



Navigating barriers to academic professional development in Zimbabwe: a qualitative analysis of academics' experiences

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Abstract

In Zimbabwe, universities have established Teaching and Learning Centres to address issues of teaching quality which have become a source of concern. However, programmes designed and developed in these centres have experienced limited uptake from members of faculty thereby threatening the quality of teaching and learning. This study aims to explore the reasons for this low uptake of academic professional developed programmes from the lived experiences of lecturers. The study was framed by two theories, namely constructivism and adult learning theory. In terms of methodology, the qualitative case research approaches were used to collect data through open-ended semi-structured interviews. The population of the study was lecturers in institutions of higher learning from which 20 lecturers were purposely sampled from two conveniently sampled case study institutions. For data analysis, identification of themes was done through transcription and thematical analysis of data. The study revealed that departmental workloads, time, and pressure to do research made lecturers not to prioritize training in academic professional development. It also came out that lecturers were not consulted in the development of training programmes and that workshops clashed with scheduled academic commitments of lecturers. It was recommended that needs analysis of lecturers should be conducted to inform the workshop programmes as well as having policies that are clear on workload balance and time for support staff development.

Keywords: Academic professional development, academic developers, quality teaching and learning

Background of the study

Universities have the potential to be drivers of economic and social development of any country the world over including Zimbabwe (Boom, Canning, and Chan 2000; Cole, 2022; Newman, 2023). Its role in knowledge economies and development of 21st centuries skills in developing countries has heightened its importance (Galeas, 2024; Weber, 2011; Yadav, 2024). Such evidence is demonstrated by the level of investments in the higher education sector by both developing and developed economies (Mao, Chen, and Wang, 2024; Oganode, Olowonefa, and Suleiman, 2024; Psacharopolous, 1998; Shava, 2020). The impact level of higher education (HE) depends on its type and quality (Guedes, 2023; Kapur and Crowley, 2008). The higher education quality is one of the major threats of universities' contribution to national development in

developing countries (Boughey, 2012; Goczek, Witkowska, and Witkowska, 2021; Inamorato, et al., 2019; UNESCO, 2011). Cited challenges that have threatened higher education quality in Zimbabwe include the following among others aged professors being replaced by junior academics (Mugimu, 2010; Mushemeza, 2016; Shava, 2020), lack of digital skills among lecturers to leverage delivery through educational technologies, large and diversified student population as well as poor funding (Teferra and Altbach, 2004; Shava, 2020). The impact of these challenges on HE's capacity to contribute towards Zimbabwe's sustainable development is significant (Mukwambo, 2019). Studies by Shava et al., (2021) have shown that low quality university education in Zimbabwe has constrained its ability to reach the SDG4 including the aspiration of Zimbabwe's Agenda 2030. In addition, Mukwambo (2019) found out that, in

Zimbabwe, low quality teaching and learning impacted negatively on expected benefits such as economic outcomes and human capital formation among graduates. To address teaching quality challenges, Zimbabwe universities established Teaching and Learning Centres to champion academic professional development for lecturers, (Gosling, 2007; Jacob, et al., 2007; Inmorato, et al., 2019; Ward and Selreslar, 2012). The German Development Foundation (DSE) funded the first academic development initiatives in Zimbabwe State Universities in the early 1980s where the was to capacitate lecturers with higher education pedagogical skills ((Materu, 2005); Kara, 2020; Weinman, et al., 2020) and enhance a sense of agency to meet the needs of a diversified student population (Brookshire, 2015; Marques and Xavier, 2020). However, lecturers have shown limited interest and uptake of staff development programmes run in these T&LCs. The consequence of this development is perpetuation of the problem of low quality teaching and learning in universities. So low quality graduate output is likely to persist in universities which threatens Zimbabwe's development agenda particularly attainment of a middle-income economy which is a major pillar of its VISION 2030. Elsewhere some studies have been conducted that showed that institutional conditions impeded the development of APD in universities (Boughey, 2008; Quinn, 2012; Volbrecht, 2003) but none has been conducted in Zimbabwe. In this regard, the purpose of this study was to investigate barriers behind low uptake of APD programmes as experienced by lecturers in Zimbabwean universities. The study addressed the following main research question: What are the major barriers that influence lecturers not to take up academic professional development programmes offered in Teaching and Learning Centres?

