CHALLENGES AND SUCCESSES OF RESEARCH CAPACITY BUILDING AT A RURAL SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

In the South African context, rural universities are labelled ‘historically disadvantaged’ and are faced with numerous challenges regarding research capacity development. It is against this background that this article examines the challenges faced at the University of Limpopo (UL), Sovenga, South Africa, in the area of research capacity building. UL adopted a multi-pronged approach to build research capacity. This approach involved increasing the number of accredited publications by staff; training supervisors; increasing the number of staff who have doctorates; providing support for female researchers; increasing awareness around funding opportunities; providing research support for postgraduate students and incentives for staff who publish and supervise postgraduate students. Data was obtained from research statistics compiled by the university, approved policy and incentive documents of the university, and evaluative and reflective feedback from participants in different support programmes. The data was analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively. The
findings revealed that there has been an increase in UL’s capacity building initiatives over the past four years, which is reflected in an increase in research output. The article recommends that institutional research capacity building be approached from a context-specific perspective.

Keywords: challenges, supervision, research, capacity, postgraduate

INTRODUCTION

The research capacity of South African higher education institutions (HEIs) reflects the vast discrepancies that exist between historically advantaged universities (HAUs) and historically disadvantaged universities (HDUs). This can be traced back to the apartheid era where universities were built and funded according to racially segregated policies. With the dawn of democracy in South Africa in 1994, all HEIs fell under the control of the Department of Education (DoE). This unified structure brought about ‘levelling of the playing fields’ in research funding. The DoE was divided into basic education and higher education in 2009 and HEIs now fall under the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET). The funding model for research output (publications and postgraduate students) was applied uniformly across HEIs. However, HDUs lagged behind in terms of research capacity to increase research output because of the challenges they faced (staff qualifications and retention, poor infrastructure, under-developed research culture). For HEIs that did not meet the quota for publications in accredited journals, funding allocated for research publication output by the DHET was converted into Research Development Grants. The aim of these grants was to increase development of research initiatives at HEIs. However, such initiatives could not address the imbalances that already existed between previously advantaged and previously disadvantaged HEIs. The problem is that the research capacity at rural universities (most of which are HDUs) is low and efforts to build research capacity are met with challenges within the rural sphere such as insufficient funding, unqualified and under-qualified personnel and second language barriers.

It is against this background that this article addresses the successes and challenges faced by the University of Limpopo (UL), Sovenga, South Africa, in building research capacity. The ‘research wing’ of the university has undergone change over the past four years with new appointments, a focus on research policy development, research development initiatives and a more comprehensive research incentives programme. These changes in the research structures and programmes have resulted in a strengthening of the research culture at UL, from which the success stories (which are later discussed) emerge. However, research capacity building in a rural environment is also challenging, for example: experienced researchers are often ‘poached’ by other HEIs; funding for research capacity building initiatives is
limited; the culture of research is adversely affected by poor supervisory skills; and the language of research (English) is a second language for the majority of students and academics.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Developing research capacity begins with examining the context within which the research occurs. For the purpose of the current article, capacity development is viewed through the lens of social critical theory and development theory. Social critical theory recognises that although people can act consciously to change their social and economic circumstances, their ability to do so is constrained by various forms of social, cultural and political domination. Although social critical theory is concerned with addressing oppression and emancipation in society, it also concerns itself with institutional and conceptual transformations (Leonardo 2004). It is within this context that the article examines capacity development initiatives in research. By critically examining research capacity development, ‘intellectual energy is spent on critiquing notions of power and privilege, whether in the form of cash or culture’ (Leonardo 2004, 13). Critical social theory does not necessarily offer a blueprint solution to a given problem; however, crucial to this theory is that part of the solution can be found in how the problem is addressed.

Closely linked to locating research capacity development with a social context is the theory of how development takes place. Development theory focuses on an assortment of alternative theories on how societal change can best be realised (Adjibodou 2005). Modernisation theory, dependency theory, world systems theory and state theory each contribute towards the process of development. Contemporary development strategies and policies include concepts such as poverty, dignity, participation, appropriate technology, sustainability and capacity building. For example, Schulze and Gouws (2008) talk about individual motivation of researchers and communities of practice as stimulants for research development. These concepts are extended in the research capacity development initiatives that are discussed here.

