

Conducive Environments for the Promotion of Quality Teaching in Higher Education in South Africa

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Abstract

The article reports on an investigation into constraining and enabling conditions for professional academic development with regard to the teaching role at eight South African universities. The data comprised transcripts of interviews with 10 – 16 academics across a range of levels of seniority, demographic categories and disciplines at each institution. The findings suggest that organisational climate and access to infrastructure and resources are more significant than the literature on professional development to date has implied, especially for institutions in resource-constrained environments. The analysis supports the view that critical realism helps to bridge the psychological/individual and socio-cultural approaches and points to the need for further research on individual properties such as sense of agency. From a methodological point of view the study affirms the need for multi-site investigations, which analyse phenomena occurring across a range of socio-political contexts.

Keywords: critical realism; higher education; professional development; socio-cultural; South Africa; teaching and learning

Learning to Teach

Approaches towards the professional development of academics are intentionally or unintentionally based on theories of how adults or professionals learn. These theories form an important element of the armoury of resources required to strategise how to enhance learning in the higher education environment. A key perspective accounting for how academics learn to teach has been described as an individually based, cognitive or psychological approach.

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Cognitive perspectives have been useful, but to a certain extent have been superseded by socio-cultural approaches (Trowler, 2005). Two important and interrelated elements within a socio-cultural approach are those of practice and interaction. The significance of practice has been highlighted by Boud and Brew (2013) who stress that practice is highly contextualised and constructed in relations with others. The contextualised and relational aspects of learning via practice in sociocultural approaches underscore the significance of professional arrangements and relationships at institutions and within departments (Knight, 2006; Trowler and Cooper, 2002; Trowler and Knight, 1999). The important role played by practice supports the observation that there is a fine line, a continuum or perhaps even an interrelationship, between being a good teacher, and becoming a good teacher (Leibowitz et al., 2009). Derived from his investigation into what excellent school teachers in the United States do, David Berliner (2001) observed that two out of three crucial elements which account for teaching quality are context and practice. According to Berliner what is distinctive about practice, is that it is deliberate and sustained over time. Thus conditions that support or encourage academics to teach well, over time, could be seen to be reinforcing their development as teachers, although the actual teaching or practising, is conducted by teachers themselves.

An interesting view articulated by Kahn, Qualter and Young (2012) is that both individual/psychological and socio-cultural perspectives can be bridged with the use of realist social theory. Social realism considers how personal properties (of which reflexivity and agency are key) interact with the structural and cultural domains in order to generate change and growth. A social realist approach to the interplay of structure, culture and agency is useful in that it stresses the way in which the given structural conditions and cultural conditions interact with the personal and agentic, such that learning or growth is neither purely predetermined according to given social structures, nor entirely of free will. It is precisely how these interplay, that leads to growth and change in relation to professional development (Crawford, 2010; Kahn, 2009; Leibowitz et al., 2012; Quin, 2012).

These accounts of how academics learn to teach underpin the various strategies towards professional development that are outlined in the literature. The basis for the range of strategies is neatly summed up by Knight, Tait and Yorke (2006) who make a set of distinctions between formal and informal learning, and between intentional and non-intentional learning. They maintain that whilst formal approaches do have a role to play, informal learning, occurring in context, is the more significant. Thus there are a variety of

ways that lecturers learn to teach, and a variety of potential means to enhance quality teaching and the professional development of academics in their teaching role. These all appear to have some merit, and their impact would rely partly on strategic considerations such as timing, purpose, appropriateness to context, as well as on individual properties. In the next section, the setting for this study, higher education in South Africa, and key features of the policy environment pertaining to teaching and learning in higher education, are discussed.

Research Setting: Higher Education in South Africa

In South Africa there are 23 public universities (with an additional two currently being founded), the result of mergers and unbundling of 36 institutions which existed in the apartheid era. This process was set in motion by government policy laid down in 2002 (Ministry of Education, 2002) and completed in the ensuing five years. Whilst the ministry provided funding, guidelines and support for the merging institutions, the merging of the institutions with diverse management styles and approaches to teaching and learning posed - and in some cases continue to pose - challenges to administrators, academics and students (Hall, Symes and Luescher, 2004; Arnolds, Stofile and Lillah, 2013; Roberts, 2006).