Problem statement

Challenges experienced in higher education in Zimbabwe, particularly the quality of teaching has threatened its potential to contribute towards the country's development. To address the challenge of lecturer teaching quality Teaching and Learning Centres (T&LCs) have been establishment to champion professional development of academics. However, the training programmes have experienced limited uptake by

lecturers resulting in the status quo of low teaching quality in Zimbabwe State Universities. This is a concerning threat to the development agenda of Zimbabwe given the expected contribution of higher education to it.

Aim of the study

To find out barriers to successful uptake of APD programmes by lecturers in Zimbabwe universities.

Research Question

The following research question guided this study.

What are the major barriers that influence low uptake of academic professional programmes by lecturers?

Theoretical framework

The study was guided by two theories, namely: constructivism and adult learning theory.

Constructivist theory

Constructivism as a paradigm is a theory about how people learn. Ontologically, it emphasizes the way people actively construct their notions of reality through experiencing things and reflecting on these experiences (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Schwandt, 1997). The theory therefore has direct application to APD. Constructivist view the participant to be active in the construction of meaning and knowledge (Amineh and Isl, 2015). Equally, a constructivist teacher should create opportunities for students to interrogate their assumptions and beliefs and those of their classmates (Gray, 1994).

There are implications for APD arising from this. The first is that a constructivist practitioner creates situations that challenge the assumptions on which traditional lecturing and learning approaches are based for academics to construct responsive programmes with relevant knowledge content. Second, in constructivism APD practioneers should contribute through concepts of cognitive apprenticeship, scaffolding, tutoring, and communities of practice (Brown, 1994; Rogoff, 1998). Academic practitioners as constructivist teachers should draw on academics' (as their students or participants) knowledge and

experiences in the construction of staff development programmes content (Mvududu and Thiel-Burgess, 2012). The importance of culture and context in institutions is emphasized in social constructivism theory (Cheng, et al., 2008; Vygotsky, 1978) as APD programmes are developed with the necessary knowledge and skills meant specifically for that institutional context. Constructivism theory serves as a framework on which APD practitioners can use it to make decisions on programme design, development, and implementation.

Adult Learning Theory

Adult learning theory or andragogy is defined by Knowles (1998) as “the art and science of helping adults learn”. Key elements that characterise andragogy are that adult learners are self-directed and that they are independent learners who do not depend on teachers (Briggs and Sommefeldt, 2002; Cheetham and Chivers, 2001; and Rogers, 2002) and that adult learners have immense experience that can be used as a resource in a teaching and learning situation (Knowles 1998). Using these key assumptions of adult learning theory to issues of APD and research in professional development PD practice is appropriate because academics as self-directed experts have a wealth of knowledge and experience in their fields of specialisation. In such situations, APD programmes would draw directly on academics’ expertise knowledge and experience. Expanding on andragogical principles, Knowles (1998) argued that adult learners have a “psychological need” for self-direction in the process of learning and tend to resist learning that is not supportive of their learning needs and goals. Self-directed concept is a crucial concept in the development of APD. According to Merriam (2001), a learner’s capacity to be self-directed should be one of the philosophical goals of self-directed learning that should be developed through APD. Professional development initiatives in universities in Australia (Chalmers and Fraser, 2022; Herbet and Danker, 2023; Patfield, et al., 2022), the UK (Shaw, 2018; Solomon, et al., 2023; Sutherland, 2018), and South Africa (Lubinga, Maramura and Masiya, 2023; Matope and Baleni, 2014; Nkalane, Makena and Mpahla, 2024) are currently promoting development of academics’ capacities in self-directed teaching.