RESEARCH OUTPUT

Measurement of research output in South Africa is done centrally and controlled by the DHET. Research output is directly linked to government funding for research. The two main categories of research output are publication in accredited journals and postgraduate throughput. Accredited publications are guided by the *Policy and Procedures for Measurement of Research Output of Public Higher Education Institutions* (DoE 2003). The purpose of this policy is to encourage research productivity by rewarding quality research output at public HEIs. Publications in accredited books, journals and proceedings are catered for in this policy. For postgraduate throughput, graduation statistics are sent by HEIs to the DHET. Based
on these having met the stipulated criteria (e.g., graduation within the specified time), research funds are made available to HEIs.

The concern is that the majority of research in South Africa is conducted by just a few HEIs (De Villiers and Steyn 2009). Their intensive examination of state funding of higher education research and the effect of this on research output revealed that: there has been a steady increase in the number of doctorates awarded by universities; the National Research Foundation (NRF) has played an important role in the dissemination of research funding for projects; the 2004 publication units are the baseline against which the future number of publication units in the higher education sector will be measured; only a few HEIs have established themselves as research institutions; and a small number of HEIs are generating the majority of research. The small number of HEIs involved in discipline-related research (natural sciences) is also reflected in Onyancha and Jacobs’ (2009) study. They found a low growth rate in the number of researchers in natural sciences in South Africa. An example of a university that is leading the number of publication units in South Africa is the University of Pretoria. Here, an important element of the research management process is to ensure that research projects culminate in appropriate research output (Madue 2008, 132). Key to this outcome is the issue of funding. Although a New Funding Framework was introduced in 2004 by the South African government in an endeavour to influence the size and shape of the higher education sector (De Villiers and Steyn 2009, 45), Inglesi and Pouris (2008, 347) contend that ‘funding mechanisms have failed to steer our universities in a more desirable direction in terms of the supply of skills needed by the country’.

RESEARCH CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT

This section examines capacity development in general and thereafter looks at research capacity development specifically. Capacity building and capacity development are concepts often used interchangeably. Capacity building implies that capacities do not yet exist and need to be built from scratch, as Walters (2007, 1) explains that

> the current understanding of the concept of capacity development recognizes that there is no situation in which capacity does not exist. The question is whether the existing capacities are being recognized and whether the existing capacities are capacities that enable individuals and organisations to perform well in what they want to achieve.

Such an understanding of capacity development is crucial when planning capacity development programmes. Capacity can refer to the ability of individuals, organisations and institutions to perform or a holistic society/sectorial/large systems approach to understanding capacity (Walters 2007). Botha (2009, 72) defines capacity building as ‘building of human, institutional and infrastructural capacity to help societies develop safe, secure, stable and sustainable economies, governments
In response to many criticisms concerning capacity development work, the World Bank Institute developed the Capacity Development Results Framework (CDRF) (Otoo, Agapitova and Behrens 2009). The CDRF is a coming together of various strands of change theory, capacity economics, pedagogical science, project management, and monitoring and evaluation practice to provide a rigorous yet practical instrument (Otoo et al. 2009). A key feature is the designing of learning interventions by supporting locally driven change. The principal elements of the CDRF are illustrated in Figure 1.

**Figure 1:** Principal elements of the Capacity Development Results Framework

**EDUCATING IN A RURAL CONTEXT**

Educating in a rural context has specific challenges. Some of these are geographical location, levels of poverty, the prevalence of disease and other social ills (Chikoko 2008). The challenge lies in making education in these rural settings as competitive
and cutting-edge as education in any other context. Chikoko (2008, 78) raises an important point here, ‘It is not the education that is rural, but the setting’. This is in contrast to Pansiri’s (2011) definition of rural being informational and infrastructural underdevelopment. Kariuki’s (2006) study of a rural KwaZulu-Natal university found that both information and infrastructure affect education at rural universities. For example, students rated low on adopting a critical approach to their studies. Also, infrastructure in relation to accommodation for students was insufficient.

