



Exploring allied professionals' perspectives on academic development in South African higher education institutions: A social realist case study

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Abstract

This study examines how allied professionals perceive and experience academic development within a South African university, employing a qualitative case study approach. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, evaluation form and focus groups with 25 participants from varied professional roles. The analysis draws on Margaret Archer's Social Realist Theory and General Systems Theory to interpret the interaction between individual agency, institutional structures, and systemic relationships. Using Social Realist Theory, the study explores how structural conditions, such as policy frameworks and hierarchical arrangements, and cultural norms, including academic-administrative divides, shape and constrain professional agency. Thematic analysis highlights how participants navigate these conditions through identity work and collaborative practices, sometimes reinforcing and at other times challenging existing norms. General Systems Theory complements this perspective by situating these dynamics within the institution as an interconnected system. The findings reveal that fragmentation between academic and administrative domains disrupts systemic coherence, limiting the institution's ability to achieve integrated academic development. The study contributes to ongoing debates by framing academic development as a relational and systemic practice rather than an exclusively academic function. It challenges dominant discourses that marginalise non-academic staff and advocates for inclusive governance and integrated support structures. By foregrounding allied professionals' experiences and theorising them through Social Realist Theory and General Systems Theory, this research offers a more holistic and context-sensitive understanding of academic development in higher education.

Keywords: Academics; higher education; perceptions; professional development

Introduction

South African universities have demonstrated remarkable adaptability in their pursuit of academic transformation. Over time, these institutions have progressively refined, expanded, and diversified their programmes and departments, reshaping the educational landscape and empowering students to achieve their academic and professional aspirations. Central to this transformation is the Centre for Professional Development (CPD); a pivotal unit within universities that supports the growth of academics and allied professionals (APs). APs typically include markers, face-to-face tutors, and e-tutors

who are contracted to support students in various disciplines in an Open Distance and e-Learning (ODEL) context. CPD training initiatives are focused on enhancing teaching methodologies, ensuring policy compliance, and promoting the effective use of learning management systems.

Previous studies have explored the evolving nature of professional development in higher education. Sebolao (2023) and Soldat and Weyers (2023) highlight that while some academics embrace CPD as a transformative process, others approach it with hesitation or limited understanding. Johannes et al. (2019) emphasise the need for conceptual change and reflective practice in academic development (AD)

programmes. However, these studies are primarily focused on academics and often overlook APs, whose roles are critical in ODeL institutions. Furthermore, existing research tends to examine professional development as a generic process without sufficiently interrogating how disciplinary expertise interacts with pedagogical development or how institutional expectations shape engagement.

Globally, debates on AD underscore the tension between disciplinary mastery and pedagogical competence. Scholars argue that effective teaching in higher education requires more than subject expertise; it demands continuous engagement with evolving pedagogical practices, digital technologies, and institutional policies. In contexts such as South Africa, where ODeL models are expanding, this tension is amplified by the need to integrate technology-mediated learning and ensure equitable student support. Yet, there is limited empirical evidence on how academics and APs perceive and navigate these expectations, particularly in resource-constrained environments.

This study addresses these gaps by examining how APs perceive and engage with AD initiatives within South African universities. Specifically, it seeks to;

- explore the relationship between disciplinary expertise and pedagogical development;
- investigate how APs interpret institutional expectations for continuous learning; and
- provide insights that inform strategies for enhancing teaching and learning in ODeL contexts.

Literature review

Academic development and allied professionals in higher education

Higher education institutions are undergoing profound transformation, driven by technological advancements, shifting student demographics, and having the imperative for inclusive and responsive teaching practices. AD has emerged as a strategic domain aimed at enhancing teaching quality, fostering student

success, and supporting institutional change. However, the role of APs, including that of tutors and academic support staff within this evolving landscape, remains underexplored. This section critically evaluates the literature on AD and APs, identifies strengths and limitations, and situates the study within the South African context.

