

What close-up research is needed for responsive academic development practices?

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Abstract

This paper is situated in the field of academic development. The most often cited definition of the field as practised in South Africa is: “Academic Development is an open set of practices concerned with improving the quality of teaching and learning in higher education and training through integrating student, staff, curriculum, institutional and research development” (Volbrecht & Boughey, 2004:58). Although it has been a useful definition, it does not signal the importance of context. As pointed out by Hlengwa (HECU Thinkpiece 2020), “Higher Education is called to respond to multiple, complex, and urgent transformation imperatives”. There have been significant cultural and structural upheavals in the South African higher education context in the last 15 years. Cultural changes include a much greater concern for access *with success* for Black students; the need to balance issues of equity, redress, quality and development; and most recently the call to decolonise all aspects of higher education. Structural changes in the system include massification without the requisite increase in state funding; legislated institutional differentiation; institutional mergers, and changed student and staff demographics. All these changes have implications for the practice of academic development. The nature of these changes needs to be fully understood if the field wishes to contribute to a more socially and educationally just higher education system that takes account of the socio-economic realities in South Africa and how they impact on higher education.

To better understand what these changes mean for the field, this exploratory paper attempts to answer the following question: What are the issues in the broader context, specifically in South Africa, which the field of academic development has to respond to and that requires more close-up research? Our aim is to adopt a

critical approach which focuses on the interaction between “broad and macro analysis of the HE sector” and close-up research (Janja Komljenovic, HECU 10 Thinkpiece).

To develop a nuanced understanding of the most important contextual conditions that impact on the practice of academic development in South Africa we will analyse /examine existing close-up research on how higher education institutions and academic development practitioners have responded to the changes and challenges in the context. Most importantly, from our analysis of the literatures, we will set out to identify absences (Bhaskar 1993) in the practices of academic development in relation to the challenges in the context - particularly those that impact on teaching and learning.

Keywords

Academic development, South African context, responsiveness