



How the Teaching Development Grant was used (and the problem of common-sense understandings of teaching and learning)

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Abstract

Teachers at primary and secondary education levels are required to hold a professional qualification but, at the higher education level, all that is required is content expertise. This may well contribute to South Africa's low university throughput and retention rates, in response to which, since 2004, the state has provided ZAR5.5 billion in the form of the Teaching Development Grant (now the University Capacity Development Grant) to address poor completion rates. We present an analysis of the use of the grant across the sector using a social realist framework. Every academic and student has themselves been taught and so have developed untheorised assumptions about curriculum and pedagogy. Such common-sense assumptions about teaching and learning often serve to reinforce the status quo, which is particularly problematic in a sector with poor and racially differentiated throughput and success rates. Many initiatives funded through the grant evidenced a reliance on common-sense assumptions rather than on theorised accounts. In particular, student development often took the form of remedial, add-on initiatives that left the mainstream curriculum untouched—and staff development was often generic and short term. We also found that expertise in academic development, which could potentially challenge common-sense assumptions, was unevenly distributed.

Keywords: funding, academic development, Teaching Development Grant, University Capacity Development Grant

Introduction

The higher education sector of South Africa is beset with throughput and retention problems (Department of Higher Education & Training [DHET], 2020a). The earliest cohort studies of first-time entering students conducted by the then Department of Education (DoE, 2008), and an in-depth analysis of the cohort data undertaken by Scott et al. (2007), showed serious inefficiencies in the teaching outputs of the higher education system. The studies showed that only 32% of students studying in 3-year programmes were able to successfully complete their programmes within 4 years. Furthermore, student performance was racially skewed. While African students have enjoyed the highest increases in enrolment since the new democratic dispensation, they were the poorest performers, with only 21.6% graduating within a period of 4 years; greater percentages of mixed-race (27.5%), Indian (32.1%), and white (46.2%) students completed in that same 4-year period (DoE, 2008). Recent studies (such as DHET, 2020a) have shown improvements in these teaching output indicators but low and racially skewed completion figures persist. These inefficiencies point to an injustice that is exacerbated by the uneven participation rates¹—only 14.5% of mixed-race and 16.5% of African youth attend higher education, while participation rates for Indian and white youth stand at 48.9% and 54.7%, respectively (DHET, 2020a).

The persistence of poor teaching outputs and the urgent need for the higher education system to meet the policy goals of equity of access and success (DoE, 1997, 2008; National Planning Commission, 2010) led to development of the Teaching Development Grant (TDG) to enhance teaching outputs. The TDG was included in the block grant² in 2004 and then, from 2006, as an earmarked grant to improve student retention and throughput by means of systematic improvements in teaching and learning (T&L). Earmarked funds are targeted interventions to address identified systemic problems with specific policy goals and for which reporting on the use of the funds is required.

A 2008 review of the implementation of the TDG called for more focused use of the funds, and recommended strengthened oversight by government and greater accountability by universities (DoE, 2008). Despite this call, up until 2012, reporting on the use of funds was through unaudited progress reports; and accountability and monitoring structures were weak, allowing for sometimes problematic usage of funds (Council on Higher Education, 2016; DHET, 2013). As we have discussed elsewhere (Moyo & McKenna, 2021), such funds were often used for infrastructure and physical maintenance rather than for teaching development, and there were examples of unaccounted funds and funds used on extraneous issues such as the purchasing of vehicles and garden maintenance. From 2012 onwards, the processes of proposal review and reporting on spending were significantly tightened. In 2017 the TDG was reconfigured with the Research Development Grant to form the combined University Capacity Development Grant (UCDG).

1 The gross participation rate refers to the proportion of a population enrolled in universities as a percentage of the total population in the 20–24-year age group, the official university-going age group (DHET, 2013).

2 Government funding to universities in South Africa is made up of the block grant, which are funds that can be used at the discretion of each institution's council, and earmarked grant funding, the use of which is determined by the Minister of Higher Education and Training.

