Enhancing higher education quality in South Africa: The professionalisation of academics as university teachers

M. Ndaba
Centre for Higher Education Professional Development (CHEPD)
North-West University
Potchefstroom, South Africa
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2325-6282

ABSTRACT

Academics, as university teachers, are crucial role players in quality higher education provision. This article firstly argues that, as shown in higher education literature, many of them enter the academy as subject-matter experts without being equipped with the necessary pedagogical competencies, which has implication for the quality of education provision. Secondly, drawing on findings of a qualitative study that explored the role of academics in higher education as a public good at two universities in South Africa, it argues that, in the ongoing competition for resources and recognition between the research and teaching roles of academics, the teaching role is largely disadvantaged, which has adverse implication for the quality of education provision. Lastly, it argues for professionalisation of academics as university teachers to address the quality concerns it raises, thus advocating for the implementing the imperatives for action outlined in the national framework for enhancing academics as university teachers.

Keywords: higher education, quality education, university teachers, quality teaching, professionalisation

INTRODUCTION

The legacy of colonialism and apartheid continues to shape South Africa's higher education landscape over three decades since the dawn of democracy in 1994. This has been well documented from various angles in the literature (Heleta 2016; Jansen 2004; Langa 2017; Motala 2020; Mtshweni 2022). The unprecedented wave of student movements under the banner of #feesmustfall between 2015 and 2017 brought significant attention to the continuing legacy of colonialism and apartheid, exposing the colonial organisation of the university and the slow pace at which higher education in South Africa is transforming (Langa 2017; Luescher 2016). Mtshweni (2022), writing about the impact of the COVID-19 on South Africa's higher education, argued that the pandemic also exposed these legacies and exacerbated disparities inherited from the apartheid era.

While the country's colonial and apartheid pasts continue to shape higher education today, notable progress has been made towards transformation and the provision of quality higher education in South Africa. This includes policy and legislative mechanisms geared towards

transformation (Makhanya and Botha 2015). For example, the transformation imperative is at the centre of South Africa's higher education policies: the 1997 Education White Paper 3: A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education, and in the *White Paper for Post-school Education and Training* approved in 2013. There has also been increased access, especially for previously marginalised groups (CHE 2024; Chiramba and Ndofirepi 2023; Mouton and Rewitzky 2025), and the diversification of the academic staff (CHE 2024), among other things.

Some criticism has been levelled against the higher education system in South Africa because of the ways in and the pace at which it is transforming. For example, Heleta and Dilraj (2024) argue that the process of transformation has been superficial while maintaining Eurocentric epistemic hegemony. For example, while public universities' academic staff is more diverse than it was during apartheid, the ranking of academics still reflects the inequalities of the past, with more white academics as full professors and more black academics as junior academics (Hlatshwayo 2024). Moreover, there are some portions of the literature acknowledges the significant increase in access since 1994, but also point out that success rates continue to reflect the inequalities of the past (Chiramba and Ndofirepi 2023; Masutha 2022). For example, Kelly-Laubscher et al (2018), as cited in Woldegiorgis and Chiramba (2025, 760), "highlight stark graduation rate disparities between black and white students. Only 20 per cent of African and 24 per cent of coloured student's complete degrees within the stipulated time, compared to 44 per cent of white students."

Moreover, Akoojee and Nkomo (2008) contest that this widening access must be viewed in light of the quality of the higher education that students are accessing. An element of this is the quality of teaching and learning in which academics play a key role. This is important because, as many scholars have argued, teaching is one of the core functions of the university. (Archer 2017; Badat 2009; Cloete and Maassen 2015; Badat 2010). In this article, I look at why the professionalisation of university teachers is necessary for enhancing the quality of higher education in South Africa. I make a case for the implementation of the National Framework for Enhancing Academics as University Teachers provided by the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET 2018). To this end, I make a threefold argument in this article.

