

Enabling teaching development at a research led university: The UCT case study

Jeff Jawitz and Teresa Peres

University of Cape Town, South Africa

Abstract

This study forms part of a multi-institutional investigation into the contextual influences on the professional development of academics as university teachers in South Africa. UCT, as an historically advantaged, research intensive institution, dominates the South African higher educational landscape in terms of research and international rankings. The study draws on a questionnaire of academics and interviews with senior management to analyse the environment within which UCT academics decide to invest in their role as teachers.

Introduction

Concerns about the low success rate of students at universities in South Africa (SA) have given rise to a growing emphasis on the need for professional development of university academics as teachers (Scott, Yeld & Hendry, 2007; HESA, 2011). The reasons cited for the increasing challenges experienced by academics in SA in their role as teachers include the under-preparedness, growing numbers, increasing class size and diversity of students, and course results showing significant differences in student performance by race¹ (Scott et al., 2007).

This study forms part of a national research project across eight higher education institutions investigating the contextual influences on the professional development of academics as university teachers in SA. The research project explores the interplay between structure, culture and agency (Archer, 1995) in understanding the engagement by academics with teaching development opportunities.

The University of Cape Town (UCT) is a medium size, contact university located on the slopes of Table Mountain in the previously white Southern Suburbs of Cape Town. It draws the majority of its students from a set of established feeder schools from throughout SA, which are amongst the best resourced in the country. As an historically advantaged, research intensive, English medium institution, UCT is ranked as number one in Africa by several international university ranking systems and describes itself as “one of Africa’s leading teaching research institutions” (UCT, 2014). Given this advantageous position, UCT dominates the South African higher educational landscape in terms of research output and the

¹ Historical ‘race’ classifications continue to be used as indicators of disadvantage in South African education institutions to monitor and implement transformation policies and hence our use of them in this research. At UCT staff and students are asked to self-classify their race when completing admissions and employment documentation.

number of National Research Foundation rated academics.

Under the Apartheid government, with a few exceptions, UCT was only allowed to admit white students. Since the 1980's UCT has implemented a series of admissions policies aimed at changing the demographic profile of its students. In 2012 SA African, Coloured and Indian students made up 43% of approximately 17000 undergraduate students. White SA students made up 34% and the rest were international students (UCT, 2012). A similar shift in the racial profile of UCT academics has not yet occurred. In 2010 white academics constituted 70% of the 982 permanent academics at UCT (Table 1).

Table 1: Racial profile of academic staff at UCT (2010)

<u>Race</u>	<u>No.</u>	<u>%</u>
African	115	12%
Coloured	87	9%
Indian	68	7%
White	684	70%
No Info	28	3%
Total	982	100%

Data obtained from Hemis Aug 2011

The Vice-Chancellor (VC) and four Deputy Vice-Chancellors (DVCs) make up the senior academic leadership of the University. Together with the Registrar, the six Deans and the Executive Directors, they constitute the executive management committee.

Over the years the institution has developed a strongly devolved system of decision making with substantial power being vested in the faculties, in particular through the Deans. At the structural level, the historical investment in educational development through the Centre for Higher Education Development (CHED) and its faculty based projects has left a legacy of pioneering work in learning and teaching at UCT. Several academic staff development initiatives in teaching have been in place for over ten years. Much of this work was referred to in the data from senior management and individual academics. Relatively recently teaching criteria for academic performance appraisal and promotion have been strengthened.

Study Design

The research design was done collaboratively by a research team spanning all eight participating institutions. The guiding framework for the study is based on the work of Margaret Archer (1995), which examines the interaction between social processes of structure, culture and individual or group agency. The term 'structure' refers to the power relations and broad policy and legislative framework in which higher education operates. 'Culture' refers to the pedagogical approaches and beliefs about teaching and learning while 'agency' refers to how individuals, or groups of individuals, respond to the constraints and enablements that are presented to them. In line with this framework we have focussed on

exploring expressions of agency in the form of engagement with professional development opportunities.

