

# HUMANISING ACADEMIC STAFF DEVELOPMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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## ABSTRACT

This article focuses on academic staff development in higher education in South Africa. It emphasises the importance of locating academics within the broader racialised contexts and history of the country. Recognising the complexities of social academic exclusion in relation to academics working across the sector in diverse universities, the article argues that academic staff development programmes which provide formulaic interventions are far less likely to have a long term impact on the individual and the sector. The social and academic legacies of racial segregation continue to permeate the professional experiences of marginalised academics, the support they receive for their career aspirations, and the recognition (without acknowledgement) of institutional and systemic barriers to their success (Breetzke and Hedding 2018; Khunou 2018; Hlengwa 2019). The literature is replete with references to humanising pedagogies for students yet is overwhelmingly silent on the impact on the academic or aspirant academic. For transformation initiatives to have an impact, there is clearly a need to humanise the participants in academic development processes. What this implies is a full appreciation of the fact that academics enter universities with histories and experiences that inflect their work is central to the success of the transformation project. This article is premised on social justice which informs an understanding of transformation as the empowerment of academics through academic staff development programmes. Predicated on Sen's "capability" approach, the article argues that academic development in the context of South Africa cannot afford to ignore the fractured history of the country.

**Keywords:** academic staff development, transformation, social justice, South Africa, higher education, exclusion

## INTRODUCTION

If the loud whispers of apartheid linger in the corridors of universities, with race, class and gender disparities in the prevailing dynamics, including exclusionary institutional cultures, structures, and systems, then the question of how academic development programmes are to steer through these spaces becomes poignant. The legacy of apartheid planning in higher education in South Africa (SA), have resulted in significant wastage and unnecessary

duplication given the multiple racially- and “tribally”-designated universities. The result of the stratified higher education system resulted in a narrow academic pool which did not reflect the demographics of South Africa. Thirty years post-democracy, the higher education sector still grapples with the uneven race and gender distribution of its academic cohort, alongside the false assumptions that a sense of belonging and cohesiveness is shared by all. Universities with their variances in structures, systems, policies, persist in varying forms in the current landscape (Badat 1994; 2009; 2017). The value of analyses of representivity of academics in the sector at the level of institution is not questioned. However, what is lost in the morass of discourse on the transformation of higher education, are the individuals – the real people whose lived realities as academics continue to be profoundly negatively impacted. The focus of this article is on professional academic staff development with due acknowledgement that the academic workforce in SA is diverse in terms of race, class and gender.

Analyses of events over the last 25 years in higher education (such as #feesmustfall, #Rhodesmust fall, and the various other permutations of protests at universities) have consistently highlighted the students’ predicaments such as affordability, lack of belonging, accommodation issues and alienation, amongst others (Le Grange 2016). However, scant regard has been paid to the realities faced by the academics in these institutions (Khunou 2018). Student protests highlighted the discomfort they experienced in university spaces; however, the concomitant experiences of academics have not been sufficiently explored. The kinds of discomfort experienced by academics surfaces primarily in high profile media stories and on social media (Hlatshwayo 2020) Although decolonising the curriculum has been emphasised, the transformation of the academy has largely been rendered in numerical terms rather than focusing on the substantive matters that make academic spaces an insider-outsider terrain.

Maphalala et al. (2022) note that the proportion of women at professor level in 2018 was 30 per cent, compared to 14 per cent in 2000, while the proportion of black professors similarly doubled from 9 per cent in 2000 to 19 per cent in 2018. These are still relatively low increases overall, indicating a lack of deep transformation especially at senior levels in universities. Capacity development initiatives have been calibrated towards effecting this kind of transformation through targeted development of promising academics from historically marginalised groups, while expanding the pool of academic talent in the system overall. There is insufficient evidence that the multiple initiatives from national bodies, through targeted grants and carefully curated programmes, have made significant gains.

The social and academic legacies of racial segregation continue to impact the professional experiences of marginalised academics, the support they receive for their career aspirations, and the recognition of institutional and systemic barriers to their success (Breetzke and Hedding

2018; Khunou 2018; Hlengwa 2019). The very specific governance structures, promotion criteria, and other policy instruments continue to create real barriers. Even where individuals have the social and cultural capital to breach these barriers, they may come up against invisible and exclusionary constraints which surface, often as part and parcel of ordinary academic processes. Power in universities vests in promotions committees, or Senate, or similar structures, which if not themselves transformed perpetuate the existing power relations.

