KEEPING THE DOORS OF LEARNING OPEN FOR ADULT STUDENT-WORKERS WITHIN HIGHER EDUCATION[i]?

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Abstract

The Freedom Charter of the African National Congress (ANC), the triumphant South African liberation movement, proclaims that 'the doors of learning shall be open' for all. Twenty years since coming to power, the doors of the universities are struggling to stay open for adult student-workers. An action research project into implementation of 'flexible provision' at one historically black university is described in response to these realities. Rich experiences from lives of working librarian student-workers illustrate the complex issues that confront individuals, workplaces and institutions in implementing innovative pedagogies within a university.

Key words: adult student-worker; flexible learning and teaching provision; higher education; South Africa; institutional change

Introduction

Professional innovation and development are shaped by the abilities of higher education and training institutions (HEIs) and workplaces to adapt to the changing circumstances within which workers live and work. The inability of HEIs to adapt to providing access for professional development in more flexible ways can have major consequences for the professional education of workers. Presently, public HEIs in South Africa are under pressure to increase their intake of young students which can mean that working people are finding their options for lifelong learning limited.

This article is based on institutional research within one university in South Africa, which has a 54 year tradition of providing access to working people. It sketches contradictory contextual factors which can impact professional development profoundly. It describes the situation which has led to an action research project on 'flexible learning and teaching provision' for working people who are studying, whom we refer to as 'adult student-workers'; and it points to the

difficulties for the professional development of librarians who are working, in particular. The action research is part of a process of institutional change.

We are concerned with the inter-relationships between the adult students, their working lives and the university – the primary question is how can the university respond meaningfully to the real circumstances of adult students to enhance prospects for their professional development? In brief our research process set out to explore how the university can develop more appropriate pedagogical approaches to help adult student-workers to succeed. This has entailed understanding the working lives of adult students, engaging their workplaces, and influencing the teaching, learning and administrative environment of the university. This is a work-in-progress.

Setting the national scene

The commitment made in the South African Higher Education Policy document (Department of Education, 1997, p.17), which echoed aspects of the ANC's Freedom Charter, that the education system would 'open its doors, in the spirit of lifelong learning, to workers and professionals' raised expectations in South Africa that provision for the education of adults would be taken seriously. Yet, one finding of the study by Buchler *et al,* (2007) was that adult learners remain poorly served at all levels of higher education institutions. The study set out to investigate whether a higher education system that facilitates access, equity and success for adult learners exists or is being formulated. It asked: what is the place of adult learners in South African higher education policy? The study concluded that adult learners are seemingly not a high priority at a time of scarce resources and competing challenges. However, (Buchler *et al,* 2007, p.152) urge that:

> …the education of adults in a society, such as South Africa is a political, moral, historical and economic issue – and it is not merely one of these, but all of them. Adults have a critical role to play in the development of South Africa because of their accumulated knowledge and experience, which can be mediated by educational processes to strengthen it and make it socially useful.

Since then, little seems to have changed and the South African situation is certainly not unique. Within low and middle income countries, the spaces for encouraging and supporting adult learners to embrace higher education opportunities, can easily close down in the face of resource constraints, political pressures from large proportions of youth, and the resilient picture that

holds most higher education systems captive, and which is contradicted by the facts, that it is mainly serving young, full-time, able bodied, middle class, urban youth, who have good health, resources and time to concentrate solely on their studies.

The Higher Education Act of 1997 made provision for a unified and nationally planned system of higher education and created a statutory Council on Higher Education (CHE), which provides advice to the Minister and is responsible for quality assurance and promotion. The Act aimed to transform the previous racialized and unequal system of apartheid to one which embraced redress, equity and quality. Between 2003 and 2005 there was major restructuring of public higher education institutions (HEIs) resulting in 36 HEIs being merged into 23. Between them in 2009 they enrolled 837 779 students in total with 684 419 undergraduate students and 128 747 postgraduate students. The institutions vary greatly in terms of size, scope and history. There is also a growing private higher education sector which occupies niche areas (Council for Higher Education, 2009).