This paper presents data from an analysis of interviews with senior management and a survey of academic staff at UCT. Interviews were conducted with four members of UCT's executive management committee, two from the senior leadership level (SM1 and SM2) and two Deans of faculties (SM3 and SM4). The interviews were conducted by the Director of a neighbouring institution's Teaching and Learning Centre.

The survey was distributed by email to all academics at UCT. In 2010 there were 982 permanent academic staff members at UCT. Of the 171 valid responses² received, 139 indicated they were permanent academic staff members, a response rate of about 14% from this category of employee.

The survey collected biographic data and asked respondents how often they attend professional development opportunities, where they seek help about teaching and in relation to which aspects of their teaching. Most of these questions had closed format response options. Data on institutional enabling and constraining factors was collected through a combination of closed and open format questions. Respondents were asked about institutional recognition of participation in professional development opportunities in teaching; the availability of resources to support such engagement; whether the topics offered were applicable to their discipline and the accessibility of information about the available opportunities. Finally data was also collected around the significance of workload on this participation. The wording of questions in the 'enabling and constraining factors' section of the questionnaire is based on the work of Slowey and Kozina (2013).

The authors conducted a content analysis on the senior management interviews and highlighted the main points made with regards to teaching and learning at UCT as well as key aspects related to structure and culture. The authors then compared their notes in a process akin to joint coding sessions. A similar process was followed in analysing the open ended responses in the survey data. The analysis focussed on the academic respondents' views on the issues raised by senior management as well as additional aspects not mentioned by senior management.

Senior management view of teaching and staff development

All four senior management interviewees presented very positive perspectives on the quality of teaching at UCT while acknowledging unevenness across faculties and departments. This positive imaging of a key institutional function might be seen as them fulfilling their responsibilities as leadership figures, or simply as face-work (Goffman, 1955) in relation to the interviewer, a Director of a teaching and learning centre from a neighbouring institution.

They pointed to progress being made with improving several structural processes including the creation of institutional Teaching and Learning Committees and a Teaching and Learning

² 'Valid responses' refer to 171 questionnaires completed in full. Omitted were 61 respondents who returned a blank form; 11 who agreed to participate but did not answer any questions; 6 who only completed the biographical data; 2 who declined to participate and 2 who indicated they were researchers with no teaching duties.

action plan, the incorporation of a reflective process in the annual UCT Teaching and Learning report, and the growth of the annual Teaching and Learning conference. They also highlighted existing professional development opportunities such as the New Academic Practitioners Programme (NAPP) and the Distinguished Teachers Award (DTA).

Interview with Senior Leadership

Both interviewees from the senior leadership level (SM1 and SM2) argued that change needed to be driven from the top. They acknowledged that UCT's devolved decision making structure "made it much harder to bring about change" (SM1) as all change had to have "buy in from the faculties" and it was important to ensure there was "synergy between what is going on at the faculty level and centrally" (SM2). Furthermore institutional leadership needed to establish credibility before suggesting changes, particularly given that colleagues who have been serving for a long time might regard new initiatives as "an implicit critical judgment of how they've been doing." (SM1)

They both acknowledged that the dominance of Research within the culture at UCT made it difficult for teaching "to be taken more seriously". SM1 said that in terms of how academics are judged, their authority and respect derives from how they are viewed "as a researcher ... all of the implicit and explicit messages favour research and allocating time there" (SM1). Notwithstanding formal recognition of teaching in promotion criteria "at the end of the day ... being a researcher is key to your success ... at UCT" (SM2).

Despite this SM1 felt strongly that the new promotion criteria on teaching would serve as a fundamental lever leading to "rapid change ... not because [academics] are self-motivated but because they are responding to the incentives and requirements for promotion." He also felt that an improved system of course evaluations would serve as a vehicle for change in the attitude towards improving teaching.

We actually do not evaluate teaching and courses at all systematically...It should be the easiest and least resource intensive thing to start with... [It] would highlight ... where the problem areas are and ... stimulate people taking their professional development more seriously.