Firstly, I draw on the scholarly literature on higher education to argue that most academics enter academia as subject-matter experts with postgraduate qualifications and little to no pedagogical competencies necessary to teach well (Gumede, Sithole and Gumede 2023; Makondo 2012; Ndebele 2024; Norton, Sonnemann and Cherastidtham 2013). This assumption that a subject-matter expert can teach has implications for the quality of their teaching and

students' learning experiences. Secondly, drawing on the findings of a qualitative study that explored the role of academics in higher education as a public good and for the public good (Ndaba 2022), I argue that there is an ongoing competition for resources and recognition between academics' research and teaching roles. In this competition, the research role has largely been favoured over the teaching role. This has adverse implications for the quality of higher education provided to students on our campuses. Lastly, I argue that the professionalisation of academics as university teachers, through the implementation of the imperatives for action outlined in the national framework for enhancing academics as university teachers, may address the quality concerns associated with the issues raised in the first two parts of my argument.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The arguments I make in this article are theoretically grounded in Lee Shulman's (1986) pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) framework and Earnest Boyer's (1990) model of scholarship. I must acknowledge that, since its introduction in the mid 1980s, the PCK framework, as Fraser (2016) rightly states, has been widely used in research related to the schooling context rather than higher education. In instances where it is used in higher education research, it is often related the education of school teachers rather than university teachers (Fraser 2016). However, some emerging research has demonetarised its usefulness for research about university lecturers, which in this article I refers to as university teachers (Fraser 2016; Major and Palmer 2006; Sarkar et al 2024; Kabelo and Nkoane 2025). This article, therefore, contributes to the emerging literature that uses the PCK framework in relation to academics as university teachers.

According to Shulman (1986, 9), PCK includes, "for the most regularly taught topics in one's subject area, the most useful forms of representation of those ideas, the most powerful analogies, illustrations, examples, explanations, and demonstrations-in a word, the ways of representing and formulating the subject that make it comprehensible to others." In other words, it is the intersection of the teachers' knowledge of the subject matter to teach (content) and their understanding of how to teach it (pedagogy), which is fundamental for effective teaching. As Shulman (1987, 8) stated, it is "the blending of content and pedagogy into an understanding of how particular topics, problems, or issues are organised, represented, and adapted to the diverse interests and abilities of learners, and presented for instruction."

According to Sarkar (2024), PCK as a theoretical framework can be used in research to understand how teachers design learning activities and transform their content knowledge to forms that are comprehensible to students. For this reason, the PCK framework is relevant for

my argument in this article. The first part of my argument draws on Shulman (1987, 1986) conception of effective teaching as resulting from an amalgamation of knowledge of content and pedagogical knowledge. I draw attention to the need for academics as university teachers to not only be subject matter experts but to also be equipped with pedagogical competencies that are necessary for effective and quality education provision as the PCK framework suggests. Boyer's (1990) model of scholarship anchors the second layer of my argument in this article. In his model of scholarship, Boyer (1990, 15) challenge the view of "research" as the "first and most essential form of scholarly activity" which dominated academia since 1980s. In his model of scholarship, he outlines four interconnected dimensions of scholarly work. These are scholarship of discovery, integration, application, and of teaching. The scholarship of discovery is the production of new knowledge though research (Boyer 1990). The scholarship of integration is closely related to research but primarily creates connections across disciplines for a boarder understanding of what is being studied. The scholarship of application is more about the service and community engagement aspects of academic work. Lastly, the scholarship of teaching is about transmitting knowledge to students. What is important for my argument is that according to Boyer's (1990) model, the different dimensions of scholarship are not contradictory or in competition with each other but are rather seen as complementary and interdependent. This is the basis for my argument about teaching-research roles tug of war and its implications for the quality of higher education in South Africa.

ACADEMICS AS SUBJECT MATTER EXPERTS

The literature on higher education shows that university lecturers across the globe are generally appointed for their subject expertise rather than their teaching skills, as most are trained as disciplinary experts rather than teachers and therefore have limited exposure to teaching pedagogies. (Gumede et al 2023; Makondo 2012; Ndebele 2024; Norton et al 2013; Sarkar et al 2024). This is also the case in South African Higher education. However, there is evidence in the literature to suggest that the academic staff in South African universities is relatively underqualified (Hlatshwayo 2024; Tewari and Ilesanmi 2020; Cloete, Bunting, and van Schalwyk. 2022). In an analysis of the academic staff of South African universities, Cloete et al (2022) reported that 2019 data from South Africa's Higher Education Management Information System (HEMIS) indicates that, out of 19 901 academic staff members in public universities, less than half (48%) held PhDs. Only 35 per cent had a Masters equalisation, 8 per cent had a postgraduate qualification below a masters, while another 8 per cent had undergraduate degrees, diplomas, or higher certificates, and 1 per cent had no formal qualifications.