Strengths and contributions of literature on academic development

AD initiatives have been widely acknowledged for their role in improving pedagogical practices and institutional culture. Johannes et al. (2019) evaluated nine AD programmes using Systems Theory and reflective approaches, resulting in a generic model applicable across institutions. Trowler (2008) emphasises AD's contribution to enhancing teaching and learning quality, while Winter (2017) demonstrates how reflective toolkits can shift educator perceptions and foster institutional transformation.

Bengesai and Amusa (2024) demonstrate that AD programmes significantly improve graduation outcomes for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Mkuti and Aucamp (2024) argue for targeted AD interventions aligned with the Fifth Industrial Revolution to reduce dropout rates. Williams et al. (2024) critique the disconnect between AD goals and practices, particularly in supporting black students, and advocate for culturally responsive curricula.

Limitations and gaps in literature on academic development

Although AD programmes have made significant strides, several persistent challenges continue to limit their overall impact. A key issue is the fragmented nature of programme design and evaluation. Often developed in silos, these initiatives lack coherence across departments and institutions, resulting in inconsistent practices and making it difficult to assess their effectiveness in a meaningful way.

Another concern is the disproportionate emphasis placed on full-time academic staff. AD efforts tend to cater primarily to permanent faculty, while APs, including part-time lecturers, receive minimal attention. This imbalance overlooks the

crucial role that APs play in supporting student learning and engagement.

Moreover, APs are frequently excluded from institutional AD strategies despite their direct and sustained interaction with students. Their marginalisation in planning and development processes not only limits their professional growth but also represents a missed opportunity to enrich the student experience through a more inclusive and integrated approach to AD (McIntosh *et al.*, 2021).

The role of allied professionals: Current relevance

The literature on APs, particularly tutors, highlights their critical role in student support and academic success. Szuba (2020) provides a historical overview of tutoring, but recent studies offer more relevant insights. Ngwabe *et al.* (2025) argue that tutorship development programmes foster professional transformation and pedagogical autonomy. Sithole (2024) posits that tutor training enhances confidence, empathy, and academic skills, positioning APs as active agents of learning. However, systemic challenges remain. Okoro and Phiri (2023) identify institutional barriers such as inadequate training, poor communication, and insufficient resources that hinder tutoring effectiveness. These findings underscore the need for more inclusive and supportive AD frameworks that recognise and empower APs.

Integrating academic development and allied professionals

There is a clear disconnect between AD literature and AP focused studies. While AD initiatives are aimed at improving teaching quality, they often exclude APs from strategic planning and implementation. In contrast, AP studies rarely link tutor development to broader AD frameworks. This gap limits the potential for holistic AD and undermines efforts to create inclusive learning environments.

Local context and relevance

In South Africa, historical inequalities, socio-economic disparities, and recent disruptions such as COVID-19 have intensified the need for responsive AD strategies. Often drawn from the

same communities as the students they support, APs are uniquely positioned to bridge pedagogical and cultural gaps. Their integration into AD initiatives is essential for addressing systemic challenges and promoting equity in higher education.

Research gap and contribution to the study

In order to address the existing gaps in AD, this study is centred on the experiences of APs, whose contributions are often underrepresented in institutional planning. It investigates how APs engage with AD initiatives, highlighting both their influence on and the influence of institutional strategies on their professional roles. By examining these dynamics, the study is aimed at generating meaningful insights that can inform more inclusive and responsive AD practices; ones that better support APs and enhance the learning experiences of the students with whom they work.

By situating the study within the South African context, it offers a nuanced understanding of the intersection between AD and APs in a system marked by transformation, inequality, and innovation.

Problem statement

AD is central to improving teaching quality, student success, and institutional performance in higher education. Yet, in South Africa, these initiatives predominantly target academic staff, leaving APs, such as markers, face-to-face tutors, and e-tutors, structurally and culturally marginalised despite their critical role in mediating student learning and epistemological access (Faroa, 2017; Hlatshwayo, 2024). Institutional hierarchies and employment practices position these professionals as peripheral actors, reinforcing power asymmetries that limit their recognition and participation in academic development (De Klerk & Palmer, 2020).

