The needs and perceptions of academics regarding their professional development in an era of educational transformation

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Abstract
As the wave of educational transformation sweeps across the higher education landscape, few academics have been unaffected by its impact. It has been well documented that academics are ill-prepared to cope with the challenges of educational transformation, yet training and development that would provide the appropriate support to meet the demands of educational transformation is often neglected. To help address this problem, a study was done to determine the needs and perceptions of academics regarding their professional development within the context of educational transformation. Respondents expressed a need for training in the implementation of innovative methods of teaching and learning such as: outcomes-based education; problem-based learning and technology-enhanced teaching and learning. The article also argues that there is more to educational transformation than meets the eye.

INTRODUCTION
The modern world is not just complex, it is ‘super complex’ and has given rise to an ‘age of super complexity, marked by new accounts of the world, new images, new technologies, new texts, new discourses, new forms of professional life’ (Barnett 2000, 417). Higher education has to respond to this ‘super complex’ world and pedagogies are required that would provide the knowledge and skills for coping with super complexity (Barnett 2000, 409). There is a dire need for innovative, student-centred approaches to teaching and learning that would inculcate in students skills such as self-directed learning, critical and creative thinking and problem-solving (Barr and Tagg 1995; Swenson 1998; Candy 2000). Global changes in higher education have greatly affected the academic work environment (Steward 2007). Higher education has become closely linked to the needs of the economy and in response to a competitive global market, universities are expected to inculcate in students the necessary skills to produce employable workers needed by the labour market (Leathwood and Read 2009).

In many countries, the government plays a major role in transforming education. South Africa (the country context of this study) is no exception. As South Africa
sought to become an international competitor, the organisation and delivery of education required transformation, and a fragmented education system needed integration (Ensor 2003). The post-apartheid government has been a strong driver of educational transformation, especially in matters such as quality assurance, mergers and the incorporation of higher education institutions, the alignment of academic qualifications with the South African National Qualifications Framework (Jansen 2004), and curriculum development.

Personal experience gained internationally as a staff developer and academic, has shown that the complexity and sophistication of educational transformation is (arguably) incomprehensible to many academics who are barely able to implement traditional methods of teaching and learning, let alone apply major innovation in higher education. In South Africa, for example, the architects of educational transformation assumed that academics would be naturally adept at implementing educational transformation successfully without assessing their needs and perceptions regarding transformation. Motala (2001) reinforces this viewpoint when she declares that educational transformation and change in South Africa have emphasised form and structure and the use of legislation and regulatory frameworks to put systems in place while neglecting the actual principles and processes of teaching and learning.

To assume that the inculcation of novel facilitation and learning skills can be left to chance, strikes at the core of professionalism. Entwistle (1998) reminds us that many academics have only a rudimentary grasp of the basic principles of teaching and learning since few have studied the educational aspects of their profession. The assertion by Fullan and Stiegelbauer (1991, 309) that ‘nothing calls into question the reputation of the entire teaching profession as emphatically as the suggestion that anyone with good content knowledge can be prepared for teaching’ highlights the shortcomings and criticism levelled at most tertiary institutions which assume that anyone with a degree (master’s or Ph.D.) can teach. Indeed, adaptation to educational transformation is being demanded of academics who lack any strong educational background (Gravett and Petersen 2000).

Merely informing someone of an innovation does not guarantee that they will have the expertise to implement it. This is an argument advanced by Nicholls (1983) when the implementation of an innovation revealed that educators were unable to articulate or practically apply the fundamental principles related to the innovation. Most academics struggle to implement novel curricula (Nakabugo and Sieborger 2001) and have difficulty adjusting to the paradigm shift from teaching to learning (Wilkerson and Irby 1998). Furthermore, in a technological society, on-line learning technologies have changed practice in higher education (Hannon 2008) leaving most staff confused and threatened by technology-enhanced teaching and learning (Keane 1992).

