



Short learning programme provisioning in nursing: An evaluative case study

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ABSTRACT

In support of lifelong learning and redressing past inequalities the provision of short learning programmes and courses was encouraged in South African Higher Education. A school of nursing responded by establishing an academy wherein a range of these programmes was developed and presented. In this article the effectiveness of the initiative is evaluated in comparison to the national purposes for short learning programmes envisioned by the Council on Higher Education. These are to: enable access to higher education; support continuing professional development and generate third stream income for higher education institutions. A single evaluative case study design was employed by use of in-depth individual interviews with academy management team members, as well as a document analysis. The findings indicated that the academy, having navigated complexity, succeeded to a large extent in achieving the purposes. The continuing professional development needs of a wide range of health professionals in different settings were addressed. Regrettably, professional nurses cannot yet earn continuing professional development points in South Africa. Enabling of access to higher education is context bound. Subcategory nurses, for example, are not yet accommodated and applicants for formal academic programmes still need to comply with institutional requirements. A steady third stream income is currently generated in support of scholarship development at the school. Considering that the academy originally aimed “to enable nurses to adapt to the first and third world realities in South African healthcare,” it is advisable that this aspect be specifically explored.

1. Introduction

Short learning programme (SLP) provisioning is considered to be one of the most dynamic features of the South African education and training system. In response to directives within the higher education system, as well as the changing governmental funding policies, institutions of higher education have increasingly been presenting SLPs (Brits & Joubert, 2014; Ntshoe & de Villiers, 2013). These programmes are directed at meeting specific work based needs and present learning opportunities to the broader population that are attainable in terms of cost, time, energy and resources [The South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA), 2004]. In making learning more accessible for all, the provision of short courses and programmes within South African higher education makes an important contribution towards lifelong learning and rectifying past inequalities (CHE, 2008).

SLPs meet a variety of societal needs by serving social, economic and educational purposes. Depending on the scope of the particular programmes, those participating could gain access to higher education, develop their skills, engage in continuing professional development (CPD) or merely gain personal fulfilment from their learning. SLPs consequently contribute towards social development and citizenship,

because they:

- “...enable access to higher education to those who were denied access and/or who may not meet the formal entry requirements for higher education”;
- “...meet the needs of workers and professionals, including civil society more generally, to continually upgrade their skills and knowledge”;
- “...generate third stream income for higher education institutions in support of their teaching, research and community service mandate” (CHE, 2008, p. 12).

According to the South African Council on Higher Education these are also the purposes envisioned for SLP provisioning within the context of the higher education system worldwide (CHE, 2008). In pursuit of these worthy purposes, South African institutions for higher education were encouraged to incorporate SLPs within their present teaching and learning structures. Concurrently, the rapid advances in health and nursing sciences, demanded the development of SLPs for CPD.

The South African Nursing Council (SANC) started developing a CPD System in 2013 to ensure that nurse practitioners in South Africa

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remain competent in their respective areas of practice (SANC, 2018). It was proposed that the renewal of the Annual Practice Certificate be linked to the acquisition of a minimum of 15 CPD points per year. Other nursing governing bodies in Africa, such as the Nursing Councils of Kenya and Lesotho also link CPD points to licensure (Moetsana-Poka, Lebaka & McCarthy, 2014; NCK, 2012). Although there has been significant progress in the formalisation of CPD systems in sub-Saharan Africa in the past decade, however, there is limited evidence on their impact due to a lack of evaluation and research on CPD implementation (Feldacker et al., 2017).

The directives by governing bodies and the health sector inspired a South African school of nursing to reconsider their teaching and learning structures. A decision was made to establish an academy wherein a range of SLPs could be developed and presented. A proposal was submitted to Atlantic Philanthropies, a private foundation, via University-based Nursing Education South Africa (UNEDSA) to generate seed money for the initiative. The generous funding granted capacitated the development of the academy for a period of four years (1 April 2009 – 31 March 2013). Launching this initiative required a complex process of inquiry, including national benchmarking; consultation within and outside the university structures, as well as the completion of a situational analysis to identify the regional work based needs. A list of potential SLPs was compiled, for which a team of experts was contracted for purposes of development and presentation.