The level of the university teachers' qualification related to the discipline in which they teach is a proxy measure of their subject matter expertise and, as the PCK framework suggests, content knowledge is fundamental to the effectiveness of the teacher (Sarkar et al 2024). Moreover, as Boyer (1990, 23) argues in relation to the scholarship of teaching, "those who teach must, above all, be well informed, and steeped in the knowledge of their fields." Therefore, my argument in this article is not against the importance of content knowledge or university teachers being subject matter experts, rather is it is do draw attention to the other aspect that, according to Shulman's (1986, 1987) PCK framework, is another important element of effective teaching, which many university teachers enter the academic without. This is important to note because, while the PhD is increasingly becoming a primary requirement for securing teaching positions in contemporary higher education (Okolie et al 2020; Ramolula and Nkoane 2024), pedagogical training is often not required for those who are to be appointed as university teachers.

According to Ramolula and Nkoane (2024, 331), higher education institutions operate from the premise that "teaching is a natural activity that any person can carry out without imbibing certain principles, practices and skills. By implication, some lecturers face challenges in their teaching careers because they lack adequate training" (Ramolula and Nkoane 2024, 331). The PCK framework suggests that this is not the case. Moreover, this assumption made by universities is ironic because in basic education, teachers are expected to undergo at least 4 years of teacher training that encompasses not only the specific subjects they will teach (content knowledge) but also teaching methodologies (pedagogical knowledge).

There is compelling empirical evidence that advanced degrees (master's and PhD) do not equip holders with the pedagogical competencies needed to teach in higher education (Bullin 2018; Okolie et al 2020). For example, in a study exploring whether a PhD qualification improves academics' pedagogical competence, Okolie et al (2020) found that university teachers with both a PhD and pedagogical training have greater pedagogical competence than those with only a PhD. They also found a statistically significant difference in pedagogical competencies between university teachers whose PhD qualifications were coupled with pedagogical training and those with only PhDs. "The implication is that teachers who have undergone PT [Pedagogical Training] are more effective in facilitating teaching and learning than those who have not completed PT" (Okolie et al 2020, 1233). This is consistent with the assertions of Shulman's (1986, 1987). It points to the importance of PCK in how we think about the development of academics as university teachers. According to the PCK framework teachers need to have knowledge of the subject matter they teach (content) and knowledge of how to teach the subject matter (pedagogy) (Shulman 1987; Sarkar et al 2024; Fraser 2016).

In a study at a university of technology in South Africa, which explored lecturers' perspectives of pedagogical training initiatives, Gumede et al (2023) found that the limited pedagogical skills among academics as university teachers are increasingly becoming an issue of concern because this has negative implications on the quality of higher education and students' learning experiences. For this reason, they argued that there is a need for "systematic pedagogical training of higher education teachers to improve the quality of learning and graduating students" (Gumede et al 2023, 225). Moreover, in a qualitative study that examined the quality of teaching and learning at six universities in South Africa, Fomunyam (2018, 44) found that "teaching and learning in South African universities is marred by a plethora of challenges. Lecturers lack basic skills and essential resources to effectively facilitate teaching and learning. Furthermore, quality benchmarks set by the Council on Higher Education are only met on article and little or nothing is done to translate this into practice." While these findings are only based on 6 out of 26 public universities, they nonetheless raise serious concerns about the quality of higher education provision in these institutions. Research has shown that disciplinary expertise alone do not make an academic a teacher (Gumede et al 2023; Makondo 2012; Ndebele 2024), which means professional training in pedagogy is essential for university teaching.

It is worth noting that universities are implementing professional development initiatives to enhance academics' competencies, primarily in teaching and research supervision. These are often provided by universities' teaching and learning offices (Gumede et al 2023). However, as the literature shows, academic development initiatives and the resources required to implement them have been offered in an uncoordinated and uneven manner (Dunpath et al 2021; Gumede et al 2023). Moreover, these professional development initiatives are generally not mandatory for academics to participate in. This means that not all academics take advantage of these professional development opportunities, which may be understandable given the many challenges they face. The literature shows that many academics are overloaded with work, insufficiently remunerated and have their well-being threatened by stress and burnout Chan, Mazzucchelli, and Rees 2021; Dlamini and Dlamini 2024). This leads me to the second part of my argument, which is about the tug of war between academics' teaching and research roles and how this negatively affects the provision of quality higher education and students' learning experiences in our universities. To make this argument, I draw on the findings of a qualitative study that explored the role of academics in higher education *as* a public good and *for* the public good. This was a study conducted at two universities in South Africa (Ndaba 2022).

