Invisible professionals in a pathless land? The career pathing and professional association of South African tertiary educators in the changing landscape of higher education

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Abstract: This is a report on a research project that was conducted during the period 2003-2005 with the intention of contributing to and informing discussion and constructive action related to the nature of the professional association and development of tertiary educators in South Africa. Drawing on data gathered in a participatory action research process, the paper gives an account of the author’s attempts, in collaboration with fellow practitioners, to establish a professional association that will address the need for more effective networking among South African tertiary educators and for more clearly articulated career pathing.

Keywords: tertiary educators, career pathing, networking

Introduction
Academic Development has become an international movement and field concerned primarily with staff, student, curriculum and institutional development in higher education and training. Its main concern is improving teaching and learning in higher education and training.

South African Academic Development, after vibrant activity linked to the liberation struggle in the mid and late 1980s and early 1990s, has lost focus regarding its identity in the changing higher education and training landscape. An indication of the decline or dispersal of South African Academic Development as a collective movement can be found in the demise after 1995 of the South African Association for Academic Development.

Before the Academic Development conference of 2004 at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University in Port Elizabeth, four similar conferences since 2000 had sought, in different ways and with limited success, to revitalise a sense of community in the South African Academic Development project. The conference of 2000 at Rhodes University recognised some of the new challenges facing the South African Academic Development movement and initiated the establishment of an online forum and network that still exists. The 2001 conference at the University of the North in Polokwane attempted to make Academic Development part of the African Renaissance project, but achieved little in terms of setting a course in this direction. The 2002 conference at the University of the Witwatersrand established a voluntary organisation called the South African Association for Academic Development and elected
a working group to investigate how South African Association for Academic Development might be formally constituted. When this group was unable to meet to carry out this task I decided in 2003 to begin research on redefining the professional identity, development and association of South African Academic Development practitioners. Furthermore, as convenor of the South African Association for Academic Development conference committee for 2003, I also proposed that this research be used to inform the business of establishing or re-establishing a professional association for Academic Development practitioners in South Africa. My proposal, accompanied by a draft constitution, was that South African Association for Academic Development should be reconstituted as the Southern African Tertiary Educators and Trainers Association. The poorly attended business meeting at the 2003 conference in Cape Town seemed to indicate an absence of the will required to constitute South African Association for Academic Development as a professional association.

The main aim of my research project is to explore, in the South African higher education and training, the implications of career pathing in Academic Development for professional associations and/or statutory bodies in higher education and training as well as for policy-making, practice and research pertaining to teaching and learning. A more specific objective is to consider how professional associations as well as policies, practices and research in South African higher education and training may help to promote the professionalisation of Academic Development/Higher Education Development practice in South African higher education and training, including more clearly articulated career pathing.

**Research question/s and thesis in context**

The main research question is:
How should career pathing and professional association in South African higher education and training in general, and in Academic Development in particular, be conceptualised and developed in order to improve teaching and learning in this sector?

The main proposition or thesis is:
Conceptual clarity on the possibilities for career pathing and professional association for Academic Development (in HE institutions and in the higher education and training sector more generally) can pave the way for clearer direction and more focused action with regard to

- the formation and/or networking of professional associations and statutory bodies in higher education and training;
- policy development related to the professionalisation of teaching and other Academic Development practices in South African higher education and training;
- clearer differentiation of and, where appropriate, realignment and/or prioritisation of professional roles and practices in Academic Development and in higher education and training;
- further research needed related to career pathing in Academic Development and professional development in higher education and training.

The significance of the study lies in trying to highlight the issues of power and identity in the experiences of Academic Development practitioners related to the career pathing and professional association on the one hand and their positioning in institutional and national policy environments on the other. I see this as important not only because I am concerned that South African Academic Development practitioners based in higher education and training institutions are usually marginalised, but also because I believe that career pathing in Academic Development is related to the production, dissemination and sustained use of knowledge required for constructive and critical engagement with issues related to teaching and learning (and transformation) at a systemic and policy level, both within HE institutions as well as within learning areas such as traditional disciplines and within specialised generic and inter-disciplinary
Academic Development fields such as curriculum development, assessment and academic language and literacy development.

