



Phenomenological Analysis of the Lived Experiences of Academics who Participated in the Professional Development Programme at an Open Distance Learning (ODL) University in South Africa

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Abstract

Since online delivery of education has become a major approach to teaching in Open Distance Learning (ODL) institutions, it becomes critical to understand how academics learn to teach online. This study was designed to explore the lived experiences of academics who had participated in a professional development programme aimed at moving them from traditional distance teaching to online facilitation of learning. Giorgi's phenomenological psychological method was used to analyse and retrospectively examine the learning experiences of the participant academics in order to establish how they lived, behaved and experienced the training programme. The participants described their experiences in relation to distinct lived worlds that included the world in relation to self, others, time, and their environment. The academics' experiences and concerns provide insight into their skills development needs and the adequacy of the programme provided in addressing these and equipping academics for online teaching. The perspectives identified could serve to guide the development and promotion of professional development programmes for online teaching and learning.

Introduction

The proliferation of technologies has permeated every part of our lives, and the education sector is no different. With the incorporation of technologies into everyday teaching activities, it has become vital for Open Distance Learning (ODL) academics to acquire the necessary skills and knowledge to engage students in a technology-enriched environment (Jung, 2007; UNESCO, 2002). In this context, lecturers play a different role from those they are accustomed to in traditional print-based distance teaching. They thus require the relevant skills and knowledge to design, co-ordinate and implement appropriate technology-enhanced teaching and learning programmes (Beetham & Sharpe, 2013; Laurillard, 2013; Tyner, 2014; Yang & Cornelious, 2005). In this technology-rich environment, the lecturer is expected to design relevant, interactive learning programmes and encourage students

to use technological tools to interact and collaborate with each other (Laurillard, 2013). To realise this, training of academics becomes a critical component of quality online teaching. The need for this is even more acute in distance learning, where there is a marked shortage of academics trained in the use of technology and Open Distance Learning (ODL) instructional strategies (Neo & Neo, 2001). A significant number of academics employed in ODL institutions are drawn from traditional sectors of education (Lockwood & Latchem, 2004). While some come from conventional universities, many have been working in a distance education environment for a long time. Despite their experience in the field, many of the latter group nevertheless cannot function effectively when faced with the task of using technology for the purposes of teaching and learning (Laurillard, 2013; Lockwood & Latchem, 2004).

The need for training of academics in ODL is dictated by the necessity to provide efficient, reliable and flexible technical and pedagogical support to distance students who study online. Such skills development is vital if academics are to keep up with evolving student needs and new ODL instructional strategies (Neo & Neo, 2001). The development of appropriate professional development programmes for academics is therefore a vital element in the survival and growth of distance education systems. Most institutions, including the University of South Africa (UNISA), the oldest and the largest ODL institution in Africa, are struggling to engage a significant number of students and staff in using technology for teaching and learning. At the same time, the few academics who are passionate about using technology in teaching are not appropriately trained, and nor are they self-motivated to bring about changes needed in learning delivery through online learning. This is further exacerbated by the fact that ODL students are physically and socially separated from their lecturers and their peers. This separation could compromise the quality of the education received if the lecturers are not professionally equipped to use the different teaching modalities. In general, academics in ODL institutions thus need training and assistance to enable the transition from print-based distance teaching to online teaching (Lockwood & Latchem, 2004; Taylor & McQuiggan, 2008; Wheeler, 2004). The justification for professional development is thus anchored in the need for the acquisition by academics of the skills and knowledge required to design, coordinate and implement academic teaching and learning programmes in the contemporary technology-rich ODL context (Lockwood & Latchem, 2004; Wheeler, 2004). To ensure that staff members are properly trained, UNISA management in 2011 recommended that academics should undergo mandatory training in the comprehensive use of the virtual learning environment (UNISA, 2011). Trained lecturers are bound to be confident when they use new methods of teaching and they are more likely to be innovative, with the further benefit that their students will also learn to be innovative (Neo & Neo, 2001; Weng & Tang, 2014).

