predictors of success of pedagogical training in improving teaching. Gibbs and Coffey (2004) hold that university teachers become less teacher-centred and more student-centred after 4-18 months of training. In the same vein, Postareff *et al.* (2007) also established that short-term training pedagogy courses do not have a positive effect on teaching. Specifically, Postareff and colleagues found that teachers who had less than one year of pedagogical training (or less than 30 ECTS) scored less on the student-centred approach scale. The duration of pedagogical training that is recommended in these studies is at odds with the duration of pedagogical training at Makerere University. The findings revealed that pedagogical training at Makerere takes less than one week. Makerere University, therefore, has to rethink the short and workshop-style pedagogical training.

At Makerere University, there is lack of parity of esteem between teaching and research in human resource practices of the university such as promotion. The evaluation criteria for promotion are skewed towards research rather than teaching. This is despite the strategic plan of the university recognising teaching and research as mutually reinforcing. This finding corroborates the report of the European Commission on improving the quality of teaching and learning in Europe's higher education institutions, which observed that in most European Union member states, the academic career was more strongly linked to research than to teaching with respect to, among others, promotion and performance-related rewards (EC 2013).

The emphasis on research is anchored in a tacit assumption that research indirectly improves the quality of teaching. This nexus is articulated by Gibbs (2008: 18), who opines that research benefits teaching indirectly based on the premise that 'deep understanding of the discipline's key concepts and approaches derived from being actively involved in disciplinary research translates into clear and profound explanations for students and insightful critiques of limitations in students' understanding'. Secondly, the emphasis of research – the 'publish or perish' dictum – is intended to differentiate a university educator from a school teacher and is consistent with the NCHE Quality Assurance Framework (2008: 9-10), which states:

What distinguishes a university educator from a school teacher is the production of knowledge through, mainly, research. A school teacher transmits already known knowledge, while a university educator must

constantly create the knowledge he/she delivers to students.

The NCHE regards research as a measure of quality and productivity of an academic. Finally, the relationship between teaching and research has been perpetuated by the desire to improve rankings. Such rankings are ‘biased heavily towards more easily countable research publication citation indices rather than looking at the wider university mission in areas as fundamental as teaching and learning which are less amenable to such counts’ (EC 2013: 36).

The celebrity status accorded to research creates a reputational gap between teaching and research. This reputational gap may inadvertently divert the attention of academics from teaching to research and create a disincentive to improve the quality of teaching. This trend has been witnessed in research-intensive universities in advanced economies where many academics consider teaching as ‘tax paid to enable the important work of research, which they believe is the basis for recognition, rewards and promotion’ (Benson, Smith & Eubanks 2013: 213).

In view of the findings and discussion, we can distil two theoretical insights. The first theoretical insight is that internal and external quality assurance typologies do not serve completely different purposes in higher education. Contemporary literature on quality assurance in higher education creates a conceptual divide between internal quality assurance and external quality assurance with each type of quality assurance assumed to serve a specific purpose in higher education. Specifically, internal quality assurance is regarded as serving the function of improving teaching and learning – which is the object of quality assurance in higher education – while external quality assurance is deemed to serve the accountability function. In view of that, methodologies that are employed for each type of quality assurance have tended to vary. External quality assurance employs quality assurance methodologies such as institutional and programme accreditation, institutional audit and peer review, while internal quality assurance employs practices such as student evaluation of teaching, peer observation of teaching, pedagogical training and self-evaluation/assessment.

This study demonstrates that while the classification of quality assurance is stable, there can be an overlap in functions of internal and external quality assurance depending on context. In the case of Makerere University, internal quality assurance practices such as student evaluation of teaching and pedagogical training have been re-directed to serving the accountability rather

than the improvement function because quality assurance was initiated and implemented as a project. Implementation of these practices by the university was aimed at providing accountability for outputs in the Makerere University-Carnegie Corporation of New York project document. Accordingly, the results of implementation of these practices are decoupled from teaching. Therefore, universities in developing countries should be wary of donor-driven and project-managed internal quality assurance initiatives which defeat the purpose of internal quality assurance of improving teaching. We can conclude that isomorphism, though it has the ability to influence the adoption of internal quality assurance practices, has equal potential to re-direct internal quality assurance mechanisms from enhancement of teaching to accountability. The case of student evaluation of teaching which was skewed towards the accountability function rather than improvement of teaching lends credence to this proposition. Therefore, the imperative to shift from quality assurance to quality enhancement in university cannot be overemphasised.

The second theoretical insight is that students respond to their perceptions. If they perceive a quality assurance practice as not addressing their concerns, it is unlikely that they will positively respond to it. The implementation gap in student evaluation of teaching is a classic example of this assertion. Therefore, altering the perception of students can contribute to the revitalisation of the student evaluation teaching.

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*Assuring the Quality of Teaching at Makerere University in Uganda*

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# **Innovative Approaches for Enhancing the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Student Experience**

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## **Abstract**

This paper discusses insights from a project aimed to bring about sustainable strategic change through improving institutional capacity to enhance the 21st century student experience. It sought to build new concepts for understanding Australia's higher education students, identify new data sources and approaches for measuring the student experience, and engage institutions in enhancement work and new conversations about students. After discussing pertinent contexts and rationales, the paper discusses national research conducted to understand the current state of play. It then proposes the model derived to reconceptualise qualities of a successful experience. It closes by articulating two enhancement strategies developed to seed new practices.

**Keywords:** student success, student experience, institutional development, conceptual development

## **Valuing Each Student's Experience**

Ensuring that each higher education student has a successful experience is crit-

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ical to the future of the sector and society. Australia has made considerable progress over the last three decades to define the student experience, collect various forms of data, and report insights to various stakeholders in increasingly sophisticated ways (Ramsden 1991; Griffin, Coates, McInnes & James 2003; Coates 2006; 2009; Coates, Kelly & Naylor 2015; Radloff, Coates, Taylor, James & Krause 2013). Yet much of this work rests on generation-old and suboptimal approaches to identifying people, to gathering insights, and to helping students succeed. More contemporary perspectives are needed, particularly given that little has been done to rigorously define what constitutes a successful student experience.

This paper reports on a project designed to provoke a step-change in how the sector thinks about and leads student success. The project seeks to distil an innovative architecture so as to guide future leadership of student success in higher education. Working from detailed and ongoing research of contemporary thinking and practice, it seeks to advance new qualities and profiles for understanding the undergraduate student experience, explore expanded data sources and analytical approaches, and lay foundations for leading reform. This work seeks to raise awareness of student identities and expectations, evoke different conceptions and dialogues about students, create more effective means for monitoring and enhancing education, and set foundations for substantial further development.

In this paper a suite of new perspectives are prompted by critical constraints challenging current circumstances. While each student's experience is essentially highly individual in nature, prevailing myths and institutional norms fixate on crude group-level generalizations. As a sector globally higher education lags compared with other service sectors, stuck in batch-like mindsets that undervalue the agency and potential of core participants (Higher Education Commission 2016). As teased apart below, the basic concepts which sustain much current theorization and practice are based on reified views on who students are. Stereotypes can bear little relation to the identity or aspirations of prospective or current students. The dominant survey methods used to study student engagement have waning utility. Student survey response rates are low and shrinking, variance explained is small, and more effective electronic footprints seem available (Siemens, Dawson & Lynch 2013; Sclater, Peasgood & Mullen 2016). While most work on this front is framed within the context of institutions and fields, higher education is increasingly trans-disciplinary and trans-institutional in nature. There is a need

to break through bureaucratically entrenched barriers and look instead through the eyes of the student (Nahia & Osterberg 2012). There are practical problems. Institutions and stakeholders are increasingly unresponsive to results from student surveys, which in many instances are detached from lived practice, increasingly used for external purposes and reinforcing approaches convenient to institutions rather than serving students (Ladd, Reynolds & Selingo 2014). There exist limited insights into who students are, how people approach higher education, the ways in which they learn, and how people change as they progress.

This state of play provokes myriad uncertainties and questions. What are students seeking to achieve? How can we move beyond the suite of popular but limiting constructs on teaching, retention, experience and engagement to look instead at student profiles, types and segments? What data exists or could be used to better understand students? How can technical analysis explain more variation in the experience, particularly at the individual level? How can we get information on each and every student, not just the fifth who respond to surveys, and how can we explain more than a fraction of the variation in students' experience? What steps can be taken to improve leadership of the student experience? What are effective means for conceptualising the success of programs and institutions? How can institutions better manage their experiences as they progress through study? How can institutions move beyond conceptualising students as a source of data? Most broadly, what can be done to link concepts, techniques and practices to forge more evidence-driven and cogent leadership of the future student experience? These are deep and broad yet basic questions which require us to better understand how an increasing number and range of individuals approach higher education, students' identities and expectations, and how institutions can manage and enhance students.

This paper reports on validation of the new concepts and new methods for helping institutions lead the student experience. Conceptually, it reports on investigation of who students are and what they expect from higher education—inquiry that goes beyond stereotypes, generalities and assumptions about demography and contexts. Methodologically, it reports new approaches for measuring and reporting these new constructs and profiles by helping institutions leverage under-utilised existing data for quality enhancement. To accomplish these objectives the project involved:

- charting the current state of play;
- identifying qualities of student experience; and
- articulating enhancement approaches.

## **Charting the Apparent State of Play**

The project began by launching an investigation of contemporary student experience ideas and practices. The project bootstrapped this investigation by deconstructing the ‘student experience’ into four topics: student identity, student success, data sources, and change leadership. Each of these topics was investigated using a wide range of research and consulting with more than 50 experts. These investigations helped articulate a model of student success, clarify more effective ways for understanding each individual’s identity, flesh out effective strategies for analysing and interpreting huge volumes of data on activity and performance, and unpack the attributes of academic leadership required to help people succeed. This background research clarified the study’s broad design. In essence, the project posits that education data underpin a better understanding of students and their experience, which in turn spurs student success. Each of these areas, and particularly their intersection, are joined by distributed academic leadership. This formative work was published in an interim report (Coates *et al.* 2015).

The background research furnished important conceptual and practical clarification of the contemporary student experience. Through the fieldwork, contemporary approaches to understanding the successful student experience was assessed, motivating conceptual frames tested, and new insights and approaches designed.

The project sampled institutions, then students. A total of 31 higher education institution participated and returned an inventory. These institutions ranged across provider types (18 universities, 13 other higher education institutions), states and territories (8 Queensland, 8 New South Wales, 7 Victoria, 4 Western Australia, 2 South Australia, 2 Australian Capital Territory), and included diverse student mixes. A further six site visits and interviews were undertaken for institutions identified with differentiated practice. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a total of forty-four students. These students were from metropolitan and regional universities as well as small- to mid-size private institutions and pathway providers. Participating students represented a wide range of ages, diverse fields of educa-

tion and cultural backgrounds.

Two instruments—a student interview schedule and an institutional inventory—were developed from the study design to yield information about the nature of student success, the identity and experiences of today’s students, the nature and use of information available to institutions, and what leadership is needed to steer improvement in this core area of higher education. Both instruments were open-ended and qualitative given the nature of the phenomenon under study, the project aim, and maturity of the research and practice.

The empirical work in this study sought to probe and shape new concepts rather than yield any kind of sector-wide ‘baseline data’. Even so a reasonably large number of institutions contributed insights, offering modest generalizability. Initially, information from institutions and students was used to document and describe current practice across the sector. In terms of student identify, student success and the accessibility of relevant data sources, with further analysis it was feasible to locate institutions along a developmental spectrum in terms of whether practice was shared, differentiated, emerging or aspirational. With respect to leadership, consideration was given to the importance of several attributes for improving student success, understanding students, and data.

As a pathway into reconstructing the student experience, an assessment was made of each institution’s maturity in articulating student success, the identity and experiences of today’s students, the nature and use of information available to institutions, and what kind of change leadership is needed to improve. A developmentally nuanced interpretative frame (Table 1) was constructed to structure analysis of data gathered. The following paragraphs unpack the frame with reference to insights from the national fieldwork.

**Table 1: Frame developed to interpret current practice**

<b>Phase</b>	<b>Student success</b>	<b>Student identity</b>	<b>Information use</b>	<b>Change leadership</b>
Strategic	The institution describes multiple	Many aspects of student experience including	Data collection reflects broad ranging	Sophisticated analysis capabilities provide

## *Enhancing the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Student Experience*

	aspects of success, incorporating a broad range of perspectives from students and other stakeholders including broader communities.	academic and broader experiences are considered vital to understanding students, and data is sourced according to this definition.	information including personal, educational and cultural background, current studies, co-curricular, aspirations and post-graduate activity. Diversity of data sources including student supplied and synchronous trace data are integrated dynamically.	quantitative and qualitative data from all sources in user-friendly forms including personalised student-facing information for immediate use. The analysis produces new insights to enhance individual student experience.
Integrated	The institution has a broad view of student success, reporting a number of different aspects of success and possibly acknowledging a range of stakeholder perspectives.	Student data is defined in broad terms and includes personal, demographic, performance and elements of behavioural or cognitive data.	Data collection undertaken throughout entire student experience leveraging and integrating information from existing systems with new system capabilities. Data analysed across systems	Student-facing information directs individual students to resources necessary to assist learning and data reported to staff and leaders can assist in developing support strategies

			to provide predictive information identifying areas of support, need or risk.	tailored to current needs analysis of particular student cohorts.
Developing	An understanding of student success focused on employability and program completion, and formulated from an institutional or more often disciplinary perspective.	Students are understood by demographic and performance data and through sporadic surveying.	Planned periods and frameworks for collecting data are resourced and exist in dispersed systems. System capabilities are limited and require manual manipulation information.	Reporting is limited to institutional leaders and staff and is used to make institutional improvement student services or to specific courses based on student feedback.
Basic	The institution is unable to define student success beyond the retention and pass rates defined by the external agencies.	Students are defined by administrative, compliance or external reporting requirements.	Student data is limited to personal and/or demographic details collected at admission and academic results as the student progresses.	Analysis is restricted to reports for external requirements and leaders for administering services and facilities.

The pressure on individual institutions to articulate the value of higher education is increasing given the focus on employability, student debt and broader community debates around the contemporary purposes of higher



education in a managed market for higher education. A clear conception of student success is integral to attracting, retaining and graduating students.

Approaches to student success can be considered at their most basic in terms of retention. Institutions with broader conceptions of student success include graduation, employability, personal growth, engagement with campus or extracurricular life, critical thinking and inquiry skills, gaining access to higher education, engaging with peers and making friends. A more expansive approach to student success takes into consideration multiple perspectives from institutions, students, and a range of other stakeholders, including broader communities and attitudes. Of the 31 participating institutions, the majority of responses in relation to student success were expansive and included both universities and other higher education institutions.

There is growing pressure on higher education institutions to differentiate the value of the student experience to potential and existing students. As students invest heavily in not just one but sometimes multiple higher education qualifications and experiences, institutions have become adept at articulating what success may look like for their students. The findings of the institutional inventories support a highly developed conception of student success across the sector.

An institution's capacity to understand students is fundamental to their capacity to lead a successful experience (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges & Hayek 2006). Partly because of rapid expansion, but also likely due to sector characteristics, higher education continues to batch people into groups. Casual regard may be given to individual diversity, but identifying students according to metrics that are in effect basic socio-demographic categories, often formed in terms of deviation from elite-era stereotypes dominate practice, with scant regard to psychological factors including motivation or expectations is common.

Of the 31 institutional inventories received and organised along a maturity continuum from basic to strategic perspectives, most institutions were located in the middle with traditional or batch-like approaches to student identity. These developing approaches identify a narrow range of identity factors (typically conventional demographic features) that contribute to student success. These demographic factors link with government reporting requirements, particularly concerning equity groups. Thus, age, cultural background, gender, socioeconomic status, first in family status, disability status were identified, as was employment status. A broader more integrated

approach can be characterised as a batched perspective that takes into account more than just demographic features. Most institutions who fell into this category reported that their student body had grown more diverse in recent years including increasing numbers of less prepared students and countries of origin of international students. While most institutions fell into one of two, relatively traditional understandings of student identity, there emerged an acknowledgment that more nuanced, personalised or individually focused understandings of students was required.

A small group of four institutions espoused an individualistic view on student identity which was identified as strategic on the maturity matrix. Two of the four institutions described using ‘big data’, particularly behavioural data, to identify novel groups or individual behaviours that contributed importantly to student success, rather than relying on traditional student groupings (such as membership of nationally defined equity groups).

While most institutions were situated in less mature stages towards an individualistic student experience, many acknowledged the need for greater granularity of student information including: literacy and numeracy levels, educational background, more granular information within equity groups, mental and emotional health, whole of experience perceptions, motivations and objectives for study, aspirations and hopes for achievement, library use, co-curricular activities, technology use, barriers or difficulties in study, engagement levels, and graduate outcomes.

Enhancing the student experience through the collection and analysis of data is a strategic priority across the sector. However, acknowledgment that current institutional systems are not fit for purpose is widespread and many institutions are hampered in their efforts to access important student information often disaggregated and stored in silos within and across institutions, or not captured at all. Given these challenges it is not surprising that practice across the sector is identified in the least developed stages on the maturity matrix.

A basic approach to the definition and collection of data is driven by administrative, regulatory or external compliance. Student data is limited to personal or demographic details collected at admission and academic results as the student progresses. Data analysis is restricted to the production of reports for external reporting requirements and to institutional leaders for purposes of resourcing essential student services and facilities. In a developing stage, demographic and performance data is complemented by information from

tests, surveys, and market research with planned and resourced periods and frameworks for collecting. System capabilities are often limited and require manual manipulation to yield useful information. Reporting is limited to institutional leaders and staff and is used to make institutional improvement to student services or to specific courses based on student feedback.

Only a small minority of institutional responses reflected practice that can be described as integrated or strategic. An integrated approach is characterised by student data that is defined by personal, demographic, performance, and elements of behavioural or cognitive data. Collection of data is undertaken throughout the student experience leveraging information from existing systems, integrating systems or by introducing new system capabilities. Data from various sources is integrated and analysed across different systems and provides predictive information that provides timely information to staff or students identifying areas of support or risk. Student-facing information directs individual students to resources necessary to assist learning and data reported to staff and leaders can assist in developing support strategies tailored to current needs analysis of particular student cohorts.

Only one institution reflected an approach to student data that can be characterised as strategic. This approach considers how data impacts the individual student experience and defines data in broad terms including personal, educational and cultural background, current studies, co-curricular, aspirations and post-graduate activity. Diversity of data sources including student supplied and synchronous trace data are collected and integrated dynamically. Sophisticated analysis capabilities provide quantitative and qualitative data from all sources in user-friendly forms including personalised student-facing information for immediate use. The analysis produces new insights to enhance individual student experience. While aspirational, with rapid technological advances, and increased appetite for enhancing individualised student experiences across the sector, the strategic approach is increasingly becoming a target for many higher education institutions as they seek to personalise the student experience.

What is required to shift existing practice towards more evidence-driven leadership of each individual's success? Higher education is moving into a larger and more competitive milieu, and there is an evident need to build capability that will yield required transformations in quality and productivity. Broadly, it seems, the institutions are relatively progressed with respect to their approach to student success, moderate in terms of thinking more individually

about students, and under developed when it comes to sophisticated use of data to identify and cater to individual student experience.

For each of these areas, institutions were asked to identify important factors for executing and sustaining institutional change. Specifically, they were invited to rank the following six attributes:

- Culture—the environment created by the totality of systems, structures and people;
- Structure—the operating framework including governance and management;
- Systems—the operational elements of the institution including IT systems;
- Leadership—the style of management and the strategic direction of the institution;
- Staff—the current breadth and scope of roles responsible for operationalising systems; and
- Skills—the development of staff skills and knowledge required to operationalise institutional systems.

Table 2 summarises the rankings provided by all responding institutions. In terms of substantive experiential matters—success and identity—it is clearly the more humanistic matters like culture and leadership and staffing that are seen to count, whereas systems and skills and staff rank more highly for the education data dimension. The need to build staffing and skills features prominently across each dimension and, conversely, the need to advance governance and management structure was generally seen as low. Again, the divergence between the substantive and technical facets affirms the disconnectedness of current practice. These very broad insights marry with the maturity insights shown above, flagging the need for more fundamental system development on the technical dimension.

Looking very broadly, therefore, the need to develop education data systems could be seen as the main constraint hampering progress. Institutions flagged the particular need to develop greater understanding of students in specific areas like educational background, personal circumstances including emotional and mental health, aspirations and motivations for study, participation in non-academic activities and a holistic view of the educational

experience. With richer and more granular information, institutions noted the ability to produce more nuanced reports of various kinds to students, to staff and to the broader community.

**Table 2: Importance of change factors**

Area	Culture	Structure	Systems	Leadership	Staff	Skills
Student Success	High	Low	Low	High	Medium	Medium
Student Identity	High	Low	Medium	Medium	High	Low
Education data	Low	Low	High	Medium	Medium	High

While student success and understanding students are considered largely influenced by culture and leadership, the collection and analysis of information needed to realise student success and to better understand students is seen as a systems issue. This apparent disconnect between leadership and culture and the development of analytic skills, resources and systems provides insights that stimulate new perspectives for bridging this gap. There is a particular need for educational rather than solely technical leadership of analytical systems to realise the goal of joining up the substantive, technical and practical facets of the future student experience.

The fieldwork component of the project confirmed that while Australian universities and some higher education institutions currently use large amounts of institutional data to inform business decisions such as marketing strategies or the development of new funding sources and operating models, fewer are engaged in strategic, intentional and institution-wide approaches for data to improve and personalise the student experience. Further, the research indicated that although there is sector-wide commitment to enhance student experience, in practice concentrated data points occurred at admission and when students were identified as ‘at risk’. The vast majority of students not identified by existing frameworks including by equity descriptors or through retention algorithms, are largely amorphous and increasingly unknown to institutions as they transition through and out of higher education.

Broader and more meaningful information on each student throughout and beyond their higher education experience is considered important for

student success. As student numbers increase so too do the institutional challenges of being aware of how to help people succeed. The challenge of integrating and analysing disparate pieces of information about each student and using it strategically to individualise and enhance their experience is significant. Yet, from the perspective of the student, these disparate bits of information existing in different institutional systems or not being captured in full, are artefacts of a personal educational experience.

Understanding each student through data-driven approaches requires a harmonising of strategic priorities with institutional operations and systems. There are multiple challenges in re-orientating collection and use of data from an institutionally-led frame to a more dynamic and individualised approach. Digitising student profiles and journeys in ways that make sense to institutions, and institutions using the ideas sketched in this report, may well evoke altered approaches to higher education. But much work is underway in pockets of the sector to increase system capability, analytical functions and data-warehousing. In the medium term certain institutions and fields will advance more quickly than others until a critical mass of educational infrastructure reaches a tipping point that invokes fundamental reinvention of the student experience.

## **Proposing Qualities of a Successful Experience**

The fieldwork projected deep insights into contemporary practice which extended and enriched preceding literature analysis and consultation. Building actionable concepts for understanding and managing students is core to future success in this area. Much applied data-focused student management and institutional research work is a-theoretical, but taking a conceptual approach is critical for it helps people make educational and institutional sense of the phenomena under study.

Drawing together prior insights into student experience, success and identity, with more contemporary frames and emerging from the empirical work, the team proposed nine qualities for leading student success. The intersecting qualities presented distil insights from the literature, from students, from experts and from institutions. For explanatory purposes these nine qualities are grouped into three broader clusters: student outcomes; student formations; and student supports.

In the reconceptualization being advanced student outcomes encompassed the four qualities of discovery, achievement, connection, and opportunity:

- **Discovery** is an essential quality of students' experience of higher education. Even in very epistemologically convergent areas of 'training' or development, people relish experiences where they have the opportunity to encounter but even better create new ideas. Ultimately, discovery seems cognitive in nature and provoked by intrinsic motivators, though it can be mediated socially and behaviourally and associated with various forms of emotion such as stimulation, intrigue and delight. Discovery experiences in higher education are varied such as research experience, building understanding, generalising transferable ideas and skills, building emotional capability, or creating social networks.
- **Achievement** plays a formative role in the student experience. Much student experience work has focused on learning and development processes, but outcomes are what really count. Somewhat separate policy and research traditions have emerged around education processes and education outcomes, yet students do not see the distinctions forged by governmental and institutional policies and practices. Instead, both students and experts see achievement as critical to a positive student experience. Achievement means really concrete things such as getting into higher education, passing units, getting good marks, completing courses, articulating to other qualifications, and getting a job.
- **Connection** is something people seek from higher education, even in very theoretical moments. Connection is whether institutions, teachers, fellow students and support staff help learners make connections between ideas and people and experiences. Practically, such connection plays out in terms of learners establishing new networks within and outside their institutions, going on academic exchanges, joining-up ideas across activities and academic learning, building cultural sensitivity to differences in orientations, collaborating with communities, and linking with professional communities as well as those on campus.

- **Opportunity** is a reason that people embrace higher education. Academic and professional opportunities are principal among such interests, but there are others like enhancing health, social and culture prospects. The kind of opportunity being defined involves social linking and the provision of helpful insights into prospects, and building people's sense of being personally enriched and empowered. Hence there are a broad range of activities and conditions in play, ranging from personalised perceptions of accomplishment to tangible vocational achievement.

Student formations encompass three qualities—value, belonging, and identity:

- **Value** should be returned from higher education. While seemingly simple and self-evident this proposition masks myriad complex and difficult considerations. Often, value is segmented into different categories like financial, social, educational, professional or personal. A common though complex distinction is almost made between private value for individuals versus public value for industries or society as a whole. In terms of an important quality of the student experience, value is defined as people seeing that higher education was worth the cost, time and effort. This definition puts emphasis on monetary and opportunity costs as well as broader forms of cognitive, emotional and behavioural effort.
- **Belonging** to a community has long been seen as an important quality of higher education, associated with many forms of constructive experiences and outcomes. The concept of belonging taps into part of what is embraced by research into student engagement—that is, people's support to participate in educationally purposeful practices—but more specifically pinpoints people's orientation and inclusion into and recognition by communities.
- Forming **identity** is an important rationale for participating in higher education. Higher education offers people opportunities to extend or change themselves, either in localised or more expansive ways—to become more responsible citizens. Simply put, it is expected that people who study medicine or engineering or accounting graduate not just with new knowledge and skills but also with new personae.



Similarly, mathematics and history graduates should have a sense of what they have learned and how to apply this to future opportunities. Identity formation is codified explicitly in many professional programs, for instance as ‘bedside manner’, ‘clinical skills’, or ‘management capability’. In other courses ‘professional attributes’ are defined (e.g. ‘ethics’ or ‘integrity’) in more general ways. The presentation of ‘graduate attributes’ by institutions in recent decades has signalled an even more diffuse and pervasive form of identity development. Recent enthusiasm regarding entrepreneurialism is relevant here, signalling interest in higher education helping learners build a sense of themselves as leaders of new ideas.

In terms of student supports, people should feel that their experience is enabled and personalized:

- Higher education should **enable** people. It should help people acquire new competencies and also the broader self-regulatory and meta-cognitive capacities that will help them flourish in the future. Empowering students in this way comes from formal education but also from broader experiences and conditions which affirm people’s development and participation in organisational activities. Sitting on committees and boards, for instance, offers excellent experience in governance and leadership.
- Growing relevance is being placed on a **personalised** higher education experience. Such experience is commonly characterised as ‘just-in-time’, ‘just-enough’, and ‘just-for-me’. People receive information, support and guidance as they need it, rather than when the institution schedules to deliver it. This does not imply the lack of curriculum and broader organising structures, but rather that such structures are nimble and responsive to different circumstances. Such personalised experience can be contrasted against industrialised batch approaches like large lectures, scheduled paper-based exams and place-fixed learning have serviced a means for scaling higher education from elite to mass to university levels.

The above discussion sketches the nine qualities which are intended to map out important pictures of the future student experience. In articulating these nine

qualities it is acknowledged that they are neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive. Rather, it is suggested that they mark out a suite of worthy agendas and carry potential to create discourse that helps students and their institutions succeed.

The qualities step well beyond prevailing terms used to define and operationalise student experience and related constructs. For instance, while ‘student satisfaction’ has become somewhat entrenched, there is ample evidence that beyond stamping out poor practice it offers substantially diminishing returns to improving higher education. Worse, it sucks energy and attention away from things that really count as articulated in the nationally validated nine qualities above. Major organising phrases such as ‘teaching quality’ and ‘student support’ and ‘student services’ are also becoming less relevant as team-based computer-mediated teaching and facilitation become more pervasive. The nine qualities are broader than the frequently espoused though rarely measured ‘graduate attributes’. Rather than fixate on what are really supply-centric concepts, instead the qualities signal new co-created conceptualisations of higher education.

These qualities are designed to be equally meaningful to many diverse stakeholders, including people such as those who have not thought about higher education, prospective students, students, graduates, employers, teachers and support staff. Given the transparencies and efficiencies afforded by new technologies and knowledge it makes little sense to design ideas about education or quality for segmented or partitioned audiences, as has been the case in the past. Instead, common and suitably nuanced information can be provided to myriad stakeholders. What this means in concrete terms is that the same data used for individual student reports could flow to academic leaders.

Articulating such qualities has the potential to be intellectually fruitful though of little practical import without a feasible means for operationalising the ideas. A suitable suite of data is essential to giving life to the nine defined qualities of a successful student experience. Then to activate future success an effective platform is required to ensure that information is communicated in meaningful ways to as many people as possible who have the potential to benefit from higher education, and to individuals as they create a higher education experience.

Relevant and reasonably robust data must be available that support and advance the defined qualities of a successful student experience. An initial stocktake based on the consultations and fieldwork conducted in this study is

provided in Table 3 for just two of the nine qualities. Further information is available in the full project report, which can be obtained from the lead author.

The associated indicators provide important new analytical and actionable frames for discussing the student experience in Australia. They provide new means for correlating a range of demographic, contextual, or psychographic factors with various facets of the student experience. Specific metrics are then identified to underpin the indicators. The metrics offer quantitative potential for giving life to the indicators. These are sourced from large and under-utilised storehouses of data held in a variety of institutional systems.

As this shows, desired data can flow from a range of sources. Aspects of the qualities can be sourced from survey data, and from a range of enterprise systems. Additional data is needed in places, as is the need to integrate and organise existing data in new ways. Known problems surround the lack of integration across systems, the inability to capture online student learning undertaken in non-institutional platforms, the exploitation of data from ‘offline’ activities that may be captured by card swipe or other systems (Higher Education Commission 2016), and working through a complex set of institutional, academic, pedagogic, social, ethical and cultural issues (Prinsloo & Slade 2013).

**Table 3: Mapping of two qualities with indicators and data**

<b>Quality</b>	<b>Associated indicators</b>	<b>Data availability</b>	<b>Data needs</b>
Discovery	Specific indicators which underpin this quality include: development of new technical, generic and personal skills; advanced problem solving skills, production of	Based on audit of existing information, lagged data is available from national student and graduate surveys. There is a shortage of collected data that measures students’ capacity for discovery however internal data points including curriculum and assessment systems, and	Hence adequately assessing this quality would involve making available and integrating data collected by student surveys, institutional systems and commercial platforms.

Quality	Associated indicators	Data availability	Data needs
	body of creative academic work; understanding academic culture and expectations; and acquisition of new interests.	commercial online profiling platforms would yield richer information.	
Value	Specific indicators which underpin this quality include: graduate outcomes; course fees; course duration; work experience opportunities; physical and online facilities and services; perceptions of teacher quality; identification of study purpose aspirations; and student information.	Based on audit of existing information, lagged data is available from national student, graduate and employer surveys. Additional information could be gained from student service use and incidence of attendance, exit interviews, institutional alumni systems and social media platforms.	Hence adequately assessing this quality would involve making available, formalising and integrating data collected by national surveys, institutional systems and records, and commercial platforms.

The nine qualities map out facets of a successful student experience and for each of these it would be helpful to identify thresholds that signal transition from one level of experience to another. This exposes our adherence to a fundamental measurement assumption that gradations of ‘increasing experience’ can be specified for each quality. This does not imply that every student proceeds stepwise or even necessarily through each threshold, or that

each threshold is even meaningful for each student. It does imply a fundamental structure which underpins each quality and is relatively invariant across environments and people. This is uncontroversial if the thresholds are defined in sufficiently general ways than are able through the process of measurement to be particularised in relevant and helpful ways.

The process of defining these thresholds typically involves an iterative sequence of steps which involves:

- for each quality conceptualising experience transition thresholds—that is, for instance, clarifying what characterises low, medium and high forms of personalisation or value or opportunity;
- identifying or creating relevant data elements that have desirable technical properties—for instance, compiling information from student surveys and related systems into reporting resources;
- aligning data elements with each of the transition thresholds, giving consideration to appropriate assessment and reporting analyses and protocols;
- validating the alignment of data with qualities using validation and psychometric review;
- testing and refining the model in small-scale applications; then
- scaling the model for use in more general contexts.

The approach sketched above reflects the straightforward application of assessment science to build technical foundations for the nine qualities. It is important to follow such process in developing new student experience infrastructure, though this does not mean that the solution must be complex. The field of higher education student experience has a history of searching for more precision in evidence than is often warranted by quality of data—the pervasive (mis-use) of satisfaction data being a primary case in point. Identifying robust but parsimonious indicators of these facets of the student experience will do more to advance practice than searching for decimal-place differences on current metrics will ever achieve.

As well as this growth dimension, it is important that the transition through thresholds is interpreted in an individualised manner. People do not move at the same pace or even in the same way through common educational experiences (Sturtz 2008). Hence as flagged directly in one of the qualities,

there is the need for a highly individualised interpretation of student identity as part of the proposed model of student success. The idea of ‘intersectionality’ (Dill & Zambrana 2009), for instance, forwards an approach to identity that uses intersecting vectors of relevant information to account for differences in identity criteria to build complex pictures of who people are. Such identity delineation already abounds for anyone with an online presence, yet is just starting to emerge in higher education. Taking this approach helps move beyond bundling people into simplistic groups/boxes which fails to provide the nuance necessary for helping individuals succeed.

The ideas of profiles and journeys are useful tools for conveying this approach. Simply put, a profile can be envisaged as a dynamic complex of diverse attributes which portray an individual in relation to a successful student experience. A journey is a multiple branching pathway through a higher education process, from beginning to end. The idea of profiling ‘movements through journeys’ steps well beyond the idea of shifting ‘batched groups through lifecycles’. Together these two approaches may seem on first glance to unleash infinite complexity for conceptualising and managing each student’s experience, but the history in other industries implies otherwise. After initial reworking in terms of new processes, effective digitisation has been shown to yield substantial increases in productivity and quality of people’s purposeful interactions with organisations.

Different players will of course interface with this information in different ways. Indeed, understanding differences in perspectives and interpretation has proved to be an important part of how new forms of data are being positioned and developed in traditional/existing higher education structures (which are often changing themselves). It is important to design new approaches taking very seriously the demands of consequential validity. Technical development can then be driven by a clear sense of what should be achieved. The approach enacted in this study—involving reviews and discussions about research and practice, have sought to design an approach that yields meaningful insights to key stakeholders such as students, teachers, support staff, managers, leaders and the public at large. Understanding how these and other actors best harmonise, was an important facet of the final consultative phase of the project.

## **Articulating Enhancement Approaches**

To carry the desired change the agenda articulated in this paper must play out across many levels. Change of this scale needs to be deconstructed into several component initiatives. As evidenced in this project it involves working with vast numbers of people and organisations—academics, leaders, policymakers, industry, vendor firms, and most particularly students. It may require leading developments through various stages of acceptance, particularly when treading among sensitive matters like how to represent the value of an institution's provision.

Three initiatives were distilled from the preceding research, which seem helpful to propel future innovation. These could play out across institutions or perhaps even within specific campuses or disciplines. A suite of state-based workshops were convened to test and enrich these ideas advanced in this project. In this paper we describe two of the initiatives, with further information available to interested parties in the full project report (Coates, Kelly, Naylor & Borden 2017).

The first initiative involves 'institutional reshaping' which involves rebuilding institutions around students. There is little doubt that institutions and the people within them have an intrinsic drive to help people succeed. But this energy must be directed in the most effective ways. As suggested, entrenched myths and rituals are delivering diminishing returns and there is a need to step beyond these and try new and different ways. Providing fresh perspectives on the student experience, exciting as they may be, are not sufficient to activate major strategic or practical change. Hence an enhancement framework to clarify and exemplify opportunities for sustainable adoption was developed. The framework is fully articulated in the interim report titled 'Student Experience Enhancement Framework' (Borden, Coates, Kelly & Zilvinskis 2016).

The framework proposed a means to help institutions identify how they could build more evidence-based leadership of the student experience. It sought ways to create a collaborative culture of student success within a professional bureaucracy. Enhancing the student experience will only happen if the appropriate people talk to each other, share their understanding, and apply their expertise and diverse judgments to shape the institution's environment for student endeavour. It is crucial to focus to avoid or remedy 'organizational attention deficit disorder'. It is important to shift to a student-

centric perspective on the educational experience that encompasses a holistic frame familiar to students as they intersect with a broad range of processes and people, units and departments, platforms, services and requirements. Therefore, the enhancement framework envisions a ‘new order’ of institutional arrangements and capacities that support a more aligned focus on creating a culture for student success, and describes pathways for realising aspects of this vision.

Sometimes characterized as a cycle (for example, ‘plan, do, check, act’ or ‘plan, implement, review, improve’) (Deming 1994), enhancement practices are perhaps better conceptualized as a set of interconnected and interdependent spirals. Specific improvements spiral through iterations of improved performance and increased understanding within a context of leadership and executive management that seeks to optimise overall performance.

The framework which includes five stages:

1. Identifying priority areas for improvement and developing a shared vision for enhanced quality;
2. Taking stock by assessing the current status of the institution’s inputs, processes and outcomes in relation to the vision for improved quality;
3. Prioritising initiatives and selecting strategies for enacting improvements and developing action plans;
4. Implementing the action plans with fidelity, typically starting with a pilot or small scope project; and
5. Assessing the impact of the new processes and programs, making adjustments as needed, and scaling up.

The framework is expressed as a normative ideal. In its purest form, it requires institutions to operate in ways that are fundamentally different to how things are typically done. By describing such an ideal type, it is envisioned that individual institutions can apply the framework in select, priority areas and, through organizational learning, tailor the process to local contexts and expand upon enhancements. Institutions are never likely to reach the ideal type across all enterprise activities but can make significant progress toward enhancing the student experience—a critical aspect of operation that requires the greatest amount of coordination and collaboration across academic and administrative units.



In advancing this framework it is acknowledged that managing change within higher education institutions is fraught with peril (Borden, Calderon, Fourie, Lepori & Bonaccorsi 2013). The protective silos and other barriers to communication within these organizations serve to quell tensions that can arise from the diverse and sometimes competing objectives of units within the institution, given fixed resources and multiple mission objectives. Fostering the collaboration and communication required to create an institution-wide collaborative culture of student success can reveal tensions and conflicts that the existing order has successfully masked. Accordingly, effective change leadership is required to navigate these rough waters and so is also considered as a core aspect of the enhancement framework.

The second initiative involved creating an agency for student success. Australia has a rich tradition of innovation regarding the student experience and it is important there are means to sustain future development. As conveyed by the broad rationales shaping this project, leadership of the student experience must keep moving, and preferably be a step ahead of policy and practice. Research into past practice coupled with consultation during this project has highlighted helpful mechanisms. This section advances the need for a Student Agency focused specifically on promoting student success.

Thinking broadly, a handful of shared interests are required to sustain future work in this area. This study has affirmed the value of developing better advisory mechanisms. Without these the sector as a whole and public will suffer, yet improving these will build capacity and infrastructure within each institution. But even for this a substantial amount of technical work must be done by analysts to collate, prepare and report new insights in ways that address the concerns of stakeholders. Further concurrent work is needed to deploy emerging platforms to find how they can be shaped to ignite the interest of people in participating in higher education. This developmental work provides a shared platform for further multipronged development, including joint research, training programs, and a range of quality improvement practices.

It would appear that initiatives of this type are most successful when they are ‘co-created’ rather than ‘driven’ or ‘owned’ by an existing interested individual or organisation. In a nutshell, co-creation involves bringing interested people together to jointly develop a valued outcome. However, powerful agents in the tertiary ecosystem with enormous capacity to steer discourse, governments and institutions by themselves are unable to deliver the

required change. Students, the public, business and academics must be jointly part of future work on the student experience. Tertiary institutions have always had an intrinsic interest in helping students succeed but this has shaped up as a competitive frontier with changes in higher education markets and the broader economy. ‘Coopetition’, in the language of strategy, seems the best way forward.

Clearly, a structure is required to support this student experience work. In 2015, government in the United Kingdom proposed formation of an ‘Office for Students’ to embrace and advance broad work in this area (BIS 2015). Such development signals the lack of existing infrastructure, also the case in Australia. Many initiatives, networks and agencies touch parts of the future proposed in this project, though considered alone or together none are positioned to advance the full agenda. For instance, the Australian Universities Quality Agency used to host an annual forum and good practice database (AUQA 2010) which was not sustained when the agency was superseded by the Tertiary Education, Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA). Relevant research and engagement was stimulated by the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (Coates 2009), which in 2011 was institutionalised into the mandatory national University Experience Survey (Radloff *et al.* 2013) now conducted by generic research agencies sponsoring little broader capacity development. Technical facets of the proposed work might be advanced by the Australasian Association for Institutional Research (AAIR), though this community is changing given broader role and workforce shifts. The Higher Education Research Development Society of Australasia (HERDSA) is a scholarly society. The Australian Government has closed the Office for Learning and Teaching (which funded this project), and the Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching (QILT) website is a decontextualized initiative in need of major reform and repositioning to meet the future needs exposed through this project. Graduate Careers Australia (GCA) focuses on the graduate experience. Tertiary Admissions Centres (TACs) are owned by universities and focus on applications and admissions. Major student groups focus much more on political advocacy rather than broader capacity development. Commercial conferences have proliferated but these pay dividends to host organisations rather than the broader community and several agencies exist to lead research. It is revealing that Australia lacks an agency dedicated to advancing the interests of students.

Given the growing role students play investing in and creating higher education, there is strong case for an agency that exists to advance their interests. The government, leadership and management of such an agency must be carefully planned. The above remarks portend it should have a not-for-profit status. Additional work is required to clarify the nature and remit of such an organisation, and whether it might be aligned with an existing capability. A suitably governed network might be established which has as its mission the advancement of a broad suite of innovative work on the successful student experience. In this connection it is difficult to ignore persistent bi-partisan political calls for an expert higher education advisory body which is independent of both governments and the sector. A commercial option might prevail, considering the powerful role that online job boards have grown to play in people's lives.

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# Exploring the Educational Engagement Practices of Disadvantaged Students at a South African University

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## **Abstract**

This article discusses the educational engagement practices of disadvantaged first-generation students at a South African university. Based on qualitative research conducted in the interpretive tradition and using interviews and focus groups with selected students, this article explores how disadvantaged students engage with the education and support structures at the university. Drawing on Bourdieu's (1990; 2000) analytical tools of field, capital and habitus, it explores how students are able to produce practices and dispositions to develop their educational engagement within the university. The article highlights the varied and uneven field conditions of the university in terms of which the students had to navigate their university studies. Their responses to these conditions were strategically directed towards narrowly focusing on, and maximizing, their academic commitments to their studies. This resulted in minimal and halting engagement with the university's social support services. The article demonstrates the significance of the students' complex engagements with their lecturers, active and productive interaction with their student peers and the academic support offered by the university's Teaching and Learning unit. These were central to their engagement practices at the university. The article illustrates the students' acquisition of strategic emergent academic dispositions in an uneven university field. These dispositions, we argue, are crucial to them establishing productive educational paths at the university.