The former University of the North (now UL) was created in 1959 to cater for Sepedi, Xitsonga and Tshivenda speaking students of the Limpopo province while the Medical University of Southern Africa (Medunsa) was established in 1976 to provide tertiary education and training facilities for black students in the fields of Medicine, Allied Health and Nursing Sciences and Dentistry. As historically black universities, the two institutions formed part of the subgroup of institutions for Africans under the administrative authority of the Department of Education and Training. They were both established to maintain the socio-political agenda of the apartheid era as well as to train blacks who would be useful to the state (Bunting 2004). Both institutions were categorised as ‘historically disadvantaged institutions’ that had been created to advance the ideology of the apartheid state. UL is a rural-based traditional university that was established on 1 January 2005 as a result of a merger between the University of the North (UNIN) and Medunsa as part of the restructuring of the higher education landscape in South Africa. UL is a medium-sized (23 500 students), predominantly undergraduate and residential university located in Limpopo and Gauteng. The Turfloop campus is situated geographically in a predominantly rural area while the Medunsa campus is located in a densely populated peri-urban area to the north of Pretoria adjoining Ga-Rankuwa Township. As at 1 January 2015 ‘decoupling’ of these two campuses took place, the Medunsa Campus was incorporated into the newly formed Sefako Mogatho University. UL straddles a wide geographical area covering a distance of some 300 kilometres. The rural nature of the Turfloop campus has associated challenges; however, the research capacity building initiatives address these challenges in their nature and design.

RESEARCH AT THE UNIVERSITY OF LIMPOPO

The source of the statistics contained in this section is from the bibliometric profile of research at UL, which was commissioned by the Council on Higher Education (CHE) for the university audit and conducted by the Centre for Research on Science and Technology (CREST 2010). UL offers general formative and professional qualifications, comprising a mix of undergraduate diplomas and a range of degree programmes from bachelor to doctoral level in four faculties: Health Sciences, Humanities, Management and Law, and Science and Agriculture. Undergraduate bachelor degree enrolment has increased from 77.5 per cent in 2008 to 80.6 per cent in 2010. At postgraduate level, enrolments are fairly steady at 9.5 per cent at master’s...
level and 0.8 per cent for doctoral studies in 2010. In 2008, UL ranked 15th out of all 23 universities (in terms of DoE journal publication figures) and produced 1.1 per cent of the national article output. Even with the sharp increase in publication between 2010 and 2013, UL is still ranked 14th out of all 23 universities. Furthermore, UL’s research production depends on a handful of researchers. Between 2006 and 2008, 14.2 per cent of all researcher output at UL was produced by five authors (CREST 2010, 4–5).

As far as gender is concerned, there has been an overall increase in female authors. In 2006–2008 about 36 per cent of authors were female, compared with 23 per cent in 1998–1999. The share of article equivalents produced by female authors has also increased. In 2006–2008, it was about 25 per cent, compared to 16 per cent in 1998–1999. The 2006–2008 figures for UL were above the national average where approximately 22 per cent of all article equivalents is currently being produced by women.

A MULTI-PRONGED RESEARCH CAPACITY BUILDING APPROACH

Given the scenario presented above, research capacity building had to be approached using a multi-pronged strategy to enable an advance in the general research culture of UL. Below is a summary of the approaches adopted.