In adult learning theory adult readiness to learn is determined by the need to know or do something. Also change has influence on adult learning. In an adult learning situation change can trigger readiness to learn (Ho, 2024). So online teaching and other related changes brought about by digital technological are changes whose pedagogies are imperatives that influence academics to take up APD programmes.

In considering adult learning theory, the investigation explored whether programmes were developed in line with andragogical principles that put the characteristics of the adult learner at the centre than have these programmes developed by academic practitioners according to their predetermined ideas and frameworks. These two theories are applicable in this study because they have common principles that can be used in the development, implementation, and evaluation of APD programmes.

Both theories subscribe to active learning in which tasks and problem-solving activities are part of the educational encounter. The teacher’s responsibility in both theories is to provide students with challenges for them to solve. Students are not passive recipients in which teachers’ responsibility is to transmit knowledge.

Review of related literature

According to adult learning literature (Ausburn, 2011; Wlodkowiei, 2004), professional development must involve academics as adult learners in content selection and planning of APD programmes if the developed programmes are to have relevance. Knowles (1980) argues that for professional development programmes to be effective, personal and professional experiences of adult learners should be taken into account. This calls for academic developers to convince participants of the importance of the material and learning opportunities in the programmes they create.

The role of academic development is the enhancement of student learning through improved teaching (Brow, and Grant, 2012; Geertsema, 2016). The “professionalisation movement” of academia through academic development in the UK experienced some constraints such as “a too-slow take-up of ideas”

because academics did not conceive themselves as 'professionals' (Gibbs, 2013; (Blackmore and Blackwell, 2006)) but as disciplinary experts. Southerland (2018) talked about the pull between teaching and research responsibilities as this tension affect the academic development project (Reid and Peto, 2013). Academics cannot prioritize development of teaching over research development and growth because of the rewards associated with research. Southerland (2018) acknowledges the challenges academics face in balancing these two roles: teaching and research. Samuels (2013) suggests that academic development practice should promote disciplinary growth through scholarship of teaching rather than traditional methods such as workshops, and seminars. Rather academic development should foster synergy between teaching and research.

Focusing on the needs of academics improves the relevance of an academic professional development programme. According to Archambault, Leary and Rice (2022) and Kilago, et al., (2024), the key factor that contributed to an APD programme's effectiveness was programme content that incorporated the needs of teaching academics. Cook-Sather (2020) and Tight (2022) recently argued for staff development programmes that are constructed in a way that considers the voices of academics and their various needs for the programmes to be effective and impactful. Staff development programmes could, for example, equip academics with skills in reflecting on their teaching with the objective of improving choice of instructional approaches appropriate for teaching a specific discipline (Ross-Gordon, 2012; Timperley and Schick, 2022). If programmes are properly structured, links between teaching methodologies and discipline knowledge can occur effectively.

Developing academics into university teachers through academic development is a challenge that universities must respond to as part of the answer to improve the quality of teaching. Gore and Rosser (2022) propose that systematically planned and implemented APD programmes provide the answer. However, Grunfield, et al., (2015) and Valovira and Maunevo (2022) warn that there are risks in running APD programmes in an ad hoc manner without plans. Fairbanks (2021) proposes that

staff development programmes should treat academics like adult learners and use adult teaching and learning methodologies that promote learning from their experience. As a result, an effective professional development programme is a practical endeavour in which academics use their experience to solve classroom-based problems.

Adult learning theory provides for adult learning emphasizes importance of presenting programme content in a manner participants can understand (Marschall, 2012). So, for staff development to be both a meaningful and a productive endeavour, it should promote scholarship of teaching among academics that emphasizes the connection between the practice of teaching and learning and disciplinary research (Patfield, et al., (2022)). Also, academic professional development can improve APD programme relevance by considering for inclusion issues about students' diversity and their needs in higher education as well as the role of educational technology in teaching their disciplines (Dystart and Weckrl, 2015).

