

EMERGING RESEARCHERS IN EMERGING UNIVERSITIES: LIVED EXPERIENCES (UNDERSTANDING CHALLENGES FACED)

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents challenges faced by emerging researchers in rural universities, by exploring their lived experiences throughout the journey of becoming a researcher. The paper argues that research creates new knowledge, benefits the education institutions, and impacts national development and transformation. Higher Education institutions globally, and in South Africa in particular, are striving to increase their research output by presenting research as requisite for academic promotion. Research, as a component in academia, is so valued that the cliché ‘publish or perish’ aptly defines the academic’s career prospects. In a bid to achieve research excellence and boost research output, South African universities, especially the emerging rural universities, went on a massive recruitment drive for Research Fellows, PhD holders and professors, to cultivate research culture and to enhance research output for their institutions. The challenge is that, as soon as a new academic is appointed, they are expected to contribute to the institution’s publication profile. This paper employed Constructivist theory and the qualitative approach within a case study design. Purposive sampling techniques were used to identify three emerging rural institutions and fifteen emerging researchers. Collection of data was done through in-depth one-on-one interviews. Thematic frames were used to present and analyse data. The findings revealed that, among the myriad challenges were heavy workloads and lack of research technical skills. The paper recommends that emerging rural universities’ management conduct workshops in capacity development, research paper writing among others, to empower the emerging researchers.

Keywords: Capacity building, Challenges, Emerging Researcher, Higher Education Institutions, Infrastructure, Transformation.

INTRODUCTION

The expanding access to Higher Education has necessitated mass production of undergraduates and postgraduates; the latter who have found their way back into the academy soon after their higher degree qualifications as junior lecturers, lecturers and postdoctoral fellows. According to Mabelebele (2015), Higher Education (HE) systems in South Africa face common challenges, which explain the White Paper 3 of 1997’s call for the transformation of the tertiary system (Department of Education (DoE) 1997). In as much as recent literature attests to HE challenges regarding the role of universities in providing quality education and the funding of universities (Mouton, Louw & Strydom 2013) among other things, one less documented but critical challenge of HE in South Africa and elsewhere, is the research component and the myriad challenges it faces. Since it is argued that research creates new knowledge, benefits the education institutions, and impacts national development and transformation; higher education institutions should be investing in research (Warwick 2013). This explains why HE institutions

across the globe, and in South Africa in particular, strive to increase their research output (Majoni 2014).

There is, however, concern that many young scholars who have graduated with doctorates are not developing into National Research Foundation (NRF)-rated researchers (USAf 2017). The concern is especially critical considering that research is meant to improve university service and quality of teaching and learning and generate new knowledge. Research is what primarily distinguishes high school teachers from university lecturers; as the latter are creators of knowledge while the former largely remain consumers of knowledge. The research component is so valued that the cliché ‘publish or perish’ fitly defines the academic’s career prospects.

In a bid to achieve research excellence, South African universities, especially the emerging rural universities, went on a massive recruitment drive for Research Fellows and other new academics to improve the research output. While the question of whether the massive drive towards quantitative research output has not compromised the quality of research output is a worthy one to ask, the academy measures research success in quantitative terms. The present study sought to determine whether adequate research support and research cultures have evolved in proportion to the quantitative increase in the researchers and the research expectations. This it does by exploring, from the researchers’ perspective, the extent to which emerging researchers, in emerging rural universities, are adequately supported in their research role. The report on a Workshop Committee on Partnership for Emerging Research Institutions Policy and Global Affairs (2009) raises a pertinent question, “How does one initiate research in an environment that is not necessarily friendly?” The question implies that a research culture and a research-conducive environment should precede all successful research efforts.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Constructivist Theory (CT) informed the study. It posits that meanings or realities are multiple and socially constructed (Mertens 2005). The theory argues that people create their own subjective understandings from what they are exposed to (Creswell 2009). Constructivism acknowledges that constructions and understandings are alterable and open to new interpretations as information and sophistication of understanding improves (Guba and Lincoln 1994). This theory best suited this study where participants’ view of the enabling nature of their environment was constructed from their experiences and could evolve as the experiences shifted. The study acknowledged that knowledge is created from an occurrence, event or experience. In this study, the experiences of emerging researchers in emerging rural institutions, and how these experiences colour their perceptions on engaging in research within their environments, are explored.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Traditionally, research is known to be a preserve of professors and few PhD holders in the so-called elite universities. The fact that research is a critical requirement for career progression means it is no longer confined to only a few academics. Higher Education institutions, particularly universities, strive to cultivate a research culture to increase academics’ participation in research, with the hope of improving research output and put the university names on the map. There have been several calls by the Department of Higher Education and Technology (DHET) for the universities to carry out research as part of the transformation of the entire university landscape in South Africa (SA). Mouton, Louw and Strydom (2013) acknowledge that, within the context of the enormity of the shift from apartheid to democracy, the tertiary education system has been dominated by considerations of transformation, with