Increasing publication of accredited articles

Increasing the number of accredited articles at UL is one of the most tangible ways of indicating a growth in research yet it is the most challenging to achieve. The reason is that it requires changing the paradigms of staff about conducting research and publishing articles. The attitudes of academic staff towards publishing had to be changed. The process of doing this involved providing opportunities for lecturers to engage in the steps involved in publishing. This was done through publication workshops conducted by the Research Office and the various schools within UL. Another significant incentive to increase the number of researchers publishing in accredited journals was a 100 per cent increase in the monetary value gained from publications for researchers. Previously, researchers who published in accredited journals received a 20 per cent slice of the funding received from the DHET. In 2011, this percentage was increased to 40 per cent. This meant that in 2011, a single publication unit produced by a researcher was valued at over R40 000. Researchers have a choice to cash in their portion or leave it in their research accounts. This incentive definitely created a stir amongst researchers. For the first time, publishing research articles has become lucrative for academic staff. This incentive produced a ‘win-win’ situation. The publication rate is positively affected, which benefits
the university and the researchers have money to continue with their research and produce more publications, thereby increasing their academic profiles. In addition, researchers are not confined in their research spending in comparison to funded projects. They can use these funds to suit their individual research needs. The effect of the capacity building workshops together with the monetary incentive has had an impact. The year-on-year percentage increase in publications for 2010, 2011 and 2012 was 26.41 per cent, 35.8 per cent and 48.6 per cent, respectively.

Supervisor training

Postgraduate output is an important indicator of increase in research capacity of an institution. It is also coupled with funding and therefore an increase in postgraduate output can provide funds for further capacity building in relation to research activities. However, this process is a vicious cycle in that existing research capacity is needed to build more capacity. In the context of a rural and historically disadvantaged university, this is a challenge. The strategy adopted was to train young supervisors on an annual basis. In 2011, 60 new supervisors selected from different schools went through an intensive training process. After this process, directors of schools and heads of departments (HODs) were expected to allocate postgraduate students to these new supervisors for supervision. The strategy for training of supervisors in 2012 involved capacity building for discipline specific teams in supervision so that they could cascade the supervisory training in various schools. Through this approach, larger numbers of supervisors received training. In 2014, 25 supervisors were trained through the Nuffic/Rhodes initiative and a further 25 through funding from the DHET.

Doctoral programmes

Currently, 22 per cent of the staff at UL have a doctorate. There is a national concern about the low number of academics who possess doctorates (Sunday Times 2011). Improving staff qualifications and thereby increasing their research capacity requires planning at a higher level as such projects involve large monetary input and usually have wider implications in any university environment, such as replacement staff and sabbatical leave. In 2011, 12 UL staff members were involved in a pre-PhD project organised by the Programme Support for Pro-Poor Policy Development (PSPPD) and funded by the European Union (EU). These staff were trained in PhD proposal writing and mentored through the process until they produced their proposals. They are now in the process of completing their doctorates at various universities. In 2011, support was also given to 15 academic staff enrolled for doctorates in the form of a PhD Writing Retreat where staff engaged in uninterrupted writing of chapters. In 2013 and 2014, two groups of 25 staff each were trained in a SAVUSA-sponsored pre-PhD project.
Supporting women’s research

Women researchers at UL have been slowly yet steadily increasing their research output since 1998. Therefore, providing support to them is essential to build further capacity amongst women researchers. Support in mentoring of women staff and postgraduate students was done through a mentoring workshop in 2011 involving 100 women staff and postgraduate students. In addition, an independent women’s research group at UL is supported financially by the Vice Chancellor of the university. The Research Office has also made provision in its incentives policy for financial support of two women’s organisations annually.

Research support for postgraduate students

Building research capacity of postgraduate students equips them with the necessary skills so that they are able to produce quality research in the minimum prescribed time. The Research Office launched an upgraded version of a one-year generic postgraduate course in 2011. Postgraduate students from all faculties registered for the course, which comprised the following seven modules: Induction to Research at UL, Proposal Writing, Soft Skills Management, Literature Review, Academic Writing Skills, Quantitative Methodology, and Qualitative Methodology. In 2011, 282 postgraduate students registered for the course; 505 in 2012; and 540 in 2013. The course material used was a manual for postgraduate students that was developed by the Research Office and made available to all postgraduate students of the university. This postgraduate course has been successfully running for four years with enrolment increasing annually.