The larger desktop study on the TDG (Moyo, 2018) from which this article comes, does not allow for an evaluation of the actual initiatives; it offers an analysis of institutions' plans, budgets, and reported expenditure. This article homes in on the findings related to student and staff development. With ZAR5.5 billion spent on the TDG (DHET, 2016), and funds of ZAR5 billion paid through the UCDG to date (DHET, 2020b), it is imperative that we identify constraints on the potential of earmarked funds to bring about improvements in teaching across the sector.

Concerns about common-sense approaches to teaching

We all have common-sense understandings of the world that help us to navigate our daily lives. While common sense is not in itself problematic, we acquire it within a preexisting system and it often serves to reinforce rather than challenge the injustices of that system (Archer, 1996). Common sense thus often comprises normalised, dominant understandings of the world (Fairclough, 2010).

Every academic and student has themselves been taught and so have developed untheorised, common-sense assumptions about curriculum and pedagogy. There is no teaching qualification required to work as an academic and not even much by way of incentive for academics to engage with the wealth of research on T&L, much of which troubles dominant assumptions. Niven (2012) showed there has been little uptake of theorised accounts of T&L in practice in the South African higher education system and Hlengwa et al. (2018) showed that where research on T&L is referred to, it is often misappropriated to support common-sense understandings. Deaker et al. (2016) argued that teaching methods cannot be developed in isolation from theorised understandings of T&L, and Scott (2019) cautioned against simplistic approaches to multilayered T&L problems, which he argued, require expertise to identify complex underlying constraints on student success.

The call for teaching development interventions to be well theorised has been made both locally (for example, Boughey & McKenna, 2021; Shay, 2012; Vorster & Quinn, 2015) and internationally (for example, Clegg, 2009; Rowland, 2009; Tight, 2017). Trowler (2020) suggested that the most common understandings of student learning are psychologised accounts that explain success or failure in terms of the skills of the individual student. Boughey and McKenna (2021) called this the *discourse of the decontextualised learner*, which assumes that student success is due to attributes inherent in the individual such as their levels of motivation and intelligence, or to their having certain seemingly generic and neutral skills such as study skills or language skills. The student is decontextualised from their experiences, norms, values, and practices and seen to be simply an individual with (or without) specific sets of attributes and skills. In these kinds of accounts of teaching and learning, the university is almost entirely absented and thus what is offered in the university, and the practices expected in the university, are rarely considered at all—and where they are, they are seen to be neutral.

This common-sense assumption allows the flourishing of the notion that the university is a meritocracy (Sobuwa & McKenna, 2019), whereby student success and failure is understood to emerge entirely from their inherent attributes and skills. While such accounts are repeatedly troubled by the research on T&L, which calls for a far more nuanced appreciation of the student as a social being and the university as a social space, they remain pervasive in our everyday, common-sense understandings. Our analysis of the use of the TDG considered what kinds of understandings underpinned the many initiatives for which these funds were used and, as we will show, found such common-sense assumptions to be pervasive.

Methodological approach

In order to make sense of the use of TDG funding, this paper draws from a larger study (Moyo, 2018), which included data from all public universities from 2004 to 2015.³ The data included TDG budget plans that detailed how each university planned to use their allocated TDG funds (2-year plans were submitted from 2007 to 2013 and, from 2013 onwards, universities were required to submit 3-year plans). The data also included annual TDG progress reports that contained university narratives of the grant's utilisation and their financials, which from 2013 also included an external audit report. Other TDG-related documents such as policy documents and the 2008 review report were also included as data. The data was thus all secondary and, although we reviewed numeric data in the budgets and expenditure reports, the study was largely qualitative in nature. Ethical clearance was granted for the study on the condition that no data was identifiably attached to a specific institution.