The vestiges of the fractured legacy of apartheid continue to create challenges as the higher education sector expands. These challenges include disproportionate academic to student ratios and the monumental skewing of the race, gender, and age profiles of academics with marginal mirroring of the demographic profile of the country (DHET 2008; 2013; 2015). Power relations at universities and between universities remain, in many ways, still premised on the race, gender and class dynamics perpetuated by apartheid. Against a backdrop of persistently skewed power dynamics, transformation is challenging. As part of the transformation process, academic staff development can either provide meaningful interventions aimed at a real unlocking of potential and power or can be meaningless programmes that subscribe to a mechanistic “skills development” model or unlock vanity transformation with little tangible or impactful reform.

## **TRANSFORMING THE ACADEMY**

Meeting the transformation demands of post-apartheid South Africa has required engaging with the spirit as much as the letter of higher education policy, especially in developing a transformed and strengthened professoriate (Khunou 2018). The extent to which deep transformation is evident beyond the numbers demonstrates that mechanistic solutions are insufficient on their own. Notable steps have been taken in the area of higher education policy to address these issues through the University Capacity Development Programme (UCDP), the establishment of The Framework for Staffing South Africa’s Universities (SSAUF) (DHET 2015), as well as the development of The National Framework for Enhancing Academics as University Teachers (DHET 2018) amongst other initiatives. In the foreword to the SSAUF document, the Minister of Higher Education notes that the sector faces a number of interlinked challenges that necessitate a coordinated, multipronged response. These challenges include:

“the slow pace of transformation, regeneration and change, the ageing workforce, developments in higher education worldwide that demand ever greater levels of expertise from staff, the relatively under qualified academic staff workforce, and low numbers of postgraduate students representing an inadequate pipeline for the recruitment of future academics.” (DHET 2015, 3).

The identification of the state’s concerns in national policy and their concomitant responses

have not been sufficient to catalyse substantive change in the academy. The state has introduced a number of strategies and programmes to support and strengthen the promotion pathway for academic staff to develop into and ultimately, reach a professorship. The rationale for combining these strategies, regardless of country context is coherent (Ewing et al. 2008; Canale, Herdklotz, and Wild 2013; Lerch-Pieper et al. 2017; Baker et al. 2018). While there may be similar issues confronting the preparation and retention of emerging and established scholars, the modalities supporting their career progression are of necessity relatively different depending on context (Cameron and Woods 2016).

Much of the government's focus has been on developing the next generation of scholars, PhD researchers and post-doctoral fellows; and the development of teaching competences (curriculum development, learner guides, assessment, teaching with technologies), establishing research niche areas and applications for research grants, promotions, and research ratings amongst others. On one level this is perfectly sensible – especially in countries such as South Africa, where despite a commitment to growing the number of PhDs per million people, completion rates in doctoral programmes remain low and are often skewed by race, class and institution (Reddy 2017; Khunou 2018). Indeed, much of the literature sourced on academic staff development programmes focuses on early-career researchers and ensuring that they have the support, mentorship and professional development necessary to integrate successfully into faculty as teachers and/or researchers, identify and respond to student needs, and balance their own research interests with collaborative work and teaching responsibilities. Internationally, there is deafening silence on the experiences, challenges and opportunities that mid-career faculty face (Romano et al. 2004; Cameron and Woods 2016). The South African context has challenges that arise from its complex history as already indicated.

Transformation is a blunt tool in institutions with different complex cultural, political, academic and financial histories. Barring the express goals of access, success, and an equitable higher education landscape, as the DHET (2008) flagged, the varied interpretations of transformation and its implementation in higher education institutions were subjectively interpreted, often resulting in no deep institutional change at all. The DHET (2008) report further articulates a failure to interrogate both the overt and the nuanced ways in which apartheid had worked to undermine and marginalise both black academics and women. Their stories remained untold, and consequently have not informed the transformation initiatives. The instrumental outcomes of transformation initiatives need deliberately and intentionally to be embedded within a deeper understanding of why transformation is required, what form it will take, and what its ultimate goal it serves is. This must take into account South Africa's history and the nuances of the post-apartheid setting. Thus, to transform the academic profile of South

African universities requires not only redress of the imbalances in the current staffing trends; it requires also that a concomitant culture of empowerment and self-humanisation is created that enables academics to consider the impact that their work and presence has in changing institutional dynamics, values and practices (Reddy 2017; Breetzke and Hedding 2018). The literature is replete with references to humanising pedagogies for students yet is overwhelmingly silent on the impact on the academic or aspirant academic.

