Research capacity development: A case study at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2003–2007

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Abstract

The merger of institutions of higher education in South Africa which has taken place in the last decade has presented several challenges to academic staff in Faculties of Education. The present article reviews the process of transformation in a particular school within Education at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Colleagues from institutions where there was little obligation to publish research found that at UKZN there was a strong research emphasis. The obligation to correct imbalances in race and gender representation amongst the staff coexisted with this emphasis and had to be reconciled with it.

A system of incentives, research seminars and mentoring was devised and operated within a particular school for five years. Details of this system and the degree of its success are offered in this article.

INTRODUCTION: NATIONAL ISSUES

Policies shaping higher education in South Africa have led to the creation of new knowledge areas, the rationalisation of structures and disciplines and the merging of historically advantaged institutions with the historically disadvantaged. Teacher education colleges have been closed down or incorporated into universities, and professional teacher education, as well as postgraduate teacher advancement, have become the responsibility of universities.

Issues arising from a decade of transformation in South Africa are being reconsidered and have already appeared in published research (see Chisholm et al. 2004; Cloete et al. 2002), and research capacity development has become a key focus in reconfigured institutions.
Enslin et al. (2003) argue that the Higher Education Act (1997) reflects tension between the drive for bureaucratic control of national transformation and academic freedom in the universities. Resources allocated to higher education remain inadequate, requiring the tailoring of strategic plans to research, and research to ring-fenced funding. While the DoE’s National Education Plan (2001) focuses on how education can serve the state and its citizens, the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) seeks to achieve coherence in nomenclature and level descriptors for qualifications. The Council for Higher Education, especially its Higher Education Quality Committee, attends to the quality of teaching and learning within higher education institutions. Little attention, however, has been given at national level to ‘generic’ research capacity development or the quality of research produced by new or inexperienced academics.

Higher education institutions need to attend to research development, taking into account the different race-and gender-related access to education in the past. The National Research Foundation Act (NRF 1998) encapsulates a mandate to ‘promote and support research through funding and human resource development’. Further expression to this mandate is evident in the NRF rating scheme (introduced in 2002) and the ear-marking of funding opportunities for black and female scholars (see Thuthuka and REDIBA funding) are examples of work towards the transformation in these areas, but the figures for achievement remain low. Over 80 per cent of our rated researchers are over 40, and over 55 per cent are over 50 (Evaluation and Rating 2007, 14). Most of them are white and male. The figures concerning the race and gender composition of rated academics suggest that by 2006 only 12.8 per cent of rated researchers were black (Evaluation and Rating 2007, 8).

The promotion and development of indigenous languages, and the promotion of access to education through English as a lingua franca is also urgent. English remains the key to intercultural and international communication.

A significant body of writing reveals the lack of correlation between policy directives and their implementation, (see the English Academy Review (special issue) 2003; Alternation (special issue) 2004; Webb and Du Plessis 2007), but the impact of problems of language on the advancement of the individual and the capacity of the institution has been little studied. Issues related to effective language learning, for the most part through English, have been addressed. Balfour (2002), Buthelezi (2004) and Visser and Venter (2004) have discussed the situation of other languages indigenous to South Africa. Language learning has been considered as a means of addressing societal ills such as low literacy, gender violence and stereotyping (Balfour and Ralfe 2006) as well as economic needs (Aitchison, Keyser, Land and Lyster 2005). These debates exist as a background to this case study, situated as it is within a school of languages.

Policies concerning the transformation of the higher education institutions of South Africa have also recognised that knowledge production is a core function, together with teaching and community engagement. To improve the use of resources and move away from the racist legacy of the past, a number of institutional mergers
of universities, former colleges of education, polytechnics and technikons have taken place. One such merger occurred when Edgewood Teacher Training College was incorporated into the University of Natal in 2001, and the University of Natal and the University of Durban-Westville were merged in 2003. Faculty of Education colleagues from the teacher training college sector were merged with the sector at the university which dealt exclusively with postgraduate education (PGCE, B. Ed. Honours, M.Ed. and Ph.D.). The new University of KwaZulu-Natal aspires to be the centre for African scholarship, and its language policy (UKZN Language Policy 2006) and plan gave further expression to the centrality of language within the institutional vision and mission statements (UKZN Vision and Mission 2003).

