



# Examining the Professional Excellence Programme: Inducting University Teachers into the Higher Education System in South Africa

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## ABSTRACT

The obligation to increase the standard of instruction and learning falls on academic developers. A crucial part of academic staff development at institutions of higher learning is the induction of academics who are primarily subject matter specialists without the pedagogical abilities to teach effectively in the higher education environment. This qualitative essay investigated how the Professional Excellence Programme (PEP) might be utilised as an induction Short Learning Programme (SLP) for new academics. After finishing the brief SLP, the inductees were given a questionnaire to evaluate the modules (Teaching and Learning, Curriculum Development, and Assessment in Higher Education) and qualitative data was gathered. The study was framed by Wegner's social learning theory. The research showed that the PEP programme can be an efficient programme to develop academics into university teachers. Since the SLP was accepted by all participants in the study, the study recommended that the Directorate of Teaching and Learning should develop the PEP programme into a credit-bearing postgraduate diploma in higher education at NQF Level 8, which is equivalent to an honours degree.

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## INTRODUCTION

Academic developers have the responsibility of ensuring that there is improvement in the theory, practice, originality and or standard of teaching and learning communities in higher education or post-secondary institutions.<sup>1</sup> As such, they are also involved in the induction of new academics. The Academic Induction Programme offers a secure environment to support transformative educational practice and develop student-centred learning, teaching, and assessment (LTA) practices that enable students to become engaged, responsible and critical learners and citizens. The induction programme at Walter Sisulu University (WSU) enhances new academic staff as university teachers, as part of their academic professional development. It is a compulsory programme for all new academics appointed on permanent as well as part-time fixed-term contract. The induction programme is funded by the University Capacity Development Grant (UCDG). As part of the induction programme, the University offers an SLP named PEP to all new academics. The programme introduces the new academic staff members to the higher education context and exposes them to constructive alignment principles. With a six-month duration, it is aimed at offering the new academics the opportunity to be competent in designing, developing and delivering meaningful teaching and learning experiences that

<sup>1</sup> Sharon J Flecknoe et al., "Redefining Academic Identity in an Evolving Higher Education Landscape," *Journal of University Teaching & Learning Practice* 14, no. 2 (2017): 2; Brenda Leibowitz, "Reflections on Academic Development: What Is in a Name?," *International Journal for Academic Development* 19, no. 4 (October 2, 2014): 357–60, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360144X.2014.969978>.

enhance student success. Through reflection and critical practice, this programme seeks to expand participants' theoretical and practical understanding of the nature of learning. It also aims to give participants a practical grasp of how to make it easier for students to access learning across the range of disciplines in higher education. All actions are taken in accordance with the institution's vision and goal statement, which is to be "An impactful, technology-infused African university."

PEP is thus structured according to three modules, namely Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, Curriculum Development in Higher Education, and Assessment in Higher Education. This article aims to give an overview of how the design and implementation of the PEP is enabling academics to drive the academic project in nuanced ways aligned with the WSU mission and vision. Apart from a review of the module structure, this article analyses feedback from qualitative data drawn from the first cohort of academics who participated in the SLP. An open-ended questionnaire will be used to draw feedback that was around the perceptions of academics on the relevance of the programme to their practice. Through this programme, academic socialisation and identity construction are enhanced among educators transitioning from professional experts to university teachers.<sup>2</sup> This paper thus focuses on how the induction of new academics through a structured professional excellence programme will enhance the capacitation of academics into the field of higher education. This programme acknowledges what Austin says that "on entry into the profession, teachers are socialised into the norms and needs of higher education", resulting in them gaining an "understanding of institutional policies and procedures and familiarise themselves with the organisational dynamics of their departments."<sup>3</sup> Induction through the PEP, at the university, enhances academic staff to become university teachers as part of their professional development. It also fosters the adoption of transformative student-centred educational practices shifting from the traditional teacher-centred teaching approaches. The programme explores student-centred LTA strategies that empower students to become active, responsible, and critical students and citizens. This paper is underpinned by Wenger's Social Learning Theory. This paper presents an analysis of qualitative data collected from academic inductees who were part of the first cohort of PEP. The data focuses on what they gained, what they found interesting, what was challenging, and suggestions for improvement of the SLP.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

As part of the capacitation of new academics and introduction to the new university context, workshops and short learning courses are envisioned to have marginally positive impacts on the practices of academics.<sup>4</sup> Unlike WSU, other universities provide postgraduate degrees in higher education to advance academics' expertise in a variety of relevant fields, including instruction, curriculum development, assessment, course evaluation, and postgraduate research supervision.<sup>5</sup> The academic induction programme at WSU has been going on for several years and is aimed at introducing newly appointed academics and non-academics to various university structures and cultures. PEP is a new developmental strategy that only caters for new academics. The institution under investigation was created by the amalgamation of Border Technikon, Eastern Cape Technikon, and the University of Transkei, and is a historically disadvantaged institution.<sup>6</sup>

"On entry into the profession, teachers are socialised into the norms and needs of higher education";<sup>7</sup> they gain an "understanding of institutional policies and procedures and familiarise themselves with the organisational dynamics of their departments."<sup>8</sup> The induction process is defined by Trowler and Knight as "professional techniques meant to assist the introduction of recruits to an organisation and to equip them with the necessary tools to perform effectively within it."<sup>9</sup> Sharp, poses, "How do professionals learn and develop?"<sup>10</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Fran Beaton, "How Do I Know Who I Am? Academic Professional Development, Peer Support, and Identity for Practitioners Who Teach," *International Journal for Academic Development* 27, no. 3 (July 3, 2022): 234–48, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360144X.2021.1910953>.