**Keywords:** disadvantaged students, educational engagements, university support structures, peer engagement

## **Introduction**

After 1994 South African universities embarked on a process to increase access to higher education for students from disadvantaged backgrounds (see Cloete *et al.* 2004). However, there have been a range of reasons why such efforts have not made much progress. Seepe (2000) suggest that South Africa's universities are not optimally prepared for these 'newer' types of students who are mainly from township school backgrounds. Krause (2005) points out that the culture of higher institutions is foreign and alienating to first-generation university students from disadvantaged communities as they lack the social and cultural capital to engage effectively at university. Smit (2011) thus questions the adequacy of the response of higher education institutions to disadvantaged students and the nature of the support they provide.

A review of the literature shows that research on educational engagement and student support mostly focuses on what the institutions and students should do to facilitate students' engagement with the university (Trowler 2010). A study by Leach and Zepke (2011) highlights how non-institutional factors such as students' financial problems, their family responsibilities and the impact of poverty influence students' educational experiences. Kuh (2009) suggests that the time and effort students spend on their study activities have consequences for their educational success. Bozalek (2009) focuses on what students can do to enhance their educational experiences at university. She suggests that active participation, shared learning and securing financial assistance are strategies that students employ for successful study. Solomonides (2013) discusses the affective dimensions of student engagement. Work on schooling contexts highlights the importance of behavioural, academic, psychological and cognitive aspects as key to understanding student engagement (see Christenden, Reschly & Wylie 2012; Fredericks, Blumenfeld & Paris 2004; Lawson & Lawson 2013).

What we miss in the extant literature is students' accounts of their experiences and educational engagement practices at the university. This article thus focuses on students' agency and capacity to engage in their education at the university. It focuses on the educational engagement practices of first-generation students from low socio-economic backgrounds at one South African university. The article explores the ways in which they are able to navigate the university's educational infrastructure. Educational engagement here refers to the practices that students establish to access and

engage with the university as well as its support infrastructure, which is meant to provide them with their ‘opportunity to learn’ (Boykin & Noguera, 2011: 1).

To make sense of how students are positioned at and by the university, as well as how students position themselves, this study draws on the work of Bourdieu (1990; 2000). Using qualitative research methods, we show how students engage the institution’s enablements and constraints in interacting with the university’s academic and institutional structures. Our main finding is that they actively go about establishing productive engagements to strengthen their academic performance despite the uneven educational support environment at this particular university. Understanding how students engage within the institutional terrain is key to understanding the resources that they draw on and the activities they are able to generate to advance their education at the university. We argue that the selected students discussed in this article developed emergent forms of engagement that enabled them to establish productive educational paths at the university.

## **The Context and Participants of the Study**

The university that forms the context for researching this phenomenon is in the Western Cape Province. In addition to its regular programmes, the university offers an alternative, longer programme for students who do not qualify for admission, namely the Extended Curriculum Programme (ECP). The ECP allows students who do not meet the requirements to enter the mainstream programme to register for a four-year diploma via this alternate route. The students on the ECP follow a similar curriculum to the mainstream programmes, but all their semester subjects are extended to a year. This allows lecturers to provide additional support in the form of tutorials, mentoring, technological support and service learning modules. The programme has a separate timetable during the first and second years with dedicated lecturers. Lecturers attend developmental workshops that support their pedagogical approaches towards teaching these students. They are encouraged to give concerted targeted support to the students via the use of innovative teaching methods.

The participants of the study were selected from the Extended Curriculum Programme (ECP) and were registered for courses in the Applied Sciences Faculty. They receive additional learning support in modules such as



Physical Science, Mathematics and other modules related to their specific areas of study. The participants were all township school graduates. They obtained lower than required scores for Mathematics and Physical Science in their high school matric examination. Despite their lower matric results in these two key science subjects, they still wanted to apply for courses in the applied sciences field. They made a conscious decision to be part of the ECP, even if that meant that they would have to spend an extra year at university. The students regarded their admission to the ECP as a 'second chance' and an opportunity to compensate for the low marks they received in high school.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Bourdieu's (1990) concepts of field, capital and habitus informed our understanding of the strategies that disadvantaged students employ to develop their educational engagements at the university. Bourdieu proposed that:

in order to understand interactions between people or to explain an event or social phenomena it was insufficient to look at what was said and what happened. It became necessary to examine the social spaces in which interactions, transactions and events occurred. (in Thomson 2014: 65)

The concept of field is an essential part of Bourdieu's analytical toolbox to explain individuals' interactions with the social structure. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992: 97) define the concept 'field' as:

a network of objective historical relations between positions. These positions are objectively defined, in their existence and in the determinations they impose upon their occupants, agents and institutions, by their present and potential situations in the structure of the distribution of species of power (or capital), whose possession commands access to specific profits that are at stake in the field as well as by their objective relation to other positions (domination, subordination, homology).

Field thus refers to the social space as made up of institutions, situations, power

and people's practices. This study's 'field' is the university's educational platform, which includes the courses that the selected students are registered for, the teaching and learning support services, and other support services at the university. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) compares field to a game guided by rules and field positions for the various players who participate. The positions they occupy in the game determine their actions. However, in contrast to the rigidity of the game, field is 'much more fluid and complex than any game that one might ever design' (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992: 104). Therefore Bourdieu (2005: 148) maintains that it is necessary to 'examine the social space' in order to understand social practices in the field.

Furthermore, Bourdieu suggests that the game that occurs in social spaces is competitive and that players use various strategies to maintain or improve their field position. The analogy of the field and the field positions of players are useful in a study that seeks to understand how first-generation students who gained access to the university through admission into an extended curriculum programme (ECP) navigate this social space. The focus in this article is on how and in what ways they are able to engage in their education at the university.

Bourdieu (1990) argues that individuals are always in the process of producing capital in the field, by which he means investments in social field. He argues that individuals are in the process of producing differing amounts and quality of capital to engage in the field, and that some even have 'trump cards' (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992: 98). According to Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), capital functions as power over a field and the more capital an agent is able to access and amass, the more power he or she will be able to exert in the game. However, students from low socioeconomic backgrounds might not have the extensive capital possessed by middle-class students, but they do have what Yosso (2005) calls community cultural wealth to draw on. Bourdieu and Passeron (1977: 8) argue that the 'cultural capital of different social groups are unevenly valued in society, and that the value placed on any particular form of cultural capital is arbitrary – that is, it cannot be deduced from any universal principle, whether physical, biological or spiritual'. Giving more value to one group over another creates conflict and points of struggle among the different social class groups in the social. Bourdieu (1990) argues that practices are generated in the interaction of habitus, capital and field. He suggests that there are different power dynamics and conflicts within the field and individuals enter into formal agreements in the game and have a vested

interest in the game. While the ‘field’ is the terrain for Bourdieu’s ‘logic of practice’ (1990: 80), habitus is introduced as a related concept to understand human actions in relation to the social structures that they are a part of.

Bourdieu (1990: 86) defines the individual’s habitus as ‘ways of standing, speaking, walking, and thereby of feeling and thinking’ and adds that habitus ‘refers to something historical, it is linked to individual history’. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992: 126) suggest that ‘to speak of habitus is to assert that the individual, and even the personal, the subjective, is social, collective. Habitus is socialized subjectivity’. Bourdieu describes habitus as a ‘feel for the game’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 28). He regards the ability of the individual to read the field as the function of her habitus. Bourdieu (1993: 87) indicates that individuals have various dispositions towards the game and argues that ‘dispositions or tendencies are durable in that they last over time, and are transportable in being capable of becoming active within a wide variety of theatres of social action’. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) argue that the relation between habitus and field is crucial for understanding how practices occur in social spaces. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992: 127) suggest that the relation between habitus and field operates in two ways.

On one side, it is a relation of conditioning: the field structures the habitus, which is the product of the embodiment of the immanent necessity of a field or of a set of intersecting fields, the extent of their intersection or discrepancy being at the root of a divided or even torn habitus. On the other side, it is the relation of knowledge or cognitive construction. Habitus contributes to constituting the field as a meaningful world, a world endowed with senses and value, in which it is worth investing one’s energy.

Maton (2014: 50) describes Bourdieu’s notion of habitus as ‘structured by material conditions of existence and generates practices, beliefs, perceptions, feelings and so forth in accordance with its own structure’. He explains that Bourdieu’s notion of ‘field’ refers to ‘part of the on-going contexts in which we live, structures the habitus, while at the same time the habitus is the basis for actors’ understanding of their lives, including the field’ (Maton 2014: 51). For Bourdieu (2000: 150-151) the relation between habitus and field can be regarded as ‘a meeting of two evolving logics and histories’. In the evolving higher education space the habitus of students is constantly emerging and

reproducing educational capital and practices. The students' unfolding engagement practices therefore focuses on how their habitus emerges and adapts in interaction with the university field.

Thus, like Bourdieu (1977: 72), we see institutional space as a 'strategy-generating principle enabling agents to cope with unforeseen and ever changing situations'. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992: 129) suggest that individuals adopt strategies to find a 'feel for the game'. They define strategies as 'objectively orientated lines of action which the social agents continually construct in and through practice' (1992: 129). Jenkins (1992: 51) suggests that, according to Bourdieu, strategies are 'the on-going result of the interaction between the dispositions of the habitus and the constraints and possibilities which are the reality of any given social field'. Bourdieu explains that individuals are involved in a 'strategic calculation of costs and benefits' (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992: 131). By employing Bourdieu's analytical tools of field, capital and habitus, this article explores the strategies and activities that disadvantaged students utilise to develop their educational engagements with the university. His analytical tools allow us to discuss how students are able to produce practices and dispositions by which they are able to access and engage the university as a 'field'.

## **Research Design and Methodology**

This study followed a qualitative, interpretative methodological approach to understanding the educational engagement practices of disadvantaged first generation students at the university. The sample population was senior students in their fourth year of study who participated in a mentoring programme. From this group seven students were purposively selected based on the criterion that they were first-generation students who came from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Purposive selection emphasises information-rich participants (Patton 2002), which allowed us to gain an in depth understanding of their educational engagement strategies. Of the seven participants, five were from the Western Cape Province and were Xhosa speakers. The other two students come from the Gauteng province and were Tswana speakers. The latter two lived at the university's residence. Pseudonyms were assigned for all participants.

Bourdieu's analytical framework was employed to interpret the data on how students engage with the institutional context as a space that structures

the habitus within which they navigate the world of being a student. The methods of data collection were appropriate for this purpose, as interviews gave the participants the opportunity to express themselves and share their opinions on important events associated with their educational engagement at the university.

Leach and Zepke's (2011) student engagement model was used as an organising framework for the semi-structured interview questions and the focus group discussion. This model focuses on significant aspects of engagement at the university such as students' transactions with lecturers as well as with peers, the institutional support offered to students at universities, and the non-institutional factors such as the support of family and friends, and the impact of poverty on students' educational experiences at the university. Leach and Zepke's (2011) model allowed us to understand the various spaces and places students were able to access and utilise for their educational engagement, i.e. the fields and capitals which they were able to mobilise in building up their habitus. The semi-structured interviews enabled us to elicit responses from students about their educational engagement practices and also assisted us to better understand and explain the broader university contexts in which these practices occur. We focused on the participants' perspectives, meanings and subjective views. Patton (2015: 8) notes that 'looking for patterns in what human beings do and think, and examining the implications of those patterns, are some of the basic contributions of qualitative inquiry. The focus group discussion allowed us to clarify targeted issues that came out of the semi-structured interviews that we wanted to probe further. Okeke and Van Wyk (2015: 340) point out that focus group discussions assist in establishing 'multiple understandings and meanings'. The focus group discussion thus elicited further discussion on aspects that emerged from the interviews which needed more clarification. For these reasons we used semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions to obtain data about the types of educational practices participants produced while they were studying at the university.

Data were collected on their interactions and engagements with the university's support structures, lecturers and fellow students. Important concepts and themes were extracted and patterns of data were highlighted; similar ideas were then grouped together and themes were developed. We explored situations that could potentially inform us about students' engagement with lecturers, their interaction with their peers, and their

engagement with the support campus structures such as the counselling centres, computer laboratories, writing centres, residences and their off-campus life as these affect their university education. These themes enabled us to offer an analysis to achieve our research objective, which was to explore the ways students were able to establish their engagement practices with reference to the university's support platforms. The themes highlighted were (1) active strategies to engage lecturers, (2) seeking support from significant others, (3) seeking support from older students, (4) pedagogical engagement with peers, (4) difficulty accessing and utilising support structures such as sport and religious organisations at the university, (5) struggling to engage effectively in the residences, and (6) time constraints experienced by off-campus students. These themes enabled us to inductively analyse how they mapped and established their engagement practices at the university. This involved reading and comparing our data with the theoretical frameworks that we employed for the research (Taylor & Bodgan 1984: 127). Our inductive approach enabled us to analyse the data and generate analytical categories to elucidate our research focus and questions (Patton 2015: 548). In the section that follows we discuss the three themes that emerged from the data.

## **Students' Tentative Engagements with the University's Support Structures**

Tinto (1993) suggests that students' integration into social and academic life provides them with a strong sense of commitment to their institutional experiences and enables them to become competent members of the academic community. Our exploration of this shows that the participants were directed towards the institutional support services through the orientation programmes offered to first-year students. The students were given a brief overview of the types of support they could access. Students reported that they used the library to borrow books, meet with their study group, and search for journal articles, and access computers and the university's e-learning platforms. They indicated that they particularly used the library to meet with students for group projects and larger research projects. They made use of the learner management system (LMS) to access assessment information, announcements from lecturers and class notes. Naledi explained that during her first year of study the use of the LMS gave her opportunities to use the library's computer facilities. She explained that:

## *Exploring the Educational Engagement Practices of Disadvantaged Students*

Blackboard gave me the influence of being in front of a computer almost every day; I had access to the announcement and could wait for the marks - so it gives me that feeling of using computers.

The research participants were compelled to complete a basic computer skills course during their first year of university study. None of them had prior access to computers during their high school years. During their four years at the institution their on-going exposure to computers for their learning gave them the computer skills necessary for university study. By their final year most of the participants had acquired personal laptops, which further facilitated access to the university's learning resources.

The students reported that they sought the support of the Teaching and Learning Unit (TLU) at the university for tutorials and for writing support. They stated that their department formally arranged with the TLU to offer their students writing, tutorial and mentorship support. Musa explained that he came to the TLU regularly to submit writing reports and that the department allocated a certain percentage towards their final marks if these reports had been submitted to the TLU for advice and improvement. Naledi expressed her appreciation for the tutorial support by explaining that she thought that 'the TLU has faith in young people'. She felt that such support gave her confidence to continue her studies. The students had a chance to engage with the writing consultants, tutors and mentees who were provided by the TLU. It was clear that for these students' activities such as tutoring, mentoring and writing support were a crucial addition to their overall curriculum experiences and they established productive relationships with the TLU based services.

Although the students made use of the academic services, they struggled to make use of the counselling services offered by the institution. All students were aware of the counselling services and that they are available for voluntary and confidential access. Noluthando and Naledi both attempted to consult with a counsellor at the start of their studies. Noluthando indicated that she struggled to cope with her first year of study, because she was working and studying at the same time. She made an appointment to see the counsellor but did not meet up with the counsellor when it was time for her appointment due to time constraints. Naledi intended to access the counselling services for assistance during her second year of study, but failed to arrange an appointment. Despite having access to the services, Naledi did not seek the help that she needed. These students attempted to get a sense of the resources

at the university in order to access the services available to them. Their lack of action and follow-through suggests that they did not always explore or utilise the counselling and other similar services for a more optimal university experience.

Most of the participants live off campus, a situation that hampered their opportunities to become involved in social activities on campus. They often had late afternoon classes and had to travel long distances to get home. Musa explained why it was difficult for him to get involved in other social activities on campus by saying that his ‘classes were ending at four and I had to travel and the trains, sometimes they delay a lot and I’m arriving at home eight o’clock. So I thought I will never make it’. Similarly, Noluthando wanted to get involved in social group activity but was constrained by the long distances she had to travel to get home. Sifiso was willing to get involved in campus organisations but spent a substantial amount of time travelling to and from campus with public transport. The students had to fit in their studies around their travelling time. Social participation was difficult for them because of poor transport services to and from campus.

Leach and Zepke (2011) suggest that non-institutional challenges such as these are important to acknowledge when discussing students’ engagement. They point to the ‘complex interaction between the personal and contextual factors’ (2011: 200) that characterise students’ university experiences. The selected students were confronted with difficult daily socioeconomic circumstances which impacted on their university life. On the other hand, those students who lived in the university residences participated in selected activities at the university. Thabisa and Sindiswa, who stayed on at the residence until their final year, joined the residence netball team. They did not have a formal coach but they would occasionally participate in practice sessions and matches amongst students at the residence. They explained that other students were not fully committed to participating in the games and that the netball matches were organised on casual basis. Their remarks show that despite living on campus they found it difficult to commit to participating in sport activities.

The research participants’ tentative engagements with available social support structures can be attributed to their lack of knowledge about how to access them as well as the time constraints that prevented them from fully accessing the services and activities, even though information about these services and activities were given to them during the orientation programmes.



de Certeau (1984) refers to this type of information as ‘tour knowledge’, referring to knowledge given via once-off impersonal instruction about the availability of resources, physical and social spaces, and other generic information. Such information or knowledge does not in itself capacitate the students to properly access and use these resources and service. The students were not provided with any type of ‘map knowledge’, which refers to detailed understanding of what is required to successfully navigate and maximise behaviour in social spaces (de Certeau, 1984). They did not get exposure to the type of knowledge and information for them to develop the necessary capacity or interpersonal skills to access and utilise the university’s services.

Tinto (2008: 26) suggests that ‘students need to benefit from social support services, including academic advice, personal and career counselling’. Our data show that the students prioritised their academic work over social activities. They did not recognise the social support services as essential to their university education and were uncertain about how to explore the social support structures. The students’ attempt to develop ‘a sense of the game’ was constrained by limited access to the social support within these structures. They displayed only minimal or tentative interest about, and involvement in, social activities at the university as they had to focus their time and energy on their academic work. Bourdieu refers to this type of behaviour as resulting from a ‘strategic calculation of costs and benefits’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992: 133), which arises out of their habitus.

They calculated that it would be in their best interest to give precedence to the development of their academic capacity by utilising the university’s academic support structures such as the TLU mentoring and tutoring services. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) argue that meaningful social action is only possible through access to forms of capital that are recognised in the field. The students identified the TLU as the space in which they would acquire the ‘capital’ necessary for success in their course. In the absence of a type of ‘map knowledge’ with regard to the other social support services on campus, they focused their engagement on their academic commitments, which is a reflection of their one-dimensional type of engagement at the university. In the next section, we focus on the strategies that the students adopted to engage with lecturers teaching their courses.

## **Students’ Strategies to Engage Lecturers**

This theme explores how the students engage with their ECP lecturers around

module content and learning, and sheds light on the ways, and extent to which, the students were able to actively leverage university support for their academic development. Leach and Zepke (2011) conceptualise students' engagement with lecturers as a type of lecturer-student transaction entered into by two parties. Our data show that students' consultations with lecturers were crucial to their educational engagement activities. Musa consulted with his Food Chemistry and Microbiology lecturers because he needed to familiarise himself with the scientific terms used on these modules. Musa explained:

I had a problem with the Food Chemistry. So she [the lecturer] said I must make sure that every day I am looking after Food Chemistry, because Food Chemistry it's more scientific, so it needs time, same as Micro [biology]. So, I treated Food Chemistry same as Micro because when I was studying Micro, I had a problem with it but the more I put time into it, at least I was having a better understanding.

Musa's statement shows that through consultation with these two lecturers he was able to understand the importance of investing more time in some subjects in order to pass. Sindiswa consulted a lecturer because she found a module challenging. Through dialogue and discussions with the lecturer Sindiswa attempted to clarify her understanding of aspects of the module's content. Though she found reaching out to her lecturer challenging, she also knew that if she wanted to pass, she had to 'keep on making sure that whatever I'm doing is right and I understand it'. Thabisa's interaction with the lecturer showed her persistence and determination to understand the subject.

Naledi chose to discuss her study methods with her Microbiology lecturer. She explained her study strategies to the lecturer and requested guidance about how to study for Microbiology. According to Naledi, the lecturer emphasised the importance of memorising key concepts at the initial stages of studying. She reported that the lecturer cautioned her about writing down too much information and that; instead, memorising was crucial at this early stage of learning the subject. Naledi stated that:

... when she looked at my summaries she said I did – I include a lot of information and unnecessary information. She said this information is too much; you won't be able to know this information.

Naledi's interaction demonstrated the importance of receiving clear guidance from lecturers about appropriate study techniques.

Another significant feature of the data was reports by some of the participants that they consulted with lecturers for their own as well as their study group's benefit. Students felt that they needed to report back to their groups any information or skills that lecturers gave them during consultations. Sifiso pointed out that:

the lecturer knows that you are here for yourself and you are here for the rest of your study group. So when she or he explains it, she or he was explaining it in a way that you must get it.

Sifiso explained that he consulted with lecturers with the view of giving feedback to his study group. Sindiswa developed a similar strategy. She provided the group detailed feedback about their lecturers' comments. The interviewed students consulted more readily with approachable lecturers who they felt were open to interacting productively with them. Thabisa referred to two lecturers whom she admired and who motivated her. She was impressed by these lecturers' commitment to connecting community-based initiatives to the lecture content, which made this module meaningful and the lecturers accessible to her. According to the students, supportive and engaging lecturers were easier to approach for assistance with the problems that they experienced with their learning.

Assessment feedback from their lecturers was an important area of students' engagement with the lecturers. Students regarded the post-test feedback discussions as a space for engagement and dialogue. Musa explained the value of post-test feedback:

And also what I like about lecturers, after assessment, you go through the question paper and you do some corrections and look at a better way to look at the problem because sometimes you understand it, the concept but not the question in the exam.

Musa's comments showed that he considered his discussions with lecturers after assessments as a vital part of his learning. His engagement with lecturers after tests showed how he was beginning to learn to take up the types of practices crucial for acquiring the kind of academic disposition that would

enable him to succeed at his studies.

The participants were encouraged by their lecturers to conform to the academic rules and processes within the departments. The students decided, in turn, to participate actively in these processes, in other words to ‘play the game’ necessary for their learning engagement. Some of the lecturers were aware of the responsibilities to provide support to these students and consequently offered one-on-one consultations, extra explanation, second assignment opportunities and writing support. The students explained that it was through using these support mechanisms that they were able to develop the required academic dispositions which placed them in a position to make their way productively through their various modules. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992: 133) refer to this dispositional acquisition as part of engaging in habitus formation via ‘an open system of dispositions that is constantly subjected to experiences, and constantly affected by them in a way that either reinforces or modifies its structures’. The support offered by the lecturers in these courses had a direct impact on the students’ capacity for improving and augmenting their academic engagement, which played a key role in shaping their habitus in the university context.

Not all encounters with their lecturers were positive and beneficial. In one course, in particular, they were never given the opportunity to consult with their lecturers. These lecturers were described as unfriendly and unapproachable. Pulane explained that the lecturers were largely white lecturers and mostly spoke Afrikaans:

We only understand English and they will speak Afrikaans even in practicals and they will say in Afrikaans it’s like this. I didn’t do Afrikaans in high school. It’s unfair.

Pulane’s comment showed that she felt excluded and unrecognised when lecturers used another language. This affected her academic engagement negatively, which resulted in her failing the subject. Bourdieu (1977: 78) describes this type of experience as ‘hysteresis’, with reference to a situation ‘when practices are always liable to incur negative sanctions when the environment with which they are actually confronted is too distant from that in which they are objectively fitted’. Pulane experienced a sense of disconnection, which, according to her, added to her difficulty with this course.

In addition to these negative comments, Pulane and Noluthando also

experienced negative post-test feedback from their lecturers. This compelled Noluthando to adopt a courageous stance towards her lecturers. Noluthando explained:

The Biochemistry teacher wrote, ‘that is rubbish’ all over my script. He wrote rubbish. I showed the (HOD). It was very bad and it’s not like I wrote something that was out of context or... But he must not do that, it’s not nice because as a student... they are supposed to motivate us and when he wrote I’m writing rubbish, how’s that going to motivate me?

Though Noluthando was severely affected by the comment of the lecturer, she still went to the Head of Department to complain about this treatment. Her actions showed that she had the courage to speak out and took the risk of being victimised further. Speaking out was her way of resisting the destructive manner in which she was assessed. She hoped that this would result in improved interactions with the lecturer. She felt that asserting herself was important for herself as well as for future students, so that they would not experience a similar fate. Her ability to confront the department about her treatment by the lecturer meant that she took strategic action to challenge some of the rules and attitudes in the department.

Similarly, Pulane experienced a lack of support from the course lecturer when she wanted feedback after she failed a test. She consulted the lecturer and challenged her assessment mark; the lecturer responded by referring to the procedures and rules of assessment, which prevented her from gaining access to her script. The attitude of the lecturers towards the students meant that the students confronted a different ‘field condition’, which resulted in a ‘disruption between the habitus and the field’ (Hardy, 2014: 127). Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992: 105) describe these types of actions as ‘position-takings or ‘stances, i.e. the structured system of practices and expressions of agents’. These students, when faced with constraints in the department, chose to confront the lecturer, whom they experienced as acting against their interests. Their ability to speak up and challenge the way lecturers engaged with them shows that students relied on their ‘resistant capital’ (Yosso 2005) to engage with the lectures. Our data thus show that resistance and contestation are aspects of the educational engagement practices amongst the selected students.

In this section we discussed the students' engagement with lecturers on the ECP at the university. We showed the complex forms of transactions between students and lecturers on the ECP course. The data show that when students are faced with supportive lecturers there is greater scope for the development of academic dispositions and engagement. On the other hand, in the absence of lecturer support, some of the students developed the ability to challenge unfair practices, which in turn influenced the types of educational engagement practices they are able to generate. The uneven forms of lecturer support in different courses in the ECP had consequences for the types of interactions the students had with lecturers and their educational outlook. Although the students developed various dispositions and qualities to address the difficulties that they experienced in their course, they sometimes faced constraints that impacted on their ability access the resources to succeed on the course. The students' actions in addressing these structural constraints show that they sometimes had to contest some of the unjust practices.

### **Engaging with their Peers: Student-to-student Engagement**

An important finding of the study is that the participants' peer engagement and support practices were significant aspects of their engagement stances at the university. Odey and Carey (2013: 294) suggest that 'the journey through peer support focuses on growth in which an individual is still advancing and deepening their own learning through peer interaction'. The data show how these students use various strategies amongst themselves to establish their educational practices at university.

One of these strategies was to form study groups consisting of three to five students. When asked why they joined these groups, they said that the study groups gave them a sense of belonging and recognition. They also felt that their student peers' explanations gave them a better understanding of the content of their modules. Musa's explained that he is:

not sure whether a lecturer explains it differently or what, but when you're in a study group and someone explains it to you, it's easy to understand, since it's just a small group then that's why it's easy to understand.

Sifiso reported that the study group enabled him to ask questions and to express

his opinion about the course content. He further explained that when he was in the study group he had more chances of repeating information and ideas and that the study group was a less pressurised environment and thus beneficial to him.

Noluthando preferred to be part of a small study group of three. She used to rely on old question papers to study, but when she joined the study group she realised the importance of debate and discussion for her learning. This indicated a shift in her learning practices from a more superficial approach to learning towards an emphasis on deeper dialogue and discussion.

Thabisa was part of two study groups, one consisting of students from her class and the second of students at her residence. She found the learning opportunities provided by both groups fruitful, but preferred the smaller study group from her class. Study groups were an essential learning space for the selected students and membership of the group was based on whether students worked well together. Sindiswa pointed out how students would gather together spontaneously outside the classroom and explain difficult concepts amongst themselves:

I learnt from other students as well. Like those, you know, Physics when maybe I didn't get something in class we'd go – we'd sit on the benches, we'd sit and then if somebody knows or gets the concept then they'd explain.

Sindiswa's statement indicates the significance of informal study groups outside the classroom and students' willingness to participate and learn from other students.

Another significant feature of the data was that some students sought the support of an academically stronger student and senior students to assist them their studies. Noluthando pointed out that she initially did not have a learning strategy. She described her reading as 'I would just take the notes and study like studying a magazine. I didn't have a know how to study'. She approached an ECP student who was performing well on the course for help. Naledi expressed a similar strategy by seeking support from older students. She explained her rationale for approaching the senior students, 'you must talk to your seniors and ask like previous question papers so that you can know the structures – how does that lecture set the paper'. Naledi and Noluthando were able to communicate with, and seek the support of other, often older, students.

This they regarded as a key support strategy to bolster their learning.

The students were able to find other avenues of engagement besides study groups for support and encouragement. Through dialogue and discussion with the older students they managed to discuss different learning approaches as well as the expectations and challenges of the course. Connecting and forming relations with other students indicated that the students were able to recognise other peers as essential to their learning. These distinct practices were part of their strategy to build and discover their pedagogical voices and agency. They were able to ask questions and to repeat certain aspects that they did not understand. Students connected with other students to ensure engagement with the academic work. Barnett (2007: 55) refers to students who begin to discover and develop their academic capability as people with ‘a voice just waiting to emerge’. Their pedagogical voices were developing with the support and encouragement of informal mentors and tutors, and in active conversation with their fellow student peers.

In this section we presented data that showed that the students were able to connect with peers to enhance their academic development. These strategies were vital to their emerging academic habitus to ‘provide a basis for the generation of practices’ (Jenkins 1992: 48). The conditions within the field of the ECP course such as the formal opportunities made available on the timetable for students to engage with other peers enabled participants to develop a sense of solidarity and create opportunities to engage amongst themselves. Their encounters within the supportive ECP structures allowed them to generate educational practices which were essential for their engagement with the university. According to Bourdieu, ‘habitus becomes active in relation to a field, and the same habitus can lead to very different practices and stances depending on the state of the field’ (in Reay 2004: 432). The ECP provided the academic support bases for students to develop their habitus and to establish their emergent educational engagements and academic dispositions. The students connected with like-minded peers, older students and academically stronger students to advance their learning. These types of academic dispositions, we argue, were essential practices when more time and space were given to students to engage among themselves.

## **Conclusion**

In this article we discussed the educational engagement practices of disad-



vantaged students by using Bourdieu's (1990; 2000) concepts of field, habitus and capital to analyse how students were able to engage in their education at the university. The article argues that the nature of students' educational engagement practices must be seen in relation to the 'field conditions' that students encounter at the university. The findings show that there were various resources that the students drew on and activities they were able to generate for their education. We highlighted the students' accounts of their engagement with the university's education support structures and platforms as a significant perspective. We illustrated how their subjective educational engagements were established in the light of their active, albeit uneven, interactions with the social spaces of the university. It was from this interaction that their emergent and productive educational engagements were generated.

As first-generation students they entered the university as alternative access students in need of extra assistance and were directed to the ECP. They made strategic choices about the ways in which they engage in the social spaces of the university. They were always narrowly focused on obtaining the necessary academic capital for their academic success. The students cultivated a keen sense of engagement with the educational support structures that directly benefited their academic commitments such as the TLU, the library and LMS but found it difficult to engage in the social support structures such as counselling services. The analysis illustrates that in the absence of the institutional capacity to enable them to access the social support structures; they either opted out of accessing these structures or interacted with them in them in superficial ways. As the example of their interaction with their lecturers highlight, the students familiarised themselves with the university or course rules and expectations in order to acquire the necessary practices to succeed at their university studies. Some of the participants also became empowered enough to question unfair practices and to challenge negative responses to their work. Thus, despite adopting strategic actions that would augment their studies, some students also did not hesitate to question lecturers and departments if they felt these impeded their progress. It is clear that the students were able to activate educational practices within supportive structures of their courses and amongst themselves by forming study groups, participating in group work and purposefully seeking informal mentors and tutors. These educational engagement practices show the emerging academic dispositions among the students in terms of which they were able to generate strategic engagement practices in support of their university study.

The article raises important questions about the uneven and disparate educational support environments that disadvantaged students encounter in their university education. The article points to the potential of supportive educational environments in activating students' emerging academic dispositions. One key suggestion emanating from this research is that universities should actively recognise the importance of strengthening their support platforms as pivotal in enabling their students to intensify their educational engagements for successful university study. This would involve providing support for optimal access to course learning, lecturers taking care and showing concern in their dealing with the requirements of these students, and providing knowledge and opportunities to encourage students' active participation in the university's support programmes and extra-mural activities. Leveraging the university as a productive academic field would more adequately enable students to establish their educational practices for success.

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*Exploring the Educational Engagement Practices of Disadvantaged Students*

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# **Policy for Prevention of Sexual Assault on Campus: Higher Education Students' Perspectives**

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## **Abstract**

Crucial to genuine transformation at higher education institutions is a commitment to eradicating sexual violence and creating safe, democratic spaces within which the institutions' broader goals may be realised. Sexual assault is a serious concern at higher education institutions and requires a comprehensive approach to address it. The aim of this article is to elucidate students' perspectives on the need for a separate sexual assault policy at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN). Gaining the perspectives of students serves as a catalyst for sexual assault policy formulation and institutional development. In this article we draw on data generated within a larger project that focuses on addressing gender violence at UKZN. We report on a study which is located at a selected UKZN campus, and utilised an online survey which was distributed via a hyperlink accessed through student emails. Analysis is based on the responses of 265 undergraduate students in the School of Education. The findings suggest that higher education students view a sexual assault policy as a fundamental institutional obligation that has the potential to educate the university community about how to identify, prevent, report on and deal with sexual assault. Students suggest that the existing policy on sexual harassment is inadequate as a form of protection, poorly enforced, and has weak reporting mechanisms. They stress an urgent need for development of a specific sexual assault policy at UKZN that is widely communicated and

engaged with. The development of a sexual assault policy which has significance for victims and (potential) perpetrators can be informed by considering students' reflections on the personal, social, cultural and institutional elements that increase their vulnerability to sexual offences.

**Keywords:** Policy formulation, sexual assault, higher education institutions, student perspectives on policy, institutional research

## **Introduction**

*UKZN needs a policy on sexual assault because it's real and it's happening a lot on this campus* (female student, participant 51 [f51])

The exceptionally high incidence of sexual crimes in South Africa has precipitated a multitude of law reforms, scholarly and parliamentary discussions and policy initiatives. Within the South African higher education institution (HEI) context, we argue that it is imperative to engage with students' perspectives as catalysts for related policy formulation at the institutional level. We contend that in order to purge the unacceptably high rates of gender violence at HEIs, student-led policy is key.

Sexual assault on university campuses, which according to the female student quoted above is 'real' and 'happening a lot', requires comprehensive methods to prevent it, and clear ways of reporting and addressing it when it occurs. The preceding excerpt from the student survey (f51) suggests that students are mindful of the need to address the high incidence of sexual assault by means of an institutional policy. Within the prevailing institutional and social context, sexual assault experienced by students may be construed as part of everyday life, leading to its acceptance and normalisation in social relationships.

The achievement of quality education demands creating safe learning spaces and requires extensive and integrated interventions, for which institutions have the major responsibility. The American Association of University Professors (2013) asserts that the freedom to teach and to learn is inseparable from the maintenance of a safe and hospitable learning environment.

According to Lichty, Campbell and Schuiteman (2008) policy is a core component of the total campus response to sexual violence, which should include numerous elements such as services for those who are victimised, educational initiatives and monitoring and evaluation of interventions. Policies describe an institution's drive, ideals and mission (Simbayi, Skinner, Letlape & Zuma 2005). Organisations or businesses design policy with the intention to control practice, mainly in sensitive or important areas such as equity, racism and gender equality.

In the context of education, explicit and conspicuous policies to maintain system functionality and develop service and support in the aforementioned areas are essential. However, simply creating a litany of policies does not guarantee effective enactment unless plans exist for these policies to be implemented in order to have their objectives realised.

The current policy document designed to address contraventions of a sexual nature at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) is the *Sexual Harassment Policy and Procedures* document (UKZN 2004). This is a detailed policy that includes definitions and forms of sexual harassment, responsibilities of different university stakeholders, and procedures for resolving complaints of sexual harassment. Addressing serious sexual assault such as rape is embedded in this policy. When reported, rape is treated like any other criminal offence. However, only reported incidents can be pursued, and an important issue that also emerges in the international literature is underreporting of sexual violence (Abbey & McAuslan 2004; Gonzales, Schofield & Schmitt 2005). Since this is also the case in South Africa for a multitude of reasons (including unsatisfactory reporting procedures, fear of stigmatisation and secondary victimisation of victims within the justice system), it is crucial that reporting processes be given serious attention.

Given previous research that has shown HEIs to be spaces where sexual violence is perpetuated against students (Collins, Loots, Meyiwa & Mistrey 2009; Phipps & Smith 2012; Singh, Mudaly & Singh-Pillay 2015), it is important to understand how students may be protected from becoming victims of sexual violence. We cannot ignore that these studies have also shown students to be perpetrators of sexual violence, which necessitates equivalent attention on preventing students from becoming perpetrators of sexual violence.

This article draws on the data generated within a larger project that focuses on creating a safer learning environment at universities by addressing

gender-based violence. The research question which we explore in this article is: ‘What are male and female students’ perspectives about the need for an institutional policy on sexual assault?’

## **Sexual Assault on Campuses**

What constitutes sexual assault is often poorly understood, but simply put, it involves sexual activity that is nonconsensual and unwanted (Peterson & Muehlenhard 2007). Sexual assault violates an individual’s *sexual autonomy*, which includes the right to refuse sexual activity or advances with any person, at any time, for any or no reason (Schulhofer 1998). Substantial research shows that the victims of sexual assault are mainly women and that sexual assault has serious short- and long-term consequences for victims. According to Kalichman and Simbayi (2004) sexual assault is associated with women’s risk of sexually transmitted diseases.

Research by Ben-David and Schneider (2005) revealed that many myths about man-on-woman sexual violence persist. Those which enable recidivism among perpetrators include the notion that rape is a crime of passion, it is motivated by sexual urges, that men have naturally uncontrollable sexual urges, that men who rape are ill or emotionally unstable, or that men misinterpret women’s intentions or desires. A study conducted by Yescavage (1999) revealed that women were perceived to be more accountable for rape, because when they reject sexual advances they do so as a token to preserve their image of sexual innocence and not because they sincerely do not wish to engage in sexual activity. Myths which attribute blame to women include ‘victim masochism’ (women enjoy it), ‘victim precipitation’ (women invite rape), and ‘victim fabrication’ (women falsely accuse others or exaggerate the sexual incident) (Ben-David & Schneider 2005: 386).

Male participants in the study by Ben-David and Schneider (2005) tended to minimise the severity of rape as a crime. ‘Real rape’ was conceptualised as sexual penetration of a young, vulnerable virgin who is in the custody of her father, by an armed man. In this scenario the woman escapes from the perpetrator after the crime and reports it to the police (Ben-David & Schneider 2005: 395). A previous relationship/association between a victim and perpetrator would lead to assessment of the rape as a less serious incident. Research findings in a study by Viki, Abrams and Masser (2004) confirm the perception that acquaintance rape is a lesser violation and warrants decreased



punishment compared to stranger rape.

Given these findings by other researchers, and the data from this study which allude to victims' and perpetrators' uncertainty about the crime of rape, the need for a policy becomes critical. A sexual assault policy which clearly defines what is meant by consent, sexual assault and rape, including acquaintance rape, will go far towards achieving an understanding of rape as an aggressive, antisocial, dangerous tool which is used to assert power and control.

Research on gender and sexual violence in HEIs has revealed that this is widespread on university campuses globally (Phipps & Smith 2012). Several studies in South Africa have found a high prevalence of sexual assault on South African university campuses. These include studies at UKZN (Chetty 2008; Collins *et al.* 2009), Rhodes University (Botha, Snowball, De Klerk & Radloff 2013), Stellenbosch University (Graziano 2004), and the University of the Western Cape (Clowes *et al.* 2009), amongst others. According to Gonzales *et al.* (2005) the primary reason for the underreporting of this crime is that most sexual assaults on university campuses are committed by assailants who are well known to the victims. Furthermore, survivors/victims may not report for many reasons, including fear of reprisal and exposure, peer pressure and/or lack of faith in the reporting process (Ontario Women's Directorate 2013; Fisher *et al.* 2007; Perreault & Brennan 2010).

## **The Role of Institutional Policy**

Policy can be defined as 'a written document that provides the basis for action to be taken jointly by an institution or organization' (Dye 1995: 4). The intention of such a document is to raise awareness and create mutual understanding about a situation (based on an analysis of the problems, trends, causes and potential solutions); articulate ethical and other principles that should justify and guide action; generate a consensus vision on the actions to be undertaken; provide a framework for action; define institutional responsibilities and mechanisms of coordination; and engage a variety of partners. In some cases policy is seen as crucial to maintain order in organisations, as emphasised by Roux (2002), who asserts that an organisation without policy is an organisation without control.

Education institutions have a responsibility to create and maintain a safe space where staff and students 'Acknowledge the value of the individual

by promoting the intellectual, social and personal well-being of staff and students through tolerance and respect for multilingualism, diverse cultures, religions and social values, and by fostering the realisation of each person's full potential', as pledged in one of the principles and core values in the Vision and Mission Statement of UKZN (UKZN 2012). With regard to sexual offences, Marshall (1991) contends that institutions which fail to fulfill their responsibilities in preventing and addressing cases of sexual offences commit an institutional breach of trust. Singh *et al.* (2015), who studied students' fears about sexual violence on university campuses, assert that institutional response to sexual assault on campus is critical.

Often there exists a gap between policymaking and policy implementation. Research indicates that the mere presence of a policy does not ensure its effectiveness (Laabs 1998; Orlov & Roumell 1999; Owens, Gomes & Morgan 2004; Paludi 1996). As suggested by the findings of a study carried out at three Southern African universities to explore the effectiveness of official campus policies on sexual harassment by Bennett, Gouws, Kritzinger, Hames, & Tidimane (2007), a policy needs to be effective, and effectiveness is determined by a number of factors, including the obvious one: that the policy should be communicated and available to everyone at every level of the organisation.

## **University Policies on Sexual Offences**

A review of policies at several South African universities which are related to sexual offences suggest that for many universities addressing sexual assault is embedded in sexual harassment policy. The primary purpose of such a policy is to provide institutional environments in which staff and students feel safe and can pursue study and work activities without fear of unsolicited, unwelcome sexual attention or sexual crimes. Many South African universities have introduced policies and grievance procedures to deal with sexual harassment (Gouws & Kritzinger 2007).

A study by Wilken and Badenhorst (2003) focused on analysing and comparing the sexual harassment policies of selected universities in South Africa with the aim of creating a checklist of important elements that should be contained in such a policy. Eight South African universities formed part of the study. The results indicated that the sexual harassment policies of the eight universities seem to be incomplete and deficient in many respects. With the

exception of Rhodes University and UKZN, the other six universities in the sample have either an established forum/committee/panel that deals with harassment complaints, or a specific person who, with the help of a committee, is appointed to oversee this task. Two universities, namely, the University of Pretoria and Vista University, describe in their policies specific disciplinary and appeal measures in the case of an accused found guilty of sexual offences or in cases of false accusations. The rest of the sample refers to the institution's existing disciplinary code in order to implement disciplinary action.