METHODOLOGY

In this study, I explored three key issues. Firstly, how academics conceptualise the public good of higher education. Secondly, what are their perceptions of the role(s) academics play in higher education's contribution to the public good? Lastly, what they perceive to be the conditions of possibility for this contribution. My argument here focuses on the study's findings regarding the second point. However, before delving into these findings, I will provide an overview of the methodology I used to conduct the study, which adopted a qualitative approach to provide an in-depth understanding of participants' perceptions (Creswell 2014).

The data was generated through in-depth semi-structured interviews ranging from 45 to 60 minutes each, with 15 purposively selected academics from two traditional South African universities. One of these universities, which I refer to as Protea University for anonymity purposes, is a historically black university. The other, here referred to as Yellowwood University, is a historically white university. Both universities granted permission for this study to be conducted on their academic staff. The interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent, transcribed, and analysed according to King and Horrocks's (2010) three stages of thematic analysis: descriptive coding, interpretive coding, and overarching themes. Pseudonyms were used in the transcription and presentation of the data and finding instead of participants' real names. This was important for ensuring the ethical principle of anonymity (Monette et al 2014).

THE TEACHING-RESEARCH ROLES TUG OF WAR

The study found that academics play various roles that can either complement or conflict each other. Among these roles are teacher, researcher, research supervisor, public intellectual, mentor, role model, and activist. It also found that not all these roles are equally valued in the academy. Some are more valued than others. Those ascribed greater value are better incentivised, which makes them a higher priority for academics. In this article, I will focus on teaching and research as roles that sometimes complement each other but often conflict.

According to Visser-Wijnveen et al (2010) Under ideal circumstances, research and teaching ought to be closely connected. Academics' research should inform their teaching, and vice versa. However, the relationship between these two roles is not often this way. These roles often compete with each other more than they complement one another, with severe implications for the quality of higher education provision. Drawing on the findings of this study, I argue that research (particularly the production of research outputs) is generally valued and incentivised more than any other academic role in higher education today. This is the reason for the tug of war between research and teaching, pushing most academics to invest more time

and effort in research at the expense of their teaching responsibilities. In the following sections, I turn to the findings of this study, which demonstrate the teaching-research tug of war and its implications for the provision of quality higher education.

RANKINGS, STATUS, AND FINANCIAL GAINS

The issue of rankings, status, and financial gains emerged from the data, as participants sought to explain the disparities in the value ascribed to the teaching and research roles of academics. Participants suggested that the value attached to the research role is mainly based on the status and financial gains academics and their institutions derive from it. In the words of Dr Zoziwa, "it brings in money for the institution." According to Prof Smith, it brings "international recognition" for the researcher and the institution. The pursuit of higher positions in international university rankings has put universities under significant pressure to adapt to their criteria, despite the problematic nature of these rankings and the purposes they serve, especially for universities in the global south. (Badat 2010; Shahjahan et al 2017; Unterhalter 2018).

The pressure on universities also trickles down to their academics in the form of the publish or perish culture. As Prof Aeron said, "The pressure for us to do PhDs, Master's, publish papers, etc., is growing … funny enough. Now we are moving totally towards research. So, we also have the same rules now for promotion." This echoes van Dalen (2021, 1675), who stated that, "Publication pressure is high and is related to faculty position and university ranking position." In this study, participants posited that, under pressure to publish, many academics neglect their teaching role. The following section unpacks how academics' role as researchers often flourishes at the cost of, or to the detriment of, their teaching role. A discussion of the implications of this research-teaching tug-of-war for the quality of higher education teaching and learning follows.

RESEARCH PRODUCTIVITY AT THE EXPENSE OF QUALITY TEACHING

One of the participants in this study, Prof Aeron, put it very well: "You only get acknowledged at the university when you publish, you know that. And you don't get acknowledged for the good you do as a teacher." Because of this pressure that academics experience to publish of perish, their researcher role often flourishes at the expense of the quality of their teaching. Students bear the brunt of the tug-of-war between research and teaching. For example, Mr Dan argued that when this happens, "students suffer in the long run" because academics tend to "spend less time on thinking about how they teach and focus more on their research." Prof Aaron shared the same sentiment.

> "People just go through the actions of teaching, you know, and that kind of stuff, do the same old same old, not really thinking about it and focus more on research and what gets them promoted." (Prof Aeron).

Prof Logan explained this research-teaching tug of war very well when he described the way in which the incentive of research-related promotion might shape academics' choices.