Often academics have to find their way through an uncertain, confusing higher education terrain. The pressure brought on by educational transformation has never been more intense. Prior to educational transformation, academics could readily self-educate to keep abreast of new developments and to maintain high skill levels. To
It is clear that staff development is crucial if higher education institutions are to cope with the challenge of educational transformation. The literature concurs. Wilkerson and Irby (1998), agree that relevant professional development is vital if academics are to be successful at innovation in teaching and learning. Gibbons (1998, 12) goes further by emphasising the need for continuous professional development and proclaiming that ‘within the context of a learning society life-long study as well as training and re-training become possible’.

Staff development programmes, however, should be meaningful and relevant if academics are to derive any benefit from them. Therefore, one could ask: What are the needs of academics for their professional development within the context of educational transformation? This constituted the research question that guided the study. Reports of empirical studies in the literature that would address this question are sparse. In addressing this gap, this article reports on a study that investigated the needs and perceptions of academics against the variables that drive educational transformation in higher education.

THE VARIABLES THAT DRIVE EDUCATIONAL TRANSFORMATION AND THEIR IMPACT ON THE ROLE AND DEVELOPMENT OF ACADEMICS

As a consequence of the knowledge explosion, advances in technology, globalisation and socio-political and economic change, the past 15 to 20 years have seen several variables that drive educational transformation. These variables, which also impact on the role of academics and create a need for training and development, are discussed below.

- Curriculum development and innovation in teaching and learning: The desire for educational innovation is universal. The shift to novel curricula such as outcomes-based education (OBE) and problem-based learning (PBL) requires a change towards more complex, innovative teaching and learning methodologies (Gray 1998; Bligh 1995; Colliver 2000), with an emphasis on self-directed, life-long learning (Spady 1993).

- Quality assurance (QA): Quality assurance has come into vogue in higher education mainly because of the demand for value for money and greater accountability for public funds (Brennan, De Vries and Williams 1997).

- Information and Communication Technology (ICT): Given the advances in technology, if universities are to remain competitive, they must effectively integrate ICT into the classroom (Rogers 2000).

- Scholarship of teaching and learning and the scholarship of research: Ramsden (1998) proclaims that universities are the successful creators of the information
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age’s most important product: ‘cutting-edge knowledge’ while Atkinson (2001) argues that the scholarship of teaching and learning is at the core of the current transformation in higher education. Therefore, in a knowledge society, the important roles of academics are the production of academically rigorous research outputs, while concomitantly being accomplished and imaginative facilitators of learning in the midst of vast and available knowledge.

CONTEXT OF THE STUDY AND METHODOLOGY

The research, which was part of a Ph.D. study, was conducted at the University of Limpopo (Medunsa Campus), in the North-West Province of South Africa (Hassan 2004). Medunsa is an acronym for Medical University of Southern Africa. The mission of the University is to ‘empower the educationally disadvantaged’ by providing training in the medical and dental fields and therefore, the University’s admissions policy gives preference to black students.

When this study was conducted there were four faculties, namely the Faculties of: Medicine; Dentistry; Science and the National School of Public Health (NSPH). The university trains clinicians, dentists, and allied health professionals (physiotherapists, occupational therapists, radiographers and dieticians). There were approximately 5000 students, who were mainly black, and approximately 1800 academics; 350 of whom were in full-time, permanent employment.

As a historically black institution (HBI), the University was financially deprived and the development of research-capacity and resources for teaching and learning, have been limited. The application of ICT was minimal, except for the NSPH which adopted e-learning. Academics could attend workshops on OBE, QA and curriculum development, by invitation only (by the Centre for Academic Development Services-CADS) because the resources and capacity to offer training to everyone was not available. Application of QA was through peer reviews, student evaluation of lecturer and course performance and institutional audits that were carried out by the Health Professionals Council of South Africa.

A purposive sample was used; only full-time, permanently employed academics were chosen (n=350) as it was assumed that their commitment to staff development and educational transformation would be greater than the part-time, temporary staff. The selection from all faculties was proportionate and representative of the general academic staff profile. The sample included academics at all levels: junior lecturers, lecturers, senior lecturers, associate professors, professors, Heads of Departments and Deans.

