



PART ONE

Setting the Stage:
the “Parts and the People”
in NATHEP

CHAPTER ZERO

The significance of zero in NATHEP

Introduction

When one considers the structure of a book, it is common to start with Chapter One which provides the introduction, background and context for the subject matter. This first chapter, however, does not provide any background or responses as to the why, when, who and how questions that led to the origin and content in the first place. This input is often bracketed off from the main content.

This book intentionally starts with Chapter Zero, to reinstate the significance of the concept of zero, often thought of as “nothing” but is the real beginning, the embryo from which great things are birthed. In paying homage to the concept of zero as “something”, I also included a Chapter Zero, in my doctoral dissertation, to acknowledge my process of coming into being as a doctoral candidate and scholar who challenged the notion of nothingness, and asserted that it is from “zero-ness” that something can be developed, shaped and nurtured into substance and form.

Zero is important across various fields, including mathematics, science, philosophy, and culture. Zero plays a crucial role as a placeholder in the decimal number system and is the identity element for addition in arithmetic. In computer science, zero is one of the two binary digits (0 and 1) used to encode data. It is critical in defining negative numbers, fractions, and limits in calculus. In economics and finance, a “zero-sum game” refers to the idea of balance or neutrality where opposing forces or ideas cancel each other out. The concept of zero is also used in cosmology to describe the lowest possible energy state of a quantum system. Zero as a symbol of “emptiness” is a positive concept in Buddhism and Taoism, to emphasise the “emptiness” in existence and consciousness. In different cultural understandings, zero is a symbol of cycles and rebirth, marking the beginning and end, linked to the ideas of rebirth, infinity, or circular time.

The concept of zero holds profound significance in the creation of this book which emerged as a process of coming full circle as well as a potential for new beginnings. It demonstrates the intertwined nature and entanglements of a rhizomatic view of life and energy where all matter is connected in some way. Like holons, we are simultaneously a whole in and of itself, as well as a part of a larger whole. So is this book, which is an emergence of multiple forces, contributions and energies. Ubuntu in action!

Coming full circle

As an academic staff developer, I have been closely connected to the field of

practice of new academics for many years, so much so that I undertook a doctoral study entitled “Conditions enabling or constraining the exercise of agency among new academics in higher education, conducive to the social inclusion of students” (Behari-Leak, 2015). My interest in my doctoral study was born out of my involvement in 2011 as the convenor and facilitator of an academic staff development initiative known as the Teaching Development Programme (TDP) for new academics at a South African university of technology. My vantage point as TDP facilitator offered me profound insights into the challenges of new academics as they struggled to immerse and embed themselves in the educational ethos of the institution.

From field of practice to PhD

The TDP became the basis of enquiry for my doctoral study which focused on the exercise of agency among new academics, conducive to the social inclusion of students. The unit of analysis was the new academic, whose narratives were analysed through six in-depth case studies. Using Roy Bhaskar’s critical realism and Margaret Archer’s social realist theory, I explored how new academics transitioned from varied entry points into higher education while they negotiated their identity and agency in their contextual settings at an institutional, faculty and departmental level. My study showed that despite difficult contextual influences, the positive exercise of agency is a marked feature of new academics whose actions are driven through their own concerns, commitments and projects in higher education. In addition, my study revealed that current induction practices for the transition of new academics into HE, were inadequate to the task of transformation because systemic conditions, conducive to critical agency and social justice, were not enabling. This finding had immediate implications for academic staff development programmes at disciplinary and departmental levels, pointing to how staff developers could approach the professionalisation of new academics through more conscientised and contextualised practices.

From PhD to institutional practice

My doctoral dissertation has been instrumental in shaping my staff development work at many levels, locally and globally. I have drawn on theory and insights to deepen my understanding of the university as a structural and cultural entity, influenced and changed by choices agents make. Based on my PhD study, I was able to successfully re-design and implement an existing professional development programme for new academics known as the New Academic Practitioners’ Programme (NAPP) at the University of Cape Town (UCT). When I took over convenorship of NAPP in 2015, I infused the induction programme with a theorised and contextualised layering to create conditions for newcomers to exercise their agency in ways that respond to the challenges and opportunities in a complex higher education context.