In the time since I began this research I have worked with Chrissie Boughey, Director of the Academic Development Centre at Rhodes University, on a research project for the South African University Vice Chancellors’ Association. This project, which surveyed and sought to reappraise the history of the South African Academic Development project as well as previous attempts to analyse its nature (ETDP Project, 1997; Morphet, 1995; Moyo et al. 1997; Pavlich & Orkin, 1993), was presented at a South African University Vice Chancellors Association symposium on Curriculum Responsiveness in 2004, and is due to be published as “Curriculum responsiveness from the margins: A reappraisal of Academic Development in South Africa”. One of the main conclusions reached in this paper is that South African Academic Development, because of various significant changes in the international higher education landscape as well as the historical preoccupation of South African Academic Development with overcoming the oppression and marginalisation of black students, would be better served if it were called Higher Education Development. In our view the term Academic Development tends to have a divisive effect on Academic Development as a community of practice at both the institutional and national levels. In the rest of this paper, however, I will continue to refer to Academic Development, since this was the term I have used in the research process.

Refining the research question and thesis statement has included asking questions about how Academic Development as a field can be related to the notion of career pathing. There is an international trend, evident in South Africa, to define core roles and practices in various occupational fields including higher education and training (see for example, Brew and Boud, 1996; ETDP Project, 1997), but I would argue that the implications of this trend for career pathing and professional development in South African higher education and training have hardly been explored or pursued.

The notion of career pathing in relation to occupational roles and identities is strongly linked in higher education and training to redifinitions of professionalism and professional development. Reconceptualising the defining features of professionalism (e.g. expertise, a certain kind of academic/professional initial education, professional standards; certain kinds of public recognition) and professional development in higher education and training has major implications for how career pathing and professional association in Academic Development are conceptualised. If we adopt a holistic definition of Academic Development, one that seeks to integrate student, staff, curriculum and institutional development, key questions arise with regard to how a career path in Academic Development relates to the definition.

In this research project I have used four main frameworks for conceptualising career pathing in relation to South African Academic Development:

1. A career path in which one identifies oneself with the scholarship of teaching or education in a particular learning area and/or discipline and/or profession in higher education and training, e.g. Science; Physics; Engineering. In this framework a career may or may not be linked to involvement with national and/or international professional organisations (e.g. the South African Applied Linguistics Association; the Engineering Council of South Africa; the International Association for Applied Linguistics).

2. A career in which one identifies with Academic Development and/or one of its sub-fields, where Academic Development is conceptualised holistically as a field which specialises in generic and interdisciplinary understanding of issues related to teaching and learning in higher education and
training. These sub-fields, some of which can be further subdivided, include: staff (i.e. teaching) development; curriculum development; language and academic literacy development; e-learning; assessment; quality development and/or assurance pertaining to teaching and learning; organisational/institutional and policy development related to teaching and learning. In this framework, as in the first, a career may or may not be linked to involvement with international and/or national professional organisations. This career path is the one most frequently associated with academic or educational development as an emergent profession internationally (See, for example, Andresen, 1996; Bath & Smith, 2004; Candy, 1996; Harland & Staniforth, 2003).

3. A career leading to managerial or leadership positions in some way related to Academic Development. On this path it seems to me that most South African tertiary educators cease to identify themselves as Academic Development professionals once they leave a higher education institution.

4. A career leading to managerial or leadership positions relatively unrelated to Academic Development. (e.g. from Academic Development practitioner to manager/leader in the corporate world). If such people continue to play an educative or training role in this world and in work-based learning, they are highly unlikely to see themselves as Academic Development professionals.

In their report on Education, Training and Development in the South African higher education and training sector, Stones et al (ETDP Project, 1997) examine some aspects of career pathing for academics and Academic Development practitioners in South African higher education and training. They argue that a research publication record, preferably in a discipline or field with high status, is the main currency for career progression in higher education and training from junior lecturer to professorial researcher, or to professorial senior manager or leader. In the field of Academic Development, there is a need for further research into how initial and subsequent qualifications and publications impact on possibilities for career pathing and progression. Indications from my research are that South African Academic Development professionals would be less likely to be marginalised as “the Other” if they could raise the academic status of the field through accumulating significant academic capital in the main currency.