In her leadership role SM2 felt that she had a responsibility to show that teaching is taken seriously at UCT. She cited the example of the classroom renewal project, which she leads, as having sent "a message to people that [teaching] matters."

SM1 argued for the need to foster an institutional culture that accepted the need for every member of the teaching staff to undergo formal professional training in teaching.

One doesn't just know [how to teach] from having been in the system... ultimately all lecturers would [need to] engage... early in their careers, with some formal, professional development program.

He admitted however that he had not yet made these views public, a possible admission of the extent to which the prevailing culture might resist such an idea. He added that teaching development needed to be better incentivised through teaching grants and sending "people overseas to look at what the leading institutions elsewhere are doing."

SM2 felt that the existing formal postgraduate teaching qualification in higher education available at UCT for academic staff was too demanding and argued for a wider range of teaching development opportunities. She justified favouring ones that provided immediate

support for participants because of her perception that academics need “to see it as empowering ... need to be able to walk out of any intervention thinking ‘I have learnt something.’”

SM2 acknowledged the tension between central and disciplinary provision of teaching development activities and argued that while some aspects might need to be discipline specific “there are more generic things that can be [better] provided in a centralised structure.” She noted that much expertise was held by “key people who are not within the faculty structures” and to try and embed this expertise in each faculty would lead to unnecessary duplication. SM2 noted that finding adequate and sustainable resources for teaching development was central. While she welcomed the South African government’s new system of Teaching Development Grants she warned of the need to ensure sustainability for new proposals receiving funding.

Interview with two Deans

The two Deans, SM3 and SM4, provided leadership perspectives positioned differently in the structural relationship between UCT’s central leadership and the faculties. Both were nearing the end of extended periods as Deans and gave glowing accounts of the quality of teaching in their respective faculties.

SM3 described the quality of teaching in the faculty as “generally quite high”.

[There are] some outstanding teachers in the faculty, enthusiastic, committed and excellent ...evidenced in the nominations that go for the distinguished teacher’s award.

Similarly SM4 described the teachers in her faculty as “fantastic” also pointing to the numbers having received DTA’s, and even national teaching excellence awards, while others had completed UCT’s Masters in Higher Education Studies. One head of department, a “really hectic scientist”, had openly voiced excitement about attending workshops on how to use educational technology in his teaching.

Both highlighted the importance of the Faculty and the role of the Dean in leading change. SM4 emphasised the agency of the Dean in promoting teaching and argued that whatever decision the university executive made “in the end the implementation and delivery comes to the Dean.” This view was shared by SM3 who argued that very little had been successfully driven centrally. In contrast the leadership in the faculty, particularly the Deputy Deans had successfully lead initiatives such as the re-curriculation across all departments, a review of assessment practices, increased investment in tutor training, and improved administrative support for teaching. She did however, acknowledge an “unevenness across the departments in commitment to the faculty’s Teaching and Learning agenda”.

Disciplinary context

Both Deans highlighted the importance of disciplinary context. SM3 argued that the passion for teaching amongst her colleagues derives from the close link between teaching and research in their disciplines.

Those colleagues who are able to incorporate their research interests into their teaching love that and are enthused by it and by and large I would say that the majority of staff in fact actually enjoy teaching.

Unlike the situation in some other disciplines where curricula remain unchanged for long periods of time, the close connection between research and teaching in the disciplines in her faculty required constant curriculum renewal.

The professionalism associated with disciplines in SM4's faculty meant that her colleagues were aware of the consequences of poor teaching and the need to ensure that students are taught to "do things properly" in professional practice. Furthermore nationally driven curriculum requirements set by the profession left little room for individual preference with respect to curriculum content. In addition the large teaching load competed with research and service delivery in the hospital and clinics.

SM3 argued that the performance appraisal system provided an opportunity to spell out expectations in terms of teaching and ensure that support was provided particularly where newcomers were found to be struggling with their teaching. In some cases central provision of staff development might be more appropriate than being department-based as it had the advantage of providing a "safe space" for issues to be discussed.

