

CHAPTER ONE

Situating and Positioning NATHEP in the Higher Education Context

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Introduction

The New Academics Transitioning into Higher Education Project, known as NATHEP, was a national collaborative project in Higher Education (HE) in South Africa, focused on the professional development of academic staff developers involved in the induction programmes of new academics transitioning into HE. This chapter sets out the aims and goals of the project and provides a rationale and justification for NATHEP's purpose and necessity in the current context. The importance of academic staff development/professional development was given significant emphasis in the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET)'s framework (2018), which recognises the need to increase and enhance the capacity of academics who teach, to shift the needle on student throughput. University Capacity Development Plan (UCDG) projects in the 2018–2020 cycle, of which NATHEP was part, were keenly focused on staff and student developmental activities, as well as on decolonisation of the curriculum.

Following the 2015–2016 student protests in South Africa and globally, the DHET used redress and responsiveness as two significant levers to respond to students' challenges, namely the inequalities, prejudices and structural disadvantages that continue to characterise South African society, our universities and our classrooms. For example, to address local, cultural and social absences in the curriculum as part of their UCDG, student development activities at one university focused on:

"... reducing alienation, empowering students to write, ensuring access to academic discursive practices; bridging the gap from high school into university, increasing throughput and success rates for students and closing achievement gaps; improving the completion rate, reducing the average time to completion of PhD students and psychosocial support" (UCDG, 2017).

The importance of induction is critical to the DHET's transformation plan (DHET, 2017) to provide teaching, research and holistic professional development opportunities for all academics from recruitment to retirement. While this was a DHET funded and initiated project, the mandate and responsibility for addressing national needs and goals lie not only with the DHET but with institutions themselves, who articulate these aspirations in their mission and vision statements, as well as through their curricula, pedagogy and assessment practices within each of the institutional contexts. Accordingly, staff development activities at some universities focused on:

"... increasing capacity of both researchers and teachers, to accelerate the pipeline of future academics through holistic professional development opportunities, and by investing in growing the pipeline of black, women academics" (UCDG, 2017).

Given the unequally resourced HE landscape, there is a range of existing induction practices at several universities. Many of these belong to well-resourced and historically advantaged universities. There are an equal number of institutions where induction as professional development is non-existent or offered in a very ad hoc manner. NATHEP set out to try to 'level the playing fields' by engaging academic development (AD) practitioners responsible for academic induction at universities where formal induction practices are non-existent by initiating and establishing induction practices at institutions that needed it the most. Acknowledging that institutions need support (funding and human capital), NATHEP asserts that it would be erroneous to believe that the onus should be placed on academics to remedy a challenged system. The responsibility must be borne by all components of the university.

Why this project?

New academics form a critical target group in South Africa as many established academics are retiring (HESA, 2011) and the window for succession planning and longevity is closing. Many retirees leave the institution with much sought-after knowledge about curriculum and teaching, as well as organisational and methodological memory. Recruiting and retaining quality teachers is an imperative (Trowler & Knight, 2000; DHET, 2018), a call echoed in local as well as international contexts, for example in the Dearing Report (Gosling & Hannan, 2007). The impending exodus, however, also presents a unique opportunity. There is space now to recreate and reshape the course of teaching and learning by using what has emerged in the context over the last 10 years to define practices in new ways. Inclusive, collaborative and socially just education is paramount and should be the guiding principle in all scholarly activities, including professional development. For NATHEP, this was an opportunity to review the uncritical reproduction of traditional induction practices against current challenges in the sector and society at large. For teaching to be responsive and relevant (Kotluk et al., 2018), teachers need to bridge the gap between the social and the epistemic domains. Students are more aware now of the blurred boundaries between the affordances (or lack thereof) of their social contexts and how these impinge on their academic success (Thomas, 2014). All teachers, not just new academics, need to be able to mediate these domains in how they curate content and material and how they make their teaching relevant for the students they teach.

Induction practices at many universities are viewed in different ways based on who

is convening the induction programme. From an operational and human resources (HR) perspective, for example, induction is viewed against proficiency and efficiency drivers and the ability to hit the ground running. In HR-driven induction, there is very little emphasis on pedagogy, curriculum or assessment, which are important for new academics to understand. While “productivity, participation and quality” (White et al., 2010, p.181) are important, these are not useful to new academics in understanding the teaching function of their academic role. Among our participating universities in NATHEP, it became evident that many induction programmes were still convened under the auspices of human resources, which although useful, does not prepare the academic for the HE contemporary classroom.