Making sense of a complex social phenomenon such as the TDG required an analytical framework that would allow for a nuanced investigation. We drew on Archer's (1995, 1996, 2016) work, which argued that social phenomena do not have simple sets of factors that cause them to occur but, rather, they emerge from the interplay of various cultural, structural, and agential mechanisms. Archer (1995, 1996, 2016) described structures as resources as well as institutional and national arrangements. Culture refers to accepted, engrained, and adopted approaches to doing things. Within this domain can be found all that might be considered to be common sense, that is, the shared perceptions and judgements of events—with such shared perceptions and judgements enabling or constraining the emergence of other events. Agency refers to the human ability to pursue goals and interests, with such agency being enabled or constrained by the structural and cultural mechanisms at play in that particular context (Archer, 2016).

Although the data do not allow for an analysis of the effectiveness of specific TDG-funded projects, we were able to identify the kinds of interventions that each institution planned and implemented, using analytical dualism. Analytical dualism entails understanding any social phenomenon, such as the TDG-funded activities, as emerging from an interplay of structures and cultures with the agency of people (Archer, 1996). The researcher is tasked with

3 The TDG was implemented from 2004 to 2017. However, the analysis of the progress reports and plans was from when it was first allocated as an earmarked grant in 2006. The last 3-year TDG plans were submitted in 2013 and the last TDG progress reports were submitted in 2015. Between 2015/16 to 2016/17, the TDG was migrated into the UCDG.

identifying the enabling and constraining effects of mechanisms within each domain separately.

In this article, we share three findings. The first two are the deficit approaches to student development and the generic approaches to staff development. We argue that these emerge from common-sense understandings of teaching and learning in the domain of culture. The third finding discussed in this article can be categorised as being within Archer's structural domain, which is concerned with access to resources. This is the shortage of academic development expertise and the uneven distribution of the same, which institutions stated constrained what they were able to implement. We begin by looking at deficit approaches to student development and the common-sense understandings that enabled these approaches.

Deficit approaches to student development

The greatest portion of the TDG was allocated to student-focused activities. This was evidenced in the budget allocations, in which more than 50% of the grant was consistently allocated to such activities, and in the narrative portions of the plans:

By far the largest proportion of any funding would be allocated to tutors and supplementary teaching support. (HAI 8)⁴

Given the country's poor schooling system and the rapid massification of the system, it would be difficult to argue that using the bulk of the funds on student development is problematic. However, the consistent use of such funds for interventions aimed at the student separately from the mainstream classes left key T&L areas such as curriculum development and institutional culture untouched. Examples of student development initiatives funded by the TDG included a wide range of add-on courses, additional tutorials, and supplementary teaching:

Workshops, report writing assistance, English courses for non-English speakers. (Merged HAI 8)

Tutoring learners in Mathematics, Science, Accounting . . . affording the learners access to additional workshops that will provide them with further academic and social support. . . . These will include: a) Writing Centre for Reading and writing workshops and b) Life Skills workshops. (HAI 22)

Across most of the data was the idea that students could be supported separately from the curriculum to attain missing "generic skills" and then transfer these back to their mainstream

4 Data quotes come from the range of documentation listed in this article and in more detail in the methods section of Moyo (2018). In order to ensure institutional anonymity, we have numbered the institutions from 1 to 23 and also included a general indication of institutional type in the form of HDI for historically disadvantaged institution, HAI for historically advantaged institution, and Merged Institution in cases where the particular merger process meant that the institution now straddles the previous two identification categories. There are 8 HDIs and, arguably, 10 HAIs. These HAIs include institutions that had HDI campuses incorporated into them. Quotes are amended using square brackets where identifying issues needed to be redacted in the interests of anonymity. Apart from such amendments, data quotes are inserted verbatim.

studies as needed. Ashwin indicated that the “myth of generic skills” is dominant across higher education internationally; he stated that “just because we can describe any process generically does not mean that what is at stake is meaningfully generic” (2020, p. 19). For example, the term “argumentative essay” is often used within the humanities but this does not mean that the nature of an argumentative essay is generic across fields. Following a template for constructing an argumentative essay in an academic literacy course has not been shown to have helped a first-year student make sense of a series of readings to construct a philosophy essay or to understand how arguments are constructed in political studies. The concept of generic skills is alluring because it oversimplifies the educational experience (Ashwin, 2020). This oversimplification allows the response to students’ challenges to take the form of add-on generic initiatives that leave the status quo unchanged.