SM4 reported a long history of teaching development activities in the faculty. "For us it's always been there ... even in the 80's we had teach-ins for teachers." Much of this engagement with teaching development was fostered by the availability of formal and non formal teaching courses and workshops as well as a supportive in-faculty educational development unit. As Dean, SM4 insisted that all new staff go through an induction programme related to teaching. She also sends one or two lecturers each year to international education conferences.

Supporting professional development

The four senior management interviewees all supported having a range of professional development opportunities for teaching in place while some argued that these should be compulsory for all teaching staff. A concern was expressed that formal teaching qualifications should not be "too onerous" and that instead a range of formal and informal practical opportunities should be provided. They also acknowledged the structural conditions that limit the possibility of change being driven from the centre.

At the cultural level senior management articulated a commitment to raising the profile of teaching at UCT, while acknowledging the current dominance of research. Despite the very positive portrayal of teaching at UCT by senior management, there was an acknowledgment of the threat that the overwhelming dominance of research at UCT poses for teaching development.

[UCT is an] institution that prides itself on being research-led... Drivers for research in a research led institution threaten to overwhelm the teaching function. [SM4]

Academics' views on professional development in teaching

The quantitative and qualitative survey data was analysed for evidence that spoke to themes that emerged from the interview with senior management as well as additional themes raised by the academic themselves.

In terms of seniority over half (59%) of respondents were either lecturers or senior lecturers while one third (32%) were Associate Professors or Professors. Twenty percent of respondents were new academics i.e. had taught for 4 years or less in higher education while 40% had worked at UCT for 4 years or less.

Well over half of the respondents had acquired a doctorate, while a further 20% were studying towards either a PhD or a Masters. The pressure to complete postgraduate studies up to PhD level is a significant one for new academics at UCT. Only 35% had completed a teaching qualification of any kind. It is unclear how this compares with the general UCT academic population. It is assumed though that the respondent sample is skewed towards colleagues who invest in their teaching. They are the ones who are most likely to participate in a survey on teaching.

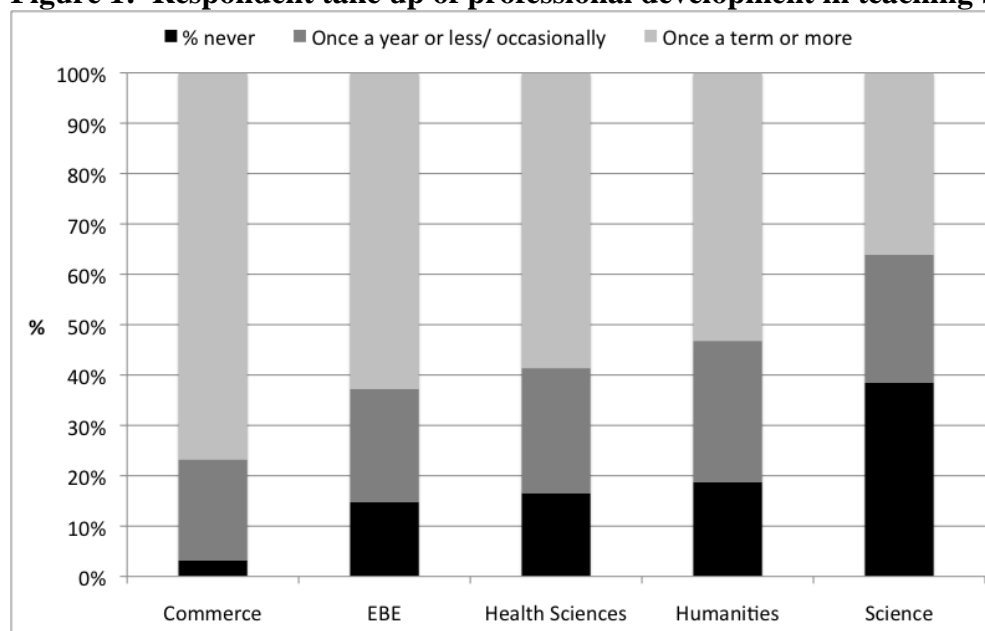
Respondents presented a very positive view of themselves as teachers mirroring senior management’s positive view of the teaching at UCT. 80% rated their teaching as either 4 or 5 (excellent) and 19% rated their teaching as 3. Only 1% rated themselves as 2 and none as very bad (1).