It is highly possible that underlying these practices are assumptions about who can teach (Gravett & Petersen, 2002) and who gets to teach. Further assumptions that formal training programmes on their own will make better university teachers (Coffey & Gibbs, 2000) perpetuate the belief that anyone can teach, even without formal qualifications. To “hunt” these assumptions (Brookfield, 1995), universities are becoming more cognisant of the importance of professional and staff development capacity-building interventions (Quinn & Vorster, 2012; Behari-Leak, 2017), to promote student success. This thread is foregrounded in this book as an important indicator of how we can improve throughput and success rates of students from enrolment to graduation.

From the perspective of NATHEP, to do this effectively, academics learning to teach in HE need more than peripheral teaching support. They need to be exposed to a range of cognitive, affective, epistemological and ontological theories, stances, frameworks and positions that challenge and develop who they are and who they need to be in the current context. In order for academics to be effective change agents in teaching and learning, they must have changed themselves, from states of ignorance and disbelief to a space of understanding the challenges of contemporary HE.

When professional development involves more than learning new teaching tips, tricks and techniques but includes an internal transformation that changes limiting worldviews and conservative practices, it embraces critical professional development (CPD) (Kohli et al., 2015). CPD is an emerging form of social justice professional development that prepares educators to develop their critical consciousness, teach with critical pedagogy and challenge inequity (Kohli et al., 2015). In other words, it is an approach to shaping critical agents in the teaching and learning space (Postma, 2015). This approach aims to deepen academics’ understanding of the conditioning structures and culture that influence classroom practices (Behari-Leak, 2017). While massification, neoliberal policies, austerity and other questions seem to occupy a huge space in global higher education debates

(Bertelsen, 2004), the urgency of the contextual teaching and learning challenges at South Africa's universities, compounded by a complex past, makes South African higher education a highly contested space; one that needs to be engaged with in a critical way. "The transformation taking place in the South African university system is about addressing inequality and improving quality and academics as teachers are required to be change agents within this process" (DHET, 2018).

Why now?

In NATHEP, we take the 1994 watershed moment in South African history as a departure point for the changes that led to a new HE sector to address/redress the inequalities of the past. While many gains have been made since the new dispensation in South Africa (DHET, 1997) to transform HE, there are still legacy gaps to be addressed. Given the historical imbalances in the sector, there is a need for mechanisms to level the playing fields by addressing transformational imperatives related to equity, quality and success in the university system.

The DHET recognised this need by ensuring that "apartheid era student and staff participation and success patterns are disrupted and transformed" (DHET, 2017). To respond to the challenge of a siloed HE system, fragmented by a plethora of activities which vary significantly between universities based on resources, improved coordination was needed at institutional, regional and national levels. There was thus an urgent need to provide a development resource to enable, for example, the development of programmes that are of strategic importance and are national priorities.

In addition to redressing the ills of a segregated HE system under apartheid, institutional differentiation not only affects material resources but influences cultural ethos as well. In some contexts, institutional culture is debilitating, especially where it is authoritarian, managerialist and corporate, and where academics and students "feel marginalised, silenced or threatened by the demands for change or unable to respond to the evolving environment" (DHET, 2017). Worse still if the culture at the university is driven by a compliance ethos, with little or no critical thought or engagement (Boughey & McKenna, 2021). The overarching danger is that no matter how many initiatives are in place, and how much money is thrown at the problem, if the interventions are not critical and change-oriented, there will be a reproduction of the status quo with minimum impact on systemic issues in the sector. The sector has not only been challenged by systemic issues but current challenges that are often out of its control. The HE sector today into which new academics are inducted is beset with many challenges, such as student protests and calls for decolonised education. A study on new academics' transition found that despite support for transformation in the higher education sector, new academics entering higher education were especially vulnerable to

reproducing the status quo if sensitisation to issues of critical agency and social justice within teaching in postcolonial contexts were not an explicit part of their professional induction (Behari-Leak, 2017). The sustainable development goals (SDGs) have become important to raise awareness about climate change through the curriculum. More recently, the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2021) which brought the entire world to a standstill, presented unique challenges as HE pivoted to online provision to mediate the challenges of physical distancing. Even more recent is the emergence of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Chat Generative Pre-Trained Transformer (CHATGPT), which are wreaking havoc with university assessments and plagiarism policies.