Alongside initiatives aimed at developing generic skills were those focused on developing language, where “language” pertained to the grammatically correct use of English rather than the discipline-specific literacy practices valued in different fields of study:

The Academic Literacy Unit will provide remedial interventions by concentrating on the development of critical skills in reading, writing, listening and oral communication with a view to facilitating the academic success of students. (HDI 10)

The University plans to establish a 60 to 120-seater Language Laboratory equipped with the latest technology and materials to assist those who have difficulty in communicating in English as well as other languages. (HDI 23)

Such above-mentioned initiatives generally assume that reading and writing in the academy is “simply a matter of acquiring a set of neutral, a-social, a-cultural, and a-political ‘skills’” (Boughey & McKenna, 2016, p. 5). Although many of these courses were called “academic literacy” courses, they were at odds with academic literacy theory, which stipulates that the practices of the academy emerge from the norms and values of different fields of study (Bailey, 2018; Lea & Street, 1999).

That the majority of TDG funds were spent on student development may well be appropriate, but the student development was primarily in the form of add-on, generic interventions. This suggests an understanding in the domain of culture that (a) the problem of poor throughput and retention lies in the attributes of individual students and that (b) learning in the academy is generic across programmes, and that (c) learning gaps can thus be attended to outside of the curriculum by people who are themselves not disciplinary experts.

As long ago as 1978, Wilson cautioned that the deficit approach underpinning much student development in the USA categorises certain students as lacking in various skills or capabilities, and positions T&L challenges as pertaining to a certain population group. This is divorced from engagement with the living and learning environments of the students, and divorced from engagement with the deeply political and sociocultural nature of the university. In South Africa, back in 1985, Vilakazi and Tema suggested that the deficit focus

on the student as “the problem” served the agenda of leaving university cultures and curriculum structures unchallenged.

Literature has shown that similarly poorly constructed conceptions of T&L were a common part of the early years of academic development work in South Africa (Boughey & McKenna, 2021; Shay, 2012), and our data show they have continued since then. As Boughey indicated (2010, p. 5):

Widely held conceptions of disadvantage or “under preparedness” tended to rely on common sense assumptions in constructing students as (i) lacking skills; (ii) experiencing gaps in conceptual knowledge areas; (iii) in need of language development and (iv) lacking the ability to think critically.

The common-sense discourse of the decontextualised student needing remedial support, evident in our data, is thus well-established elsewhere as being problematic—particularly because it allows the curriculum to avoid critique. This is what Archer termed a *situational logic of protection* (Archer, 1995, 1996, 2016). Situational logics suggest that structural, cultural, and agential mechanisms intersect in complementary or contradictory ways resulting in opportunities or constraints for change (Archer, 1995, 1996, 2016). Here, understanding of the “student problem” in the cultural domain, coupled with the notion that the curriculum is a neutral construction of knowledge, worked in complementarity resulting in the TDG being used for add-on interventions that did not disturb mainstream teaching, learning and assessment.

While most TDG money was spent on student development, a significant portion was spent on interventions aimed at academics.

Generic staff development interventions

Staff development initiatives took many forms but most were short-term and arguably failed to engage with deliberations about institutional structures and cultures. The most common staff development programmes funded by the TDG focused on the development of generic skills such as how to write outcomes and assessment criteria, separate from the academic’s identity, the target discipline, or the institution itself. Behari-Leak (2017) argued that generic one-size-fits-all approaches to professional development are ineffective in contexts characterised by great disparity because they do not engage with differing and contested perspectives across the university spectrum. Institutions need to consider, as Deaker et al. (2016) argued, how the messages they send about teaching through policies, processes, and practices, shape staff perceptions and academic identities. The data however suggest that most staff development took the form of add-on workshops and seminars:

R2 544 000—seminars and workshops for the improvement of teaching and learning. (HAI 6)