Participation in teaching development opportunities

Only 25% of respondents indicated that they had never participated in teaching development opportunities; over one third attended once a year or less frequently and 41% attended at least once a semester.

These levels of engagement were not equally distributed across all faculties (Figure 1). The most frequent participation was amongst respondents in the Commerce faculty while the largest percentage of respondents who reported never attending such opportunities was in the Science faculty. It should be noted however that within the Commerce faculty exists an active group which arranges well attended fortnightly seminars on teaching. No such group exists in Science. This unequal spread of participation in teaching development activities, supports senior managements’ concerns about unevenness across faculties.

Figure 1: Respondent take up of professional development in teaching by faculty*



*Law and CHED have been removed from this analysis due to a low response rate.

Teaching experience

Data revealed substantial variations in the participation in professional development opportunities in teaching over the life course of an academic career (Figure 2). Over 25% of academics did not participate in any such activity during their first 5 years of teaching in higher education. This figure drops to 11% for academics in their 6-11 years of teaching. This quartile also has the highest proportion of academics attending most frequently, once or more a semester. From that point on the proportion of academics not attending increases steadily to over a third never attending once they get to more than 20 years experience.

One might assume that newer academics would have the greatest need for professional development. The data suggests that there are factors inhibiting new staff from participating in professional development opportunities in the earlier years of their career. Despite criticisms from some respondents that courses were often aimed at new staff, those with less experience commented that they were often not in a position to take advantage of these opportunities;

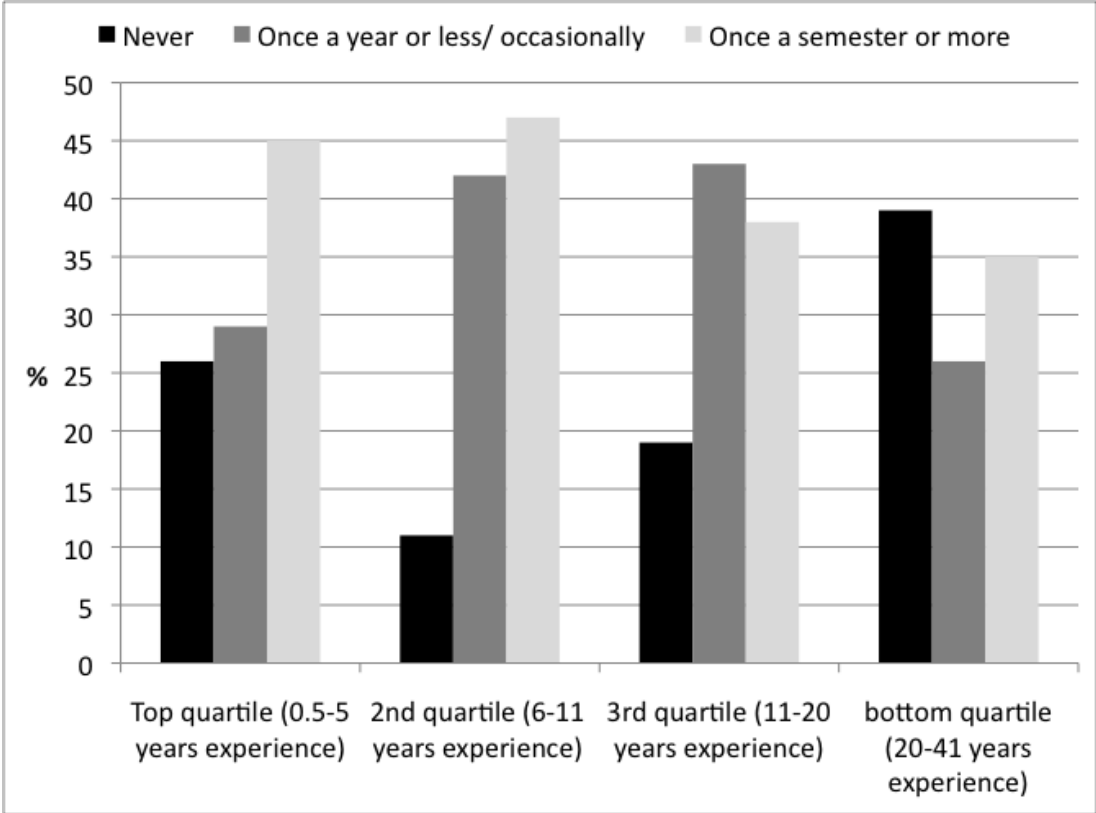
As a new lecturer I spend so much time preparing new lectures, I never get the chance to attend workshops.