The purpose of professional development in an educational environment is to change teaching approaches and practices. In higher education, a combination of innovation and technology can bring about positive change in terms of teaching and learning (Littlejohn & Pegler, 2015). Weurlander and Stenfors-Hayes (2008) found that medical lecturers who had participated in a professional development programme were not only equipped to use new teaching techniques or tools, but had also significantly changed their views on learning and what it meant to be a teacher. However, a number of studies on professional development initiatives in technology-enhanced teaching and learning found that many of the training programmes are deficient in terms of theoretical grounding, clarity of goals and acknow-

ledgement of context (Kearsley & Blomeyer, 2004; Laurillard, 2013; Taylor & McQuiggan, 2008). Instead, designers and implementers of professional development programmes tend to focus on individual features of an initiative, such as duration, format, and level of assessment, and in the process they ignore the critical link between theory and practice (Steinert et al., 2006). This is because many of these training programmes are in the form of seminars or workshops and are focused specifically on skill-based job-related training (Irani & Telg, 2002; Ramalibana, 2005; Taylor & McQuiggan, 2008). It has been observed that short, episodic and disconnected professional development programmes that are divorced from practice have little impact on teaching performance (Beetham & Sharpe, 2013; Kearsley & Blomeyer, 2004; Steinert et al., 2006).

Most research on professional development in education has focused on teacher development in conventional educational institutions. This has left academics in ODL struggling with a number of conceptual issues regarding the pedagogical strategies of teaching in an ODL environment and the facilitation of learning in the virtual environment. Since pedagogy is closely related to the technologies of teaching and learning, Beetham and Sharpe (2013) observe that the scope and style of teaching and learning tend to change as technologies change. Professional development for online teaching and learning should enable academics to acquire positive experiences in the process of learning how to teach in such an environment.

Soliciting information about their experiences is one way of finding out how academics experienced the world of training at UNISA. Human experiences, both negative and positive, can be used to inform professional development practice, according to Pajares (1992). The present study is accordingly designed to explore the lived experiences of academics who participated in the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) training programme offered at UNISA. Giorgi's (1986) phenomenological psychological method was used to uncover how these academics experienced the training. Accessing the lived meaning of the academics' respective experiences of the VLE training programme required obtaining detailed descriptions that could only be elicited in sufficient depth and breadth by means of phenomenological methods.

Giorgi's Phenomenological Psychological Method

Central to Giorgi's phenomenological psychology is the lived experience of the individual as it is recalled to consciousness (Giorgi, 1986, 2009). In phenomenology, each distinct feature of the lifeworld comprises "the meaning of one element which is only understandable in relation to the situation as a whole" (Ashworth, 2003, p. 108). It is therefore important to point out that most human experiences depend on the meaning individuals attach to a situation. To obtain information about the

meaning UNISA academics attach to a Virtual Learning Environment training programme they participated in, face-to-face interviews were conducted with six UNISA academics. As emphasised by Giorgi (2009, p. 122), the aim of the data collection process was to elicit “as complete a description as possible of the experience that a participant has lived through”. The interviews not only yielded detailed information about the participants’ experiences, but allowed for spontaneous responses to reveal the natural feelings, behaviour and attitudes of the participants (Giorgi, 2009). The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and code-named L1 to L6 in accordance with the order in which each lecturer was interviewed.

The research process in phenomenological psychology has four distinctive characteristics: (i) it is descriptive, (ii) it uses reduction, (iii) it looks for essences, and (iv) it focuses on intentionality (Giorgi, 1986). In analysing the data, we had to follow the naïve descriptions as given by the academics while taking into consideration the context in which their lived experiences were described (Giorgi, 1986; Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). Secondly, as researchers, we had to ensure phenomenological reduction by bracketing all our preconceived notions and prejudices about professional development at UNISA. Reduction in Giorgi’s analysis relates to the ideal of the researcher being open to taking the meaning of any experience exactly as it appears in the consciousness of the other. With regard to the essences, we looked for those unchanging characteristics of the phenomenon being investigated and, thus, for the essential qualities of the academics’ experience of professional development as embedded in their consciousness, which is referred to as intentionality (De Castro, 2003; Giorgi, 1986). This fourth characteristic of phenomenology “refers to the intentional act by which every human being is related to the world and objects” (De Castro, 2003, p. 50).

Analytical Procedures

In light of the fact that individuals’ lived experiences are closely related to their background, culture and history, noting the participants’ respective backgrounds and professional contexts enabled the data to be situated appropriately (Van Manen, 1990). Data analysis in Giorgi’s (1986) phenomenological psychological method is oriented towards capturing as closely as possible the manner in which the phenomenon under investigation has been experienced by the participants (Giorgi, 1986; Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). This entails a rigorous step by step procedure whereby the raw data is segmented into units of meaning, restructured in terms of meaning clusters, translated into scientific language consistent with their central meaning, and the constituent themes common to all the participants’ accounts eventually synthesised into a coherent description of the structure of the experience investigated.