Vorster and Quinn's (2017) work showed the need for systematic, longer term, and contextualised staff development initiatives. In a South African study undertaken by Quinn (2012, p. 79), some lecturers, for example, expressed a fear that skills-type workshops would result in a "dangerous and ultimately enfeebling tendency towards 'dumbing down' by a focus on educational procedure at the expense of intellectual content." The literature has repeatedly called for ongoing interventions that move away from weakly theorised staff development (Clegg, 2009; Shay, 2012). Although there was indeed some evidence in the data of courses that were fairly extensive, many of them took the form of once-off, 1-day, or 2-day workshops to equip academics with generic teaching skills:

Conduct a series of workshops for all the teaching staff as part of implementing the strategy. (Merged HDI 9)

The reliance on once-off workshops can partly be attributed to the grant structure, which dictated that unspent funds be withdrawn (Moyo, 2018; Moyo & McKenna, 2021). This encouraged rushed expenditures on ad hoc type interventions that did not address contextual issues (Moyo, 2018). Because the funding was short-term and often seen to be unreliable (because funding was often withheld if previous funding had not been spent), it was challenging for many universities to invest in more long-term systematic approaches.

Boud and Brew (2013) called for an end to generic skills approaches to teaching development and insisted that academic work should be understood as a social practice: a complex entity comprising interrelated sayings, doings, relationships, meanings, artefacts, and emotions that cannot be broken down into packages of decontextualised skills. It makes little sense to manufacture development activities that separate staff from their workplaces, colleagues, and contexts since professional practice is located, mediated, and relational (Boud & Brew, 2013). Boud and Brew (2013) urged academic developers to instead, focus on academic practice as a whole, and to identify development opportunities that arise in the course of the work itself. Enabling students to identify, take on, and challenge the specific practices of their field can only be done within the field itself.

The academic development literature (for example, Boughey & McKenna, 2021) has suggested the need to question whether millions of rand spent on consultants, sometimes external to the higher education sector, is likely to ensure sustained improvement. Furthermore, even where such ad hoc short-term interventions provided individual participants with improved skills, these individuals will not necessarily have the agency within their universities to implement changes if such changes contradict the institutional structural or cultural conditions. As Archer (2016) explained, the extent of agency available to an individual is often limited by their position in the institution as a primary agent, as opposed to a social actor who enjoys more ability to act by virtue of the powers accorded to the institutional role they inhabit. Furthermore, agency is always enacted within preexisting structures and cultures and so there may well be a situational logic that constrains the individual's ability to change practices within their department (Boughey & McKenna, 2021). Behari-Leak (2017), for example, showed that new staff who were introduced to ideas for change were not always able to implement them. Motshoane and McKenna (2014) argued

that the focus on the development of individual academics can also prevent a closer look at institutional structures and cultures.

Thus far, we have argued that both student development and staff development initiatives funded by the TDG were largely external to the mainstream curriculum and failed to raise awareness of how institutional and disciplinary structures and cultures play out, and what this means for teaching in ways that make knowledge accessible to all students. While most of the data suggest that this decontextualised approach to both student and staff development emerged from common-sense understandings within institutions, there was also an indication that the shortage of academic development expertise was a key constraint.

Shortage and uneven distribution of experts

The impact of historical injustices on expertise distribution is a major constraint (Bozalek & Boughey, 2012; Quinn, 2012). Capacity constraints as a result of apartheid-generated inequities manifested in a wide range of areas such as financial management, institutional planning, and human resource management expertise (Bunting, 2002; Leibowitz, et al., 2017).