## **FISSURES AND FRAGILITIES**

There can be no question that the hostile institutional cultures reported by students during the #RhodesMustFall movement had also impacted negatively on the experiences of academic staff and created universities in which the legacies of segregation and discrimination were retained through subtle codes of inclusion/exclusion. The movement revealed many of the fissures in the higher education system's transformation tale and the legacies that still prevail. Anecdotal and documented evidence indicates the complexities of the difficulties encountered by black academics at even the most senior structures in "transformed" universities. Hlatshwayo (2020, 176) suggests "that although racially the institution could be seen to be transforming at least in the demographic sense, the epistemic, ontological and normative traditions of the university remain intact and unchallenged". For transformation to be meaningful, it has to be a multi-faceted instrument through which a broader vision of social justice can be achieved in South Africa.

Justice, equity and the fair distribution of political and material liberties are issues that continue to influence the formation of public policy in South Africa, given the historically-embedded nature of inequality and its associated impact on social relations and the possibilities of achieving a robust social compact (Barolsky 2013). Despite major efforts towards desegregating universities through radical policy changes and structural shifts like mergers, student enrolment and academic staffing, South African universities continue to bear the stubborn imprint of apartheid inequalities. In addition, inequalities in higher education often mirror broader societal issues with the result that university communities remain complex and fragile spaces. As the CHE concluded: "Intricately interwoven with the society in which it is embedded, the higher education sector in South Africa today is as much a creature of its past as it is a creature of sustained effort, through policy, legislation and institutional restructuring, to redirect and transform it" (Council on Higher Education 2016, 5).

It is argued here that the design of academic staff development programmes has, in ways similar to discussions on student access and success, failed to recognise the agency of the academic, their individual histories, experiences, and the contexts in which they work.

Academic staff development interventions cannot be conceived of in a vacuum, and cannot view academics as a homogenous group, even where the members may share common characteristics. The contexts in which academics find themselves – structural, systemic, environmental – constitute complex ecosystems to which each individual academic will respond uniquely. If we are to pursue a social justice agenda in the development of academic staff at universities, then academic staff development programmes have to go beyond a formalistic “steps to advancement” approach so often in evidence.

## **ACADEMIC STAFF DEVELOPMENT THROUGH A HUMAN CAPABILITIES APPROACH**

Both nationally and within universities, there are varied models and frameworks that have been implemented with the goal of developing academics. The focus or tipping points are aimed at improving teaching, fostering research, management of postgraduate supervision and lastly, navigating the university promotions environment and the national systems which acknowledge and reward researchers. Recently a strong drive underpinning academic interventions has been technology and the utilisation of a battery of applications in teaching.

In arguing for a more nuanced approach to academic staff development that centres the academic in their loci as set out above, it is possible to use staff development initiatives as substantive levers for transformation in and of the university space. Recognising that academic development has to be framed in a social justice paradigm moves it beyond performativity and into transformative spaces. A significant voice in theorising justice is Amartya Sen. Sen (2005) argues that two people with the same means, resources and rights may have quite different capacities to make use of opportunities available to them. In this way, a disabled person may in fact need more, or different resources, in order to operate at a comparative level to someone without a disability. Sen argues that capabilities are “opportunities to achieve valuable combinations of human functioning” (2005, 153) which people are free to make use of or not. Capabilities are what enable people to do and to be in society, and as such are temporally and contextually dependent. People are free to make a choice (freedom of process) as well as to enact that choice out of a selection, or not to act at all (freedom of opportunity).