<sup>3</sup> Ann E Austin, "Supporting Junior Faculty through a Teaching Fellows Program.," *New Directions for Teaching and Learning* 50 (1992): 73–86; William K Jackson and Ronald D Simpson, "Mentoring New Faculty for Teaching and Research," *New Directions for Teaching and Learning* 1994, no. 57 (1994): 65–72.

<sup>4</sup> Sioux McKenna et al., "From Affirmative to Transformative Approaches to Academic Development," *Teaching in Higher Education* 27, no. 8 (November 17, 2022): 1005–17, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2022.2119077>.

<sup>5</sup> McKenna et al., "From Affirmative to Transformative Approaches to Academic Development."

<sup>6</sup> Government Gazette No. 25787 of 28 November 2003.

<sup>7</sup> Raphinos Alexander Chabaya, "Academic Staff Development in Higher Education Institutions: A Case Study of Zimbabwe State Universities" (University of South Africa, 2015), 86.

<sup>8</sup> Jackson and Simpson, "Mentoring New Faculty for Teaching and Research."

<sup>9</sup> Paul Trowler, and Peter Knight. "Organizational socialization and induction in universities: Reconceptualizing theory and practice." *Higher Education* 37, no. 2 (1999): 177-195, 178.

<sup>10</sup> Peter Knight, Jo Tait, and Mantz Yorke, "The Professional Learning of Teachers in Higher Education," *Studies in Higher Education* 31, no. 3 (June 2006): 319–39, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075070600680786>.

To him, this is the question around which induction revolves. Academic staff developers have the mandate to facilitate professional development initiatives for the initiation and growth of early academics.<sup>11</sup> Through the university statutes, the induction of academics is taken seriously; however, the impact of these induction programmes has not been researched at WSU. Mathibeni, views induction programmes as part of the orientation of newly appointed academics into teaching and learning practices at the university.<sup>12</sup> The induction programmes are a way of ensuring that academics align their practice to the university's vision and mission, culture and systems that enhance the delivery of quality teaching in the context of organisational socialisation.<sup>13</sup> The induction of academics has also been viewed as a way of addressing the problem of ageing academics, especially in the professoriate group. Thus, induction will equip early academics with skills to focus on research trajectories and teaching excellence.<sup>14</sup>

New academics include early-career academics and mid- and late-career academics who join the university. Given this setup, it is prudent that academic developers do not fall into the trap of designing a one-size-fits-all approach to the induction of academics. At Walter Sisulu University, all academics are expected to go through the induction process within the first year of their appointment.

The induction programme follows a blended structure with both online and in-person sessions. The programme is structured in two phases. The first phase is funded by the Human Resources division. Here, the institutional structures from the vice-chancellor, deputy vice-chancellors, senior directors and directors make presentations about their portfolios in terms of their mandates, policies and procedures. The sessions are meant to define the university project around Learning and Teaching, Research and Innovation, and Community Engagement. The second phase of the induction funded by the DLT, introduces academics to key aspects of the academic project. The DLT draws its funding from the UCDG. Specifically, the PEP programme prepares academics for the principles, methods, and practices used in higher education and research regarding learning, teaching, and assessment. The following diagram illustrates the induction programme's flow.

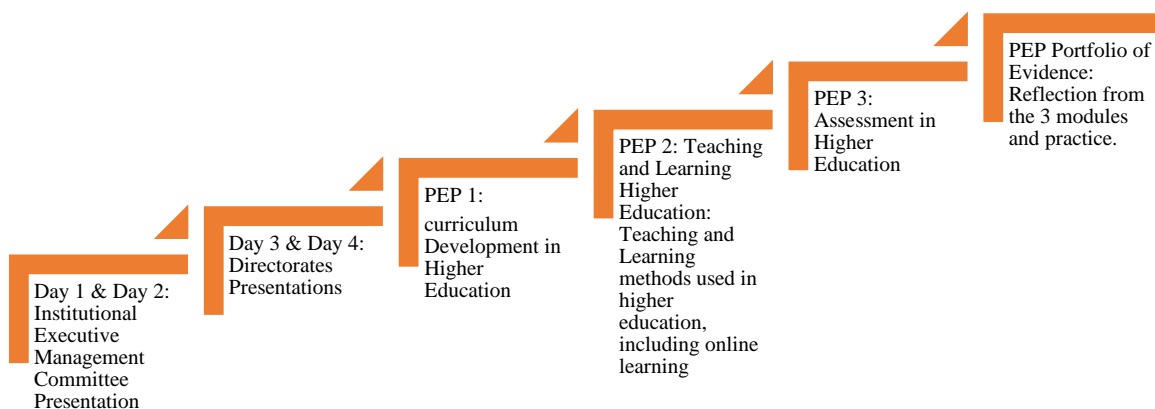


Figure 1: How the induction is structured: own source

According to CHE, "Enhanced student learning with a view to increasing the number of graduates with traits that are personally, professionally, and socially beneficial" is the definition of student success.<sup>15</sup> Without giving academics access to a structured SLP that gives them the chance to comprehend the nature of learning and teaching in higher education within the framework of WSU, some have criticised the induction of academics

<sup>11</sup> Kathy Luckett and Suellen Shay, "Reframing the Curriculum: A Transformative Approach," *Critical Studies in Education* 61, no. 1 (January 1, 2020): 50–65, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17508487.2017.1356341>.

<sup>12</sup> Matshidiso Faith Mathibedi, "The Contribution of an Education Induction Programme to Academic Professional Formation" (University of Pretoria, 2019).