From institutional to regional practice

To extend this intervention beyond my university, I, together with my staff development counterparts in the four Western Cape universities, convened a regional colloquium in 2017 to bring together five new academics from each university to share scholarly ideas and strategies on how they were navigating their contexts and mediating their challenges. This led to an annual event known as New Academics' Transitions into Higher Education Regional Colloquium (NATRC). Based on the success of both NAPP and NATRC, and the evident need for such an intervention, I submitted a proposal for funds for a regional professional development programme targeted at new academics in the Western Cape region. This programme aimed to provide a holistic and enabling orientation for new academics to strengthen their teaching, learning, assessment and technology practices for the postcolonial higher education classroom.

From regional to national practice

The Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) invited me to apply to lead a national collaborative project on new academics' transitions into higher education (HE), to target the enhancement of academics as university teachers through a capacity building funding intervention, the University Capacity Development Plan (UCDG). Leaning into my knowledge, experience, and research undertaken in this area, I submitted the national collaborative grant application proposal, highlighting the implications of my doctoral study (Behari-Leak, 2015), namely that if the concerns, commitments and projects with which new academics enter HE are harnessed optimally at the outset of their academic journeys, new academics would most likely maintain this commitment, continued support, to ensure their success as well as student success in university classrooms. This resonated well with DHET's agenda for transformation, and given the diversity across the project, the proposal also aligned well with the UCDP goal 4.1: "to provide a development resource to address transformation imperatives in the university system through the provision of quality research development and teaching development opportunities for all academics from recruitment to retirement" (DHET, 2017). In response to my UCDG application, the DHET included a caveat that suggested the new project should include universities that did not have staff development programmes aimed at induction, as well as those universities in dire need of enhancing existing ones.

And so...NATHEP was born

The proposal was accepted, and the New Academics Transitioning into Higher Education Project (NATHEP) was born. I reached out to colleagues to invite them to join the steering committee (SC) of NATHEP. My selection of SC members was

based on colleagues' track record of successful staff development initiatives at their own universities as well as their role in the national arena of teaching and learning and professional development.

As soon as the SC was confirmed, the NATHEP launched in August 2018 with two academic staff developers (project participants) each from 10 universities nationally. Through NATHEP, project participants were supported to initiate and convene well-theorised and conceptualised induction programmes in their institutional contexts to address historical and systemic challenges and to contribute to the transformation of higher education. A further aim of this project was to see if academic staff developers would be driven by corresponding but different concerns and commitments. Through the intervention provided by NATHEP, each university team created its own contextualised and customised new academic induction programme, where this was nonexistent or needed enhancement. The pandemic years in 2020–2021 were difficult for the project as we lost momentum and time. With the willingness of the SC and participants, we were able to switch to online meetings and workshops to ensure NATHEP moved at a steady (even though slow) pace, despite challenges. The biggest casualty during this time was the loss of a dear colleague and university participant, Dr Sithembiso Ngubane (UniZul) whom we honour and memorialise as we launch this book.

Heartfelt acknowledgement and gratitude

Although the SC endured many changes over the years, all members played a valuable role in bringing the project to life in the time they served on the committee. The following colleagues are acknowledged for their contributions to the project in its formative years: Jo-Anne Vorster, Mabokang Monnapula-Mapesela, Kwena Masha (four months) and Joe Makua; Amanda Hlengwa (who joined for a short period as nGAP researcher); Anthea Metcalfe who served as project manager in 2018; and Goitsione Mokou, Amandla Ngwendu and Xolelwa Ngantweni who served as research assistants for short periods in years one and two. We are also thankful to Hayley Gewer who supported the case study process as academic development writing consultant. The current SC, namely Noluthando Toni (NMU), Rieta Ganas (Wits), Nalini Chitanand (DUT) and Siya Sabata (CPUT) are the longest standing academic members and the stalwarts of NATHEP. From the time they joined, they shared the vision of the project and believed in its tenets and principles. It is through their unique efforts as academic staff developers, their leadership, professionalism and expertise in the field as well as their support, commitment and dedication to transformation and decolonisation, that NATHEP achieved its outcomes as a meaningful contribution in the national HE landscape. Each colleague also served as a mentor to the university case study teams and worked tirelessly to support and guide them through the book project. Together we built a healthy container for the project to grow and succeed.



