

RESEARCH TITLE

An analysis of the implementation of the Teaching Development Grant in the South African Higher Education Sector

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ABSTRACT

The South African government has attempted to address various transformation and efficiency challenges in the system through the steering mechanisms at its disposal. This study analyses the implementation of one of these mechanisms, the Teaching Development Grant (TDG), which is designed to enhance student learning through the improvement of teaching and teaching resources at South African universities. Since the inception as an earmarked grant ten years ago, a total of R5.5 billion has been allocated for the TDG.

The study thus sought to answer the question: What are the factors enabling and constraining the use of the TDG to enhance teaching and student success at South African universities? A total of 275 TDG progress reports and budget plans were analysed alongside other TDG documentation such as TDG payment letters to universities and institutional submissions that universities made on the use of the TDG for the 2008 TDG Review. The TDG criteria and policy over the years were also included as data. The analysis used Archer's (1995; 1996) morphogenesis/stasis framework, which is concerned with how change does or does not happen over time. Archer's analytical dualism was used to identify the interplay of structural, cultural and agential mechanisms shaping the emergence of and practices associated with TDGs in order to make sense of the events and experiences in the data.

One of the main findings of the study was that the historically-based differentiated nature of the South African higher education landscape constrained the implementation of the TDG. The stark resource differences in the sector has meant that the TDG has not fully translated into system-wide gains. In the initial years of TDG implementation from 2004 to 2013, most institutions did not use the TDG for teaching development initiatives per se, but rather spent the bulk of the funds on infrastructure and equipment. Such resource gaps have persisted and continue to compromise the academic enterprise at affected universities.

The data also showed that universities which have access to additional funding other than state funding have been able to augment and advance their own funds and were thus able to at least partially counter late payments of the TDG, fluctuations in allocations, and the short-term nature of TDG budgets and inadequate allocations. This enabled relatively straightforward implementation of the teaching and learning enhancement programmes at these universities, while there were ongoing implementation difficulties at the universities with the lowest success rates, the very institutions the grant was most targeted to address.

The study showed that the shortage of appropriate teaching and learning staff constrained the nature and type of interventions. Historically Disadvantaged Institutions in particular struggled to attract and retain the much-needed expertise. This emerged from multiple structural constraints such as geographical location, conditions of work, inefficient human resources systems, lack of access to financial resources for competitive packages, and instability in governance and management structures at some universities. Emerging from the data in the study is the fact that staffing challenges remain one of the core constraints in the implementation of the TDG. In particular, the data indicated that teaching and learning staff hired on the basis of TDG funds were generally hired as part-time or contract staff. This meant that their academic qualifications and experience in teaching development were limited and, in many cases, it meant that the posts were not filled at all. In some cases, the fluctuating budgets meant that some projects had to be downscaled or abandoned altogether.

The study found that many of the interventions that were implemented had tenuous links to teaching and learning and, even where there were such links, these interventions were often based on fairly a-theoretical, common-sense understandings of what would develop teaching. In many universities, there was little evidence of institution-level planning of interventions aimed at fundamentally addressing the need for teaching development.

The limited access to teaching and learning expertise across the sector was mirrored in the uneven distribution of expertise in administration, financial management, institutional planning and human resource divisions, which had implications for the establishment of monitoring systems and implementation processes of the TDG. The lack of strong systems and policies encouraged cultures that did not value transparency, accountability or compliance to the TDG policy. The role of corporate agency in the form of leadership and ownership of projects emerged as a key enabler in the implementation of the TDG. All of these structures shaped the ability of institutions to spend the TDG and in some cases millions of Rands in funds were not spent and so were withheld. The study found that the inability of some universities to spend was exacerbated by the problem of a lack of alignment between the DHET financial year and the academic year.

Although the TDG has made a notable contribution to the advancement of teaching and learning (T&L) nationally, this study revealed that the blunt implementation of the TDG across the sector constrained the gains. In particular, the practice of withholding unspent funds focused only on the symptoms of underspending and not on the structural, cultural and agential mechanisms that led to such under-expenditure. The withheld funds were redirected by the government for national projects but as all universities including the well-resourced Historically Advantaged Institutions (HAIs) had access to these withheld funds this translated into a regressive distribution of the TDG.

Limited capacity within DHET to direct, manage and monitor the grants has also had a constraining effect on their use and the secondment of a teaching and learning expert to the department was seen to be a significant but short-term enablement in this regard.

The findings of how the TDG implementation has emerged in the South African higher education sector are particularly important at this point in time as the TDG together with the Research Development Grant will

be reconfigured into a new grant called the University Capacity Development Grant as from 2018. This study provides significant insights into the structural, cultural, and agential enablements and constraints of this new grant being able to drive changes in the sector. The findings also provide insights into the implementation of other earmarked grants.

Keywords: Teaching Development Grant, University Capacity Development Grant, Historically Advantaged Universities, Historically Disadvantaged Universities, Earmarked Grants

The full thesis can be found at <https://www.ru.ac.za/teachingandlearning/highereducationstudies/doctoralprogramme/phdgraduates/>