

Exploring critical theories and methods to enhance academic development as a profession with status in South African higher education.

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Abstract

This paper responds to the thinkpiece by Hlengwa in which she argues that transformation initiatives in the higher education sector need to “navigate the complex organizational cultures of the academy” and trouble “the nature of academic work, academic identity and career pathways” (p.2). Our focus academic staff development (ASD) and academic staff developers (ASDs) in the South African Higher Education context.

ASD is diverse and exists in the spaces between academic disciplines and departments and institutional leadership and management. ASDs contribute, *inter alia*, to activities to enhance teaching and learning: conceptualising, designing and facilitating workshops, informal or formal programmes on various aspects of the teaching role of academics; induction programmes for new academics, supporting curriculum development processes, managing and supporting teaching awards and fellowship programmes and engaging in the scholarship of teaching and learning. If ASDs are to make a meaningful contribution to the professional learning of academics they need specialized knowledges that can help to ameliorate the current high-participation-high failure/high-dropout scenario in South African higher education (Scott 2010). They also require the capacity to devise “new and innovative ways of responding to the changing academic” context (Hlengwa, p. 3) and be able to work with academics who may not always be convinced that higher education practices need to change, in response to diverse student cohorts and academic needs.

The authors are members of a national project tasked with exploring ways to enhance the field of ASD in SA and will therefore examine what (should) constitute(s) the shared knowledge and practice base for ASD while recognizing that different institutional contexts are likely to require different approaches to ASD. In addition, the project team must understand the ways in which diverse histories have shaped institutional structures and cultures and what this conditioning context means for ASD.

This paper will explore what theoretical and methodological tools will enable the kind of critical close-up research the project team will need to conduct and to prepare for the project and as it proceeds so that they are able to contribute meaningfully to the stockpot of powerful knowledge that will enhance the field of AD as a profession with status in the South African higher education context.

Keywords

academic staff development, institutional contexts, powerful knowledge, practice.