Self-administered questionnaires containing structured and unstructured items were applied. Structured items were designed using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from ‘strongly agree’ to ‘strongly disagree’. Items in the questionnaire focused on the needs and perceptions of academics regarding the variables that drive educational transformation, general matters pertaining to educational transformation, and staff development programmes.
Questionnaires were posted to all full-time permanently employed academics (n=350) via the university’s internal mail system, and three reminders were mailed to improve the response rate. Ultimately, 106 questionnaires were received, giving a response rate of 30 per cent.

The responses to the structured items were statistically analysed using the Statistical Analysis System (SAS) for the calculation of frequencies and modes. The responses to the unstructured items were captured by means of coding, categorisation and the identification of patterns.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
The results of the study are discussed below to give an overall perspective of the developmental needs of academics within the context of educational transformation.

General needs and perceptions pertaining to educational transformation
It could be assumed that in many higher education institutions the demands of educational transformation have left academics feeling overwhelmed. Their resistance to change could jeopardise transformation. Thus, it was important to determine the level of buy-in for educational transformation in general. The study found that 64 per cent (68/106) of respondents were positive about educational transformation and were willing to participate in educational change. These findings are in contradiction to the literature which suggests that universities are usually resistant to change (Moran and Brightman 2001). This positive attitude towards educational transformation should be capitalised on by offering staff development programmes which would better prepare academics for the challenges of educational transformation.

About half (56% or 59/105) of the respondents complained that they were seldom informed about educational transformation matters through their departments. There may have been a communication problem that resulted in the ineffective dissemination of information. The implication for staff development programmes is that CADS will need to play a more active role in disseminating information related to educational transformation, since it is the role of staff developers to act as catalysts in stimulating debate and discussion and to serve as internal consultants to individuals and groups within the university (Badley 2001).

The majority (88% or 92/105) of respondents expressed a need for greater leadership from top management in matters pertaining to educational transformation. Therefore, leaders, as academic champions, found it difficult to respond to the imperatives and challenges of educational transformation. Marshall et al. (2007) are adamant that academic managers must be effective change agents: they must be able to plan, implement and evaluate change.
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Curriculum development and innovative methods of teaching and learning

The mode for seven variables that related to OBE was calculated and it was found that 67 per cent of respondents were in agreement with these variables, as discussed below.

Respondents agreed that they were familiar with the OBE terminology. This finding contradicts claims cited in the literature that academics find it difficult to understand the OBE terminology. For example, Schwartz (1994) criticises the terminology used in OBE for being confusing, nebulous, business-like and controlling and only serves to confuse educators.

Respondents also felt that they:

- Had sufficient knowledge of the philosophy of OBE.
- Needed to improve their knowledge and skills regarding student assessment using OBE principles.
- Needed support with the writing of courses in an outcomes-based format.

Although the respondents understood the terminology and philosophy of OBE and were adept at designing OBE programmes, they faltered at the level of implementation of OBE. This finding aligns well with statements in the literature that many educators lack the expertise to write courses in an outcomes-based format, and have difficulty implementing OBE effectively (Goode and Thomen 2001; Nakabugo and Sieborger 2001). This problem, therefore, is not unique to the University of Limpopo. The complexity and sophistication of OBE and the fact that it is inclined towards a philosophy rather than a methodology, could result in academics not knowing what appropriate teaching and learning methods to apply.

Despite acknowledging that they lacked the knowledge and skills required to implement OBE successfully, only 41 per cent (44/106) of respondents indicated that they would benefit from training in the implementation of OBE, and few (34% or 36/106) agreed that they would benefit from training in OBE-aligned assessment. This finding demonstrates a gap between the respondents’ perceptions of their knowledge and skills, and their perceived need for training in OBE.

While there may not have been an explicit perceived need for training in the implementation of OBE, an analysis of other items that related to the specific hallmarks of OBE, such as self-directed learning, suggested otherwise. The general response to an unstructured item, that ‘more information and better communication about the expectations regarding the implementation of OBE is required’, endorsed the motivation for support and training.