Incentives for staff engaged in research

In order to encourage more staff to engage in research-related activities, an Incentives and Awards Programmes and Procedures document was approved in 2010 and implemented in 2011. This document contains a comprehensive programme of incentives and awards aimed at encouraging academic staff to succeed in a variety of research-related activities. In addition to financial incentives for publishing in accredited journals (discussed above), other incentivised research activities include: cash incentives for supervisors of completed master’s (course-work and full dissertation) and doctoral studies; cash incentives for rated researchers (in addition to funding given by the NRF); research awards to researchers from all schools as well as different categories of special research awards.
Encouraging participation in funded research projects

Researchers at UL are encouraged to gain research experience through participation in funded research projects. Opportunities for funding are made available to research staff through the university intranet, email, funding workshops and through the SPIN module of Research Information Management System (RIMS) Project. These ‘funded project’ opportunities range from projects in research institutes in South Africa, the NRF, private research partnerships, to projects abroad involving bilateral and trilateral research across various countries. Almost all funded research projects cater for research capacity development of researchers and postgraduate students. In addition, incentives are offered for participation in such projects.

Community engagement

Many members of the university community across faculties are committed and dedicated in the area of community engagement and they have been commended in the CHE Audit Report of 2011. The range of activities includes:

- The Limpopo IDC-Nguni cattle project
- The Centre for Rural Empowerment established by the School of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences has a number of projects, which include capacity building of small farmers, a farmers’ network, student participation in internships
- NRF funded projects such as grain legume enhancement and improving indigenous and broiler chickens
- Improving indigenous goat production project
- Disabled Students Unit Outreach programmes
- Centre for Student Counselling and Development School and Outreach programme
- Radiological Diagnostics Services to Communities
- Maths, Science and Technology Educators’ School Development Project

EVALUATION OF RESEARCH DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMMES

Supervisors’ training workshop

Although training of supervisors takes place on an annual basis, the first structured and intensive mass training of supervisors took place in 2011. Supervisors
representing all faculties were trained by an expert in supervision during a week-long supervisor training workshop. Monitoring and evaluation of this supervisory capacity development initiative is on-going. The requirement from trained supervisors was that they commence immediate supervision of postgraduate students in their respective departments. The evaluation of the supervision workshop is presented in Table 1. For almost all aspects of the evaluation form, participants indicated a very good to excellent response.

Table 1: Evaluation results of supervisors’ training workshop

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issues/questions</th>
<th>AV</th>
<th>Good</th>
<th>Very good</th>
<th>Excellent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What is your overall assessment of the training?</td>
<td>4.44</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall did we reach/obtain our objectives:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants are equipped with skills and knowledge to supervise postgraduate</td>
<td>4.32</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>students</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In terms of key skills, do you feel you understand:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guiding the project planning and identification of research timelines, topics,</td>
<td>4.22</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>problems and objectives</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supporting the structuring of the thesis</td>
<td>4.16</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guiding the application of research techniques</td>
<td>4.06</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structuring the thesis/dissertation</td>
<td>4.32</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Editing and marking students’ dissertations</td>
<td>3.93</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological components of supervisor and postgraduate student responsibilities</td>
<td>4.18</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How useful did you find the sessions on:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project planning, student research timelines, identifying researchable topics</td>
<td>4.31</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>problems, research objectives</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research proposition, hypothesis and research questions, research techniques</td>
<td>4.20</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meta-structure of theses and dissertations, alternate structures using index</td>
<td>4.20</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cards, the proposal</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervisor and postgraduate student responsibilities</td>
<td>4.36</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The introduction and literature review</td>
<td>4.24</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The qualitative comments were grouped and summarised as follows:

- There is a greater need for continual supervisor training.
- All new staff should undergo training on supervision.
- A platform should be created for supervisors to meet and share supervisory experiences.
- It should be compulsory for all postgraduate students to register for a course in research methodology.
- Supervisors need constant support.
- Co-supervision needs to be used more.
- Reduce teaching load of dedicated supervisors and researchers.

Mentoring workshop for women

The mentoring workshop for 100 women staff and postgraduate students was conducted by an expert in the field of mentoring. The women’s research group (ULWASA) was also invited to participate in this workshop. In their evaluative feedback, all participants indicated that they benefited from this workshop and had a clear understanding of mentoring. Some of the qualitative comments are summarised as follows:
There is a need to set up mentor support groups.

More workshops need to be held that empower and capacitate women.