The adoption of a capabilities approach enables a fuller reflection on the complex factors that enable or constrain individuals’ decisions as they navigate society and higher education spaces. In turn, these reflections place the neo-liberal construct of equal opportunity in its appropriate place, as part of a far broader concept of equality (as a constitutional right) in which ethical and moral considerations have force and must prevail. Academic staff development must not be hidden under the guise of “skills development”, in which “skills” are divorced from the

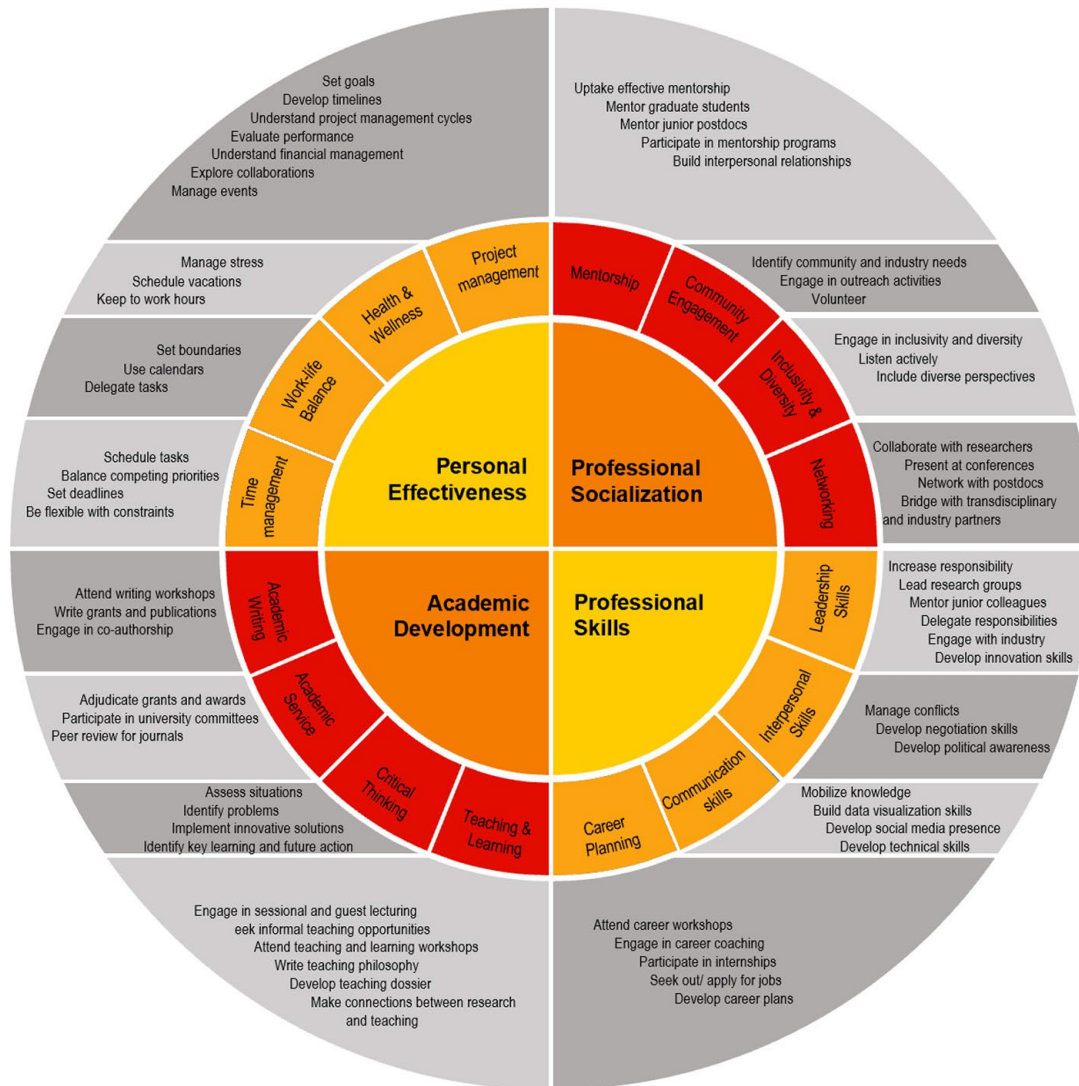
persons they are designed to serve. The failure to recognise individuals' histories and realities means that the responsibility for the capacitation needed to ensure their ability to take advantage of "equal opportunities" remains with the individual. In line with Sen's concept of "human rights", the view of equality above too rejects the view that rights are static and unenforceable, arguing that the conceptual fuzziness around what constitutes human rights should not be conflated with their relative importance. In this case, equity in the workplace demands that equality be conceived in its fullness in programmes where the stated intention is to serve this purpose. The invocation of human rights in considering what important capabilities may be places the ethical obligation on society, given that what makes defining human rights so important is the subsequent freedoms and guarantees that they afford (Sen 2004). It is in this sense of rights, therefore, that the view that academic staff development and its contexts are neither objective nor neutral is made clear.