L1’s protocol will be used to illustrate how the data was processed using Giorgi’s method of analysis.

A black woman in her late 30s, L1 held a master’s degree in accounting and worked as a full-time lecturer at a traditional university, although she also lectured part-time at the University of South Africa. Despite having obtained a master’s degree through distance education, she had never experienced teaching through distance education until she was appointed as a part-time e-tutor. Her primary role as an e-tutor is to facilitate and support online teaching and learning. To equip her for this new role, she was required to undergo a two-week course of training to teach online. At the time of the interview, L1 had been engaged in teaching online for a period of seven months. Talking about her experiences, L1 conveyed her appreciation that she had been exposed to a programme designed to enable her to teach electronically from a distance.

Step 1: Getting to Know the Data

The starting point of Giorgi’s method of analysis is to listen to the recordings (or read the transcripts) of the interviews several times in order to familiarise oneself with the data. This process enables researchers to get a global sense of all the transcripts and to understand the meaning of the experience from the respondents’ points of view (De Castro, 2003). To ensure that researchers viewed the experience through the respondents’ lenses, they had to assume a “phenomenological attitude” (Giorgi, 2009). This implied that we “bracket” our personal views on and knowledge about professional development programmes at UNISA and suspend any preconceptions or prejudices in order to allow us to be open to the phenomenon as experienced by the participants and see it afresh through their lenses.

Step 2: Identifying Meaning Units

The general sense that was grasped after reading the transcripts in the first phase of analysis was not interrogated, since this merely served as a basis for the second step (Giorgi, 1986). In this step, Giorgi suggests that the whole description should be broken into its constituent parts. The process of delineating parts is referred to as identifying meaning units. The meaning units express distinct aspects of the participant’s experience and each only becomes meaningful in relation to the overall meaning structure (Ratner, 2001). A unit of meaning consists of “those words, phrases, non-verbal or para-linguistic communication which express a unique and coherent meaning ... clearly differentiated from that which precedes and follows” (Hycner, 1985, p. 282). During this stage, it is important to ensure that the identified meaning units are not interrogated in any way, as the aim is to accept the phenomenon as described (Giorgi, 1986).

Example of Meaning Units from Transcript L1

1. We went to UNISA to be trained to teach online/
2. During the first session we were supposed to familiarise ourselves with e-learning/
3. We were told how important e-learning is in a distance education environment/
4. We were told how important it was to use 'myUnisa' as a tool to facilitate online learning/
5. and the importance of facilitating learning in a more authentic, collaborative and interactive way/
6. We were told that this was possible if we made use of 'myUnisa' /
7. The facilitators also wanted to find out our knowledge and skills with regard to the use of technology to facilitate learning/
8. It was really a good experience for me/

Step 3: Re-Grouping Meaning Units in Clusters

This phase was vital for gaining a fuller understanding of what the respondents had said by identifying units that were relevant to the study and building a coherent structure of the meaning of their experiences. What we looked for in the meaning units was the lived nature of the constituents of each participant's experience and the interrelationship between those constituents (Giorgi, 1989). Constituents that were found to be relevant were regrouped according to their intertwining meanings so that they could express the participants' lived experience more fully (Giorgi, 2009; Wertz, 1985). Ratner (2001) argues that this process usually includes the context, the discourse and certain background knowledge that makes the utterances identifiable. Giorgi and Giorgi (2003) posit that unearthing meanings that may not have been explicitly expressed by the respondents but can be intuited in their utterances enables richer description of the nuances of the participants' lived experiences.

At this point, the psychological intentions contained in the constituent meaning clusters of the participants' descriptions of their lived experience were developed (Giorgi, 1986, 1989; Ratner, 2001). This step involved the transformation of the participant's own first person expression into appropriate scientific language in the third person (Giorgi, 1989, p. 73).

When L1 expressed in unit 162 that "*some of us had to overcome the fear of using technology*", the unit was elaborated and rephrased as, "*She felt that she had needed more time in the training since she had to overcome her anxiety and fear before proper training could start*".