NATHEP's aims and aspirations

To build staff development capacity in the sector to address the challenges discussed above, NATHEP engaged with 10 universities across the country to conceptualise and contextualise well-theorised induction programmes for new academics to address their university's needs, at the same time shaping the national landscape for induction practices. The overarching aspiration of NATHEP was therefore to develop an approach and orientation to induction practices for new academics (NA) in HE and to develop principles and practices for contextualised induction programmes in the sector. Newcomers need support in taking up positions as future teachers, researchers and leaders (Åkerlind, 2003). To achieve this, professional development activities targeting new academics can no longer be generic (Archer, 2008) but need to be relevant to the extent that they consider the university context as well as the global context into which newcomers are entering (Sutherland, 2019). Professional development programmes need to demonstrate a concern with the challenges of teaching and learning in a complex context (Leibowitz, et al., 2016). The NATHEP methodology was designed with this aspect in mind, to enable project participants (staff developers) to engage with institutional induction in mindful, reflective, reflexive and critical ways (Behari-Leak, 2017).

The overarching aim of NATHEP was to develop a relevant and well-theorised approach and an orientation to induction practices, without compromising the specificities of contextual constraints that many higher education institutions (HEIs) face. The plan was also geared to address historical and systemic challenges, as well as to create conditions for a new cadre of academics to emerge to respond to the pressing challenges of the current institutional and national contexts, the retiring professoriate notwithstanding. By equipping new academics to engage in critically reflexive and well-theorised teaching practice, enabling them to create the pedagogic conditions needed to enable students from across the cultural divide to thrive, staff developers on NATHEP would also be able to exercise their agency in meaningful ways.

This project also sought to better understand how induction practices were being conceptualised and delivered across the sector and where gaps existed for development and strengthening to achieve the transformation goals of the sector, articulated in the Education White Paper 3 of 1997. Given the current HE context, it is perhaps more important now than it has ever been, to deeply theorise how new teachers are trained for the university classroom; how curricula, pedagogy and assessment are conceptualised and actualised at different institutional sites; and what this means for student success. It is incumbent on institutions to provide professional development offerings that respond to the demands of the HE context. This is in keeping with the UCDP goals to seek development interventions that enable high levels of success for undergraduate and postgraduate students, which supports one of the overarching purposes of the UCDP, namely, to provide capacity development opportunities for professionals that manage specific programmes. Through its rationale, contextual underpinnings, theoretical spine and pedagogical and methodological approaches, NATHEP sought to develop principles for a range of induction approaches, relative to different contexts, through a collaborative, consultative and inclusive process. It shines the torch on the need for well-theorised, scholarly and critical approaches to academic staff development in the national sector. By engaging professional developers in ways that build their confidence in creating and convening successful induction programmes at their institutions, NATHEP aimed to address historical and systemic challenges, as well as to create a new cadre of academics who can respond to the pressing challenges of the present but also an unknown future.

NATHEP's focal areas

NATHEP was focused on developing a national (not nationalised) orientation and approach to contextualised induction practices and principles across the sector. It stemmed from a need to induct new academics in more considered ways (Quinn, 2012) into the sector so that they understand their roles as university teachers and the importance of teaching and learning as critical levers for student success and throughput. In addition to working from the premise that the positive exercise of agency is a marked feature of new participants in HE despite contextual challenges (Leibowitz, et.al., 2016), NATHEP focused on how structural and cultural contexts might act as a trigger or dampener for academic staff developers' agency. Importantly, we needed to know the extent to which contexts would have immediate implications for ways in which professional and academic development programmes are conceptualised and implemented. It was hoped that with an alternative theorisation and creation of conducive conditions for the uptake of critical agency, in both disciplinary and departmental programmes, staff developers would create emergent induction programmes for new academics that are contextualised, sensitised, responsive and informed.

NATHEP's key questions

- 🦁 How are university induction practices conceptualised and theorised by professional development units and staff developers in the current HE context with new academics' transitions and student success in mind?
- 🦁 What insights, ideas, beliefs, values, ideologies and theories about professional development broadly, and about the professionalisation of new academics specifically, are useful in the South African higher education context today?
- 🦁 What are the implications for professional and academic staff development and departmental programmes in creating and sustaining conducive conditions for new academics' success at the university and for their students' success?