UKZN, like the University of Stellenbosch, does not have a dedicated policy on sexual offences but has a Sexual Harassment Policy, which is meant to guide the understanding and procedures in respect of sexual harassment. This policy does not specifically mention rape, and refers to sexual assault only once in the document. According to this policy sexual harassment is conceptualised as 'unwelcome, unsolicited and unreciprocated' behaviour which has a sexual dimension (UKZN 2004:1; 2016:6).

A revised version of this policy was approved in January 2016. The 2016 version is less detailed than the 2004 version, and excludes the details of the three stages used to govern procedures for resolving complaints. The 2016 policy refers to 'Heads of Divisions' to respond to allegations or incidences of sexual harassment, and is unlike the 2004 document which specifies role-players such as Discrimination and Harassment Advisors, and Diversity Managers. It is not clear which 'Heads of Divisions' are being referred to in the 2016 policy. Through our discussions with the Human Resources staff we understand that there have been no discrimination and harassment advisors for several years.

A mechanism at UKZN to capture cases of harassment and discrimination is an online<sup>1</sup> equity data form. This form is designed to record biographical information of both the complainant and respondent (who is possibly the alleged perpetrator). It outlines various possible forms of discrimination and harassment, including those related to age, gender, religion, origin, sex, sexual harassment and sexual orientation. The form also outlines possible methods of discrimination or harassment, which include (among others) telephonic, verbal, letter, gestures and stalking. This form provides choices for the outcome of the case, and includes (among others) criminal charges, no action taken, counselling, and referral to the Diversity Unit.

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<sup>1</sup> See [http://www.ukzn.ac.za/dhr/EQUITY%20DATA%20FORM\\_Final.pdf](http://www.ukzn.ac.za/dhr/EQUITY%20DATA%20FORM_Final.pdf).

The University of Cape Town and Rhodes University are guided by separate policies, namely the Sexual Offences Policy and the Sexual Harassment Policy. The Sexual Offences Policy states that ‘rape and sexual assault constitute serious misconduct’ (University of Cape Town 2008). This sexual offences policy takes into account the high incidence of rape and sexual assault in South African society, the vulnerability of women to these crimes, and the South African laws which have been promulgated in this regard.

A look at sexual offences policies at international universities reveals other dimensions. Research at 78 universities in the United Kingdom displayed great variation in the management of cases of sexual harassment over a two-year period (Thomas 2004). The findings revealed that 28% of these universities dealt with 10 or more cases, while 22% did not get any complaints at all (Thomas 2004). Twenty five per cent of the universities indicated that they were not certain of the effectiveness of their policies, 55% were satisfied, 11% were fairly dissatisfied and 2% were very dissatisfied. Many respondents acknowledged limitations of their policies.

In the United States of America (USA) the Northwest University has a ‘Nondiscrimination, Harassment, Sexual Harassment and Sexual Violence Policy’ which guides the university community about several issues related to sexual offences (Northwest University 2011). These include names and contact details of persons to whom reports can be made, details on how to lodge a complaint, and when to lodge a complaint. Separate officials deal with harassment and discrimination in general, and sexual offences specifically. Clear information on accessing medical assistance and reporting to the criminal justice system is provided.

The above review suggests that many of the policy initiatives are largely reactive, put in place to address incidents that have occurred. While these are crucial, the focus on prevention does not receive sufficient attention. This article draws on students’ perspectives on the formation of institutional policy that also has the potential to educate students on what makes them vulnerable to being victims and/or perpetrators and how to prevent this from happening.

## **The Study**

The data are drawn from an ongoing larger study titled: ‘Safer Learning Environments: Addressing Gender Based Violence at Universities’. This study

is located at a selected UKZN campus that has a diverse population of resident and day students. In 2014 the undergraduate student population on this campus numbered 3544.

Researchers such as Hawkesworth (2006), Hesse-Biber (2007), Risman, Sprague and Howard (1993) and Sprague (2005) contend that a major methodological problem in studies on physical and sexual violence against women is the underreporting of such violence. Additionally, we support the notion that the best way of doing feminist research depends on the specific questions to be addressed and the context of the research. Therefore an online survey was used to access wide-scale baseline data about the nature and extent of experiences and fears of sexual violence on the university campus. The online survey comprising closed- and open-ended questions was distributed to all students via a hyperlink<sup>2</sup> accessed through student emails, as it provided a safe, confidential and anonymous space in which students could respond. Furthermore we hoped that the online survey would facilitate the sharing of their experiences and opinions. However, student response rate was very low, even after we encouraged our own students to participate during lectures and encouraged other students to do the same. The overall poor response rate alerted us to methodological challenges associated with quantitative methods in feminist research.

This analysis is based on the responses of 265 students (152 female and 113 male). The respondents were undergraduate students from diverse racial and socio-economic backgrounds and were pre-service teachers who specialised in a variety of disciplines, including Science, Technology, Mathematics, Computer Studies, Social Sciences, Languages, Media, Education Development and Leadership, and Arts. The sample included students who lived in university residences and those who lived at home. We acknowledge that this sample is not representative of the student population on the campus. Since our focus in this article is on responses to the closed-ended question about whether the university needed a policy on sexual assault and the open-ended explanation regarding that question, this can be seen as a limited but large enough number of responses from students who felt strongly enough to participate in the survey.

In this article analysis is largely qualitative, and simple frequency analysis on the closed question is presented to show the overall opinion. The

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<sup>2</sup> <https://goo.gl/fTvcNz>.

data were initially grouped into responses from female students and from male students; responses from female students were numbered 1 to 152 and those from male students were numbered 153 to 265. The data from female respondents are represented as f(number) and those from male respondents as m(number).

The data from the open-ended question were organised into categories, then these were grouped into themes. Content analysis (Elo & Kyngäs 2008) was used to categorise themes and interpret the data.

## **Findings and Discussion**

The findings from the survey reveal that the majority (72%) of the respondents indicated that UKZN needs to have a dedicated policy on sexual assault. However, there was significant disparity between the responses of the female students and those of the male students, where 89% of the female students and 51% of male students answered this question in the affirmative. While this is not completely surprising, some explanations for diverse views are offered within the themes below. The three themes that emerged from the data are not mutually exclusive because there is considerable overlap between them, but for the purpose of this discussion they are presented separately as Policy as obligation; Policy as protection; and Policy as education.

### ***Policy as Obligation***

Many respondents, especially female students, strongly asserted that a policy on sexual assault is fundamental for all universities because sexual assault is prevalent on campus and should be addressed:

*I believe every institution needs a policy because sexual assault is found everywhere. (f103)*

*I think that every campus should have this policy because you might never know when sexual assaults happen ... for there to be a solution to it UKZN should have a policy on sexual assault because it is likely to happen. (f16)*

Several respondents also referred specifically to UKZN; for example, ‘because

## *Policy for Prevention of Sexual Assault on Campus*

*it [sexual assault] does take place on campus and it must stop'* (f80), and the following student emphasised this by using uppercase letters: '*UKZN MUST have a policy on it. UKZN needs this policy because there are so many students which are raped here on campus'* (f15).

Policy as prevention was also suggested by the following:

*if UKZN comes up with a Policy on sexual assault, few incidents of this nature will take place because action will be taken against the perpetrator.* (f33)

However, a few male students offered the view that such a policy is unnecessary since sexual assault is absent on the campus. A typical response was:

*I say no because what's the need for something when there's nothing to call sexual assault on campus, it's never happened. Therefore I feel we are mature enough to know the law.* (m219)

Overall there seems to be consensus that by having a dedicated policy on sexual assault the university would send a strong message about the seriousness of dealing with incidents of sexual assault. The majority of the students' responses suggest that there is a lack of awareness about current policy on sexual harassment or that the existing policy is inadequate to address sexual assault on the campus. This is evident in the following responses:

*Many students practice sexual harassment on others due to the fact there are no consequences that will be faced, as the campus does not have any policy regarding sexual abuse.* (f71)

*I feel like UKZN is not strict enough when it comes to GBV [gender-based violence] because people do physically harm each other and nothing is done with that.* (f12)

*Many people may be victims of GBV or may know someone who is a victim. In these instances these people do not have a course of action to take because UKZN does not have a policy on sexual assault.* (f108)

*Because there is evidence showing that these offences take place within UKZN and I therefore think it would be a good idea for UKZN to implement a policy to avoid future incidents. (m203)*

A common thread in students' responses to the open-ended question point to sexual assault being a common part of students' everyday lives, and that policy that deals with sexual offences on campus is a basic requirement through which the university will demonstrate its serious intent to address this issue. The following views reveal this:

*UKZN doesn't take GBV seriously. There are cases that have been reported but nothing was done to the people who assaulted others. They need to take us serious[ly]. (f39)*

*The university ... does not care about anything else except academic things while students are suffering out there and being affected in their academic work. (f62)*

Participant f62 shows some disappointment about the apparent lack of concern about students' welfare and suggest that having a clear policy will also show that the university genuinely cares about students' wellbeing and that any threat to their safety compromises their academic performance. This resonates with the assertion by Perreault and Brennan (2010) that sexual assault may affect students' academic achievement as well as their capacity to contribute to the campus community. They add that university students who have survived sexual assault rarely perform as well as they had prior to the incident, and are sometimes unable to carry a normal course load and frequently miss classes.

### ***Policy as Protection***

While the university campus is expected to be a safe space for students and staff, 91% of respondents indicated that they felt fearful on the campus. In their explanations about the need for a sexual assault policy, many emphasised that an effective policy has the potential to reduce fear and increase safety of students on campus:



## *Policy for Prevention of Sexual Assault on Campus*

*It is important for students to feel safe on campus and that help is available to them. (f83)*

*Sexual assault is an offence that should not be taken lightly, the student needs to feel safe and be sure that the University will protect them if any such occurs. (f80)*

*It is important to have this policy because it will make other students to feel safer when they know that there is a policy which (protected) them from this kind of assault. It would be difficult to lay charges against someone if there is no policy against this assault. (m166)*

The preceding excerpts reveal that students regard policy as being important in protecting them on the campus. They see the need for clear ways of reporting and dealing with acts of sexual assault. The role of effective, well-communicated policies on sexual assault, as proposed by the Ontario Women's Directorate (2013), is to help create safe environments where everyone on campus knows that sexual assault is unacceptable, victims receive the services and support they need, and perpetrators are held accountable.

An effective sexual assault policy is necessary for the following reason, stressed by a male student: '*In order to halt even the notion or thought of such barbaric activity*' (m193).

According to participant f10, a policy on sexual assault is essential not only for the protection of students but also for the institution, by enabling students to '*deal with and it and the policy can only protect the university ... addressing the issue even if it has not occurred.*'

It was clear that without having the perpetrators adequately dealt with, victims contend with ongoing fear and insecurity:

*It's horrible to be a victim, I'm even scared to walk around campus at night and seeing that person every day it really breaks me apart and brings back the whole picture of what happened. (f1)*

*Victims need not suffer alone, perpetrators need harsher punishment for their behaviour. UKZN is supposed to be a learning environment. One shouldn't feel unsafe. (f57)*

Similar to the assertion by Kalichman and Simbayi (2004) that sexual assault is associated with women's risk of sexually transmitted diseases, the urgency to prevent sexual assault was emphasised by participants. They linked this to the need for protection from other serious consequences for women, such as unwanted pregnancy and infection, as seen in the following excerpt:

*UKZN needs it [a policy] because [a] lot of students are falling pregnant and also they end up being HIV positive. (f61)*

The following response indicated that a policy could serve a protective function by raising awareness about sexual assault and preventing hopelessness amongst victims:

*Most of the time some students have been victims but they not aware and they do not know what to do and who to tell, that is why some they commit suicide. Students ... need to be educated and know the rules and the law about sexual assault. (f7)*

The helplessness felt by victims of sexual assault at UKZN is a pervasive feature of the preceding responses. Even though we had not included a question on awareness about the existing Sexual Harrassment Policy, through an analysis of their responses on the need for such a university policy it was clear that students are unaware of the existence of 'Procedures for Resolving Complaints' (UKZN 2004: 4). The data elucidate the feelings of vulnerability, defencelessness and powerlessness of victims of sexual violence. Students require a safe environment that will facilitate the reporting of sexual violence in a secure and confidential manner, without fear of further victimisation.

The majority of the respondents suggest that the messages that a policy can send about sexual assault can powerfully shape students' understandings of sexual assault, their rights, mechanisms for reporting, and protection. Fear was a common discourse in the responses. The need to reduce fear of sexual violence amongst students, as discussed above, is related to the imperative to reduce fear about reporting sexual violence. This view was exemplified by participant f4, who asserted that '*because some fellow students have been victims of sexual assault and they did not report it because they were scared and have no idea where to go for assistance.*' The role of a policy which details clear consequences for perpetrators/potential perpetrators, and which could

dissuade them from engaging in this crime, was highlighted. The following two responses are illustrative of the latter:

*[UKZN] does need a policy so that perpetrators of this sort of violence are aware and will face the consequences of their actions if they go against this policy. This will make them afraid to commit such crimes. (f2)*

*UKZN needs to establish a policy against sexual assault or any form of violence to ensure that possible perpetrators are aware that there are airtight consequences - this will instill fear and may ensure they do not act out - right now, they feel that there are no consequences, therefore they have nothing to lose. (f103)*

The discussion in this theme demonstrates the protective value of a policy on sexual assault which, if disseminated and implemented, would potentially increase safety and reduce fear. This was underscored by a large number of participants, who valued a policy on sexual assault for its powerful potential as a deterrent to perpetrators.

### ***Policy as Education***

The need for policy for awareness in one form or another is a persistent feature of the participants' responses, as well as of the literature on policy which was reviewed. The majority of the respondents mentioned the need for clear communication of what constitutes sexual violence; for example '*Students often don't know what sexual assault is. If there is a policy on sexual assault then it can be up to them to read it and know about it*' (m164).

Participants showed awareness that what constitutes gender/sexual violence may be poorly understood amongst students and may be perpetrated unknowingly: '*Students need to be taught about these issues because sometimes they do it not knowing that it not acceptable*' (m159).

This is an important consideration, and may give us insight into the high prevalence of sexual assault by students and enable us to find strategies to address this in our classrooms.

Some suggested that victims may not recognise when they are being sexually assaulted: '*Many sexual acts are committed to both male and female*

*that people are unaware that they are being assaulted and violated'* (m189).

It was clear that many respondents were of the view that sexual assault may be persistent on campus due to ignorance amongst perpetrators and victims. They saw policy as having an educative purpose:

*Because this is where the student will be informed about everything that has to do with the violence and understand it because some of us do not understand it some are victims but they don't know, some are perpetrators but they [are] not aware.* (m162)

In addition to educating the university community about what constitutes sexual violence and how to identify it, an overwhelming majority of the participants mentioned a policy having clear information about the consequences and thereby serving as a powerful deterrent:

*So that perpetrators will be aware of the punishment they will get after being involved in this kind of violence and it will be safer.* (f40)

*The policy should be addressed and be out bold, so that the university should not experience such acts, because the consequences are well established.* (f95)

Participants in this study called for a *bold* policy, with *well-established consequences*. This call by participants indicates that students are unaware of the Sexual Harassment Policy that exists at the university.

Several respondents suggested that there continues to be silence around sexual violence, and that a policy on sexual assault would remove the veil of silence:

*UKZN does need a policy on sexual assault as this offence is not something that can be swept under the carpet.* (f74)

*UKZN needs a policy on sexual assault because within our residences many students are victims but afraid to voice out, some even feel it is a usual and an accepted thing.* (f41)

In an imperceptible way the excerpts below draw our attention to students' lack of awareness of UKZN's existing Sexual Harassment Policy:

*Yes, because some of fellow student has been a victim of sexual assault and they did not report it because they were scared and have no idea where to go for assistance. (f5)*

*UKZN needs to make organisation or the meeting whereby they would teach about this issue; it can be meeting. (f53)*

*Most students need to read about it so that they become aware of it. Therefore there must be its documentation. (m180)*

This finding raises concerns about students' awareness of the enforcement, distribution and communication of the existing policy, as well as its accompanying reporting mechanism procedure.

## **Conclusion**

The findings presented in this article are part of a broader study that attempts to create a safer learning environment by preventing gender/sexual violence on campus. While the sample is not representative of the student population, qualitative analyses of a large enough sample of students who were interested enough to respond to an online survey provides us with a catalyst for further enquiry and discussion.

Students in this study pointed to a high prevalence of a wide range of sexual assault on the campus. They identified a sexual assault policy as a fundamental institutional obligation that has potential to educate the university community about how to identify, report and deal with sexual assault. It is apparent that there is inadequate awareness about the existing policy on sexual harassment. Students' widespread ignorance about the policy that currently exists to address sexual assault on campus is indicative of the need for more effective ways to engage with them about the content, purpose and location of relevant policies. Having the policy available on the internet is necessary but not effective, as it is not accompanied by effective engagement with the students.

By studying both sexual harassment policies (2004 and 2016) and consulting with the Human Resources department we have learnt that there has been no university advisor for discrimination and harassment for several years. This, together with the insights from the student data, suggests the need for one or more dedicated staff members who deal with formulation, review, communication and implementation of policy.

Furthermore, students assert that the campus community's understanding of what constitutes sexual assault and the policies and procedures are important to their application.

Understanding students' expectations, fears, ambitions and commitments provides a catalyst for formulation of policy. The creation of spaces for intellectual engagement with all stakeholders, especially students, could initiate policy development in this regard. A sexual assault policy can be informed by considering students' reflections' on the personal, social, cultural and institutional constituents that increase their vulnerability to sexual offences.

Students' understandings of policy as an obligation as well as for protection and education point to possibilities for creating policy not just as a mechanism for control by outlining procedures to deal with offenders, but as a powerful resource for prevention. The students indicate that a dedicated policy on sexual offences can be construed as a vehicle for the promotion of safety. In addition to having the potential to conscientise students about what constitutes sexual offences, and what measures are in place to seek help and support, policy can serve as a significant educational resource.

As educators in higher education, drawing on students' perspectives we see the need to create opportunities at curricular level for intellectual engagements through deliberations on policy formation and policy reform. As co-constructors of policy as living documents, students may be encouraged to reflect on their own practices that are likely to transgress the rights of other students.

Policy is meaningless unless effectively communicated and deliberated upon. How might we engage with them in our classrooms? Engaging students in critical reflection and dialogue has the potential for transformative work that seeks out and creates alternative identities, thereby addressing victimisation as well as perpetration.

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# **Women in Senior Positions in South African Higher Education: A Reflection on Voice and Agency**

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## **Abstract**

For decades, the entrance of women into higher education spaces and senior positions has been obstructed. Particularly for women who finally break the glass ceiling to occupy senior positions, the challenges they face to execute their responsibilities successfully in such positions have been insurmountable. This paper explores these challenges as reported by 14 women academics and administrators in senior positions at one South African higher education institution. Drawing from the women's narratives and employing the standpoint theory as a lens to analyse data, the study highlights that women in the position of power at the institution face obstacles pertaining to voice and agency needed for them to develop professionally and personally in their positions in higher education. The findings show that the obstacles that these women face include gender stereotypes of women as home carers, questions around their leadership styles and exploitation by their male colleagues in similar positions.

**Keywords:** Women, higher education, voice, agency, leadership positions, standpoint theory

## **Background Introduction**

Across higher education internationally and in South Africa, women have been reported to suffer and face huge challenges in terms of gaining access into

higher education spaces. Reports and studies in the area of gender in higher education point to the underrepresentation of women in global higher education (Thaman & Pillay 1992; Adusah-Karikari 2008; Badat 2010; Dominguez-Whitehead & Moosa 2014: 266). The slow entrance of this constituency into the higher education spaces has been linked to the ideology that men are more suited than women for academia (Ramphele 2008). In some parts of the world, research indicates that discourses that highlight the stereotype of women as nurturers who have a place in the home still seems alive and barricades the way for the majority of capable and competent women to gain access to the academy (Odejide 2007; Tsikata 2007). In an opening speech at a conference held in Cape Town, South Africa, Ramphele (2008) raised a concern regarding the struggles that women in African higher education institutions and specifically in South Africa face regarding their entrance into higher education institutions. She re-emphasised that higher education discourses had to be strengthened around women as deserving to be in the academy. She indicated that institutional cultures were still awash with gender-based constructions, which contribute to keeping women out of academia and particularly in leadership positions.

Some other factors that seem to influence institutions to give less recognition to women in academic spaces could be the cultural stereotypes that still exist in higher education. Such stereotypes include the biologically based assumptions that highlight the differences between men and women (Rudman & Glick 2008). For example, women are characterised as being gentle and kind, traits that are considered weak in the patriarchal society. Men on the other hand are considered aggressive, bold and strong (World Bank Report 2014). These traits have always been used to pit men against women and render the former as suitable to hold social roles and masculine careers such as lawyers and CEO positions. In some cases, even blue-collar jobs like construction, which needed physical strength, were all fitted into masculine job categories (Gabriel & Schmitz 2007). Women needed to stick to their nurturing roles such as wife, mother and homemakers, which linked well to their constructed kind and gentle character. These differences between men and women became so entrenched in the cultural and institutional systems that even to date the clusters act as barriers towards the access of women into the organisations since they are seen as belonging to the home (Green, Ashmore & Manzi 2005). This is particularly true in the case of academic positions. The *Statistics on Post-School Education and Training in South Africa* document (DHET 2014)

indicates that there are 45% teaching positions are occupied by women. While this statistic might paint a picture that women are well represented, the DHET further shows that this percentage consists mainly of women in junior positions within South African higher education institutions. These are positions that are not regarded as highly influential in higher education (Gabriel & Schmitz 2007).

It should be noted though that despite the debate on underrepresentation of women in higher education and specifically in the teaching section, some scholars believe that higher education institutions have made noticeable strides in ensuring that they open doors for women to join the academy, in academic and administrative positions. This being the case though, the concern for the same scholars is that while institutions are improving in opening physical access for women, there are no growth strategies put in place by the same institutions to ensure the development of these women and their success to occupy positions of power (Morley 2005; Bishop 2006; Le Feuvre 2009). Kloot (2004) asserts that higher education institutions perceive women as unqualified for these positions. These institutions seem to regard leadership as a male feature in which women do not have a place (Still 2006). McKinney (2009) and Jamali, Sidani and Kobeisi (2008) also refer to this challenge when they point out that there is a glass ceiling that deters women academics and administrators to access leadership positions in higher education. This glass ceiling is described as 'obstacles and [barriers] that prevent competent women from advancing in higher education' (McKinney 2009: 121). The barriers are seen in the semiotics in institutions which, when critically analysed, bring to the fore hegemonic discourses, which regard males as more befitting than females to be in academia. This situation leads to higher education institutions being male dominated in top management in the case of administrative staff and senior lecturers as well as professorial positions in the case of academics. Riordan and Potgieter (2011) and Barnes (2007) have noticed that especially in African higher education there are very few women at professoriate level, which remains overwhelmingly male and mainly white in South Africa

It is for the above reason that countries around the world have established acts and policies that regulate the labour practices to ensure parity in the employment practices in institutions. In South Africa for example, The *Employment Equity Act* (EEA) (RSA 1998) and the *Promotion of Equity and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act* (RSA 2000) were established to

respond to the need to eradicate unfair practices that had for a long time led to the discrimination of people according to gender, disability and class. These are not the only Acts but as a report on the *Profile of Higher Education in Southern Africa* (Fongwa 2012: 77) states, there has been a ‘plethora of acts and policies’ that are aimed at redressing inequities within the South African higher education context. These acts and policies have afforded every South African citizen a chance to realise their potential in their workspaces in terms of access and mobility.

Resulting from these acts and South African higher education institutions’ own initiatives, a few women have since succeeded to break the glass ceiling to senior and powerful positions. However, when these women finally break through, reports show that they have to surmount more challenges emanating from the power of male supremacy (White 2003). These male power and other institutional barriers suppress the voices of the women to lead effectively and to become change agents within their institutions.

## **Women in Leadership in Higher Education**

As Odhiambo (2011: 668) and Ngunjiri (2010: 1) have noted, generally there are few studies conducted within Africa on gender and leadership. Most literature in this field comes from developed countries (Carvalho, Özkanlı & de Lourdes Machado-Taylor 2012). The vast literature on discourses around women in higher education is mainly on the invisibility of these women in senior positions and the need to provide a space for them to break the glass ceiling. This makes it difficult, therefore, to understand the challenges these women face once they are promoted to leadership positions in African higher education, particularly women in South African higher education (SAHE). However, a look at the challenges of these women reported in studies from developed countries gives an indication that there are political, structural and cultural barriers that have an impact on the success of women in senior positions. It becomes necessary, therefore, to report on some of the SAHE challenges that these women face as highlighted in this paper, in order to give recognition to their narratives. A study on the experiences of women in senior positions based on an African higher education institution is important to bring a localised perspective that bridges the gap in literature.

Since women and leadership draw so little attention from the African scholars, there is almost no literature that looks specifically into the issue of

voice and agency for women in senior positions in SAHE. As such, this paper contributes to this field by discussing the experiences of academic and administrative women in senior positions in SAHE with a specific focus on these women's voice and agency. The two concepts, voice and agency, are discussed in this paper, with a focus on institutional factors and processes that are deemed critical in the process of leadership in the workplace. The authors of this paper believe that having a voice and an ability to drive changes in one's work environment (agency) are important aspects in leadership. Sen (2002: ii) defines agency to include 'what human beings can do to improve [themselves and their environments], together with the meaning, motivation and purpose that they bring to their activity, whilst appealing to their sense of power within'. From this, it could be seen that agency denotes meaningful conscious endeavours to effect change, which can only be attained if people are motivated to contribute to such changes. It is in line with this understanding that The World Bank Report's (2014: 3) definition of agency echoes the words 'decisions', 'desired outcome' and 'ability' as key to agency:

The ability to make decisions about one's own life (or environment) and act on them to achieve a desired outcome [that is] free of violence, retribution, or fear.

The World Bank Report (2014: xv) clearly states that agency is equated to empowerment since women who have agency have a 'free space to decide for [themselves]' and are 'no longer dependent on others to make decisions'. The report further states that to empower themselves in this way, women need to have the capacity to talk and engage in all discussions, discourses and decisions in their work environment. This is referred to as voice.

On the other hand, Maiese (2005: 1) defines voice as:

[the] ability to engage in meaningful conversation, to make a difference through what one says, and to have a say in key decisions ... [express] viewpoints, thoughts, and feelings which receive a 'fair hearing' and are readily recognized by others.

Looking at the two concepts, voice and agency, it could be noticed therefore that the aspects of change or improvement, making a difference and

influencing change are central issues that need to be taken into consideration. It could therefore be concluded that when discussing women and leadership in senior positions, the two concepts cannot be divorced from each other.

It is disturbing, however, that women in senior positions often report incidences of institutional practices, processes and discourses that marginalise their voices. Such practices have an impact on these women's ability to engage in decision-making, articulation of an authoritative voice and fitting into the institutional cultures (Marumo 2012; Mestry & Schmidt 2012). In a study by Hale (2009), the narratives of women in senior positions at one US higher education institution indicates that women still face gender-typical stereotypes that nullify their ability and power as efficient leaders in higher education. The challenges they face include among others non-recognition from men in the same positions and colleagues in their departments. This makes it difficult for these women to exercise their power, make decisions and lead their departments effectively. As a result, these women find it difficult to assert themselves in their positions and bring positive changes to their institutions.

## **Theoretical Grounding**

This paper draws from Smith's Standpoint Theory in analysing the experiences of the women in senior positions in SAHE. Standpoint theory, as a feminist theory, emphasises self-reflection as a process women need to undertake to understand themselves in relation to dominant discourses in their environment. Spence (2002: 31) brings to the fore Smith's concept of 'relations of ruling', which alludes to discourses that construct women as nurturers and home carers in the midst of men who are constructed as leaders in the labour force. The argument in the relations of ruling is that it is only when women understand such discourses (or reflect on them) within their social environment that they can find ways to deal with the challenges they encounter in their social spaces with the aim of finding ways to reshape their environment. In the case of this paper, focus is given to how women perceive these relations and what measures they put in place to create dialogue with them in their own way.

According to Smith (1992), relations of ruling entail understanding the environmental dynamics. This could assist women in understanding the forces and factors that shape gender discourses and assist them to find ways to move beyond the subjective, negative constructions imposed on them by the institutions' community. In essence, women draw strength from such



constructions by exploring them with the intention to ‘go beyond what is implicated by the constructions’ (Smith 1992: 329) and use them to their advantage. For example, while gender discourses could still place women in lower senior positions compared to men holding similar positions in different aspects and belonging at home as nurturers and carers, they can use these constructions as a form of a social capital that could give them the voice and agency needed to advance their institutions. Hooks (1989) talks about a similar idea when she emphasises the need for women to embrace who they are, not only at present (i.e. with their status as leaders), but also their past, which shapes their total identity and helps them to theorise their roles in communities. This means that the negative constructions need to be reinterpreted positively by women as empowering them to practise their leadership differently from men. In this paper, therefore, while negative constructions about women in senior positions in SAHE are highlighted, the study shows how the women interviewed for this study interpret the stereotypes as actual forces that show that women have the power to be agents of change. Through the same stereotypical views about them they can have a voice to change and advance their professions and institutions.

## **Methodology**

The study used a qualitative approach to exploring the experiences of women in senior positions with regard to voice and agency. Using a qualitative approach assisted in drawing in-depth responses from women (Nieuwenhuis 2007). Fourteen women in administrative (support), academic (lecturing) and leadership positions were individually interviewed. These women came from across all the faculties at the institution in which the research was conducted. Notwithstanding the intersectionality of race, gender and class, it should be noted that in the selection of participants, the only variable that was considered was gender pertaining to women in senior positions. While we have to acknowledge that this is a limitation in this study, the decision to exclude race as a variable rested on the authors’ observation that women from other race groups were absent in the leadership positions within the institution. However, even though race was not the focal point of our data analysis, it can be mentioned that the majority of women participants were white. Also worth noting is that eight of these women were senior administrative personnel from different sections of the institution and only four were directors in their

academic divisions. The women were later involved in three focus-group discussions, depending on their availability on the chosen dates. The first session consisted of four administrative women, the second session was a mixed group of one academic woman and three administrative women and the last consisted of three academic and three administrative women. The following two objectives guided the individual and group discussions that the authors had with the women:

- To gain an understanding of the experiences of women in senior positions in SAHE
- To gain an understanding of the mechanisms of resistance the women use to deal with their work challenges

The process of collecting data from these women was exciting, since one author is also a woman in the academy who aspires to climb the academic ladder and occupy a senior position at some point, while the other is already a deputy director of one unit at the institution. Conducting this study was motivated by the authors' aspirations and we were aware of the subjective nature with which data collected could have been interpreted. This reflexivity made us more vigilant during the interviews. We tried to avoid steering the discussions in the direction that would suit us as researchers. Watt (2007: 86) points out the importance of reflexivity for qualitative researchers by stating that:

Researchers first of all need to be aware of their personal reasons for carrying out a study ... their subjective motives – for these will have important consequences for the trustworthiness of a project. If design decisions and data analyses are based on personal desires without a careful assessment of the implications of these methods and conclusions, they risk creating a flawed study.

It could be stated, however, that as Watt (2007) further indicates, subjectivities form part of qualitative studies, so researchers do not have to aim to purge them but being aware of them and dealing with them lead to trustworthy results in a study. In this light, it is important to state that the reporting of the findings in this paper are indeed the experiences of the interviewed participants. However,

being women in academia assisted us in forming a rapport with the participants from an angle of gender similarities, challenges and aspirations.

Data analysis for this study was mainly thematic but drew from a critical discourse analysis (CDA) perspective. This means that although themes that emerged from the categorised data as well as the researcher's arguments are presented in the results section, the researcher is aware that the formulation of such themes draws heavily on the discourses of power, dominance and inequality that dominate gendered spaces. Nel (2012) alludes to the use of CDA in cases where researchers are aware that discourses of power have an influence on the relations of people within a social space. This notion of an awareness of discourses of power forms the crux of what CDA scholars such as Van Dijk (2001), Fairclough (2004) and Machin & Mayr (2012) view as the most important aspects in CDA studies. In fact, Nkoane (2012) asserts that the prevailing discourses should be considered when interpreting the voices of participants in any study. We aligned ourselves with this proposition in analysing the voices of the women in this particular study.

## **Findings and Discussion**

Findings from this study indicate that the few women that make it to senior positions in higher education face challenges in many areas of their professional lives. These challenges have a serious impact on these women's ability to bring and influence changes in the powerful positions that they hold. The women reported that in most cases they found that their voices were not heard. At times, when they were allowed to contribute, one woman indicated that the subtle message that they received from the male colleagues was that *'she is a good leader, but we should make sure that she does not row the boat too much'*. The women further reported that they always felt that the institutional culture did not often allow them to come forward as leaders since the male power suppressed their voices and ability to be agents of change. The institutional and social barriers to effective leadership arise from the gender-stereotypical discourses about women, which challenge their leadership styles and render them inferior to men. Dahlvig (2013: 99) has found that the historical hierarchical and patriarchal structures that form part of the institutional cultures force women to assimilate to male-dominated leadership norms, which silence their voices and kills their agency. Another issue that arose from the discussions with the academic women was that they often had

to defend themselves against exploitation by male colleagues who sometimes dump unwanted workloads on them. These three issues, the leadership style, disabling institutional cultures and exploitations by male colleagues are discussed in detail below.

### ***Leadership Style***

From the findings, it was noted that the women in the study preferred a more participative, empathetic, caring and empowering leadership style. During the focus group discussion, the women consistently emphasised that *‘taking the people [they] work with by the hand’* and *‘mentoring them for senior posts as well’* make one a true leader. They believed that their personalities as *‘caring individuals’* made them unique for the role of empowerment and mentoring.

I just come with that motherly love. I am a mother to students and colleagues [so] I should have that motherly touch... that way of advising people, of working with people to make them succeed and give them a sense of why I occupy that position

To echo that women have to use a motherly touch to mentor others, another woman pointed out that she regarded herself as *‘an ambassador for other women’* who advocated for the success of other women in academia as well. She sees her role as a woman leader, as that of strengthening other women through offering advice and working together with them towards the success of their careers. The kind of leadership that is expressed here is an interpersonal one that Yarrish, Zula and Davis (2010) have noted as characterising women leaders and which differentiates them from men.

Regardless of the strength of the women leadership as stated above, one finding was that the women felt that their leadership is often compared to that of men and they find themselves under immense pressure to change the way they do things in order to fit into the male-dominated culture. On this point, Eagly and Chin (2010) have observed that due to this comparison pressure, women in leadership positions are more likely to switch between the typically male leadership styles and typically female styles, depending on the context. When pressured, some women in leadership positions abandon their caring nature and adopt a chauvinistic leadership style, which oppress other people. This was seen in the context of this study. The academic women

pointed out that at times women who hold senior positions in their departments forget the plight of the other women and impose huge workloads on them, undermine their abilities and do not consult before making decisions. They stated that perhaps this stemmed from the long period of oppression that the women leaders had endured under the male leadership. One of the women said:

Let me take an Afrikaner woman, she has never been given power before and immediately she is put in power, the only way she knows is to use that power as an oppressive tool ... When she climbs the ladder, immediately you see the power relations because those that are down start fearing her because she also stops identifying with other women below her.

What is interesting about the view above is that once the academic woman assumes power, she starts oppressing those 'below' but fears those that are in the same position with her, which in most cases are men. According to Wyn, Acker and Richards (2000), the structural positioning, which places women in senior positions as part of the power hierarchy resembled by a masculine leadership style, is responsible for how women turn out once they occupy these positions. This scenario paints a picture of a vulnerable woman who is caught up between two poles that stifle her and influence her effectiveness as a leader. On the one hand, there are structural expectations that require women to assert themselves to fit into their positions, while this on the other hand goes against the hierarchical structures they would in normal cases challenge. It is such cases that prevent women in academia from coming forward as strong leaders who challenge the structures according to their preferred approach because even though they understand that institutions need change, they fear to suggest such changes lest they become labelled as weak. As Dahlvig (2013: 99) indicates, they just assimilate into the status quo, are silenced and do little to bring about much-needed changes in higher education. Commenting on the confusing nature of this assimilation for women in senior positions, Wyn *et al.* (2000: 444) quote Young (1990), regarding the dilemma that women encountered:

When participation is taken to imply assimilation, the oppressed person is caught in an irresolvable dilemma: to participate means to

accept and adopt an identity one is not and to try and participate means to be reminded by oneself and others of the identity one is.

A woman participant expressed this similarly when she stated that she felt she always needed to *'be able to overcome and eliminate the barriers and restrictions which are eroding women's voices'*, and to fight the restrictions that placed women within an oppressive power circle that inhibited them from challenging the inequities within the institution. She suggested that women academics in senior positions needed to stand up and *'let men become aware that they are women who know what they are doing and can stand up to them'*. The implication here is that sometimes women in senior positions are trapped into adapting to the male environment in their struggle to prove themselves as efficient leaders, which in turn negatively affects their identity as leaders.

### ***Disabling Institutional Cultures***

The academic women pointed out that they experienced an alienating culture that did not recognise their worth and the value they bring in the leadership positions they occupied. One woman expressed this when she stated that:

No one recognizes the good work we are doing ... it's like we are in a sinking Titanic, this is my experience and that of others. I feel it's working on my confidence as a leader.

The other woman supported this when she said:

We don't have support. I don't have self-confidence; I feel terrorised in this position ... I feel like I am not growing. When we are in a meeting we fight, we battle ... it's not easy for men to give up their power, there is always gate-keeping when you initiate some things.

Once again, this smothered feeling that academic women express shows that they feel powerless in the powerful positions that they occupy. If they have to battle to voice their contributions in meetings, it could be assumed that the powerful male voice always suppresses and overpowers them. This could lead to a situation where these women could give up trying to assert themselves and become tokens in senior positions. A lack of confidence, as one woman

indicated, leads to fear because one feels that her contribution will be undermined. She said:

There was an institutional assessment going on, one of the things I said to them is I do not have confidence, I feel I am not growing. In this institution you do not get recognition. Your contributions don't matter; you are in this position but you are not taken seriously. Sometimes you feel like they are questioning how you made it to the top, after all you are just a woman. Your voice always takes a back seat. They only listen to you if there is no counter contribution from the male colleagues ...

The other woman also indicated that her experiences at the institution had made her conclude that the institution did not believe in women as having the necessary expertise and capital to lead or occupy senior positions. She recalled an instance when a woman colleague was appointed to a senior position:

When a post in one of the departments was advertised and a woman was appointed, there was much speculation that she did not know the job even before she started .... I mean, do you think that anybody was going to listen to anything she said? She had already been stereotyped!

The institutional cultures that do not recognise women as efficient leaders' worthy to be given recognition, stem from the constructions that stereotype women as belonging at home and having little space in the workspace (Hale 2009). This is the case where the relation of ruling that Smith's standpoint theory alludes to comes to play. In this theory, the issue of negative constructions about women have been threshed, highlighting that women are often constructed as nurturers who should leave the masculine spaces to the men (Spence 2002). This stereotype perpetuates patriarchal societies that believe in male dominance and continue to benefit men in workspaces, therefore invalidating women's presence and silencing them as well as instilling in them fear and doubt about their abilities in the workspace. Yarrish *et al.* (2010) also allude to this stereotyping of women when they point out that throughout history, societies have constructed good leadership as a masculine feature that women cannot handle. This is clearly seen in this section where academic women who participated in this study felt that they lacked the

confidence to participate fully in senior positions in higher education, feeling as if they were in a 'sinking Titanic' fighting for survival.

### ***Male Exploitation***

This point was raised by the women who felt that they were just tokens the institution used to show the outside world that equity issues are taken seriously by the institution. They indicated that they normally got confused when males sometimes disregard them and then at other times compliment them because they were hardworking and always willing to walk the extra mile to assist when the need arose. In one focus group discussion, the women discussed this issue as male exploitation:

Men can take you for granted, when they reassign all their work, they will give it to you by saying that they know you will do a good job ... if you don't know this trick you fall for it.

The women indicated that at times male colleagues would mock them by saying that they should do the work because they knew what they were doing and then piled all the work on them. This happened in particular in cases where the woman had held a senior position before, which in most cases would be lower than their currently held position. However, to men it would be sufficient to abandon their own work and duties and leave them to the woman academic. Lamenting on a similar situation, one woman reported:

Even in this position people assumed I would know my job, know how everything worked, which was not true because if you are a researcher or HOD, it differs from being a dean... I think it is a way of trying to frustrate me or leave me to do the bulk of what they consider unimportant work so that they get time to do what they deem important ...

The women also felt that when men relegate work roles to women, it is not simply because they trust the women's expertise. The reason for these men's behaviour seems to stem from the belief that work that could be done by women has no value and threatens the egoistic superiority demeanour men attach to masculine tasks. One participant indicated that in the research office



that she managed, a male colleague who had always managed the staff development programme relegated the responsibility to her when she joined the office. She indicated that initially the male colleague would tell her how difficult it was to draw a *'solid staff development plan for the year'* because one needed to be *'grounded in research'* to understand the needs of the academics. When the women colleague showed understanding of research and programmes, her colleague suggested that she be responsible for staff development.

This could be likened to Peterson's concept of 'feminisation' of roles (2011: 625). This refers to a process in which certain jobs or roles that women can do are regarded as feminine and therefore become undervalued, leading to a degrading of respect and prestige for such roles. The fact that men leave their duties to be done by women and do not get involved means that they regard any work that could be done by women as not prestigious enough to be done by men and perhaps not promoting the institution in the most significant way as constructed through the male opinion. This could be the reason why they 'subtract' themselves because they do not want to be associated with the job and roles they feel no longer have value.

Although giving women extra work or leaving them to do tasks could sometimes be considered as empowering them, according to Peterson (2011), it is just a way of showing that the position has decreased in status and power and is therefore no longer fitting for men. This again points to the relations of ruling (Spence 2002) where women are once again juxtaposed to men and are socially constructed in a work environment to depict characteristics of valueless and weakness and as a result, they are unable to place and position themselves as powerful agents in senior positions. The only way they are constructed is as beings that will always be subordinate to men and only take over what men leave behind. In this case, it becomes apparent that the same male forces that want to put women back where the men think they belong would suppress whatever contributions they make. Therefore, when women feel that they have finally made a breakthrough into senior positions, men find ways of devaluing such positions in different ways such as leaving the paperwork to women, as seen in the findings of this study.

### ***Finding Voice and Agency through Redesigning Constructions***

As stated earlier, the standpoint theory used in this paper requires that partici-

pants reconstruct or redesign the negative constructions about them as a coping mechanism used to find the positive in a negative situation. The findings above indicate that women in senior positions in academia mostly have negative experiences emanating from the way they are viewed as either effective or non-effective leaders. What is significant is the finding that even after breaking through the ranks of academia to occupy senior positions, women academics are still considered unfit to take up such positions. The construction of a female as a home 'carer' or nurturer who has to leave the work environment for men, especially leadership, persists in the academe and frustrates women's efforts to show agency in their positions.

It is worth noting, however, that the participants in this study felt that they could not just succumb to the constructions without challenging them. The challenge is not stepping up to become like men and adopt the male leadership style. These women believed that they could draw strength from the negative constructions and use them to bring about changes in the academe. One participant, who is the only woman in a senior position in her department, emphasises this point when she says:

I am the only woman among men. I do not allow men to create a wall for me or for them to create two environments, one for me and one for them. I take them on using my own strategies as a woman; you know that form of resilience and power that only women have. They all think that I am feeble and sensitive because of femininity. And yes, that sensitivity allows me to deal sensitively with the junior staff and I think for me it is an asset.