The sense of irony in this situation is captured by the following quote from a respondent:

It is my first year teaching so I feel I don't have time to learn how to teach because I am spending all my time ... learning how to teach.

Given the pressure to establish a research project and in a significant number of cases to complete postgraduate studies up to PhD level, it is not surprising that new academics are the ones that feel they are unable to participate in teaching development activities.

Figure 2: Staff take up of professional development opportunities by experience in higher education.

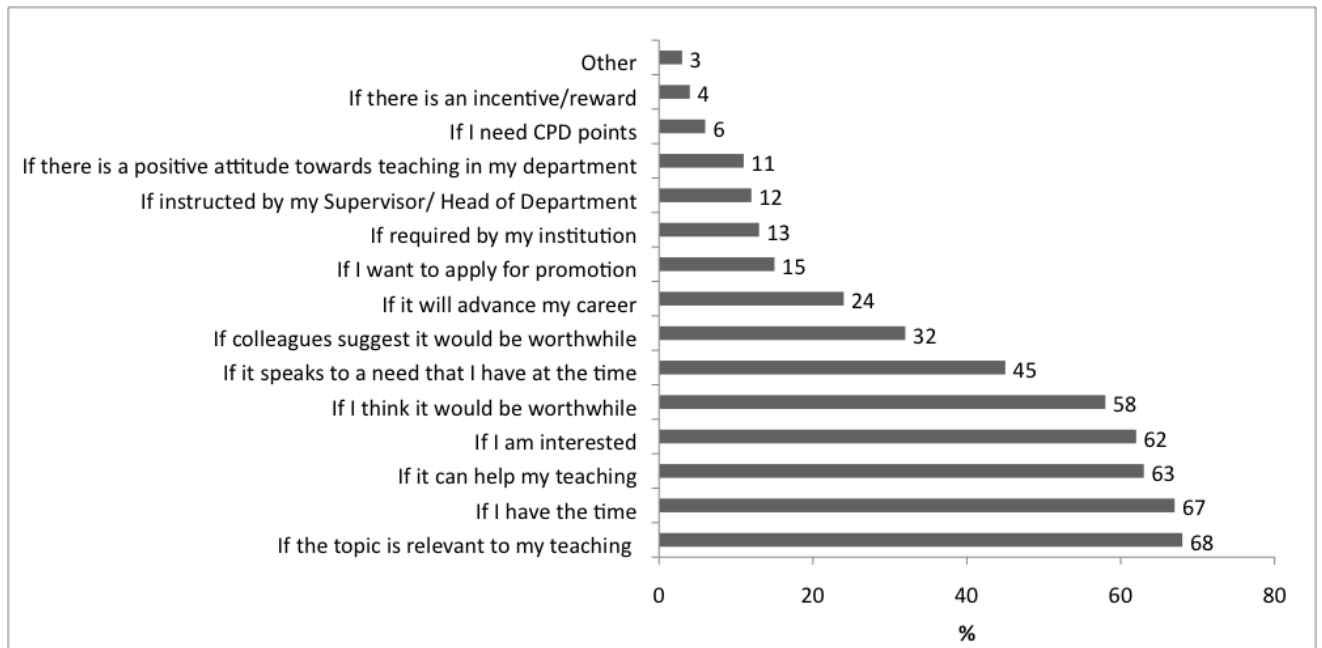


What motivates academics to improve their teaching?