A core concept shared by the capabilities approach and by later feminist theorists such as Nancy Fraser, (2008) is that of agency. It is not difficult to understand why. Sen (2004) and Nussbaum (2007) highlight that unlocking agency is achieved through securing civil and political rights in tandem with those material and social affordances that make actualising one's rights possible. In the sphere of academic development, and although various restrictions on participation and opportunity have been dismantled, social and economic limitations on the ability to actualise these remain, in a variety of ways. Black academics have, for example, frequently borne an inordinate burden of care in terms of students and institutional diversity processes; women in academia too face challenges in terms of cultural and familial expectations, lack of support, child- and family care responsibilities, and discrimination at faculty and department level (Cassese and Holman 2018; Munro-Stasiuk et al. 2019). The broader sociological constraints impact directly on the institutions intercessions as there is no control over external factors.

The framework for professional learning and development (see Figure 1) is geared towards post-doctoral researchers and captures the core competencies and skills necessary for all academics at different stages of the career journey. The details of how specific competencies and skills are developed will naturally shift over time as academics take on new responsibilities, develop their research interests and hone their links to practice and target communities.

In South Africa, the social justice dimension, which figures largely in how these competencies are developed, serves as the invisible "outer layer" of the model depicted below. It is critical that as academics develop the core personal, professional, and pedagogic competencies necessary to grow in their careers, that they also remain contextually-embedded in the complexities of South African society and the higher education sector, and act to create

social impact and lasting change through their work. The framework is unquestionably useful, but in considering academic staff development in the context of the history of South Africa, it is neither desirable nor appropriate to apply this model to all equally. The academic in the framework below (Nowell et al. 2021) is the hero and it is incumbent on academic staff developers to know their stories, appreciate their experiences, and locate these in context in a non-industrial model.



**Figure 1:** Professional learning and development (PLD) framework for postdoctoral scholars (Source: Nowell et al. 2021, 358)

### SOCIAL JUSTICE IN ACADEMIC STAFF DEVELOPMENT

Interventions designed to address the exclusion and marginalisation of particular groups should, ideally, grapple with how specific power, gender, race, and other dynamics impact the capacity of individuals to take up the opportunities designed for their development and offered to them. Singh (2001) emphasises that the development of academics, amongst other things in the broad basket of transformation, will form part of the challenge for societies effecting a transformation



project, especially in the context of the debates and contestations about what transformation means and how the concept is applied. Critical scholars such as Motala and Vally (2017), Badat (2017) and Soudien (2008; 2012; 2019) emphasise the importance of globally and nationally prescient political-economic relations in influencing the ethical basis of the demand for social justice in contemporary South Africa. Factors include the effects of global changes in basic and higher education management and governance, the implementation of pro-poor and redistributive policies, as well as how liberal or cosmopolitan discourses of race serve to underplay the influence of class and other factors in crystallising existing inequalities. Transformation may be seen as the *raison d'être* of social justice, or as simply one dimension of a multipronged strategy towards its realisation.

Singh's (2001, 2011a) work picks up on this from both a global and South African perspective. She argues that neoliberalism and globalisation have accelerated a reshaping of the work of universities towards achieving developmental and economic outcomes. As with all activities in universities currently, academic staff development has not remained impervious to economic instrumentalism. Although in South Africa academic staff development continues to be nested in a framework of equity and redistribution, arguably the focus on efficiency and accountability has served to undercut higher order questions about process – such as teaching and learning, institutional cultures and traditions, application of equity policies, and more (Singh 2011a). Although in a sense the higher education system is geared towards the realisation of individual capabilities that meet broader developmental and economic goals, this is still confined by a narrow instrumentalism that does not address how issues of belonging, participation and access hang together, or are experienced and enacted in the day-to-day practices of institutions (Fataar 2018). Academic staff development offerings often resort to conservatively conceived, more traditional “show and tell” processes in which mimicry of the established pathways is viewed as the only way. This type of staff development stands in direct contrast to activities in student development, where the focus is on transformative student engagement in the context of a humanising pedagogy. The implication here is that students are accorded agency not necessarily evident in academic staff development.