Step 4: Transformation of the Meaning Units into Descriptive Expressions

As a continuation of the previous step, this step similarly involves understanding, judgments of relevance, and coherent organising of the constituents of the experience described. As such, it draws implicitly on the special interest of the researcher (Wertz, 1985) and requires that the elaborated meanings that emerged be expressed with "heightened psychological sensitivity with respect to the phenomenon under study" (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003, p. 253). This step yields individual descriptions which serve as the basis of further analysis. However, to the extent that this process is essentially subjective, there are no categorically right or wrong formulations.

Below is the idiographic analysis of L1's descriptive account when she was asked about her experience of the professional development programme:

Idiographic Analysis of L1

L1 indicated that they were invited to attend a course in which they were **introduced to teaching online**. She reveals that, as a lecturer who was attached to a residential university, this course introduced her to teaching online. Through **exposure to practical** (authentic learning) activities she was equipped with the essential **knowledge and skills** required to teach online. She noted, however, that the training had its **anxious moments**. As a first-time user of computers for online teaching, L1 explained that she many a time experienced a **fear of technology** since she had to upload information on the internet.

It is through this process that themes were identified from each participant and then clustered into a number of general themes that appeared to be common to all the participants' descriptions (Pietersen, 2002). Common themes reflect the general experience of the phenomenon by the participants and are conducive to generalisation.

Step 5: Synthesis and Integration

Once the psychological structure of each description had been identified, the researchers identified statements that could be taken as true in most cases. Even though individuals have uniquely distinctive social experiences, when bound together in a particular context they are likely to share certain practices, perspectives and values (Ratner, 2001). It is during this phase that protocols which had something in common with each other were compared to establish the similarities and differences in meaning constituents (De Castro, 2003). Achieving universality beyond individual cases entailed examining all relevant possible variations of the academics' staff development experiences and views. Consequently it was possible to link identified themes to meaning units.

Existential Themes

Since there are no definitively clear ways of identifying phenomenological themes, all the general themes that emerged were grouped in accordance with Van Manen's (1990) four fundamental existential themes, namely *lived space* (spatiality), *lived body* (corporeality), *lived time* (temporality), and *lived human relation* (relationality or communality). Van Manen (1990) argues that these existential themes run across all individual lifeworlds irrespective of their particular historical, cultural or social situatedness. This is vital procedurally to the focus of phenomenology on perceiving the pattern of the lived experience of any given phenomenon. Ashworth (2003, p. 147) proposes several universal categories of lived experience he terms "fragments" (in that they "together do not yet constitute a full account of the essence of the lifeworld"), and suggests that these fragments not only enable "the detailed description of a given lifeworld", but that the study of any given lifeworld would "be enriched by analysis in terms of these parameters". He cautions, however, that these parameters should not be used as a kind of checklist, since such an approach may compromise the phenomenological attitude by presupposing an interpretative framework (Ashworth, 2003). In order to give a trustworthy account of the academics' lived experiences, it is of primary importance that the analysis remain faithful to the thematic meanings that emerged from the subjects' own accounts (Ratner, 2001).

The Lived-Space (Spatiality) Experiences

In phenomenology, *lived space* refers to a physical environmental locus that brings human experiences, actions and meanings together spatially (Ashworth, 2003; Seamon, 2013). Academics' interactions within the physical space constituting the training centre's *lived space* entailed the trainees' "moving" in training sessions. Through interaction among the participants and the trainers, the training resources in the training sessions, and the physical space, as provided for the purpose by the university, the individual trainees were oriented to online training, thereby making it possible for them to acquire the requisite skills and knowledge to teach online.

Orientation in the training space provided participants with opportunities to participate in practical development sessions. Participants reported that their initial training exposed them to a variety of skills and teaching approaches including the construction of authentic experiential tasks and doing assessment online. These practical experiences took the form of authentic learning tasks such as developing and recording audio podcasts, as well as editing and uploading the audio podcasts using Audacity software and the 'myUnisa' podcast server. These practical training sessions equipped the academics with the cognitive, affective and psychomotor skills and knowledge required to use online tools. Ashworth (2003) and Van Manen (1990) point out that

experiential space is of great importance, since it is a rich source of information from which a particular experience derives its quality of meaning.