previously marginalised rural universities being deliberately funded more for research activities. The individual academic's research output became an important contribution to the university's ranking and the individual's eligibility for promotion. In light of this the questions to ask were; how can an emerging researcher in an emerging rural university engage in research? Is the environment conducive for ideal engagement in research? Through these questions, the paper explored various factors, challenges and lived experiences of novice researchers in a setting with insufficient research support system.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to explore challenges faced by emerging researchers in rural universities. The study sought to understand different obstacles to emerging researchers' full engagement in research and strategies to enhance their research development and involvement.

LITERATURE REVIEW

It is generally perceived that emerging researchers in emerging universities are faced with a variety of challenges. For the purpose of this paper, an emerging researcher (interchangeably used with novice) is an academic who has not yet established themselves as researchers. It is an early career academic as defined by University of Cape Town (2018). The Collins English Dictionary (2014) defines a novice as a person who is new to, or inexperienced in, a certain task, situation; a beginner or a newcomer. The emerging/novice researcher, therefore, is new to a field or activity, and sometimes lacks technical knowhow. In the present study context, this would be an academic who would have just completed a Master's or Doctorate degree and still learning to do research. An emerging rural university is a university which is new or relatively newly established in previously disadvantaged rural areas in South Africa.

Publishing research is essential to an academic career—for recognition in the academic field (Moodley, et al. 2015). Neem (2014) argues that in the absence of such publications, one's academic standing and consequently, prospects for promotion, applications for grants, and National Research Foundation rating are compromised. Being an academic at a university clearly requires research and the production of new knowledge that is useful to society (Neem 2014).

de Luca, Tuchin and Bonalo (2015) perceive that in building research capacity, a greater understanding of the motivations, challenges and issues surrounding career development in research is necessary for the development and retention of early-career researchers. Building the next generation of academics and researchers is critical for research to be sustainable (Mabelebele 2015). For that to take place, an all-encompassing research atmosphere should be promoted by the institutions of higher learning. NAS, NAE and IOM (2007) state that institutions should demonstrate a commitment to research and create an environment that is conducive for novice researchers to grow in both teaching and learning and research activities. It is argued that the development of research brings about fundamental changes in the way lecturers approach teaching and learning and in the way a university is perceived and rated. Research is a daunting enterprise even for established researchers in research intensive institutions and the challenge can only be greater for emerging researchers in emerging rural universities.

According to the Global Market Research Report (GMRR) (2018), there are numerous barriers to doing research in emerging countries where, in some countries, the law requires a permit for one to conduct a study. The GMRR (2018) goes further to report that governments often want

to review the survey questions prior to giving their approval. A permit can take several weeks to obtain, slowing down progress. Since the governments in emerging countries do not take regular census data as developed nations do, it is also extremely difficult for a researcher to target a specific population or to pinpoint a sample group. There is no centralised data to rely on (GMRR 2018). Such experiences may scare off the novice researchers who may not have the experience or patience to go about getting their work approved.

Novice researchers have limited access to financial support and a lack of technological capabilities, which impact negatively on publication of their work. de Luca, et al. (2015) and GMRR (2018) report that most financial organisations are cautious to provide financial support to conduct research studies due to the challenges related to emerging market research. Budget constraints make research efforts less than optimal, with little resources for research and development, modern technology integration, and staff development. Many emerging countries have subpar infrastructure, such as poor transportation and road systems, lack of electricity and telecommunication devices, and low levels of literacy. Much of the research conducted in emerging countries is face-to-face interviews due to the limitations in technological capabilities (GMRR 2018).