The Gosling (2009) report on academic development centres in South Africa showed great differences in how academic development staff were appointed. In some universities, academic development staff are appointed on contract and in others, they are permanent; in some institutions, they are hired as academics and in others, they are designated as administrators or support staff. This has significant implications for the qualifications and expertise of those appointed and the credibility they enjoy. There were also great variations in the job descriptions of academic development staff across the sector (Gosling, 2009). The TDG budget plans and reports also evidenced such differences. In some universities, academic development positions are funded through the ongoing block grant and, in others, they are funded through the project-based TDG funds. In the data below, for example, the possibilities of being able to appoint such as senior person on a project-basis is not discussed:

The respective grants prioritised the appointment of Senior Faculty Co-ordinators appointed at the level of Deputy Dean . . . who would coordinate teaching development and academic monitoring. (HAI 8)

Academic development can take many forms and serve many different agendas; it can serve to reinforce the status quo or to disrupt it (McKenna, 2012). The different academic development contexts affected the kinds of teaching development initiatives institutions could offer through the TDG (Luckett, 2012; Quinn, 2012).

The inability to attract and retain academic development staff with specialised teaching development capacity was mentioned in many of the documents. In particular, HDIs noted that they were almost entirely dependent on TDG funding to implement their teaching development initiatives and appointed short-term contract staff to do so. They indicated that delays in obtaining these funds and bureaucratic complexities confounding speedy

appointments had significant effects on the implementation of planned initiatives (Moyo & McKenna, 2021):

The writing centre project . . . has been rather slow in taking off due to the unavailability of suitable staff and it is planned that earlier advertising in the next year of the project will be more successful. (HDI 10)

Even where staff could be recruited for the Centre, highly-skilled staff were a challenge to employ. (HDI 23)

This inability to attract and retain staff with teaching development capacity can be seen to emerge from multiple structural constraints such as geographical location, the short-term contract nature of employment, and inefficient human resource systems:

There were two resignations during the year, people going for permanent appointments in other universities. . . . There are delays in filling the current vacant positions due to very slow administration processes at our Human Resource Department. . . . Staff retention becomes a problem for staff who have Master & PhDs qualifications. (HDI 20)

Typically, Academic Development units are staffed by temporary personnel and the initiatives are often hampered by a lack of stability and continuity in staffing. (HAI 8)

Often, the thin distribution and stalled development of T&L expertise in the country (Boughey, 2012) resulted in the appointment of individuals without much by way of expertise and few institutional structures to draw on in the implementation of teaching development activities. A lack of capacity would undoubtedly constrain academic development staff from conceptualising activities that challenged the status quo. This problem could then be exacerbated by their having little social agency in the institution given their lack of credibility amongst academics and their lack of institutional power. According to Archer (1995, 2016), social actors can be understood as occupants of influential positions who can shape practices and goals.

The shortage of experts with social agency also constrained the possibilities for drawing knowledge from experts in the application of theorised practices, resulting in a number of misunderstandings and problematic initiatives as evidenced in the data. For example, in some cases, the TDG was expressed as:

A source of income for (financially challenged) students.

In another example, the scholarship of teaching and learning was referred to as a means to increase funding through publication (Coetzee, 2017) rather than as a means of ensuring the implementation of theorised approaches to student and staff development. And in another, tutorials were not framed as a pedagogical initiative but rather as:

Tutorials: Provide employment for senior students as tutors. In the process assist academic staff with reducing workload and allow for more time to study. Major relief is required for 18 members of staff that are studying. (HDI 10)

The challenges that some universities faced in acquiring and retaining academic development staff often meant that funds could not be spent. In some cases, posts could not be filled due to the general shortage of expertise in the system:

The pool of available candidates with eLearning skills is small, so there may be difficulty attracting suitable candidates. (HAI 2)

At least four universities indicated that they had failed to utilise their TDG due to high staff turnover and inability to fill budgeted posts:

[HDI 23] does not have academic staff members who are experienced in, and understand fully, the nature of vocationally-orientated programmes. Consequently, it has struggled to develop more vocationally-oriented . . . programmes. The university needs a curriculum specialist with suitable experience. (HDI 23)

The projects started only in the second term which created difficulties for their operationalisation especially when appointment of staff was required for successful implementation of the projects. Projects that did not have very clear project plans and designated project leaders in the faculties did not have much success. (Merged Institution 4)

In addition to the difficulty in filling academic development posts, there was uneven access to grant management expertise. The uneven expertise in broader administration, financial management, institutional planning, and human resource professions had implications for the establishment of systems and thus the implementation of the TDG. The sourcing and retention of staffing is a system-wide problem. The DHET (2017) *National Review on the Use of the Clinical Training Grant*, for example, which is a grant that subsidises the training of health sciences professionals, pointed to large under spending in the staffing category for all universities for similar reasons.