<sup>13</sup> Mathibedi, "The Contribution of an Education Induction Programme to Academic Professional Formation"; Elaine Huber, Susan Hoadley, and Leigh Wood, "Teaching Induction Program: Framework, Design and Delivery," *Asian Social Science*, 2011.

<sup>14</sup> Kathryn A. Sutherland, "Precarious but Connected: The Roles and Identities of Academic Developers," *International Journal for Academic Development* 20, no. 3 (July 3, 2015): 209–11, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360144X.2015.1066343>; Andy Adcroft and David Taylor, "Support for New Career Academics: An Integrated Model for Research Intensive University Business and Management Schools," *Studies in Higher Education* 38, no. 6 (2013): 827–40.

<sup>15</sup> CHE. Framework for Institutional Quality Enhancement in the Second Period of Quality Assurance. Council of Higher Education, South Africa (2014), 12.

as being insufficient. Once teachers are equipped with the requisite skills to adapt to the university context and its culture of teaching, students' success will be guaranteed. It is the view of this paper that a well-planned programme for university teachers in the three areas of curriculum development, teaching and learning, and assessment, is a crucial step toward the university's quest for excellence. This will also allow the teachers to interact and socialise with their counterparts from the other campuses. The advantage of this is that it will help them create communities of practice that cut across the four campuses.

## THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

The four elements of Wenger's, social theory of learning communities of practice are identity learning as becoming, practice learning as doing, community learning as belonging and meaning learning as experience.<sup>16</sup> To underscore the necessity of knowing who instructors are and what they believe, the identity construct establishes a partnership between the social and the individual. This relationship highlights the personality within the activity of teaching. Figure 2 below shows the social theory of learning communities of practice.

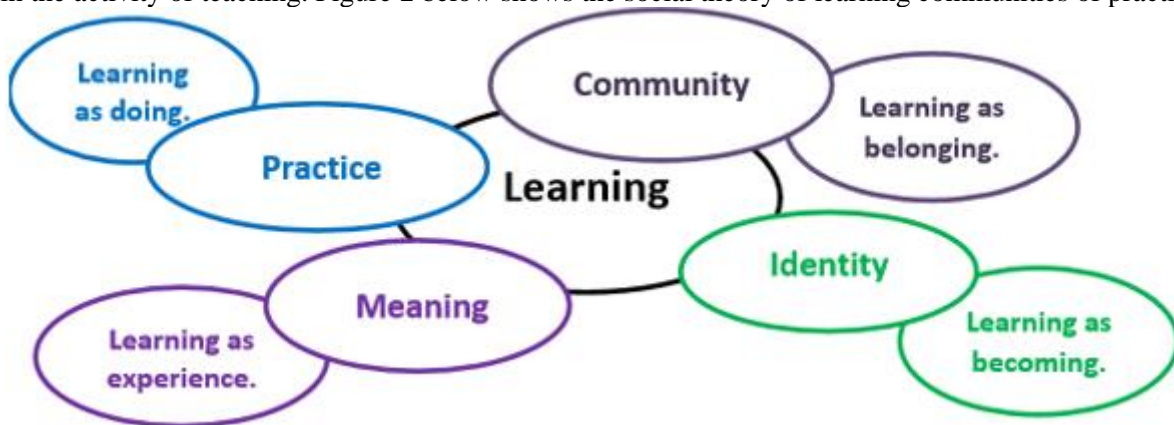


Figure 2: Social theory of learning communities of practice.<sup>17</sup>

Through socialisation with more experienced academics as part of the induction process, new academics are socialised to develop a learning identity in their disciplines. Developing a learning identity results in academics being able to reflect and act on the world to transform it.<sup>18</sup> As a result, the academic will establish an identity as a lifelong learner who is always willing to modify his or her practice when learning and becoming in these contexts. As Kolb and Kolb, put it, such an academic can self-reflect and accept an evaluation from others.<sup>19</sup> These can influence their learning identity, sometimes in unexpected subtle ways. Once the new academics have developed an identity in the university, they will view themselves as learners with a quest to be more engaged meaningfully in university activities. Mid-career academics and senior academics will be tasked to guide new academics as mentors. Mentoring incoming academics in various communities of practice tends to promote their engagement in worthwhile pursuits, which causes them to grow a sense of identity and belonging in various communities of practice. This is viewed by Sfard, as the process of joining and belonging to a community.<sup>20</sup> The integration of new academics into a new university context contributes to their complex identity building and is crucial for establishing academics within the university's culture and systems. This allows them to meaningfully exercise their agency within the different communities of practice in the university.

## Structuring PEP

Aligning induction to university teaching and learning agenda should be framed around transformative learning experiences. The inductee must be prepared to be transformed. The thrust must be to ensure that teachers must

<sup>16</sup> Etienne Wenger, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity* (Cambridge university press, 1999).

<sup>17</sup> Wenger, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*, 5.

<sup>18</sup> Wenger, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*; Alice Y. Kolb and David A. Kolb, "Experiential Learning Theory: A Dynamic, Holistic Approach to Management Learning, Education and Development," in *The SAGE Handbook of Management Learning, Education and Development* (1 Oliver's Yard, 55 City Road, London EC1Y 1SP United Kingdom : SAGE Publications Ltd, 2009), 42–68, <https://doi.org/10.4135/9780857021038.n3>.

<sup>19</sup> Kolb and Kolb, "Experiential Learning Theory: A Dynamic, Holistic Approach to Management Learning, Education and Development," 6.