APD should draw from adult learning theory by providing a suitable learning environment in which academics as a community of practice can reflect on teaching challenges and share solutions. These communities of practice would be a basis for benchmarking of mentorship of adult learners, their mental orientation, and the development of academic peer ship (Fairbanks, 2021). These are important concepts associated with the application of adult learning theories (Ross-Gordon, 2011). Similarly, Knowles (1980) theory of andragogy says adults would want to apply new information to solve real life problems. The implication is that APD programmes should make learning about teaching an exciting project about discovery (Bowma-Gearhart, 2012). University professors that are successful work on theory to impact practice (Kennedy, 2014). As a result, an effective APD programme should encourage participants to integrate theory and practice.

Methods

The study was undertaken at two state universities X and Y that had set Teaching and Learning Centres to conduct staff development

programmes throughout the year with the objective of improving lecturers' teaching quality in faculties. However, these APD workshops experience low uptake by lecturers thereby perpetuating low teaching quality in faculties. The research question pursued in this study was "What are the main barriers that influence lecturers to participate in APD programmes?"

The study was approached qualitatively using a multi-case study design. In-depth unstructured interviews were used to collect data from the participants. According to Leedy and Ormord (1980) a case study enables an investigator to conduct an in-depth investigation of small number of cases to get an understanding of phenomenon. Ten participants were purposively sampled from each university which was conveniently selected. The participants were made up of 1 Centre Director, 2 Deans, 2 professors and 5 lecturers from each university giving a total of 20 participants from the two case study institutions. Involvement in APD workshops was a key condition for selection apart from lecturer's availability and willingness to participate voluntarily. Participants were free to withdraw from the study without any conditions. In-depth unstructured interviews were used to collect data from the participants. The interview questions were based on lecturers' experiences and challenges they encountered in participating in APD workshops. A digital voice recorder was used in all interviews. In addition, document review in Teaching and Learning Centres related to the problem under study was also used. Triangulation of data from participants was conducted to ensure credibility of information.

Data analysis method

Because of the study's qualitative nature, six steps of the theme analysis technique were used. For detecting, analysing, and reporting patterns within data, these procedures are commonly employed in qualitative research data analysis methods (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Each conversation was documented using the interview transcription. Each transcript was individually read, and topics were coded. To discover and characterize themes that emerged from the data, inductive and deductive approaches were applied. The data was then used to finalize primary themes.

Findings and Discussion

Five themes emerged from the analysis of the qualitative data from the two universities X and Y. The themes that emerged are lack of consultation, value of adult experiences, programme content, unplanned programmes, and student adversity.

Lack of consultation

Most of the participants pointed out that they were not consulted in the development of APD programmes. Participants P₁, P₃, P₄, P₅, and P₆ in university X, for example, were against the practice, whereas participants P₁₁, P₁₂, P₁₄, and P₁₅ in university Y expressed similar concerns but stated that the programmes were beneficial. They were also concerned that their training needs were overlooked. According to the Centre Director of the Teaching and Learning Unit, lecturers ignored the Centre's request for feedback.

Below is what participants P₁ and P₅ of university X said:

Participant P₁

No attempt was made to consult, or invitation made. There is no communication. Facilitators never consulted faculty members in developing programmes.

Participant P₅

There is need to consult departments. That will help someone (facilitator) to know our needs.

Similar sentiments were expressed in university Y where participants said:

Participant P₁₄

Personally, I was not consulted. One knows one's shortcomings. Consultation will address specific needs and problems of participants

Participant P₁₅

Personally, I wouldn't say I was consulted. Currently it's a weakness.