This statement takes us back to earlier paragraphs, in which Hooks (1989) stresses the need for women to turn negative constructions into positive ones by reinterpreting the negative constructions and embracing them as a basis from which they draw their strength. Smith (1992) indicates that the past constructions, which have seen women regarded as weak, over-sensitive and as people who cannot engage in serious male discussions [at the workplace] should actually currently be used by women to carve their own leadership styles that are in step with who they are'. In other words, '*they should go beyond such constructions*' (Smith 1992: 329) according to the standpoint theory. Such is the agency that women can enforce in academia. In an interview with one participant, this issue was reiterated:

Power must be women power, that's where our power lies: develop our own identity, not the kind of power that we want to be like men, we won't get anywhere. Have power as a woman; that is how we are created. On the academic side, internalize that power, not try to have male power, women and men are different ...

Another woman said:

As a woman I have different abilities, that softer touch, I bring different dimensions to leadership with my own attributes ... the softness makes me a good mentor, an approachable person, a mother-like figure.

The above means that if women are taken as mere carers, they need to use that nurturing to uplift and mentor the junior members of their department; that is power. If women are regarded as soft and weak, they need to use that softness to influence the people to understand where they want to take their department, to say to them, as leaders, *'We cannot do it alone, because we have our weaknesses, let's do it together'*. This is what the standpoint theory suggests (in our opinion), namely that women should not try and emulate the male leadership style but lead in their own way and find the voice and agency in the leadership style that is exclusively 'female'. As they do so, Smith (1987) suggests that they will be theorising their constructed roles and identities, and using such a theory as their social capital that would enable them to have the voice and agency they need in academia. This does not mean that women need to bend to and re-enact the negative stereotypes about them but they need to use these as springboards that can advance their agenda in senior positions. One woman in this study jokingly suggested that women were strong in their perceived weakness, that the weakness was what made them strong and powerful in the positions of power that they held. She said:

We got power, we must just use it. Our power is not only being in academics but also in being nurturers. We have power of doing our job well, power of knowing our field and of caring. Women have power to manipulate, we have charm, and we got a lot, we can make decision

... Why did you think Eve got it right to let Adam to eat the apple?  
Just because she had power to use her woman power to do so!

The manipulative nature of becoming part of decision makers highlighted in this response is not deceiving and taking advantage of situations but it is to be smart to make men understand that women have the knowhow in leadership. The women suggested that even if this took using one man in a department to voice what actually was a woman's idea, it would still advance the agenda of changing and transforming departments. In this case, it means putting an idea through to one man and 'manipulating' him to buy into the idea and asking him to raise it in a meeting. If it is a good idea, members in a meeting will buy into the idea when a man raises it. Even though this could seem like giving the womanpower away, it does not rule out the fact that it is a woman's idea and it has achieved its purpose. In this way, the woman's voice and agency is realised through a strategic, diplomatic and 'charming' manner that makes a man feel important in raising the idea. In line with this, a participant reiterated:

Sometimes I need a male ally who would back me up and make my voice be heard. In senior positions we need the support of men because they are heard ... this is a strategy, and if it helps to put our ideas forth, we can use it, because actually what will be implemented will not be the voice of the man that raises an idea but my voice through a man.

Looking at the discussions in this section, we cannot ignore that while the women in the study sought to carve a leadership identity that embraces and assigns a positive value to attributes that are considered feminine; the approach could on the other hand be counterproductive to their efforts of challenging the patriarchal structures. Their strategy to reconstruct the negative stereotypes by using them to their advantage seems to strengthen and reinforce the very stereotypes and essential notions of femininity that they seek to overcome. However true this might be, the authors believe that workspaces are complex for women in leadership positions and at times to navigate the spaces and the legitimacy of their presence in these spaces, the women might have to compromise some of their principles. It could be argued therefore that an understanding of the challenges women in leadership positions face and the

strategies they employ to overcome them should be situated within a discursive context that informs the perceptions of women as leaders.

## **Conclusion**

The findings and discussions in this paper indicate that gaining voice and agency for women in senior positions in higher education is a serious challenge that these women need to surmount. The challenges that have been identified include questions around the women's ability to lead, their leadership styles, their place in the work environment and the construction of the woman's role as nurturer at home and a carer who should not be involved in serious decision-making discourses in higher education. The standpoint theory that has been used highlights that this is the frame within which women in the work environment, not only in academia, are placed. It states that when women step into the work environment, they need to remember these societal constructions around femininity and then shape their current experiences around these constructions. Important in this theory, as highlighted, is that women should embrace these constructions and use them as an empowerment tool that would give them agency within the work environment. Through the responses of the women in this study, it has been established that such a standpoint is possible, in which the women feel that they can use the negative schemes formed about them by the male dominated world to advance their agenda of being agents of change. Therefore, as the objectives of the study were stipulated, the current study has successfully drawn on the experiences of the academic women who participated in the study to understand the challenges they face when they get to occupy senior positions as well as finding and understanding the mechanisms of resistance that they use in the face of their negative experience.

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# Language of Learning: Policy, Personal Preference, and Professional Identity

**Ted Sommerville**

## **Abstract**

This article explores medical students' preference to study in English rather than their home language as an index of identity formation at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Data were produced through interviews with 19 third-year medical students and 6 lecturers. Data were recorded, transcribed, submitted to respondents for checking, then analysed thematically using NVivo. Analysis of their class's assessment marks according to demographic characteristics was performed using SPSS. The analysis showed a statistical and sustained difference between first- and second-language English speakers. However, the latter preferred English as their medium of teaching and learning. They saw terminology as being more problematic than language, stated that their own languages did not have sufficient technical vocabulary, and felt that their professional interactions would be conducted largely in English. The author concludes that language influences, and is influenced by, an individual's identity. Professional identity is a powerful shaping force in young adulthood when one's personal identity is being de-and re-constructed. The status of English, and the developmental state of other South African languages, are also salient factors. While these findings support policies to develop the technical vocabularies of indigenous languages, they also signal the ways in which language use may be constrained by students' personal perceptions and professional goals.

**Keywords:** Identity, identity formation, professional identity, medical students, language, discourse, language policy.

## **Introduction**

The language we use forms an important part of our sense of who we are – of our identity (Edwards 2009: i).

Particularly at this point in history, South Africa's various language groups are able to assert the primacy of their own languages in multiple spheres – social, cultural, religious, and academic. The Higher Education Act of 1997 (Anonymous) mandates university councils to determine language policies, and the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) is not the only higher education institution to formulate a language policy (Anonymous 2006), not only in terms of the language(s) of teaching and learning and administration, but also in order to acquaint students with the principal indigenous language of the region (Vithal undated). Against the thrust of policies on developing indigenous languages as media of scientific discourse, can be set the proclivities of institutions, communities, and individuals who would be required to create and implement these developments. These proclivities may be influenced by the inherent inertia of resistance to change, and also by specific personal considerations such as the areas of interest to those charged with language development, and the perceptions of those subject to language policies.

This article presents findings from a mixed-methods study that explores the influence of language on higher education students' academic results, and the perceptions of students and lecturers of issues to do with language. It sets out to answer the questions:

- What is the influence of home language relative to the language of teaching and learning on students' marks?
- How do students and staff members respond to the data on marks versus home language?
- Why do these constituencies respond in the way that they do?

In order to set these questions in context, I review the literatures on identity, language, higher education, and professional identity. I then describe my methodologies for investigating these aspects in the setting of UKZN's School of Clinical Medicine. I discuss the findings that arise, and finally offer an analysis of these findings in relation to the literature.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Identity in General***

Erikson (1980) depicts an individual's mental development as a sequence of changes, each constituting an 'identity crisis' which the individual must resolve. He makes the point, as do others, that identity formation is a lifelong progress of which the individual and the community are largely unaware. With reference to the crisis of adolescence, Erikson (1977) maintains that this is a period of 'identity confusion' (Erikson 1968:131), and explains further: 'In general it is the inability to settle on an occupational identity which most disturbs young people. To keep themselves together they temporarily over-identify with the heroes of cliques and crowds to the point of an apparently complete loss of individuality' (ibid.: 131f).

Piaget (1969) maintains that the chief characteristic of adolescence is detachment from the concrete here-and-now in favour of the potential and the future, and believes that the significance of this period of life is less that of puberty than of 'the individual's introduction into adult society' (ibid.:149). Homing in on a specific aspect, Skorikov and Vondracek (2011) describe occupational identity formation as a major element in an individual's development of meaning and structure – which they believe is a critical task of adolescence.

Burkitt (2011) contends that the individual is not born into an identity, but that one's life in particular contexts is the means by which one's identity is formed. Creuss *et al.* (2015) propose that throughout our lives we continuously organise our experiences into meaningful wholes incorporating our personal, private, public, and professional selves. They further argue (ibid.) that there are three domains of identity development relevant to (medical) education, namely individual, relational, and collective identity.

Gore and Cross (2014) suggest some of the detail of the changes that a developing or evolving identity may undergo, proposing three elements common to identity change. These are: the extent to which aspects of the self are rewarded or punished in the current environment; comparisons with others; and the cognitive accessibility of social and physical stimuli. If the audience that views the self is large, of higher status, and is made salient, the self is likely to be presented in ways deemed appropriate for that audience. Thus, for example, one may downplay one's own language at the expense of the language perceived to be ascendant. Comparing oneself with others in the

community that one aspires to enter can lead to changes in the direction of likeness. Taking medical students: the lab coat, the stethoscope draped casually around the neck, and the adoption of the discourse – and the language in which the discourse is conducted – exemplify these changes. Given that one's concept of self is to an extent a cognitive construction, as students take new cognitive information on board, so also they take on new conceptions of themselves as inhabitants of the new cognitive space.

While Piaget describes cognitive development and Erikson psychosocial development – each of which contributes to identity formation – both can be criticised for portraying human development as stepwise rather than continuous. Burkitt implies that identity is contextually formed, and both Cruess and Gore imply that parallel processes may take place continuously. For the purposes of this discussion, I take it that the process of becoming a doctor represents a significant period of change for students, which is not only perceived as such by them (Sommerville 2014), but would be recognised as salient by each of the authors cited.

### ***Language and Identity***

Bamberg *et al.* (2011: 182), writing on the intersection of the use of discourse and construction of an identity, state that:

...speakers, in their choices of how they say what they say ... are interpreted as making use of (indexical devices) that cue listeners on how to read their messages as interactively designed. It is through a reading of these means that hearers (or more generally, recipients) come to a reading of the speaker's intentions and ultimately to a reading of how speakers present a sense of who they are. ...

Bourdieu (1977: 652) argues that 'a language is worth what those who speak it are worth' and 'speech always owes a major part of its value to the value of the person who utters it', implying that choice of language reflects, in one sense, the values of the speaker.

Foucault (1972) describes what he terms the 'political' nature of language choice: that what is said, and *can* be said, using language, is constrained by forces beyond language. Within a body of knowledge, he argues, the discourse of that discipline is shaped by – and in turn shapes – those

who profess that discipline, and the knowledge that they profess. The disciplinary discourse may be constructed and refined so as to act as its own gatekeeper – only certain people may be granted access to the discourse and be allowed to speak through it and about it.

Foucault writes also about the role of ritual: the stance, the behaviour, the circumstances, the implicit understandings surrounding the use of discourse to signify not just the validity but the roles of speakers within the discourse. The ritual of clinical teaching – the hierarchy, the way in which patients are approached, examined, and presented to the consultant – is what Shulman (2005) identifies as the signature pedagogy of medicine. This is its characteristic mode of teaching and learning, which necessarily entails use of the technical discourse of medicine. If the discourse is available only in a particular language, use of that language becomes a necessary part of the ritual. In similar vein, Hafferty (1998) writes of medicine's hidden curriculum: that which is not explicitly taught, but which is transferred by example – elements of dress, of behaviour and, no doubt, of speech and language patterns.

Taking a critical look primarily at acquisition, rather than use, of a second language, Norton and McKinney (2011) examine this acquisition as a process of identity construction, not purely as an educational transaction. They affirm that identity is multiple rather than singular, changes over time, and contains inferences as to power dynamics in learning – and, I dare add, using – language. One of these power dynamics is access to particular communities, and investing in their cultural capital (Bourdieu 1977) by use of language.

Turning to the use of specific languages, Obanya (1995) mentions the perception in West Africa that African languages are not suited to scientific discourse. Burkitt (2011) argues, following ideas of Vygotsky and G H Mead, that language does not express pre-existing thoughts so much as provide the tools for forming thoughts. This implies that if a particular language does not contain the verbal tools to express certain thoughts, these cannot be entertained or conveyed by that language. Edwards (2009: 58) disagrees, claiming that developments in a language are secondary to conceptual advancement: 'Words themselves are only indicators'. Of course, the proficiency with which one operates in a particular language may also constrain the thoughts that one can form and convey in it.

McKinney (2007), studying black learners at schools in suburban Johannesburg, observes that proficient use of English may be a source of pride,

connoting that the speaker (and, by implication, the wider family) is educationally and/or financially well off. She does, however, note the ambivalence of township dwellers who acknowledge the value of English in accessing various benefits, but at the same time denigrate their peers whose skill in English is better than in their own language. Detractors use the terms ‘coconut’, ‘Oreo’, ‘Top Deck’, and ‘white wanna-be’ to suggest that, in neglecting the language of their peers, those who speak English better reduce – or attempt to reduce – their (racial) identity to a superficial veneer. Expressing a contrasting view (in the Western Cape) that the vernacular is not ‘cool’, Heugh *et al.* (2007: 104) describe a feeling among school children that isiXhosa is ‘old-fashioned and used simultaneously by intellectuals and rural people.’

Ambivalence about language use is not limited to South Africa; there is an extensive literature on language attrition in other countries (Ginsberg 1986; Hyltenstam & Obler 1989; Kopke & Schmid 2002; Lambert & Freed 1982; Schecter & Bayley 1997). This attrition is seen principally amongst immigrant minorities learning the language of their adopted country and gradually, through lack of use, forgetting their own and failing to pass it on to the next generation. The learners in Johannesburg and the Western Cape quoted above are not, geographically speaking, immigrants, and other non-immigrant examples exist: Native American languages, for example, have been documented as suffering the same disuse (Crawford 1996). South African indigenous languages may be under similar threat – for instance, through poor teaching by the older generation to the next (Nkosi 2011).

McKinney (2007) writes of language use as a strategic performance, as if to imply that in fact language, and its inferred identity, can be assumed or laid aside. This is echoed by Warschauer’s (2001) finding that postmodern identity is ‘multiple, dynamic, and conflictual, based not on a permanent sense of self but rather the choices that individuals make in different circumstances...’. One such circumstance might be assimilation into a community by acquiring and interpreting the language of the community. Wenger (1998) writes of membership of a community of practice as being only part of our identity as student, family member, and member of a religious or other interest group. He describes a community of practice as having three distinctive characteristics (Wenger undated): a commitment to a domain of practice, a community that builds relationships that enable members to learn from each other, and a shared repertoire of resources for practice. Entry into a community of practice entails learning the nature of the domain, the behaviours of the

community and the competencies of the practice, and, like all learning, this transforms our identities (Wenger 1998).

Those who write philosophically of discourse and identity may assume that the intersection of the two is played out within a uniform language structure, while those who draw from practical experience of language use may assume that a single discourse is being conducted in more than one language. For the purposes of this article, I distinguish between the *language* used by an ethnic group and the technical *discourse* used by a profession, and I argue that the use of a specific language in a particular context may signal the user's sense of identity as clearly, if not more so, than the use of the appropriate discourse.

### ***Higher and Professional Education and Identity***

Moving on to the particular time and place in which identity and language are expressed, Besser and Zeigler-Hill (2014) point out that stress at the beginning of university life tends to lower self-esteem, even in those students who exhibit positive personality characteristics such as optimism, hope and happiness. Cuperman *et al.* (2014) describe the malleability of the opinions of individuals with a weak sense of self. Diemer and Blustein (2006), following Freire's (1973) concept of critical consciousness, describe how oppressed individuals frame a critical analysis of the structures of their oppression, and of their perceived capacity to change the inequities in their socio-political circumstances. These authors then relate the agency of critical consciousness to individuals' sense of vocational identity in expressing their ability to overcome systematic stumbling blocks. Hadden *et al.* (2014), arguing from self-determination theory, posit the need to integrate self-concepts so as to fulfil three psychological needs of relatedness, competence, and autonomy. They describe presenting the self relative to others either assertively (by ingratiation, intimidation, or self-enhancement) or defensively (by self-handicapping, disclaiming failure, or self-justification).

Referencing the foregoing texts is not to suggest that students in general, or second language English-speaking students in particular, have weak, oppressed identities. What the texts do suggest, however, is



the force of influences on the young adult's sense of identity when entering an institution that has an alien tradition and culture.

In the intellectual culture of the medical school, Jarvis-Selinger *et al.* (2012) argue that development of clinical competence – medical education's current emphasis – is not itself enough to establish students as part of the community of practice. They argue that doing a doctor's work is only part of being a doctor. The role of a doctor is not the same as the identity of the individual becoming a doctor, and the process of becoming a doctor in fact involves construction and subsequent reconstruction of a number of identities, such as: scholar, student, clinical clerk, intern, independent practitioner. (Foucault might link these various roles to a sequence of 'rituals' in the discourse of medicine.)

Skorikov and Vondracek (2011), summarising research on occupational identity, find that achievement of a strong occupational identity is associated with good mental and emotional health, and that this achievement is particularly important for disadvantaged youths. In traditionally male-dominated occupations such as medicine and engineering, females – often seen as disadvantaged in those fields – tend, perhaps surprisingly, to have stronger occupational identities. This may be because of their need to assert their commitment to their career. These authors suggest further that in middle and late adolescence, the provision of mentors and role models significantly enhances occupational identity development. They make the pertinent point:

Occupational identity refers to the conscious awareness of oneself as a worker. The process of occupational identity formation in modern societies can be difficult and stressful. However, establishing a strong, self-chosen, positive, and flexible occupational identity appears to be an important contributor to occupational success, social adaptation, and psychological well-being. ...we note that there is also an urgent need to address the issues of cross-cultural differences and interventions that have not received sufficient attention

in previous research (ibid.: 69).

It is evident that identity is a concept and a construct that develops with the individual, and is mutable according to circumstances. The literature adduced does not, however, address the philosophical question of whether each individual in fact possesses an essential core identity – an ‘*I qua myself*’ if you will (but see Bamberg *et al.* 2011). Identity in its development and its outworking is generally portrayed as ‘I relative to others’ – akin to the indigenous concept *ubuntu*; as an expressed identity. Wenger and others would argue that identity is both built and revealed in community. Certainly, languages and discourses are used in various communities in interactions between individuals. Each language is shaped by the history of its users, and, as Burkitt (2011) argues, in turn shapes its users’ thought patterns. (Burkitt’s drawing of an analogy with Vygotsky’s theories of education is interesting, but, I suggest, incomplete: it is an individual, not a language, who aids in developing the learner’s mastery of almost-in-reach material.) I argue, with Edwards (2009) – and presumably with those who champion the intellectualisation of indigenous languages (Anonymous 1997; Anonymous 2006; Captain-Hasthibeer 2015) – that developing thought patterns form the language. The need to express new concepts or name new discoveries demands new lexical terms, and it seems that the thrust of efforts to intellectualise indigenous languages appears to be aimed primarily at the vocabulary of the languages concerned.

A significant intersection of language with discourse occurs when students make the transition from high school to university. In the former they may have been taught nominally in a second language; in the latter, the majority of their lecturers and their textbooks operate in that second language alone, as they induct the students into a technical discourse. Medicine serves as an example of a discourse to be assimilated; more than a vocabulary, a repertoire of concepts.

The various literatures on identity *per se*, language, and professional education frame, but do not directly address, the topic of language change during the development of a professional identity. This

article seeks to address some of the insufficiently researched issues of cross-cultural differences in language and discourse in professional education, by means of a combination of methods as described below.

## **Methodology**

For this study, a mixed-methods approach was adopted: a quantitative phase to measure the influence of students' languages on their assessment marks, and a qualitative phase to explore possible explanations for any effects seen.

For the quantitative analysis, the assessment marks of a cohort of students were recorded over the entirety of their five-year curriculum, in order to see if any effect found varied over time. As a matter of convenience, a class was chosen that was part-way through its course and whose marks were obtainable from the university marks system. So as to maintain consistency with regard to the class members and the assessments, students who failed a year and dropped back into a subsequent cohort were excluded from further analysis. Similarly, students from the preceding cohort who had failed a year, and thus dropped back into the cohort under study, were not included in the analysis.

Marks were collated in an Excel® spreadsheet, rendered anonymous, and imported into SPSS®. Analysis of assessment marks according to home language was performed in SPSS, using the general linear model (GLM). This is similar to analysis of variance (ANOVA) using regression (Field 2009:350), and can be regarded as the overarching term that includes comparative tests such as the t test, ANOVA and regression analysis. The GLM has the advantage of being able to incorporate matrices that represent sets of data and also to make multiple comparisons (Trochim 2006).

In their third year, 19 students from the cohort under study were purposively selected so as to represent the demographic spread of the class as to ethnicity, sex, age, previous academic experience and current academic performance. These students were interviewed in groups or individually, depending on their availability. At the same time, six members of the teaching staff, chosen to represent a spread of ethnicity, age, and clinical- or laboratory-based disciplines, were interviewed using the same semi-structured schedule. A graph showing the relationship between languages and marks over time was used as a stimulus for discussion; participants were asked to comment on what

the graph depicted and what might explain what was portrayed. Interviews were recorded, transcribed and anonymised, submitted to respondents for checking, then analysed thematically using NVivo®.

Ethics permission, gatekeepers' assent and participants' informed written consent were obtained prior to commencing the study.

## **Findings**

In a class of 202 students, 15 different languages were spoken as mother-tongue, including 91 first-language English speakers and 65 first-language isiZulu speakers. Statistical comparison between the 15 language groups over time showed no consistent relationship:  $p = 0.145$  on ANOVA according to GLM. Categorising marks into two groups – English first or second language – showed a significant ( $p = 0.001$ ) difference of about 6% in favour of first language English speakers, which was maintained over the whole period of their degree programme.

In the interviews, the aspect of language cropped up in discussions on the nature of the barrier between everyday knowledge and medical knowledge, as well as specifically relating to the marks differences referred to above. In this article I am focussing on the responses to my question 'Would you prefer it if we were to lecture and assess you, and provide textbooks, in isiZulu (as the dominant vernacular)?' To my surprise, the answer from isiZulu speakers and non-speakers alike was uniformly 'No!' Reasons given for this response can be grouped broadly into factors pushing away from isiZulu, and those pulling towards English.

(Quotes are identified by pseudonyms and line numbers in the interview transcriptions.)

A not unexpected attitude to the local indigenous language was typically expressed:

*...if you dare to speak English ... [patients] are so offended. Like you think ... English is the, it's the better language. It's the language of the white persons that oppressed the black people, so now 'You think you're better' (Zodwa;658-60).*

Such a reaction would be unsurprising in virtually any setting; apart from the sensibilities of the patients, one's pride in one's own language is an understand-

ably strong sentiment.

One student toyed briefly with the idea of being taught in isiZulu:

*...it will help, I think, receiving lectures and notes in Zulu, because it would make it better. But like I've got this point: at the same time it would take us back to the whole '94 apartheid thingie – and then we – I don't think it's going to help much (Imbali:760-2).*

Imbali's response harks back to the days of 'separate development' when discrimination in terms of the language of instruction was a sore point (Anonymous undated). It is noteworthy that, so many years later, the suggestion of separation according to language elicited an adverse reaction.

Considerations more practical than political were also raised:

*People who are coming from Durban and Pietermaritzburg are speaking a more easier form of Zulu, unlike people that are coming from Nkandla that are speaking the Zulu that the chief speaks – you know – and it's different... (Zodwa; 693-5).*

Students from urban centres recognised that their command of their own language was deficient compared to that of their rural-origin peers. This deficiency extended to technical terminology:

*...it makes it worse. Do you know how to put Zulu into medical Zulu? We'll spend a decade on one system. ... So putting it in Zulu – it actually takes you two steps back... (Lungi; 597-8).*

*...in terms of understanding, you know, the concepts, sometimes, ja, the terminology can not be – easy (S'bu; 593-4).*

The problematic matter of terminology was also mentioned by an isiZulu-speaking staff member:

*...putting the instruction into Zulu wouldn't have made any change to me. In fact, it would have made it more difficult for me, because how would you translate 'pancreatitis' into Zulu... (Dr Hlubi; 137-9).*

At the same time as negative connotations of studying in isiZulu were expressed, reasons were given for the use of English:

*English is one of the country's – one of the languages that you need to know and understand (Lungi; 625-6).*

*...in terms of medical, medical language and medical jargon, when you speak to someone in Cape Town, you speak to someone in Jo'burg about a patient here, you have to understand each other (S'bu; 590-2).*

In parallel with Imbali's reluctance to return to the days of separate education, a similar thought was expressed in slightly different terms by another student:

*I think there has to be some kind of universal idea with the whole thing, because then some people are learning in Zulu, some in English, and they are stuck to what they learn in and they cannot converse with each other now, in terms of peer relationships and doctors (Bala; 749-51).*

There was generally a sense that English and the local vernacular could co-exist. An isiZulu member of staff was comfortable with his isiZulu-speaking students greeting him and talking amongst themselves in that language. However, their presentations of patients' cases were invariably in English:

*As I walk around, you can hear them speaking to one another in Zulu, discussing the case. But when they come to present at the end of ten minutes, fifteen minutes, they present in English... (Dr Hlubi; 121-3).*

Despite a demonstrable and persistent difference in assessment marks between first- and second-language English speakers, the latter consistently argued for continuing in English, citing both reasons against using isiZulu and for using English.

## Discussion

The quantitative data that acted as a stimulus for discussion show a disparity between the absence of statistical significance when comparing all 15

languages with one another, set against the significance when comparing English first-language speakers with English second-language speakers. This may be due partly to the fact that some languages were spoken by few students, making statistical significance less likely due to the low numbers. In contrast, seeking common features between groups, in order to form larger aggregates which may be more likely to reflect statistical significance, is a statistical technique that, in this instance, was able to confirm the impression that first-language English speakers have the advantage in English-medium education.

It is not possible to claim that studying for a profession is the sole impulse that drives students seemingly to reject their mother tongue. The pervasiveness of English in schooling, in the media, and in social life generally (Jensen, Arnett & McKenzie 2011), could account for its ascendancy in students' minds. However, given the (theoretical) offer of the opportunity to study in the language(s) in which they were most at home, and bearing in mind that their patients would expect them to communicate in the vernacular(s), it is nevertheless striking that they should unanimously opt for English as their preferred medium of learning. This implies that there may be stronger forces at work than the pervasive presence of English in their lives, when it comes to choosing a language for professional communication.

Erikson and others (Cruess *et al.* 2015; Erikson 1977; Piaget & Inhelder 1969; Skorikov & Vondracek 2011) describe the ferment of identity development in the adolescent phase of finding an occupational identity. Given that language and its use are related to construction and expression of the user's identity (Bamberg *et al.* 2011; Edwards 2009; McKinney 2007; Norton & McKinney 2011), and that entry into a profession is mediated, at least in part, by acquisition of its discourse (Foucault 1972; Shulman 2005; Wenger 1998), I argue that my respondents' choice of English as their preferred language of teaching and learning springs from their emergent professional identity, rather than from a rejection of their mother tongues. Erikson (1968) writes, as noted previously, of the tendency to over-identify with the heroes of the moment. My student respondents showed no signs of hero-worship of their teachers – although Erikson (*ibid.*: 129) also recounts adolescents' 'loud and cynical' concealment of any such commitment. I suggest that identification with their role models in the medical world, all of whom use English professionally, may well be part of the loosening of students' ties to the languages that were hitherto so much a part of their identities.

Without entering into the debate about whether language follows or forms the development of thought patterns (Burkitt 2011; Edwards 2009; Obanya 1995), my English second-language respondents certainly reflected the fact that certain technical terms and concepts current in the community they were joining were not available in their own languages. Respondents commented that one of the barriers they faced on entering medical studies was the technical terminology. This was available to them only in English, the language and discourse thus presenting a double hurdle. (Possibly unique to this country is the fact that for some students, English may have been their third or fourth language. The problem of operating in a language not their own remains, nonetheless.)

Shulman (2005) identifies clinical interaction as the signature pedagogy of medicine; the ritual, in Foucault's (1972) terms, that signals the status of those who engage in its discourse. The discourse, and thus the language in which the discourse is conducted, is a part of the ritual. Staff and student conversations in their own language (isiZulu) signify their comfort with that aspect of their identities; their automatic transition to English for the formal case presentation signifies their acceptance of the ritual of the medical practitioner identity. It is interesting, bearing in mind the instances of ambivalence to one's own language cited above (Heugh *et al.* 2007; McKinney 2007), that several of my respondents proclaimed their own township origins, and admitted that they were unable to speak correct isiZulu as spoken in rural areas. Dr Hlubi's observation in his wards that students talked amongst themselves, and casually with him, in isiZulu, yet presented patients formally in English, perhaps corresponds to the mutable use of language depending upon circumstances as related by Warschauer (2001).

My respondents saw their access to the medical community as mediated (partially, not wholly) by a particular language. The dynamics of power and time (Bourdieu 1977; McKinney 2007) were touched on by Imbali, who accepted that learning in her own language would be good, but rejected the idea because it smacked of the past days of 'separate development'. At that time, language was one of the distinctions used by those in power to discriminate against certain groups of people – 'identity as a site of struggle' (Bourdieu 1977: 74) indeed!

As to the site of higher education, Besser and Zeigler-Hill (2014) describe the stress experienced by students entering university life. How much more might this be the case for those labouring under the various disadvantages



affecting many present-day South African students, whose state of mind may be less sanguine, and whose self-esteem less robust, than that of students in culturally more homogeneous countries? My respondents did not in fact exhibit the typical features of malleability of opinion that Cuperman *et al.* (2014) describe in individuals with a weak sense of self. I suggest that it is not a weak self-image but rather the stresses of a significant change in intellectual environment that may have brought these students to the point of appearing, at medical school, to abandon their own language in favour of another.

My respondents, both students and staff members, could be thought of, in Hadden's (2014) terms, as 'ingratiating', inasmuch as their peers and superiors, and this researcher, habitually speak English. On the other hand, respondents may have been exercising self-enhancement by asserting their ability to cope in a second language. Thus, by autonomously choosing to operate in English, and proclaiming their competence in that language, they established their relatedness to other practitioners in the field. Noels *et al.* (1996), writing from Canada, which has a strong bilingual tradition, observed Chinese-speaking university students, noting that they tended to identify themselves exclusively with either the Chinese or English languages. I find the comparison with my own students intriguing, considering the extent to which the latter code-switch in practice, while maintaining that their primary allegiance in their studies is to English.

One is always aware of the risk of bias when interacting with one's own students – the more so in the area of language. As might be expected, the language in which an interview is conducted tends to produce responses in the frame of the culture represented by that language (Smith 2011). Thus, being questioned in English – the language of the individualistic Western culture – respondents would be more likely to provide answers that accorded with that culture, since these individuals themselves come from a culture that values consensus and agreement.

Respondents' interactions with me as researcher were relatively limited. However, medical students and staff members are generally in daily contact. Dr Hlubi's comment on students' language use in his ward illustrates part of the 'hidden curriculum' (Hafferty 1998) that implicitly teaches students their role as doctors-to-be. Dr Hlubi, as a role model, may inadvertently perpetuate the stereotype of the practitioner who dresses in a certain way, behaves in a certain way, interacts with patients in a certain way, and addresses colleagues *in a certain language*. As students strive to mould themselves into

the role to which they aspire, just as linguistically they pick up the discourse of medicine, so too they pick up with it the language in which they see the role portrayed.

It is quite apparent, from Dr Hlubi's observations in his ward, that isiZulu-speaking students were not abandoning their own language. By the same token, my argument is not that they were in a phase of discarding their linguistic and cultural identities, but that they were in the process of constructing a new and additional professional identity as one of the multiple identities that each individual negotiates for him- or herself (Creuss *et al.* 2015; Norton & McKinney 2011; McKinney 2007; Warschauer 2001; Wenger 1998).

## **Conclusion**

I have sought, relative to a synthesis of the literature on the topics of language and identity, to establish that the initially surprising choice of English as academic language by respondents for whom it was not their first language stemmed more from their efforts to construct an occupational identity that reflected the profession for which they were studying than from an abnegation of their own languages and their ethnic and personal identities.

The bias induced by a non-representative sample is inherent in qualitative methodology, and, as mentioned above, my posing of questions in English may also have influenced respondents' replies. The consistency of the responses, particularly in the face of a significant and sustained academic advantage in favour of those assessed in their home language, suggests that the thoughts expressed were both valid and genuine. The exact nature of their reluctance to use their own languages could be a fruitful area of further study.

Policies for language use may be formulated to serve political ends (such as enhancing the status of indigenous languages) and/or educational needs (such as the enhancement of students' epistemic access to higher education). Taking a more pragmatic point of view, clinical medicine has the need to communicate effectively with patients, which requires the learning of local languages – itself a difficult task (Matthews & van Wyk 2015). Intellectualisation of indigenous languages, in terms of devising technical vocabularies and discourses for the crafts, technologies and professions that South Africa needs, is a laudable aim. I imagine that my respondents would support such an initiative. It would address some of the 'push factors' that at present militate against the use of vernacular languages at this level of study.

Having said that, I acknowledge that posing the question of first-language teaching presupposes an immense amount of work in producing the resources (technical vocabulary, textbooks, lecture notes, examination questions, and marking rubrics, among other necessities) that such provision would require. The unavailability of such resources in this place at this time – and thus the hollowness of the question – may well have influenced my respondents' answers. When implementing educational language policies, care will be needed in dealing with the 'pull factors' that promote the use of English as an increasingly global language, and, by the same token, the 'push factor' of students' diminishing competence in their mother tongues, rendering problematic both their understanding of their own language and their grasp of technical discourses in that language.

This article presents a cross-cultural, mixed-method study that contributes to the need expressed by Skorikov and Vondracek (2011) to address cross-cultural differences and interventions that have not previously been sufficiently studied.

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# Engaging Indigenous Knowledge Holders in Teaching Preservice Teachers in IKS Food Production and Practices: Implications for Higher Education

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## Abstract

This paper explores preservice science teachers' views and reflections of science, Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) and their perspectives on the inclusion of Indigenous Knowledge holders as teachers in the academy, in the context of teaching Environmentally sustainable development practices. Forty-nine preservice teachers were engaged in a Science Education university module that prepared them for transformative pedagogy for the new South African school Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) curriculum. This module included the teaching and learning of IKS, scientific issues pertaining to IKS, and preparing students to establish gardens on campus and in their communities, using agriculturally sustainable practices. Two African *izinyanga* (medicinal knowledge holders) shared their knowledge and skills of agriculture and sustainable development during the teaching of the Science Education module. Data were collected from 49 preservice teachers about their views of science and IKS using open-ended questionnaires, and 29 reflections on the inclusion of IKS holders as indigenous knowledge teachers in the academy. The data were analysed for the emergence of major themes or issues. The findings indicate that preservice teachers' views of science, IKS and their relationships are complementary. The study has implications for planning responsive and innovative pedagogies in Higher Education curricula.



**Keywords:** Indigenous Knowledge Systems; preservice teachers; indigenous knowledge holders; pedagogies; higher education

## **Introduction**

Indigenous Knowledge (IK) holders such as chiefs, *izangoma* (spiritual healers) and *izinyanga* (medicinal knowledge holders) are traditionally respected elders of African indigenous communities. As divine spiritualists, *izangoma* communicate with deceased ancestors and interpret their messages which are relayed to people who seek this information. In addition *izangoma* have intuitive knowledge of natural elements, such as the weather, and can predict rain (Krige 1965; Govender, Mudaly & James 2013). *Izinyanga* who are also herbalists play a crucial role in health provision for many communities (Govender *et al.* 2013). We argue that the ethno-botanical knowledge of the *izinyanga*, together with the knowledge of the natural elements of *izangoma*, can contribute to the establishment of sustainable environmental practices such as community gardens, adding credence to African Indigenous Knowledge Systems (AIKS). Their knowledge needs to be preserved, made accessible to the wider community and transmitted to future generations.

## **Problem Statement**

There is a problem with competing paradigms of knowledge with indigenous knowledge being historically subjugated by Euro-western scientific knowledge in relation to environmentally sustainable development practices, global environmental issues and crises of poverty. Environmentally sustainable development involves participatory educational endeavours, public conscientization, and group efforts in learning to change in response to environmental and agricultural sustainability challenges. The recognition of the rights and knowledge of indigenous people has been endorsed through the establishment of the United Nations Inter-Agency Support Group (IASG) on Indigenous Issues (IASG 2014). Reports to the IASG reveal the importance of the role of customary and traditional practices in enhancing community resilience, particularly the promotion of Indigenous Knowledge through inter-generational transmission (IASG 2014).

The South African government adopted the Indigenous Knowledge Systems Policy in 2004 (Republic of South Africa 2004). This policy serves to strengthen collaboration among government departments, tertiary institutions, scientific councils and indigenous knowledge holders. In addition, it provides a framework for collaboration with other African countries with a view to recognising and addressing continental challenges, such as biopiracy (*ibid*). The University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) is among the tertiary institutions which commissioned a feasibility study on researching African Indigenous Knowledge Systems (AIKS). The findings revealed that UKZN has an immense potential to contribute to this field and in 2014 the policy on African Indigenous Knowledge Systems became effective. One of purposes of the policy is to affirm the value of AIKS as a ‘legitimate’ knowledge domain (UKZN 2014). By embedding AIKS in activities related to research, teaching and community engagement, issues of poverty alleviation, food security and health management can be addressed in a more holistic fashion (UKZN 2014).

The argument for universities to create spaces which facilitate the construction and promotion of IKS is a cogent one, and policy formulation in this regard is evidence of the importance that universities attribute to it. This process, however, is not unproblematic, given the historical tension which permeates research and indigenous people (Kelly & Gili 2009). The reason for this tension is that universities are colonial institutions which operate according to distinct rules, procedures and conventions. The ‘languages of legitimisation’ (Kelly & Gili 2009:1) enable the way of knowing of academics at universities to be predicated on superiority, regardless of whether these academics self-classify as indigenous or non-indigenous people. Indigenous Knowledge holders can make a valuable contribution regarding the intersection between IKS and Western Science. We are of the opinion that a scholarly encounter with IKS and IK holders can enrich the ways we engage in research and re-conceptualise education. Within this context, we formulated the following problem statement: How should teacher educators and preservice teachers approach the problem of competing knowledge paradigms regarding the inclusion of indigenous knowledge of agricultural practices, including health and food security, in the context of planning and delivering responsive and innovative pedagogies in Higher Education? Furthermore, how are different IKS incorporated into other ways of knowing and systems of knowledge production? Can the Western paradigm of knowledge’s encounter with IK holders and IKS help bring about innovative perspectives and pedagogies with

regard to Science Education in order to build food security and sufficiency through sustainable use of known indigenous knowledges and practices? We respond to this by discussing three issues which are central to this question. Firstly, we focus on food security within the context of sustainable environmental practices. Secondly, we argue for preservice science teachers to be mentored to respond to these challenges. Thirdly, we examine the ‘social relation’ between the knower and knowledge (Kelly & Gili 2009: 2), and contend that the IK holder can and should serve as a pedagogue within the academic space.

Environmental sustainability issues include food production in the midst of dynamic global climatic changes (Harvey & Pilgrim 2011). The current crises of food insecurity and under-nutrition, which are associated with poverty (Altman, Hart & Jacobs 2009), require interventions from all sectors of the population to ensure increased production of food. Food security is a major global and national issue and gaining the knowledge and skills of how to adapt to climate change and ensure food security requires major interventions so as to transform current patterns and practices of food production, distribution and consumption (Beddington, Asaduzzaman, Clark, Bremauntz, Guillou, Jahn & Wakhungu 2012). Beddington *et al.* (2012) suggest that multidisciplinary investigations of regionally and nationally appropriate responses to climate change and food security challenges are necessary to tackle long term food security. In addition, it is important to ensure that sustainable agricultural practices are inculcated in order to manage climate change.

Science education preservice teachers engage with many learners during work integrated learning (referred to as Teaching Practice) in schools. We contend that these preservice teachers have a major role to play in developing learners for sustainable agricultural practices during Teaching Practice via projects, which should include integrating IK. However, they first need to be mentored at university on how to do this. One of the five key curriculum principles of the current school curriculum policy, the National Curriculum Statement (NCS), is: ‘Valuing indigenous knowledge systems: acknowledging the rich history and heritage of this country as important contributors to nurturing the values contained in the Constitution’ (Department of Basic Education [DBE] 2011: 5). A specific aim of this policy explores the link between indigenous knowledge and school science. Traditional medicines and sustainable use of the environment are among the topics which are specified (DBE 2011).

As practicing academics in science education, we sought to change from our continuous engagement with dominant Western and Eurocentric epistemologies and methodologies towards African-centred knowledge and practices. We developed an increased understanding of the value of IK and responded to the call for the inclusion of IKS in the university curriculum (Govender 2009; Mudaly & Ismail 2013; Valderrama-Pérez, Andrade & El-Hani 2015). We chose a novel way to do this by engaging IK holders as knowledge discussants and teachers in an academic setting. These knowledge holders conducted practical work on gardening for food-security and health, using indigenous practices and indigenous plants. This was related to the topic 'human nutrition', which we sought to teach in a holistic, authentic and relevant manner. We wanted to teach more than physiology and anatomy, so we transcended disciplinary boundaries by recognising the knower as the IKS knowledge holder, and IK as legitimate knowledge within the higher education landscape.

We argue that by creating a space for IK, and positioning the IK holder as a pedagogue within an academic place, we set the stage for transformative learning and transformative pedagogy. Transformative learning is a process whereby 'we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open [changeable], and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action' (Mezirow & Associates 2000: 214). Transformative pedagogy is a pedagogy which responds to changing socio-cultural, environmental, political and technological needs. Central to transformative pedagogy is the teacher's willingness to transcend traditional, familiar pedagogical boundaries, and to enable active participation in knowledge production. It marks a departure from parochial, transmissive models of teaching. It involves advocating for a socially-relevant curriculum which is sensitive and responsive to power relations between cultures (Senteni & Schneider 2007). This study was conducted to elicit the perspectives of our preservice teachers, in order to enrich our engagement with this type of pedagogy and we present the insights and implications for pedagogy which emerged from this study.

In an attempt to integrate IK holders in an academic setting and to formally recognise their knowledge and skills, two IKS guardians and knowledge holders were involved in sharing their knowledge of agricultural practices including health, food-security and sustainable development during a one day workshop as a way of integrating IK into an academic module. At the

time, forty-nine preservice teachers were engaged in a Science Education university course that prepared them for transformative pedagogy for the new South African school curriculum. This course included the teaching and learning of IKS, scientific issues pertaining to IKS, and preparing the teachers to establish gardens on campus and in their communities.

The research questions aimed at exploring preservice teachers' views of Science and IK, the inclusion of IKS holders' participation in the academy, their reflections regarding the IK holders contributions to knowledge regarding sustainable development, and their views on the implications for pedagogy in Higher Education.