Drawing on Archer's Social Realist Framework, this marginalisation reflects the interplay of structure, culture, and agency (SAC). Structural conditions, such as contractual precarity and exclusion from governance, constrain agency, while cultural norms privileging permanent academics sustain hierarchies of legitimacy.

Within these contexts, APs exercise limited agency, often in compliance rather than transformation, perpetuating morphostasis rather than morphogenesis.

Empirical evidence underscores this gap: APs significantly enhance student engagement and success, yet their contributions remain undervalued and underresearched (Faroa, 2017). Development programmes for tutors exist, but fail to address systemic conditions that reproduce marginalisation (Ngwabe et al., 2025). In a national context prioritising transformation and inclusivity, this lack of insight into APs' experiences constitutes a critical research gap. This study, therefore, explores their perceptions of roles, challenges, and opportunities within AD, using Archer's Social Realist lens to illuminate structural, cultural, and agential dynamics. The findings aim to inform institutional policy and advance more inclusive and equitable AD practices.

Theoretical framework

This study is underpinned by Margaret Archer's (1995) Social Realist Theory (SRT), as well as General Systems Theory (GST), introduced by Ludwig von Bertalanffy (1968) and adapted for education by Robert Owens (1981).

SRT examines the dynamic interaction between SAC within social contexts. The structural component encompasses institutional policies and knowledge systems, while the cultural dimension reflects collective attitudes, values, and norms. Agency refers to the capacity of individuals to navigate and influence these structural and cultural elements. In the context of higher education, the complexity of SAC makes SRT a valuable analytical framework for understanding how quality assurance (QA) mechanisms shape curriculum responsiveness. This framework enables an assessment of how Internal Quality Assurance (IQA) and External Quality Assurance (EQA) processes influence curriculum development, particularly in terms of how QA policies and committees either facilitate or hinder responsiveness. The agency dimension is focused on the interactions among key stakeholders, such as QA bodies and curriculum developers, as they

work to align curricula with institutional structures and cultural expectations.

In parallel, GST conceptualises institutions as open systems composed of interrelated components working collaboratively towards shared objectives. Within higher education, GST provides a lens to examine the interplay between IQA, EQA, and curriculum development, emphasising the role of various stakeholders in shaping curriculum adaptability. This theoretical perspective highlights the dynamic and interconnected relationships that influence curriculum responsiveness across universities.

Cognitive Dissonance Theory and academic development

Cognitive Dissonance Theory (CDT), introduced by Leon Festinger in the 1950s, posits that individuals experience psychological discomfort when confronted with conflicting beliefs, attitudes, or behaviors. This discomfort often motivates efforts to reduce dissonance, either by changing attitudes or modifying behaviours. Although CDT has traditionally been applied to general societal phenomena, recent scholarship has extended its relevance to educational settings.

In the broader social context, Harmon-Jones et al. (2015) explored how dissonance influences health-related behaviours and self-perception. It was found that individuals who perceive themselves as healthier than others may avoid engaging in exercise, experiencing internal conflict about its necessity. Furthermore, those with unrealistic self-perceptions of attractiveness may pursue unattainable social relationships, increasing the likelihood of rejection and emotional distress.

Within the academic sphere, McGrath (2020) examined the application of CDT to teaching and learning. The study reveals that students often resist adopting more effective study strategies, preferring familiar methods despite evidence of their limitations. This resistance reflects a psychological tendency to avoid the discomfort associated with changing established habits. Complementing these findings, Graham and Jones (2011) demonstrate that individuals tend

to align their attitudes with prevailing social behaviours. For instance, students initially resistant to e-learning may revise their attitudes and adopt digital platforms when they observe widespread acceptance among peers.

These studies collectively underscore the versatility of CDT in explaining both individual and collective behaviour across diverse contexts. They also highlight the potential for leveraging CDT to inform pedagogical strategies that encourage adaptive learning and attitudinal change.