THE LOCAL CONTEXT FOR CHANGE

In the present study we have been concerned primarily with strategies and support systems for transformation to support colleagues in what in 2003 was known as the Programme of Language Education, and since 2005 has been the School of Languages and Literacies, Media and Drama Education (SLLMDE), in the Faculty of Education of what was in 2002 the University of Natal and is now UKZN.

No transformation could have occurred without the support of the University at all levels. We have nevertheless decided to focus on the academic staff of SLLMDE, and to explore this process of transformation, since we ourselves were part of it, the one as Director and later Head of School (HoS), and the other as a mentor. Some of the formal interventions which we shall describe are now over and the degree of their success can be assessed, though the process of transformation is still on-going.

The section of this article titled ‘Merging Institutions’ describes the situation in which SLLMDE, then the Programme of Language Education, and its teaching staff found themselves in 2003 when the transformative process was underway. The rest of the study comprises the sections titled ‘Planning and Administration’ and ‘Strategies of Transformation’ which describe the mutually dependent processes of transformation, and ‘Evaluation’ which attempts to estimate the extent to which they have been effective. Data on which graphs are based are available in published form and a series of website reports and addresses are provided.

MERGING INSTITUTIONS

The three different institutions from which colleagues came to UKZN had each its own ethos and understanding of academic obligations. One group had served in a training college, the other two in universities in the same city, but with different histories. There were in addition three new members of staff, without experience in tertiary institutions.

The qualifications of most members of staff were inadequate in terms of the requirements of UKZN, of which they were now part: only two out of ten had Doctorates, six had MAs and two had only Honours degrees. Most were experienced in
undergraduate work or its equivalent in training colleges, but were unqualified for the supervision of higher degrees, at least as far as doctoral level, and inexperienced in any kind of supervision. Before a larger volume of higher degree work could be attempted within the School, the majority of colleagues had to improve their qualifications.

Few colleagues had encountered the obligation to publish research in academic journals, which was at that time – and is still in the present (2008) – emphasised in the new institution. They already taught experimentally and encouraged their students to do so: Outcomes Based Education (OBE), with its focus on problem solving and collaborative learning was introduced in 1995, and had created a break with past methods and syllabus content, creating a focus on what Young (2001, 8) terms ‘progressive pedagogy, curriculum and qualifications’. The political change of 1994 and the new Constitution, adopted in 1996, with its emphasis on equal access to education and gender equality, had inspired them to consider the implications of these principles, and to translate them into their practice. What they needed was to recognise the value to other tertiary-level educationalists of their experimental work, the skills to transform their experience into theses, conference papers and articles, and the confidence to present their work to the public.

The challenge presented itself in different forms to members of the three language groups in the School: Afrikaans, English and isiZulu. Whereas there are many journals within and outside South Africa which specialise in articles on education through the medium of English, in Afrikaans there are few, and in isiZulu none. This deprived the members of the Discipline of isiZulu Education, not only of outlets but also of models for research articles. In 2002 there was little formal access available to the debate on the teaching of African languages in this country, which, in terms of the government’s language policies and the economic limits of what it can achieve, was urgent. If they were to publish, they would be obliged to work in a second language, with all the disadvantages implied.

Colleagues in Afrikaans were similarly placed. Although like their Zulu colleagues they had a good working knowledge of English, for them too it was a second language. They were aware that Afrikaans in post-democracy South African schools was encountering problems, and that these were not adequately explored in Afrikaans-medium publications concerned with education.

PLANNING AND ADMINISTRATION

The merger of three institutions into UKZN in 2003 had also brought with it legacies of historical disadvantage in the cases of education and education-related opportunities. The Programme of Language Education needed to consider its equity profile over the following three years. Race and gender were components of a strategy to deal with the historical legacy of Apartheid in the composition of the staff. It was necessary to diversify and expand the permanent staff complement to bring about a greater level of parity between males and females and the range of race groups represented. Though this
aspect of the development of the unit seemed to be concerned with equity indicators, it had to be integrated with the personal transformation of the staff.

In 2003 the Programme consisted of seven white and three black academics. The Programme Director formulated with colleagues an equity plan that would see the race diversity and gender profile of the programme shift significantly over the next four years. The shift which took place is made visible in Figure 1.

Figure 1:  Right-sizing race representation

One component of equity relates to gender representation. Higher education has been dominated by men, but since the languages have conventionally been associated with women, the situation in the Programme was different. In 2003 the Programme was overwhelmingly female (90%), but by 2006 this had changed. Figure 2 reveals that over the same time frame as Figure 1, the representation of women had decreased and men increased.