A study of the above results shows that academic development practitioners in both universities designed and developed APD

programmes without consulting participants. Practitioners as facilitators did not consider teaching inadequacies of academics to be addressed by the professional programmes they designed and developed. A “one size fits all” approach was employed in the design and development of professional programmes and this resulted in not addressing the needs of members of faculty. (Elliot, et al., 2015; Hagedoom, et al., 2023; Hubner, et al., 2021). This lack of collaboration tends to yield programmes that are irrelevant and might not benefit academic staff (Wilson 2012). Scholars like West, et al., (2020), Quinn (2014) and Kathryn, et al., (2018) advocate that practitioners should engage academics in critical debate about solving challenges faced by universities particularly understanding students’ learning needs and how to support them in faculties. Professional development programmes that are not client driven might fail to capacitate beneficiaries because of lack of relevance. Similar findings were noted in Australia by Ashton-Hay and Chanock (2023) in which lack of collaboration between development practitioners and lecturers was found to be a constraint in the development of effective APD programmes. The emerging implication is that development and design of APD programmes that does not capture participants’ voices particularly their needs, experience poor commitment and uptake by academics. Practitioners, as key agency (Archer, 1998) of APD, are not creating spaces for academics to participate in the design and development of professional programmes. The implication is that, developed programmes would be less effective in developing academics into university teachers by missing to address their pedagogical needs (Slander and Stigmar, 2023; Ward and Selrelar, 2012). Critical realists like Giroux (2004) call for change in such approaches. In this regard academic development practitioners and academics (as learners) should be co-developers of relevant APD programmes that can empower academics to become transformative intellectuals. If such collaboration is missed, APD is likely to experience limited development and low uptake by academics.

Value of adult experiences

Contrary to some participants who indicated that they were not consulted in

developing APD programmes, participants P₁₄ and P₁₅ of university Y expressed that their experiences were considered in the design and development of APD activities. P₁₄ highlighted that “they bring in experiences, we need to use” while P₁₅ added his voice to the debate by commenting that facilitators drew heavily on participants’ experiences. He eloquently expressed his point thus:

Experiences of the practitioners (facilitators) and academics (learners) were used. Experiences became part and parcel of both. Experiences were acknowledged.

Responses from participants P₁₄ and P₁₅ above suggest appreciation of being considered in the processes of staff development where their experiences formed part of the professional development programme. Adult learning theory advocates that, adults have an accumulated reservoir of valuable learning experiences that can be used as a resource in teaching (Caruth, 2014; Nichols, 2005; Knowles, 1990). Teaching academics is different from teaching children because they bring to the faculties life experiences that can be used to solve teaching problems in departments (Briggs and Sommefeldt, 2002). Valuing these experiences by including them in APD programmes will not only enhance programme content relevance but will also generate academics’ interests in the programmes. From a constructivist approach, this is also empowering to academics since valuing their experiences in the design and development of APD training programmes promotes creation of knowledge and skills between facilitators and academics (Aminch and Isi, 2015). So, academics are motivated to participate in programmes in which they feel that their experiences and contributions are valued and respected (Bellington, 1988; Putch and Kaliannan, 2016).

Communication Skills and ICT as knowledge gaps to be included in APD.

Some participants suggested that professional development programmes should address knowledge gaps of trainees where communications skills was singled out. In expressing his point P₃ of university X stated that:

Lecturers who cannot teach in English resort to communicating in the mother

tongue. The result in accuracy, and subject rigour is changed.

P₄ of the same case study institution, identified ICT as an area to be included when programmes are being developed to strengthen lecturer effectiveness in multimodal delivery of content. He also suggested that “ICT could be embedded in in all APD programmes.

However, in university Y participants were more concerned about ICT training than communication skills. This is what they said;

P₁₁ recounted that:

I need IT training. Some of my students need help in this. I can't provide a hands-on approach to it.

P₁₄ also said:

APD programmes should provide IT training. My sentiment is that I should have higher knowledge in ICT. Some of my students appear quite competent.

P₁₅ voiced pedagogical concerns and said:

Teaching online needs us as lecturers to be conversant with digital technologies. Our facilitators should assist.