Maslow's hierarchy of needs in academic settings

Maslow's hierarchical needs are crucial for AD in higher education contexts. Naaz and Khalid (2023) argue that Maslow's theory serves as a basis for academic developers, as they design instructional strategies, classroom environments, and support systems that are inclusive, diversified and flexible, to address individual differences. It remains crucial to address academics' needs related to physiology, safety, a sense of belonging, self-esteem and self-actualisation, to foster a supportive and enriching learning environment.

Meeting academics' basic physiological needs is necessary to create an environment that is stable and conducive to learning. Providing emotional support systems is also important to enhance academic safety. Social connections, positive relationships, and a sense of belonging within the academic community will enhance a diversified, supportive and inclusive classroom environment where academics feel valued, accepted, and connected.

To meet these needs, it is essential for academics to collaborate and engage collectively. Academic developers play a crucial role in creating environments where academics are acknowledged for their achievements, receive constructive and meaningful feedback, and participate in activities that enhance their self-confidence. Fostering autonomy, recognising accomplishments, and promoting a growth mindset are key strategies in addressing these professional needs.

Self-actualisation, as conceptualised by Maslow, refers to the pursuit of personal growth,

the realisation of one's potential, and the attainment of self-fulfillment. Within the educational context, supporting academics in achieving self-actualisation involves providing opportunities for creativity, critical thinking, and personal development. This includes assigning intellectually stimulating tasks, encouraging the exploration of individual interests and talents, and motivating academics to set and pursue meaningful goals.

By applying Maslow's hierarchy of needs to higher education, institutions and professionals can cultivate a supportive and enriching environment that responds to the diverse needs of academic staff. This can be achieved through the design of instructional strategies, classroom management approaches, and support systems that promote holistic development, intrinsic motivation, and positive educational experiences. However, it is important to recognise that individual needs vary and that progression through the hierarchy is not always linear. Academics may experience different needs at different times, and educators must remain responsive to these variations by tailoring their approaches accordingly.

SRT is applicable as the study investigates how structural factors such as university policies, departmental priorities, and leadership affect professionals' engagement with AD. It remains important to understand challenges relating to support for AD as a reflection of broader social and institutional dynamics.

GST is used as a basis to explore how interdepartmental relationships, communication flows, and feedback mechanisms influence professionals' perceptions. Identifying systemic barriers or enablers to AD initiatives is important in understanding professionals' perceptions.

CDT forms an important theoretical underpinning in understanding how professionals reconcile conflicting views such as valuing student success, but feeling sidelined in AD. The study investigates how dissonance affects engagement, motivation, or resistance to AD activities.

Maslow's hierarchy of needs was used as a lens to assess whether AD initiatives address

professional growth, esteem, and self-actualisation. This is significant in understanding how unmet needs such as a lack of recognition or inclusion may lead to disengagement or negative perceptions.

The above theories were used complementarily in this study. SRT provided a macro-level view of structural influences; GST offered a meso-level understanding of organisational dynamics; and CDT and Maslow's hierarchy give micro-level insights into individual motivations and psychological responses.

Research methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach as the researchers aimed to explore the content in its natural form and understand how it is perceived (Busetto et al., 2020). Qualitative research is focused on data presented in narrative or textual form and typically involves a smaller number of participants compared to quantitative designs (Warren, 2020). This approach is well-suited for gaining in-depth insights into participants' experiences, beliefs, and attitudes. That being the case, it is noted that qualitative research is mainly considered to be lightweight in research as it involves a small sample size that does not represent the entire population, compared to quantitative research, which considers a much bigger sample size (Hammarberg et al., 2016). However, owing to the researchers wanting to understand facts and perspectives from the APs' point of view, the researchers utilised qualitative research.

The research design employed in this study is a case study. It involves the analysis of evaluation feedback from 40 participants who attended training sessions at the CPD. These participants contributed their perspectives by completing an evaluation form that was provided to them. Data were collected at the beginning and end of each cohort-based training. This provided valuable insight into the perception or change of perception of APs. Besides the evaluation form, the researchers also considered the attitude and tone of the cohort at the beginning of the training, compared to the end of the training. The researchers meticulously evaluated their responses, employing narrative analysis to dissect

and interpret the data and consider which themes and patterns were significant. Through this method, the goal was to uncover and comprehend the various perceptions of professionals and APs towards professional development. Although this research was focused extensively on expectations and perceptions, the researchers explored the changes and impacts on the cohort (Khoa et al., 2023). It must also be noted that not all the participants completed the evaluation form.

