

Academic Staff Development: A Lever to Address the Challenges of the 21st Century University Classroom

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Abstract : Most academics entering Higher education as lecturers in South Africa do not have qualifications in Education or teaching. This creates serious problems since they are not sufficiently equipped with pedagogical approaches and theories that inform their facilitation of learning strategies. This, arguably, is one of the reasons why higher education institutions are experiencing high student failure rate. In order to mitigate this problem, it is critical that higher education institutions devise internal academic staff development programmes to capacitate academics with pedagogical skills and competencies so as to enhance the quality of student learning. This paper reported on how the Teaching and Learning Development Centre of a university used design-based research methodology to conceptualise and implement an academic staff development programme for new academics at a university of technology. This approach revolves around the designing, testing and refining of an educational intervention. Design-based research is an important methodology for understanding how, when, and why educational innovations work in practice. The need for a professional development course for academics arose due to the fact that most academics at the university did not have teaching qualifications and many of them were employed straight from industry with little understanding of pedagogical approaches. This paper examines three key aspects of the programme namely, the preliminary phase, the teaching experiment and the retrospective analysis. The preliminary phase is the stage in which the problem identification takes place. The problem that this research sought to address relates to the unsatisfactory academic performance of the majority of the students in the institution. It was therefore hypothesized that the problem could be dealt with by professionalising new academics through engagement in an academic staff development programme. The teaching experiment phase afforded researchers and participants in the programme the opportunity to test and refine the proposed intervention and the design principles upon which it was based. The teaching experiment phase revolved around the testing of the new academics professional development programme. This phase created a platform for researchers and academics in the programme to experiment with various activities and instructional strategies such as case studies, observations, discussions and portfolio building. The teaching experiment phase was followed by the retrospective analysis stage in which the research team looked back and tried to give a trustworthy account of the teaching/learning process that had taken place. A questionnaire and focus group discussions were used to collect data from participants that helped to evaluate the programme and its implementation. One of the findings of this study was that academics joining university really need an academic induction programme that inducts them into the discourse of teaching and learning. The study also revealed that existing academics can be placed on formal study programmes in which they acquire educational qualifications with a view to equip them with useful classroom discourses. The study, therefore, concludes that new and existing academics in universities should be supported through induction programmes and placement on formal studies in teaching and learning so that they are capacitated as facilitators of learning.

Keywords : academic staff, pedagogy, programme, staff development

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