A conservative approach was taken by starting with two SLPs in 2010 [HIV and AIDS Care; Integrated Management of Childhood Illness (IMCI)], which were presented on site using the available human and physical resources. The number of SLPs gradually increased to 31 by 2017 and the variety of programmes, as well as target groups evolved accordingly. It was considered timely, also in light of the lack of evaluation and research on CPD implementation in Africa, to engage in research on the initiative. The development and the effectiveness of the academy were the focus of study. This article relates to the latter, where the effectiveness of the initiative is evaluated in comparison to the purposes for SLPs envisioned by the Council on Higher Education (CHE, 2008; Rule & John, 2011).

2. Purpose and research questions

The purpose of this study is therefore to evaluate the effectiveness of the academy for continuing nursing education at a school of nursing in achieving the purposes envisioned for SLPs, that is, to:

- enable access to higher education;
- support CPD and
- generate third stream income for higher education institutions (CHE, 2008).

An evaluative case study design was employed to ultimately describe the value of this initiative in this regard (Rule & John, 2011). The main research question asked was: “How effective has the academy for continuing nursing education at a school of nursing been in achieving the purposes envisioned for SLPs?”

3. Clarification and operationalising of concepts

The *Academy for continuing nursing education* is an entity for CPD and research capacity development that serves health professionals (SoN, 2008, 2013b). The academy functions as a business that operates parallel to the school of nursing and is administered within the university structures.

Continuing professional development (CPD) is a means by which professional competence is continually maintained and enhanced. Within the context of healthcare the purpose of CPD is for health professionals to maintain, update and acquire new “levels of knowledge,

skills and ethical attitudes that will be of measurable benefit in professional practice and to enhance and promote professional integrity” [Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA), 2009, p. 5]. The HPCSA states that healthcare practitioners have a responsibility to continually update their professional competence for the end benefit of the patient or client (HPCSA, 2017).

Health Professionals, within the context of this study, are professionals practicing in terms of the South African *Health Professions Act 56 of 1974* and are registered with a professional board, for example medical practitioners, occupational therapists or physiotherapists.

Lifelong learning or learning for life, refers to voluntary self-motivated learning from daily interaction with others that enhances inclusion, active citizenship, as well as personal, professional and organisational or community development (Zuber-Skerritt & Teare, 2013; Zuber-Skerritt, Wood & Louw, 2015). The concept supports the notion that individuals should have opportunities for self-improvement at any stage of their lives (SAQA, 2004). Notwithstanding the fact that lifelong learning may be considered to be informal in nature, it “is goal-directed, intentional, strategic, systematic, reflective, collaborative, and action oriented” (Zuber-Skerritt, et al., 2015, p. 7).

The concepts “*short learning programmes*” and “*short courses*” are often used interchangeably to describe courses that are shorter than those leading to formal qualifications. The SAQA criteria and Guidelines for Short Courses and Skills Programmes document distinguishes a short learning programme (SLP) to be an overarching term that includes short courses (SAQA, 2004). Furthermore, SLPs can be either credit-bearing or non-credit-bearing. The completion of a credit-bearing SLP can enable someone to achieve credit towards a particular unit standard or part of a qualification, whilst non-credit bearing SLP do not have this advantage. Non-credit-bearing SLPs could, however, include formal assessment resulting in statements of applied competence (CHE, 2008).

Third stream income, within the context of higher education, refers to “all income derived from sources other than public subsidies and student fees for tuition or accommodation” (Regal, 2013). The general decline in government allocations has compelled institutions of higher education to expand their funding base through philanthropic funding and academic entrepreneurialism (Ntshoe & de Villiers, 2013). These entrepreneurial activities most often involve funding partnerships between the university and the private sector (Ntshoe & de Villiers, 2013).

4. Methodology

The research conveyed in this article formed part of a larger study that sought to explore, describe and evaluate the development and effectiveness of an academy for continuing nursing education at a school of nursing. The overarching purpose dictated a qualitative approach with the employment of an explorative, descriptive and evaluative design. The second phase of the research involved an exploration and description of the key factors that contributed towards the effective establishment of the academy. In this article the first phase of the research is conveyed where the value of the academy was evaluated by means of a single, evaluative case design (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011; Rule & John, 2011). More specifically, the effectiveness of the academy in achieving the Council on Higher Education purposes envisioned for SLPs were evaluated (Rule & John, 2011).

Data were collected through in-depth individual interviews with the three academy management team members, as well as a document analysis of official documents attached to the establishment of the academy. The researchers consequently made use of comprehensive sampling by including all possible data sources (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). The data sources comprised three interviewees; the project funding proposal; four annual reports (2010–2013); the overall project report and the institutional policy on SLP provisioning.

The following questions were posed to the research participants:

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