Higher education institutions in South Africa are differentiated in terms of government delineated terms (traditional universities, comprehensive universities and universities of technology - National Plan for Higher Education (NPHE) (Ministry of Education 2001) but they are also stratified in terms of features including funding, historical privilege, culture and geographical location. Research-intensive universities enjoy the highest level of resourcing and outputs, the comprehensive universities focus on mass higher education, and the UoTs facilitate the acquisition of technology-based qualifications. In the apartheid era historically black or historically disadvantaged institutions (HDIs) lacked resources, were controlled by the apartheid state and were set up mainly in the former homelands. Their differential access to, for example, library resources and to land and buildings continues to impact on these institutions in post-apartheid times (Bozalek and Boughey, 2012). As Boughey and McKenna (2011) show in their study of teaching and learning at five HDIs, these institutions still struggle financially, influencing levels of staff morale and commitment to teaching. Historically white or advantaged institutions (HAIs) are more likely to be research intensive, better resourced and more autonomous, and are typically located in more affluent urban centres. Table 1, a summary of conditions of the eight

universities participating in the Structure, Culture and Agency research project, on which this article is based, demonstrates some of the key issues regarding differential access and output alluded to in this section.

Table 1: Eight institutions in the research project (2010)

	Historical Legacy (advantaged v. disadvantaged) (merged v. not merged)	Focus	University type	Student Population	Campuses	Urban v. rural	No of Students (in 2010)	Permanent Staff/ Student Ratio (2012)	Established	Student Success rate (in 2009) ² .
1	Advantaged	Research	Traditional	Elite schools	3	Urban	25 000	1:23	1829	84
2	Advantaged	Research	Traditional	Elite schools	4	Urban	27694	1:28	1881/1916	84
3	Advantaged	Research	Traditional	Elite schools	1	Rural	7274	1:21	1904	83
4	Disadvantaged	Teaching	Traditional	Disadvantaged schools	3	Urban	18031	1:32	1960	79
5	Disadvantaged Merged	Teaching	Traditional	Disadvantaged schools	3	Rural	11074	1:34	1916	79
6	Disadvantaged Merged	Teaching	Traditional	Disadvantaged schools	1	Rural	11000	1:32	1981	79
7	Advantaged and disadvantaged Merged	Teaching	University of Technology	Disadvantaged schools	8	Urban	36000	1:42	1960 and 1962	79
8	Advantaged and disadvantaged Merged	Teaching	University of Technology	Disadvantaged schools	8	Urban	23000	1:42	1956 and 1907	76

² These statistics were taken from the national Higher Education Management Information System (HEMIS) in August 2010. Success rates were determined as follows: a calculation is made of full-time equivalent (FTE) enrolled student totals for each category of courses. A further FTE calculation, using the same credit values, is made for each category of courses for those students who pass the courses. FTE passes are then divided by FTE enrolments. This does not reflect actual graduation rates. It does however complement the summary profile of the participating institutions.

A significant preoccupation in South Africa has been the need to enhance the effectiveness of the public higher education system. With regard to student participation and achievement overall, the concern is that the participation rates of students in higher education is comparatively low, with 18% of the relevant age group entering into higher education in 2010. This figure is compared to 46% in the United Kingdom in the same period (Department of Business Innovation and Skills, 2013). The South African participation rate is racially skewed, with for example 57% of whites, 46% Indian, 15% coloureds and 14% of Africans entering higher education. Graduation rates for this skewed population are comparatively low as well, with only 17% of the 2005 cohort graduating by 2010 (CHE, 2012). This includes distance as well as contact universities. The estimate for graduation rates on average across OECD countries is 39% (OECD, 2012).

A shift has occurred in South African thinking on academic development, from a concern with students and student learning, in particular that of ‘disadvantaged’ students, to a concern with enhancing the quality of teaching. This parallels a shift in preoccupations and national policy discourse in the Anglophone countries (Manathunga, 2013). The view that enhancing teaching capacity and teaching expertise will promote student success is advanced in a widely disseminated and discussed report in South Africa by Scott, Yeld and Hendry (2007). This shift in emphasis has been evident in the trajectory of additional funding the government has made available to all universities: from 2002 it made financial support available to all universities for ‘Foundation Programmes’ for what are referred to as ‘educationally disadvantaged students’ and from 2005 it made available financial support in the form of ‘Teaching Development Grants’ primarily to improve teaching capacity. These latter funds have increased significantly since the inception of the fund and the moral and financial investment by the national Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) has increased in the current period.

In South Africa currently higher education institutions offer a range of approaches to professional development similar to those offered internationally, including: “workshops and seminars, project-based interventions, research-based approaches, peer mentoring, formal qualifications (e.g., postgraduate diplomas and M Phil degrees in higher education), rewards, incentives, research funding and specialist associations ... and conferences (Winberg, 2011).