Assistance is needed to network women staff with each other and with other universities.

Leadership workshops are needed for women academics.

Mentoring models and relationships can assist in planning mentoring activities.

Senior women researchers need to be identified and trained as mentors; a list of these must be made available to women researchers.

**Postgraduate course**

Postgraduate students are exposed to a one-year course on research. The purpose of this course is to build capacity and develop research skills amongst postgraduate students. This type of capacity development is needed in a research environment that is in the developmental stages. The impact of the course on individual students is captured in their evaluation of their experiences during the course. Below are some excerpts of their learning:

‘This is really helping me in my research. I had no idea about research but now I am helping other students through the knowledge I gained from the sessions.’

‘In the literature review, I learnt the difference between the text reference and the source reference.’

‘The classes gave me an idea how to do my proposal.’

‘The literature review section gave me direction because it was the most confusing and difficult section for me because I did not know how to integrate it into my study.’

‘I have learnt the proper way of writing a proposal.’

‘The proposal writing session taught me how to formulate a proper plan.’

‘The course helped me especially with the use of databases.’

‘It was a good experience, I learnt a lot on how to go about conducting my research. Along the way I discovered that doing research can be fun especially when you know exactly what you are doing.’
‘Soft skills management really helped me a lot in managing my studies.’

‘I have learnt research writing styles and how to be concise when writing.’

‘I thought I knew what is really expected from me in order to obtain my degree but to my surprise, I knew little, the course helped me with the rest.’

‘I have a better understanding on the title of my research.’

‘I came with a bad attitude towards research as it is said to be very difficult but after attending the lessons, I have changed my attitude. Research is interesting, it just needs one to be committed and work hard.’

Publication workshop

The publication workshop was aimed at staff who wanted to write their first article. It was titled: ‘Writing and publishing your first article’. Participants indicated a high degree of learning in the different sections presented. Suggestions for future publication workshops included:

● Make workshops longer – participants should have a draft article by the end of the workshop.
● Identify relevant journals for the authors.
● Invite experts from other universities and journal reviewers.
● Let experts on article writing act as coaches.
● Discuss technical issues about journal requirements.
● Provide referencing software.
● Establish accredited journals in different disciplines.
● Provide mentorship from experts in field of interest.
● Provide editing services.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The research capacity building initiatives that have been implemented have benefited both staff and postgraduate students, as reflected in the evaluations. Since these capacity building initiatives have been recently implemented, the impact may not be realised immediately. These initiatives need to be sustained so that the impact can be translated into published articles, highly competent supervisors, high quality
dissertations and theses, increased research collaborations and increase in the number of rated researchers.

The findings from the supervisors’ training revealed that staff found the training relevant and appropriate. The staff needed the training and felt that supervisory training should be an on-going initiative. The demand for experienced supervisors is increasing at an alarming rate as universities scramble to enrol more postgraduate students in an attempt to increase DHET subsidies for postgraduate throughput. This is coupled with the rapidly aging cohort of experienced supervisors. HDUs are feeling the greater impact of this trend as they have been struggling for a longer time with limited supervisory capacity. Training of supervisors is time consuming and expensive. There is no ‘quick fix’ method of training. The important learning point from this is that young academics should be involved in supervision as quickly as possible. The best way for this to happen is through co-supervision. One of the issues faced by HEIs is that more experienced supervisors are not always willing to mentor young supervisors, neither are they prepared to relinquish their supervisory loads.

Mentoring as a capacity building tool is an effective way of training young academics and new staff to become immersed in research. Although the mentoring workshop that was held was aimed at women researchers and postgraduate students, mentoring is applicable to all academics. The participants in the mentoring workshop were inspired and motivated to help others. They had positive comments on how a more structured programme can be implemented at UL. Like with the problem of experienced supervisors, mentors are not easy to find. Not all experienced researchers are willing to be mentors. Also, mentoring requires time and patience which experienced researchers may not always have. The positive aspect of mentoring is that mentors need not necessarily be experienced researchers; they just need to be willing. A culture of mentorship takes long to build; it needs to be ingrained into the institutions culture; and it needs strong proponents to drive it. The ‘each one teaches one’ principle, if adopted as a mentoring strategy, can yield lasting results, especially in a research environment.

