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A social realist account of the enabling and constraining conditions in the uptake of professional development opportunities by academics at university as viewed from the educational development centre

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The Study

Study sought to find out from educational developers what they saw as the enablements and constraints in the uptake of professional development opportunities by academics in their role as teachers

METHODOLOGY

- Qualitative paradigm

- Semi structured interview schedule

- All ten ED practitioners in the university

- The study used Margaret Archer's Social realist analytical framework (specifically the concepts Structure , Culture and Agency)

- Archer sees the social world as consisting of two components, parts(structure and culture) and agency (people)

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Structure

Structure: relates to material resources and to the recurring patterns of social behaviour or to the interrelationship between different elements of society around the distribution of these (e.g. social class, gender, race, marriage, education, systems, committees –Staff Development Committee, Senate Teaching and Learning Committee)

- What mechanisms have been put in place to support academics wishing to develop themselves as teachers?

Culture and Agency

Culture: ideas, beliefs, values, ideologies (What ideas, values, beliefs are held in relation to professional development of academics as teachers by the academics , by management , by ED practitioners? Does one have to receive training or is disciplinary expertise enough on its own to make one a good teacher?

Agency: personal and psychological make up of individuals, their social roles and relates to the capacity of people to act in voluntary ways .(Boughey 2010). How does structure and culture(e.g. how do huge workloads and the valuing of research over teaching affect the way academics respond to professional development opportunities offered?

Constraints -Structure

Huge workloads-little time for issues such as professional development

People are extremely busy. Everyone has got more than enough and then there is also pressure on new academics to be finishing their masters, or doing PhD because that's what's more valuable to the department

Constraints: Culture

- Fear of vulnerability due to low sense of expertise in teaching-*lot of our colleagues don't have expertise or a lot of experience in teaching and they may feel quite vulnerable as expects in their field to expose themselves*

- Privileging of research over teaching-*In most cases it seems that to have a post graduate qualification in your own field is valued much higher than working with your teaching and learning so the research is often given far higher priority.*

- Departmental cultures-*you will get some departments where T&L is definitely very supported and then you will get others where I think anybody who arrives in the department is just told that the Teaching and Learning Unit is rubbish - don't bother to go there.*

Constraints -Agency

- **Feelings of lack of expertise in the disciplines to be supported-**EDPs generally came from non-science disciplines and therefore were not confident enough to help the scientists as they lacked science disciplinary knowledge. Because of this academics were wary of being offered support by people who did not share their disciplinary expertise

- *even though we work very hard at respecting and acknowledging disciplinary differences, the scientists find it very difficult to understand initially particular educational discourse and so reading the papers, the long papers, 10 -14 pages is very alien to scientists who are used to reading and writing one and a half pages with lots of diagrams dispersed on those pages*

- They therefore shy away from professional development opportunities

Enablements- Structure

- Well established teaching and learning centre-the academic development centre had been in existence for along time and had generally gained the respect of the academics

- Probation requirements of staff to demonstrate assessment competence. *You have to show that you meet the outcomes of the assessor course as a probationary requirement. And so you can do that without doing the assessor course but very few people are able to do that. And so people are in a sense forced to engage with issues of assessment through doing the assessor course.*

Enablements- Culture

- **Valuing of teaching** -the culture of valuing teaching and learning that existed in the university and which enabled easy access to the lecturers e.g. VC Teaching Excellence awards (alongside the well established research incentives)
- Institutional colloquium on teaching and learning-*We hold institutional colloquia on aspects of teaching and learning at which people who have done our courses talk every now and then.* This helps spread the message to other academics

Enablements : Agency

Supportive key agents in the university-the support of key agents in executive management in the university was said to create a conducive environment for academic staff development (VC and Dean)

We have got good leadership in the form of the dean and of course having a vice chancellor who is a person from higher education, a sociologist .....

Recommendations from EDPs

- An academy for educational development
- Compulsory HE teaching qualification
- More incentives for teaching
- more informal spaces for conversations on teaching and learning
- more contact with academic development units at other institutions by ED practitioners for benchmarking and sharing of best practice

Recommendations of this study

- Evidence of competence in teaching and learning should form an integral part of policy on promotion and tenure in universities. This will ensure that the three tier issue of teaching and learning, research and community engagement is taken seriously with equity in universities.

- Professional development courses offered by teaching and learning or academic development centres in universities should be varied and tailor-made to ensure relevance to different faculties and departments in universities.

- Universities should operate with clear staff workload policies so that there is equitable distribution of teaching load and ensure that staff members have teaching loads that allow them to participate in other professionally relevant activities.

- Teaching and learning or academic development centres should devise ways of constantly engaging staff to motivate them to make it a priority to undertake professional development courses in teaching and learning.

The End

THANK YOU

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