## **The Role of Indigenous Knowledge and Education in Sustainable Agricultural Practices**

Internationally, sustainable agricultural and environmental practices are gaining increased focus as evidenced from a seminal joint article by 53 international scholars who compiled the top 100 questions of importance to the future of global agriculture (Pretty *et al.* 2010). The first question in the study by Pretty *et al.* targeted the critical impact of climate change on agriculture yields and practices. It is generally accepted that organised agricultural production has been predominantly the domain of large-scale farmers, although small scale subsistence farmers, mainly from indigenous communities, also contribute to the global agricultural basket. While millions of people live in urban areas with limited land and farming space, urban agriculture (UA) is viewed as a valuable activity in developed countries, considering its capacity to alleviate food scarcity and its contribution to the economy, sustainable development, employment and optimal land usage (Pearson, Pearson & Pearson 2010). Evidence of the growth of UA lies in the value of food production in big cities that have an estimated UA production of between 15 and 20 per cent of the world's food requirements (Armar-Klemesu & Maxwell 2000).

Traditionally, agriculture in rural areas with rural communities far removed from urban areas has been the focus of research and interventions. However, with the migration of rural dwellers to towns and cities for employment opportunities and the resulting need for resources there, they can still continue with small-scale farming (Baiphethi & Jacobs 2009).

Unfortunately, they encounter many constraints such as small plots, cash expenses related to water, rates to be paid, and theft. Nevertheless, UA can be promoted and sustained as a valuable agricultural practice since most homes do have small plots and some households do already grow vegetables, herbal plants, and stock some animals, which are used to supplement food for the wider household, although very few engage in small-scale commercial activity. What is necessary is an exploration of the role that IK and IK holders can play in contributing to the development of urban agriculture in both developed and developing countries.

The need for increased initiatives in small scale subsistence gardens and farms, mini-co-operatives and the intervention of government and businesses is now more urgent than ever (Dorward, Kydd, Morrison & Urey 2004). With the HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis pandemics in Africa and other lifestyle diseases that affect many adults, large households often need to be managed by inexperienced and financially-strapped teenagers. There is therefore a dire need for schools and tertiary institutions in Southern Africa to promote sustainable agricultural education programmes (Chopra 2004), but this could be difficult as there is a lack of cohesive planning by the Departments of Education, municipalities, and communities to provide suitable education linked to the production of food (Kalaitzidis *et al.* 2011). We are aware of some local municipalities working on climate change community programmes with the focus on energy, food and environment (Aylett 2011) and also with schools on sustainable agricultural projects.

The latter has met with numerous challenges, where teachers' and learners' motivation rapidly dwindled as they encountered problems of theft, time constraints, and safe after-hours working periods. Nevertheless, we are aware from our preservice teachers and learners at schools that food-programmes organised by the government (Keller & Lang, 2008) as well as religious and charitable organisations in some communities do assist some learners and their families who have frugal economic means, to have healthy meals and so not attend classes hungry. The need for individuals and families, including university students, to provide their own food security has to take on a more practical form while integrating the theoretical concepts of science in agriculture.

Preservice teachers at a university come with agricultural and IK experiences from diverse settings, including urban areas and rural areas. They could share these skills with others. We maintain that spaces at homes, schools,

community areas and institutions could be maximised and used for extensive agricultural means thereby contributing to sustainable food security. We contend that these efforts which integrate science education and IKS food production practices within a collaborative and mentored work-setting have the potential to create a regular supply of fresh organic fruits and vegetables, which could also be used to sustain the family and to generate additional income. This could enhance the nutritional balance of healthy food in the urban diet thereby reducing the incidence of adverse health conditions among students and the wider community.

### **The Role of IK Holders in Agricultural Practices and IKS**

During the past few decades there has been a flurry of activity relating to the value of IKS especially in developing and previously colonised countries, where substantial loss of culture, land, agricultural practices and IKS have demoralised and decimated indigenous communities (Hammersmith 2009). Many highly respected IK holders in indigenous communities are subsistence farmers with indepth knowledge of the weather, seasons, agriculture, environment including droughts and floods, identification of soils and nutrients, seeds, plants and animal diversity and maintain intricate relationships with their environment (Alcock 2010, 2014). But, sadly, much of this knowledge and skill has been lost, primarily through deliberate subjugation of the indigenous way of community life.

In South Africa, after the demise of 300 years of colonial rule and apartheid, the democratic government in 1994 set about rejuvenating and establishing systems to restore and preserve IKS. In this regard, IK policy was drafted to be implemented in all aspects of South African society including the agriculture and education sectors (Department of Science and Technology 2004). The policy underscored the protection of intellectual property of IK holders (Department of Trade and Industry 2008).

In education, research on practicing and preservice teachers' views of IKS and pedagogy of IKS in classrooms is evident (Vhurumuku & Mokeleche 2009), but a focus on authentic IK holders' participation in the academy (Mpofu, Mushayikwa & Otulaja 2014) is minimal. As they are often interviewed in the field, they are generally not considered on equal terms as tutors or lecturers in the academy. Several reasons for this have been suggested:

flexible access to IK holders, a complicated process of monetary payment, current policies of appointment of ‘legitimate staff’ in terms of formal academic qualifications, perception of the status of IKS in relation to Western and Eurocentric knowledge, amongst others (Ntuli 1999). Kaya (2013: 148) adds that the ‘recruitment of appropriate AIKS teaching staff’ into the academia is problematic as ‘the availability of appropriate and qualified staff is one of the major challenges of integrating IKS into teaching and learning’. Some researchers are convinced that indigenous agricultural knowledge (IAK) if harnessed, taught and practiced in a community-supportive manner in communities and in student-driven projects on university campuses could encourage and grow the knowledge, interest and action for sustainable agricultural practices. Parrish (1999) maintains that an understanding of IAK may be a necessary ingredient in any successful contemporary effort to feed the world and thus reduce extreme poverty. Successful outputs of this work may be observed in studies of Native Americans, First Nations (Canadians) and Maori (New Zealanders) (Masemula 2013), which indicate how indigenous knowledge lessons in academic operations can be directly linked to economic, political and community action.

As IK activists in academia, it is incumbent upon us to seek knowledge and utilise the lessons from pioneering initiatives and efforts for greater development. In Southern Africa, there are only a few published studies based on preservice teachers’ and teachers’ interactions with IKS holders in the formal sector or who are exposed to the struggles of the indigene (Mudaly & Ismail 2013; Vhurumuku & Mokeleche 2009). For preservice teachers and in-service teachers to critique IKS and science they need knowledge of science, IKS and Nature of Science (NOS) and Nature of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (NOIKS) (Vhurumuku & Mokeleche 2009), insight into politics, hegemony and colonisation (Kincheloe & Steinberg 2008), and how to integrate these into the school/tertiary curriculum (Govender 2014; Hewson & Ogunniyi 2011; Mpofu *et al.* 2014). It is, of course, extremely important to consider the types of questions we ask about the relationship between indigenous knowledge, western science and education as presented in the problem statement.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Preservice teachers need to understand the historical and power relationships of societies and how some groups of people are prioritised at the expense of



others, who are marginalised. In order for these preservice teachers to appreciate a wide variety of insights, they also need to better understand and engage with the issue of indigenous knowledge in the academy. The main weapons used to conquer human societies in Africa were guns, germs and steel (Diamond 1997). Nowadays, the conquerer has taken to literature in the guise of neoliberalism where numerous individuals engaged in scientific research come from dominant Western/Eurocentric cultural backgrounds, and they continue to belittle the importance of cultural and indigenous knowledge in academic work and pedagogy (Huygens 2006). The Western scientific worldview generally regards alternate knowledge systems as outdated, lacking in evidence, superstitious and archaic (Tamdgidi 2012; Kho 2014).

In framing the study in terms of the educational and epistemological value of indigenous knowledge and to counteract the claims which position IKS as subaltern, critical multilogicality (CM) as espoused by Kincheloe and Steinberg (2008) is relevant and appropriate. Critical multilogicality is:

an effort to act educationally and politically on the calls for diversity and justice that have echoed through the halls of academia over the last several decades. Such an effort seeks an intercultural/interracial effort to question the hegemonic and oppressive aspects of Western education and to work for justice and self-direction for indigenous peoples around the world (Kincheloe & Steinberg 2008: 135).

In the CM perspective, the purpose and inclusion of indigenous education in academia and in communities, and the viable economic production of indigenous knowledge must help to construct environments that facilitate indigenous self-sufficiency. Indigenous knowledge systems are complex and are a vast reservoir of practical and theoretical indigenous resources that can provide substantial insights into multiple domains of human endeavor. Such a complexity of IKS is discussed by IKS scholars (Bredlid 2009; Govender 2012; Ogunniyi 2011). Critical multilogicality is based on the notion of the transformative power of IK and of IK as an alternate way of knowing. It can be used to nurture empowerment, justice and sustainability in a variety of social, cultural and political contexts. Transformative IK involves having self-confidence in one's experiences, knowledge and skills, and knowing and understanding the 'other' through an exploration of '*ubuntu* (humanness)' (Waghid 2014: 57). Reflecting and being aware of the way we interact with

others and how similar we are in many respects involves an ‘engagement with cultural difference’ (Kincheloe & Steinberg 2008: 136). In South Africa in particular, most of the economic power and skills still lie in the hands of wealthy previously advantaged communities, mine owners, property-owners and large-scale agriculturalists. While IK is a rich social resource for any justice-related attempt to bring about social change, its economic value also needs to be elevated. In this context indigenous ways of knowing about agriculture and unique farming skills for sustainable living can become an important area for research, development and transformation. It is imperative then to examine pedagogical ways of how IK activities affect the reality in local agricultural contexts and how these activities can be included in the academic curricula. The IK ways of knowing and inclusion can contribute to the educational experiences of preservice teachers because it challenges the ‘rules of evidence and the dominant epistemologies of Western knowledge production’ (Kincheloe & Steinberg 2008: 136). The hope is that preservice teachers’ newly acquired experiences and knowledge of IK will provide a platform for them to further challenge the academy on Western and Eurocentric universalism of knowledge with the questions that IK raises about the centrality of ‘*ubuntu* (humanness)’ (Waghid 2014: 57), the relevance of our technological and scientific knowledge production (for instance the negative effects of armaments for warfare, wastage of food, amongst others), and about environmentally sustainable development. Leveling the power balance through personal and community transformation via agricultural and other services is what we anticipate as the product of engaging in the theoretical frame of CM. Preservice teachers, academics and IK holders will then be viewed as being on the same academic platform albeit contributing differently to the human dialogue and endeavours. In focusing the lens for this study, we adopt Kincheloe and Steinberg’s (2008: 147-150) five principles which shed light on the theoretical framework of CM. These are that critical multilogicality: (i) *Promotes rethinking our purposes as educators* - An understanding of indigenous ways of seeing as a subjugated knowledge alerts us to the fact that multilogicality exists and that there are multiple perspectives of human and physical phenomena. (ii) *Focuses attention on the ways knowledge is produced and legitimated* - The study of indigenous knowledges we are advocating is concerned with the process of knowledge production for sustainable agricultural practices. Such an awareness is too often absent in Western education. We are often taught to believe that the knowledge we consider

official and valid such as in textbooks and in research journals has been produced in a neutral and philanthropic manner. However, such a view dismisses the cultural and power-related dimensions of knowledge production and structures that propagate such practices. (iii) *Encourages the construction of a just and inclusive academic sphere where IK is not seen as merely a curricular appendage that provides a little diversity to Western academic institutions* - Curricular transformation based on our analysis of indigenous knowledge requires that educators become critical scholars. In addition, teachers who organise their work and teaching around an effort to help others to make critical sense of the world and who expose their learners to how knowledge came to be validated and included in mainstream pedagogies, is crucial. Educators who adopt this CM approach may bring a new dimension to the academy, in reconceptualising and making explicit the hidden, often implicit and unjustified practices, such as notions of superiority of the academy. (iv) *Produces new levels of insight* - Indigenous ways of knowing help communities to cope with their sociological, political and agricultural environments and are passed down from generation to generation. A curriculum that incorporates and implements IK supports the notion that indigenous knowledge is important not only for the culture that produces it but also for people from different cultures. (v) *Demands that educators at all academic levels become researchers* - In positivist Westernised-Eurocentric education teachers often say 'Give me the truth and I will pass it along to students in the most efficient manner possible' (Kincheloe & Steinberg 2008: 149). In the indigenously transformed curricula, preservice teachers are encouraged to understand a variety of subjugated knowledges and to assert their independence from Eurocentric experts.

In order to apply constructs from CM, critical ontological reflection is required. Our view is that who you know, what you know and how you come to know determines your identity. We are of the view that there is an inextricable connectedness between ontology, epistemology, methodology and axiology. Therefore, we invited IK holders to participate in the official educational programme as a way of bringing those individuals into the 'who you know' and their knowledge into the 'what you know' and we did so by means of a workshop on indigenous agricultural practices as the means of 'how you come to know'.

## **Methodology**

This study was located in the critical paradigm. We positioned ourselves as critical pedagogues (Burbules & Berk 1999), and we created opportunities for our preservice teachers to critically reflect on ‘legitimate’ knowers and ‘legitimate’ knowledge within academic settings. Our study was also informed by the ‘three ways of knowing’ postulated by Habermas (Walker & Lovat 2015: 123). Habermas contends that knowing oneself (self-reflective or critical knowing) is a pre-requisite for empirical-analytic knowing (which focuses on technical data about what is known) and historical hermeneutic knowing (which focuses on understanding of meanings and is interpretive). According to Habermas, through self-reflection, social action for change and emancipation is possible (Walker & Lovat 2015). In our study we reflected on ourselves as knowers, and on the knowledge we wished to construct. We also encouraged our preservice teachers to reflect on the knower-knowledge dialect, by positioning the IK holder as the knower, and IK as part of the mainstream knowledge, within the academic curriculum.

A qualitative, case study approach was adopted in this study. Forty-nine preservice science education teachers (who represented both the population and sample) were purposively selected to participate in this study. The criteria for selection was that they should have been registered students in the Science Education module, had agreed to participate voluntarily in the study, and had attended the practical demonstration conducted by the IK holders. The Science module for which preservice teachers were registered included food gardening as part of the topic ‘human nutrition’ in the module outline. These participants were asked to complete open-ended questionnaires and record their reflections in the form of essays. Forty-nine questionnaires and 29 reflections were submitted by the participants. The questionnaires were used to elicit preservice science teachers’ views of the nature of science and of indigenous knowledge and possible links between the two seemingly disparate bodies of knowledge. The questionnaires were completed after the participants’ exposure to the teaching sessions by IK holders. Questionnaires were useful because they provided a private setting in which the preservice teachers could write about their views without fear or ridicule from peers.

The two indigenous knowledge holders who interacted with the participants were not academics and were schooled in Zulu culture, traditions and agricultural indigenous knowledge. We decided to bring the IK holders,

who typically might be positioned as ‘intellectual fringe dwellers’ (Dudgeon & Fielder 2006), to the centre of knowledge production and dissemination. The engagement of these ‘unconventional sources’ was intended to transcend preservice teachers’ ‘epistemological and pedagogical’ horizons (Mudaly & Ismail 2013: 193). We sought to disrupt ‘classical epistemological regimes’ (Pohl *et al.* 2010: 269) which positions academics who are schooled in Western scientific epistemologies and methodologies as the sole legitimate knowledge holders in tertiary education settings, by creating spaces for our preservice teachers to interact with other knowledge holders (Nakata, Nakata, Keech & Bolt 2012). We contend that IK holders are legitimate producers and disseminators of valuable knowledge, and should engage with aspiring future teachers in academic settings. The indigenous knowledge holders conducted a day-long workshop and taught the participants about indigenous plants, indigenous methods of planting, and the control of pests.

The workshop was interactive and the participants asked many questions. Most of the participants wrote a reflective essay after the workshop, where they recorded their learning from the indigenous knowledge holders about indigenous agricultural practices. We used reflexive inquiry (Cole & Knowles 2000) as a process of generating data from these participants, in order to plan effective, inclusive teaching strategies. We agree with Abbott, Brown and Wilson (2007: 187) that ‘reflections potentially form the basis of transformations in learning’. We propose that through reflecting on the nature of science and IK, the preservice teachers would have engaged in more than mere knowledge packaging and information-receiving and would produce rich data. Data from the questionnaires and reflective essays were analysed and content analysis was used to categorise major themes or issues.

## **Findings**

### ***1) Analysis of Questionnaires Regarding IKS and Science***

Evidence from the open-ended questionnaires confirm that preservice teachers defined science using science content concepts such as natural selection, the use of science in life, and living in a context without science (see Table 1). The results were not surprising because preservice teachers have had deep and consistent exposure to the content and values of Western orientated science both at school and university.

**Table 1: Preservice teachers' conceptualisation and views of science**

<b>What is science?</b>	<b>Give an example of a concept in science</b>	<b>Give an example of the practical application of science in your daily life</b>	<b>Can you live without science? Explain</b>
It is a body of knowledge that uses an investigative process to gain knowledge and understanding of the world.	Photosynthesis	In boiling liquids, I can use science to know what chemical processes occur for making products, how it does so and understand what happens at high temperatures?	No, I can't. Science can be used to explain how things occur and this information is used with regard to everyday applications.
Science is the study of all things that are part of life sciences and to determine why and how things happen.	The theory of evolution by means of natural selection.	Rooibos tea is known to reduce allergies and improve sleep. I drink one cup a day because of its benefits which is now verified by science.	No, science surrounds all aspects of life and can be used to improve and understand various aspects of life.
Science is how nature relates to us and how we connect with	The process of photosynthesis and food production in plants.	Making a cup of tea requires the application of science such as boiling points,	No. Science and experimentation allows us to enjoy life and get the best out of it in

our surroundings .		infusion and evaporation, temperature and safety.	terms of food, resources, travel, water supply etc.
Science is concerned with how humans understand the history of the natural world around us on the basis of physical evidence.	Photosynthesis – plants make their own food through the use of sunlight, air and water.	Boiling water is used to make an infusion (of tea/coffee). When water boils, you see steam and water vapour rising and then condensation takes place. This is the same concept as the water cycle to explain the formation of rain.	No, because through scientific forensic evidence of a murder case suspects can be found. Forensic evidence helps to catch out the criminals.

The format and the content of the questions asked represent the Western manner of interrogation and the lack of space for narratives. The responses to the first question revealed the ‘textbook’ meaning of science where the content and process is presented. Since science is about learning concepts, it was expected that the preservice teachers would respond in this way, and not surprising that they refer to photosynthesis as an example of a science concept. The application concerned the use of water (in a liquid mixture) for consumption and life purposes. All participants indicated that they could not live without science and provided evidence in general or related it to its importance in their personal daily life.

**Table 2: Preservice teachers’ conceptualisation of IKS**

<b>What is IKS?</b>	<b>Give an example of a concept in IKS</b>	<b>Give an example of IKS experienced in your daily life</b>	<b>Can you live without IKS? Explain</b>
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IKS is knowledge that is generated and passed on by people of various communities.	IKS utilises plants for medicinal purposes as a natural remedy for a variety of ailments.	My mother always told me to drink crushed ginger and tumeric when I had the flu. It does help to relieve the symptoms of a flu.	No, IKS is embedded in our past and everyday lives.
IKS is knowing the traditional knowledge that is passed down from elders or ancestors about how to live, to farm and hunt etc.	Drying of meat – meat from animals slaughtered have to be cut up into pieces and stored in the sun so that the meat is cured.	There is a plant called ‘Mother-in-laws tongue’ that my granny used. When one is having an earache, the leaf is squeezed and the juice is warmed and poured gently into the infected ear.	No, because to an extent IKS is of vital importance as information is being passed from one generation to the next. It is mostly in oral form.
Indigenous knowledge is knowledge of a particular group that is passed on from generation to generation.	Plants are used as treatments for bites, stomach ailments, flu etc.	Use ginger and tumeric powder and boiled with milk to help with colds and flu.	No, it is just as important as Western science and we can use IKS in our everyday lives. The IK is applicable and sustainable.
Knowledge that is learned from indigenous people within a community and passed on from generation to generation.	IKS farming utilises rotational cropping where different species of vegetation are grown at different times.	Tumeric powder and syringa crushed leaves are used to treat chicken pox or measles by applying on one’s body.	No. IKS has direct relevance for our current society as it can be utilised in combination with modern Western methods to enhance the quality of life.



Students were able to explain the concept of IKS, give examples of IKS as experienced in daily life, many of which were examples of natural remedies used at home that have been passed down from generation to generation. Their answers indicate that they perceived IKS to have historical value and to still have value nowadays as well (see Table 2). The IKS expressed is linked to how participants used the resources available to them for healing and health related purposes.

Preservice teachers reported the relationship between science and IKS as follows: Science was developed through IKS experiences acquired generations ago and had an early influence on the development of Western knowledge, mainly through oral tradition. They cited examples of medicinal plants that have been known to cure ailments, the healing properties of which have now been confirmed by scientific experiments providing scientific evidence of the value of some treatments used in IKS. As examples, participants mentioned the use of rooibos tea for stomach cramps which has now been shown scientifically to have antispasmodic properties and to have antioxidants and flavonoids which are beneficial in treating dermatitis (Bramati, Minoggio, Gardana, Simonetti, Mauri & Pietta 2002). In addition, participants mentioned curcumin (tumeric) which has now been shown to have valuable antioxidant and anti-inflammatory properties (Tilak, Banerjee, Mohan & Devasagayam 2004) and as an antiseptic for cuts and as a facial wash (Prasad & Aggarwal 2011). These examples cited were used and continue to be used by different communities in South Africa.

Preservice teachers also responded to the following questions: ‘What is your understanding of the relationship between IKS and Natural Science? Explain with examples.’ Here are a sample of the participant’s responses:

*P1 - The relationship is dependent on each other and should be taught alongside. The one cannot be taught without the other. Without IKS experience, science is ‘foreign’ and not relateable at times. For example, when teaching about ‘heartburn’, it will be useful to teach a western science perspective of how to treat it as well an indigenous medicinal plant that is also used to treat it and alleviate the problem.*

*P2 - Natural Science is a Westernised compilation and development of ideas that arose through various IKS. IKS provides the ground work for many of the topics in science or scientific approaches used to*

*explore these topics. The ideas of inquiry in science was also brought about through IKS. For example, elders long ago used rooibos tea as it was beneficial and assisted in alleviating stomach cramps and heartburn but now through scientific investigation scientists discovered that rooibos hold antispasmodic properties supporting IKS practices.*

*P3 - IKS and natural science are directly connected as they share a common object 'nature'. Previously, communities have made use of tumeric and syringa leaves to treat chicken pox and measles. Science can use this knowledge to extract the medicinal properties of the tumeric and syringa leaves to produce medicine for chicken pox or measles. In this way science and IKS can co-exist without one being more dominant than the other.*

**Table 3: Categories of science, IKS and their perceptions of relationship between science and IKS**

Science	IKS	Relationship between science and IKS
Science is based on experiments.	IK is based on experiential knowledge and shared historical knowledge.	Science originated from IKS.
Science has largely Western influence.	IKS is used for daily survival as it comprises knowledge from plants, animals, materials and spirituality.	IKS supports science. Both are linked to nature and should be taught alongside each other.
Science explains natural events.	IKS still has valuable medicinal uses.	Science can confirm the validity of some IK medicinal substances through laboratory testing.

Table 3 shows the categories which emerged from the questionnaire data regarding the participants views of science, IKS and their perceptions of the relationship between the two.

## **2) Reflections on the Workshop**

Preservice teachers shared their reflections on their learning from the workshop experience. Sample statements are presented below:

*The visit helped me a lot in terms of understanding how the traditional healers know which herbs to grow and use.*

*I did not know that we can plant Blackjack, since they grow quickly and rapidly. Blackjack is a weed that helps! It is not good for other plants but our health. The visit helped a lot because I learnt so many things about common plants that grow on their own in our gardens.*

Analysis of the reflection notes indicate that participants were able to identify indigenous plants that they have at home and recollect their historical and current uses as taught to them by their elders, and to prepare these plants for medicinal uses. A significant observation is that Zulu names of plants were provided and foods prepared from them were named. In particular, the Blackjack (*Uqadolo*) and the Amarathus (*Imbuya - umfino*) leaves were mentioned, both being used as a herb source for meals as they are nutritious, contain Vitamin C and have a fibre content which is beneficial for the digestive system.

Preservice teachers recognised the value of the integration of IKS knowledge into mainstream science, especially the practical integration of such knowledge. Participants expressed positive attitudinal and emotional feelings towards the inclusion of IK holders as teachers in higher education settings. Bongi expressed her joy as follows: *The visit from the traditional healers was extremely exciting as it was the first time I was exposed to one. It was learning something simple as planting in a new and innovative way. I will definitely pass on the knowledge of indigenous crops to my own learners because I think it will greatly benefit them.* The participants also expressed a desire to share and teach their learners this type of knowledge, when they begin their science teaching career.

## **Discussion and Implications for Responsive and Innovative Pedagogies in Higher Education**

Our goal as educators and researchers operating in Western academia is to

create the space for practical, relevant, indigenously informed science that is dedicated to the social needs of communities and is driven by humane concerns rather than only political ideology. Often Western science via its education curricula plays a significant role in perpetuating the hegemony of the Western-European worldview and thereby the subjugation of indigenous experience, knowledge and worldview.

Based on classroom questionnaires and reflections during our first implementation of the inclusion of IKS holders in the academy, the voices emanating from the data, our interpretations of preservice teachers' narratives and our analysis, we propose that the participation of IKS holders should be explicitly included in the curriculum on a regular basis. This would assist preservice teachers by involving them in dialogues on different ways of knowing and, also, in promoting awareness and recognition of different knowledge systems and knowledge holders, through agricultural projects in their communities. This inclusion may encourage more political and community participation for enriching sustainable environmental programmes. We propose that a scholarly encounter with indigenous knowledge holders can enrich the ways we engage in research and conceptualise education while promoting dignity and respect, stimulating dialogue on an equal footing, and contributing to the survival strategies of marginalised communities and modern urban communities. We contend that exposure of preservice teachers to these arguments is critical, which is why we brought the voices of preservice teachers to the centre in this article. The critical debate between indigenous knowledge and science should now embark on a more practical and integrative phase to deal with the many questions posed regarding sustainable agricultural development.

### ***Relationship between Theory and Findings***

This study has produced new levels of insight along the lines of Kincheloe and Steinberg's five principles of critical multilogicality (CM). Our study has *promoted rethinking of our purposes as educators*, as a result of seeing the need for integration of IKS in science education curricula and creating the spaces for preservice teachers to re-think their roles. This study has *focussed attention on the ways knowledge is produced and legitimated*, by engaging IK holders as teachers in science education, and thereby legitimising and valuing their knowledge and status. In doing this, we contend that this study has

*encouraged the construction of a just and inclusive academic sphere where IK is not seen merely as a curricular appendage that provides a little diversity to Western academic institutions.* Finally, we argue that preservice teachers have been enabled to *produce new levels of insight* from the opportunities created for them to think and reflect deeply about the value of IKS and science, and the role of indigenous knowledge holders as teachers in academia. By researching how ontology, methodology and epistemology interact, and how these can be used as tools of control, power and subjugation, we meet the fifth principle of CM which *demand that educators at all academic levels become researchers.* We anticipate that some preservice teachers will be leaders in IKS programmes and enrol for post-graduate courses in Higher Education where IKS is further explored and researched.

There is evidence of preservice teachers' new experiences and changed attitudes towards IK holders and a confirmation of their intention to co-construct IK with their learners. They valued the aspect of the Science Education curriculum that incorporated and implemented IK because it supports the notion that indigenous knowledge is important, not only for people from the culture that produced it, but also for people from different cultures. Preservice teachers revealed that they were cognisant of the implications of science-IKS research in relation to agriculturally and environmentally sustainable development.

## **Conclusion**

The questionnaires and reflections enabled the preservice teachers to voice their positive experiences of an IKS learning experience, and the findings show that in particular they valued the medicinal uses of plants embedded in IKS. In addition, they were inspired to preserve their IKS through trans-generational knowledge transfer to their learners and communities. They also supported IKS inclusion and indigenous knowledge (IK) holders into the academia but were not explicit about how this should occur. They have come to recognise that Western science is not the only legitimate knowledge producer, through conversations about how different forms of research and knowledge are produced based on issues of locality, cultural values, and social justice. The findings indicate that preservice teachers did not take the binary position of western epistemology/indigenous epistemology. Instead they sought to create a hybrid space where ideas rooted in different epistemologies complement each other.

## Implications for Further Studies

While preservice teachers were eager to engage in IKS inclusion, the study suggests that they also need to be challenged further to express their critical voices on the status of IKS and science and take on a more cohesive and practical role in their communities, given their scientific and IKS experiences on garden projects. This can be the basis for further studies.

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# The Porous University: Re-thinking Community Engagement

**Julia Preece**

## **Abstract**

This primary goal of this concept paper is to stimulate a conceptual re-think around the nature of community engagement in higher education. The paper outlines the evolution of community engagement. It questions some of the ideological rhetoric of this term whereby the university is presented as a collaborative partner and co-creator of knowledge, particularly through strategies such as service-learning. It highlights issues of power relationships, ownership of the engagement process and knowledge generation. The paper offers a theoretical framework for community engagement, drawing on the capabilities approach, asset-based community development and dialogue. The framework is then presented as a diagram which can be used as an evaluative tool for assessing how metaphorically porous university boundaries are to facilitate a more mutually accessible relationship between community and university. In this way, the engagement relationship can build on community assets, rather than following a deficit model of intervention which is premised on community need.

**Key words:** community engagement; knowledge; capabilities approach

## **Introduction**

The notion of university community engagement (CE) has been the subject of a conceptual re-think, particularly over the past 15 years or so. Its origins lie in the tradition of many university cultures which share three missions – teaching, research and service.

Since the 1990s universities have become increasingly marketised, following business models of managerialism. The focus is on income generation and productivity in the form of publications and research output. Courses are sold on a mass scale and universities compete fiercely with each other to achieve high rankings in the global market place. The third mission is not a criterion for assessing such rankings. Yet, in the context of this notion of the university as a private good that must be paid for, there is an ongoing resistant discourse which argues that universities have a social responsibility to contribute to the public good. The public good nature of universities, on the one hand, means that the benefits of university education accrue to more than just the individual who is able to access that education. A university graduate is expected to be more committed to engaging in citizenship responsibilities and national development than someone who has not been to university (Howard 2014). On the other hand, it can be argued that the public good role of universities extends beyond the students they admit to their degree programmes by acting as an agent of community development through relevant research, teaching and ‘service’.

Academics in African universities are often strongly committed to addressing issues of hunger, disease, poverty, crime and racial divisions that ravage the continent. In South Africa this pursuit of social responsibility was especially evident during the apartheid years prior to the election of the country’s first democratic government in 1994. Universities played a major role in challenging the injustices of the national party, its racial settlement patterns and inequities of housing, education and health services. Seepe (2004: 27) for instance, argues that the African university’s pursuit of truth must be ‘imbued with a sense of social responsibility’.

The global ideology of what form of community service is appropriate for universities has changed. Now there is less emphasis on individual philanthropy to and more emphasis on embedded institutional response to addressing community needs. So, while the discourse of the market dominates how universities are managed, the discourse of ‘service’ in institutional strategic plans and other policy documents has shifted to ‘engagement’. The shift in terminology reflects an endeavour to move away from deficit-focused models of communities in need whereby universities contribute their expertise for community benefit. The new ideology is that universities should work in partnership with communities as a collaborative effort for mutual gain.

Schuetze (2010: 25), for instance, in the context of North America, states that CE should be understood as:

... the collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity.

Communities in these contexts are understood as organisations with shared interests, but also as a geographical space. In the South African context Hall (2010: 25) describes CE as a:

Process of creating a shared vision among the community (especially disadvantaged) and partners (local, provincial, national government, NGOs, higher education institutions, business, donors) in society, as equal partners, that results in a long term collaborative programme of action with outcomes that benefit the whole community equitably.

Types of community partnerships in both these definitions may include government and other public bodies as well as private, industry or civil society organisations. It is significant, however, that this South African definition adds the notion that communities are expected to be ‘disadvantaged’. So, while ‘Engagement’ implies an equal partnership relationship that can involve a range of agencies, the concept of ‘disadvantage’ immediately positions communities in an unequal power relationship with their universities. Similarly, the South African definition, unlike that by Schuetze, focuses on communities as beneficiaries of the engagement relationship rather than agents of mutual exchange. The implication of these nuances of understanding will be discussed later.

The third mission is no longer the concern of one discipline or department. It has captured the imagination of a wide range of actors. National and global organisations such as Engagement Australia, the Global University Network for innovation (GUNi), PASCAL International Observatory and Talloires Network have, in the past fifteen years, turned this historical third mission into a social justice agenda for community empowerment as a central priority for universities. Their goal is to strengthen higher education’s role in society within its varying socio-economic and cultural contexts. Community

engagement, for these organisations, takes centre stage, whereby higher education institutions partner with their local or regional neighbours to produce a shared vision for development. Grau (2014: 3), the non-executive director of GUNi, argues that the university of the 21st century must also be measured by the extent to which it interacts with the socio economic and cultural environment as a contribution to the university's market goals. In this argument, the university's interaction with the environment generates knowledge which can be transformed into: 'economic value, productivity and competitiveness. In turn this creates jobs and wealth and helps to lay the basis of a balanced, advanced, just and sustainable society'. Innovation, he argues is no longer the prerogative of universities:

Universities need to understand that they are fundamental to the process of creating knowledge but that they do not have the monopoly; they should recognise (and work with) the institutions involved in knowledge creation outside the sphere of higher education in all fields (Grau 2014: 5).

These arguments hinge on our changing understandings about the creation and ownership of knowledge and the university's role in distributing and using that knowledge for a better world. Bivens, Haffenden and Hall (2015: 9) distinguish between the concepts of 'knowledge economy', 'knowledge society' and 'knowledge democracy' in relation to CE. They highlight how knowledge economy refers to a competitive skills development agenda. In contrast, knowledge society focuses on the 'use of knowledge to strengthen or deepen participatory decision making'. But they argue that knowledge democracy takes us one step further in that it explicitly recognises the multiplicity of knowledge and the fact that such knowledge derives from an array of sources and methods. In other words, university knowledge is not the only kind or source of knowledge. An expansion of this knowledge agenda is articulated in the context of knowledge democracy and cognitive justice (Gaventa & Bivens 2014; Hall 2015). Here it is argued that knowledge is embedded in power relationships and defined by who has authority to know. The struggle to overcome dominant forms of knowledge has come to be articulated 'as the struggle for cognitive justice' (Gaventa & Bivens 2014: 70). These concerns are particularly relevant for community based knowledge.

Community based knowledge is rarely discipline specific because it is embedded in context and the practical realities of living. Gibbons (2006: 28) has coined the terms mode 1 and mode 2 knowledge to reflect the distinction between discipline specific knowledge (mode 1), which is tested in laboratory conditions and thus known as ‘reliable knowledge’, and ‘socially robust’ knowledge which is context specific and embedded in practice. It has been argued that mode 2 knowledge is multidisciplinary because it is constructed collaboratively between a variety of actors (Muller & Subotzky 2001). In this respect mode 2 knowledge can be the outcome of collaborative community based research which has been classified in South Africa under the ‘scholarship of engagement’ (O’Brien 2009). Such new knowledge, for example, could be a combination of scientific expertise for pest control and more experiential knowledge about soil fertility in a particular location. It might be knowledge gained from the community about the healing or nutrition properties of herbs which can then be analysed academically for their applicability for a variety of illnesses or nutrition supplements.

Nations and universities themselves have paid more or less attention to this alternative vision for university engagement. In South Africa, these policies took shape after the introduction of nation-wide democracy, following the collapse of the apartheid regime in 1994. In 1997 the White Paper on the *Transformation of Higher Education* (Department of Education 1997: 10-11) emphasised a commitment to the ‘common good’ and the ‘social responsibility’ of universities which could be articulated through community service programmes as part of the university mandate for its students. This commitment was in recognition of the fact that university education still serves an elite minority of the population. Although participation rates in South Africa now reach approximately 19% of the eligible age group (Council on Higher Education 2013), in 1997 the figure was significantly lower. Subsequent policy documents such as the National Plan for Higher Education (Department of Education, 2001) and the Higher Education Qualification Committee (HEQC 2006) guidelines for teaching, research and community service have been reinforced in the most recent White Paper on Post School Education and Training (Department of Higher Education and Training 2013: 39). It is notable that the latter document now uses the term ‘community engagement’ interchangeably with ‘community service’ which is described as encompassing a wide range of university activities and identified as:



... socially responsive research, partnerships with civil society organisations, formal learning programmes that engage students in community work as a formal part of their academic programmes, and many other formal and informal aspects of academic work (ibid).

The same document has now steered CE to be integrated into the university's teaching and research functions so that it is not a stand-alone activity. In reality, this means that most formal CE activities are translated into what is commonly described as 'service-learning'. This concept is borrowed from the United States where service-learning was introduced as a curriculum based activity, whereby students undertake some form of placement within a community setting, reflect on the learning they have gained from the experience and thereby gain credit for this documented reflection as part of their course work (Howard 2001).

## **Service-learning**

Although not all service-learning programmes operate in the same way, the majority are semester based and take place as part of a menu of other courses so that students have to negotiate their time in community placements around other lecture and course work demands. The length of 'service' may be limited to 30 hours over a period of three or four months (Preece 2016). Longer placements often take place in professional development degree programmes such as medicine, teaching or social work. In this case, students are more likely to follow 'work placement' models where they involve themselves in communities as a form of professional development in their specific discipline.

Although the service-learning strategy secures the university's link with its surrounding communities and relevant organisations, it is a model which potentially constrains the university-community relationship and what can be achieved. Much of the topic's academic literature, for example, concerns itself with exploring the pedagogical aspects of small scale service-learning programmes within the university (for example Maistry & Thakrar 2012), the nature of a service-learning curriculum (Albertyn & Daniels 2009) or the benefits to students of engaging with their communities (for example, Hill *et al.* 2008). However, the capturing or facilitating of this reflection is rarely extended to community members themselves, in spite of their status as partners (Bender 2008). There is an assumption in much of the literature that

community members actively contribute to the creation of new knowledge, but rarely is the community voice captured in the research or knowledge construction process. Hatcher and Erasmus (2008), for instance, emphasise the need to pay more attention to indigenous ways of knowing. Erasmus (2011) has also argued for more culturally sensitive and pedagogically embedded curricula, which contribute to community empowerment and co-creation of knowledge.

There is an increasing body of literature which challenges or critiques the extent to which university CE and its service-learning component address issues of power, inequality of relationships, or the sustainability of short term involvement by students in community issues. A few examples are given here.

Albertyn & Daniels (2009) and Erasmus (2011a), for instance, question the extent to which the power differentials between grass roots community members and university members allow knowledge to be genuinely co-constructed. Similarly, when strategies for consultation are built into university-community relationships there may be several layers of community agents so that one layer of the community may have been consulted, but that consultation does not necessarily filter down to other layers (Osman & Attwood 2007).

These tensions, it has been argued (Preece 2016) are historically constituted through notions of governmentality (Miller & Rose 1993) whereby universities have already defined, labelled and characterised communities as marginalised, poor, disempowered and in need of care. This argument has a particular resonance in post-apartheid South Africa whereby universities' responsibilities to their communities were enshrined in government reform policy for higher education. Thus the act of service-learning as a benign act upon communities is legitimated.

The above literature feeds into the argument of this paper - that service-learning, as a particular aspect of CE, contributes to pre-identified community needs, captured hegemonically as a benevolent contribution, rather than working with communities to help them maximise their assets.

Some literature addresses community based and participatory research as a solution to concerns about the co-creation of knowledge (Hall *et al.* 2013). This category of empirical work includes a wider range of experiential student learning than service-learning alone but has recently developed as a methodology for engaging communities in mutually beneficial and participatory ways. The overriding concern among these writers is that

research paradigms need to be participatory to allow for a plurality of perspectives and that all participants should be involved in contributing to the research design (Erasmus 2011; Hall *et al.* 2015). Recommended methodologies are primarily qualitative, and often premised on an action research approach. Community based research is described as:

Research that is responsive to societal needs, that is carried out in a community setting, where the process involves the community and the results promote social equity (Daniels, Adonis, Mpofu & Waggie 2013: 156).

There are examples of service-learning activities which are integrated into community-university research partnerships as shared spaces for co-creation of knowledge. Lepore and Herrero (2015) in the context of Argentina, describe how community-university research partnerships in selective universities utilise service-learning activities as an integral part of participatory research activities with civil society organisations. In the context of Canada, Brown, Ochocka, de Grois and Hall (2015) refer to the rise of indigenous research community partnerships which link community controlled research agendas with students' experiential learning in communities. These approaches point to a shift in understanding about knowledge dimensions and of communities as asset-based resources, rather than deficit-burdened (Hall *et al.* 2015).

Critiques of service-learning which expose its sustainability issues for communities have paved the way for a model that incorporates service-learning activity into a more encompassing community development approach to engagement which recognises communities as partners in the co-creation of knowledge. The trend in terminology is now moving towards notions of 'critical service-learning' (Ringstad, Leyva, Garcia & Jasek 2012). Theoretical concerns place more emphasis on power and privilege, the notions of 'radical' and 'transformative' community service-learning (Gerstenblatt & Gilbert 2014; Sheffield 2015). Nevertheless, the service-learning literature makes very limited reference to asset-based community development theory. Among the exceptions, Gerstenblatt and Gilbert (2014) for instance, refer to a community based approach to exploring community assets in their social work.

The literature on community development emphasises that this is a contested term. For the purposes of this paper development can be defined as an end goal of agency: 'the capacity of people to order their world, the capacity

to create, reproduce, change and live according to their own meaning systems' (Bhattacharyya 2004: 12). Bhattacharyya makes the connection in this definition to Sen's notion of freedom.

Community development is the process of enabling this to happen. In Vincent's (2009: 63) terms it is a 'process through which people learn how they can help themselves'. Community development, therefore, is distinguished from CE because its focus is on enhancing human agency within the community. The focus of service-learning through CE has, in the past, privileged the learning needs of the student and focused on the contribution the CE process makes to the academic agenda. A community development approach to CE endeavours to reverse that relationship. In support of the apparent trend towards community and social change, Stoeker (2016) argues that service-learning needs a different set of theories that move beyond the dominant focus on pedagogy and student development.

It is this latter literature which particularly resonates with the question of how to address power differentials in such a way that community participants are not trapped into colluding with the hegemonic discourse of equality and benevolence. In other words, how can community members have ownership over their own development agenda and how can they have an equal stake in engagement relationships with universities? The rest of this paper proposes a theoretical framework that draws on adult education principles of dialogue, asset-based community development and capabilities literature with a view to identifying a community-centred model of engagement. This will be followed by a brief discussion on policy implications for such a model. My argument for pursuing this theoretical window of opportunity is premised on a need to find a curriculum approach which privileges the community as much as the student. While credit-based assessment of student critical reflection addresses student growth, it does not provide a tool for evaluating or engaging with community growth or social change. The aim is to facilitate a more mutually penetrable relationship between knowledge dimensions and reduction of power differentials.

## **A Proposed Theoretical Framework for Community Engagement**

Service-learning is only one component of CE, although it is often the most formalised university strategy in South African contexts. The following

discussion is premised on a more composite picture of CE as a whole university project, whereby service-learning may or may not feature as a core component. A substantive portion of this text derives from the draft chapters of a proposed book to be published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2017 or 2018 (*Lifelong Learning and Community Engagement: The Porous University*).