In 2009 a new policy was introduced to build a differentiated post-school system (Council for Higher Education, 2009). The Department of Education was split into the Departments of Higher Education and Training and Basic Education, which oversees schooling for youth. As Cosser (2010) stated, the unbundling of the departments paved the way for redrawing the post-school landscape and forced a re-examination of the entire education and training pathway system. He pointed to the estimated 2.8 million 20 – 24 year olds not being in employment, education or training, who are a major concern for politicians and are creating the lever for certain immediate policy imperatives that have implications for adult learners. 51% of the 48 million people in South Africa are under 25 years.

In 2013 a White Paper on Post-School Education and Training was gazetted and it emphasises the principles of 'learner centeredness, lifelong learning, flexibility of learning provision...', (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2013, p.48). It advocates higher education programmes and modes of provision that are more responsive to learners' needs and realities, including those of working adults, 'which take into account their varying life and work contexts, rather than requiring them to attend daily classes at fixed times and central venues'. It recognises

the important role of educational technologies and encourages the expansion of quality 'online' and 'blended' learning, including open and distance learning programmes.

The tensions at national level between the contradictory messages of access for adult student-workers, on the one hand, and the imperative to get the unemployed youth off the street into education and training, on the other, is leading potentially to the limiting of lifelong learning opportunities and is being played out within HEIs. The action research project exists in the middle of these tensions and contradictions.

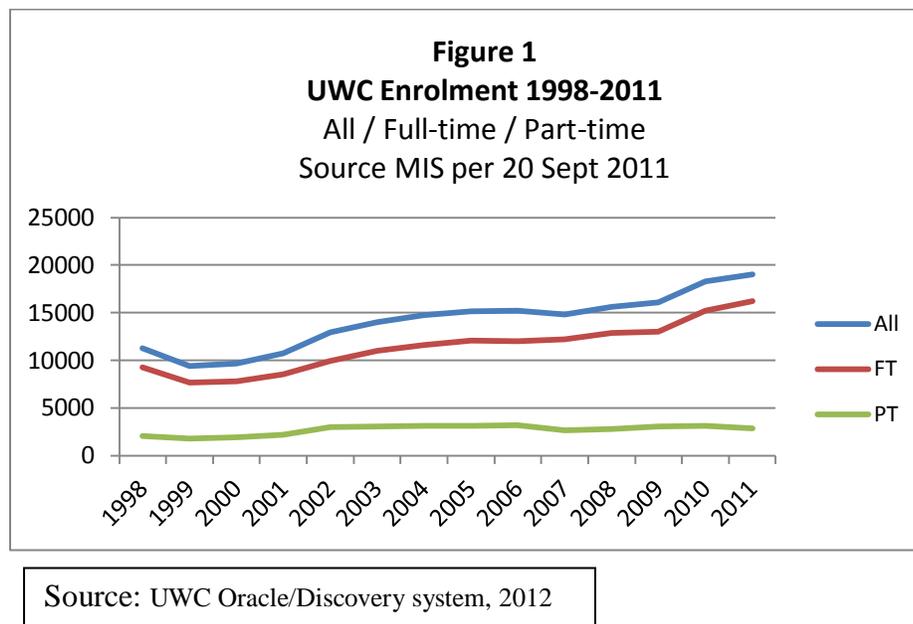## Setting the institutional scene: University of Western Cape (UWC)

UWC is an historically black university that was founded in 1960 to fulfil the needs for 'coloured bureaucrats and professionals' to service the Apartheid political vision of separate development. In 2010 it had about 17, 000 students with a student profile of primarily black, poor and working class students, nearly 60% being women. From the beginning, offering of evening classes to adult student-workers, was part of its mandate.