Social justice in higher education should be embedded in a responsiveness that transcends questions of competitiveness, industrial innovation, efficiency and resource accountability, and should, rather, consider the societal impact of policy and operational choices (Singh 2001). Responsiveness to the individuals' locations in the contexts in which they operate will result in enhanced access for the previously marginalised while also undertaking a collective knowledge project that foregrounds human and environmental experiences, rather than the strict focus on a return on investment model in which success is enumerated rather than discernible in viable

shifts in teaching, learning and research. Singh (2001) underscores Nussbaum's (2003) views in arguing that critical thought is essential to the public good, and that higher education institutions can only provide this benefit if they are substantively repositioned as social institutions. In her later work (Singh 2011b), she clarifies this by arguing that the gains of higher education cannot be limited to individual and familial benefits – it is crucial for institutions to be embedded with multi-scalar commitments to social responsiveness in order for widespread social justice to emerge from their work. Thus, even with employment equity policies in place to open up access and opportunity, South Africa's higher education system has not produced the kind of systemic outcomes envisioned to drive national development. This means that academia has transformed only minimally, in isolated pockets and in ways that result in no discernible overall impact or visible change.

Part of the recognised challenge in fostering social justice through public institutions is the lack of consciousness-shifting that is required so that the implicit vision of public policy may be actioned. In the past in South Africa, the shift has been framed through the principles of *Batho Pele* (people first) or *Ubuntu*, signalling some notion of shared humanity and mutual dignity, despite continued proof of discrimination and subtle forms of exclusion persisting. The result is the historical layering of inequalities (Pogge 2004; Matsuda 2017) alongside redress mechanisms that may intensify, rather than resolve, experiences of exclusion, impoverishment, or misrecognition.

South Africa's challenges in drawing on and retaining excellence in faculty are not unusual but, as noted, are intensified by the country's inherited and contemporary inequalities that grate against attempts to substantively transform the profile of faculty in the higher education sector. Transformation becomes increasingly urgent as the existing professoriate ages and a new generation of scholars emerges, requiring new mentors, university leaders, senior researchers, and teachers (Maphalala et al. 2022). Developing the professional capabilities of a new generation of academic staff further requires engaging with the nuance of their experiences at the forefront of the continuously changing higher education landscape.

## **LOOKING TOWARDS HUMANISING PEDAGOGY**

A humanising pedagogy offers a view into how these concerns have been taken up within the sphere of teaching and learning in universities. Similar to feminist scholarship, humanising pedagogy draws on the importance of consciousness-raising as a necessary precondition to self and collective liberation (Zembylas 2018; Mapaling and Hoelson 2022). Substantive transformation requires making visible the relations of coloniality and domination within higher education curricula and as part of the broader formation of societies and institutions conditioned

by a history of oppression. Troubling the relations of power at work, and in the classroom itself, will permit for enacting measures that not only correct but also dismantle the conditions of lived injustices. For a start, this pedagogy requires addressing “epistemic othering” (Keet 2014) through teaching and learning strategies that draw the knowledge cultures of students into critical conversations with what is taught at universities. If social justice in higher education is not only a function of material and representative redistribution, then cultural, ideological and attitudinal factors must also form part of how inclusion is facilitated. These factors have a relational influence on the contours of belonging, acceptance, tolerance, and other interpersonal manifestations of social inequality.

A number of aspects of the student experience may be related directly to those of the academics. For example, transformation should move beyond the essential question of what epistemic misrecognition is, to considering how the lack of social and cultural belonging (or alienation) in South African universities contributes to the misrecognition of students’ struggles as primarily resource- or welfare-focused. Rather, the challenges students raised during the #RMF/#FMF period was the confluence of racialisation, poverty, and social exclusion, meeting at the interface of what Pityana (2009 in Singh 2011a) frames as the “exclusionary triangle” of higher education – equity, access and quality. It is in this way that the epistemic and the social interact to reproduce alienation and educational inequalities in higher education today.

Similarly, these are experiences that many of the academics at the centre of development initiatives at universities would be personally familiar with. Incidences of bullying, marginalisation and discrimination continue to occur in university management and faculty spaces in South Africa, including in hiring and promotion processes (Breetzke and Hedding 2018; Khunou 2018; Hlengwa 2019). The process of academic development often requires engaging with these experiences and the trauma they hold as part of supporting academics on the journey towards self-empowerment and professional success.