The survey explored the factors that might motivate academics to attend professional learning opportunities for teaching through the question ‘What may prompt your attendance of professional learning opportunities for your teaching?’ The four most frequently chosen prompts out of a list of 15 options, selected by 60% or more of respondents, included one that relates to the availability of time, and three that link to academics’ intrinsic motivation to improve their teaching (Figure 3).

Prompts related to incentives received relatively little support with 15% of respondents indicating a desire for promotion and almost a quarter seeing career advancement as potential motivations to attend. These would seem to counter the view expressed by SM1 that academics respond to incentives rather than being self-motivated to take steps to improve their teaching.

Figure 3: Factors prompting attendance at professional learning opportunities for teaching.



Available time and workload

The element of available time is an aspect that we feel needs closer scrutiny as 67% of respondents indicated that they would attend only if they had the time. Further in the survey 80% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that “My workload often hinders my ability to participate in professional learning for teaching” with 28% of respondents referring to their heavy teaching load and 23% referring to research related demands. In addition 39% of respondents used the word ‘time’ to explain their support for this statement.

While time was the most frequently occurring reference in the qualitative responses it was not always presented as a constraint. The differences in the way time is conceptualised by respondents, could give some indication of academics’ sense of agency. Individual agency is reflected in the way in which some respondents felt they had some control over time.

‘I make the time because I think it is that important.’

‘If the need is there I would find the time.’

A second category of respondents also displayed agency in their choice to use time for activities other than teaching development;

‘It would not be my priority even if I had more time.’

‘I don’t see it as a core interest... I would much rather devote to my research.’

On the other hand some respondents presented time as an external constraint that imposed its will over them;

‘Time constraints prevent me from attending some of the workshops.’

‘I have many administrative duties, mostly tied to the (very) large classes I teach. ... and there are only so many hours in the day.’

Given that time is such a central issue the perceived value of professional development activities becomes critical.

I do not have the time to both perform at a high level when it comes to research, teach at an equally high level, fill out paperwork ... and attend courses which may or may not improve my teaching.

One respondent commented that 'Teaching is fine, but huge dollops of time to deal with theory of education is not'.

Linked to the sense of time as an external constraint were several references to the overwhelming pressure to perform in research;

'It is hard to justify spending time on improving my teaching when I know that the main determinant of getting a permanent position or promotion is my research.'

'Very limited time to take up opportunities due to the pressure to publish and complete PHD.'

The dominance of research was a recurring theme throughout both the survey of academics and management interviews.

Tension between research and teaching

The tension between research and teaching was highlighted in the open responses to the statement that 'My institution provides formal recognition for engagement in professional learning for teaching'. Respondents were split between 39% who agreed or strongly agreed, 36% who were unsure and a quarter who disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Many respondents referred to the structural mechanisms in place to recognize teaching that were mentioned by senior management including the new promotion criteria on teaching and teaching awards. Some respondents referred to support from within their faculty or department which suggests that important sources of recognition may be localised within smaller groups rather than across the institution. This localised support highlighted the experience of unevenness.

There seems to be disparity across the institution, even across departments within a faculty.

Ten respondents made reference to what 'is supposed to' be the case and what happens 'in practice'. These, together with other comments about the divide between informal and formal recognition means that regardless of whether respondents agreed/disagreed/not sure about whether there was institutional recognition, there was consensus that there existed a difference between what was said and what actually happened at UCT. For example;

Though teaching is recognized for promotion, it counts very little. Overall, the university provides very few rewards for teaching excellence and, while it states that it supports teaching, the experience of teachers is very different.