The Structure, Culture and Agency Research Project

Given this concern with the enhancement of teaching, a group of professional developers at eight South African universities came together to investigate the contextual features at these institutions which could be seen to influence teaching and learning. This study is based on the construct of the interplay of structure, culture and agency, as elaborated by social realist Margaret Archer. (See more about the project at: <http://interplayofstructure.blogspot.com>.) The research team members were interested to foster critical reflection about their own work, to understand how context across socio-cultural and geographic locations can influence change and enhancement, and to understand how various elements within and across institutions influences the interplay with individual properties. The multisite project is participatory and collaborative. For more about the collaborative nature of the research, see Leibowitz, Ndebele and Winberg, 2013.

This article reflects on one slice of the data collected at the institutions: interviews with 10 – 16 teaching academics at each institution on the basis of agreed upon criteria such as levels of seniority, range of disciplines and gender. Additional data from open questions in a multi-site questionnaire developed for the project is also used for triangulation or corroboration of evidence. Once the interviews had been transcribed all project members came together to develop a series of codes based on the interplay of structure, culture and agency and the literature on professional academic development. These codes were used to analyse the transcriptions and the responses to the open questions in the questionnaire. Finally each institution produced a case study report, using the jointly agreed upon codes. The data on the academics' perceptions as contained in the case studies was then slightly regrouped (by the author of this paper) to recast the data under only the headings of enablements and constraints. It should be noted that whilst an understanding of the interplay of structure, culture and agency underlies this analysis, the terms 'structure' and 'culture' are not easy to use as the basis for coding, since in reality these two analytic categories are interrelated (Leibowitz, Bozalek, Winberg and van Schalkwyk, 2014). As realist writer on qualitative research methods, Maxwell (2012: 26) points out, the causal relationships are 'deeply entangled', and multi-directional. It should also be noted that this article is based on the academics' perceptions of the enabling and constraining conditions, and on their own responses to this. This is not an inappropriate basis for this discussion, since, drawing on the work of Archer, Crawford (2010) argues that influences at the macro or inter-institutional context are mediated by influences at the intra-institutional context, but that they only

become activated when academics respond to them. She, along with Kahn (2009) emphasise the importance of hearing academics' voices 'from below'.

Findings

The comments from academics about what promotes and hinders their being and becoming good teachers were found to be loosely grouped under various headings or dimensions, which loosely cohered at the macro, meso and micro levels, as summarised in table 2 below:

Table 2: Summary of influences on teaching quality

Systemic structural and cultural features	
Level	Feature
Macro	National and international networks and initiatives
	Institutional policy environment
	Provision of professional development opportunities
Meso	Informal learning
	Culture
	Organisational climate
Micro	Student responses
	Workload
	Resources
Individual Properties	

Macro Level

National and international networks and national initiatives

This very broad category was created to signal that many features affecting teaching at the institutional level were set in motion outside the actual institutions. An example is the curriculum transformation initiatives targeting UOTs, the direct result of national government curriculum reform. At UOT8 an academic put it this way:

The university has done a lot in terms of giving us this platform to re-curriculate. It's given us almost a blank sheet and said go and re--design your curriculum as to what you think and together with other stakeholders what you think is going to make this a better quality student exiting our system. (UOT8)

Another national imperative influencing teaching and learning at the institutional level is the merger process. At UOT7, how this process was managed by the institution was referred to by an academic interviewed as inhibiting good teaching:

...the institution paid enough attention to harmonising senior management levels but not nearly enough to manage change itself on the ground level of teaching where people work in completely opposing teaching ideologies, let alone political ideologies on merger. I think that created a massive drain of energy. We're muddling through that but it's still left a bit of rigor mortis behind it. (UOT7)

As d'Andrea and Gosling (2005) point out, phenomena which exist outside of institutions also influence teaching and learning. One example cited in the case study from HDI4 is the national or international conferences and professional organisations:

What I have been doing is attending conferences and presenting what I'm doing. Because what I have found, I learn better from sharing with other people. I feel that I learn best by interacting with intellectuals, academics and other professionals with the same interest. (HDI4)

Institutional policy environment with regard to teaching

D' Andrea and Gosling (2005) and Bozalek and Dison (2013) write in favour of a 'whole institution' approach to professional development and the enhancement of teaching. In support of this approach, data from this project demonstrates how the institution as a whole can be experienced as enabling or constraining. A respondent from HAI3 provides an example of the institution as enabling:

And I have incredible job satisfaction. I love research. I love teaching. I love working in the profession and I find that the university affords me a very rich space to bring all those interests into a sort of relationship and it gives me an opportunity to kind of grow in quite interesting ways. (HAI3)

At HAI3 the positive attitude towards teaching and learning was strongly signalled by the Vice Chancellor in speeches, publications and other forms of support. At HAI1 there was also the sense that there is institutional support and recognition for teaching, but this is a fairly recent phenomenon:

I think the institution is becoming more engaged with these issues - and there is now a DVC with responsibility for teaching and learning and there are teaching and learning formal committees - but this engagement is relatively new. (HAI1)

There were also observations that institutional policy initiatives were impositional and inhibiting professional development. For example the curriculum change initiative was seen as 'top down' by one interviewee at UOT8, and the language policy was described as constraining at HAI2, as it required lecturers to translate lecture notes into a second language, and was thus an unnecessary imposition on their time.

An example of an institutional initiative which was not successful in certain instances, is the institution of deputy deans responsible for teaching. The incumbents are not all equally competent and some were seen as retarding teaching quality and enhancement at, HDI5 and UOT7. This was possibly due to lack of training or interest in teaching quality, but the matter was not investigated further.

In support of the contention that alignment of policies plays an important role (Crawford, 2010), the case studies from all eight institutions contained statements from academics that the policy regarding the need to develop professionally as teachers was either contradicted at the level of policy, or was contradicted by the practices of managers. The need to enhance one's teaching was in tension with the need to enhance one's research, or to acquire higher qualifications in one's discipline. This mixed messaging or contradiction of policy on teaching was seen as having a constraining effect on many of the lecturers in the case studies. This finds resonance with other studies which demonstrate how academics may feel too constrained by pressures - especially to engage in research - to engage in professional development activities (see for example Clark and Reid, 2013). At HAI2 a lecturer described prioritising activities in relation to 'what counts', and thus in relation to extrinsic reward:

Even though I do my best for the students and do enjoy teaching, I just do not have the time to attend courses for teaching. The little time I have I try and spend on research since ultimately publication output is what leads to promotion. (HAI2)

Mixed messaging with regard to teaching was cited at all the universities, whether they were research-led or not and historically advantaged or not. At the non-research-led universities the emphasis on research and the emphasis on the need to enhance the professional qualifications of academic staff were cited as necessary as a form of ‘catch up’. A comment from a lecturer at HDI5 illustrates the possible impact of this pressure on academics’ professional development:

then I did embark on one module, I think it was the curriculum development, which in hindsight I really should have kept going with, but at the time, it just wasn’t uppermost in my mind. For me, the thing is, I need to complete my thesis and if I have any spare time, it should be focused on that and I can do the rest afterwards. (HDI5)

A comment from an interviewee at UOT7 is illustrative of the pressure on academics to publish and enhance their qualifications at UOTs. The comment underscores the tension generated by this situation, however, as the learning from students can be jeopardized in the short-term:

...the department understands the importance of teaching and learning, but I think from the Dean’s perspective - as a university and maybe given our history being a former technikon - we did not have a focus on research and therefore his emphasis is more on research. I’m in a teaching department yet the university is going more for research. So we are old fashioned and we may be obsolete soon but what we are trying to do and especially myself, is to come up with a balance. So that while I teach I also research at the same time. I’m not sure if they have an understanding of the level of the students and the kind of lecturers we are as well (UOT7)

Unlike the case of opportunities being provided to develop as researcher, teaching development opportunities are not woven into what it means to be an academic, into sabbaticals and timetables (UOT8) and academics are not given time off to attend workshops or courses (HDI6). Thus the institutional policy environment may enable or constrain teaching enhancement, and a significant arena is that of an emphasis on research, which tends to be more incentivised than the teaching role, in the current era.