By way of example, Munro-Stasiuk et al. (2019) report that meeting the requirements for career progression is especially challenging for black and women staff members at their institution in the USA. Many experience microaggressions, exclusion from valuable research networks and other opportunities, relegation to “diversity” functions, and additional emotional and social pressures from students and other staff (Munro-Stasiuk et al. 2019). Underrepresentation has a knock-on effect in terms of institutions being unable to provide faculty with mentors who share their experience and can support them through the particular challenges they confront. The authors emphasise the important interrelation between coaching and mentorship in achieving greater career progression for underrepresented groups: coaching allows for specific, time-bound and goal-driven support and instruction, buttressed by ongoing

individual and group mentorship opportunities that support the personal development of the academic as they move through successive stages of the career (Munro-Stasiuk et al. 2019). Considering the demographic profiles of the three types of universities in the South African system – traditional research, comprehensive and university of technology – black women staff in South Africa are more likely to work in institutions with limited mobility opportunities available to them, or where the professional development required to support their transition to professorship is either insufficient or non-existent.

Writing about Swiss academic medical programmes, Lerch-Pieper et al. (2017) suggest that institutions require better understanding and management of the specific issues women confront on the track towards professorship, given the increased social and familial demands on their time. Anecdotal reports during the COVID-19 lockdown period support the view that men benefit more and progress further even under adverse working conditions, given the increased burden of child and family care placed on women alongside their professional responsibilities. Buch et al. (2011), Lerch-Pieper et al. (2017) and Munro-Stasiuk et al. (2019) advocate for a combination of structural and personal initiatives both to support women academics in achieving career progression and to create an enabling environment in which their contributions are valued, supported and recognised. The same view is held by Heggins (2004), writing about African-American men entering the professorship track at Washington State University. Heggins argues that a prevailing view of underrepresented scholars as being “diversity” hires aligns with an expectation that they will not succeed, thus further entrenching existing power dynamics within faculty that reproduce historic inequalities on the basis of “merit”.

## **STRATEGISING ACADEMIC TRANSFORMATION**

Cameron and Woods (2016) offer an interesting framework from the South African perspective, termed the “Ladder of Learning”. The design aligns specific professional development stages with points in career progression to articulate the growth paths of scholars from the early through to the established stages of their careers. Three loose categories are defined: early stage academics (postdoctoral researchers and associate lecturers); developing academics (lecturers and senior lecturers) and established academics (associate professors and professors). The authors further break down the Ladder of Learning into three typologies:

1. Conceptual and material tools: expressed for each career stage, including reflection on practice; theory development; portfolio building; scholarship of teaching and learning; and recognition of teaching expertise.

2. Development of “rules”, including standards for quality assurance, with a focus on induction; probation; promotion; evaluation of teaching and courses; and quality assurance.
3. Community development, including mentorship and communities of practice (Cameron and Woods 2016).

The Ladder of Learning is intended as a broad design framework to support academic career progression by identifying the specific competencies and practices that faculty should ideally develop in order to ensure forward movement. It sets out what mid-career faculty need for professorship, spanning not only their teaching practice but their administrative capacity, support for institutional process, and contribution to academic citizenship. Whilst the framework may conform largely to a fairly instrumentalist approach to academic staff development, this does not detract from the overall relevance and use-value of the design. Its weakness, however, resides in its failure to centre the individual academics in contexts which are often sites of struggle.

### **REPURPOSING KGOTLA<sup>1</sup>**

Using the model of kgotla, being heard and able to articulate one’s experiences could become central to the empowerment process and the consequent capabilities. Most universities view academic staff development as part of a wider “return on investment” in a human capital development paradigm. Whilst this may work for purely instrumentalist purposes and achievements (for example, how to apply for promotion, obtain NRF rating, use the learning management system, publish in journals, become a good teacher), bypassing the deep-seated traumas of dehumanising practices or exclusionary devices means that true transformation – replicable and transferable to others – becomes a myth, unlikely to be achieved. Should academic development utilise the concept of kgotla in which the seasoned elders debate, discuss, and provide a safe space in which the contestations and experiences of the academic can be held, and advice and supportive guidance be given? In kgotla, meanings are negotiated in context, with direct reference to the circumstances that prevail at the time. In academia, it is assumed that the rules of engagement are clear and explicit to all. However, this is not the case and academics manoeuvring through university spaces may find themselves in a maze of contradictions, unspoken rules and customs. A kgotla approach could work, as a trusted space in which the competing demands and tensions are worked out, to enable the interpreting, deciphering, and application of these long-held laws and customs. The purpose of this kgotla is the achievement of a higher good, to elevate the role of the academic beyond promotion or