The analysis adopted a systematic, theory-informed approach. All interview and focus group transcripts were first transcribed verbatim and imported into qualitative analysis software. Initial coding began with an open coding process to capture recurring concepts and patterns across the participants' accounts. These codes were then organised into axial categories that highlighted relationships among ideas, such as collaboration, resource constraints, and role ambiguity.

The coding framework was subsequently refined through an iterative comparison with Margaret Archer's SRT and GST. Drawing on SRT, how participants' narratives aligned with the domains of structure (institutional policies, hierarchies), culture (norms, academic-administrative divides), and agency (professional identity, initiative) was examined. This enabled the researchers to interpret not only what the participants had reported, but also how their experiences had been shaped by and responded to systemic conditions. GST provided a complementary lens, emphasising interdependencies and feedback loops between institutional subsystems. Together, these theories offered a nuanced understanding of fragmentation and integration within the university context.

Finally, selective coding distilled these insights into overarching themes, namely cross-functional collaboration, sustained professional learning, and systemic coherence, while preserving the participants' voices. Throughout the process, memo-writing and peer debriefing supported analytic rigour and reflexivity.

Results

A general question was asked: "*Why do you want to be a tutor/teaching assistant or allied*

professional at university?” This question is fundamental in understanding the driving force behind why APs apply for this work and

participate in the training conducted at the universities. The results are shown in Figure 1 below.

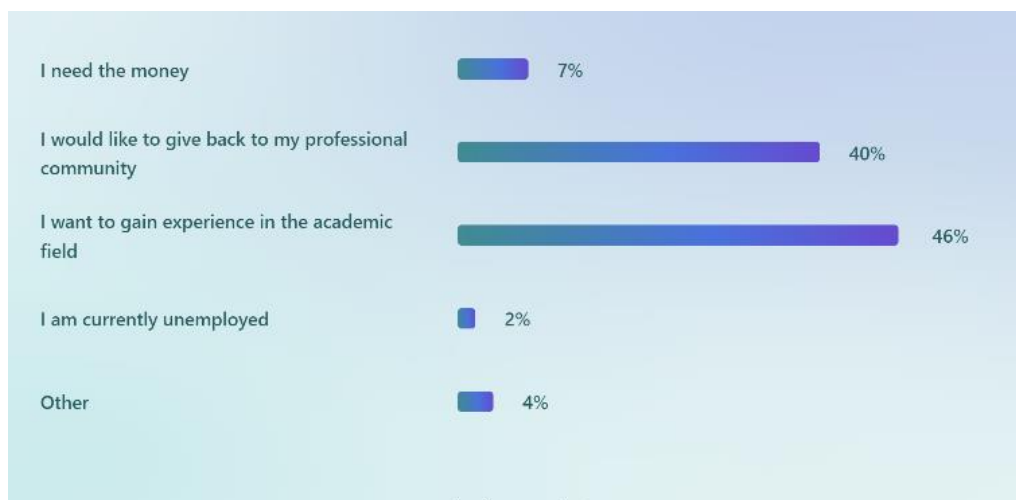


Figure 1. Reason to be a tutor: Evaluation rating in percentage

A total of 46% of the participants highlighted wanting to gain academic experience when asked why they had applied to be APs. On the other hand, 40% indicated that they had applied as they wanted to give back to their professional community in the form of knowledge sharing. While 7% indicated their interest was based on financial reasons, they applied for the position to earn an income. From Maslow's hierarchy of needs perspective, the above motivation reflects the chase of both self-actualisation and esteem. The intrinsic goal of professional development seems to drive those who were initially looking for academic experience. While on the other hand, those driven by financial need demonstrate how socio-economic factors impact academic labour participation by reflecting lower-tier physiological and safety needs.