The ETDP Project, like its counterparts in the USA (e.g., Graf, Albright and Wheeler, 1992) has noted that Academic Development practitioners generally acquire their educational expertise through self-study, networking and work-based learning. However, my study suggests that in the South African context at least, the expertise of many Academic Development professionals is rooted in formal educational and applied linguistic studies. The linguistic focus may be unique to South Africa because the privileging of English in SA higher education and training has historically been one of main reasons for the academic difficulties of black students. The twenty-one respondents (including three full professors, one associate professor and seven doctorates) to my questionnaire concerning Academic Development practitioners and their professional development had thirty-one post-graduate qualifications in Education amongst them, as well as ten post-graduate qualifications in Educational Language and Literacy Studies.

The frameworks suggested here may help to throw some light on the often heated debates about whether Academic Development in South African Higher Education Institutions should be centralised or decentralised. Most decisions arising from this debate are unlikely to have taken full cognisance of the epistemological implications for Academic Development as a field and community of practice with investments in intellectual and educational management capital, nor of the related implications for the career pathing of those affected by the decisions. The emphasis on remediating “disadvantaged” students, which is accompanied by a serious neglect of the kind of staff and institutional development needed to implement new higher education policies and to ensure quality in teaching and learning more generally, comes sharply into focus when one compares
South African national approaches to Academic Development to those in the International Consortium for Educational Development countries, where staff development around teaching and learning is increasingly a major feature of the transformation of higher education and training.

In comparison with the UK, for example, South Africa is currently in the early stages of making staff development central to Academic Development. South Africa does have enabling policy frameworks for Academic Development such as a National Qualifications Framework and enabling statutory bodies such as the Council on Higher Education and the Higher Education Quality Committee, but it remains to be seen how they can contribute to promoting forms of professional development and career pathing that are consciously related to the restructuring, revival and growth of South African Academic Development.

Despite the sluggishness in national policy development around Academic Development, some South African Academic Development practitioners have aligned themselves with the international drift to staff development as central to Academic Development. This trend is evident in many of the responses to my questions in this research project.

**Methodology**

In this research project I am attempting to create a hybrid form in which the qualitative research approaches of participatory action research are blended with survey research, narrative inquiry and argumentative analysis of policy and practice. I am trying to combine analysis with social action, so that the research is embedded in a particular context (the project of reviving and possibly redefining the South African Academic Development project) while attempting to change that context from the inside (Winter, 1989: 27).

I have conceptualised the action research process as entailing a spiralling sequence roughly comprising five recursive steps: problem identification and clarification including analysis of context; the gathering and interpretation of data; action based on the interpretation and on contingent factors; reflection on the steps taken; and “next steps”. The survey research, in which I designed a comprehensive questionnaire for Academic Development practitioners whom I regarded as knowledgeable informants, and then analysed their responses, contributed in various ways to each stage of the process. In the narrative inquiry component, I complemented the survey research by asking ten experienced Academic Development practitioners to tell the story of South African Academic Development and their own professional development in relation to it. Like the survey research, this contributed to each stage of the process.

In the research process I saw two main action trajectories, one leading to the formal establishment of a professional association, and the other leading to more clearly articulated career pathing for South African Academic Development practitioners, with the professional association playing a role in securing this. The process is participatory in that I have involved fellow practitioners in each stage of the process. For example, the drafting of a proposal for a new association, together with a constitution for this association, has been done collaboratively. The key problem of weak professional association appears to have been solved in that the draft constitution has been approved in principle and an executive committee elected to take the “next steps” in the process.

**Themes emerging from the research**

Four themes have emerged from the action research process so far. These can be formulated as problems that need to be addressed in the “next steps”.
Firstly, South African Academic Development practitioners/tertiary educators collectively (and often individually) lack academic credibility and self-confidence in conventional terms (a publications record of mainstream or educational research together with recognition of expertise as lecturers and leaders in their field (Education, with a specialisation in Higher Education). This points to at least three avenues that need to be explored if we are to address the problem. At institutional, regional and national levels, we need to create support groups or networks that assist Academic Development practitioners or tertiary educators in the mainstream who need mentoring with regard to becoming authors of internationally and nationally accredited publications. Respondents who were excited and happy with their career progression in Academic Development usually attributed this to a clear alignment between their career path and their accredited publications record. A strong grounding in research should then be linked to visible and credible participation in teaching in the field of Academic Development or Higher Education Studies, or in the case of mainstream tertiary educators, teaching and research supervision at the postgraduate level. Several respondents suggested that there should be a post-graduate qualification in Academic Development practice, which could be obtained either through Recognition of Prior Learning and/or through a formal structured learning programme. A programme of this nature would be a good grounding for a subsequent career in higher educational research. The confidence stemming from having accredited Academic Development-related post-graduate qualifications and a strong publications record would be likely to produce an increasing number of leaders in the field of Academic Development or Higher Education Development. Formal study, research and teaching related to leadership and management of in Higher Education Development would further enhance the credibility of Academic Development professionals.