### ***Capabilities Perspective***

During the past 15 years, the capabilities perspective, or approach as it is sometimes called (fostered largely by Amartyr Sen and Martha Nussbaum), has captured the imagination of many disciplines. A particular proponent of the capabilities perspective as a means of advocating the ‘public good’ role of higher education has been Melanie Walker. Her focus has been to develop a higher education curriculum that nurtures a sense of social justice and responsibility towards society among higher education students (Walker & Loots 2016). But Walker’s analysis to date does not sufficiently capture the ‘community’ perspective in terms of exploring CE as a collaborative and partnership relationship.

Furthermore, the capabilities literature emphasises that the capabilities approach in itself is not a complete theory and needs to be aligned with, or enhanced by, additional theories in order to apply its understandings to a particular concern. This paper therefore builds particularly on Sen’s arguments but supplements those discussions with reference to asset-based community development theory which speaks directly to the community voice. It starts by outlining the capabilities perspective.

Sen (1999) and Nussbaum (2000) come from different disciplinary backgrounds. But they have both envisioned a more humanitarian way of exploring how human life should be evaluated from a social justice perspective. Their disciplines and rationales have influenced their arguments and areas of focus, but they overlap in terms of the core concern that human development rests on the degree to which individuals have access to a range of freedoms to lead the life they have reason to value. For the purposes of this paper, I focus on Sen’s position. Sen argues that freedoms focus not on what one has but what one has agency to use or benefit from. In other words, people’s freedoms include their entitlements but also their sense of agency to make choices about how to use their entitlements. Sen is concerned with how ‘unfreedoms’ (1999: xii) restrict or constrain one’s ability to convert available

resources into achievable functionings. Sen identifies ‘five distinct types of freedom’ as ‘political’, ‘economic’, ‘social’, ‘transparency guarantees’ and ‘protective security’ (1999: 10). These provide the capability set of a person or community. They are opportunities that people have which enable actions and decisions to be taken in the context of personal and social circumstances. But true freedom only comes about when the social environment allows people to take advantage of their entitlements.

In CE terms, one might argue therefore that university interactions with the community which do not facilitate collaborative processes of decision making are denying community members their opportunity for agency to influence how the university supports their social or other needs and desires to lead the lives they have reason to value. At a very basic level, a university, for instance, which fails to recognise cultural concerns to respect Islamic prayer times by organising a meeting date for Friday lunchtime is restricting the freedoms of Muslims to attend the meeting. The Muslim community therefore is unable to convert the availability of a meeting into the function of actually attending the meeting.

At a more macro level Sen points out that poverty is an expression of the deprivation of many basic capabilities beyond the aspect of income. Unemployment, for instance, impacts on the individual psyche at a level of confidence, self-esteem and agency. Poverty is often also connected to other capability deprivations in terms of access to nutrition, life expectancy, literacy levels, and health services. At a community level, these capability ‘unfreedoms’ can be expressed through violence and anger which impact on the capability freedom of protective security and transparency guarantees. Such expressions are often evident in South African communities through protests at government failure to provide basic services such as electricity and water.

Development, therefore, is the ‘process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy’ (Sen 1999: 36). Education is a basic capability freedom which impacts on all other capabilities and freedoms because education enables people to make informed choices about the lives they have reason to value. The university, as a public good, has a responsibility to contribute to that process (Boni & Walker 2013). Capability freedoms include having suitable levels of literacy and numeracy, being able to avoid starvation or escape premature mortality and being able to enjoy participation in democratic elections. Freedoms therefore are both instrumental - a *means* to development

- and evaluative - an *end* goal of development. A ‘capability set’ is the combined set of freedoms that enables people to convert their assets into ‘functionings’ (Sen 1999: 75) or achievements according to what they want to achieve. In this respect, Sen argues that there is not one universal capability set which will suit everyone. People’s circumstances and life aspirations vary.

The capability perspective focuses on context and whether people make choices as an option or because there simply is no choice. For instance, a person with a disability who chooses to stay at home because he or she has no freedom to take up employment outside of the home is capability deprived. But a person with a disability who experiences no restrictions in terms of employment or education opportunities is free to choose to live at home if his or her capability set enables him or her to do so. The emphasis, therefore, is on a person’s true freedom to choose.

Sen (2009) defends his position in the face of criticisms that the capability perspective is too individualistic and does not take account of communities as collectives. He argues that although individuals make choices about their lives, they always do so within a social context. People belong to many different groups and are always connected to their society. (Even if they choose to ‘opt out’ it is still in the context of a response to existing social arrangements). This argument is important for the CE context since ‘communities’ are what universities engage with, rather than isolated individuals, even though individuals may represent their social groups when interacting with university representatives.

Service-learning is an important contribution to expanding the capabilities of communities but it does not fully capture the essence of how the university as a public institution should be a capability resource in its entirety for community development. Its focus tends to be more on expanding the capability awareness and civic responsibilities of the students themselves. In essence, it often means that community members rarely, if at all, step inside the university premises, thus creating a symbolic power divide.

Vaughn and Walker (2012: 499) produce a diagram to articulate the complexity of how capability sets, as freedoms to achieve, are influenced by social contexts and environmental factors, people’s personal histories and what resources they have to convert their assets and services, and ultimately how individuals make choices to achieve certain functionings. In other words, the means to achieve, (capability inputs), can be affected by context which influences opportunities and freedoms to make choices for particular

functionings (the achievements or ends). A possible translation of this diagram into a CE context could thus be described as follows. The university as a social institution in a working class community has potential resources such as sports facilities, computer classrooms and individual staff and students with disciplinary expertise. If community members are given access to those resources, they may be able to convert these resources (new knowledge, additional skills and people, new understandings) into a set of freedoms or opportunities to impact on an identified need or problem such as insufficient electricity or limited childcare provision. The achieved functionings – perhaps solar powered lighting or a community crèche - will be the outcome of decisions and choices based on an expanded capability set (freedoms and opportunities). In this respect communities acquire increased agency and the university performs a public good function. Vaughn and Walker, however, fall short of taking their diagram and approach into the community dimension. Their focus is on the development of university students rather than a direct capabilities relationship between universities and communities.

Moreover, this model does not acknowledge that communities may already have resources that could be harnessed to solve their own problems. In addition, the power relationship between universities and communities is under-developed in the capabilities literature, even when the public good role of universities is well articulated, as it is by Walker (see Walker & Loots 2016 in relation to the role of universities in developing citizenship responsibility). Boni and Walker (2013) argue vehemently, for instance, that:

The university should not be distant from the tremendous problems the world faces nowadays ... it should have an active role, engaged in local and global spaces, to foster and support a just and sustainable society (2013: 2) ... universities can have a role as a place of interconnectivity in society (2013: 6).

An important consideration, therefore, is the sense that a capability set is also a power set, which in turn creates an obligation to use that capability responsibly. Sen does not elaborate too much on this latter concern. He merely states that ‘capability is ... only one aspect of freedom, related to substantive opportunities’ (2009: 295) and that ‘capabilities are the characteristics of individual advantages .... [which] fall short of telling us about the fairness or equity of the processes involved’ (ibid: 206).



The capabilities literature in relation to nurturing student civic responsibilities, does not discuss the extent to which communities may already have capability sets or how those capability sets can be developed as community assets. The engagement relationship, therefore, should also be concerned with encouraging communities to recognise and build on their own assets or capability sets in order to minimise their ‘adaptive preferences’ (Nussbaum 2000: 139) in the context of partial freedoms. These latter concerns mean that we need to look beyond the capabilities literature in order to complete our potential CE model. At this point it is useful to draw on the asset-based community development literature and references to the role of dialogue.

### ***Asset-based Community Development***

Asset-based community development (ABCD) is one approach among many. It was developed in the United States during the early 1990s as an alternative to deficit models of community development. The approach has gained momentum during the past 15 years because it challenges the needs-based philosophy that focuses on community problems whereby external agencies intervene with a view to ‘fixing’ community deficits. The main proponents for ABCD were Kretzmann and McKnight (1993), through their book called *Building communities from the inside-out: asset-based community development*. More recently Cunningham and Mathie (2002) have popularised it further.

These above authors are widely cited when describing the approach as ‘a set of strategies for identifying and mobilising community assets for change’ (Boyd, Hayes, Wilson and Bearsley-Smith 2008: 191, for example). Assets can be at individual level (such as vocational or practical skills), organisational level (such as social networks and financial or physical resources) or externally controlled institutional resources that are geographically located within the community field (such as schools or clinics) (Ennis & West 2010). Although Ennis and West also critique this approach, essentially, the argument is that all communities have assets and strengths which can be harnessed for change. If communities are not fully engaged in identifying and finding solutions to their own problems, or motivating for change, then externally imposed interventions can only serve to undermine communities and their own capacities. If communities feel a sense of ownership over their own destiny by drawing on existing assets and strengths as a resource for change, then their members are

more likely to accept external agencies as partners in the development process. In African contexts the spirit of collectivism which characterises the ABCD approach is an essential feature that acknowledges Africans' communitarian history (Chirisa 2009). Chirisa emphasises that the approach is more than a set of strategies. It also requires relationship building and engaging with the social and environmental nature of particular contexts.

Cunningham and Mathie (2002: 1-3) identify a set of six principles which underpin ABCD. The first is that any engagement should focus on recognising what already exists in terms of social, human and practical resources in a community setting. Secondly, the development goals should be community-led. Thirdly, an appreciative enquiry approach is required – that is, to understand, from the community perspective, what previous success stories can be built on. A fourth principle is that the development process must be participatory to ensure community ownership over decision making. Closely connected to this is that the development process must be collaborative. Finally, in order to enhance the collective process, civil society and other community based organisations need to be involved in leveraging both their constituent members and external resources. There are examples of this approach in developing country contexts. For example, Hipwell (2009) describes how the ABCD approach became part of a 'post development practice' for indigenous development in Taiwan which included attention to cultural assets such as language and spirituality as a means of community empowerment.

In terms of how the ABCD approach is a practical extension of the capabilities concept, ABCD could be construed as capabilities building – enabling people to identify their freedoms and articulate how those freedoms could be converted into functionings. Ssewamala, Sperben, Zimmerman and Karimli (2010) reflect on the potential effectiveness of this relatively understudied approach in Sub Saharan Africa. They specifically link ABCD to Sen's concept of capabilities as a contribution to enabling individuals and their communities to take more control over improving their lives within specific contexts. They stress that this approach needs further testing and revising in the field.

## ***Dialogue***

The use of dialogue and discussion is seen as central to enabling people to

‘map, analyse and assess what assets they have or would like to have’ (Westoby & Dowling 2013: 3). Rule (2015) points out that dialogue, at its most basic, is a reciprocal exchange between two or more people. He describes it as a relationship framed by context and meaning making. As such it is a resource for teaching, learning and knowing. In community development contexts it is also a space for challenging power relations and building shared understanding (Westoby & Dowling 2013). Dialogue, therefore, is neither a safe space nor a space without power. But if the goal of community development or CE is collective action for change, dialogue is a positive tool for a ‘committed relationship with the marginalised’ (Westoby & Dowling 2013: 12) in the spirit of solidarity and co-investigation. Dialogue is thus a ‘sense-making’ process (ibid: 17). From a pedagogical perspective it draws on Freirian notions of emancipation of the oppressed whereby teachers and learners engage in mutual listening as co-learners. A key aspect of Freire’s approach for educators (which we can interpret for the purpose of this paper as university educators) is that they must first familiarise themselves with the learning context and act ‘as sympathetic observers with an attitude of understanding what they see’ (Freire 1972: 82). From this position of observer, the educator can reflect back the community participants’ perspectives with a view to encouraging them to re-visit their context in order to help them ‘perceive reality differently’ (ibid, p. 86). This process becomes a process of meaning making as a shared endeavour - one of ‘cooperative and reciprocal inquiry’ (Gravett 2001: 20). An essential feature of this relationship is the building of trust and credibility, and a non-judgemental attitude. It is an aspirational, ideological position which requires hard work from all participants. It also, for university-community engagement purposes, arguably entails a process of familiarisation by the community of the university environment. This is an observation that is rarely made in the literature (Bruning, McGrew & Cooper 2006).

The following model (figure 1) is suggested as a potential guideline for drawing on ABCD as a means of realising the capabilities perspective through university CE. The ultimate goal is to create a two-way communication flow, whereby community members themselves feel free to enter the university premises to dialogue about potential collaborations that draw on community assets as a mutually accessible capability set that can translate into action for change.

In this model the community assets may be human skills, cultural knowledge, economic resources, social capital, or physical resources such as

buildings. The university's participation will be to engage in dialogue with the community (of place, interest groups and other institutions) and facilitate mutual asset mapping, including discussions on how those assets can be converted into freedoms and opportunities to lead the lives they have reason to value. This will entail action planning and possible inclusion of additional resources or institutional assets. The dialogue will explore the potential conversion factors within the community and university, in terms of their personal (such as health and well-being), social (such as cultural norms and policies that might affect what men, women and marginalised groups can do) and environmental (such as the geographical terrain and weather conditions which might affect what can be grown or planted). The cumulative assets and their conversion potential will provide the capability set of freedoms and opportunities (political, economic, social, transparency guarantees and protective strategies). This capability set will then determine the choice that individuals and groups feel they can make in order to take action. The achieved functionings will be the outcomes of those actions. Such community outcomes may, for example, be enhanced qualifications, increased income generation activities or a new school or safe play space for children. University outcomes may be a revised curriculum or timetable or use of university facilities.

Since the literature has emphasised that the community field is a constantly changing set of relationships, this model is an iterative process which also has to negotiate power relations and the tensions and struggles that that entails. The engagement process may be initiated by a community interest group or any individual and may not necessarily be initiated by the university, depending on the nature of the asset mapping process. The community based research models, as articulated earlier in this paper are potential mechanisms to capture the concept of asset mapping. The ultimate aim is for boundaries between university and community to become porous, whereby both university and community gain new understanding for change and interact fluidly as neighbours.

## **Policy Implications**

It has long been argued that universities need an institutional infrastructure that facilitates CE in a coordinated way. The barriers to policy implementation or the operationalisation of organisational goals relate to funding limitations, weak management structures, or network coordination capacity, poor

implementer incentives and weak political support (Wu *et al.* 2010). A further operational challenge for academics is how to oversee community learning spaces, including how to ensure those spaces are beneficial for all participants (Preece & Manicom 2015).

Policy implications for institutional change are remarkably similar in publications across the international spectrum. Bivens *et al.* (2015) highlight that policy needs to be addressed at national and institutional level. Government policies, for example which attach funding incentives to their guidelines for engagement are more likely to motivate institutions to devise internal university processes that support CE. Within the higher education institution itself it is emphasised that support must be top-down and bottom-up. For instance, mission statements require leadership at all levels of the institution. Some of the best examples of engaged universities include a coordinating infrastructure, perhaps including a central community office, fundraising activities, professional recognition in tenure and promotion arrangements as well as staff development programmes. Bivens *et al.* also point out that strategies for bringing in professionals from the community into the university staffing structure is an important factor in building partnership relationships. Watson (2007: 60) elaborates, calling such staff members ‘community-university brokers who can work across different cultures and in different languages’. He confirms that micro level behaviours are also necessary such as establishing a working dialogue with people in and outside the institution about processes and engagement structures, setting up strategic links, working to the strengths of the institution as well as the community. Important in these arrangements is the creation of community ‘spaces’ in the university itself and creativity about working round conventional university systems because the community rhythm and way of working is often very different.

The attached model does not address these challenges. Rather it proposes a theoretical value base for evaluating the CE process which starts with the community voice (an expression of assets) and concludes with an analysis of change for both community and university. The model is offered as a basis for discussion that could inform these policy challenges.

## **Concluding Remarks**

This paper has argued that a theoretical framework, drawing on the capabilities

perspective and asset-based community development, with a focus on dialogue, addresses the current literature gap regarding the expansion of the service-learning curriculum and ways in which knowledge boundaries can become more porous. This framework is stimulated by the following argument.

In the context of an increasingly globalised and interconnected world, universities are no longer seen as the primary knowledge producers. As such, they should connect more collaboratively with other knowledge producers and other sources of knowledge. There is a growing understanding that the world's challenges require collaborative solutions. To this end, universities have an obligation to partner with other knowledge providers, including those in community settings. Similarly, the trend towards massification of higher education means that universities cannot distance themselves from society and can no longer embrace their stereotypical 'ivory tower' image.

The engagement imperative, in emerging economies, is often linked more closely to the need to advance democracy, address inequalities and social justice. As a reflection of this argument, several recently established national and international organisations, such as the Global University Network for Innovation (GUNi) emphasise that universities have a role to play in the development of responsible citizens. This vision for higher education as a development agent is also reinforced through the new Sustainable Development Goal 4 for lifelong learning.

This combination of imperatives – the development of knowledge societies and knowledge democracies and the contribution of higher education to responsible citizenship – was the impetus for this paper. I presented a potential model of university CE, whereby the university becomes a participatory listening agent, as opposed to an interventionist. In this model, it is argued that a combination of asset-mapping through dialogue and collaborative planning can facilitate the conversion of community assets, as combined capability sets (freedoms and opportunities), into community-led choices for action. The process of identifying and validating those assets through action planning within specific cultural and social contexts can build agency (self-determination) which can result in enhanced development outcomes (achieved functionings). The dialogic process within this model is essential to address underlying power relations at macro and micro levels. But the additional factor for the porous university is for the dialogic process of familiarisation of each other's environment to be taken literally.

The policy implications impact at national and institutional level. They require a conceptual re-think about the nature of knowledge, and the engagement relationship as a negotiation of assets and conversion factors which may lead to outcomes that community and university may have reason to value. Essentially this means the university is porous – both physically, in allowing access into its premises, and intellectually, in allowing knowledge to be socially defined.

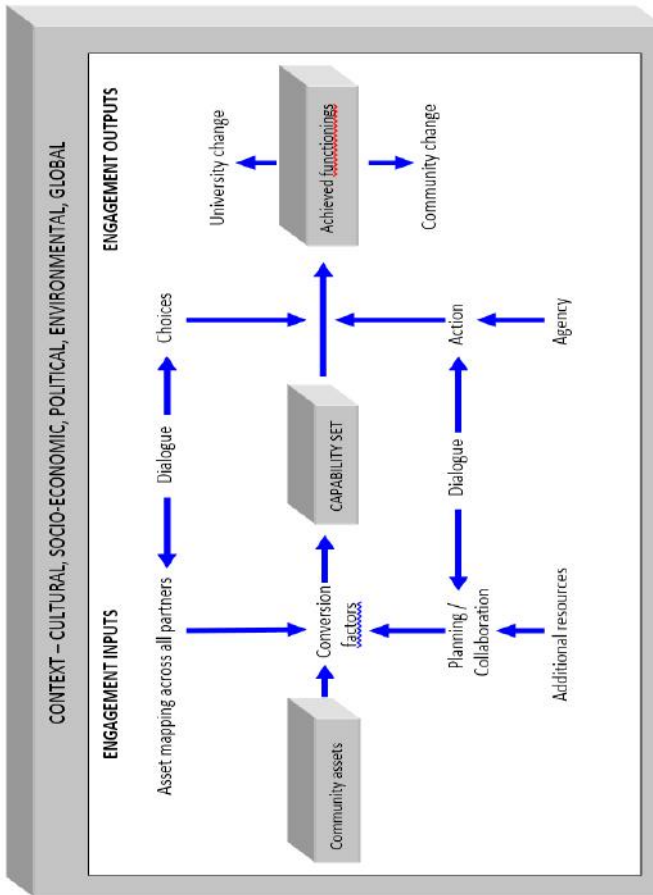


Figure 1: Community engagement model drawing on the Capability and ABCD literature

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# **Towards a Conceptual Framework for Interdisciplinary Teaching and Learning Dialogues in Higher Education**

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## **Abstract**

This paper explores the development and early validation of a conceptual framework for learning-centred teaching by six Teaching Advancement at Universities (TAU) Fellows and their mentor, each representing a different higher education institution and a different discipline. A grounded theory approach was used to construct the framework and its potential utility value was explored through the use of six teaching innovation projects conducted in undergraduate South African university programmes in law, medicine, education, and the arts. The project revealed that interdisciplinary dialogic spaces can be initiated and nurtured through opportunities offered by communities of practice such as the TAU Fellowship when academics suspend their exclusive disciplinary preoccupations to open up possibilities for a generative, emancipatory scholarship. We argue that the conceptual framework is useful to facilitate and promote dialogues across and between the multiple discipline specific ontologies, epistemologies and methodologies offered in higher education.

**Keywords:** Interdisciplinarity, learning, teaching, conceptual frameworks

## Introduction

The insatiable knowledge demands of the information age and the complexification of globalised societies cannot be systematically or adequately addressed by the expertise vested within unitary disciplines in higher education (Jacob 2015: 2). Furthermore, as a counterpoint to the reductionism associated with historical materialism theorized by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, the established canons of the disciplines of new materialism (Bennett 2010) are rendered incomplete and inappropriate for addressing the devastating impact of modern capitalism on societies and the natural environment. For example, sustainable sources of energy are no longer the preserve of engineers and scientists alone: participation is now essential from public health experts regarding the health risks of fracking and nuclear energy (Levy & Patz 2015; Sidel & Levy 2008); from lawyers regulating the environmental impact and the ownership of land rich in fossil fuels (Adler 2001; Du Plessis 2015); and from financial experts who can establish whether such endeavours are ethically defensible and financially viable (Lewis 2010; Robichaud & Anantatmula 2011). These challenges can only be adequately addressed by professionals who have a range of discipline-independent skills including problem-solving, leadership and interdisciplinary thinking (Frenk *et al.* 2010). The latter, defined as: ‘the capacity to integrate knowledge of two or more disciplines to produce a cognitive advancement in ways that would have been impossible or unlikely through single disciplinary means’ (Spelt, Harm, Biemans, Pieterman & Luning 2009: 141) is one of the most recent additions to the higher education agenda and is being addressed in a number of constructive ways. In our quest for a post-human future as envisioned by Haraway (in Kroker 2012), for example, many higher education institutions are now offering education and training in the form of porous multidisciplinary programmes based on an additive approach and interdisciplinary programmes based on an integrative approach.

While such programmes do have the potential to equip graduates with the required knowledge and competence to achieve this mandate, the academic project can only be sustained by the appropriate training of teachers responsible for providing this type of education. Faculty development programmes do abound, but typically, initiatives which draw participants from a range of disciplines are usually restricted to disciplines within a specific field of professions. Faculty development initiatives that represent a range of disciplines which are not restricted to one cadre of professionals are more

recent additions to the list of faculty development activities offered around the world. Such programmes achieving representation from engineering, medicine, law, the arts, and education- do so by focusing on the scholarship of teaching and learning. This common agenda facilitates engagement across discipline-specific ontologies, epistemologies and methodologies. An example of such an initiative is the Faculty College of Wisconsin Teaching Fellows & Scholars Program, which is offered by the University of Wisconsin system's Office of Professional and Instrumental Development (OPID 2016). The OPID programme addresses the needs of around 30 000 educators across 26 campuses and more than 12 disciplines. Other similar programmes, though on a much smaller scale, have been developed in the Singapore Management University (SMU 2016), Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU 2016) and the University of British Columbia (UBC 2016). In South Africa, the Cape Peninsula University of Technology also offers a comprehensive programme (CPUT 2016).

## **The Interdisciplinary Imperative**

South Africa faces many challenges in higher education, including the consequences of massification of education (Soudien 2007; Khan 2005), the need for educational support in widening participation programmes (Burch *et al.* 2013), and dwindling budgets (Business Tech 2015). The skills to address these concerns are not all located within insular disciplines, which thus transfers the obligation to academics to emerge out of their disciplines in order to collectively address the knowledge demands of the information age (Frenk *et al.* 2010). An interdisciplinary ethos is emerging in South African universities, as evidenced by five universities ranked in the top 100 Rankings by Subject (QS 2016), which offer development studies with an interdisciplinary focus. However, the real question is how these pockets of interdisciplinary work may be up-scaled to regional and national levels.

A key driver of current debate in South African higher education nationally is the need for curriculum transformation (Le Grange 2016; Luckett 2010; Shay, Wolff & Clarence-Fincham 2016). While the notion of transformation has taken on many divergent meanings in this context, at an abstract level, curriculum transformation as a social justice imperative is certainly one of the strongest justifications for pursuing the interdisciplinary

agenda. Quinot (2012: 412) notes that ‘if the academic sector of the South African legal community is serious about the country’s transition from authoritarian rule to a constitutional democracy, it is imperative that legal academics, without exception, should start to engage with educational theory as part of the core of their craft’. This reasoning applies equally to other fields of study. However, given that this endeavour is premised on the complex social realities in which university teaching occurs, it follows that the required change in approach must involve a greater interdisciplinary thinking than before (Quinot 2012). It is accordingly neither desirable nor feasible to conceptualise the teaching of any particular field of knowledge in a way that is isolated from other fields, aimed only at producing graduates for a singular, well-defined professional career track (Shay, Wolff & Clarence-Fincham 2016). Fit-for-purpose university teaching in South Africa should be aimed at equipping graduates with the capacity and inclination to drive societal transformation, as well as to tackle the complex challenges of reconstruction beyond the narrow confines of traditional disciplines (Burch & Reid 2011).

### **The Quest for Interdisciplinarity: The Case of Teaching Advancement at University (TAU) Fellowship**

A significant challenge in enacting interdisciplinary faculty development programmes, both locally and internationally, is the need for a platform upon which educators with widely varying disciplinary orientations and expertise can engage in education dialogues that are not limited or constrained by discipline-specific ontologies, epistemologies, and methodologies. While the literature describes many frameworks that may be applied to education initiatives across a wide range of disciplines (Jacob 2015; Lyall & Meagher 2012; Wall & Shankar 2008), such frameworks do not in themselves provide an overarching philosophical and theoretical basis for education dialogues across disciplines. Furthermore, these frameworks do not address the need to find common ground and to mediate the power gradients and status differentials which are deeply entrenched in dialogues between adherents of different disciplines (Van Dijk 2008).

In response to the need for academics and researchers to adopt a more emancipatory outcome for higher education teaching and learning, at a national level the Teaching Advancement at University (TAU) fellowship programme



was launched in 2015. The TAU endeavour is funded by the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) through a Teaching Development Grant and hosted by the Chair of Teaching and Learning at the University of Johannesburg. The pilot project, possibly the first of its kind in the country, aims to bring together distinguished academics and scholars from across institutions and disciplines as scholars, leaders and mentors in teaching and learning in their institutions or disciplinary fields; to enhance the status and stature of teaching, by promoting the culture of teaching excellence, and contributing to the scholarship of teaching and learning (TAU 2015).

The 12-month pilot teaching fellowship development programme, involving 60 academics from a range of public higher education institutions, requires participants to engage in education projects which seek to address challenges experienced within their own institutional contexts, and which results in the generation of support materials for advancing teaching excellence in varied disciplinary contexts (TAU 2015). The authors of this article were participants in the pilot project (2015-2016). In addition to individual projects, an important component of the TAU fellowship programme required Fellows to conduct a group project focusing on one or many aspect/s of teaching and learning in higher education.

The purpose of this paper is to describe the 12-month scholarly journey of six TAU Fellows and their advisor as they initiated, engaged and completed a group project which culminated in the development of a shared conceptual framework of learning-centred teaching. The project was aimed at facilitating interdisciplinary conversations within higher education to achieve the common goal of enhancing the impact of their teaching and learning praxis.

## **Methodology**

### ***Participants***

The TAU group 7 (dubbed G7) consisted of three women and four men (six fellows and an advisor), representing four professions (medicine, law, higher education, and the performing arts) from seven higher education institutions in five provinces in South Africa. Each of the Fellows is recognised as a distinguished teacher – the recipient of a departmental or an institutional teaching award and/or a National Teaching Excellence Award conferred by the Higher Education Learning and Teaching Association of Southern Africa.

### ***Grounded Theory Approach***

A grounded theory technique for building conceptual frameworks for phenomena linked to interdisciplinary bodies of knowledge and conceptual framework analysis (Jabareen 2009), was used to develop the framework described in this paper. As ‘an inductive, theory discovery methodology’ (Martin & Turner 1986: 141), grounded theory facilitates ‘the generation of theories of process, sequence, and change’ (Glasser & Strauss 1967: 114). Accordingly, it builds a ‘context-based, process-oriented description and explanation of the phenomenon, rather than objective, static descriptions strictly in terms of causality’ (Jabareen 2009; Orlikowski 1993; Andersson, Hallberg & Timpka 2003: 50).

Conceptual framework analysis, which ‘aims to generate, identify, and trace a phenomenon’s major concepts, which together constitute its theoretical framework’ (Jabareen 2009: 53), focuses on three essential components: (i) the data: multiple bodies of knowledge vested within disciplines; (ii) the process: the iterative and continuous interplay between data collection, analysis, and comparison to ‘control conceptual level and scope of the emerging theory’ (Orlikowski 1993: 10), and (iii) the procedure: a stepwise approach of analysis, which included mapping, reading and categorising the data; identifying and naming concepts; deconstructing and categorising concepts; integrating concepts; synthesising and resynthesizing the framework; ‘making it all make sense’; validating the framework, and rethinking the framework (Miller & Mansilla 2004).

### ***Procedure***

An organic iterative process of multiple conversations, based on the tenets of a grounded theory approach proposed by Strauss and Corbin (1990), was used to develop the conceptual framework and to achieve relative consensus on its utility in the disciplines represented within the group. These conversations, both face-to-face and online, were supplemented by extensive reading of the literature relevant to the concepts included in the framework. The process began during the first onsite session of the fellowship programme in July 2015 and was concluded at the last onsite session 12 months later. Throughout the process, the development of the framework was recorded in a document which was updated after each engagement and regularly reviewed by all members of the group. This was to ensure that it accurately reflected the conversations,

decisions made and the next steps to be taken. This paper, reporting the development and validation of the framework was written at the conclusion of the fellowship programme.

## ***Developing the Conceptual Framework***

### **Phase One**

The first meeting of the G7 in July 2015 was characterised by apprehension and uncertainty, given the apparently inexorable diversity amongst Fellows and the difficulty individual members of the group experienced in identifying the common conceptual threads that linked the individual projects to provide coherence for a group enquiry project. However, it soon became apparent that a key unifying attribute amongst members was their individual and collective passion for teaching. The initial apprehension soon gave way to lively conversations on elements of good teaching, which affirmed a general sense that Fellows had more in common than was initially obvious. While the group acknowledged that the canonised teaching space within a discipline is an essential element of its integrity, cycles of individual introspection and group conversations allowed members to temporarily abandon institutional affiliations, disciplinary masks and ideological biases to pursue a process of improving the way they learnt and taught. This ‘interdisciplinary space’ provided an opportunity for the group to think outside the proverbial disciplinary box and helped clarify the need to establish a common platform for ongoing meaningful engagement across the multiple disciplines represented in the group.

The group adopted the view that their individual projects, focusing on the development of curriculum materials, had to be theoretically grounded. The idea of a common shared conceptual framework was first conceived of when a group member offered the University of Limpopo School of Education’s conceptual framework which used the metaphor of an egg to encapsulate the outcomes of transformational teaching. Group members agreed that regeneration, development, empowerment and compassion, which were key concepts of the framework, were fundamental values that drive teaching and were common objectives in all the individual projects within G7. These concepts, thereafter called the ‘drivers of teaching’, were adopted for the further development of a shared conceptual framework of teaching, which was initially articulated as ‘student-centred teaching’, in keeping with current dogma.

The emergent interdisciplinary ethos within the group, brokered in dialogues during formal residence sessions, in conversations over dinner and between-residence online interactions, served as a catalyst to achieve further consensus on four other common concepts identified in the individual projects: self-regulation and self-efficacy; co-creating new knowledge; co-creating improved futures and meaningful reflection. These concepts, acknowledged by all to be the bedrock of their personal teaching practice, were termed the ‘pillars of educational practice’ and formed the foundation of the framework being developed.

## **Phase Two**

During early online conversations, the theory of multiple intelligences (Gardner 2006) was invoked as an essential component of the framework. This was included in the framework to capture, in a discipline-independent manner, the different intellectual capacities which predispose students to learning, remembering, understanding and performing. Furthermore, the mandate to activate these psychosocial and cognitive domains in a variety of teaching/learning environments reminded the group of the need for teaching processes which engage the diverse and broad spectrum of students present in higher education spaces in South Africa.

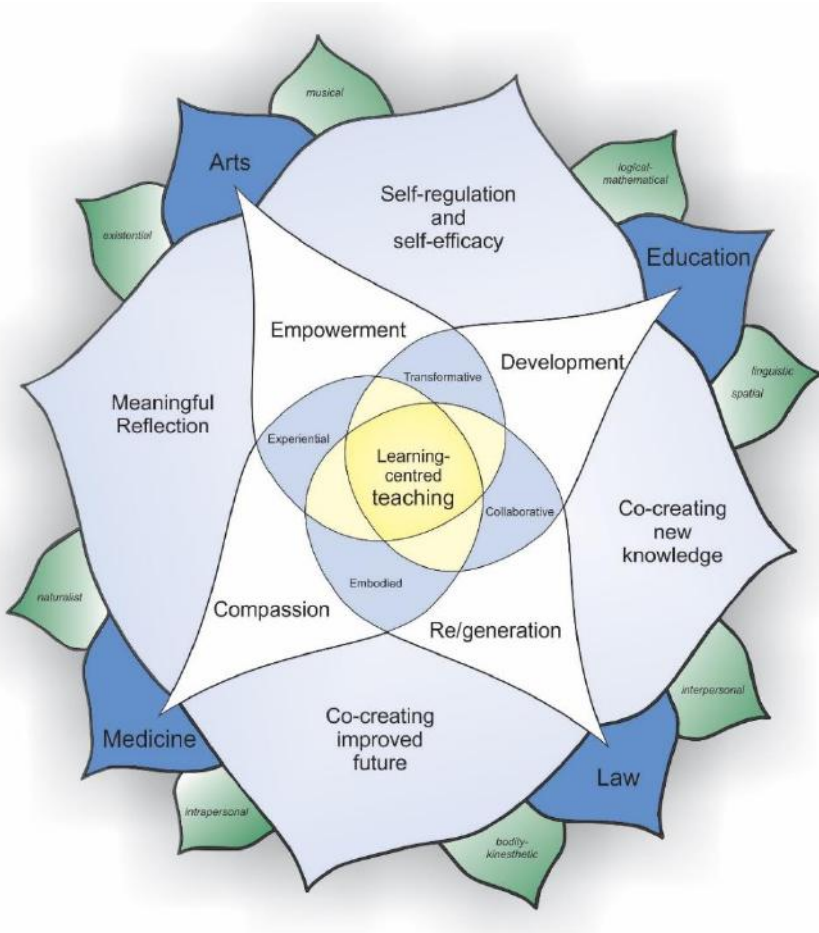
A visual interpretation of the framework, developed by the performing arts academic in the group, started as an interlaced Venn diagram reflecting the foundational pillars of practice, the drivers of transformational learning and the theory of multiple intelligences. The interlaced design reflected an early intention to depict the interweaving and interdependent relationships between the constructs. After review of the initial Venn diagram, the concept of ‘caring’, one of the drivers of transformational learning in the egg metaphor used by the School of Education at the University of Limpopo, was replaced with ‘compassion’ because it represented a more generic construct of humanity that did not invoke an academic discipline.

## **Phase Three**

Reflection and feedback from the group resulted in consensus that student-centred teaching should be replaced with ‘learning-centred teaching’ (Sparke 1999; Reynolds 2000; Candela, Dalley & Benzel-Lindley 2006; Whetton 2007; Mostrom & Blumberg 2012). Further, as a process of deconstructing and

categorising the key concepts, the initial simplistic Venn diagram evolved into a more complex 'flower' metaphor (see figure 1). The Lotus flower was chosen for its many symbolic attributes, including the depiction of practitioners who carry out their intellectual labour with little concern for reward and with a full liberation from attachment (Ravenscroft 2012). This was perhaps a turning point for members of the group who, despite being acknowledged scholars in their respective fields, chose to suspend their individual disciplinary scholarly pursuits to embrace the identity of the collective. The name of the group subsequently changed to 'Group 7: Lotus', with each member identified as 'loti'. While a Lotus flower is the product of a plant (seen as a metaphor for the teaching environment), both the open flower and the unopened Lotus bud forms are associated with human traits which offer a further metaphor for learning and teaching: that of shrouding oneself within a discipline, but with the ability to unfold oneself to heightened empiricism, (Barone 1992), emancipatory knowledge and deep understanding.

Further attributes of the Lotus image emerged, including spiritual references of being associated with higher knowledge and life-long learning. The image of the Lotus was particularly significant in depicting turbid contexts, since lotus flowers thrive in the prevailing grimy conditions of the ponds in which they survive and flourish, without being tarnished by the grime. This is indicative of the flower's resilience and tenacity, which are valued attributes of university academics who work in conditions of adversity. The muddy waters around the Lotus epitomise the complexities of the political context, socio-cultural dynamics, economic pathologies, enabling or disabling legal frameworks and the dynamic policy landscape - all of which constitute the human ecosystem. Further, the use of the Lotus image with its elaborate, layered petals thriving within its ecosystem elegantly demonstrates the conceptual framework design, which offers a multidimensional visual representation of the complexity of the teaching/learning endeavour. The Lotus flower closes at night and re-opens in the day, which for the group, represents reflective practice, which is an essential element of effective teaching.



**Figure 1. Lotus diagram**

The layering effect of the Lotus image represents the integrated and interdependent nature of the concepts, while the overlapping centre of the original Venn diagram represents the central construct of the framework. Student-centred teaching was replaced with learning-centred teaching for the reasons already noted. Furthermore, the layers of petals, which unfurl from the centre (learning-centred learning) in a specific order, reflect the hierarchy of concepts contained in the framework – the pillars of educational practice (the

learning outcomes to be achieved) are activated by the drivers of teaching (motivation for teaching), which are in turn catalysed by specific teaching activities (unsettling rituals of practice). All the components of the framework serve to inspire the passion to learn. Figure 2 and figure 3 serve to highlight the key work from the literature which provides the theoretical underpinnings of the conceptual framework.

## **Phase Four**

The last phase of the development of the framework provided an opportunity for the group to reflect on the potential utility of the framework within the complex multidisciplinary teaching and learning context of higher education. To this end, the group used the six individual group projects (Table 1) to determine whether the key concepts of the framework were indeed present in the projects located in education, law, medicine, and the arts. This was done by asking each fellow to first determine whether the concepts embodied in the framework were identifiable in their own individual projects. Based on this analysis of each project, fellows wrote a short tabulated comment which summarised the key elements of the respective projects. This table was then circulated to all the members of G7 for comment and feedback. Since the individual projects had been extensively discussed during the onsite sessions, and group members had attended the oral presentations of each project during the TAU Research Day, each group member was familiar with all the projects; and it was easy to confirm whether the comments captured in the table reflected the key elements of the project that were relevant to the concepts contained within the framework. A final review of the table was then undertaken by the group to verify the analysis of each project and to establish consensus.

**THE LOTUS FLOWER  
UNSETTLING RITUALS OF PRACTICE  
- THE CATALYSTS AND DRIVERS**

<b>Empowerment</b> being grounded in disciplinary content knowledge, illuminating teaching and learning materials as well as innovative assessment strategies	<b>Development</b> becoming stronger, wiser, efficient, relevant and effective through reflective practice
<b>Transformative</b> processes move outward as students live beyond the classroom (Giroux and McLaren 1996).	<b>Experiential</b> engaging with the environment or experience through interaction with the experience and use of a scientific method (Ornstein and Levine 1997).
<b>Collaborative</b> being held individually accountable while working in teams on an assignment or project (Barkley, Cross&Major 2014; Felder & Brent 1996; Bruffee 1999)	<b>Embodiment</b> the mind becomes embodied when it communicates conceptual meaning, thought and emotion through physical actions (Damasio, 1999; Lakoff and Johnson 1999; Csordas 1990);
<b>Re/generation</b> re- or the generation of improved functionality suggests departure from the old to the new	<b>Compassion</b> create learning environments in which students feel recognised, supported and accepted for who they are.

**Figure 2: Theoretical underpinnings of the catalyst and driver layers of the Lotus conceptual framework**



**THE LOTUS FLOWER**  
**- FOUR PILLARS OF PRACTICE**

<p><b>Self-regulation and Self-efficacy</b></p> <p>Perceived self-efficacy exerts its influence through 4 major processes: cognitive, motivational, affective and selective processes; and operates at 3 different levels to contribute to academic development (student, teachers and faculty). Students can be described as self-regulated to the degree that they are meta-cognitively, motivationally and behaviourally active participants in their own learning (Bandura 1996; Zimmerman 1989).</p>	<p><b>Meaningful reflection</b></p> <p>Students are required to critically examine their own practice, experiences, thoughts and actions in order to improve what they are doing. For reflection to be meaningful it must engage students in meta-cognitive processes that challenge assumptions and values that drive action; thereby defining reflection as knowing-in-action (Schön 1987).</p>
<p><b>Co-creating new knowledge</b></p> <p>Each member of the learning community contributes her own pre-existing worldviews to the teaching-learning engagement so that new insights develop from the interaction (Fosnot &amp; Perry, 2005; Wastiau, 2015); adding to the knowledge base, also reconstructing or transforming her own, as well as the learning community's, pre-existing views (Pelech &amp; Pieper 2010).</p>	<p><b>Co-creating improved futures</b></p> <p>The adoption of critical pedagogies and transformative and collaborative methodologies and practices where "students are responsible for one another's learning as well as their own" (Dooly 2008: 21). Such forms of education are emancipatory and foster transformative social justice and democracy (Freire 2006).</p>

**Figure 3 – Pillars of practice towards interdisciplinary learning-centred teaching**

**Table 1: Short description of the projects**

		Project description
<b>P R O J E C T S</b>	<b>1 - Arts</b>	This project explores the use of embodied performances and activation of/in space/s as an augmented reality performative learning tool.
	<b>2- Education</b>	This project focuses on developing education support materials for novice physical science teachers engaging in teaching practice training opportunities.
	<b>3 – Law (a)</b>	This project investigates ways of using a whole-course approach to embed collaborative learning in law education in South Africa.
	<b>4 – Law (b)</b>	This project explores ways of engaging students in a process of creating ancillary learning materials for a course in customary law
	<b>5 – Medicine (a)</b>	This project explores the use of new educational methods to support and develop the diagnostic reasoning expertise of junior medical students.
	<b>6 – Medicine (b)</b>	This project examines resiliency in medical education, initially concentrating on Cuban-trained SA medical students.

Finally, the common conceptual framework was subjected to peer critique in the form of a poster presentation on the final day of the TAU fellowship programme. The poster depicted the image of a lotus flower with an attendant explanation of the layers (petals) of the flower. In addition, an augmented reality (Kipper & Rampolla 2013) digital application called Aurasma (2016) was used to embed short video presentations of the respective projects within the poster to demonstrate how each Fellow applied the framework to his/her individual project.



**Figure 4. Digitally interactive poster presentation of the Lotus conceptual framework.**

## Results

Tables 2a to 2f show the outcome of the process of reviewing the projects through the multiple lenses of the Lotus conceptual framework towards learning-centred teaching. As can be seen, each petal of the framework was identified in each of the projects. In some cases, the petals were uniformly expressed in the projects, such as the notion of ‘experiential learning’, while other concepts were more divergently articulated, such as self-regulation and self-efficacy. Because a more substantive elucidation of individual conceptualisations falls outside the scope of this article, the authors intend to explore projects and themes in more depth in further publications.