An analysis of UWC as a lifelong learning institution has been done previously (Walters 2005, 2012), where key lifelong learning characteristics were used (Division for Lifelong Learning, 2001). We do not intend rehearsing the arguments but rather to reflect briefly on specific moves that are afoot to create a new approach to meeting needs of adult student-workers through an action research project on 'flexible teaching and learning provision'.

A proposal towards this end was first mooted in March 2010 (DLL, 2010) which indicated some fundamental shifts taking place in the institution in response to different pressures. One of these was that the Arts Faculty, for the first time in 50 years, was proposing, and has since decided, to stop delivering courses after-hours except for Library and Information Science and Religion and Theology. The Arts Faculty, as did others, experienced considerable growth in its full-time undergraduate numbers. This resulted in overstretched staff, insufficient tutors, inadequate venues and reliance on inexperienced contract staff. They pointed out that the part-time numbers had decreased dramatically, from 13% to 5% while the full time registrations had almost doubled over the last ten years.

Overall enrolment trends 1998-2011

The graph in Figure 1 below clearly shows that from 2006 onwards the overall growth trends were predominantly driven by increased full-time enrollment. This largely unfunded growth created great pressures for staff (and students). In 2010 alone the first year full-time intake increased by 2200 students. These increases lead to major logistical and teaching and learning challenges.

Figure 1
UWC Enrolment 1998-2011
All / Full-time / Part-time
Source MIS per 20 Sept 2011

Source: UWC Oracle/Discovery system, 2012

Since 2002 the proportion of part-time students of the overall student population came down from a high of 23.1% in 2002 to 14.9% in 2011. The part-time numbers for the Arts Faculty went from 231 students in 2010, to 218 in 2011, to 196 in 2012. These figures are not unproblematic, for example, they mask the effects of the faculty's 'alternating offering' provision over the last 7 years. Some BA courses were offered in alternate years. For example, English I and English III would be offered during one year and English 1 and II would be offered, alternately. This affected the patterns of registrations and the trajectories for some adult student-workers. Those failing courses had to wait a year to pick up courses they failed or register for other courses or complete the courses at the University of South Africa (UNISA), a distance-education university.

The Arts Faculty conceded that departments offering professional degrees in Library Information Studies and Religion and Theology accommodate students who were mainly

working and could only study after-hours. However, these departments are located within the Arts Faculty and their degree programmes encompass courses offered by other departments within and across faculties.

The decision by the Arts Faculty to close all after-hours offerings for the BA degree as from 2012 was controversial and was discussed at the Annual General Meeting of the university's Convocation where a resolution was adopted to urge the university management and its governing structures to reconsider. There was also engagement with the Registrar's Office on the terminology of 'part-time and full-time' as used within the formal and informal university structures. It was pointed out that while the organizational practice was to refer to after-hours or 'evening classes' as a proxy for 'part-time', this was not necessarily accurate, as there were 'part-time' students who studied in the day and full-time students who attended after-hours.

In the University Calendar Faculty of Arts, it refers to rules for a 3 year BA (full-time) and a 4 year BA (part-time). Therefore the intention of the Arts Faculty was not to exclude part-time students, but to limit the number of courses which were being offered after-hours. The implications of these clarifications were that it was still possible to do a `BA part-time`, even though the numbers of evening classes offered were reduced from 2012. Students had to be advised of all the options available. Senate endorsed the position that it was *students* who were part or full-time *not courses*. However, the confusion and ambiguity in use of language have continued to cause confusion for both students and staff.

The action research project was to help shift the institution from the parallel provision of 'day time' and 'after hours' classes, to embrace `flexible learning and teaching provision`. It resonated with the UWC teaching and learning policy which supported flexible learning and teaching. Calls were made to faculties to propose pilot action research sites. This article highlights one of the pilot sites, the Department of Library and Information Science (DLIS) located in Faculty of Arts.