A story of continued improvement

We have highlighted here, issues of how the TDG has been used in ways complementary to dominant common-sense understandings of teaching and learning as generic and decontextualised, however, there were also a number of other constraining mechanisms at play in the use of the TDG such as basic infrastructure needs at some institutions. An understanding of the complexity of implementing such an enormous endeavour as the TDG requires an engagement with these and other mechanisms as we have detailed elsewhere (Moyo, 2018; Moyo & McKenna, 2021).

Despite the persisting constraints that have been identified in the implementation of the TDG (now UCDG), the enormous efforts that have been put in place to strengthen T&L development in South African higher education should be applauded. There have been bold strides at both national and institutional levels.

Many problems that beset the early years of TDG have been addressed through enabling structures such as the strengthened UCDG implementation guidelines, standard operating procedures, and a dedicated office to administer the grant. The implementation of some of the TDG report recommendations after 2013 greatly enhanced the use of the funding, albeit leaving most of the problems highlighted in this article untouched.

The TDG (now UCDG) provides an opportunity for institutions to develop more coherent strategic approaches to the development of both teaching and research, although the extent to which universities are able to maximise this opportunity needs to be further investigated.

Conclusion

Using an Archerian framework that understands events as emerging from an interplay of structural, cultural, and agential mechanisms, we have reflected on a wealth of documentation pertaining to the use of the TDG. We have argued that the TDG funding structure has the potential to enable significant changes in higher education to address poor and racially differentiated throughput and retention rates. However, this structure is implemented within a cultural context in which the common-sense understanding of T&L is decontextualised and generic. This has led to initiatives for student development focused on remedial skills development outside of the mainstream classroom and many add-on, short term interventions for academic staff. While such initiatives were not the only ways in which the funding has been used, they were dominant. The constraints on TDG use emerging from this cultural context were exacerbated by constraints in the realm of structure. The study showed how the inability to attract, secure, and retain appropriate academic development expertise at some universities was a major structural contributor to the reproduction of common-sense practices. This meant that, in many cases, fairly ad hoc interventions for both student and staffing programmes were the main focus of TDG spending. There remains significant work to be done to ensure better theorised and more institutionally focused interventions.

The suite of DHET development programmes acknowledges the immense capacity challenges in the system, and aims to address them through the complex UCDG structure. However, the problem remains that the system is dominated by atheoretical initiatives—exacerbated by lack of staffing, the temporary nature of employment, and the allure of common-sense “fix-it” approaches.

A shift away from these practices would require elaboration in the cultural domain. Although DHET funding is a major enablement, such shifts cannot be entirely left to state legislation. Cultural changes require the agency of key people in universities—social actors who participate in nuanced theorisations of teaching and learning to drive sophisticated challenges to the dominant common-sense practices.

Systemic cultural shifts could be enhanced voluntarily through a body such as Universities South Africa (USAF), which is well placed to nurture such agency. Such a structure would have to be equipped with the appropriate capacity, underpinned by a culture of sector-level collaboration that takes institutional and disciplinary differentiation seriously into account. To ensure that systematic shifts are achieved, interventions would also have to be extended at the level of academics as key primary agents at universities. This could be in the form of support for quality postgraduate diplomas in higher education and other extended courses.

In addressing the unequal distribution of expertise, our study suggests a need for a national structure to house the growing body of knowledge and research. This structure could be led by a community of academics providing expertise in a collaborative manner. The proposed structure would serve as a resource for informing and promoting policy development and for supporting professional leadership for all universities, particularly those that have extreme capacity constraints. Such a structure would have to be funded by a state lever such as the UCDG through, for example, its collaborative grants.

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