Training was highlighted as a crucial component of the work of APs. The findings reveal that 96% of the participants required training, with the rest indicating that they did not require any training. This suggests a structural conflict between institutional expectations and existing support networks within the framework of SRT. The acquisition of skills is necessary for effective student support for APs as they are expected to perform pedagogical and technological functions. The increasing integration of technology in teaching and learning requires APs to be proficient in effectively utilising the relevant educational

technology tools and platforms (Malatji et al., 2022). SRT's emphasis on the emergent properties of agency supports the idea that training supports the development of professional capital. Therefore, through training, APs learn to adapt to various learning environments and diverse student populations, fostering adaptability and resilience in their approach to teaching and learning, as well as student support.

Continuous training is crucial for APs in that it instils confidence and empowers them to engage with students effectively and contribute positively to their academic success, thereby allowing for flexibility in the face of evolving education. According to SRT, one of the ways to develop agency is through the interplay of structural, cultural, and individual mechanisms. Training, therefore, ensures that professionals are provided with the strategies and techniques to support students from diversified backgrounds and cater for and address barriers to learning, as well as fostering an inclusive learning environment, in line with institutional expectations. However, from the GST viewpoint, ongoing training maintains the balance between the institutional system and its human subsystem through systematic feedback.

In response to the question, “*Have you ever completed any training focusing on online teaching and facilitation?*”, 44% of the participants responded positively and indicated

that they have completed some training that focused on online teaching and facilitation. A total of 50% of the participants indicated that they have never completed online teaching and facilitation training. The remaining percentage of participants did not provide a clear indication of whether or not they have had such training. These responses demonstrated inconsistency and unevenness on the structural support through training, which then creates CDT between APs and their readiness for institutional support.

One of the questions asked to participants was, "*If you could become a tutor/ teaching assistant, without completing the training, would you choose to do so?*", and 43% indicated that they would, while 38% said no, 12% were unsure and 5% did not respond to this question. This question was posed to find out if APs consider training to be important. Responses to this question shed light on different perceptions of training as a way of improving AD. The interaction between structure and agency is reflected in APs' response from an SRT standpoint. When APs respond, they demonstrated that their actions reflect intentional agency in addressing the institution's expectations, which represent structural conditions. From the standpoint of the GST, their varying answers reveal how they interpret expectations regarding the necessity of training; this can either strengthen or weaken coherence.

Significantly, 82% of the APs indicated that the knowledge they had acquired over the years is sufficient for them to continue with their roles. This aligns with their qualifications as 69% possess a master's degree, while 16% have an honours degree, and 13% a doctoral degree. The discrepancy between qualification-based confidence and adaptive learning needs is highlighted by CDT, which also suggests that this self-assurance may conceal internal conflicts between perceived competence and the changing pedagogical demands of AD.

When asked to elaborate on why they hold this belief of having enough knowledge to be APs, some of the participants indicated that they have qualifications that are in line with the subject matter, as follows:

Because I hold an appropriate qualification regarding the subject, I am willing to teach and I have been a Unisa student. As such, I know how the university operates. [A10]

I am a qualified CA(SA), who is currently in practice. Also, I understand how the Unisa system works, as I completed my CTA there. [A23]

As a CA(SA), I believe I have gone through good training in my working environment experience, through my articles, to be able to comprehend and explain theory to the students. [A62]

At this particular South African university, the requirements for APs were revised post-COVID-19. The new requirement was that these professionals should have a master's or doctoral degree. Academics and module lecturers had to recruit only candidates with the required qualifications. This was a challenge in the sense that, in some fields, such candidates were difficult to find. The requirement for these qualifications was to ensure that these individuals have subject matter expertise. Their advanced qualifications signify a deeper understanding and expertise in the specific subject areas for which they apply. This expertise is assumed to be crucial for effective teaching and learning in higher-level modules and specialised content areas.