Figure 2:  Right-sizing gender representation
STRATEGIES OF TRANSFORMATION

In 2003 the Director established the Research Capacity Development Programme (RCDP) to develop a culture in which research would not only occur, but would be written up and published. The RCDP programme emphasised the development of colleagues from disadvantaged backgrounds, (on the basis of race, gender, language, or institutional setting and previous experience), though established university lecturers were encouraged to take advantage of facilities offered.

The Director began working with colleagues who had not completed higher degrees, offering them preferential access to sabbatical leave. He encouraged exposure to the range of expertise in applied language studies available at the university and at other higher education institutions, through links with the Teacher Development Unit of the Department of Education, and through interfaculty teaching and research links. These contacts alone, however, were not sufficient to create ‘critical mass’ in terms of the research needed for a national research profile. Colleagues did not always find contact with academics in other faculties easy, and they had no formal claim on them.

Since an increased emphasis on higher degrees and published research had occurred throughout the university, the Director decided to establish a formal tie with colleagues in the Faculty of the Humanities. He approached two Honorary Research Associates (HRAs) of the University (both white; one male and one female) whose achievements as teachers and researchers seemed suited to the values which had to be cultivated in the Programme of Language Education. He also approached senior managers in the Faculty of the Humanities. Given that similar needs existed there, he discussed with them the development of a joint proposal that might gain support from the University Research Office. This was formulated by the Director and the Head of the School of First Level Studies and the Head of School for Postgraduate Studies in the Faculty of the Human Sciences. The Director led the development of this proposal, which went to the University’s Research Office at the end of 2002:

We propose the institution of a Research Capacity Development Programme (RCDP), with the goal of developing academic writing capacity among both staff and senior students. The RCDP team will consist primarily of Honorary Research Associates, but may also draw on current academics. The RCDP team will take responsibility for the following structured mentoring programme:

Faculties will nominate members … as academic writing mentors. Where mentors are not currently members of staff, they will be paid by the hour by the University ….

The service will aim at helping academics new to publishing, and students writing masters or doctoral theses to solve … the linguistic problems that arise from the need to convey complex meaning through extensive argument, in the academic discourse of their particular discipline. Help will also be offered with the problems of structuring of argument.

Assistance will be based on a system of accountability whereby … mentees decide in advance on the goals they wish to achieve within the space of one year …. Participating faculties will “sponsor” mentees, and this investment will be acknowledged … by the mentee in the form of an accountability contract ….
Mentees will also attend … research seminars with colleagues on the Programme to … support each other in writing development. Mentors of graduate students will not replace supervisors, nor will mentors fulfill the role of proofreaders or editors for a mentee’s work …. Mentees’ funding for assistance towards the production of research (whether in the form of conference grants or project assistance) will be dependent on subscription to the RCDP programme …. (Extract from the RCDP Funding Proposal 2002).

The two Faculties, Education and Humanities, had differing needs in this regard. In Human Sciences, where the majority of staff was already involved in publishing, the primary need was for support for graduate students who were writing theses. Although one of the mentors worked and continues to work with postgraduates, her work in Human Sciences will not form part of the present study. In the Faculty of Education the development of ‘research-active academics’ seemed crucial.

![Figure 3: Showing higher degrees attainment](image)

Since 2002 school committee structures have been reformed to support the development of capacity in higher degree supervision, a skill not formally taught to inexperienced academics. It was decided that in SLLMDE, a significant proportion of higher degree supervision would be managed through co-supervision. The School Higher Degrees Committee monitors a database of supervision and allocates students simultaneously to more and less experienced supervisors in co-supervisory arrangements. This is developmental for inexperienced colleagues, but also equitable in the sense that all colleagues have access to the supervision of students at postgraduate level, thus preventing monopolies of supervision from developing. A larger number of higher degree candidates can be accepted than would be the case if only experienced colleagues were allowed to supervise.
A weekly research seminar was established in which members of staff presented „work in progress” and critical input was offered them by their colleagues and mentors. There were ten research seminars per semester, and although visitors presented their work from time to time, the majority of presentations were by members of staff. The intention was that colleagues should acquire the confidence to address an audience of equals, and present their work to them. Interest in the research interests of colleagues and the skills of active listening and questioning were other advantages to be gained. These seminars were organised in the first three years of the RCDP by one of the mentors and afterwards by other members of staff. Mentors attended the seminars in a didactic spirit, listening sympathetically to the papers, and asking questions which might allow presenters to improve and extend their work. After the conference the mentee would work with the mentor on development of the presentation into an article.