> When an academic like myself has to decide between "Do I teach a PGCE class, or do I write my article that I need for my performance appraisal at the end of the year?" Then I say, "I need to get out of my PGCE class." When I've written my article, and the possibility arises that I can do so, if I do three articles, I may get promoted if I do it for two years in a row. Then staying out of PGCE is even more cute. (Prof Logan).

This points to how the quality of academics' teaching and of students' learning experiences are adversely affected by the valorisation of research over teaching. This raised the question, "What can be done to address these issues and enhance the quality of education students receive in our higher education institutions?" The following section is my attempt to answer this question.

PROFESSIONALISATION OF ACADEMICS AS UNIVERSITY TEACHERS

The findings presented in the previous section suggest that there is minimal investment, particularly on the part of academics, towards improving the quality of their teaching, more especially because there are very few incentives to do so. They also show that valuing and incensing the researcher role more weakens the undervalued and less incentivised roles, particularly their role as university teachers. This diminishes the quality of students' learning experiences in our campuses and ultimately, their success rates. Therefore, if we are going to enhance the quality of higher education, these issues need to be addressed. In this section, I turn to the potential ways in which the imperatives for action outlined in the National Framework for Enhancing Academics as University Teachers (DHET 2018) may help the higher education sector address the quality concerns I raised in the first two parts of my argument.

In 2018, the Department of Higher Education and Training published the National Framework for Enhancing Academics as University Teachers, aimed at guiding efforts across the higher education system to nurture, support, and develop academics as university teachers (DHET 2018). The framework identified six imperatives for action in the higher education system to foster the recognition and professional development academics as university teachers (DHET 2018, 6):

- Enable continuous professional development (cpd) for university teachers

- Establish and maintain university teacher development structures, organisations and resources.
- Ensure that academics are recognised and rewarded for the work that they do as university teachers.
- Advance university teaching through leadership development.
- Promote knowledge production and knowledge sharing about university teaching and learning.
- Develop expectations of academics in their role as university teachers.

Points 1 and 3 directly address the quality issues I raised in the first two parts of my argument in this article. According to the Framework, establishing and maintaining university teacher development structures, organisations and resources, includes institutions ensuring that academics are supported to take part in career-stage relevant teaching and learning development initiatives such as sources courses or formal qualifications (DHET 2018). Ensuring recognition and rewarding of academics' work as university teachers includes institutions having promotion policies that consider teaching quality (DHET 2018). Other forms of recognition and incentives outlined in the framework include teaching excellence awards at different levels and opportunities to improve teaching knowledge (DHET 2018). These may serve as incentives for academics to take the quality of their teaching seriously.

While these imperatives have the potential to address the quality challenges associated with academics' teaching roles, their weakness is that they are not mandatory, leaving academics free to participate in the professional development initiatives that arise from the implementation of this framework. It is also not a minimum requirement for employment in an academic position to have appropriate training in teaching and learning through short courses or other formal qualifications. However, the number of publications is often specified as a minimum requirement in many academic job adverts.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, this article draws on the higher education literature to demonstrate the shortcomings and quality implications of appointing academics as subject-matter experts without pedagogical competencies. Moreover, based on the findings of a research study that explored academics' roles in the public good contribution of higher education, this article has also demonstrated the teaching-research tug of war and its implications for students' learning experiences and the overall quality of higher education. Then it highlighted the potential for

the National Framework for Enhancing Academics as University teachers to address the quality concerns raised in the first two parts of its argument.

Based on the threefold argument made in this article, I conclude that the quality of higher education provision will not improve if the development of pedagogical competencies among academics as university teachers is not taken seriously. For this to be taken as seriously as it should, it must be incentivised in the same way, if not better, than research productivity has been. For this reason, I recommend that South Africa's HEIs should explore the possibility of a teaching and learning formal qualification becoming a prerequisite for appointment or promotion for university teachers, in order to enhance the quality of university teachers on their campuses.

There is a need to make participation in continuous professional development (CPD) initiatives mandatory, especially for academics already in the system. This is necessary given the rapid technological advancements that are increasingly revolutionising higher education as we know it, and the skills needed for the future. Moreover, intensive research into academics' attributes to underpin the enhancement and professionalisation of academics as university teachers, in a way that equips them to produce graduates with the intended graduate attributes, is necessary now more than ever before. Dhunpath et al (2021) have paved the way for this research by identifying the professional attributes of university teachers. I have also contributed to this literature through a article on the qualities of a public good academic, which provides insights into what these attributes might be (Ndaba 2024).

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