<sup>20</sup> Anna, Sfard. "On two metaphors for learning and the dangers of choosing just one." *Educational researcher* 27, no.2(1998): 4-13, 6.

be prepared to change their pedagogical practices to facilitate transformation. In Europe, specifically in countries like the Netherlands, short learning programmes to induct educators into their profession are an essential part of teacher development. Educators have to attend these programmes during their probation period and no academic is employed permanently without successfully completing the programme. Thus, a short learning programme embedded in the induction programme should be able to equip new teachers with skills to prepare students to engage in self-directed and reflective learning needed in the twenty-first century and beyond. The PEP under review in the current study is like other internationally offered programmes from various universities. For example, the University of Groningen in the Netherlands offers a 3-module course called University Teaching Skills course and Tampere University in Finland offers the University's pedagogical education course that also is composed of 3 modules. In Europe, these courses are compulsory for any academic to be employed permanently at higher education institutions. The PEP has been designed with constructive alignment at both macro and micro levels. Alignment, on a broad scale, refers to the vertical coherence of the major philosophical principles that guide the curriculum. Here, emphasis is placed on how well the programme complies with institutional practices and policies (from both the national HE system and the relevant institution). Examining the programme's goals and justifications would be the first step.

The Northwest University in South Africa offers a compulsory induction programme as a way of driving new academics towards excellence and innovation in all aspects of teaching and learning which not only greatly benefits staff and students but also helps the institution to realise its mission of excellent academic excellence. Both the inexperienced and experienced staff members must complete an online component, attend a three-day campus programme, attend a one-day faculty session, and prepare and present an extensive portfolio of evidence after the programme is complete. Induction programmes help new academics to engage critically with their teaching practices, continuously evaluating and developing these to strengthen the standard of instruction and learning. As stated in its vision and mission statement, WSU seeks to become a leading comprehensive university in Africa in its focus on cutting-edge educational, research and community partnership programmes that are sensitive to local, regional, and national development priorities and that are aware of continental and international imperatives.

The rationale for offering PEP emanates from the fact that the university context has changed a lot in terms of the increased number of students who were most disadvantaged during the time of apartheid. Increased enrolments in higher education have increased the demand for more skilled academics with pedagogical skills needed in the 21st Century. Subbaye and Dhunpath, submit that trained human resources remain scarce, and universities must rely on professionals who have disciplinary content knowledge but no pedagogical knowledge.<sup>21</sup> Academic developers' responsibilities are to assist the university in the development of a new crop of academics with relevant knowledge and to become effective university teachers. On the other hand, many settings view disciplinary proficiency and productive research as being adequate for effective teaching. The fixation with having a doctorate as a requirement for tenure is largely based on academic credentialing, which is frequently influenced by university rankings rather than the qualifications' natural value in addition to teaching ability.<sup>22</sup> Like this, graduate programmes in South Africa at masters and doctoral levels are built to develop competent researchers, with little to no space for developing proficient academic instructors. The PEP programme has thus been tailored in line with the thinking of Subbaye and Dhunpath's, thought of bridging the gap between approaches to pedagogy and the perceptions of academics and the skills of academics in teaching and assessment practices.

Although the PEP programme is non-credit bearing, it is designed to align with the CHE guidelines for curriculum development. Further investigation at the meso level will reveal that the programme also adheres to the required minimum requirements of a contact programme, in addition to adopting a blended learning approach (and related blended learning pedagogies). Although the CHE acknowledges the necessity of and growing interest in the blended learning style of delivery, it currently only allows for qualifications to be registered as either "contact" or "distance" during the programme certification process. Therefore, HEIs must make a distinction between the minimal requirements for programmes to be approved as "contact" offerings rather than "distant" offerings based on the National Policy for the Provision of Distance Education in South African Universities in the Context of an Integrated Post-School System. Through PEP, new academics are socialised into the culture and needs of the university and higher education in general. According to Austin,

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<sup>21</sup> Reshma Subbaye and Rubby Dhunpath. "Early-career academic support at the University of KwaZulu-Natal: towards a scholarship of teaching." *Studies in Higher Education* 41, no. 10 (2016): 1803-1819.

<sup>22</sup> Denise M. Jepsen, Melinda M. Varhegyi, and Daniel Edwards. "Academics' attitudes towards PhD students' teaching: Preparing research higher degree students for an academic career." *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management* 34, no. 6 (2012): 629-645.

they "get an awareness of institutional regulations and procedures and familiarise themselves with the organizational dynamics of their departments."<sup>23</sup>

The programme is therefore aligned with the DLT's vision to promote academic excellence in undergraduate and post-graduate learning and teaching. This can be accomplished by improving the standard of instruction and learning by offering specialised and integrated pedagogical and professional skills to all faculties to improve the academic performance of students.<sup>24</sup>

After engagement with the course processes and materials, as part of the induction of new university teachers, participants should:

- Gain in-depth knowledge of the conceptual domain of teaching and learning in higher education after engaging with the course processes and materials;
- Engage with the theory, research, and practice related to the development, enhancement, and assurance of quality teaching and learning in higher education;
- Critically analyse and evaluate curriculum development practices using theories and concepts from the Higher Education literature;
- Critically reflect on curriculum transformation;
- Design and develop a qualification;
- Develop, plan, implement, and evaluate an assessment strategy that is aligned with the learning outcomes of the module, and;
- Participate in knowledge and research pertaining to the practice of teaching in higher education, including academic literacy, curriculum creation procedures, and student learning assessment.