Although the term „mentor” has been used in academic circles for decades, especially in America, it has often meant something different from what it did within the RCDP. American academics use the term mentorship to signify the relationship between a junior and an experienced colleague involved in the same research area, where the latter is willing to act as advisor and role model. The relationship between mentor and mentee in the RCDP was different, partly because it was formal and colleagues were made aware of their right to draw on the services of mentors when they needed them. Since the relationship was newly defined to suit these circumstances, we have described in detail the tasks undertaken by mentors.

The mentors were required to facilitate induction into three academic genres: seminar presentation, conference presentation, and the journal article. The mentee, often with the help of the mentor, would identify an area of research, develop this into a presentation in the research seminar series, and use the critical input of colleagues at the seminar to improve the presentation so that it could be delivered at a national or international conference.

The success of the mentorship programme depended on the support of all academics in the School for the creation of a research culture. Colleagues were asked to contribute to seminars by participation and attendance, and to undertake collaborative research with less experienced academics. The mentors were, in their research interests, aligned to the range of disciplines offered with the School and colleagues seemed to find them knowledgeable, sympathetic and approachable.

The work of the mentors varied according to the needs and experience of each mentee. When dealing with colleagues’ written work, for example, mentors became newly aware, and tried to make mentees aware, of the standard form of the research article: problem to be researched, literature survey, diagnosis of the gap to be filled by the present piece, account of research undertaken, discussion of findings, conclusions and recommendations. This is rarely formally taught in Education and the Humanities, and while authors may diverge from it, they should know, and signal, why they are diverging. The formula helps the reader by creating an expectation which is fulfilled within the paper, or which startles him into attention by being disappointed. It helps the author to understand his purposes and the place which what he has discovered
will occupy in the subject area. It helps him to develop a coherent argument which will lead to the conclusions and recommendations which he offers.

The needs of mentees varied, partly, as we have suggested, because they were engaged in teaching in different language groups. Those who were writing about teaching and research into isiZulu were obliged to offer an account of their work in English, and despite the disclaimer in the proposal, they would at times draw on the services of the mentor as editor. The term ‘editor’ here is inadequate, and distorts the needs of the mentee. Though minor corrections of expression, such as would be required in any writing for publication by an author writing in her second language, were occasionally necessary, a more interesting intervention was often required of the mentor. The characteristic problem of the second-language author is that she is impeded in her articulation of ideas by her linguistic limitations. Conversation with the mentee – ‘That’s interesting: explain a little further’ – often elicited original matter of immense interest. Many authors tend to be more articulate in the oral mode than in the written; mentors persuaded mentees to express the complications of their work in speech before helping to move it into text.

Mentors observed that this problem of articulation of ideas was present amongst all novice researchers, for two reasons. The first is that the register of the academic article is particular. Without advocating that articles be written in research-speak, we recognize that the appropriate register is formal, and that every discipline has a specialist vocabulary. Conciseness and the avoidance of prolonged explanations necessitate some technical terms.

School teaching is a discipline with a strong oral emphasis. Academics who accept M.Ed. candidates who come to them after years of work in schools are accustomed to finding that their writing skills have atrophied. Though lecturers have to report in writing on their students, the reports may have become formulaic rather than the extended pieces of coherent argument required of the researcher.

Colleagues had learnt the construction of an argument when completing degrees, but these degrees in some cases had been completed years before they found themselves required to write theses and articles, and skills had to be refreshed. Mentors found that the sequencing of matter and the relationship between different parts of a complex argument had be explained and demonstrated.

A different problem was unfamiliarity with the idea that the practical work in which a colleague was encountering problems which demanded new thinking could be written up into an article. What was needed was the confidence to record the problem and the struggle to solve it.

Members of training college staffs and other institutions where research is not emphasized have, perhaps properly, been encouraged to fill their working lives with activities other than research. This, and the fact that four weeks of each academic year are occupied in the supervision of students’ teaching practice in schools, often caused a conflict of obligations amongst colleagues.

Figure 4 charts the development of research productivity reported to the Research Office to motivate a further year’s funding, over the four-year period. Although not
all conference papers resulted in publications, there are correspondences of this kind in the years 2004 and 2006. The category ‘other’ refers to publications such as reviews or writing for the popular media. Though not formally credited by the institution, these publications raise awareness of the work of the School and its members. The increase in publication of book chapters arises in part from book initiatives undertaken by colleagues in the School or Faculty. The increase in the production of journal articles from under 10 in 2005 to 20 in 2006 can be ascribed to the completion of a number of Ph.D.s and projects.