NATHEP's theory of change

As with any process of change, one cannot proceed until one takes stock of what has come before (structural and cultural conditioning) and how this sets the scene for agents to bring about change or not. This is the starting point for change, i.e. to provide a rationale and need for the change and to create the conditions for it to happen. To explain the process of change, we draw again on Archer's Social Realism which provides a "user-friendly" methodological toolkit for analysing and understanding change in various phases and stages of the NATHEP in its three-year cycle, namely the Morphogenesis Framework (discussed in Chapter 3).

NATHEP's theory of change is to empower staff developers and new academics to be change agents themselves, creating and designing teaching and learning opportunities that transcend the structural and cultural limitations they face at their institutions (Archer, 2000). Based on experiences of working as professional developers in our context, the SC held the view that participants learn meaningfully in social groups or communities of practice, where ideas and perspectives are shared and exchanged. When academics are able to engage with their own identities, their institutional and professional identities as well as their disciplinary identities in meaningful ways, there is scope for their discourses and practices to be deepened, expanded and better theorised, leading to more relevant responses to pedagogic and research challenges (De Rome & Boud, 1984). Also, a plurality of epistemologies and pedagogies is possible when you have a diverse group of educators responding to common challenges. This interdisciplinary way of working is critical in the current university, where more and more academics are being asked to connect and link with knowledge that sits outside our specific disciplines and training. In a context where new academics have increased teaching workloads and research demands, as well as challenges of transformation and decolonisation of curricula, pedagogy and assessment, we need to provide strategies for thinking

differently and creatively about how academics enable their students to succeed (Clegg & Stevenson, 2013).

While success is desired at all levels, it cannot be achieved at all costs. For a long time, the discourse of “fixing the student” (Ramos et al., 2020) has pervaded academics’ approach to students’ learning difficulties. NATHEP was mindful that the project did not perpetuate this belief in terms of fixing the university teacher. From a critical realist view (Bhaskar, 1995) there is no direct causal link between teaching and learning. This is dependent on structural and cultural contexts and emerges through choices and actions, i.e. through their agency (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). It is therefore highly contextualised and cannot be used as a foolproof recipe to fix anyone (Ecclestone & Hayes, 2009). NATHEP’s approach to this dilemma was to create the conditions with the relevant input, for staff developers on the project to make meaningful choices against the challenges of their specific contexts. While we offered a smorgasbord of approaches and tools, we were not prescriptive in how these were taken up or refuted. Our approach to staff development was based on emergence (Elder-Vass, 2010).

NATHEP’s approach to capacity building

NATHEP’s methodology was based on targeted support through a cascading model of capacity building and enhancement (Hayes, 2014). Known well in HR practice as the “train-the-trainer” model of staff development, the cascade model (discussed in detail in Chapter 4) was reframed by NATHEP by muting “training” and amplifying the recognition of capacity building for teaching. This involves intense academic and affective labour (Shechtman et al., 2004) as staff developers have to work deeply at the ontological, epistemic, methodological and axiological levels to bring about changes, first in themselves and then in others. The NATHEP target audience/participants were staff developers themselves, who through their own transformation in the project, were able to effect change in their university contexts through their new induction practices.

The “cascading model” of staff development was designed to have a ripple effect on teaching and learning practices in a critical and responsive way in different contexts. While the unit of targeted benefit in NATHEP is the staff developer, the intended beneficiaries are the new academics entering HE, who in turn have a huge impact on students and their success at the university and in the sector. In using the cascading model of staff development, NATHEP brought together ASD practitioners at these universities responsible for academic induction, over a series of engagements to develop specific approaches to address the micro and macro needs identified earlier. NATHEP explored structural and cultural opportunities and constraints that inhibited or promoted the emergence of critically reflexive induction programmes to respond to new academics’ needs and to the needs

of students. Adopting a collaborative, consultative and inclusive approach, professional developers were supported to initiate and convene contextualised induction programmes at their institutions, aimed at supporting the teaching, research and professional development of newly recruited academics. Through this approach, NATHEP hoped to realise its aim to advocate for the emergence professional developers who are critical agents of change (Postma, 2015).

The NATHEP project team

NATHEP was led by an academic staff developer based at the University of Cape Town (UCT) in the role of project leader, under the auspices of Centre for Higher Education Development (CHED) at UCT, which provided location and infrastructural support for the national collaborative project.