It is clear from the information given and the way the programme and the exit-level outcomes have been constructed that the programme was established with the clear purpose of producing university teachers who are flexible in their practice. This confirms that graduates should be able to function in a variety of social circumstances and acquire nuanced concepts of identity that have the potential to improve the creation of graduates who will "contribute to the reconstruction and development needs of society."<sup>25</sup> The PEP programme has also been designed to equip academics with the ability to respond to students' diverse learning needs by offering responsive pedagogical skills that reduce student dropout rates and increase throughput rates.<sup>26</sup>

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a more vigorous thrust towards increased online pedagogy; hence, one of the exit-level outcomes focuses on the need to equip university teachers with skills on how to engage with multiple technologies in transformative ways that will result in preparing them for the ever-changing contexts. The programme focuses on using blended learning approaches (as well as other related blended learning pedagogies). The CHE acknowledges the need for universities to have more focus on blended learning methods of instructional delivery. Thus, this programme seeks to build an academic community with common shared pedagogical skills that enhance effective teaching and learning while being responsive to the ever-changing world. In this notion is the mandate to produce future-ready academics as well as graduates who are fit for purpose. Bosman and Strydom, allude that technology integration into the curriculum further assists in aligning university teachers to the development of twenty-first-century skills.<sup>27</sup> This will assist teachers in constructively aligning their programme to encourage learning and understanding through students' interactions in their learning communities.<sup>28</sup>

In developing academics to become university teachers, the PEP programme seeks to introduce and strengthen academics in the four kinds of knowledge domains as identified by Perkins, (1992), namely:

- Content knowledge: which students acquire through disciplinary knowledge. Since teachers are hired based on their disciplinary expertise. The focus is on how to align this content to the level of students.
- Problem-solving knowledge: this focuses on how academics will design learning outcomes that require students to attain the knowledge levels within their respective NQF level descriptors.

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<sup>23</sup> Austin, "Supporting Junior Faculty through a Teaching Fellows Program," 86; Jackson and Simpson, "Mentoring New Faculty for Teaching and Research," 65.

<sup>24</sup> DLT Strategic Plan, 2020.

<sup>25</sup> CHE. Framework for Institutional Quality Enhancement in the Second Period of Quality Assurance, 19.

<sup>26</sup> DHET. *A National Framework for Enhancing Academics as University Teachers*. (Pretoria; Department of Higher Education, 2018).

<sup>27</sup> J P Bosman and Sonja Strydom, "Building the Knowledge Base of Blended Learning: Implications for Educational Technology and Academic Development," in *Building Knowledge in Higher Education* (Routledge, 2020), 198–219.

<sup>28</sup> K. Luckett, "Towards a Model of Curriculum Development of the University of Natal's Curriculum Reform Programme." *Academic Development*. 1(2), (1995).

- Epistemic knowledge: allows academics to support student learning towards the development of an understanding of what the discipline demands.
- Inquiry knowledge: where students utilise information across contexts to conduct research that leads to solving problems and leads to a redefinition of new possibilities in their contexts.<sup>29</sup>

All this knowledge kinds will be acquired because of the distinctive combination of the students, the variability of their work environment like using block-contact sessions on campus and the use of technology-assisted teaching and learning/blended learning pedagogy. This will contribute to producing university teachers who are versatile in their orientations to teaching and learning.

### Curriculum Transformation

Curriculum transformation is central to the curriculum module. Since the advent of democracy, African countries have been grappling with neo-colonialism. There is a need to position African knowledge systems at the fore of our curriculum design and curriculum implementation. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, remarks that seemingly, there is an absence of African universities; instead, there are universities in Africa.<sup>30</sup> This statement implies that academic discourses should not only marginalise Eurocentric domination but should also claim their own intellectual space, as presently the South African education system is resident in Western modernism.<sup>31</sup> It therefore becomes imperative to critically reflect on and adapt any form of ideology, theory, relationships and institutions which support integrated decolonised and Africanised curriculums.<sup>32</sup>

Blignaut, argues that curriculum transformation should relate to societal needs and provide relevant knowledge that reflects an African society, as the existing ones do not show the direct relationship between a curriculum and the desired society needs.<sup>33</sup> Blignaut, further alludes that students at African universities ignore the indigenous knowledge obtained from their societies and ultimately face a cultural shock when they replace it with a contemporary culture that does not favour them.<sup>34</sup> Decolonisation of higher education in Africa includes indigeneity in education, addressing racial issues and involves the concept of 'Ubuntu'.<sup>35</sup> It is novel to tackle the decolonisation matter and to have insights into an African context in higher education.

On that note, the following themes are articulated in the curriculum module of the SLP: processes in curriculum transformation, decolonisation and Africanisation of the curriculum, curriculum transformation framework guidelines and an integrative approach to curriculum transformation. These assist in changing the mindset of our university teachers to have respect for our Africanness and how African epistemologies should draw our praxis from the periphery to the centre.

### Curriculum Orientations

Although the SLP is non-credit bearing, it has been designed following proper curriculum design principles. This was done with a focus on developing a post-graduate qualification for academics in the future. The design approach considered the traditional (with the curriculum as a product), interpretive (with the curriculum as a process), and critical orientations to the curriculum as suggested by Luckett, as well as the curriculum as praxis.<sup>36</sup> It is crucial to recognise that this curriculum combines academic and practical abilities. Therefore, the curriculum is employed in this context as both a process and a product.

Roberts maintains that curriculum orientations mainly focus on teachers inducting students into the discipline and that the main curriculum decisions aim at empowering students on how to acquire disciplinary knowledge and the different ways of knowing and becoming.<sup>37</sup> Thus, the PEP curriculum module has been

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<sup>29</sup> D. N. Perkins, *Smart schools: From training memories to educating minds*, (Free Press, 1992).

<sup>30</sup> S.J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, "Decoloniality as the Future of Africa." *History Campus* 13 no.10 (2015): 485–496. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hic3.12264>

<sup>31</sup> V. Gumede, and M. Biyase, "Educational reforms and curriculum transformation in post-apartheid South Africa." *Environmental Economics*, 7(2), (2016); 69- 76. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9780857021038.n3>

<sup>32</sup> T. Ncanywa, N. Mesatywa and S. Matope, *Integrating Decolonization and Africanisation into University Curriculum Transformation Activities of South African Universities*, (2022).