(Respondent who answered 'disagree' to statement)

There is informal recognition in the promotion process but nothing formal
(Respondent who answered 'not sure' to statement)

Good teaching is required for promotion. On paper it is ranked as a useful skill. My impression is that in practise its priority is very much second to research in most departments

(Respondent who answered 'agree' to statement)

Once again in terms of institutional recognition, the priority remains research. As one respondent described it, it reinforces a 'publish or perish' discourse that positions teaching as a less worthwhile pursuit for those that value career progression.

However some respondents made reference to changes taking place at UCT at an institutional level.

I think the institution is becoming more engaged with these issues - and there is now a DVC with responsibility for teaching and learning and there are teaching and learning formal committees - but this engagement is relatively new.

Conclusion

The UCT case study reflects the challenges facing research intensive institutions in promoting teacher development amongst academic staff. Despite the advantage of the experience, positioning and resources available through the Centre for Higher Education Development, the institution's leadership struggles to promote a balance between its research and teaching imperatives that facilitates investment by academics in their role as teachers.

Tension between research and teaching

Courses and workshops on teaching development have become part of the culture at UCT, indicated by the widespread awareness of their provision. Emphasis is placed on individuals deciding whether or not to attend these professional development opportunities. However academics are surrounded by mixed messages with the overwhelming dominance of the research discourse requiring them to make difficult choices. As such good teaching at UCT happens despite the institutional culture rather than because of it.

Impact of context

The ability of academics to consciously pursue avenues to improve their teaching is heavily dependent on their immediate institutional context, which characterises their daily experience of working at UCT. This means that comparable academics (in terms of age/ experience/ motivation) have radically different experiences of implicit and explicit messages. This has led to the creation of pockets of colleagues and departments that allow for the possibility of academics spending time on developing their teaching. At the other end of the spectrum are the spaces where the supremacy of research remains entrenched as part of how academia has always been.

Recognition for engagement in professional learning for teaching

The DTA and NAPP are held up as evidence, by both senior management and academics, of institutional recognition for good teaching. However, winners of the DTA and those who attend NAPP also represent two ends of a scale that epitomise polarity in the experience of working as an academic at UCT, between well established and emerging academics. The gap between theory and practice means that new academics once having completed the non compulsory NAPP programme are left to make choices about how to spend their time, knowing that if they want a promotion, they need to prioritise research.

From a critical perspective, the inclusion of teaching in the promotion criteria can be interpreted as a phrase that is appropriated by management as evidence of institutional change, rather than a mechanism by which to actually achieve it.

Both senior management and academics surveyed presented a positive image of teaching at UCT, reinforcing a sense of satisfaction in their own roles in promoting good teaching. This supports senior managements' confidence in the good standard of teaching at UCT. However their confidence is not heard or felt by many academics, to the extent that it shifts their belief that substantial change has taken place in the recognition of teaching.

References

- Archer, M.S. (1995). *Realist social theory: the morphogenetic approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Goffman, E. (1955). On face-work: an analysis of ritual elements in social interaction. *Psychiatry: Journal for the Study of Interpersonal Processes*, Vol 18, 213-231.
- HESA (2011). *A Generation of Growth: proposal for a National Programme to Develop the Next Generation of Academics in South African Higher Education*. Higher Education South Africa.
- Scott, I., Yeld, N. & Hendry, J. (2007). A Case for Improving Teaching and Learning in South African Higher Education. Higher Education Monitor No 6. Council on Higher Education. Pretoria.
- Slowey, M. & Kozina, E. (2013). Practicing what they preach? Academics' views on professional development for their teaching role in: Farrell, C. and Farrell, A. (Eds). *Emerging Issues in Higher Education III: from capacity building to sustainability*. Athlone: Educational Developers of Ireland Network (EDIN), pp. 55-69
- UCT (2012). UCT Annual Report Highlights 2012. University of Cape Town. Cape Town
- UCT (2014). *Our history*. Retrieved May 9, 2014, from <https://www-uct-ac-za.ezproxy.uct.ac.za/about/intro/history/>

Acknowledgements

This project was funded by a South African National Research Foundation grant number 74003, entitled Structure Culture and Agency.