### *Tables: Project-specific Disruptive Innovative Learning-centred Teaching*

The tables follow below.

**Table 2 (a) Site-specific performance and AR in the performing arts**

1- ARTS		
Catalysts	Drivers	Pillars of Practice
<b>Embodied</b> performance and learning are the primary focus for activation of the conceptual tools.	<b>Re/generation</b> - conceptual embodied commentary on current personal-cultural and socio-political circumstances using Augmented Reality (AR) performance.	<b>Self-regulation and Self-efficacy</b> - original conceptual expressive performance creation.
<b>Transformation</b> - Students reflect critically on the theme of 'Embodied performance and learning are the primary focus for activation of the conceptual tools.	<b>Empowerment</b> - site-specific performances that explore aspects of identity, diversity and transformative potential of dialogic interactions that transcend cultural insularity.	<b>Meaningful Reflection</b> - critically engaging with social reality as reflection of theatre-making. leaving a visceral comment as a legacy for future generations to encounter and reflect on.
<b>Experiential</b> - critically engage with a theme and conceptualize their views through practical performances.	<b>Development</b> - demonstrating an understanding of conceptual composition in/for site-specific performance creation. and collaborative practice.	<b>Co-creating new Knowledge</b> - create narratives that disrupt their single story views of identity. Generated a shared social commentary for current and future interpretation.
<b>Collaboration</b> - ensemble performative aspects of body space and time in order to execute the narrative (literal/non-literal or abstract) successfully.	<b>Compassion</b> - supportive and respectful engagement.	<b>Co-creating an improved future</b> - augmented reality site-specific performance is unique to learning about alternative modes of performance.

**Table 2 (b) Physical science teaching toolkit**

2- EDUCATION		
Catalysts	Drivers	Pillars of Practice
The Physical Science toolkit is an <b>embodiment</b> of a set of resources that empowers student teachers to transform how and what they teach, benefiting both student teachers and practicing teachers.	<b>Re/generation</b> - It is envisaged that our students will contribute towards the regeneration of the rural communities as they enter this space as subject 'experts' and disturb the current status quo.	<b>Self-regulation and Self-efficacy</b> - Student teachers used the support materials without lecturer supervision, offering an understanding of their personal strengths and limitations, and gave them a strong sense of purpose as future teachers.
The toolkit has <b>transformed</b> the mindset of Physical Science student teachers. Teaching resources are no longer considered stumbling blocks.	<b>Empowerment</b> - The toolkit empowers students by providing them with tools that can improve their practice as future teachers due to the easily accessible resources they have electronically on a CD.	<b>Meaningful Reflection</b> - The student teachers reflected on their teaching practice experience before the materials were developed and after using the developed materials.
<b>Experiential</b> - teaching practice experience is relied on when identifying needs in the project questionnaire. The toolkit also improved the teaching practice experience for student teachers.	<b>Development</b> - the toolkit has improved student's content and pedagogical knowledge. The additional references, textbooks and science dictionary aided in their professional development.	<b>Co-creating new Knowledge</b> - The support materials to be used by student teachers in their training will equip them to handle the challenges they will experience as future physical science teachers.
<b>Collaboration</b> - Students and lecturer worked collaboratively to identify and develop the resources used in the toolkit. The resources respond to the lived experiences of student teachers in their contexts.	<b>Compassion</b> - The caring environment within which the toolkit was developed and distributed allowed them to freely share with learners and mentor teachers during teaching practice.	<b>Co-creating an improved future</b> - Identifying the shortfalls and benefits of support materials in teacher training will generate new knowledge, which will be applied in future teacher education training programmes.

**Table 2 (c) Collaborative learning in law training**

<b>3 - LAW (a)</b>		
<b>Catalysts</b>	<b>Drivers</b>	<b>Pillars of Practice</b>
<b>Embodiment</b> - Students are required to verbalise the process of their knowledge construction, activating a consciousness of epistemology as constructed and embodied.	<b>Re/generation</b> - law graduates conceptualise their professional identities so that they view themselves primarily as collaborators with others in pursuit of legal/social justice instead of competitors in pursuit of victory over the other.	<b>Self-regulation and Self-efficacy</b> - Students were responsible for ensuring continued engagement within their learning groups during the module and took charge of this aspect of their learning.
<b>Transformation</b> of learning to a networked or collaborative activity so that students' perception of being alone in the learning process is mediated and transformed.	The approach <b>empowers</b> graduates not only to be successful practitioners, but also empowers them in the pursuit of justice as a collective societal endeavour.	<b>Meaningful Reflection</b> - The design of the collaborative learning module was based on the guided reflection of final year LLB students regarding their experiences of collaboration during training.
<b>Experiential</b> - The approach imitates authentic application settings within the learning context in the form of team problem-solving activities.	<b>Development</b> - to develop the paradigm of legal education from a highly individualised and competitive one to a more collaborative one.	<b>Co-creating new Knowledge</b> - The module constitutes a community of knowledge-creators who co-create new knowledge and their own insight into the field in a collaborative manner.
<b>Collaboration</b> is the main catalyst in this approach as the project aims to develop a collaborative model for teaching law and thus relies heavily on collaborative learning in its design.	<b>Compassion</b> - The ability to relate to others, to respect and value their divergent views are core aspects of the collaborative learning design.	<b>Co-creating an improved future</b> - An important outcome of the module is to train law students to pursue justice for their future clients and social justice generally in a collaborative manner.

**Table 2 (d) Learning materials for a course in customary law**

4 - LAW (b)		
Catalysts	Drivers	Pillars of Practice
<b>Embodiment</b> - Conscious shift that laws are socially constructed and embodied in the everyday realities of people's existence rather than instruments of subjugation and control.	<b>Re/generation</b> - The project served to challenge traditional conceptions of professional legal identities, moving students from custodian of the law to promoters of social justice.	<b>Self-regulation and Self-efficacy</b> - A critical part of the project was affording the students some agency and autonomy in determining what they learn.
<b>Transformation</b> - The legitimacy, equal status and diversity of customary and cultural systems the students represent is recognised as legitimate.	<b>Empowering</b> through moving away from a taught curriculum towards a learning curriculum which draws resources from within and outside the formal setting.	<b>Meaningful Reflection</b> - Students had to engage in critical and meaningful reflection on both the existing material and what they would add to it including what should be excluded.
<b>Experiential</b> - perception and memory through orature and anecdotes and are recognised to complement codified sources. The plurality of customary law acknowledged.	<b>Development</b> - The transformative ethos that underlies the project is meant to lead to an emancipated and developed graduate.	<b>Co-creating new Knowledge</b> - the creation of new knowledge in that other forms/types of knowledge stemming out of living customary law including anecdotes and orature are recognized.
<b>Collaborative</b> use of an adapted jigsaw learning technique in researching and selecting different aspects of the various customary law topics fostered both accountability and interdependency.	<b>Compassion</b> - acknowledging the special needs of adult learners through inculcation of some of the principles of andragogy. Whilst recognizing and respecting the values, ideas, needs and histories of our communities.	<b>Co-creating an improved future</b> - a capacity building programme for councillors in municipalities, aimed at improving their work in their communities.



**Table 2 (e) Teaching diagnostic reasoning skills in Medicine**

5 - MEDICINE (a)		
Catalysts	Drivers	Pillars of Practice
<b>Embodiment</b> - students embody the conceptual and theoretical understandings which are made explicit through practice.	<b>Re/generation</b> - The mandate to train health care professionals capable of addressing the complex and interdependent health care needs of the 21st century requires a pedagogy of regeneration that develops graduates into change agents.	<b>Self-regulation and Self-efficacy</b> - The project explored the impact of new teaching methods on the self-efficacy beliefs of medical students regarding their clinical reasoning ability.
<b>Transformation</b> through significantly improving student's self-efficacy beliefs regarding their clinical reasoning ability.	<b>Empowerment</b> - Teaching/learning methods that have a positive impact on self-efficacy beliefs empower students to persevere when learning complex skills like clinical reasoning.	<b>Meaningful Reflection</b> - Utilisaiton of structured reflection charts, clinical reasoning skills, evaluated and purposely used clinical information to substantiate a differential diagnosis made during real patient encounters (reflection-in-action).
<b>Experiential</b> - Students practiced their clinical reasoning skills in authentic patient encounters in an outpatient clinic setting	<b>Developing</b> students' clinical reasoning skills motivated the development of the new teaching/learning approaches evaluated in this project.	<b>Co-creating new Knowledge</b> - This project advances our understanding of the effects of novel methods on medical students' self-efficacy beliefs about their diagnostic reasoning ability.
<b>Collaboration</b> - Teams of students collaboratively derived a differential diagnosis during patient encounters.	<b>Compassion</b> - fostering an understanding of diversity and compassionate engagement rather than the competitive approach typical of high-achieving students.	<b>Co-creating an improved future</b> - Improving clinical reasoning ability is likely to positively impact the process of learning these skills and ultimately improving diagnostic expertise, which should reduce diagnostic errors and improve patient care.

**Table 2 (f) Resilience of Cuban-trained South African medical students**

6 - MEDICINE (b)		
Catalysts	Drivers	Pillars of Practice
<b>Embodiment</b> - The students embodied values of communication, understanding medical concepts and knowledge necessary for the practice of medicine in SA.	<b>Re/generation</b> - The Cuban-SA training programme serves to regenerate undergraduate health professionals training by cultivating a pedagogy of care which values resilience as a skill in medicine.	<b>Self-regulation and Self Efficacy</b> - Students selected for the Cuba-SA training programme demonstrated a sense of resilience and exhibited success in the face of demanding times.
<b>Transformation</b> - The learning of medicine in a foreign country in a foreign language necessitated the transformation of student's values and attitudes to enable them to adapt to the medical system in SA.	The sense of <b>empowerment</b> engendered in these individuals is evident in their ability to practise their skill in SA independently, having learnt different clinical reasoning skills, despite being trained in a foreign context.	<b>Meaningful Reflection</b> - Students were able to reflect in a very engaging way on their experiences in Cuba as well as in SA medical schools and the health system.
This process was <b>experiential</b> as the students, upon entering the SA Health system, had to adapt to and practice their medical reasoning and knowledge within the context of a new system.	<b>Development</b> - Instills knowledge, skills, appropriate attitudes and values as a core pursuit in the development of health professionals, rather than the acquisition of disciplinary knowledge alone.	<b>Co-creating new Knowledge</b> - Engagement with the students indicated a strong need for the production of medical doctors that are competent in all spheres, professionally and ethically as well as personally to service the SA population in its health needs.
<b>Collaborative</b> - Students trained as a cohort, for 6 years, shared experiences which catalysed their learning in a foreign country and all had to adapt collaboratively to the new system in SA.	<b>Compassion</b> - A training programme that engenders self- efficacy, encouraging compassionate engagement with their patients.	<b>Co-creating an improved future</b> - building resilience in medical education by measuring the effectiveness of the programme and future consideration for the general medical curriculum at both undergraduate as well as postgraduate level.

## Discussion

### *Nurturing Dialogic Spaces*

The TAU programme (TAU 2015) is the first national attempt to coalesce a

diverse group of HE practitioners in a dialogic space to advance their teaching potential through a community of practice. While the programme has certainly succeeded in the first part of its mandate of bringing practitioners together, participants had to negotiate their own way into interdisciplinary spaces to engage in learning dialogues, which were discipline-bound. For the group of authors, representing four diverse professions (education, performing arts, law and medicine) this proved to be an unfamiliar task and the conceptual framework described in this paper was born of the need to find common ground by engaging in a process of ‘thinking across perspectives and disciplines’ (Miller & Mansilla 2004). Through a process of dialogue, reading the literature and critical reflection, the group, with their advisor, conceptualised a framework which captures the essential dimensions of learning-centred teaching (Sparke 1999; Reynolds 2000; Candela, Dalley & Benzel-Lindley 2006; Whetton 2007; Mostrom & Blumberg 2012). Essentially the framework articulates ‘why we do what we do’ (the educational principles that should underpin 21st century teaching practice), ‘to what end we do what we do’ (universal drivers of teaching) and ‘how we do what we do’ (the catalysts of learning embodied in our teaching practices).

### ***Embedding and Strengthening Conceptual Coherence***

This paper does not provide a detailed description of the theoretical underpinnings of the concepts embedded within the framework. These are well articulated elsewhere in the literature and key work is referenced in the figures included in the paper. Rather, the paper focuses on describing the emergent process that was instrumental in achieving conceptual coherence across the diverse disciplines represented in the group. On reflection, it is clear that key elements of processes where interdisciplinary work has been successfully achieved (Miller & Mansilla 2004) were present in the journey undertaken to create an interdisciplinary space in which the group could work towards achieving a common goal. These strategies- which include reasoning through analogy, creating compound concepts, building complex and multi-causal explanations, advancing through checks and balances and bridging the explanation-action gap- were not an explicit part of a pre-planned process but were easily identified when reflecting on the project at the time of writing the

paper. An example of each one of these strategies is briefly described to illustrate the point.

At the first meeting, the use of discipline-specific analogies facilitated a process of mapping the properties of 21st Century education from one domain onto another domain, thereby articulating the key pillars of education practice. The process of identifying existing concepts that bridge domains led to the next level of the framework, the drivers of the teaching and learning enterprise, i.e. creating common concepts. Thereafter the group engaged in a prolonged (six months) process of revision and review of the emerging framework using different disciplinary perspectives, i.e. a series of checks and balances to keep the process ‘intellectually honest’. A critical part of the development of the framework was the process of bridging the explanation-action gap. This took place during the transition from a text-based framework to a visual representation of the framework using the metaphor of a flower. It is the opinion of the group that this was the ‘tipping point’ of the process and the step that cemented the inter- and trans-disciplinarity of the framework.

### ***Plurality of the Conceptual Framework***

The potential utility of the conceptual framework in the diverse landscape of higher education was explored by a process of peer evaluation (a poster presentation during the TAU fellowship programme) and preliminary validation (Jabareen 2009) using six authentic HE teaching projects representing four diverse professions. This was done to obtain an overview of how the petals of the Lotus framework could be (re)positioned within discipline-specific contexts. While a detailed description of the diverse representations of the conceptual framework in each project is beyond the scope of this paper, some observations of the initial validation process are worth reporting.

How the lotus petals are easily positioned within the disciplines can be seen by reflecting on the concept of experiential learning, which was easily identified in a set of projects located within a paradigm of ‘learning by doing’. This elegantly demonstrates the direct applicability of some of the simpler concepts contained in the framework without the need for more careful analysis to uncover convergence.

The need to reposition the Lotus petals within the respective projects was apparent when reviewing the role of self-efficacy. The scope of expression of this concept included ‘the ability to engage in original expressions of learning’ (arts project), ‘teaching without the need for supervision’ (education project), ‘taking charge of one’s own learning’ (law project A), ‘developing a sense of agency and autonomy by participating in a process of curriculum development’ (law project B), ‘a belief in one’s ability to make an independent diagnosis’ (medicine project A), and ‘resilience in the face of challenges encountered in a training programme’ (medicine project B). While the concept of self-efficacy is well described in discipline-specific work, the plurality of expression in an interdisciplinary space, without violating the tenets of disciplinarity, provides a new way of seeing the potential convergence of these concepts while retaining context-specific divergence.

Based on the broad compatibility of the framework in this limited validation processes, the authors are cautiously optimistic that the Lotus framework may be a useful way of facilitating learning dialogues in interdisciplinary spaces created by faculty development programmes, which aspire to facilitate the development of graduates who are equipped to deal with the complexities of modern society. Further work using a large sample of teaching and learning projects to determine the wider utility of the Lotus conceptual framework in higher education is clearly needed.

### ***The Challenge of Interdisciplinary Dialogues***

While the emergence of inter-and transdisciplinary education has accelerated the need to find common ground for co-operative engagement across disciplinary bodies of knowledge, the literature contains many descriptions of the challenges associated with doing so and provides examples of the failure to achieve this mandate. Recent examples include the work of Vanasupa, McCormick, Stefano, Herter and McDonald (2012) and Gillette and colleagues (Gillette, Lowham & Haungs 2014). One of the key success factors in the work undertaken by the authors of this paper was the use of the theory of multiple intelligences (Gardner 2006), which speaks to cognition, and therefore learning, at a universal level. This common approach to understanding learning across disciplines effectively limited the opportunities for conflict by averting the need to resort to disciplinary discourses and engage with the power vested

in, and restricted access to, these discourses (Van Dijk 2008). In addition, this approach also avoided the misunderstandings which emerge ‘in interdisciplinary meeting places as a result of the inability, and perhaps the continued unwillingness to learn the language of the other’ (Newman 2006: 75).

The approach does suggest that the dialogic process was not punctuated by divergent views during the process of constructing the Lotus framework. However, each of these conversations was tempered by the shared goal of finding a common platform for meaningful engagement and a conscious undertaking to ‘see one’s own thinking, suspend one’s epistemic beliefs, and engage in productive dialogue’ (Vanasupa *et al.* 2012) in order to achieve this outcome. Other strategies which facilitated difficult conversations was a shared recognition of the value of, and the need for disciplinary pedagogy outside clearly demarcated interdisciplinary spaces; and the reconceptualization of the framework as a Lotus image which provided a broader understanding of the complexities of working in a discipline-based world, and an unwavering commitment to the ethos of the TAU programme, i.e. improving the teaching and learning praxis in higher education in South Africa.

## Concluding Remarks

Higher education is an arena that is under constant and, sometimes, brutal scrutiny, which places enormous pressure on institutions to deliver on their promise of quality and excellence in teaching and learning. Repeated failures over the years to resolve perennial problems related to curriculum, institutional cultures, governance and financing, behoves us to concede that conventional modes of enquiry no longer effectively serve their intended purposes and call, instead, for radical shifts from individualistic to collaborative approaches. As the value of conventional modes of enquiry is placed under scrutiny, the *raison d’être* of higher education is being challenged, notably by students themselves. An enduring condition inhibiting transformation is our continued adherence to essentialised and ritualised disciplinary identities.

The pilot project on which this article is based reveals that interdisciplinary dialogic spaces can be initiated and nurtured through opportunities offered by communities of practice such as the Teaching Advancement at Universities (TAU) Fellowship, and when academics suspend their exclusive disciplinary preoccupations to open up possibilities for a generative, emancipatory scholarship. The pursuit of participatory parity requires us to feel comfortable with making public our curiosity about each other’s work, and in

the process, share in the common values, interests and beliefs that emerge through engagement in interdisciplinary, inter-institutional projects.

A key success indicator of whether the TAU interdisciplinary community of practice will survive beyond the formal fellowship programme, is the ability of Fellows to sustain the collaboration in their institutional contexts and more importantly, to expand the networks beyond their institutional contexts. By the time this article was concluded, the members of G7 had developed collaborative relationships in three of the provinces, forging a trans-regional network of Fellows at traditional universities and universities of technology. This engagement with the collaborative suggests that the Lotus conceptual framework may be sufficiently durable and pliable to facilitate interdisciplinary dialogues about teaching and learning in higher education. Further work is needed to interrogate this contention and provide further evidence in support of the broader utility of the framework.

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# Retreating to Write: Are Publications the Only Important Outcome?

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## Abstract

In many South African universities, the academic writing retreat has become a popular means to increase participants' publication rates and complete higher degrees. Yet retreats that focus on publications as their main outcome may overlook other benefits to participants. Research managers, writing mentors and those involved in the professional development of academic staff could benefit from knowing how a wider range of outcomes may arise from writing retreats designed from a holistic perspective. The authors conducted an email survey of academic staff who had participated in a total of 27 writing retreats held over a five-year period to find out what they valued about and achieved in the process-oriented writing retreat offered by the authors. The results strengthen arguments which favour a process-oriented writing retreat because of its ability to increase a sense of writerly and academic identity, strengthen collegiality and develop a sense of agency and community in writing.

**Keywords:** writing retreats; research publications; hard and soft outcomes; identity; collegiality

## Introduction

For years now academics in South Africa and other countries have been under mounting pressure to conduct research, attract research funds, and publish more, while their teaching and administrative duties have grown (Devlin & Radloff 2012; Dwyer, Lewis, McDonald & Burns 2012; Hanson 2009). This development causes great anxiety, especially for early career academics and

those in professional disciplines, such as accountancy, law, or nursing, where research and publication have not been a strong aspect of academic identity. In our ‘research-intensive’ institution in Johannesburg, academic staff who do not write for publication risk being labelled ‘unproductive’ or ‘research-inactive,’ implying that they do not merit respect, recognition or reward as academics. There is also increasing concern about the quality of research articles and higher degrees as university academics rush to churn out papers or complete dissertations (Mouton, Boshoff & James 2015) in the shortest possible time to qualify for promotion and performance bonuses. Both these trends are causes for concern in our university where many staff are, in addition, confronting rolling student protests over fees and demands for more responsive curricula in higher education.

Moore (2003) points to a widespread assumption that if you are an academic you are willing and able to write academically. She adds that even if this were true at some (distant) time in the past, the profiles and backgrounds of academics in the United Kingdom, as in South Africa, have become more diverse in the past decade or two, making the assumption valid for only a small number of them. In addition, academic writing is not easy, and may not be simply a matter of acquiring technique.

The response of some research managers and academic staff developers who acknowledge these trends has been to initiate workshops and courses to enhance lecturers’ writing skills and to equip them with strategies to write for publication. But technical advice on writing, while helpful, is not sufficient for establishing productive writing habits among academics, as Moore (2003) and Murray (2013) amongst others, attest.

In research-intensive institutions such as ours, funds to support research writing are liable to be diverted because of pressing needs for other expenses, such as student fees, student support, and new learning technologies. The effectiveness of writing development strategies, especially relatively costly writing retreats, needs to be strongly motivated. Research and line managers in universities typically demand an account of writing products as evidence that papers are a direct result of attending a writing retreat. This external sanction and surveillance may create an additional source of stress – both for academics and academic staff development professionals. Added to this is the erosion of traditional institutional collegiality, autonomy and freedom (Hanson 2009). ‘Getting away from it all’ is, we argue, a reasonable and essential response to pressures to write for publication.

In this paper we reflect critically on the design and outcomes of a process-orientated writing retreat and report on the results of a survey to find out what participants valued about and achieved in the retreat(s) they took part in.

## **The Purposes and Benefits of Writing Retreats**

In the past fifteen years, university academics committed to research and writing development for staff and students have created a vibrant literature on writing retreats, mainly from the perspective of those who design and facilitate them. We extract some of the main themes about the purposes and benefits of writing retreats below. Relatively little, however, has been published about the outcomes of retreats from the perspective of retreat participants. Our paper contributes to redressing this imbalance.

In response to institutional pressures on academics to publish, some proponents of writing retreats have argued that they increase the quantity and quality of publications for individuals and departments (Dickson-Swift 2013; Grant, Munro McIsaac & Hill 2010; Jackson 2009; McGrail, Rickart & Jones 2006; Rickart, McGrail, Jones, O'Meara, Robinson, Burley & Ray-Barruel 2009). These authors attribute the increase in 'outputs' to retreats because they offer structured time, space and support for writing. Retreats provide time and space for writing; as well as an opportunity to help academics 'get on with it' (Murray 2005; Silvia 2007). By allocating time for writing rather than obliging academics to *find* time for it, they 'legitimate' writing as part of research, as part of 'normal activity' (Lee & Boud 2003; Moore 2003). Furthermore, writing retreats enhance the visibility and importance of academic writing in the institution (Elbow & Sorcinelli 2006). Retreats allow writing to be practiced in community with others, rather than in lonely isolation (Grant 2000). The emphasis on producing publications can burnish the reputation of early career and established academics in departments which have regularly scheduled retreats for their staff.

Yet at least some proponents of writing retreats (Dwyer *et al.* 2012) have argued that claims to increase rates of research publication through writing retreats are limiting. Retreats which engage with participants' struggles to write, and which explore the pedagogy of writing development, may have more benefits for participants. Authors such as Murray (2013), Grant (2000) and Grant & Knowles (2000) advocate increasing participants' pleasure and

confidence in writing, thereby increasing their motivation to write. We agree with these authors.

Writing, and exposing one's writing to others for scrutiny and critique, can make writers feel vulnerable and exposed (Murray & Moore 2006; Murray 2013). Retreats which provide support for academics in the form of mentoring, peer feedback and peer learning not only develop trust and confidence among participants, they also contribute to building a community of scholars (Jackson 2009). The community provides a support system for writers (McGrail *et al.* 2006) and is especially beneficial for academics operating in a high-stress institutional environment (Castle & Keane 2016, forthcoming).

Some advocates of writing retreats, such as Dwyer *et al.* (2012) and Elbow and Sorcinelli (2006) suggest that retreats also enhance the growing diversity of academic staff by offering opportunities for exchange and sharing. These retreats bind people of different gender, age, length of experience, motivation and disciplinary background for a period of time and for an agreed purpose in a process which is simultaneously social and private (Grant & Knowles 2000). These opportunities to appreciate diversity take place outside institutional agendas for diversification or transformation of staff and are reportedly enjoyable and beneficial for participants.

By paying attention to psychological and social aspects of writing, academic staff developers can reframe academic writing as a community based, collaborative and social act (Grant & Knowles 2000: 12-13) in which writers experience writing as rewarding and enjoyable. Retreats can also support communities of practice, and sustain relationships, collaborations and networks developed in other writing development strategies, such as workshops and courses (Murray & Kempenaar 2014).

Finally, women appear to derive clearer benefits from retreats than men (Grant 2000; 2006; Moore, Murphy & Murray 2010). One reason given for this is that women more often than men juggle complex domestic responsibilities with their academic role. Grant (2006), writing about women academics in New Zealand, suggests that just deciding to participate in a retreat away from home and the university is transgressive for many women who are not used to putting themselves first, or leaving their children and students for a week. A different argument would be that women, and some men, may appreciate the nurturing, sociable culture of some retreats that offer an alternative to the competitive, stressful environment of the university.

Moore *et al.* (2010) point out that the diverse interests and needs of



individual participants create difficulties for evaluating the impact of writing retreats. For example, some participants only want time and space ‘away’ from other duties to work on a pre-defined project; others come to a retreat because they feel ‘stuck’ or ‘blocked’ and hope that the retreat will stimulate them to write productively; some want to learn, or revise, technical aspects of writing; many want feedback on their writing; some wish to establish or affirm better relations with colleagues and to establish communities of practice alongside the retreat. We recognize this diversity of interests and acknowledge the challenge it poses for evaluating the impact of retreats on individuals over time. We believe, however, that a diversity of interests and experience can be a strength. We take up the challenge of accommodating diverse interests and experience in the section which follows.

### **The Process-oriented Retreat: Design Considerations**

As its name suggests, the focus of a process-oriented retreat is on the processes involved in writing and becoming a prolific writer. A process-oriented retreat is not shapeless or unstructured, but the structure is flexible rather than rigorous, and is often negotiated by and with participants. An important aim in a process-oriented retreat is to increase participants’ sense of agency in writing alongside their identities as writers. Ivanic (1998) explains that the process of writing, in community with others, is socially constructed by participants and therefore open to contestation and change. This is in contrast to a ‘product-oriented retreat’, which is akin to a workshop or course, where the focus is on generating measurable outcomes, such as books, journal articles, grant applications and conference papers. A product-oriented retreat is likely to consist of a sequence of pre-determined practices or activities to initiate or train academics in research writing. We contrast these orientations to retreats in earlier work on writing development and writing retreats (Benvenuti, Castle & Keane 2013).

The process-oriented retreat supports and encourages academics to flourish as writers by providing an enjoyable, stimulating opportunity for personal writing development. The retreat aims to build confidence, community and collegiality among writers. Thus the focus is on holistic development. In our process-oriented retreats, a small group of writers is involved, usually 8-12 writers, in a location away from the university campus, for a period of five days. The nature of the venue is important. It should have

spaces for communal and private writing, and offer good light and comfortable seating. A pleasant, quiet, physical and social environment provides a counterweight to the culture of performance, competitiveness, measurement and surveillance which has become widespread in institutions of higher education. Thus the retreat takes place off campus in an environment designed to be an oasis, a getaway, or an escape. The venue is pleasurable, intimate and comfortable. The food is good. Writing time *and* resting time are respected.

Participation in the retreat is voluntary. People from different disciplines and fields of study, levels of seniority, race, gender, age and experience are welcomed. Diversity is cherished as a strength. In our process-oriented retreat, most participants are women who may be completing a higher degree or establishing a publication record. Participants have already completed a two-part, eight-day workshop held on campus at our academic staff development centre Castle & Keane 2013). The workshop introduces them to a wide range of techniques and practices which support writing and writers. Participants motivate their participation in the retreat by setting a writing goal to be completed in the retreat and attaining their Head of School's consent. This process shores up personal responsibility for writing productively, as well as pleasurably, during the retreat.

The retreat strikes a balance between communal and solitary writing time and activities. Community and collegiality are built through shared activities undertaken in pairs and small groups. We place emphasis on personal responsibility and commitment to the group. Collaborative writing, reflection and feedback processes at the beginning and end of the writing day strengthen participants' sense of identity and agency as writers, and also enhance commitment and accountability to one another as writers.

A process-oriented retreat, such as the Centre for Learning, Teaching and Development (CLTD) retreat, employs a pedagogy which is holistic and learner-centered, responsive to the stressful and demanding conditions in which academic staff work. We place emphasis on dialogue, experiential learning, reflexivity and creativity. We use methods including brainstorming, mind-mapping, free writing, loop writing, drawing, reading aloud, peer response, giving and receiving feedback, among others. Participants are engaged in authentic processes of pre-writing, writing, talking, listening, reviewing, rewriting, and more talking, listening, critiquing and writing. They also provide an active, appreciative and critical audience for reading texts aloud. This pedagogy may be eclectic, but it is not atheoretical. Kamler (2001:

14) describes process writing as a ‘powerful, interactive structure for learning to write and learning about writing’ consistent with Vygotsky’s (1980) theory of learning in the zone of proximal development and Bruner’s notion of scaffolding the learner’s understanding (Bruner & Haste 2010).

We encourage the growth of networks of support among colleagues, through group work and by sharing the facilitation of retreats with experienced members of the group. We find that informal mentoring and coaching techniques are helpful in assisting writers to create and fulfil meaningful and achievable goals for themselves and to reframe experiences of being ‘blocked’ or ‘stuck’. Over time, and with active engagement in the process, participants begin to write with more ease, confidence and regularity, as shown later in this article.

## **Reflective Practice and Research Design**

Reflective practice (Argyris & Schön 1978; Schön 1983) helps people reflect on their practice, think critically and ask questions about why something or someone acts the way it does. Brookfield (1987; 2012) points to the importance of questioning our assumptions, particularly when researchers are implicated in the object of enquiry, as in the case of this research.

We considered that an authentic way to research the outcomes of a process- oriented retreat was to ask participants to reflect on what was important about the retreat for them. We do this regularly by conducting written and oral evaluations at the end of each retreat, and keeping records of participants’ responses to many of the writing activities we design. These forms of research and evaluation provide us with regular, high quality, personal accounts of the value of retreats to individuals. We wanted to supplement the evaluative data, collected over several years, with data collected from a sample of participants at a particular point in time (at the midpoint of the fourth year in which we offered retreats). We also wanted to put time and space between us and participants in our retreats, enabling them to reflect on the benefits and outcomes of the retreats after the fact rather than in the glow of moment. In other words, as Saunders (2011: 4) recommends, we wanted to expand our understanding of the quality and value of the retreats beyond the participants’ implicit and tacit knowledge, to include their explicit knowledge.

We decided on a survey that could be administered online because this method could provide data rapidly (Creswell 2009: 146). We also believed that

the results of an online survey might have greater credibility and weight with auditors and research managers in our institution than the handwritten free writes and evaluations we had collected over the years.

Our interest was in the impact of the retreat on the writer and her writing practices over time, in addition to one of the products (publications or thesis chapters) which could be attributed to participation in retreats. We were also interested to find out whether we could extend findings collected in a small scale survey to a larger population of retreatants who had similar characteristics. We designed a questionnaire to focus on whether participants considered that they had become more confident and prolific writers, and whether they had continued to use techniques designed in the process-oriented retreat to promote flow and creativity in writing. We also asked what published work participants had completed in, or as a consequence of, participating in a retreat, and whether they had received any recognition or reward related to their writing from significant others.

## The Respondents

Twenty-four writing retreats were held by the academic staff development centre (CLTD) between November 2011 and July 2015. The ‘headcount’ of individuals who had participated in the retreats was 107. Nineteen of the 107 academics had participated in more than one retreat. One of the nineteen writers had participated in seven retreats, but most repeat-writers participated in two or three retreats.

In September 2015 we sent a questionnaire to 49 of the 107 retreatants whose email addresses were still current. Automatic responses received from three staff members indicated that the intended recipients were ‘out of the office’ for an extended period of time. This brought the total sample of writers who received the questionnaire to 46 people.

Nineteen members of staff responded to the questionnaire, representing a respectable 41% return. Sixteen respondents were women and three were men. Nearly half of the respondents (nine of the nineteen) were employed as academics in the School of Education, but they had different disciplinary bases, length of service, experience and career paths or trajectories. More than half of all respondents were concurrently registered for a higher degree (a Masters degree by dissertation or a PhD). We considered that the respondents to our questionnaire *could* be generalized internally,

because the majority of them were women, and many were from the School of Education. However, our intention was not to formulate generalizations, but rather to gather and interpret a group of academics' opinions about the value of our retreats (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2011).

## **The Questionnaire**

We invited participants to complete a short, open-ended questionnaire on the 'longer term effects or benefits (if any) of their participation as a writer in a CLTD writing retreat'. Participants were asked to comment 'briefly and honestly' in response to three open-ended questions.

Participants were informed that the authors had received clearance to conduct the survey by the university's research ethics committee. While we could not guarantee anonymity within the relatively small group of respondents, we assured them that confidentiality would be maintained as their names, email addresses and demographic data would not be revealed in written or oral accounts of the research.

We developed questionnaire items by first reviewing the stated aims and outcomes of the retreat, and then identifying the foci of previous evaluations of writing retreats, including those conducted by Devlin and Radloff (2012), McGrail, Rickart and Jones (2006), and Moore, Murphy and Murray (2010).

In our first question we asked whether participants had become more regular, confident and or prolific writers following participation in one or more retreats. We also asked whether they had continued to use any of the techniques practiced in the retreats, such as free writing or mind mapping.

The second question asked whether specific outcomes, such as publications or completion of chapters in a higher degree, could be attributed to attendance of a retreat.

The third question enquired whether the participants had received any comment, recognition or reward (for example confirmation in their post, or promotion) which reflected an observed change in the quality or quantity of their writing.

We present the findings of our survey below. Respondents' own words appear in *italic* script. The number in brackets following a response is a code number for the respondent.

The number of 'similar responses' to a question (see the second

column in the reporting tables below) do not always add up to 19, the number of respondents to the survey. This is because the open-ended questions allowed respondents to respond to more than a single aspect of a question.

**Findings and Discussion**

**Q1a: Have you become a more regular, confident or prolific writer?**

	No of similar responses	Examples of responses
Regular	9	<i>I have become a more regular writer and [feel] more confident about my writing. (10)</i>
Confident	5	<i>I am now a more confident writer and although neither regular nor prolific due to my own time management problems. I am quite productive when I do get to writing. (8)</i>
Prolific	7	<i>I am a more prolific writer; I need to attend retreats in order to write. My workload is such that there is little time for writing under normal circumstances. (17)</i>

**Q1b: Have you continued to use freewrites, mindmaps or other techniques to ease into a stint of writing?**

	No of responses	Examples of responses
Freewriting		<i>I use the freewrites ... so that my mind opens up and frees up before I focus on</i>

## *Retreating to Write: Are Publications the Only Important Outcome?*

	10	<i>my academic planning. I find this helps me from feeling overwhelmed. (4) I find freewriting and loop writing really helpful. (1) Freewriting has been a powerful tool that I still practice today [as] it has helped me to deal with my fear of academic writing. (7)</i>
Mindmaps	3	<i>I use freewrites and mindmaps when I am stuck rather than at the beginning of a writing session. (4)</i>
Other	1	

A striking feature of participants' responses to this part of the survey was that many respondents were not content to simply answer the questions posed, but wanted to place additional comments on record. Their comments included remarks on focus, feedback, momentum (impetus), identity and social aspects of the retreats. These responses yield interesting and nuanced responses to the CLTD retreat, so they are grouped below under relevant headings.

### ***Focus***

*It is the absolute focus on writing, with no wiggle room to do anything else but write, plus the inspiring energy that comes from everyone else also writing, that enables me to take the substantial step forward. (1)*

*The writing retreat helped me focus on my writing and get away from the world for a short while. (6)*

*The retreats help me get unstuck and focus on the parts of my research that I am most likely to avoid. (9)*

*The focused time on task, together with the emotional and cognitive support offered in writing retreats, is a very productive way to generate academic writing that would otherwise be put to the backburner in the very hectic work life that teaching academics have. (1)*

These responses underline the multiple demands placed on academics in the workplace, and the difficulty that many people have in prioritizing time for writing. Retreats may be the only opportunity which some academics have to focus on writing.

### ***Momentum/ Impetus***

*A retreat usually gets me going on a writing task and I am able to maintain the focus afterwards for various amounts of time. (5)*

*I write every day- this is already a big achievement. (10)*

### ***Feedback***

*My writing improved as a result of regular feedback. (13)*

### ***Identity***

*XX enabled me to understand that as a PhD student, I need to take on [the] identity of a writer, i.e. that being a researcher meant being a writer. (1)*

*Often (and I still struggle a lot) I think back to writing retreats and find comfort in remembering that other academics also find academic writing challenging. (18)*

### ***Social***

*The retreat helped me connect with people outside my department who were facing the same challenges of balancing work, study and family demands. (7)*

*I have made friends who are now writing buddies. We organize our own retreats. (10)*

### ***Wider Applications***

Some respondents not only used the writing techniques and strategies featured



*Retreating to Write: Are Publications the Only Important Outcome?*

in the process-oriented retreats, they introduced them into their teaching:

*I introduced writing and reading as components of my third year engineering course. (3)*

*The techniques of freewriting I now use with my own students to get them writing. Being a better writer can be taught and learned. (2)*

However, as Grant, Munro, McIsaac and Hill (2010) remark, not everyone is successful in embedding new techniques in their personal practice. Two of the three men who responded to the questionnaire indicated:

*I haven't used any of the techniques and exercises- although I did find them useful in confidence building and easing into writing. (16)*

*I don't tend to use freewrites outside the CLTD retreats. I find reading each other's work is very useful through. (17)*

Yet the first male respondent also remarked:

*I found every retreat both valuable and stimulating. The collegial atmosphere, the sense of a shared project, the ability to discuss issues and challenges with others, and the feedback from the readers has been invaluable in increasing output both during the retreat and beyond. (16)*

In summary, in response to question 1, respondents indicated that the writing retreats were useful to ease anxiety and to reduce feelings of vulnerability. Often they release the writer from feeling 'stuck'. Participants used the techniques and exercises introduced in the retreats in a variety of ways: to motivate and sustain their own writing after a retreat; to teach and supervise senior or postgraduate students; to be more focused and creative in research supervision; and to set up writing groups and retreats of their own. As one respondent remarked:

*The wonderful creative techniques introduced at CLTD writing retreats have helped me in many ways with my writing. But, of even*

*greater value: the approach, planning, respect, innovative input, and so much more- which actually taught me to be kinder to myself as a writer. This, in turn, has permitted me to learn (baby steps) to enjoy and value my own writing .... I have overcome many fears and insecurities re writing and so create in a far less restricted way. I have overcome many fears and insecurities re writing in second language through the wisdom and support of the facilitators.... (18)*

**Q 2: What published work, if any, have you produced as a (partial) outcome of participating in a CLTD retreat?**

Eleven of the 19 respondents indicated that they produced ‘*most of an article*’ or ‘*wrote a first draft of a journal article*’ during a single retreat. Rates of productivity differed considerably among participants. One writer indicated that she had written one article in three retreats spread over a period of one and a half years. By the time she attended her fifth retreat, she was able to produce an entire draft journal article in one retreat. Two of the eleven repeat-participants were able to write two articles each in two retreats. In total, eight of the 19 respondents claimed to have written and published a total of eleven articles in ‘accredited’ (DHET or ISI recognized) academic journals as a direct result of participating in a retreat(s). Two of the male respondents provided references to their published work. The female writers did not.

Two participants ‘*wrote/ reworked a book chapter*’ during a retreat, and seven drafted or wrote an entire chapter of their thesis. These accomplishments were often managed in addition to working on journal articles or conference papers. Two participants completed PhD proposals which they had barely begun before the retreat. Three participants noted that they had written conference abstracts or had planned and written conference papers in the retreat.

One staff member, also a doctoral student, wrote ‘*I made significant progress [on my PhD] in each of the retreats I attended. [Retreats] provide an opportunity to pull together work and ideas that are often fragmented or need further thinking....*’ (9)

Another wrote ‘*I only had to do minor corrections for my thesis [following examination] thanks to the writing retreats for constructive feedback*’. (8)

### *Retreating to Write: Are Publications the Only Important Outcome?*

The most prolific writer was a repeat participant who '*published one accredited journal article; wrote a successful funding proposal for an NRF grant; two international conference papers; 2 educational resources; and most of my PhD on retreats*'. (10)

In summary, responses to question 2 indicated that the CLTD retreats provided dedicated time and space for writing, allowing participants to disconnect from work responsibilities, everyday life, social media, and the internet. Most participants used the opportunity of a retreat to meet a self-imposed goal to develop a journal article, thesis chapter, conference paper or proposal. Retreats provided the feedback, momentum and support needed to complete writing goals and tasks during or shortly after the event. Writers who participated in more than one retreat increased their rates of productivity. Increasing productivity enhanced participants' sense of achievement and satisfaction, which may have increased the motivation to write.

**Q3: Have you received any comment, recognition or reward (a commendation, a promotion or monetary award) from anyone (a colleague, supervisor, an HOD or HOS) about your writing since participating in a CLTD retreat?**

	No of similar responses	Examples of responses
Comment	10	<i>One of my PhD examiners told me how well written she thought it was- some credit must go to those who helped me think it through and work on it.... (2)</i>  <i>I have been commended for clarity and for generally writing well. I give the CLTD retreats credit for [raising my] consciousness of the audience for each piece of writing. (8)</i>
Recognition	2	<i>I received an 'Outstanding Dissertation Award' for my PhD from the International Study Association for Teachers and Teaching. (1)</i>

		<i>I became Ass. Prof in 2013. I attained an NRF rating in 2014. Both of these can be attributed to my publication record, which has been enhanced by participating in CLTD retreats. (17)</i>
Reward	1	<i>I managed to get my PhD finished in 2013. I got a 5% pay rise for this. (5)</i>
	9	<i>Sadly no.</i>

The responses to this question are interesting for several reasons. The *comments* which respondents noted in the survey were commendations of the quality of writing, or clarity of expression of ideas in writing, rather than the number of ‘outputs’ achieved. Respondents’ higher degree supervisors and examiners were among those who recognized and commented on achievements or improvements in the quality of writing. Most respondents indicated that they were ‘gratified’ by positive feedback on their writing, and attributed this to qualitative improvements in their writing as a consequence of participating in one or more retreats. Two writers noted that their colleagues and students had expressed appreciation for the retreats that they, as staff members, had organized after participating in a CLTD retreat.