Figure 1 NATHEP Steering Committee

The work of the SC and participants would not have thrived without the support of Ms Avrill Dawson (administrative officer in CHED, UCT), who became the backbone for the administrative, operational and logistical management of the project. Avrill's disposition and generosity of spirit endeared her to everyone in the project as she became the go-to person when challenges arose. Avrill's dedication and commitment contributed to the success of NATHEP in myriad ways. Avrill's expanded repertoire through working on this national platform makes her a good role model, demonstrating possibilities and achievements if we work in the same direction towards the realisation of a common goal.

We were later supported by Zinhle Mthombeni (research administrator in CHED, UCT), who joined the project in 2023 at an appropriate and critical time, to support the overall book project and the case studies specifically. Zinhle's keen eye and professional gaze has added much value to various iterations of the book. She has worked diligently to support the various stages and phases of the compilation process, and she is commended and appreciated for her scholarly approach to her work. Ms Deidre Schippers, (programme manager of academic staff development in CHED, UCT), joined the project in 2024 to assist with the book production process. Deidre has a penchant for the creative and innovative in her work and her dedication, willingness and generosity of time, effort and attention to detail are

acknowledged and valued highly.

NATHEP was intentional about blurring the boundaries between the proverbial academic and administrative divide and this proved to be a generative experience, creating new possibilities and practices for project teams. A critical outcome of coming together in this way meant that as we worked with the project and its transformative imperatives, we could not help being transformed ourselves. This change, known as double-loop morphogenesis (derived from double-loop learning), represents a deep, transformative form of learning and adaptation. While single-loop learning involves making adjustments within existing frameworks, double-loop morphogenesis drives change at the foundational level, impacting underlying structures, assumptions, and beliefs. It plays a critical role in systems that require both responsiveness and the capacity for profound change, whether in organisations, educational settings, or social systems. I asked the SC members to reflect on their transformative journeys through NATHEP and it is evident from their meditations below that NATHEP has had a profound influence and impact on each of us, in similar, yet different ways. Each piece attests to the possibilities and imaginaries that can be realised if projects come together with the right people who have the right intention, right action and right purpose.



Siya Sabata

Teaching and Learning Specialist: Academic Planning Unit, University of the Western Cape

My participation in NATHEP broadened my understanding of the challenges facing higher education in South Africa. While the focus was the induction of new academics into HE, the scope of the project challenged the team to engage not only with the complexities of what it means to be an academic in a historically racialised higher education, but also to understand how new academics continue to navigate the “afterlife” of this racial order in the post-apartheid era. NATHEP created a conducive platform for the SC to stretch imaginations in an attempt to co-construct theoretical tools which guided enactment of induction programmes across all participating universities.

Through this process of collective struggle, deep study and critique, we became the NATHEP family driven by desire to strive towards just and equitable higher education and society. This family grew from strength to strength and became an affirming, caring and most importantly, an intellectually stimulating space that sharpened my academic gaze. These NATHEP family bonds and commitment towards struggle for justice made it relatively easy for the SC to impart these values to the participants. Our workshops and reflective sessions with participants emboldened the NATHEP

vision and enforced camaraderie to the entire team. We benefitted enormously from interactions with participants and the different university contexts opened our eyes to varied, complex challenges facing universities in South Africa.