<sup>33</sup> Sylvan Blignaut, "Transforming the curriculum for the unique challenges faced by South Africa." *Curriculum Perspectives Australian Curriculum Studies*, (2021).

<sup>34</sup> Blignaut, "Transforming the curriculum for the unique challenges faced by South Africa."

<sup>35</sup> E. Etieyibo, "Afri-decolonisation, decolonization, Africanisation, and the task of Africanising the Philosophy curriculum," *Decolonisation, Africanisation and the Philosophy of the curriculum*: (2021). DO - 10.4324/9780203703571-1.

<sup>36</sup> K Luckett, "A Proposal for an Epistemically Diverse Curriculum for South African Higher Education in the 21st Century," *South African Journal of Higher Education* 15, no. 2 (2001): 49–61.

<sup>37</sup> Pamela Roberts, "Higher Education Curriculum Orientations and the Implications for Institutional Curriculum Change," *Teaching in Higher Education* 20, no. 5 (July 4, 2015): 542–55, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2015.1036731>.

designed to allow academics to engage with different curriculum orientations and unpack the curriculum in ways that empower the students. Premised on the view that most new lecturers enter the university as career professionals with mainly disciplinary knowledge, they are introduced to different orientations of the curriculum. Apart from disciplinary knowledge acquisition, academics are taken through the different steps on how they develop students' cognitive skills for thinking, learning and conducting research. It is these skills that will enable the development of graduate employability.

**METHODOLOGY**

A mixed methods approach was used to collect data from all 21 participants enrolled in the Professional Excellence Programme. Data was collected using a questionnaire that was created on a Google form. The participants completed the forms online. Of the selected 21 participants, only 14 successfully responded to the questionnaire. Both qualitative and quantitative data were generated from the responses.

**DATA PRESENTATION**

**Students' Reflections on Effectiveness and Challenges**

Attribute	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I was well-informed of the expected exit-level learning outcomes	84.6%	15.4%	-	-	-
The duration of contact sessions was adequate for the coverage of key aspects of the modules	76.9	22.8	-	-	-
Selected readings were relevant to my understanding of the modules	92.3	7.7	-	-	-

At the beginning of the programme, inductees were taken through the programme structure where the expected learning outcomes were discussed. They were asked to comment on the exposition of the expected learning outcomes and 84.6% (as indicated in the table above) of them affirmed that they felt that they were well informed whilst 15.4% indicated that they somewhat felt well informed of the learning outcomes of the SLP. Unpacking learning outcomes to inductees is one step towards ensuring that students are going to direct their efforts towards the specified goals. Learning outcomes are directly aligned with graduate attributes.

Programmes must be allocated adequate time for the outcomes to be realised. The inductees indicated that they felt that the duration of contact sessions was adequate as indicated in the table above. As high as 76.9% strongly agreed whilst 23.1% agreed, and there were no responses in the other categories of the Likert scale.

Academics were also provided with some key reading materials in all the modules to guide them through threshold concepts in each module. When asked to comment about the relevance of the reading resources, 92.3% and 7.7% strongly agreed and agreed respectively that the reading materials were useful as they helped them understand the modules. It should be noted that when compiling the portfolio of evidence to reflect on their overall experience of the programme, they could also include other resources to enrich their understanding.

**Comment on topics or areas that participants found interesting and helpful in developing them academically**

Data on subjects that participants considered interesting were gathered using an open-ended questionnaire where a variety of answers were provided. Although different areas were noted by the participants, some common areas were around teaching and learning theories, teaching strategies, constructive alignment and the university context and how it is used in curriculum mapping. Below is a list of the responses from the participants:

- P1 & P2: Theories of teaching. Encouraging deep learning. Understanding the University, we are.*
- P3: The approaches and theories on teaching and learning*
- P4 & P5: Bigg's readings, outline the various teaching strategies.*
- P6: More on the context of the university*
- P7: Theories of teaching and learning; methodologies of teaching and learning.*
- P8: Learning theories*

**P9:** *University context and how we should align it to our curriculum*

**P10 & 13:** *Constructive Alignment, the context of the university and some of the issues that are controversial such as the classification of the university as a comprehensive and what this has on the funding of the university vs. traditional universities.*

**P11:** *Methods and practice of teaching, especially the "Art of Learning"*

**P12 & P14:** *Learning theories, learning, and teaching*

The participants showed interest in a variety of topics related to teaching and learning with a focus on teaching theories, teaching strategies, constructive alignment and the university context. The participants also discussed the methods and practices of teaching, the art of learning and the classification of the university as comprehensive, which has an impact on funding.

What emerged from these accounts is that teachers' interests were mainly in teaching and learning practices in higher education. Teachers were mainly interested in teaching and learning theories as well as teaching strategies. This was evident in the depth of engagement during the sessions. No participant mentioned assessment in their responses. This is a critical area of teaching and learning. This could be attributed to a lack of understanding of the assessment process as well as a lack of interest in the assessment module. An analysis of the responses against the exit level outcomes shows that participants of the PEP grasp of the main outcomes well. They were able to engage with theory, research and practice relevant to the development, enhancement, and guarantee of quality teaching and learning in higher education, and they gained an in-depth understanding of teaching and learning in higher education. Participants were exposed to theoretical knowledge and inquiry knowledge during the teaching and learning module unpacking process which helped them gain a thorough understanding of various transformative teaching and learning practices in a teaching and learning context that was heavily reliant on technology.

