

# CHAPTER FOURTEEN

UNIVERSITY OF ZULULAND



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## University of Zululand: A Reflective Account of Participation

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Noluthando Toni

### Introduction

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The University of Zululand (UNIZULU) is one of the universities that joined the New Academics Transitioning into Higher Education Project (NATHEP) from its inception in 2018. The institution's representation changed a couple of times due to various institutional circumstances. During the initial stages, the university was represented by two senior academic developers who were also curriculum specialists. In 2019 one of them left the employ of the university and the representation of the university was reduced to one. In the latter months of 2019, another participant who was a writing centre coordinator joined the project and UNIZULU representation was once again restored to two participants.

The senior academic developer (AD) who was on the programme longer, served as the anchor and worked very closely with the writing centre coordinator to ensure the university's full participation. In October 2020 the NATHEP community received the sad news of the senior AD's passing. This incident resulted in UNIZULU being represented by only one participant, the writing centre coordinator, who continued her participation until she also left the employ of the university on 7 December 2021. All three participants contributed in various ways in their attempts to advance the goals of the project and the induction programme at UNIZULU. The succeeding sections provide a synopsis of what they reported at various stages and periods of their participation. Their inputs focused on developments in the induction of new academics at UNIZULU and how their participation on NATHEP contributed to those developments. During the early stages of drafting the UNIZULU case study, the senior AD and the writing centre coordinator framed their case around "moving academics from the periphery to the centre of teaching and learning" at the university. The framing later became the title of the case study. The resignations and the passing of the senior AD led to the non-finalisation of the case study. The synopsis below draws on their previously submitted activities to explicate the work done during their NATHEP participation.

### Institutional context

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The participants described UNIZULU as the only institution that is located in the northern parts of KwaZulu-Natal within uMhlathuze municipality. It was established in 1960 as a university college and in 1970 it was granted university status. UNIZULU has two campuses: the main campus, which is located at the township of KwaDlangezwa, and an urban Richards Bay campus. Given the rurality of the area where the main campus is situated, most students who are admitted come from

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backgrounds of low socioeconomic status. The first-year experience survey shows that 72.06% of students enrolled in the institution are from rural schools in South Africa, with 94.50% being from KwaZulu-Natal (KZN).

### **Induction of new academics at UNIZULU**

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According to the submissions of the participants, UNIZULU inducts new academics from the day of appointment. This action is regarded as part of moving the new academics towards the centre of learning and teaching at UNIZULU. This is important because as new academics join the university, many are not familiar with the different activities that relate to teaching and learning, administrative issues, culture and structures of the university. The induction process orientates newly appointed academics into the entirety of the institution and is also meant to provide them with a glimpse of enablers and constraints within the institution.

It is important to note that the induction programme at the university went through various iterations that were influenced by numerous factors, including NATHEP. Some of the developments were intentional and designed to empower new academics to exercise their agency within the institution for improved learning and teaching. The participants facilitated these processes of change because, in my view, they drew from Trower and Knight's explication of induction programmes, as cited by van Vuuren, Herman and Adendoff (2022, p.77) as "professional practices designed to facilitate the entry of new recruits to an organisation and equip them to operate effectively within it". It is for this reason that they reconceptualised their programme around moving it from the periphery to the centre.

### **Induction stages**

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During participation in NATHEP, the induction of academic staff at UNIZULU was reported as taking place in four stages as determined by the institution's induction policy. According to data previously submitted by participants, prior to them joining NATHEP, the four induction stages were offered in silos and were done by different departments as follows:

- Stage 1:** Workplace induction – done by the head of department (HOD) or immediate line manager.
  - Stage 2:** Job induction – conducted by the Teaching and Learning Centre (TLC).
  - Stage 3:** Occupational health and safety – done by the health and safety representative together with the local area first aid office.
  - Stage 4:** University corporate induction – conducted by human resources (HR).
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Presenting the four stages in silos meant that some of the aspects were repeated which resulted in academic staff not attending some of the stages because of possible replication and repetition. Feedback received from academics as reported by the participants, after the delivery of the four stages, indicated that there was limited communication among personnel in charge of the different stages of the induction programme. Doing away with the silo approach meant the induction programme was moved away from a box-ticking exercise towards a meaningful academic development process as articulated in the NATHEP curriculum framework that is referred to in the latter parts of this chapter and other chapters of this book.