A key feature of the RCDP was accountability on the part of the mentee and mentor. Accountability implied that a colleague undertaking to be mentored signed a contract with the Faculty making a commitment to attend meetings with the mentor, to present at least one seminar per semester, attend one conference per year, and work with the mentor towards publication in an accredited journal. In return the Programme of Language Education, and later SLLMDE, undertook to provide the mentoring facility by paying a mentor and subsidizing the mentee towards the costs of presenting a paper at a conference.

A further feature has been the annual development of staff research plans for the year ahead. There may be a danger that these seem too close to ‘performance management’. The intention is to raise awareness of what can be accomplished in a year, and to demonstrate that the School attends to the research development of academics. The extent to which they can be used as a means of evaluating progress is doubtful, since an annual cycle of intention and achievement is too short.
EVALUATION

Research that began in 2004 and extended in 2005 was brought into focus in 2006 when the School organized a two-day workshop to reflect, with colleagues from the Faculty of Humanities, on what research had been produced and the directions in which it seemed to be moving. Colleagues took the opportunity to consider ‘who we are’ and then to develop a School Research Strategy (2006) to secure funding for projects which could focus more strongly on what appeared to be niche areas of development.

The RCDP seemed to have succeeded partly because it was accompanied by an integrated assessment and support. This was undertaken through the office of the Head of School supported by the RCDP mentors who frequently read and advised on colleagues’ M.Ed. and Ph.D. chapters. There are nevertheless challenges which remain unresolved. Neither the RCDP nor any other transformative strategy could succeed without the good will of colleagues and their willingness to acknowledge inadequacies and to supply them, though not all have done so – or not equally. There remain academics who have not internalised the idea of research as part of academic work. In our case they range across all age, gender, and race groups.

In recent years the School has undertaken high-profile work beyond its former confines. It has, through the Centre for Visual Methodologies for Social Change, a vested interest in research projects and university-wide developments. It has organised and helped host teacher-development conferences in the region in 2004 and 2006. It has secured grant funding of over three million rands in the last two years for the Postgraduate Project on Education Research in South Africa (PPER 1994–2004) and South Africa-Norway Tertiary Education Development (SANTED 2006–2009). Participation in these projects takes the form of student teaching assistantships, research assistantships, and other forms of employment, broadening the profile of postgraduate students within the School and Faculty.

Other members of the School have secured donor funding through their own agency or through large collaborative projects hosted within the Centre for Visual Methodologies for Social Change and often led from within the School. Researchers are coming under pressure to participate in research of national significance. The leadership has been obliged to manage the resources of the School in 2007 in a manner that accommodated the needs for a larger establishment and the continued development of staff. These drivers are not always compatible: growth in certain directions has consequences in others. How to manage increasing pressure remains a challenge for SLLMDE, as for other institutions with merger histories.

STATE POLICIES; INSTITUTIONAL IMPLEMENTATION

The new Constitution of South Africa, finalised in 1996, established the principle of equality of opportunity all. The National Research Foundation undertook through its policies and programmes one part of the translation of this principle into action in its
area of tertiary-level research. Yet even the NRF has interrogated the efficacy of its rating and other programmes acknowledging that these have not always yielded to expectations either in terms of pace, or impact of transformation in higher education (Auf de Heyde and Mouton 2007). Clearly what is now necessary is a refocus on transformation and capacity development at the micro-level of the institution.

Within tertiary institutions, equality of opportunity in the area of research involves the sharing with the many of skills which were previously available to the few. As we have earlier pointed out, the identification and organisation of administrative, linguistic and methodological expertise necessary to move practical experience into publishable form has been left, perhaps properly, to these institutions. The account we have given here emphasises the formalisation of the exchange between experienced and novice researchers, so that both are aware of their rights and obligations.

We do not argue that such structures are adequate on their own to the new demands for knowledge production and knowledge sharing: the state as the deviser of policy and its apparatus designated to control education and facilitate its extension are indispensable. The role of the university in devising, implementing and assessing programmes which allow the knowledge, in many cases already produced or in production, to be shared, is also vital, and the RCDP experiment is an important example of such a programme and its contribution to the transformation of higher education at the micro-level.

REFERENCES
R. J. Balfour and M. Lenta