Many respondents felt that the university should ‘supply more academic staff’ to expedite the implementation of OBE. From this researcher’s experience, the installation of a new curriculum is often labour-intensive and time-consuming and it is not uncommon for existing staff to feel overburdened.
The perception that leadership is deficient resurfaced when 86 per cent (66/105) of respondents concurred that effective leadership in the transition towards OBE was lacking. This problem is not confined to this study. Inadequate planning and a lack of co-ordination, together with poor strategic interventions in the introduction of OBE, have been reported in the literature (Christie 1999). Taking into account the difficulties associated with the implementation of new curricula, Cross, Mungadi, and Rouhani (2002) argue that ideals such as those related to OBE require significant technical and political skills that cannot be achieved overnight, and that one would need to be realistic about what can be achieved given the circumstances of the institution.

Moving on, while OBE offers a philosophy, PBL provides a more structured method of implementing innovative teaching and learning methods. Therefore, it was deemed important to determine whether respondents were familiar with PBL and whether they would like to learn more about the curriculum (see Table 1).

Table 1: Perceptions regarding PBL

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Frequency of respondents who agreed</th>
<th>Percentage of respondents who agreed</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I am familiar with the learning methodologies of PBL.</td>
<td>67/106</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. I would like to learn more about implementing PBL.</td>
<td>72/105</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I would benefit from training in the implementation of PBL.</td>
<td>47/106</td>
<td>44</td>
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</table>

The attitude of the respondents towards PBL contradicts the assertion by Gibbons (1998) that most universities are reluctant to embrace PBL. An explanation for this contradiction could be that this study was conducted at a predominantly medical university and PBL is more likely to be accepted within a medical context, given that it is already widely used in medical education.

Despite being treated separately in this article, PBL and OBE have similar hallmarks of innovation and can be used synergistically to optimise learning. They need not be construed as separate entities as shown by other researchers (Hattingh and Killen 2003) who successfully adopted PBL techniques while focussing on learning outcomes.

The mode for the items that related to innovative methods of teaching and learning yielded a result of 77 per cent (79/103) of respondents who were in agreement. Respondents felt that:

- They would be able to facilitate an integrated course in a multidisciplinary setting.
- There is a need for staff development programmes that would help them improve their facilitation skills.
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- They needed to improve on their skills in order to help students become self-directed learners.
- They needed additional skills to be able to implement co-operative learning.

Even though respondents felt that they needed more skills in implementing novel teaching and learning methods, they were not content with simply adopting the lecture method. This became evident when most respondents (80% or 85/105) stated that they would rather introduce novel methods than stick with traditional lectures as the main mode of teaching and learning. The implication for staff development programmes is that academics need to be appropriately trained and developed in the application of innovative methods of teaching and learning; otherwise, as Wilkerson and Irby (1998) warn, they may gravitate towards using traditional methods that they used in the past.

What does innovation in teaching and learning really mean? The shift to OBE in South Africa (and even elsewhere) is construed to be innovative. An analysis of what constitutes innovation in teaching and learning, in the literature, points to a dominance of a skills agenda within a commodified higher education environment. For example, Leathwood and Read (2009) argue that knowledge and skills are seen as a commodity and that the outcomes expected of students are linked to expectations of performance in the commercial world. This construction of knowledge in terms of definable generic and specific outcomes created a focus on a skills and outcomes model of curricula rather than a reflexive, developmental process-orientated model. Barnett (2004) contends that innovation in teaching and learning is intended merely to increase the employability of graduates given the narrow emphasis on what Leathwood and Read (2009) coin as skills-based education.

The commodification of learning into skills packages for the consumption of students is limiting and based on a masculinised, marketized model of higher education (Leathwood and Read 2009) which assumes that knowledge can always be objectively attained and assessed (Morley 2003). This assumption may be a caveat in the implementation of innovative teaching and learning because learning does not always present itself in quantifiable, observable, measurable terms. From a staff development perspective, academics need to be trained and supported to develop curricula that will promote participatory, active learning and to make learning more relevant to the lived experiences of their students (Burke and Jackson 2007) while promoting critical reflection. Also, academics should critically reflect personal transformation and therefore resist the commercialized culture of higher education (Molesworth, Nixon and Scullion 2007).