One of the challenges reported by de Luca, et al. (2015) is the challenge of negative attitudes toward research and researchers from within the profession. The issues surrounding research need to be demystified in academia, since research is perceived as too difficult and only meant for a few elite academics. This perception leads to the development of negative attitudes as noted by de Luca, et al. (2015). It was also noted that the seasoned researchers were reluctant to mentor the emerging researchers and the research profession should start to foster academics and build research capacity.

Novice researchers also face the problem of poor academic writing skills due to their inexperience. Cayley (2014) states that academic writing can be difficult for anyone, and more especially for a novice writer. Cayley observes that many novice academic writers struggle to formulate their thoughts and research onto paper in readable text. From Cayley's experience, novice academic writers struggle most with time pressure to write more in less time affects many. A study by Dickson, et al. (2014), on challenges faced by Emirati novice teachers, uncovered challenges such as learning to cope with their new workload, relationships with colleagues, and balancing their new working lives with their demanding home lives. Moodley, et al. (2015) reflects on the journey to publish and the pressure academics experience.

METHODOLOGY

The study took a qualitative approach and adopted a case study design to solicit data from emerging researchers' own lived experiences. Beuscher and Grando (2009) posit that a qualitative research captures meaningful experiences. Although the findings were confined to the three universities used in the study; lived experiences shared in this study could be used as a point of reference for strengthening of research output in emerging rural universities.

The convenient sampling technique was used to identify the three rural institutions used in the study because two of the researchers had once taught at those institutions which made gaining access to participants easier. The institutions were characterised by their rural geographical location, historical infrastructural disadvantages. To identify these three institutions, we named them using letters A, B, C. Fifteen (15) emerging researchers were purposively chosen because

they could provide rich information and were willing to provide information on challenges faced by emerging researchers in emerging rural universities. We deliberately chose those who had completed their higher degrees (Masters or PhD) and had more than five years within the university post their higher degree qualifications but were still at junior lecturer or at lecturer grade. These participants had rich information since they had struggled to break through the system into senior lectureship (considering that research output is pre-requisite to academic promotion). In our selection, we were also careful to include both sexes. Five participants from each rural university were selected. For the authors to be able to associate each respondent to the corresponding institution, lecturers from University A are numbered A1-A5, lecturers from University B are numbered by B1-B5 and lecturers from University C are numbered C1-C5. The Table below shows the total number of participants according to their institution.

Table1: *Number of participants per institution*

University A	University B	University C
A1	B1	C1
A2	B2	C2
A3	B3	C3
A4	B4	C4
A5	B5	C5

Data was collected through an in-depth face-to-face interview to enable the emerging researchers to express their views on research related challenges they faced. The aim of using interviews was to reveal the opinions and experiences of emerging researchers on the environments they were operating under (Mncube 2009). A common interview schedule was used for all the participants, regardless of their institution.

The data consisted of notes taken during the interviews transcribed and analysed according to Giorgi (1975) phenomenological steps and observation notes. Firstly, each transcript was read to get an overall sense of the whole. Secondly, the transcripts were read to identify the communication in the experience, with each transition signifying a separate unit of meaning as articulated by the Constructivism Theory (CT) adopted in this study. The redundancies in the units of meaning were eliminated and the remaining units related to one another. Fourthly, the participants' language was transformed into the language of science, and finally, the insights were synthesised into a description of the entire experience of leadership practices. The analysed data was then categorised into themes that emerged from the findings.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Mertens (1998) observes that ethical guidelines in research are needed to guard against any possible dilemmas. Permission was sought from the three rural university gatekeepers and the participants to conduct this study. For ethical reasons, identification letters and numerals denoting participants were used instead of the actual names of the three institutions in order to protect the image of the universities, (see Table 1). Mncube (2009) holds that information that clearly identifies the participants or organisations should not be revealed so that confidentiality is guaranteed. Study participants could withdraw their participation at any time for any reason without any intimidation or victimisation. Participants were informed of the use that would be made of data and it was explained why their participation was important.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section provides research-related challenges faced by emerging researchers in rural universities in South Africa. Presentation and discussion of data occurred simultaneously, and verbatim quotations and thick descriptions are used to present and discuss the data. All emerging researchers from three different universities who participated in the study as respondents were asked one open ended question; what are the challenges you face as an emerging researcher in a rural university regarding your research development? This question was so broad and allowed the respondents to identify all challenges they faced in this regard. The purpose of asking this question was to capture participants' experiences, knowledge and understanding of their own research development related challenges, without limiting them in their response. It should be noted that this question allowed researchers to collect much information regarding challenges faced by emerging researchers in all the three rural universities. The respondents were asked to identify as many challenges as they encountered when personally conducting research. The results of this study are presented in the next section.