On the other hand, professionals with advanced and higher qualifications can provide nuanced instruction to students and they have the ability to go in-depth into abstract interpretations, as well as providing clarity on complex areas. Based on the fact that advanced degrees contain a research component, it is most likely that APs would be able to leverage their research skills and further assist students with research activities and other related academic projects. Advanced degrees also provide professionals with critical thinking skills. It is envisaged that APs, who have acquired such skills, can assist students in developing their analytical skills, and addressing threats and opportunities efficiently. In various educational settings, APs need to show credibility and authority in their work. This will promote efficiency and develop trust when they collaborate with students, lecturers, administrative personnel, and the entire university community. APs, who

possess advanced qualifications, are assumed to understand educational theory and pedagogy. This skill is crucial in deepening their understanding of effective online teaching methodologies and techniques.

Much as the above discussion acknowledges the significant benefits of APs' qualifications, it does not mean that effective online instruction is solely dependent on such credentials. An effective approach to teaching and learning requires communication skills, genuine passion, and commitment to the work at hand, practical experience, effective student engagement and support, and collaboration with the relevant stakeholders.

Although these candidates hold the qualifications for which they applied, they do not necessarily have knowledge and understanding of teaching methodologies and/or departmental or institutional policies. One of the participants indicated as follows:

I am a chartered accountant, with over 11 years of experience in the profession, and am continuously keeping up to date with relevant standards and methodology. [A70]

Reflecting on the response below, it would seem that some of the participants have been involved in teaching. These individuals might have a better understanding of how to assist students in higher education institutions:

I have previously lectured in online and physical contact universities. [A98]

I have been an academic for over 10 years and have facilitated e-learning lectures, tutorials, and student queries for at least 4 years. I am also a Unisa alumnus and understand the myUnisa platform and potential assistance required by students. [A54]

While others have a tutor experience:

I have been tutoring since 2012, and I believe that this training has further equipped me. [A6]

I have more than four years of tutoring experience gained at UCT and Wits. [A6]

I have more than 9 years of tutoring experience. [A87]

Some of the participants have PhD qualifications, but believe that they need more training:

I need this training to understand better how the process and systems work. [A9]

I believe I have the requisite accounting knowledge from teaching at UKZN. However, I have not taught at UNISA before, therefore, I would need to know the process. [A72]

This study is focused on the perceptions of APs towards AD at one South African university and provided valuable insights into the effectiveness and impact of academic support services offered by the institution. The participants acknowledged their role, which, for the most part, is to bridge the transactional distance between lecturers and students. They understand their role to be that of advisors, tutors, librarians, and career counsellors, as well as the crucial role they play in enhancing the academic experience and success of students.

Discussion

The analysis of the findings in this study highlights both strengths and areas for improvement within the university's academic support infrastructure. By examining the perceptions of APs regarding AD, the study offers valuable insights into the dynamics of academic support in the higher education context. Several key themes emerged from the data, each warranting further exploration and critical discussion.

Multifaceted understanding of academic development

The research reveals a nuanced and multifaceted understanding of AD among APs, underscoring its importance in cultivating a supportive and effective learning environment. This complexity indicates that AD cannot be approached with a one-size-fits-all strategy; instead, it requires tailored interventions that account for the diverse roles and perspectives of APs, academic support staff, administrators, and educational developers. The diversity within these

groups enriches the AD process as each contributes distinct insights and expertise (Phillips Galloway et al., 2020).

Importance of collaboration

A key theme that emerged from the study is the significance of collaboration among APs, as well as between APs and academic and administrative units. The participants consistently emphasised that effective AD is highly dependent on collaborative engagement. This finding is consistent with existing literature, which highlights the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration in higher education to improve student learning outcomes and institutional performance (Malatji, Mavuso & Malatji, 2018). However, the participants also noted a perceived disconnect between academic and administrative functions, which can pose challenges to effective collaboration and ultimately hinder the successful implementation of AD initiatives.

Ongoing professional development

Another significant finding from the study is the expressed need for ongoing professional development. The participants highlighted a strong desire for continuous training and development opportunities that would enable them to support academic initiatives more effectively. This need reflects a broader trend in higher education, where the rapid advancement of educational practices and technologies requires APs to update their skills and knowledge continually (Cisterna & Gotwals, 2018). Institutions that prioritise professional development for allied staff are more likely to enhance the quality of academic support services and, in turn, improve student outcomes.