Information and communications technology

Fifty per cent (53/106) of respondents indicated a need for training in computer-based education (CBE) while 46 per cent (49/106) expressed a need for training in
e-learning. Therefore, ICT training should be on the agenda when staff development programmes are being designed and implemented at the institution.

Rogers (2000) argues that most academics have had little formal training on how to make effective use of information technology resources in their instructional and scholarly work. According to empirical studies conducted at nine South African universities, it was concluded that unfamiliarity with hardware and software inhibits educators from commencing with ICT programmes but that the problem is resolved with the appropriate support (Schulze 2000).

Quality assurance in relation to the professional functions of academics

While 95 per cent (100/105) of respondents in this study felt that there should be staff development programmes to guide academics in improving the quality of their teaching and learning, only 47 per cent (51/106) of the respondents indicated that they would benefit from training on quality assurance of the teaching and learning process. These two questions were stated differently but had a similar meaning to test for the reliability of the instrument, yet there was a discrepancy in the results. A possible explanation is that respondents did not have a good understanding of the meaning of quality assurance. Similarly, in a study conducted by Mammen (2006), it was found that about 20 per cent of academics have little conception of quality in higher education.

The assumption that respondents in this study had a limited understanding of QA was verified by the finding that 94 per cent (99/105) of respondents identified a need to learn more about the concept of academic quality. This need corroborates with findings in the literature which show that a large number (73%) of academics believe it is important to have the knowledge and skills for practical implementation of quality assurance in the workplace (Marshall et al. 2007).

At the time of undertaking this study, respondents had a vague idea of what quality assurance entailed and its impact on their daily functions because transformation was still in its infancy. In South Africa, transformation has been marketed as a ‘liberator’ and a shift from a hierarchical, rigid system. Transformation, in itself however, contains elements that impose control.

Morely (2003) offers a micro-political perspective of QA and describes how academics are marginalized through the implementation of QA initiatives. For example, student evaluation of lecturer performance is a form of control that is imposed on academics. The notion of students as consumers leads to students’ opinions being over-rated and gives them power over academics who have to be acquiescent and accountable to students. Morley (2003) describes how UK academics are being forced to make themselves accessible to students at the expense of undertaking research, for fear of negative student evaluations.

Research done by Morley (2003) reveals that collegiality had been identified as a major by-product or unintended consequence of quality audits as individuals work
together to prepare for the audit. Collegiality, however, can ensure compliance and reinforce hegemony when the group assumes common values, goals and lifestyles. The policy of transformation is, arguably, to collectivise and rule. When people work together on a common goal, it becomes difficult for individuals to take a stand against the belief system and actions of the group.

The scholarship of teaching and learning and the scholarship of research

Although many of the respondents perceived teaching and learning to be under-rewarded, they did not support the institution’s stance on this skewed reward system (see Table 2). This sentiment aligns well with literature reports, which show criticism from academics on the lack of recognition and incentives for teaching and learning when compared to research (Hay and Herselman 2001; Ruth 2001; Cronje, Jacobs and Murdoch 2002).

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Frequency of respondents who agreed</th>
<th>Percentage of respondents who agreed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I am familiar with the concept of the scholarship of teaching and learning.</td>
<td>29/106</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Excellence in teaching and learning is seldom rewarded by the institution</td>
<td>79/104</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I support the University’s practice of rewarding research more than it does teaching.</td>
<td>29/106</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I am interested in learning about research methods based on the teaching and learning process.</td>
<td>83/105</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Staff development programmes should not only focus on teaching and learning but on research as well.</td>
<td>103/105</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. I would benefit from training in action research.</td>
<td>47/106</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. I would benefit from training in research methodology.</td>
<td>43/106</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. I would like to know how to apply for research funding.</td>
<td>87/106</td>
<td>84</td>
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Research productivity has become a performance indicator for all higher education institutions, irrespective of their excellence in other areas. The performance appraisal system reinforces research productivity. With the focus on rewards for research outputs have emerged a distraction from teaching and learning and those who are research active want to be more research active. The pressure to be research active is an antithesis to scholarship because of the demand for research outputs at the expense of producing knowledge of high quality (Morley 2003).