The excerpts above show that participants view that communication skills and ICT should form an integral part of professional development programme to empower academics in their teaching role.

On ICT, results reveal that a disturbing omission was made by APD programme designers by not including use of digital technologies in delivery of lecturers or tutorials. Studies by Cadez, et al., (2015), Engelbert and Ankiewicz (2016) and Dystart (2015) confirmed that some academics could not deliver their courses using modern technologies despite the potential of the use of technology to raise the quality of teaching because they lacked requisite skills and competencies in ICT. It is crucial to empower lecturers to know their subject areas as well as and its appropriate teaching approach (including digital) suitable to engage students meaningfully (Kim and Kim, 2018; King and Newman, 2004). Academics as adult learners will be internally

motivated to study ICT because of its value in a digitized world. Use of ICT creates an educational environment that is engaging and content-relevant in terms of experience and facilitates critical thinking and higher order learning (Orak and Al-Kresheh 2021)). The new generation of students found in universities has high computer literacy and so university lecturers should be capacitated to make use of educational technologies in delivering lectures (Calliers, 2017; de la Harpe and Radloff, 2008; UNESCO, 2011). In short, ICT has emerged as a bona fide professional development area that should form part of APD programme content to meet training needs of academics.

Unstructured and unplanned APD programmes

In both universities X and Y participants were concerned about unplanned scheduling of APD programmes by the facilitators. In university X, participant P₁ mentioned that the Teaching and Learning Centre tended to “have informal and ad-hoc arrangement in inviting academics to come for staff professional development programmes”. Similarly, P₁₃ of university Y was frustrated by “lack of frequency” and “unstructured manner” in which the programmes were presented. Participant P₂ of university X commended that:

The programme is unstructured and lacks detail. It's a crush programme. I remember attending one session of the programme. in 2020. Ever since, I have not attended.

Participant P₅ in the same university was more emphatic thus:

Facilitators rarely timetable their training programmes in time. My experience is that they lack focus on what they want to train.

This suggests that participants were dissatisfied by the ad hoc APD programmes that were unstructured and imposed on them. Results show that the participant lost interest in attending APD programmes that were not organized. This is contrary to constructivist theory, in which dialogue and collaboration is encouraged between lecturer (academic practitioner) and student (academic) so as to come up with attractive programmes. According to social critical theory (Steinburg and

Kincheloe, 2010; Zens, 2004) this is also undemocratic and disempowering to academics who are supposed to play key roles in addressing higher education curriculum challenges. Academics are likely to be less motivated to attend imposed APD programmes which do not address their pedagogical needs relevant for teaching their disciplines. Similar findings were made by Barry (2023) and Bennett, et al., (2018) who found out that university professors experienced challenges in changing their “old modelled academic teaching approaches”. Also, Gosling (2009) and Ward and Selreslar (2012) in their studies, confirmed that teaching practice is likely to improve if university teachers spend more time engaged in APD programmes run by academic development practitioners. So, APD programmes that are not regularly conducted and are ad hoc are likely to be less effective compared to those that are well structured and organized (Tyann and Lee, 2009).

Conclusion

The study revealed that departmental workloads, time, and pressure to do research made lecturers not to prioritise participation in academic professional development. The study also revealed that lecturers were not consulted in the design of training programmes by practitioners. Findings also showed that staff development programmes were imposed and unplanned thereby clashing with scheduled academic departmental commitments of lecturers. This invited criticism and negative attitude among lecturers.

Communication skills and ICT also emerged from lecturers' voices as knowledge gap areas that could be included in APD development.

Recommendations

The study recommends that academic practitioners should consult lectures in the design and development of professional development programmes for them to address their teaching needs. Academics' needs and experiences need to be part of the input towards the development of APD programmes to make them relevant and legitimate. It is further recommended that favourable institutional conditions such as

balanced workloads and time are created through policy to support academic professional development.

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