The participants were also interested in the different types of universities and the complex nature of a comprehensive university. It is important to note that context plays a critical role in curriculum design and its implementation.

### **Suggested Areas of Improvement**

Whilst most participants stated that they were satisfied with the way the programme is structured and implemented, there were some noteworthy recommendations from them. The recommendations centred on blended learning. Some of the participants suggested that:

**P1, P7 & P14:** *Make it inherently blended. Should use more digital tools for teaching and learning.*

The participants were generally satisfied with the programme structure and implementation but provided recommendations related to blended learning. One participant suggested that the programme should be inherently blended and the use of technology should be at the forefront, rather than an afterthought. Another recommendation was to embrace a paperless environment using technology, such as digital notetaking and recordings, as a way of leading the implementation of Distance and Lifelong Learning. The response calls for more blended approaches to be used during the delivery of the programme. One of the participants suggested that there be more time for contact sessions as these allow for more engagement with their counterparts during the teaching and learning process. The participants said:

**P4, P6 & P13:** *Please try to use some practical examples to demonstrate the importance of using different theories that we have learnt. Add at least 2 days for the contact session so that we can grasp even more information.*

Lastly, the participants called for more practical examples that demonstrated how the different learning theories were used in practice.

### **What do participants like most?**

The data revealed that academics acknowledged that they benefitted from the short learning programme. They indicated a strong liking for the content that relates more to their everyday teaching experiences. Hence, they indicated their interest in teaching and learning theories and teaching strategies as indicated in the excerpts below:

**P1, P2 & P5:** *Theories of teaching. This is a guide to what kind of lecturer or facilitator you are.*

**P3:** *Constructivism theory*

**P4:** *Student learning*

**P6:** *Higher education context*

**P7:** Learning theories

**P10:** Theories of teaching and learning

**P13:** Teaching theories

**P14:** Theories because they helped me how to construct my lessons better and know how to link them with the University's vision

**P9:** Job descriptions and WSU statute

The participants expressed their interest in teaching and learning theories and teaching strategies. They saw the theories of teaching as a guide to understanding their role as lecturers or facilitators. Areas of interest included the constructivism theory, student learning, the higher education context and learning theories. The participants also noted that theories of teaching and learning helped them construct better lessons and align them with the university's vision. In addition, some participants showed interest in job descriptions and the university statute. It is evident from the responses that the new academics found the programme beneficial to them. The academics indicated a strong liking for topics that are central to the teaching and learning process in higher education. Learning theories proved to be the most liked section of the SLP. Learning theories inform how the curriculum is designed, and how assessments are in turn structured. Some academics also indicated the preference of the higher education context and the policies that guide university teaching and learning. This is indicated in the figure below.

Overall how would you rate the PEP programme? Please tick the appropriate box

13 responses



Figure 3: Participants' rating of the PEP Programme

Source: Field notes

Overall, the 13 participants approved the SLP. Their responses as indicated on the pie chart ranged from excellent (38.5%), good (53.8%) to satisfactory (7.7%). This reveals that the participants found the SLP empowering and relevant to their practice.

### Suggestions to improve the delivery of PEP

When asked about areas that they thought should be improved, the participants gave some suggestions. First, they suggested that the programme should be developed into a Postgraduate Diploma in higher education. One said:

**P11:** If we can build it to PDG HE, it would be great.

While the participants viewed the reading materials as good and helpful, they were also of the view that they should be posted before the different sessions. A participant stated that:

**P3:** Relevant readings should be forwarded prior to the session so that we prepare ourselves and not be expected to read and comment in class.

The recommendation makes a lot of sense since prior readings can assist the participants in preparing for what is coming their way. Preparing the participants before the sessions would allow even the facilitators to send advance organisers to direct them on how they analysed the readings.

Some participants suggested making the programme more blended. In line with the blended approach, one of the participants felt that there was a need to increase the blending of the sessions. The blending of the sessions would allow participants to attend online sessions if they cannot attend the face-to-face sessions.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The study has revealed that academics benefitted from PEP. The induction programme at Walter Sisulu University thus, enhances academic staff as university teachers, as part of their academic professional development. If it were to be a compulsory programme for all new academics appointed on permanent as well as part-time fixed-term contracts, university teaching and learning would be more effective. According to literature, a strong induction programme will be able to increase the number of graduates who "contribute to the reconstruction and development needs of society,"<sup>38</sup> and graduates should be able to "operate in diverse social settings and develop complex notions of identity."<sup>39</sup> This will greatly contribute to student success.

The range of subjects listed by participants as subjects which they felt they had learned more is consistent with PEP's goal of enhancing academics' pedagogical skills in the areas of teaching and learning, curriculum creation, and evaluation. The results support the idea that academic developers should improve academics' knowledge and skills regarding teaching, curriculum development, assessment, the evaluation of instruction, and courses, postgraduate study supervision, and other related areas.<sup>40</sup>

Student success is defined as "improved student learning with a goal to increasing the number of graduates with traits that are personally, professionally, and socially useful," as the CHE, has already hinted.<sup>41</sup> The participants acknowledged how much the curriculum helped them understand the higher education environment. Introducing academics to the SLP aids in acquainting instructors with the traditions and culture of higher learning. The results showed that academics saw the programme as a crucial component of their integration into both the higher education environment and the university's vision and goal. This confirms the assertions by Mathibedi, who views induction programmes as part of the orientation of newly appointed academics into teaching and learning practices at the university.<sup>42</sup> The induction programmes are a way of ensuring that academics align their practice to the university's vision and mission, its culture and systems that enhance the delivery of quality teaching in the context of organisational socialisation.<sup>43</sup> Thus, induction will equip early academics with skills to focus on research trajectories and teaching excellence.<sup>44</sup>