The promotion system has traditionally favoured research and publications over teaching. Academics who are not involved in research are seen as incompetent although they may excel at teaching. Those who are productive in research stand a
better chance of advancing their careers while those who focus on teaching find their career development being compromised (Morley 2003). Nevertheless, some studies have shown that academics are still committed to pursuing excellence in teaching. Other studies, however, demonstrate that the low status of teaching and learning is a barrier to developing teaching and learning in higher education (Young 2006). Lawler and King (2000), caution that if academics are rewarded for research but not their classroom activities, they may see no extrinsic incentive to participate in staff development programmes.

The main function of the University of Limpopo is teaching and learning, which takes precedence over research when training and development programmes are planned and implemented. It is ironic that while the University rewards outputs in research more than it does teaching and learning, limited support is provided to academics to improve as researchers. Arguably, this could be a micro-political tactic to wield power over academics. Another reason could be fiscal. If academics are not promoted, the University will not have to spend more on higher salaries.

**General perceptions regarding staff development programmes**

The attitude towards staff development programmes was positive, (see Table 3) which demonstrates a willingness to develop further in the context of educational transformation.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Frequency of respondents who agreed</th>
<th>Percentage of respondents who agreed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I am keen to have access to staff development programmes for the continued improvement of my professional skills.</td>
<td>104/106</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Participation in staff development programmes should be voluntary rather than compulsory.</td>
<td>69/106</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. The University is not doing enough to train and develop academic staff.</td>
<td>83/106</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. I am aware of the staff development programmes run by CADS,</td>
<td>74/105</td>
<td>70</td>
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Respondents, however, did not feel that they should be forced to attend staff development programmes. Blunt (1998) argues that voluntary programmes do not address the development of less competent staff. Rather, it is mainly through compulsory programmes that the needs of the institution can be met. As dentists and clinicians, many respondents in this study were also involved in treating patients and, arguably, that would take priority over attending staff development programmes. This was probably why the University’s policy was to not make the attendance of staff development programmes compulsory.
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The lack of support for their professional development as identified by the respondents is not uncommon. In a study undertaken at nine different tertiary institutions in South Africa, less than half of the respondents reported that staff development was run regularly (Hay and Herselman 2001). Thus, academics are expected to adapt to the rigours of educational transformation with little professional support.

CONCLUSION

This study showed that although respondents were committed to educational transformation, they lacked the knowledge and skills needed for its implementation. Effective leadership was identified as lacking and there was a sense that respondents were forced to cope alone with the challenges that accompany educational transformation. It is recommended that if the University is to successfully undergo educational transformation, it would need to address the gaps in training and development that were identified in this study.

South Africa had borrowed heavily from developed countries, perhaps not realising that educational transformation may not always be what it appears to be. Respondents in this study had adopted an acquiescent attitude towards educational transformation and were not able to see it from a micro-political perspective, as wielding power over them. Indeed, the subtle macro and micro-political issues at play are posing a threat to higher education.

For example, under the pretext of enhancing a knowledge society, educational transformation promotes a polarization between teaching and learning, and research through a system that favours research. Academics, who may be good teachers but who are not research-active, are perceived as incompetent. Despite the marginalization of teaching and learning, academics are expected to improve pedagogy by adopting innovative teaching and learning methods. Innovation, however, has become a micro-political concept given that ‘innovative curricula’ are intended merely to enhance the employability of students, thus reducing knowledge to a commodity.

Even QA mechanisms which are intended to improve higher education are a form of hegemony that keeps academics marginalized and under control. Academics are no longer recognised as one of the major stakeholders in higher education. For how much longer will academics tolerate an attack on their professional integrity? Educational transformation has also created a difficult environment for academics to work in. Arguably, that the variables of educational transformation as we know them may conceptually not be sustainable and may be dropped off the higher education agenda altogether is not an unlikely possibility.

REFERENCES


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