Setting the action research scene

The primary research question was: how can the university respond meaningfully to the real circumstances of working adult students to enhance prospects for their professional development? This has been a three year research partnership between the university and the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA). The action research was endorsed by the Senate and invitations were sent to all departments to participate according to certain criteria. As researchers, we worked within a set of understandings which included the need for: strong support from the leadership of the institution so that the project could be seen as a strategic priority; resource incentives to encourage involvement in innovative teaching; development of principles and processes for involvement which ensured a sense of fairness and equity; use of leading innovators from other departments to support or work with colleagues; development of project teams for each pilot site which related back to the overall coordinating research team; development of a communications strategy to back up and support the pilot sites so that they did not remain isolated pockets of innovation but had the possibilities to influence others; communication of 'leading practices' on campus and elsewhere that already existed, to illustrate potential; speed to move quickly while the need for change was obvious and people were willing to innovate; development of a community of scholarship which excited colleagues intellectually and which could lead not only to 'flexible teaching and learning provision (FLTP)' but also to publishable research results.

However, while it has been important to keep these criteria in mind, in reality, not all criteria could be met. In particular, the university was very constrained financially so has not been able to contribute additional finances to the research. This highlighted a key conundrum – even though it was not possible to achieve the criteria excavated from leading innovative practices, should we still go ahead? We have, with external funding support. However, it has been far from ideal and has demanded a great deal of additional work and commitment from colleagues who are already over-burdened.

Working librarians who are studying and their lecturers

In 2013, nearly eighty percent of the students in the DLIS were adult students, working in the public library sector. Many of them worked for the City of Cape Town Library and Information Services and they had to leave work during the day to attend classes.

The first professional qualification for librarians is a four year degree. The degree consists of two professional majors as well as credits from other departments or faculties. In terms of delivery, the first year Library Science modules could be attended in the evening, but not all the other facilitating BA subjects. This situation forced the adult student-worker to select from a very small basket of subjects. It also meant attendance during the day to take subjects of their own choice.

From second to fourth years the LIS modules were attended in the mornings only as per the day-time timetable. The morning preference was a request of the employer. The motivation was to have all personnel in the libraries in the afternoon when libraries were at their busiest. The DLIS tried to accommodate these students as far as possible in the mornings, which resulted in rather long sessions of 2-3 hours. This timetable arrangement inevitably resulted in clashes with other subjects or limitations on subject choice and selection.

The adult student-workers experienced the challenge of juggling their work and studies as they were only allowed 10 days (80 hours) per annum for all class and tutorial attendance and 10 days (80 hours) study time for assessment activities per annum. The adult student-worker had to clock out as they left work therefore those who travelled further to the campus were at a disadvantage. Having to leave work during the day could also create tensions in the library as other staff members had to cover for them. On days where there were no staff members available, the adult student-worker could not attend classes.

The researchers met with regional managers of public libraries and with the head of Human Resources at the City of Cape Town, who were the employers of many of the librarians who were studying. The purpose of these meetings was to get greater clarity on the work-study policy and to see whether anything could be done to ease the adult student-worker situation. What emerged was that it was the implementation of the policy rather than the policy itself which was the problem. It was some library managers who misinterpreted policy and who could be heavy

handed. The employers wanted their employees to professionalize and welcomed the university's attempts to work with them to find solutions to the challenges adult students were experiencing.

Lecturers have accommodated affected students by being flexible in offering additional classes to those individuals after hours (i.e. when libraries have closed and the individuals were free to come to campus) or on Saturdays. This was especially the case for practical subjects where the students needed further opportunities for face-to face clarification and access to resources.

In order to respond to the difficulties experienced by both adult students and staff, the DLIS joined the action research project and as one of the flexible provision strategies, mobilized the use of information communications technology (ICT) in curriculum design, both to facilitate access and assessment. The staff was trained and implemented a first module during 2013. The experience showed that academic literacy levels of students were limited, as were their ICT literacy levels. They also had limited to no access to computers at work to engage their course materials. There were also, at times, university ICT infra-structural problems with irregular access. This caused frustration for staff and students alike. Students struggled with time-management to access course materials and to submit assessments. Both university staff and adult student-workers have had to be exceedingly resilient and creative to 'work around' the various constraints to 'flexible' learning and teaching.