Secondly, the professional association of Academic Development practitioners/tertiary educators generally lacks explicit professional standards related to educational research and practice. Many respondents suggested that if South African Association for Academic Development is to become a fully-flanked professional association, it needs to have clearly articulated professional standards relating to all the kinds and levels of Academic Development practice. Setting standards would have to be accompanied by well-developed and properly resourced capacity-building strategies. At the national level, this calls for clearly defined roles for the various stakes-holders such as the Higher Education Quality Committee, the Education, Training and Development Practices Sector Education and Training Authority and professional or subject associations and councils.

Thirdly, there is, in the view of my respondents, a continuation of the marginalisation of educational development research and practice by the leadership in Higher Education Institutions. At ten out of the twelve Higher Education Institutions represented in my sample of respondents, it would appear that senior management seldom if ever plays an epistemologically sound and dynamic role in the structuring and management of Academic Development at institutional, faculty, programme and departmental levels. This suggests that current criteria for institutional audits need to include good practice indicators related to the management of nationally recognised Academic Development models. The Higher Education Quality Committee’s Improving Teaching and Learning Guides could be extended and used as a resource for the further development of Academic Development-related criteria and indicators.

Fourthly, all my respondents perceived a gap between Academic Development practice in Higher Education Institutions and national policy related to the structuring of Academic Development in the sector. All but two of my respondents felt that Academic Development is poorly conceptualised in national policy documents, with a “deficit” model associated with academic support for “disadvantaged” students tending to dominate Department of Education policy at the point where Academic Development practice is linked to funding. The role currently played by the Higher Education Quality Committee was viewed as helping to provide an enabling environment, but the expectation of how “quality” is
to be delivered with grossly limited resources for capacity-building remains a problem. My research suggests that one of the reasons for the credibility gap between national policy-makers and Academic Development practitioners in institutions is the leadership vacuum in Academic Development itself at the national level. There appear to be a number of reasons for this. “Demand overload” related to the transformation of South African higher education and training means that few Academic Development professionals are willing or have the time to take on yet another layer of developmental work. Many veteran Academic Development professionals are now in the mature stages of their own professional development as researchers and are unwilling to take a path which requires them to sacrifice their own academic development. Those Academic Development professionals who have migrated into government or other senior positions outside Higher Education Institutions do not seem to see themselves as belonging to or having a leading role to play in the Academic Development community of practice.

In the view of most respondents, a prerequisite for bridging the credibility gap between national policy and practice in higher education and training is the formation of a strong professional body representing the interests of Academic Development practitioners and professionals throughout the sector. This view was confirmed and acted upon through the acceptance of the previously mentioned draft constitution at the Academic Development conference held in Port Elizabeth in December 2004 and the election of an Executive Committee. This committee has revised the constitution and named the new association the Higher Education Learning and Teaching Association of Southern Africa. The committee aims to work with the Higher Education Quality Committee (represented at the Port Elizabeth conference) in improving teaching and learning in South African higher education.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I want to suggest that South African Academic Development needs to be reconstructed and created through the linking of deliberate career pathing for Academic Development practitioners and tertiary educators in the mainstream, and through the simultaneous building of a research-led, confident and nationally respected community of practice that includes quality professional associations and vibrant networking. The Executive of the new Association is a promising mix of Academic Development veterans and new young leaders more familiar with the struggles of our ten-year-old democracy than with the anti-apartheid struggles of the past. The Higher Education Quality Committee, through its representative at the 2004 South African Association for Academic Development conference, has indicated its willingness to work in partnership with the new Association. The Executive has already put a number of key issues on its agenda, the most important of which is the funding of South African Academic Development, both within institutions, and within professional associations working in the field of Academic Development.

References


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