The presentation of the generic postgraduate course yielded the most rewarding results as indicated in the students’ reflections on their learning. In an environment that has limited supervisory capacity, students showed a hunger to learn about research. Perhaps most heart-warming was the fact that they were able to translate their learning in the postgraduate course into concrete proposals and dissertations. The findings from the evaluation of student experiences and learning during the postgraduate course indicated that students had very little research experience prior to joining the course. Building capacity amongst postgraduate students can benefit any institution as the postgraduate output rate increases, more funding is made available. This funding in turn can be used to build more capacity. It becomes a cycle that keeps yielding research long after the initial effort has been made. It is also worth investing in postgraduate students’ research as they feed into the employment pool at a later stage.
The findings from the publication workshop revealed that staff writing their first articles were interested in individual attention and they wanted publication workshops to be over two to three days so that they could leave the workshop with a draft paper. The staff requested to engage with journal requirements, reviewers and editors. These comments indicate that they are interested in writing for publication and they are aware of the exact kinds of support mechanisms that will assist them in writing. Furthermore, they realised that experienced researchers are needed to act as mentors for them. Motivating researchers to produce their first article is the most difficult part of capacity building in this area. Once they publish their first article, they suddenly realise that there are positive spinoffs in publishing. For academics, research output is the main yardstick by which to measure their success and expertise in a field or discipline. Publishing commands respect and recognition amongst peers; provides opportunities for career advancement; gives recognition to the institution where the researcher works; and financially benefits both the researcher and the institution. Although there are many benefits in publishing articles in accredited journals, HDUs are still unable to grasp this opportunity. This is due to many other contextual factors such as: lack of a culture of research; little mastery in the language of research; limited financial resources; lack in research and publication skills; and lack of fully developed support structures.

CHALLENGES

In order for research to flourish at any HEI, there has to be sustained financial input for developing capacity. In addition, support structures are crucial to sustain any capacity development initiatives. Researchers also have to be continually motivated to conduct ground-breaking research and publish in high impact journals. One of the challenges faced at UL is the lack of a culture of research as already indicated. Finances are needed in order to produce quality researchers as sustained financial input makes capacity building initiatives possible. Budget cuts and non-financing of planned research activities have resulted in minimal efforts in capacity building initiatives. Out of this challenge has arisen the need to raise finances from other sources. One such partner of UL in 2011 was the PSPPD, which is located in the Presidency and financed by the EU. The PSPPD co-financed many planned capacity building activities that would not have materialised due to non-allocation of funds. HDUs are always faced with the challenge of their few experienced researchers being poached by established universities and UL is no exception. Experienced researchers are always attracted to the ‘wonderful’ research opportunities available at established universities in the country and abroad and the lure of lucrative contracts. Whilst this is common practice and researchers who want to move on cannot be slighted for this, it worsens the plight of the HDUs. The merger of HEIs has also had a major impact on research output. In the case of the University of the North, the merger
with Medunsa created UL, and the research output, which had been on a decline has showed a stabilising trend. The announcement in 2011 of the ‘decoupling’ of this merger and the final date set for the end of 2014, was certain to have an impact on research output over the next few years, as the staff numbers would be almost halved. However, it was envisaged that renewed capacity development initiatives would cushion the effect of the ‘decoupling’ of the merged institutions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Taking into consideration the context of the research environment at UL and the research capacity building initiatives over the past four years, the article recommends the following:

● Research capacity building initiatives must be designed to ensure sustainability.
● Capacity building must be done with careful consideration of the contextual factors such as location (rural university), niche areas for research in Limpopo, HDU, priority of research needs (language development, editing).
● Mentoring in all areas of research is necessary (publication, supervision, rating, writing proposals for funding, postgraduate students) for staff and students engaged in research at the university (postgraduates, young/new academics, women).
● The university needs to train and equip a new cohort of young academics who can conduct research at the university and contribute towards a positive research culture.
● Financial injection into capacity building at the university should become a priority.

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