Impact of institutional policies

The study also highlights the influence of institutional policies on AD practices. The participants raised concerns about resource constraints, which significantly limit their capacity to implement effective academic support initiatives (Wimshurst et al., 2006). This finding points to a broader systemic challenge within many universities where financial limitations hinder the development and delivery of essential support services. Moreover, the study suggests that

institutional policies often fail to align with the practical realities experienced by APs, resulting in frustration and operational inefficiencies.

Strategic involvement of allied professionals

The study emphasises the importance of involving APs in strategic planning and decision-making processes within higher education institutions. As noted by Soon et al. (2020), integrating the perspectives of APs into institutional strategies can lead to the development of more responsive and effective AD frameworks. Such inclusion not only empowers allied professionals, but also fosters a sense of ownership and accountability, which can significantly enhance the impact and sustainability of academic support initiatives.

Conclusion

The study shows that empowering APs through inclusive collaboration, strategic communication, and ongoing development is essential for strengthening academic support and fostering institutional excellence. Additionally, the findings highlight the interaction between structure, culture, and agency as described in SRT. This indicates that while institutional structures may limit APs, training and collaboration act as mediating factors that improve their AD. It was also emphasized that continuous AD helps balance institutional goals with individual growth, in line with GST. Overall, the study demonstrates that AD is not merely a managerial process, but a relational system that enables individuals to provide effective support in higher education institutions.

Recommendations

In enhancing AD in higher education, this study underscores the need for a more inclusive and integrated approach that recognises the important contributions of APs. The participants emphasised the importance of fostering cross-functional collaboration between academic and support staff, one which can be facilitated through structured platforms that encourage co-creation and shared ownership of teaching and learning initiatives.

A recurring concern was the ambiguity surrounding the roles of APs. Clarifying these

roles and establishing clear career pathways would not only validate their contributions, but also strengthen institutional capacity. Recognition mechanisms such as awards, professional development opportunities, and inclusion in performance metrics can further reinforce their value within the academic ecosystem.

Strategic inclusion of APs in institutional planning and decision-making emerged as a crucial recommendation. Their insights, grounded in daily operational realities, could enrich policy development and ensure that AD strategies are practical and sustainable.

The study also highlights the need for systemic coherence. Drawing on GST, it becomes evident that the fragmentation between academic departments, support units, and administrative offices undermines institutional effectiveness. Enhancing communication channels, aligning goals, and establishing feedback loops are essential steps towards building a more interconnected and responsive system.

Sustained professional learning is another key area for development. APs require ongoing, context-sensitive training that aligns with institutional priorities. Encouraging reflective practice and peer learning can further support their growth and engagement.

Addressing structural constraints such as rigid policies and siloed practices is essential for enabling collaboration. Institutions must allocate dedicated resources to support integrated AD efforts and remove barriers that hinder cooperation.

Finally, cultivating a culture of mutual accountability is vital. Shared goals and collaborative evaluation frameworks can assist in ensuring that all stakeholders are invested in the success of AD initiatives. By embracing these recommendations, institutions can move towards a more inclusive, coherent, and effective model of AD; one that fully leverages the expertise and agency of APs.

These findings echo global debates on AD, particularly the call for inclusive, systemic approaches to supporting teaching and learning. International scholarship increasingly frames AD

as more than pedagogical training for academics; it now encompasses institution-wide strategies that integrate diverse professional roles (Boud & Brew, 2013; Quinn, 2012). The fragmentation observed in this study reflects challenges reported elsewhere, where siloed structures constrain collaboration and innovation (Leibowitz et al., 2017). Similarly, the emphasis on sustained professional learning aligns with ongoing discussions about lifelong learning for all staff, not only faculty as essential for responsive higher education systems. By centering the perspectives of APs, this research advances arguments for distributed leadership and systemic coherence in AD, reinforcing calls to bridge structural divides and cultivate inclusive learning cultures globally.

Disclosure

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict

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