*Public recognition*, in the form of an award, on the other hand, was granted for the quality of an entire dissertation, or for both quality and quantity of publications, as noted by two of the respondents. One writer noted a pay rise given as a reward for completing her thesis.

Nine writers, nearly half of all respondents, indicated that they had received no comments, recognition or reward for their writing. The reasons for this non-recognition were not explored in the survey, but it is worth noting the ‘sadly’ attached to the ‘no’ in many responses, because it contrasts sharply with the gratification expressed by writers who did receive positive feedback. Guiding participants to solicit and give feedback on writing remains an important, but challenging, aspect of facilitating the CLTD writing retreats.

## Concluding Remarks

The survey reported above shows that the process-oriented retreat designed by the authors and offered by our academic staff development centre has multiple outcomes. Respondents indicated that participating in a retreat had a positive

impact on their productivity *and* pleasure in writing. Retreats contributed positively to their enjoyment of writing, and to becoming a generative writer.

While participants valued the opportunity-benefit of a retreat (dedicated time and space to write) their comments show appreciation of opportunities to talk to others about their writing and their workplace-- opportunities which seem to be fast receding in academic life today. They valued the diversity of participants in retreats, remarking on the benefits of exposure to different views, knowledge and experience of research and writing. Some respondents' supervisors and HODs remarked that participants' writing had improved qualitatively. Examiners and reviewers wrote encouraging comments about respondents' writing. Recognition from these sources was appreciated by participants, confirming their own growing self-confidence and ability in writing.

One of the surprising outcomes of the survey was the way that respondents adapted the questionnaire by expanding on the questions asked. For example, in responding to question 1, participants directed the authors to other aspects of the retreat that they valued equally, if not more, including the atmosphere of the retreat which allowed them to focus on writing; the nurturing physical and social environment; and discovering a new identity as a writer. Some respondents reported that they had initiated similar retreats for their postgraduate students and departmental colleagues, to positive effect. Other respondents had started their own writing groups, or sourced other retreats offered in the university which would help them on their road to completing their writing goals. Taken together, these findings validate the authors' view that a process-oriented writing retreat produces important outcomes which extend far beyond increasing participants' publication 'output'.

Planners and facilitators of writing retreats may benefit from reflecting on the process and outcomes of their retreats by conducting an open-ended, online survey of participants as we did, with a focus on whether the aims of the retreat were valued by participants after the passage of time and with increasing experience of academic writing. Planners and research managers may also question whether they wish to collaborate with those who offer writing retreats whose sole purpose is to increase rates of publication. Such retreats may bring status and reward for individuals, their departments and institutions, but they also reinforce the more ruthless, competitive, and controlling aspects of university life which may deny opportunities for self-respect, personal growth and collegiality. These are, for many, more meaningful features of academic

identity and purpose—features which can be nurtured in a process oriented writing retreat, as shown in this research.

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*Retreating to Write: Are Publications the Only Important Outcome?*

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# Analyzing Work-integrated Learning Assessment Practices through the Lens of Autonomy Principles

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## Abstract

There is generally an increasing interest in the vocational aspects of higher education, including work integrated learning. Yet there is often an assumption that students will make connections between these two sites, but this is often not the case; connecting university knowledge and practices to those of working life thus remains a vexing problem. In this research article, we examine this connectivity with a focus on work-integrated learning (WIL) assessment as this may highlight what lecturers judge as important knowledge. The lens for examining assessment is that of the Legitimation Code Theory concept of Autonomy codes. Whereas we find that work and university practices and knowledge may be quite well connected, our theoretical lens reveals an unexpected outlying field that may be less well connected to disciplinary knowledge: that of writing and presentation practices judged as valuable by the lecturers. The paper suggests that the integration of the two fields, general writing and presentation and disciplinary knowledge and practices, may be improved for the purposes of strengthening student learning.

**Keywords:** work-integrated learning; assessment; legitimation code theory; autonomy codes

## Introduction

In general, there is an increasing interest in Higher Education worldwide in

the use of some form of work experience alongside the regular university curriculum (Billet 2009). For the purposes of this paper we will use the acronym WIL, denoting ‘work-integrated learning’, for the workplace experiential period that university students undergo, rather than the alternative term of ‘workplace learning’ (WPL). We recognize, as have a number of other authors concerned with relationships between the university and workplaces, that these are two different contexts with different forms of knowledge and practices (Eraut 2004; Le Maistre & Pare 2004; Wheelahan 2010). Of interest in an analysis of WIL assessment would be the identification of where the assessment is situated: predominantly at work according to the principles of the workplace or predominantly within the university for the purposes of the university. When assessment is situated within the workplace then the assessment criteria could be said to reflect work learning as a field of study unto itself, for instance where such assessment concerns issues such as specific work organization or practices. By contrast, when the assessment is mostly situated within the university then work learning is a mode of university study and the assessment criteria are drawn predominately from the university curriculum (Costley & Armsby 2007).

Where the assessment sits, whether within the field of work or as a mode of university study, is an arena of development and contestation currently in South Africa and beyond. For example, work assessment, in order to gain credit, is increasingly being linked to programme outcomes and content rather than to the interests and principles of the workplace as is reflected in the descriptions of WIL in the emerging South African Higher Education Qualifications Framework or HEQSF (2013) documentation. In a similar vein, other initiatives, for example in the United Kingdom, attempt to position WIL assessment within the overarching university curriculum structure of ‘constructive alignment’ (Walsh 2007).

Where WIL (and also WIL assessment) is understood as a mode of university learning, there is an attempt to integrate university practices and purposes with those of the workplace. Students ideally are required to transfer knowledge and practices from university and effectively recontextualise them for work (Barnett 2006). In support of this mode, authors such as Maton (2014) and Billet (2009) have argued that learning something in one context then being required to use it in another can, under the right circumstances, help students to build up more connected and advanced forms of meaning than when learning occurs in one context only. As Billet (2009: 838) suggests:

Within the curriculum and pedagogical practices of contemporary higher education, it is therefore important to advance approaches that can support the integration of practice-based experiences.

However, such integration is often expected to be enacted autonomously as long as theory and practice are brought together, and lecturers may not be aware of the complexity students experience in actually doing this (Eraut 2004). Thus, as Maton, Howard and Lambrinos (2016) suggest, connecting knowledge from university with that of working life remains a key goal but also a problem for higher education.

To this end the research reported on in this paper examined how and when such integration may be occurring, and the nature of the knowledge involved, drawing on the recently developed (and developing) lens of Maton, Howard and Lambrinos' (2016) and Maton's (2005) Autonomy codes. However, although we began with an analysis of integration between work and university knowledge and practices, our findings suggest that there is a third field of knowledge and practice that requires analysis as to its degree of integration; the field of communication, writing and presentation skills.

Maton's (2014) theory of Legitimation Code within which the Autonomy dimension lies, has been used to analyse assessment more generally in higher education. For example, Shay (2008) uses the Specialization dimension of Legitimation Code Theory to critique constructivist approaches to assessment which, in her view, may prioritize how students represent knowledge over the actual nature of the knowledge itself. Similarly, Wolff and Hoffman (2014) also used the Specialization dimension to examine WPL assessments in Engineering. Their findings highlighted that assessors often value students' dispositions, how they present themselves, as well as their knowledge, even though Engineering has a strong disciplinary base. However, Autonomy dimensions and their associated codes have not been used extensively in higher education research; the work of Arbee, Hugo and Thomson (2014) on the Marketing curriculum in South Africa and that of McNamara (2010) on principles underpinning the Irish nursing curriculum are notable exceptions.

The research reported on here draws on four cases of WIL assessment carried out in science courses. Assessment was selected for two reasons. Firstly, the faculty in question is itself interested in examining and improving WIL assessment. Secondly, assessment is well known in higher education as

an indicator of what counts in the field being assessed from the perspective of the assessment designer (Race 2003; Wass, van der Vleuton, Shatzer & Jones 2001).

## **Legitimation Code Theory (LCT) and the Autonomy Dimension**

Drawing on Bourdieu's field theory, LCT understands the social world as consisting of relatively autonomous fields each with their own favored knowledge resources and practices (Maton 2014). Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), in particular, were concerned with the degree of insulation of the university from the influences and interests of the state and industry. Thus in the classical use of autonomy and field by Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), it is autonomy of the university which is being examined against the influence of other social, political and economic influences. LCT, therefore, has obvious relevance to examining WIL assessment where we are examining practices which span the fields of work, and their interests, and those of the university.

LCT is concerned with identifying what counts in the social world both in terms of the required knowledge and its underlying principles but also the extent to which a particular way of knowing, or knower code, has effect. These knowledge and knower 'codes' are often tacit yet where people draw legitimation from has real impacts on what they actually do in practice. Furthermore, understanding what is being learnt and how it is to be learnt in the systematic way offered by LCT is important for development and change in practice (Maton 2014).

LCT looks at the principles which underpin the ways in which knowledge is organized and how the different sections of knowledge fit together so that it is easier to see what we as teachers are in fact doing (which may be tacit). Once teachers understand and are made aware of this organization, it becomes more possible to help students understand how different parts of knowledge (e.g. university and workplace knowledge) can be brought together, thus enabling students to both cross boundaries into new contexts and so enhance their learning.

The Autonomy principle in general refers to the degree of insulation or differentiation between fields (Maton 2014). In the case of this research, it refers to what is valorized in workplaces and in universities, and thus which

exerts the most dominant control over and hence legitimization of practices. Maton (2005) distinguishes between two aspects of Autonomy: positional and relational autonomy.

Broadly speaking, positional autonomy indicates which area of knowledge, the principles, theories and ways of practices, is being referred to (Maton 2005). Following Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), the position of the university is seen as the primary position and other positions are measured in relation to this, as either close to the university (+) or far from it (-). As we are dealing with science programmes, strong positional autonomy in assessment would therefore refer to a strong focus on scientific theory and practices as is taught in the curriculum. Where there is this focus then the positional autonomy is given a '+' sign (PA+). By contrast, where the principles, theories and ways of practicing are drawn from outside of the science curriculum then these sorts of knowledge are referred to as PA-.

Relational autonomy (Maton 2005) refers to a somewhat different aspect of knowledge, that of to what purpose the knowledge and practices are being put. For example, where the knowledge and practices (which may be either about science or about something else) are being used to further the aims and purpose of the science curriculum, then relational autonomy is strong and would be referred to as RA+. Alternatively, where knowledge is being used for the purposes of something outside of the science curriculum, for example for the purposes of the workplace, then relational autonomy is weaker or RA-. To put this simply, when we ask where practices or knowledge are coming from, from inside or outside the university science curriculum, we are referring to different strengths of positional autonomy; when we ask where the purpose for which they are being used is predominantly situated, we are referring to relational autonomy (Maton, Howard & Lambrinos 2016).

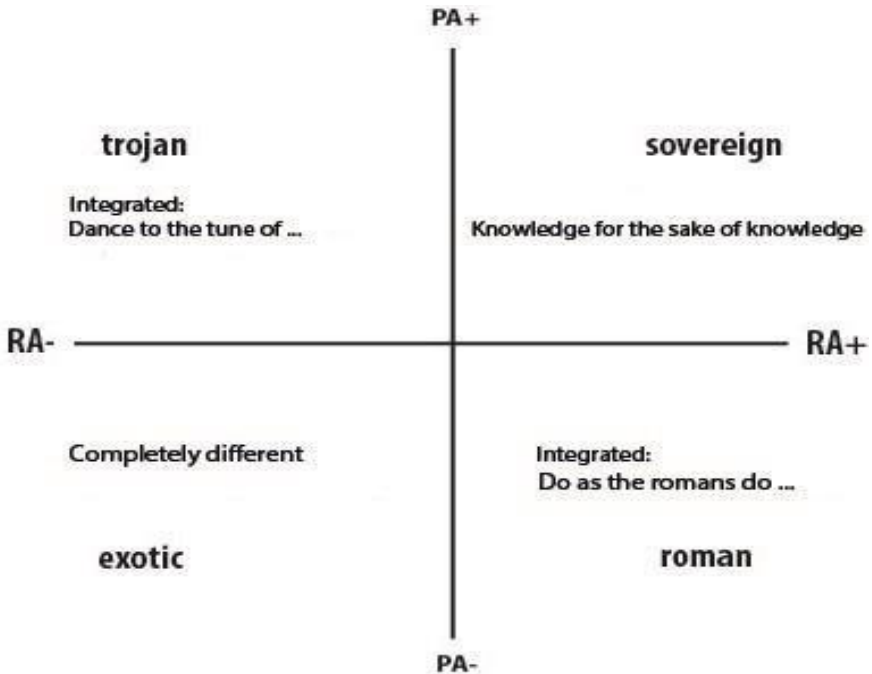
In this article, the focus is on assessment as we are interested in where assessment practices are being drawn from: whether it is from the university curriculum (PA+) or from elsewhere, for example, from the workplace (PA-). In addition, we are interested in ascertaining for whose purposes the assessment is being used: whether for the purposes of the university curriculum (RA +); or for purposes outside of the curriculum (e.g. for work purposes) which would be labeled as RA-.

Thus, from the previous paragraph, there are four possible configurations of Autonomy codes, where both PA and RA are plus or where they are both minus, and two more configurations of +/- . These configurations

are shown as four quadrants in the graph, or Autonomy plane, in figure 1. The quadrants can be used as a means to map where assessment practices are predominantly located, so that the researchers, and the lecturing staff, can gain a clearer picture of where they are drawing their actual assessment practices from. This matters not just because it can make staff more aware of what they are doing in assessment but also more importantly, whether and how they are integrating the practices and purposes of the university curriculum and workplaces. As was pointed out earlier, it is this sort of integration of the university curriculum and the workplace that provides the optimal conditions for student learning. In the rest of this section we will describe the nature of the different quadrants in more detail so that their use as an analytical tool may be made clearer.

The descriptions and naming of the quadrants, with reference to figure 1, is drawn predominantly from Maton, Howard and Lambrinos' (2016) recent work on Autonomy codes. As Autonomy refers to the degree of insulation of the university from outside, we start with the so-called *sovereign* autonomy code in which, in this case, content, concepts and practices are drawn mostly from inside the field of the science curriculum (PA+). In addition, this knowledge is being used to further scientific knowledge, so RA+, rather than for other purposes, e.g. outside contexts such as workplaces or other knowledge fields. This code could be described as 'knowledge for knowledge's sake'. Where knowledge and practices are again drawn from inside the scientific curriculum, but are being used for other purposes, e.g. the workplace or another field of study, Maton, Howard and Lambrinos (2016) describe it as a *trojan* code; here, knowledge and practices 'dance to the tune' of the other field and can be described as PA+/RA-. Thus, for example, where scientific knowledge from the curriculum is being applied to solve 'real' workplace problems (as is discussed in the data where lecturers talk about 'contribution' to work) this can be coded as mostly PA+/RA-, or trojan code.

In the *roman* code, knowledge and practices are drawn from outside of the field of the science curriculum (PA-) but these are being used for the purposes of advancing the knowledge of science (RA+) rather than that of outside fields. Thus, for example, the model of WIL as a mode of study of the science curriculum would fall predominantly in this field, and work knowledge and practice would be judged mostly against academic, science curriculum criteria.



**Figure 1: Autonomy Codes after Maton (2016)**

Maton, Howard and Lambrinos (2016) suggest that a catchphrase for the roman code is ‘when in Rome do as the Romans’ do. In the *exotic* code (PA-/RA-) everything lies outside of the field of science studies and there is much distance from the university science curriculum. An example of this code would be where WIL is understood to privilege the advancement of students’ knowledge of workplaces so that they may come to understand how the field functions rather than as a mode of learning curriculum content (Costley & Armsby 2007).

The LCT dimensions plotted on the Cartesian plane typically represent continua or relative strengths. In this article, however, we are interested in what Maton, Howard and Lambrinos (2016) have described as autonomy ‘tours’ or journeys. The metaphor refers to teaching or assessment practices which typically start in one of the pure or insulated fields of the university curriculum

or workplace (sovereign and exotic codes respectively) then move into the more integrated roman or trojan codes. In ‘going on a journey’ students are crossing boundaries such that what has been learnt or experienced in one context now has to be re-visioned for a new context.

## Methodology

As with other investigations into higher education and work, the research is small scale, localised and exploratory (Smith *et al.* 2007) as we wish to put forward argument as to the extent to which university and workplaces are connected through the lens of assessment practices. The research revolves around four case studies of WIL assessment practices. The expectation is that the researchers can put forward tentative principles from these cases (Anderson 2001) that can be further explored within their faculties. The research does not aim to present any general observations or principles pertaining to WIL assessment except in so far as the theoretical framing of the research may be transferred to other sites.

This investigation took the form of case study research in that data was gathered from a defined and bounded context. Descriptions presented were analyzed so that their plausibility as being representative of a trend can be judged by the reader (Cousins 2009). The units of analysis presented here are those of lecturers’ perceptions of how WIL assessments are designed and conducted, drawn from four different programmes in the Faculty of Applied Science. Each programme formed a case in that they involved different actors and contexts but have in common that they reside within one faculty, which is typical of collective or comparative case study research (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2000; Cousins 2009).

The four cases were selected as they were representative of each of the four clusters of programmes offered in the Applied Sciences: Environmental, Chemical/Biological, Applied Mathematical and Agricultural Sciences. Applied Sciences was selected as staff had expressed an interest in evaluating and improving their WIL assessment practices.

In conducting the research, and in the light of recent moves for greater incorporation of WIL into the curriculum, we were interested in the degree to which assessment does or can integrate the two fields of work and science knowledge and practice. In order to gather data on these issues the following



broad questions were presented to the lecturers responsible for WIL in the four programmes identified:

- Describe your WBL assessment methods.
- Why were these chosen/for what purpose?
- What did you base the assessment methods on e.g. curriculum outcomes, graduate attributes, workplace, professional bodies?
- Who does the assessments and why?
- Are the procedural elements mostly work-related or academic-related?
- Given a marked assessment, can you describe why you assessed it as you did?

The last question was particularly revealing. Here we were trying to find out what lecturers were actually doing in action under real marking situations, rather than what they espoused to do in interviews. The method could be said to draw upon Argyris and Schön's (1974) distinction between espoused theory and theory in use, and whether there is congruence between them.

Lastly, in analysing the data themes related to the Autonomy dimension, codes were identified and claims made are supported by quotes from the interviewees. From this analysis, the autonomy journey for each of the four cases is represented graphically on the Autonomy dimension Cartesian plane.

## **Discussion of the Data**

### ***Environmental Studies***

In Environmental Studies, the first assignment for students is a scan of the workplace they are in and what activities they will undertake. So this task is drawn strongly from actual work practices. However, the task is assessed by the lecturers and what counts as 'good' is judged collegially. In the following quote the lecturer highlights that assessment is focussed on what the students are doing at work.

And also what skills they think they need, ja, the values and the principles because of their position and also, what skills they think they need and what sort of knowledge base they need ... We invite feedback

from my colleagues on this what they take as good and what's not good and then we sit with the final things that everybody knows we are doing.

Not only is the task assessed by lecturers according to what they believe matters, but it also fits in with the perceived culture of the university environment, where marks determine whether or not students pay attention to tasks, as the following quote suggests.

They know the importance of doing things right, to get marks. So they take it seriously.

This description of assessment can be described as predominantly about workplace practices and knowledge – what is actually being done at work- for the purposes of students' knowing about the workplace, thus an exotic code. However, it appears that academic standards are also being applied such that these outside work practices are being partially recontextualised for the purposes of the university. Thus the assessments take students on a journey from the more exotic field of workplace knowledge and skills into a more integrated mode or roman code.

Apart from the workplace scan, the main additional assessment in Environmental Studies is an investigation of a work practice carried out by students while in the workplace. The purpose of the main assessment is to put theory learnt into practice and thus can be seen as an extension of students' university studies, rather than being predominantly about work. This can be described as doing work for the purposes of learning more about science, again a roman code (PA-/RA+). In other words, work practices are being recontextualised for the purposes of learning science, as the following quote outlines.

... actually seeing that whatever we taught our students, the theory, was really practiced at the work place

As with most work place assessment the situation is not simple as lecturers recognise that simply extending university studies is somewhat one-sided as indicated by a participant that 'students are being prepared for industry'. Thus

there are always reflective components in the assessments of what the students have learnt in the workplace.

We do not tell them what to include, we just indicate broad topics like ... how you feel you have grown professionally, what sorts of skills you have developed, that sort of thing.

Accordingly, assessment practices, though situated mostly in the roman code, are also partially moving back into the exotic code.

As was pointed out in the methods, lecturers were also asked to take the researchers through a marked WIL assignment, highlighting how they awarded marks. As the lecturer takes us through a good assessment, she again describes the importance of theory into practice, reflection and some workplace skills (such as teamwork): in other words, they are working predominantly within a roman code. They are, however, also quite strongly expressing the importance of the way the report was written, and its presentation.

So I think the reflection was very good and the whole presentation of her report, ideas logically presented. So I think and I just said here it's a pleasure to read. The report is well written with an easy, logical flow of ideas.

It could be suggested that a 'good' report has to mainly align itself to university principles. However, she also points out that in assessing a report as 'good' she would like to know if it contributed to work practice. This is of some importance in her industry as the mentors themselves are often not so well trained nor know how to run things adequately, as she suggests in the following quote.

And also to contribute. Like I said, with our students in these municipalities where there is lack of expertise they can make a contribution. Like do the things that are not happening (in the workplace) and make suggestions.

What matters here for the lecturer is the knowledge and practices learnt at the university being put to service for the purposes of improving work. What can

thus be suggested is that assessment takes students on a journey from the pure sovereign code of university knowledge to an integrated trojan code. Conversely, a poor report is judged partly according to more academic principles of good structure but this is also integrated with theory and practice.

So you'll find it's a list, just a list of things that happened. No reflection, no integration of theory with what is given, what the student was doing. That would be a good example of a bad report for me.

Figure 2 summarises the autonomy journey followed in WIL assessment in Environmental Studies, from work scans for works' sake (exotic), to work for the purpose of learning science (roman), and back again. Then there is the journey from the more sovereign code of science knowledge and practice to the more integrated code of science contributing to work – science for the purposes of work – a trojan code, which is shown on figure 2. Good, coherent writing (5) remains something of a difficulty as it is a university practice for university purposes even though it cannot be categorised as science. For the moment, however, we have categorised it as belonging to the sovereign code.

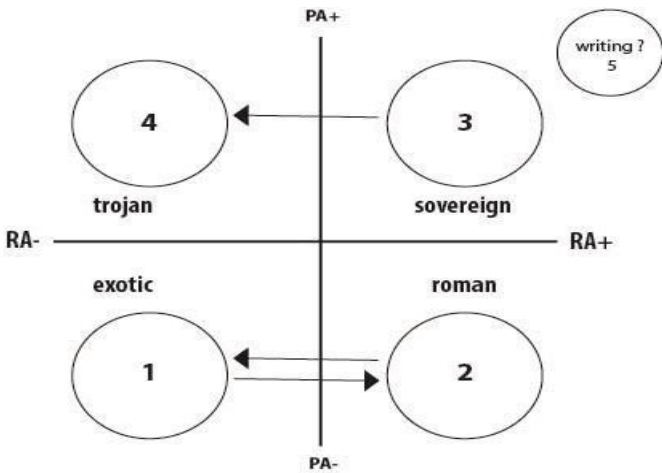


Figure 2: Autonomy Journey in Environmental Studies

### ***Chemical/Biological Sciences***

In Chemical/Biological Sciences the workplace assessments consist of initial reporting on learning at work followed by a more intensive and heavily weighted investigative written assignment and formal presentation. In so doing, students are required to present their workplace learning for the purposes of learning the university curriculum. As with Environmental Studies the purpose of WIL as described by the lecturers is primarily to apply in the workplace what they have learnt in the university and, secondarily, to learn about industry.

The purpose is to get students to ... really put in practice what they have learnt. And also, learn things in the industry ... getting together a team there in the workplace and learning to learn. But it's to build up more on what they have learnt in the (university) laboratories.

Assessment practices focus first on the more exotic work knowledge and practices before students are taken on a journey into the more integrated roman code where work practice is used for the purpose of learning more about or enriching their science knowledge and practices.

For the final investigative assessment project students are asked to seek out a problem or issue that could be improved upon in the workplace. This is similar to a workplace scan but at the same time it is more complex in nature as it involves students in identifying a potentially solvable work problem. However, in solving the problem, students are expected to mobilise their science knowledge. Workplace mentors are much involved here because, firstly, they may have an interest in the results of the project (it may be of benefit to the workplace thus 'contributory') and secondly, to ensure that IP issues are dealt with (an issue in the work field of Biotechnology). Thus assessment practices take students on a journey from the more exotic code (assessment of workplace practices/problem for workplace purposes) towards the more integrated trojan code (science for the purpose of contributing to work).

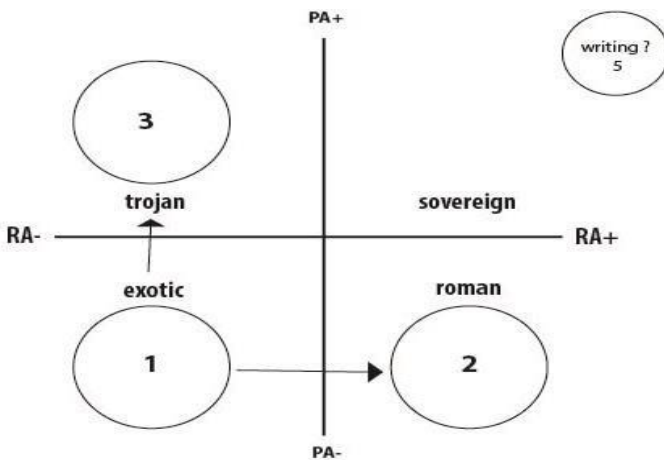
On an investigation assessed as excellent, the lecturer indicates that it is the content and the structure of the report that matter, but there is an indication that structure and how the report was written may be of equal or greater importance than the actual content.

... because of the scientific content and the mastering of the presentation, the way it was presented was really, really superb work ... the way she wrote it ... I'm talking about it from the introduction to the literature review, the results, the methodology.

On a poor assignment there is no such ambiguity and she points specifically to language difficulty as the reason for a low mark, though acknowledging that this also made it hard to understand as well.

... because the English wasn't right.

In examining the autonomy journey of the assessment practices in Chemical/Biological Sciences there is a similar picture to that of Environmental Studies. Student assessment practices move from the pure fields of work and science into the integrated roman and trojan codes. Again, there is the outlier of the report structure and language (writing) which seems to be disconnected from either science and work; as it is a university practice seemingly for university purposes, it is placed in the sovereign code (5) in figure 3.



**Figure 3: Autonomy Journey in Chemical/Biological studies**

### ***Mathematical Sciences***

The third programme that made up our research study is more mathematically focussed. In this programme an outside workplace identifies a problem (for example, testing a statistical programme) that they need investigating and hands it over to the university. Finding a solution or better understanding the problem is then a task carried out by students with the help of their lecturers. Thus it differs from the other work based programmes because students do much of their WIL in the university, sometimes visiting the company which they are involved with for just a few days per month. The assessment is more focussed on the investigative project, its development, final written report and presentation to both work and academic representatives. The purpose of the assessment is thus, unashamedly, about extending and developing what has been taught in class (the lecturer refers to WIL as a ‘problem solving mode of teaching’).

I would say, to my mind the purpose of the project is two-fold. The first one is to integrate the classroom theoretical knowledge that they have gained in the last two and a half years and apply it in an industrial work place context. And the second one is also to consolidate all of the individual subjects because each subject is kind of like its own little compartment ... to solve a particular problem (at work).

The project is assessed by university lecturers against a university-developed rubric. As with Chemical/Biological studies the workplace mentors play a minimal role in assessment, usually in the form of ‘looking at the project’. When lecturers describe the criteria for assessing the investigative project, the ability to solve problems is highlighted, which could be seen as an ability for both the workplace and the university. Lecturers further highlighted the importance of being able to find literature resources and to apply appropriate investigative methods in their assessments, which could again straddle both work and university competencies, but given the situated nature of the project within the university they could be said to be aligned, predominantly, to the university agenda. The investigative project could thus be described as using work for the purposes of learning about university subject knowledge, that is, a journey from the more exotic work code to the more integrated roman code.

However, when the lecturer takes the researchers through how they

marked two assignments, they pointed out where the student did not meet the criteria listed in the marking rubric, making it apparent that the focus is different to that of the roman code. The criteria, as indicated in the abstract described below, appear to focus mostly on what counts as an academically sufficient report, i.e. writing skills such as argument and cohesion, rather than what is actually found out or experienced at the workplace.

It says the abstract was supposed to capture the main findings of the report exactly. This doesn't capture the main findings ... she got ten out of twenty for the conclusion and I underlined one of the items in the rubric, which said that the conclusions were based mainly on subjective opinions and not clearly linked to results.

The observation that there is a focus on assessing the writing skills is strengthened by the comments of the lecturer who was 'shocked by some of the bibliographies students produce'. While the ability to compile a reference list is an important general skill, it is also one situated primarily in the academy rather than in the workplace. Thus again we have this academic outlier which is seemingly neither related to science nor to work knowledge and practices. The assessment journey is summed up in figure 4:

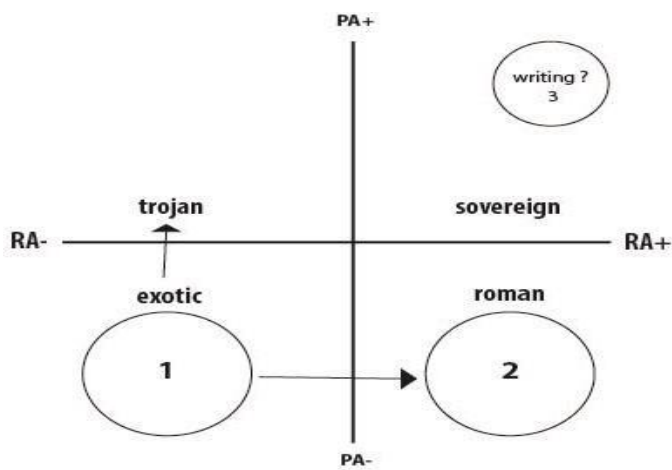


Figure 4: Autonomy Journey in Mathematical Sciences



### ***Agricultural Studies***

In the fourth programme (Agriculture), work assessment involves two components across two temporarily distinct WIL sessions. The first WIL session is in second year and here students are required to present a poster on their work experiences. In the second, a six-month session in the third year, students do a written assignment and give an oral presentation thereon. In the poster presentation, as the lecturer reports, what is important is the work they have actually done at the workplace. In marking the student's posters, students are asked to reflect on their learning at work. This is about work for the purposes of work, an exotic code.

They need to describe what they have done during the six months so we can understand they have fulfilled the criteria ... it is also a bit reflective ... the lecturer would ask the students where do you see yourself? How have you learnt from this? The student needs to think what they have taken away from the experience.

There is however some attempt to connect work practise to the curriculum. In talking about both the poster and the written and presented assignment, the lecturer asserts that there is also a more normative application of classroom learning in the workplace. Thus a connection is made between the more exotic workplace experiences and the university curriculum.

Obviously what they have learnt in class through lectures and things like that, to a large extent, this needs to be practiced within the workplace.

However, in getting the lecturer to talk about what actually counts in assessment by 'stimulating' them to think about an actual assessment, there appears to be less of a focus on reflection and application and more on surface features of the product (the poster, assignment and presentation), as illustrated in the following quote about assessing posters.

Polished ... the layout obviously, when you look at the poster it's got

to be easy on the eye, the colours that they use. I mean when Dr B does the lecture with them then he advises them what are good colours. He gives them the font size ... you look for colours and layout.

In the written assignments in the second WIL component the lecturer refers to their approach to assessment as being more than just about the importance of surface features; that what is written and what the assignment is about also matter, as indicated below.

I think layout is the first thing then also scientific knowledge ... the student must be able to get me to imagine the experience in that workplace.

However, surface features seem to be highlighted again as the 'first thing' and subsequent explanations of what matters in good and bad assignments is further substantiated in the reflections on actual marked assignments.

So even things like the font of something, the spacing, the alignment play a part ... a bad one (assignment) ... I mean there is so much that is grammatically incorrect, the spelling, the grammar and where they have taken pictures, the pictures are bad.

The final case is interesting in two ways. Firstly, the exotic code is not left as is but is linked to a more roman, integrated code, as was observed in the other cases. However, as has happened with most of the other cases, there is a focus on knowledge and practice (writing and presentation) which are peculiar to the university and do not seem to relate in any clear way to either the work experiences or the science curriculum (figure 5). In all the other cases we have presented in this paper this situation was represented as a form of sovereign code as it is about university principles for the purposes of the university. But a rethink is necessary here. These sorts of presentation skills may rather be seen as 'exotic', not because they are rooted in the workplace, but because they represent a field of knowledge that is different to science.

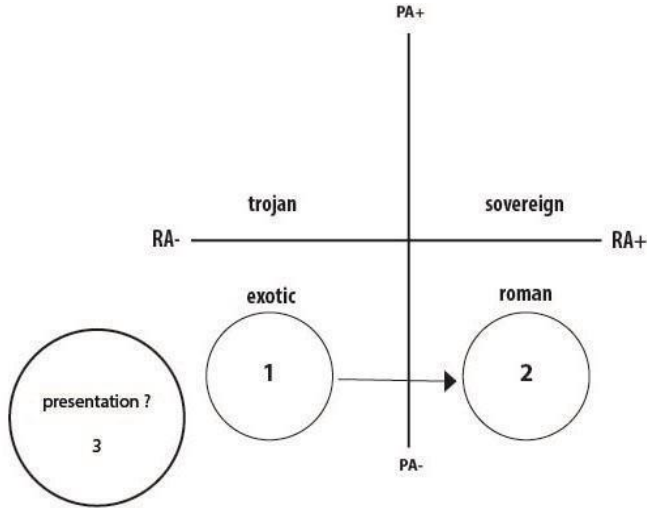


Figure 5: Autonomy journey of Agricultural Studies

## Discussion

The LCT tool of Autonomy focuses our attention on how different knowledges are situated in relation to one another, for example, science curricular knowledge, work knowledge and what we will describe here as more generic writing and presentation skills. LCT asserts that embarking on ‘autonomy tours’, moving between the different quadrants of the Autonomy plane is important for learning because students are confronted with different languages of legitimation, or sets of rules, that require recontextualising what has been defined in one way within a different set of circumstances. In particular, LCT Autonomy codes alert us to whether and how these languages of legitimation are integrated or whether they are simply placed ‘side-by-side’ in the hope that integration will occur. In so doing we are also conscious of the claim that what is selected and highlighted for assessment is the knowledge and practices which, in the mind of the lecturer (and so also the student), counts as important knowledge in that field (Race 2003).

As Costley and Armsby (2007) suggest, work experience or WIL may be used as a mode for learning science. In agreement with the aforementioned, all the respondents suggest that the normative purpose of WIL is to use

workplace practices for the purpose of learning more about science, which reflects a roman code. There is, however, also some movement to a trojan code where the purpose of WIL assessment concerns solving real problems at work, so contributing to workplaces. Thus assessment practices reported on in this research do describe a journey into integrated quadrants (roman and trojan codes), and there is also some signalling of what matters in these quadrants through what staff value in the assessments. It is likely, therefore, that students are experiencing some level of integration of scientific and work knowledge. This is most strongly so where lecturing staff indicate that they value 'reflection' and/or relating theory to practice in their assessment practices.

However, one particular field of knowledge stands out, perhaps, as being not so well integrated. When staff actually take the researchers through an assessment example, they often indicate that what counts are generic writing and presentation practices such as a correct 'bibliography', 'abstract and conclusion', 'layout', 'fonts' and even colour and neatness. These practices appear to have their own principles and criteria for what is legitimate, and serve mostly their own purposes rather than those of the science fields or the workplaces.

In Maton, Howard and Lambrinos' (2016) terms, assessment which focuses on generic writing and presentation practices takes students into the exotic quadrant at some distance from scientific principles and purposes. It can thus be described as 'other knowledge for other purposes' (Maton, Howard & Lambrinos 2016). Unlike with the integration of workplace and science's content, practices and purposes (e.g. as roman or trojan codes), there does not appear to be an attempt to connect these generic writing and presentation practices with science; neither is there an obvious attempt to link them to the field of the workplace. A similar finding can be seen in Maton, Howard and Lambrinos' (2016) work where they describe how learning science often involves learning about graphing, a maths principle. However, what teachers may sometimes do is move into maths and stay there without necessarily signalling the route back to the inside knowledge of science. The teachers appear to stay in the outside exotic code and students often fail to connect their mathematics learning to help them develop their knowledge of science.

How then could this tour into the 'exotic' be done better in the four cases discussed here, to both improve assessment practices and students' learning through integration? One suggestion would be to reconceptualise the more procedurally-orientated communication practices as 'social practices that

vary with context, culture, and genre'; in other words, through an academic literacy model lens (Lea & Street 2006: 368).

In an academic literacy model, the means which people use to communicate within a particular knowledge field typically reflects an understanding of that particular field (e.g. how the concepts in the field are connected to one another and how knowledge is typically represented and argued). Similarly, the use of abstracts or literature reviews incorporates referencing in order to present an argument that has value and is legitimate in that field. Students thus learn not only what matters in the field through learning in an academic literacy fashion, but also the beginnings of how to create their arguments in a legitimate way that will have purchase in the field (Lea & Street 2006).

The referencing and/or investigative report assessment criterion is then the extent to which students are able to explain the workplace problem through appropriate use of the scientific curriculum. The outside (of science) field of communication practices with its own principles and practices (PA-) is then recontextualised for the purposes of extending and learning science material (RA+), a roman code. In this way, better integration of the two fields for the overall benefit of student learning, may be achieved.

## **Conclusion**

Our concern in this paper has been, initially, to examine the extent to which WIL assessment practices are able to bring together knowledge and practices from the university science curriculum with those outside of it in the workplace. It was found that there was some degree of integration and students were given opportunities to rework workplace knowledge for the university and vice-versa. However, what was unusual was the emergence of an exotic code, related to how knowledge should be represented at university. In the discussion, we suggested that the means to help integrate this code with that of university science could be achieved by using the concepts of academic literacies.

In higher education, it is important that students engage with different contexts of learning for different purposes so that their learning is enhanced. The Autonomy codes indicate to us how the inside knowledge of a discipline (e.g. Environmental Studies) can remain far apart from other, outside practices,

or alternatively, how the inside and outside can be brought into closer proximity with one another. The latter, in which principles, knowledge and practices and their purposes are integrated, is suggested as being beneficial for student learning and development.

In the discussion we highlighted too how the apparent outlier of ‘writing and presentation’ skills can be better integrated with learning science. However, this particular orientation to teaching and learning science may warrant further interrogation. It may be fruitful in further research, to analyse generic writing and presentation practices in terms of the Specialization dimension which focuses attention on the interaction between assessment of knowledge and assessment of more socially orientated dispositions which are expected to have been cultivated in students (Wolff & Hoffman 2014). In this instance students are possibly being assessed against criteria for an ideal university knower, with particular dispositions ‘fitting the character of the university’ (Maton 2007: 91), rather than on their scientific knowledge.

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*Manuscripts* must be submitted in English (UK). If quotations from other languages appear in the manuscript, place the original in a footnote and a dynamic-equivalent translation in the body of the text or both in the text.

Contributors must submit *one computer-generated and three double-spaced printed copies* of the manuscript. Up to 10 original off-print copies of the article will be returned to the author after publication.

Manuscripts should range between 5000-8000 and book reviews between 500-1000 words. However, longer articles may be considered for publication.

Attach a cover page to one manuscript containing the following information: Author's full name, address, e-mail address, position, department, university/ institution, telephone/ fax numbers as well as a list of previous publications. Authors must also submit a brief academic biographical sketch of about sixty words, indicating institutional affiliation, main scholarly focus, books published, significant articles, and/ or academic journals regularly contributing too.

*Maps, diagrams and posters* must be presented in print-ready form. Clear black and white photos (postcard size) may also be submitted.

Use footnotes sparingly. In order to enhance the value of the interaction between notes and text, we use footnotes and not endnotes.

Authors may use their own numbering systems in the manuscript.

Except for bibliographical references, abbreviations must include fullstops. The abbreviations (e.a.) = 'emphasis added'; (e.i.o.) = 'emphasis in original'; (i.a.) or [...] = 'insertion added' may be used.

The full bibliographical details of sources are provided only once at the end of the manuscript under References. References in the body of the manuscript should follow the following convention: Dlodlo (1994:14) argues .... or at the end of a reference/ quotation: ... (Dlodlo 1994:14).

The full name or initials of authors as it appears in the source must be used in the References section.

Review articles and book reviews must include a title as well as the following information concerning the book reviewed: title, author, place of publication, publisher, date of publication, number of pages and the ISBN number.

The format for the references section is as follows:

Head, B. 1974. *A Question of Power*. Oxford: Heinemann Educational Publishers.

Mhlophe, G. 1990. Nokulunga's Wedding. In Van Niekerk, A. (ed.): *Raising the Blinds. A Century of South African Women's Stories*. Parklands: Ad Donker.

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**ARTICLES**

<i>Rubby Dhunpath, Nyna Amin and Thabo Msibi</i> Editorial: Can Policy Learn from Practice? .....	1
<i>Mankolo Lethoko</i> Taking Stock Thirteen Years Later: An Investigation into the Impact of Mergers on Institutions in the Higher Education Landscape in South Africa .....	15
<i>Lazarus Nabaho, Jessica N. Aguti and Joseph Oonyu</i> Assuring the Quality of Teaching at Makerere University in Uganda: Practices and Experiences of Academics and Students .....	40
<i>Hamish Coates, Paula Kelly, Ryan Naylor and Victor Borden</i> Innovative Approaches for Enhancing the 21 <sup>st</sup> Student Experience .....	62
<i>Najwa Norodien-Fataar and Doria Daniels</i> Exploring the Educational Engagement Practices of Disadvantaged Students at University .....	90
<i>Shakila Singh, Bongeka Mabaso, Ronicka Mudaly and Asheena Singh-Pillay</i> Policy for Prevention of Sexual Assault on Campus: Higher Education Students' Perspectives ..	113
<i>Juliet Ramohai and Khomotso Marumo</i> Women in Senior Positions in South African Higher Education: A Reflection on Voice and Agency .....	135
<i>Ted Sommerville</i> Language of Learning: Policy, Personal Preference, and Professional Identity .....	158
<i>Nadaraj Govender, Ronicka Mudaly and Angela James</i> Engaging Indigenous Knowledge Holders in Teaching Preservice Teachers in IKS Food Production and Practices: Implications for Higher Education .....	180
<i>Julia Preece</i> The Porous University: Re-thinking Community Engagement Practices .....	208
<i>Vanessa C. Burch, Janine Lewis, Ugash Subramaney, Actor Katurura, Geo Quinot, Suresh Singh and Rubby Dhunpath</i> Towards a Conceptual Framework for Interdisciplinary Teaching and Learning Dialogues in Higher Education .....	233
<i>Jane Castle and Moyra Keane</i> Retreating to Write: Are Publications the Only Important Outcome? .....	265
<i>James Garraway and Lalini Reddy</i> Analyzing Work-integrated Learning Assessment Practices through the Lens of Autonomy Principles .....	285
Contributors .....	309