Negative branding of emerging rural universities

Majority of respondents (A1, A2, A3, A5, B2, B3, B4, B5, C1, C2, C3, C4 and C5) indicated that rural universities in general were negatively branded as low class in terms of resources, the nature of students and lecturers they attract, and the low level of research funding channelled to such institutions. One respondent (C3) specifically voiced that;

Most urban universities are considered top institution in terms of the student population they attract, and they also attract prominent researcher as they are able to pay them because they receive greater funding and they are well recognised in the publication industry.

This finding coincides with the Report on Partnerships for Emerging Research Institutions (2009), which noted that well established and prominent universities' and researchers' work have greater funding and acceptance in the publication industry than that of emerging researchers in emerging rural universities who struggle to break the ground. The same Report also gave an interesting picture of a researcher at Black College or University (HBCU) who was ghost-writing proposals for a prominent institution and all the proposals were accepted and funded yet when she wrote similar proposals under her own institution's name, proposals were rejected. This buttresses the argument presented by the majority of the respondents in this paper that unknown researchers in emerging rural institutions are likely to experience blatant bias. One of the respondents (A1) said:

Emerging researchers from rural universities only have access to very few journals that are available locally to publish their articles and that the journals were too strict.

It was apparent that lack of exposure to research funding and publication hampered research progress and development of emerging researchers in emerging rural universities.

Lack of institutional research resources

The paper revealed that in most, if not all, rural universities, there is an acute lack of institutional research resources like well-furnished libraries, Information and Communication Technology (ICT) gadgets, competent library staff, and adequate research equipment and facilities, just to name but a few. Several authors (Mabelebele 2015; Beuscher & Grando 2009; de Luca, Tuchin & Bonalo 2015; Majoni 2014) indicate that lack of these institutional resources constraints research efforts. Some respondents argued that high performing computing and library sources such as electric databases and other electronic facilities are fundamental for high research output. Research infrastructure encompassing information technology is crucial

for scholarly productivity as it saves time and allows for easy access to information. Majoni (2014) argues that lack of internet connectivity, compounded by lack of researchers' computer literacy skills for research, hampers the progress of research.

One respondent (B4) who talked more on the importance of university library in research said *Academic libraries are considered to be the nerve centres of academic institutions as they support teaching and learning, research and other academic programmes in various ways and the sad part is that these are seriously lacking in majority of emerging rural universities.*

It should be noted that unavailability and/or lack of fully equipped libraries in many emerging rural universities lead to poor access to literature, inability to access internet and literature from journals and other databases, which in turn, contribute to poor research output in these institutions of higher learning. If nothing is done about this situation, emerging researchers in such institutions will continue to lag behind regarding their research development. This finding is in line with results that were established by de Luca, et al. (2015) and GMRR (2018).

Unavailability of time

One of the challenges that appeared to be common (A1, A5, B2, B3, C2, C3, C4, A2, A4) from the emerging researchers who participated in this paper was lack of time to do research. It was argued that academics' teaching loads in emerging institutions are typically higher than those of staff in established institutions. One respondent (B2) said;

I am given a minimum of four and a maximum of five modules per semester whereas in the so-called prominent universities or universities in major towns and cities in the country...are teaching a maximum of two modules.