The case of working librarians who are studying has shone light on many structural, organizational and pedagogical issues which are not easy to resolve. Their resolution requires not only concerted commitment from the university but also workplaces, and professional associations, to clear some of the structural barriers to allow the staff and adult student-workers to focus more time and attention on the pedagogical matters, to ensure successful completion of their studies. During the research, it has been clear that both staff and adult student-workers have developed intricate moves to `work around` institutional and infra-structural barriers. There is still a long way to go to understand and appreciate fully how this has been done, seemingly against great odds. The development of a workable, flexible, pedagogical alternative to ease the burden on both staff and adult student-workers has been one of the objectives of the action research. So what is FLTP?

Flexible Learning and Teaching Provision

A brief dip into the literature on FLTP follows in order to frame what an alternative paradigm might mean. (DLL, 2014)

Most educationists would agree that flexible learning is about offering choices for when, where, how and at what pace learning occurs. These concepts relate to the *delivery* of learning and can be unpacked as follows. Firstly, `**pace**` which includes accelerated and decelerated programmes and degrees, learning part time, arrangements that allow learners to 'roll on/roll off' ('stop in/stop out'), and systems for recognition of prior learning and for credit accumulation and transfer; secondly '**place**' which can relate to work-based learning with employer engagement, learning at home, on campus, while travelling or in any other place, often aided by technology which can enable the flexibility of learning across geographical boundaries and at convenient times; thirdly, '**mode**', especially the use of learning technologies to enhance flexibility and enrich the quality of learning experience, in blended or distance learning and in synchronous and asynchronous modes of learning (Tallantyne, 2012, p.4; Gordon, 2014).

Our research project adopted the broad parameters of flexibility in learning and teaching provision suggested by the University of Southern Queensland (2011). They highlight *flexible curriculum design,* including flexible forms of assessment which take into account different learning styles of students; *flexible admissions criteria,* including mechanisms such as the recognition of prior learning (RPL); *flexible delivery,* including distance, online, on campus a mix of these modes as well as accelerated or decelerated options. In addition, we added *flexible support systems and services* that cater for working and non-working students and those with disabilities.

These parameters signal a coherent higher education responsibility for FLTP that can sustain the educational changes needed to support the lived realities of all students, especially adult student-workers, for learning success. FLTP, then, is more than simply re-packaging existing materials: 'we are not just selling a new course but a new concept in education' (Outram, 2009, p.9). FLTP requires the development of distinctive, more *holistic* forms of *provision,* as well as institutional change.

Principles of FLTP commonly expressed in the literature are: that it is responsive to a diversity of learners - both working and not working - and learning styles; that it is about access and success in higher education; that it is founded on good pedagogy that puts the learner at the centre of learning (Alexander, 2010; Edwards, 2014); that it develops self-regulated learners and well-rounded, knowledgeable and capable graduates who can make a positive difference in the world (Edwards, 2014); and that it requires a coordinated, enabling response.

In addition, although flexibility is regarded as good for students as well as for the university (Alexander, 2010), Barnett cautions that it is 'not an absolute good' (2014, p.7) as there may be unintended consequences. FLTP, therefore, needs to be monitored and limits to flexibility need to be recognised. We turn now to highlighting briefly technology enhanced learning, as it plays a key role in conceptualising FLTP.