The facilitation of the programme has also been structured to allow blended learning. The study has also revealed that the programme was impactful, especially in the learning theories. The university mission shows the focus of the WSU Teaching and Learning agenda, which operationalises its vision through "quality teaching, learning, research, innovation, and community engagement; WSU responds to societal needs and inspires future-ready graduates to become responsible citizens who can address complex challenges in critical, ethical, scholarly, sustainable, and entrepreneurial ways."<sup>45</sup>

The facilitation of the programme around the social learning theory allowed the participants to freely exchange ideas and experiences during the process. Senior academics had the opportunity to share their lived experiences with academics joining the university system for the first time. Developing a learning identity results in academics being able to reflect and act on the world to transform it.<sup>46</sup> As a result, the academic will establish an identity as a lifelong learner who is always willing to modify his or her profession because of learning as becoming in these situations. As Kolb and Kolb put it, such an academic can self-reflect and accept an evaluation from others.<sup>47</sup>

## SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As shown in the study findings, PEP still needs to be made a programme of impact on teaching and learning. As already pointed out in the university vision of an impactful technology-infused African university, there is a need to infuse more technology in the SLP. The teaching approach should integrate technology. To complete the package, all participants in the PEP had to do an SLP on teaching with technology offered by the University

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<sup>38</sup> Luckett, "A Proposal for an Epistemically Diverse Curriculum for South African Higher Education in the 21st Century,"<sup>7</sup>

<sup>39</sup> CHE. Framework for Institutional Quality Enhancement in the Second Period of Quality Assurance, 19.

<sup>40</sup> McKenna et al., "From Affirmative to Transformative Approaches to Academic Development."

<sup>41</sup> CHE. Framework for Institutional Quality Enhancement in the Second Period of Quality Assurance.

<sup>42</sup> Mathibedi, "The Contribution of an Education Induction Programme to Academic Professional Formation."

<sup>43</sup> Mathibedi, "The Contribution of an Education Induction Programme to Academic Professional Formation"; Huber, Hoadley, and Wood, "Teaching Induction Program: Framework, Design and Delivery."

<sup>44</sup> Kevin S. Sutherland et al., "Implementation Integrity of Practice-Based Coaching: Preliminary Results from the BEST in CLASS Efficacy Trial," *School Mental Health* 7, no. 1 (March 11, 2015): 21–33, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12310-014-9134-8>.

<sup>45</sup> Walter Sisulu University. WSU Strategic Plan 2020 – 2030. Mthatha: Walter Sisulu(2020), 4.

<sup>46</sup> Kolb and Kolb, "Experiential Learning Theory: A Dynamic, Holistic Approach to Management Learning, Education and Development."

<sup>47</sup> Kolb and Kolb, "Experiential Learning Theory: A Dynamic, Holistic Approach to Management Learning, Education and Development."

of Cape Town. This was meant to produce an all-rounded academic with the technological skills to transform teaching and learning through technology. Since the SLP was accepted by all participants in the study, it is noteworthy for the Directorate of Teaching and Learning to develop the programme into a credit-bearing post-graduate diploma in higher education at NQF Level 8, which is equivalent to an honours degree.

As the first step of the academic development and induction of new university teachers in the university, the Professional Excellence Programme provides academics with a space and opportunity to:

- Re-imagine their identities and practices as university teachers;
- Examine long-held notions about how pupils learn, which will influence how they support students and how they view teaching;
- Critically analyse their curricula, assessments, and teaching strategies to see if they are providing students with access to the knowledge of their fields (emphasis on the students' learning). This should include the Africanisation of all aspects of the curriculum as an infusion of critical African knowledge systems in African universities.
- Re-imagine teaching and learning in their disciplines. As they reimagine, they will be able to engage in scholarly approaches to teaching and learning.
- Provide opportunities to show that improving teaching can make a significant difference in the outcomes of the educational process and improve career satisfaction.

This paper recommends further studies of developments in the professional excellence programme for academics after a period of four to five years. This will help enhance a better critical analysis of the benefits and challenges of the induction process. This can be used as a nuanced way of transforming university teaching as institutions aim to shift university teaching from lecturing to a way of teaching more student-centred pedagogies that promote active learning. Shifts should promote greater student participation through the development of participative, collaborative, constructive, and connective learning models that help to produce future-ready graduates who can easily respond to societal needs in ethical, scholarly, sustainable, and entrepreneurial ways.

## CONCLUSION

The obligation to increase the standard of instruction and learning falls on academic developers. A crucial part of academic staff development at institutions of higher learning is the induction of academics who are primarily subject matter specialists without the pedagogical abilities to teach effectively in the higher education environment. This study has thus shown that a well-planned excellence programme for new academics will not only help to introduce the academics to the new university but also contribute to upskilling them in essential skills needed in their practice. Such programmes must be underpinned by a theory that allows the participants to freely share their experiences and expectations as they become university teachers. Learning in groups helped lecturers to create communities of practice and creates a good sense of belonging enabling them to share ideas with more experienced lecturers in the team. As already alluded to in the purpose of the Professional Excellence Programme, academic staff development plays a pivotal role in enhancing academics' pedagogical skills in the areas of teaching and learning, curriculum creation, and evaluation. The research findings therefore support the idea that academic developers should improve academics' knowledge and skills regarding teaching, curriculum development, assessment, the evaluation of instruction and courses, postgraduate study supervision and other related areas. It will make more sense if the professional excellence programme for new academics is developed into a credit-bearing postgraduate diploma in higher education teaching. The academic developer would then use it to usher academics into the higher education teaching and learning context.

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