Cognisant of the need for representation (Carolissen et. al., 2015), the project leader brought together a diverse group of experienced staff developers to form a SC (SC) to facilitate and implement the planned activities of the cross-institutional project. Each SC member brought a special nuance to the project based on their years of experience in leading professional development at their universities. Over the duration of the project, there were changes in the NATHEP project team based on extenuating circumstances. Five SC members based at UCT, the University of Witwatersrand (WITS), Durban University of Technology (DUT), Nelson Mandela University (NMU) and the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT) respectively, an administrator and a research assistant were committed till the end of the project in the face-to-face components as well as the research project. The success of NATHEP is due in no small part to the commitment of the administrator, researcher and SC who brought their passion, vision, knowledge and experience to this project to support the task of capacitating other staff developers to transform induction processes in the HE sector. The project also drew on guest speakers and experts in the field to contribute to its work and engagements.

NATHEP university partners

Given the wide range of existing, even disparate induction practices at several universities, this project sought to identify universities where formal induction practices were nonexistent or in need of enhancement. Cognisant again of the need for demographic and institutional representation across an unequally resourced HE landscape, it was important that as a UCDP collaborative project, NATHEP invited 10 universities, each represented by two staff developers, on the basis of diversity and need. For the three-year cycle of the project, the following 10 universities signed an offer of acceptance with NATHEP so that there was joint understanding of responsibility and commitments:



Figure 2 Universities participating in NATHEP

- University of Venda
- University of Limpopo
- Tshwane University of Technology
- Mangosuthu University of Technology
- Nelson Mandela University
- Vaal University of Technology
- Sefako Makgatho University
- Walter Sisulu University
- University of Fort Hare
- University of Zululand

Each university identified two staff development representatives to attend all engagements and to share the workload for the university-based, project-related tasks for implementation of their induction programmes. This meant that there were 20 participants from the sector at each of the project engagements per year. While the target audience over the duration of the project is the group of twenty PDPs, the intended beneficiaries of this project, as mentioned already, are new academics, who will indirectly benefit from good induction programmes convened at their universities. The ultimate beneficiary is the student and shifting the needle on student success.

We remember and acknowledge the university partners we lost to the pandemic as well as staff developers unable to continue due to institutional demands on their

time. By the time the case studies were completed and submitted, 17 university participants were part of the closing phase of the project. These participants must be acknowledged for the meaningful work they did in transforming their induction practices for their universities. The evidence of this is captured in the institutional case studies, which bear out the rigorous engagement that took place in shaping and designing contextualised and relevant induction programmes.

NATHEP's life cycle

The project, planned around a three-year life cycle (2018–2020) as per the UCDG funding cycle, was initially launched in August 2018 as part of DHET's UCDG intervention to increase staff development capacity in the sector. It was scheduled to be completed in 2020 but had to be extended due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The NATHEP in-person/online facilitation component of the project therefore officially concluded in 2021. All planned activities regarding input for shaping the contextualised models of induction had been completed and participants had engaged thoroughly with theory, context and critical debates. All new university induction programmes had been trialled on site and each one received feedback from their stakeholders.

While most staff returned to work in 2022, it took time to regain the momentum of the project as the project team had been focused on catching up on their core institutional work. The project then entered a reflective, scholarly mode to harness the lessons learnt and identify areas for further development. In this phase (2022–2023), each university team was tasked to write up a contextualised and theorised case study, in preparation for the publication and launch of this book before the end of 2024. These case studies and reflections are presented in Chapters 5 to 11. Guidance and expert assistance were provided by a writing consultant, and group and individual consultations were provided. This helped to shape the case studies and prepare them for publication. Each SC member was assigned two universities with whom they worked closely on the case studies, as mentors. Their mentorship of colleagues and the case study process was invaluable to the success of the book project. In addition, NATHEP recruited the services of a research administrator to oversee the progress of the book. The SC plans to host a national colloquium and book launch in 2024. Additional dissemination mechanisms include international conference presentations and a special journal issue, with credit to the DHET for its support.

Conclusion

This chapter has provided a situational analysis for the location of the New Academics Transitioning into Higher Education Project (NATHEP) as a national collaborative project. Given the complexity and contested nature of the current higher education

landscape (UCDP, 2018), based largely on the historical imbalances as well as the current demands on the system, this chapter unpacked the numerous challenges new academics face as they embed themselves in disciplinary and institutional contexts. With systemic conditions not being conducive to critical agency and social justice, current induction practices for new academics are inadequate to the task of transformation in higher education (Behari-Leak, 2015), making new academics especially vulnerable (Behari-Leak, 2017). NATHEP thus makes a strong case for critical professional development as an imperative.