This observation was in line with the findings of the Partnership for Emerging Research Institutions Report (2009) which indicated that around four modules that emerging researcher in emerging rural universities taught were about two or three times the teaching load of an academic in an established institution. In many rural universities, classes are taught during the day only due to lack of transport to and from the university at night, and for security reasons, whereas in some established universities, classes are taught during the day and evenings Monday to Friday. In addition to a heavy load, the same academics are delegated numerous administrative duties, peripherally related to research activities (de Luca, et al. 2015). Authors of this paper observed that a combination of high teaching load, high advising load, extra administrative duties, and limited institutional capacity for release time, created an unmanageable situation for academics who would otherwise take an active interest in research.

Lack of research training

Most of the respondents (A1, A2, A3, A4, A5, B1, B2, B3, B4, B5, C1, C3, C4 and C5) from these three rural universities under study indicated lack of training in research as a serious obstacle to research development. A respondent (A1) captured it well by saying:

there is a dire need for workshops and training that covers excel spreadsheets, Open refine (for data cleaning) and data analysis, statistical package for social sciences, Nvivo and other data analytical software's and also training on visualization in research with regard to data presentation and analysis.

The respondent indicated that these kinds of training are very crucial for research development as this software can make research undertaking simple and interesting and also make data and findings to be more presentable (A1, A2, A3, A4, A5, B1, B2, B3, B4, B5, C1, C3, C4 and C5). Other respondents who talked about the lack of training focused on methodological training. Respondents indicated that training in research methodologies provides a foundation for one

to know and understand how research is done in different disciplines, in multidiscipline and in cross disciplines.

(A1) indicated that:

sometimes one is compelled to use a mixed method approach and if one does not know and understand what it is one will never attempt to write such kind of research projects and without this knowledge and understanding it makes collaborations sometimes impossible to achieve.

Research collaborations are currently low in institutions of higher learning and in prominent research funding institutions globally. Most research funding is channelled to both international collaboration research projects and in collaboration of researchers from different institutions within the country. It is within this context that if a researcher lacks this kind of training, it becomes almost impossible to even start to consider both national and international collaborations. As a result, these funding opportunities are taken by seasoned researchers who are well vested with different research methodologies, hence the importance of research methodology training for emerging researchers from emerging rural universities.

Another research related training needs emerging researchers from emerging universities who participated identified as a challenge was training in writing research proposal for funding purposes. One respondent (C1) said:

I see calls for research proposal for funding from different research funding institutions all the time, but I have never responded to any of those calls because I honestly do not know where to start as I have not been trained to do that.

Overall, all the 15 participants from the three institutions cited negative branding of institutions as constraining their research efforts. Reasons that were given for the effect of the university branding on research production were the low-level resources, the nature of students and lecturers they attract which results in a low level of research funding given to the institutions. What also clearly emerged from the findings was the lack of a clear understanding of the environment in which they operated and how it compromised their research development and the support that they needed. This resonates with literature, that building research capacity, a greater understanding of the motivations, challenges and issues surrounding career development in research is necessary for the development and retention of early-career researchers (de Luca, Tuchin and Bonalo 2015). This is in line with the statement that many young scholars who have graduated with doctorates are not developing into NRF-rated researchers (USAf 2017).

The findings resonate with results established by Dickson, et al. (2014), de Luca, et al. (2015) and GMRR (2018), that lack of training, lack of resources and unavailability of time impacted negatively on the research production. This paper shows the crucial need for emerging researchers in universities to be provided with opportunities to train and gain knowledge on software that will assist them in presenting their data and analyse it with ease. This would allow them to participate in knowledge production space through research. We also argue that research proposal writing skills are crucial to emerging researchers in emerging universities, as this will assist in them gaining access to research funds. Training on methodologies for emerging researcher in emerging universities will go a long way in building the capacity of emerging researcher and allow them to enter into either national or international research collaboration spaces.

CONCLUSION

It was found that, from the perspective of the participants, faculty research productivity was more influenced by institutional factors (work load, staff support, resource provisions), rather than by individual factors (self-efficacy, motivation, basic and advanced research skills), or ascriptive factors (gender, age, personality, etc.)

RECOMMENDATIONS

From the foregoing conclusion, much responsibility devolves on the universities as institutions to develop sound institutional practices supportive of research productivity. There is also need for academic staff to look inward for reasons accounting for low research productivity and not to scape goat the institutions perennially. That some academics do well in the same research support constrained environments speak to the efficacy of individual factors in determining one's research productivity.

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