Technology plays an essential role in education today, not only for graduates to succeed in the local and global economy, but also in providing flexible learning and teaching opportunities. But this must not lead to digital exclusion, especially of those already marginalised (Barnett, 2014, p. 7). Technology-enhanced learning (TEL) can mitigate the attendance requirements of full-time study, enabling students to learn in their own time and place and at their own pace; it enables easy delivery of materials from lecturers to students and vice versa; and it connects learners to people and resources that can support their educational needs online (Lai and Chong, 2007). Technology allows universities to extend their traditional campus-based service to distant and online modes, and has formed the basis of distance education for many years. Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCS) have been touted as the answer to flexibility in education, enabling thousands of learners access to learning in new ways, but there are pedagogical concerns with some of these approaches and course completion rates tend to be low (Gordon, 2014).

Pedagogy is key to TEL. McLoughlin and Lee (2010 p.28) argue that today's students 'want an active learning experience that is social, participatory and supported by rich media', through the use of information communication technology (ICT) tools and emerging technologies such as Web2.0 social networking tools. But the interactive aspects of social media enabled learning increasingly shift the position of learner, rather than content or institution, to the centre of learning, demanding a curriculum design process that is learner-centred and collaborative (Green *et al,* 2013). The agency of the learner is a significant aspect not only of effective TEL, but also

of any quality education that engages the learner in the learning process. Zimmerman (2002) argues that central to such engagement is developing 'self-regulating learners'.

The pedagogic challenges of introducing quality FLTP and TEL are therefore considerable (Salmon, 2005) and academics cannot do this in isolation. There are many examples at UWC and elsewhere, where such challenges have been met without neglecting the disciplinary knowledge that students need to succeed. Implicit within the introduction of FLTP is organisational change and development. Green *et al* (2013, p.26) claim that, because higher education is a complex system consisting of 'four inter-dependent sub-systems' - teacher, learner, delivery and administrative sub-systems - flexible approaches to learning and teaching require profound shifts in the way that the *entire university* views, engages with and develops knowledge.

Johnston (1997) suggests that (i) higher education change strategies need to be both top down and bottom up; (ii) every person is a change agent and the best organisations learn from the external environment as well as internally, from their own staff. Overall, Johnston advocates a change process that can shift pockets of enthusiasm for flexible learning towards a coherent, institutionalised outcome.

Keeping the doors open?

The action research has been surfacing and naming political, organizational and pedagogical challenges and contradictions both nationally and institutionally with regard to access and success for adult student-workers. These can be politically sensitive, uncomfortable issues to confront. The triangular relationship amongst adult student-worker, workplaces and university, is highly complex and needs to be understood more carefully to know where breakthroughs in the interests of adult student-workers may be possible.

At present, the research reveals that it is largely left up to the adult student-workers to navigate their ways through the institutional minefields both at work and at the university. The priority focus of the university continues to be young, full-time students, who paradoxically are, in all likelihood, also working full or part-time, or seeking work, in order to keep afloat economically.

The attempt to shift the pedagogical paradigm for the whole university from face-to-face, day time provision, to a more responsive FLTP orientation, which can benefit adult student-workers, still has a long way to go, will take time, and is a major undertaking that must be driven by senior leadership, who are responsive to staff and student pressures from below. As the realities of the working librarians who are studying suggest, it cannot be an 'e-learning quick fix' and there must be sufficient, effective support for students and for staff. We are clear that there is no 'one size fits all' approach, and that we must understand more fully the life worlds of students, staff and employers to develop appropriate responses. We also need to understand more deeply how adult student-workers and staff are `working around` the barriers to find solutions to problems they confront. Time, however, is not on the adult students side and they can be expected 'to vote with their feet' if the institution is unable to respond to their real conditions.

While the action research is yet to evaluate its influence, it is safe to say that through various processes, there seems to be an emergence of a common institutional understanding of flexible provision. This is but one step in a long and convoluted process to bring Green's (2013) four sub-systems into alignment. Given the political imperative to 'get the youth off the streets', it is clear that the institutional change that is required both within the university and within the workplaces will take sustained advocacy and activism from dedicated champions, working with other activists across campus and workplaces, over long periods of time, if doors of learning are to be kept open for adult student-workers.

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