Provision of professional development opportunities

The types of professional development support mentioned by the interviewees as enabling, largely mirrored the kinds of support which were actually provided at these institutions. For

example, at HAI2, where the centre for teaching and learning placed much emphasis on the scholarship of teaching and learning and developing professionally by behaving like a scholar, grants to conduct innovation and research with regard to teaching, and internal teaching conferences, were mentioned as having a positive impact. As another example, the university which had the smallest central unit to enhance teaching relied on a policy-driven approach and a network supported by each faculty. This was noted by one academic:

I think what the Directorate of Teaching and Learning has done in the institution is develop that sort of institutional teaching and learning network. I think that's why I was so inspired and motivated to join the institution's initiatives because it was the first time that I felt there was a community on my own campus. (HDI4)

The work of the teaching and learning centres was appreciated by respondents in all of the case studies, an appreciation similar to that recorded in an Australian context by Clark and Reid (2103). An example is from HDI5:

...a very good initiative from [the centre for teaching and learning], because a lot of the topics that were scheduled, were very pertinent and topical. Like how to deal with big classes and e-learning and all of that. (HDI5)

Academics saw the valuable work of the centre for teaching and learning as evidence of institutional support for teaching and learning, as at HAI3:

(There is a) strong element of support for [the CTL] from management and leadership; the [CTL] supports and nurtures this very well at [the University] with the vast experience of their staff in various aspects of professional engagement. The entire administrative set up here supports this too! (HAI3)

To a lesser extent there was criticism of these centres, often that the offerings were too generic or too basic, for example at HAI1:

I am aware of [the resources] but they are not attractive and seem way too generic and entry level orientated. Likewise, my reading of what they say seems common sense in any case -- I do not perceive that they offer much in the way of 'Aha ... I never understood that!' type of content. (HAI1)

Meso level

Informal learning in the faculty, department or workgroup

Conducive Environments for the Promotion of Quality Teaching

The significance of the faculty or department as locus for teaching development, (Trowler and Knight, 1999), was affirmed in the data from the case studies. At HAI2 and UOT8 the centre for teaching and learning was described as being too ‘distant’. When asked how he or she felt about the move to decentralise academic development to the faculties, an academic at HAI2 responded:

The other advantage of having it [academic development] in the faculties, somehow we fall back easier within our faculty than outside of the faculty. So if you have a problem it might be easier just run down the passage than all the way across the hall.
(HAI2)

These comments could be triangulated with the questionnaire results. In four case studies which featured the questionnaire results on the question of where academics sought help with regard to their teaching, the largest number of respondents sought help for teaching and learning related matters from colleagues, with the centre being the source of help mentioned second or third (HAI1, HAI3, UOT8 and HDI4). A lecturer at HAI3 described learning from colleagues:

Especially when you start teaching, you’re a bit insecure. You don’t want to let people see that you don’t know how to do something and what has helped me a lot would be the stories that some of the older faculty would tell. (HAI3)

And from HDI4:

The absolute, absolute enthusiasm of some of my colleagues in the faculty for the teaching and learning programme. Mr X is an absolute superstar. So every now and again, his enthusiasm just gets me going as well, and makes me think about things, and read up a bit more. (HDI4)

The outlier was HDI5, where the centre was mentioned as the first port of call and colleagues as second.

Culture

Culture is defined by Archer (1995) as the register of ideas or propositions which exist in a setting. In this context, ‘culture’ pertains to ideas and beliefs about teaching. Whether academics learn from their Heads of Departments or Deans or peers, might depend on the attitudes and beliefs about teaching (the ‘regimes of teaching and learning’, according to Trowler and Cooper, 2002). Despite the existence of institution-wide policies and

pronouncements, the impact of the culture or teaching and learning regimes at the level of department or faculty examples of positive comments about learning from colleagues were cited above. However the lack of interest in teaching or resistance towards improving teaching was cited in reports from the same institutions. At HAI2 professional development was described as being seen as only for newly appointed staff or those who are underperforming with regard to their teaching. At that institution comments were made that ‘the department doesn’t care’ and that there is a lack of interest in the work of the centre for teaching and learning. At HAI3, where the Vice Chancellor was so supportive of teaching and learning, this led to a ‘backlash’ in several departments.

Organisational climate

Various writers have stressed the importance of the work environment, that it should be ‘learning conducive’ (Boud and Brew, 2013: 214). According to McMurray and Scott (2013) an organisational climate that fosters learning displays attributes of support, trust and fairness, and innovation and recognition. Bozalek et al (2014) use the concept of a ‘political ethic of care’ to discuss the collegial and caring relationships necessary for effective functioning in an academic context. From the data it would seem that the organisational climate in particular at the faculty or departmental level, indeed facilitates or hinders teaching quality. At UOT7 a factor retarding teaching and learning was that Heads of Departments cannot help as they are ‘incompetent’ (UOT7). At HDI4, a lack of collegiality was attributed to an increase in performativity and managerialism by one academic. This was seen as constraining discussion and reflection, and thus informal learning about teaching:

There is less collegiality; I can see it even in my department. We used to spend a lot more time talking about individual students; talking about their progression from first year to third year. There's less of that now. People are busy running their own research groups, and there's far more sense of people as individuals building empires or developing their careers. (HDI4)

At UOT 7 there were references to staff morale and a ‘toxic departmental culture’:

there’s a lot of backstabbing and real nasty stuff going on but I have learned to cope with it and I’ve learned how to distance myself from it, so that whereas before it used to affect me personally and I used to get very upset - not because of the students but because of the colleagues - I’ve moved into a position where I am able to switch off. I

don't get involved in any [academic development initiatives]. I don't associate, so it's quite lonely. (UOT7)

At HAI2 there was a reference to a 'deadly culture in the department' which hindered the development of professionalism. These references to the culture in a department suggest that teaching and learning is not only influenced by teaching and learning related professional development strategies, but by broader and more general academic conditions.

Micro level

Conditions which encourage academics to improve or sustain their good work, or discourage them, have already been discussed above at the macro and meso levels. There are three remaining dimensions of context that constrain or enable professional development and quality teaching at the more immediate or micro level: the student body, workload and resources.

Student responses

Echoing the findings in Leibowitz et al (2012), for some academics features pertaining to student behaviour affirmed their job satisfaction:

I love it when I see the students suddenly realise how something fits together and how, you know, the penny sort of drops, to speak. I would imagine that a lot of academics are motivated by that - face to face with the students. (UOT7)

For some academics student behaviour was a spur to action, 'I think one of the biggest spurts to innovation has been a sense of frustration that I'm not being as effective as I possibly could' (UOT7). For a third group of academics across the range of universities, student responses were disheartening or constraining:

There's a lot of talking, there's a lack of discipline and for me, it feels as if all these issues are becoming more and more serious at the moment. (HAI3)

For some [students] it hinders learning because you will see their faces for the first time when they come to sit for their test. They don't attend at all. They don't buy textbooks. They don't even go to the library. (HDI6)

Workload

Workload has been cited as a feature militating against professional development by academics in other studies (Cilliers and Herman, 2010; Clarke and Reid, 2013; Boud and

Brew, 2013; Kahn, 2009). This was described as a problem at all universities, with too many students being cited as a problem at HAI2, HAI3, HDI5 and UOT8. This is despite the extremely varied staff:student ratios, evident in Table 1.

At HDI6 the large numbers creates a problem for assessing students:

And there are just so many (students), even the assessment is not of such good quality because you cannot give them discussion kind of questions, because you will be reading ... until you die. (HDI6)

A heavy teaching load and a busy schedule can constrain take-up of opportunities to develop professionally:

The PG Dip Higher Education courses are offered during the day. I teach a large undergraduate class with two (repeated) lectures in the mornings and 3-hr practicals in the afternoon, so I'm not available at the scheduled PG Dip course times. I barely have time to do my own lecture preparation and marking. (HAI3)

One of the causes of excessive workload is a shortage of posts, which was mentioned at HAI2, HAI3 and UOT7. The existence of staff without proper teaching contracts, who cannot access the institution's resources, was mentioned at HDI5 and the casualisation of staff teaching on the extended degree programmes was mentioned at HDI4. The administrative burden was particularly problematic at UOT7, UOT 8, HDI4, HDI5, and HDI6. At HDI6, for example, the case study report included descriptions of departments with no secretary to help with administering student records.

Excessive workload and lack of time was mentioned by some academics as a reason not to engage in professional development activities, whereas other academics noted a shortage of time, but indicated that this did not stop them from such engagement. Illustrative of this varied response to lack of time are two responses at HAI1:

Teaching large classes and lecturing a large number of weeks as well as trying to do some research makes it difficult to find additional time to engage in professional learning for teaching. I make the time because I think it is that important (HAI1)

Resources

With regard to resources for teaching, appreciation for conditions and infrastructure was expressed at HAI 2 and UOT 8. An academic at HAI2 expressed appreciation for the conditions in which she or he taught thus:

I can say in the [xxx] department I've got no complaint in terms of teaching. Our labs are well equipped. As you can see our lecture halls are well equipped and I think we've got a very good platform and things can only get better from here. So no there's nothing in my immediate environment that hinders my teaching. (HAI2)

Whilst the dimension of infrastructure and resources for teaching and learning were cited by colleagues across the range as retarding teaching and learning, this dimension was visibly more constraining at HDIs, for example:

...like the lecture venues that don't support a projector, I've actually done a workbook for students. I can actually show you the workbook that I did last year and so I give them lots of notes and stuff that they can follow in class. [in the absence of a microphone] I end up circling the lecture venues, so that everybody can get to hear me at some point in time. (HDI5)

Another aspect of resourcing is the technology required for administration of classes and assignments:

The admin of the lecturers is like an enormous drain. It comes back to IT connections because of course a lot of marks, submissions and things like that, the lecturers are doing this and then if they lose the connection then they lose the information. (HDI 7)

According to Margaret Archer (2000), constraints – except the most dire - can be circumnavigated. In many instances the opportunity cost is just that much higher, so that although lecturers may be willing to exercise agency and fight against difficult conditions, this will reduce energy and enthusiasm. The following statement is a literal example of 'expense' that an individual may go to in order to exercise agency in order to circumnavigate constraints. A lecturer at UOT7 explains having to deal with the lack of physical amenities at the institution:

I often buy things out of my own pocket because it's quicker, it's easier and it enables me to teach in the way that I want to teach. I don't begrudge that money because it's part of me developing the students and I'm tired of asking for things. (UOT7)

A sentiment expressing determination to work against or in spite of the constraints was expressed well at UOT8:

Look, it's hard to say the environment is conducive, but I think we have the attitude to make it conducive, we look beyond the potholes. (UOT8)

Thus one aspect of context that has not featured significantly in the international literature on teaching and teaching enhancement is resourcing and material conditions. This has however been highlighted in relation to one South African university by Bozalek and Dison (2013) and another by Quin (2012). It appears to be a significant feature of several South African universities.

Individual properties

Archer (1996) makes a distinction between culture and structure, which are given and objective, and personal emergent properties of individuals. These might be properties emerging from an individual's own educational biography, social class, cultural capital or even biology, and can include their sense of agency and motivation. Motivation featured strongly in many case study reports (HAI2, HAI2, UOT7, UOT8). Academics across the range of institutions indicated how much they enjoy teaching:

I love teaching - not 'like' teaching, I 'love' teaching, that's my life. (UOT7)

I love teaching. I love it, I really love it, yeah! I do. I find it energising. I like young people and I sometimes pull hair out of my head, I sometimes feel the generation gap but actually I am into teaching, it is an activity that I enjoy. (HAI2)

These comments demonstrate the link between an individual's concerns and commitments, the self-fulfilment derived from appreciative work contexts and sense of self and agency, which in these instances, are reinforcing in a virtuous cycle. They demonstrate intrinsic or non-monetary, rather than extrinsic or instrumental motivation.

Thus individual properties play a role in individuals sustaining themselves as good teachers, such that they become or remain good teachers. Here is an example of a lecturer who is driven to continuously enhance his or her performance:

I don't think that I've now reached a pinnacle and I'm a good teacher. I just know that I need to keep improving because I need to keep responding to the students who are different every year and I take student feedback very seriously. (UOT7)

Individual properties are not always examples of positive attributes such as self- efficacy or confidence, or stubborn determination to go against the constraints. An academic at HAI3 chose to attend various professional development opportunities out a sense of ‘alienation’ and lack of support in his or her home department.

Discussion and Conclusion

The data covers a range of factors and trends influencing being and becoming good teachers at eight South African universities. Several themes emerge as salient. One of these is the well- known and well-documented tension between research and teaching, due partly to the incentivisation of research outputs, and to universities’ desires to increase their academic reputation. Due to the burgeoning of international ratings systems, academic reputation is believed to be enhanced via research outputs, rather than by other achievements, such as efficient graduation rates or the achievement of appropriate graduate attributes at a particular institution. This is aggravated in the South African context by the need to enhance academics’ own qualifications in their disciplines, described in this article as the need to ‘catch up’. In the long term this seems appropriate, but in the short term there is a cost in pursuing this at the expense of enhancing academics’ teaching abilities, given the participation and graduation rates described in earlier sections of the article.

A second salient theme is that of individual academics’ commitment and sense of agency, often in relatively non-conducive conditions. More could be done to acknowledge this commitment, both at the national and the institutional level, and in particular at institutions which are not well resourced, as comments from academics in the latter sections under ‘findings’ attest.

A third theme is the non-formal learning conditions which influence good teaching and professional development. These include interpersonal relations, levels of functionality, conduciveness of climate, and most importantly, issues of infrastructure and material conditions. It was noted in the findings that issues of infrastructure and material conditions appear more salient as constraining, at historically disadvantaged institutions.