The Lived-Body (Corporeality) Experiences

While the *lived space* had to do with the experience of the physical places of training, the *lived body* had to do with the participants' bodily contained, enabled and enacted experience of their own subjectivity and its possibilities in the form of embodied practical and emotional experiences (De Castro, 2003; Van Manen, 1990). Phenomenologists perceive the body as linking individuals to the social and material world, and, as the locus of consciousness, as the primary medium of learning and knowing (Seamon, 2013; Yakhlef, 2010). The *lived-body* experiences of the academics in this study were characterised by their acquisition of online teaching skills and knowledge, their perceptions about online learning as a delivery method in ODL, and their experiences of learning. All of them were exposed to authentic online learning, which enabled them actively and collaboratively to work together. Even though the participants reported that they had learnt a great deal from the course, those who were uncomfortable using technology experienced technophobia, anxiety, and fear of failure. Indeed, several of the participants revealed that they would have preferred the organisers to have conducted a skills audit to establish the students' technology skill competencies before the start of the training programme. It was felt that this would have prevented their feeling inadequate and "being ashamed" in the presence of their colleagues.

While participation as a bodily practice has been given little attention in the course of exploring professional development and knowing processes (Yakhlef, 2010), it is through active participation that individuals moved from being merely observers of what occurs in their communities to becoming fully involved in the training programme. Through this process, they were able to construct their own identities as transitioning from novices to proficient users of technology in teaching. They mapped out the processes involved in the units that were to be taught – in the form of organised sketches (storyboard) – before uploading the sketches online. The online designs were then tested, reviewed, and adjusted as needed. Participants revealed that they were able to evaluate themselves, while at the same time developing their own ability to facilitate online learning. However, they were concerned that the intervention lacked a mechanism for ascertaining whether they had learnt the skills they were supposed to. Moreover, the participants would have preferred to have had more subject content in the training intervention, to improve and deepen their existing knowledge.

The Lived-Time (Temporality) Experiences

In describing their *lived-time* experience of the training programme, reference was made to the time required

for participants to accomplish their practical training and enable them to master the online teaching skills, as well as their need for interaction and engagement with each other during the process of staff development (McLoughlin & Oliver, 2000). Whilst the UNISA staff development programme was presented over a period of only two weeks, all participants reported that the short duration of the training intervention acted as an obstacle to their expected change. The participants would have preferred a longer period for the intervention as a whole and additional follow-up sessions as a support mechanism. In particular, they pointed out that they should have been given more time during the orientation phase in order to carry out practical exercises and learn more about the technology. These findings confirm the thrust of Ely's (1990) framework of staff development, which advocates long periods of time and continuity if an intervention is to yield the intended outcomes.

While participants in the present study perceived the facilitator's teaching orientation as a major determinant of the effectiveness of any staff development intervention, they also pointed to the significance of the duration of the orientation period, which they had all experienced as impeding effectiveness by being too short. They perceived the programme as being conducted as a finite process as opposed to a continuous learning process in which they would be continuously supported and supervised, stimulated and empowered to enable them increasingly effectively to incorporate e-teaching skills into their own tertiary-level teaching routine. The participants indicated that a longer training intervention would have enabled quality orientation, better training and learning, and improved performance.

The Lived-Relational (Communality) Experiences

The participants' lived-relational experiences manifested in their relationship with their facilitator and amongst themselves, as well as in their expressed need for a supportive environment. During their training, they met and interacted with facilitators and colleagues. However, they felt the need to relate to and engage with each other through follow up sessions, community of practice groups and supportive environments. Participants noted the need for a positive and supportive Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). To ensure that participants have such an environment, the facilitator should be able to implement and facilitate a collaborative, problem-based dynamic, and promote self-directed learning (Laurillard, 2013; McLoughlin & Oliver, 2000; Tyner, 2014). As noted by Erasmus and colleagues (2012), effective professional development programmes are guided by facilitators with knowledge of and skills in group processes and dynamics, as well as knowledge of how different people learn. The presence of these features will not only help trainees to overcome their initial difficulties in the training programme, but they will also induce motivation for transformation (Erasmus, Loedolff, Mda, & Nel, 2012).

Most participants were concerned that they had attended a single training session in an entire year, after which they were expected to implement what they had learnt on their own. They indicated that, due to the absence of follow-up sessions, they did not have an opportunity to hear real-life stories concerning the challenges and successes of their colleagues and to share and reflect on their own experiences. This consequently denied them the much-needed support from colleagues that could enhance learning, help them hone the acquired online teaching skills, and address any challenges they might experience. Sharing their experiences would also enable them to assess the adequacy of their progress with regard to the implementation of their newly acquired skills, and to judge whether these were having the desired impact on their practice. Although participants practised the learning activities through collaboration and team work, they felt that they would have liked to work with people in their own subject areas. This way they would be able to interact regularly, share resources and help each other to improve their online teaching practice in their mutual academic field.