excellence in teaching or research, to shift away from reductionism and check-listing which can lead to performativity, and to achieving a more nuanced appreciation and articulation of the role of the academic. In turn, the “juniors” in kgotla develop into the elders, providing the same safe supportive spaces to the next generation in their turn. Change is not anathema to this context, but fundamental.

The Future Professors’ Programme (FPP) is a flagship programme funded by the University Capacity Development Programme (UCDP) of the Department of Higher Education and Training as part of its medium- and long-term vision of a coordinated, integrated system of post-school education and training. The FPP aims at transforming teaching, learning and research, improving quality and unlocking equity. It is a national collaborative programme including all 26 universities in South Africa, with one institution serving as the coordinating and administrative partner per phase. The purpose of the FPP is to accelerate the readiness of mid-career academics for the professoriate through a dedicated and rigorous programme of personal and professional development. Participation in the programme offers:

- capacity development and access to resources
- professional, academic and research network-building
- opportunities for collaboration and mobility; and
- mentoring and coaching for holistic development.

The FPP is designed precisely to work in ways that reflect the modalities of kgotla: the collective wisdom and experience of the academic “elders” is shared, considering the unique individual academic’s histories and contexts.

As Sikora, Riggins, and Madak-Erdogan (2021) argue, the pervasive assumption that early career faculty will “learn on the job” translates into mid-career faculty that struggle to adapt to roles outside of teaching or research: to be leaders, mentors, managers, and principal investigators proficient in financial management, project management, monitoring and evaluation. The need for joint and targeted support is evident in this scenario, and the authors call for a renewed approach that builds equity into its processes while empowering faculty with new skills and dispositions (Sikora et al. 2021). The design of the FPP addresses at a very fundamental level the contexts, individual realities and dispositions of academics from the higher education sector. It has placed at the centre the need for communities of sharing, for the co-creation of their development trajectories, providing for sharing experiences in safe spaces, for speaking of their fears, uncertainties, challenges and successes. Additionally, one on one

coaching, discipline specific mentoring, leadership programmes and dedicated academic advising allows for carefully curated individual development plans. At the same time, detailed attention is accorded to the technical and formal aspects that are key ingredients of academic staff development. Devising a model in which both aspects of academic staff development are wholly integrated is predicated on a full appreciation of the individual human being at the core of the programme and the transformative potential these engagements have.

## **CONCLUSION**

This article draws on notions of social justice to inform transformation with a particular focus on the empowerment of academics through academic staff development programmes. It argues that, grounded in Sen's "capability" approach, academic development in the context of South Africa, cannot afford to ignore the fractured history of the country. Through this lens, the intensity of academics' encounters with exclusion and marginalisation cannot be overlooked. The false assumption that the dawn of democracy would bring about instantaneous equality and a level playing field whilst ignoring the hidden rules and barriers in universities, has compounded the problem. In an approach where development opportunities are offered with no recognition of the complexities faced by and within the individuals to whom they are offered, the academic's failure or success becomes attributable to their individual strengths or weaknesses. There is no recognition of the complexities and webs of power and of how the layers of personal and political histories intertwine, either enabling or disabling success. There is a powerful need to shift from an instrumentalist approach in which the mere delivery of a development programme is meant to achieve change, to a more nuanced and enabling approach which, premised in a humanising pedagogy, appreciates the academic as a person in a context and acting on that context.

Academic staff development must shift in orientation, directly questioning the underlying assumptions attached to the participation of marginalised scholars in interventions geared towards their career progression. Meeting the transformation targets of a specific programme are important because these deliver the concrete rewards to participants for their intense commitment to what is often a programme of several months or years. These rewards deliver improved capacity to the system, whether through scientific rating, increased publication, or promotion to full professorship. However, they must be embedded within a system-level orientation towards cultivating transformation for social justice and social impact, promising societal-level benefits for universities and the communities they serve.

## NOTE

1. In Botswana, “kgotla” refers to a public meeting where the elders gather to make determinations on matters of community import.

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