The various dimensions of institutional context that constrain or enable good teaching appear interrelated, each with the potential to influence an individual or group to act in a certain way. These exist in relation to each other. For example, national initiatives such as curriculum reform, mergers or incentives to reward research, influence what happens at a

particular institution, subject to how leaders at various levels at that institution respond, further enabling or retarding developments. At the next level the institutional policies and initiatives are implemented or stymied, depending on how senior and middle level managers implement them or fail to implement them. Finally, the individual lecturers as agents interact with students, choosing to improve their teaching or not, and to participate in professional development opportunities or not. Their actions, at a collective level, generate further iterations of the culture and structure, such that a university may be dominated by a culture of commitment and renewal, or a culture of disillusion and disaffection. This is why Archer uses the word “interplay” to denote the interaction between structure and culture, and individual actions. Furthermore, according to Archer (1995, 1996) structural or cultural features have causal powers in that they possess the potential to constrain or enable change, depending on how individuals respond to them and on how features interact (Elder-Vass, 2010). In the case studies various structural or cultural features, such as lack of facilities, work overload or incentives to produce research outputs, were mostly constraining. The directions of these potential influences are indicated in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: influence of systemic features and individual properties

Systemic structural and cultural features	
Level	Feature
Macro	National and international networks and initiatives
	Institutional policy environment
	Provision of professional development opportunities
Meso	Informal learning
	Culture
	Organisational climate
Micro	Student responses
	Workload
	Resources
Individual Properties	

The intention of this article has not been to highlight functionality or dysfunctionality in any particular institution, nor to demonstrate what good practice may be. It has rather been to delineate dimensions of context, and to tease out the various aspects of an institution that may be shown to enable or constrain quality teaching. One implication of this delineation is that the literature on conducive environments in higher education does not go far enough, as it does not take sufficiently into account the role of work conditions, functionality, infrastructure and resources for teaching. This is crucial in resource-constrained contexts or contexts of extreme inequality. A second implication is that policy and funding initiatives in a country like South Africa should take into account that professional development occurs or is influenced by a range of contextual features, only one of which is actual provision of formal opportunities for professional development. This formal provision is valuable and necessary, but other dimensions might be equally or more important in certain contexts. This discussion also begs the question: to what extent is the enhancement of teaching quality in higher education in this country served by policies and funds targeting formal teaching enhancement provision, as opposed to for example general functionality and resources?

Whilst all the dimensions highlighted in this article featured in all the case study reports, and whilst certain issues were found to be a constraint or enablement in all cases (for example workload or emphasis on research) the manner in which these played out differed. Certain features, for example material conditions, were mentioned across the range of institutions but were depicted as constraints more often or more intensely in universities seen as less privileged. This is interesting, and somewhat in contrast with the observation made by Crawford in a study across institutional contexts in the UK, where she concludes that ‘an institution’s historical context is not necessarily a significant influence’ (2010: 198) on their professional development. This seems to suggest that if one is genuinely in search of features that tend to constrain or enable good teaching and professional development, a study across contexts, such as this multi-site study, is necessary, and furthermore, that studies in resource-constrained conditions are as important as studies that take place in well-resourced settings. This underscores the call by Connell (2007) for social science (and thus education) to be informed by ‘southern theory’.

The dimensions discussed in this article could be used as a set of dimensions for a strategic discussion on enhancement of teaching quality at a particular institution (or in a country, for that matter). The data are not able to demonstrate the relationships between these dimensions, for example which factors might be necessary or sufficient, or which are more

fundamental than others, thus what might be priority issues at particular institutions? For some academics poor teaching conditions or high work volume might be perceived as absolutely constraining, whereas for others, these are irritants to be circumvented. Is it the case that there are conditions, which only become severely constraining when combined with other constraining conditions? Similarly, are there constraining conditions which might be ameliorated by other enabling conditions at a particular institution? These are issues for further investigation. One measure by which constraining conditions are ameliorated or mediated, is individuals' sense of agency, informed by their personal concerns or commitments, that drive them to achieve their personal or professional goals (Archer, 2000). The data contained in this study supports the claim by Kahn, Qualter and Young (2012) that social realism can bring together the seemingly disparate psychological and socio-cultural perspectives. An important set of questions for further research pertain to the issue of personal properties. The role of properties such as cultural capital, self-efficacy or motivation, and how these interact, requires further investigation, if we are serious about enhancing teaching quality in higher education - in particular in resource constrained contexts.

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Bionote

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