Implications for Practice

Giorgi's phenomenological approach provided a useful perspective that helped illuminate some of the most critical issues that may assist professional development programme designers and facilitators to improve the way they provide training. The lived experiences of the academics provided useful insights that could be used to improve and promote the VLE training programme. The findings suggest that time is a crucial factor in ensuring the effective implementation of the programme. Being introduced and exposed to authentic learning was also reported as a positive experience that needs to be incorporated in the VLE training programme. Professional development experiences not only promote knowledge and skills acquisition, but are also instrumental in building social support and relationships with fellow academics (McLoughlin & Oliver, 2000; Neo & Neo, 2001; Tam, 2015). It is upon such relationships that future professional growth and collaboration among the academics could be built. This is particularly important in relation to the academics' concern that the training intervention focused exclusively on online learning delivery methods and neglected to relate these to subject content. It was therefore felt to be important that subject content and methods of teaching online be given equal attention in the training programme.

For a successful professional development programme to take place, all the phases, including the orientation, the learning and the performance phase, need to be given enough time, since change does not occur overnight. It became evident that time as a factor should be apportioned to the entire training session, as it was observed that a week or two is not enough to master the techniques of online teaching and learning. Over-

coming the initial fear of technology and executing the authentic learning tasks requires additional effort and time (Dori & Herscovitz, 2005). For academics to adopt online teaching, they need more than just some quick exposure to the training programme. They need time to master the skills taught, and they also need time to successfully learn, experiment, adapt and reflect on their teaching practice in an online environment. It is also believed that, if the programme extends over a longer period of time, socialisation among academics will be encouraged, which has the potential to create a permanent support base even after completion of the training (Ely, 1990; Tam, 2015). Changing academics' instructional methods requires a longer period of time and continuity if training is to achieve the intended outcomes (Dori & Herscovitz, 2005; Ely, 1990). In sum, professional development needs to be envisaged as a continuous lifelong process in which participants are supported and supervised, stimulated and empowered in a manner that enables them to incorporate skills, knowledge and values to enhance innovative teaching and learning (Collins, 2004; Hemmington, 2009; Leu & Ginsburg, 2011).

The success of professional development depends on a supportive context that involves the entire university – its managers, academics, students, professional and administrative staff (Collins, 2004; Leu & Ginsburg, 2011). A supportive university environment in the form of its policies should acknowledge the importance of professional development; and managers should act as champions of professional development because they have the authority to influence change (Hemmington, 1999; Leu & Ginsburg, 2011; Ramalibana, 2005). The findings suggest that professional development should be planned and implemented in such a way that it empowers academics with technical, pedagogical and transformation skills (Gulamhussein, 2013; Wheeler, 2004). Leu and Ginsburg (2011) maintain that incorporating a pedagogical aspect in the design of a staff

development programme acts as a bridge between the academics' knowledge of the subject matter and their knowledge and skill in planning and managing their interactions with the students in ways that facilitate learning.

The ultimate objective of academic staff development is to enhance quality student learning. The improvement in the teacher's knowledge and skills is closely related to student attainment (Darling-Hammond, 1994; OECD, 2009). Academics' professional development is thus inextricably linked to their professional performance and daily practice, which in turn influences students' performance (Desimone, 2009; OECD, 2009). It is in this respect that tertiary institutions can therefore be said to have a responsibility to their students to plan and implement professional development programmes to steer academics through the complexities of teaching and learning, recognising that these require a lifelong learning perspective in order to enable academics to adapt to rapid changes and evolving constraints and needs (Gulamhussein, 2013).

It is therefore imperative that the university hierarchy view professional development as an integral component of academics' work which they need to be involved in throughout their careers. What emerged in this study is that academics' experiences and perceptions of the VLE training programme were shaped in relation to their own hopes, frustrations, intentions and histories. The context and circumstances of the individual's life thus influenced his or her understanding of the lived meaning of the phenomenon of learning in the setting of a mandatory professional development programme. The participants' experiences contributed significantly to gaining understanding of their professional development journey and how particular aspects of the training could be improved, and could be of use generally in guiding the development and promotion of both effective and sustainable professional development programmes.

Referencing Format

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