The participants, as academic developers, were part of stage two i.e., induction by the teaching and learning centre. A brief description of stage two is given as a way of summarising what the participants submitted when they were part of the NATHEP.

### **Induction before the NATHEP programme**

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Stage 2 was conducted twice a year. The first cycle was held at the beginning of the first semester and the second one was facilitated at the beginning of the second semester. On both occasions the duration of the programme was three days. The induction programme was facilitated based on commonsense knowledge and practices that an academic should be made aware of. The programme paid less attention to foundational values, knowledge/s and skills that the new academics needed to be adequately inducted to the ethos of the university. The focus was primarily on introducing academics to the fundamentals of teaching and learning and assessment based on the outcomes-based learning approach. The delivery of the programme was mostly in a lecture or presentation mode, with limited participation from inductees.

Aspects that were covered during the three-day induction programme were, among others, understanding the higher education context, fundamentals of teaching-and-learning and assessment within an outcomes-based education (OBE), the link between teaching, research, and community engagement, curriculum design and quality assurance, portfolio development and teaching with technology. The new academics were also given essential UNIZULU documentation that consisted of relevant policies including the Strategic Plan and the Institutional Operating Plan. This was done to give them knowledge related to the legislation guiding their professional practice. Student development and support information was also shared.

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## Induction during NATHEP

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The four-stage format was maintained but the stages were done jointly so as not to repeat similar aspects. The four stages were kept to illustrate to new academics how the different sections of the university assist in doing their work. The same topics and stakeholders (HR, research office, community engagement office, etc.) remained as an integral part of the programme. The key difference was that the induction before NATHEP had no theoretical underpinning. NATHEP participation led to the integration of Archer's (1996) realist social theory of structure, culture and agency and the reflexive aspect of the NATHEP CRITICAL Framework into the planning and delivery of the programme.

The theoretical framework assisted participants with improved ways to frame the induction programme to encourage discussion about enabling and constraining conditions to come up with ways to provide continued support, taking into consideration the new academics' experiences. UNIZULU participants firmly believed that NATHEP participation empowered them to design and deliver interactive sessions that were relevant to each individual that participated on the induction programme. In their submissions, they articulated their efforts in designing a programme that has elements of belonging, peer learning and holistic development as described by van Vuuren et al. (2022).

With the support from the office of the Deputy Vice Chancellor Teaching and Learning (DVC T&L) a review of the three-day biannual programme was conducted. It was agreed that the programme needed to be extended to six months with four days being the basic (normal programme that was done over three days). After the four days the new academics would be given evaluation forms and parts of the evaluation forms required identification of specific areas needed for enhancement of teaching practice.

This meant that the follow-up six months would focus on designing (and delivering) an induction that concentrates on individual needs. Academics appreciated the revised format, and they saw its relevance to their growth, better understanding of the context and improved teaching practice.

## Conclusion

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Dr Sithembiso Ngubane who ended up being the key role player was consistent in ensuring that feedback was given at the required times. He was very instrumental in ensuring that there was sufficient data to generate this brief reflective narrative. When Ms Mbalenhle Ngema ended up being the sole participant, she did her best to keep the project going even during the COVID-19 challenges. One of the main challenges that she mentioned was the difficulty of moving the programme

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onto online platforms. She reported a desperate need for an intensive training on effective online facilitation. This would have led to a pre-induction course where new academics would be familiarised with the institution's learning management system.

Both Dr Ngubane and Ms Ngema expressed appreciation of the NATHEP journey. They stated that:

*"At beginning and end of our participation in the NATHEP programme changed how we viewed our role and how we interpreted structural relationships within the institution. The changed way of thinking resulted in a model of induction that took into consideration all aspects of contexts of our new academics. The changed way of thinking resulted in a model of induction that was informed by reflection of our practices".*

A word of gratitude also goes to Dr Mziwakhe Sibugashe who never hesitated to avail himself to answer questions during bouts of doubts when needed to verify information. Dr Sibugashe also provided summaries and pieces of information that were not at Ms Ngema's disposal.

As the mentor for this team, I witnessed the participants' commitment in ensuring that their induction programme was underpinned by theory and that was reflected in the revised programme structure. The various iterations were not only guided by Archer's (1996) realist social theory, but the participants were also invested in applying the NATHEP's CRITicAL Framework. The participants were invested in designing and delivering a relevant, contextualised, responsive and theorised programme. They reflected on their inductees' feedback and used the inputs to construct a revised induction programme.

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