Siya Sabata



Dr Nolutando Toni

**Director of Teaching Development in the Learning and Teaching Collaborative for Success (LT Collab) Division
Nelson Mandela University**

I joined NATHEP in May 2018. Over the years, my participation in the project assisted me to identify my professional gaps and blind spots in providing academic leadership to my colleagues and peers. As I reflect on my journey, I am mindful of the influence of fellow SC members as well as the academic developers I have interacted with for the duration of the project. Prof Kasturi Behari-Leak, the visionary behind the project emphasised the importance of theorised academic programmes. She provided guidance on the theory of change and used critical realism not just as a lens but as a firm foundation for the (re)conceptualisation of the academic induction programmes. This (NATHEP participation) to me was a rewarding action research experience. The biggest lesson for me was the importance of a clear philosophical foundation for any programme of action in academic development.

I realised that as much as I always claimed to know this as an academic, my understanding was at a “mechanical” level where I was applying steps and processes of postgraduate learning. NATHEP amplified the benefits of going beyond “common sense” and digging deeper to get to a stage of being scholarly, critical and contextual in one’s approach. The notion of not providing useful tips and process for academic induction and any teaching enhancement programme was re-enforced. NATHEP’s CRITical framework proved useful not just for our academic induction, I extended elements thereof to my leadership approach. I have come to appreciate the value of authenticity and the legitimacy of who I am, what I have been through (my lived experiences) and what I bring to the learning and teaching environment. I have come to realise the need to be constantly alert to how academics respond to our interactions and how connections are formed, leveraged and used for forward action. I am grateful for the opportunity to be positively influenced by my peers and share my views and expertise with my fellow academic developers.

Nolutando Toni



Ms Rieta Ganas

Lecturer and educational developer, Centre for Learning, Teaching and Development (CLTD) University of the Witwatersrand

Being invited onto the SC was such a privilege, little did I know it would become the catalyst to my evolving professional identity. The impostor (only two years in the field) feeling at first coming to work amongst such AD stalwarts, but this turned into continuous confidence through genuine collaboration, engaging all ideas and distributive leadership by a project lead with a vision to enhance the agency of EVERY project participant. NATHEP under very thoughtful, caring and visionary leadership was a space for relational building, first challenging our relational and professional self, understanding our lens on life, aligning our inherent values and our cultural beings to our African soil and context.

Amidst all the disrupting, discomfoting, theorising, workshopping, researching professional learning work, was hours of rolling laughter, connections, care, love, action, camaraderie and belief in each other, from project lead to SC to administrator to researcher and AD participants – everyone was a significant part of the precious NATHEP circle. It has certainly been a catalyst to my inspiring and transformative AD learning journey every step of the way, becoming the driving force behind the conceptualisation of my PhD and which continues to shape AD practices and my ways of knowing, doing and being,

Much love and gratitude is extended to: Kasturi for taking on such a project and growing so many of us with the processes that started off as your ASD/HE intuitive and depth knowledge, Avriill for always holding us before during, after and in between the years, Zinhle, for all the research, technical and scholarly work towards the book project and being an integral part of the team, the SC, all my possibilities, through this journey with you all could only be possible with you as this encouraging, motivating and when needed challenging and passionate team, and finally to the AD participants, your energy, passion, hunger for AD, institutional and HE transformation is what kept me going endeavouring to be as responsive and relevant as I could be as the NATHEP collective continues to rise within and beyond the project!

Rieta Ganas



Mrs Nalini Chitanand

Academic Development Practitioner: Staff Development, Durban University of Technology

Having spent three decades in academic development, with 20 years in academic staff development, I have consistently advocated for transformative and sustainable practices in higher education and academic development. Reflecting on these three decades I have realised the gaps and limitations in my own understanding and practices of transformative education.

My participation in NATHEP has been pivotal to my transformative learning experiences as an academic developer, prompting me to question my own values, assumptions, prejudices and actions. This illuminated further gaps and revealed the emptiness of my AD practices. It sowed the seeds for understanding what a truly transformative and socially just higher education environment ought to be, particularly in recognising and valuing the plurality of knowledges, ways of knowing and becoming. I realised my own complicity in perpetuating the status quo of the neoliberal university, where the focus often centred on metrics such as throughput rates and success rates. While I long advocated for transformative education, I realised that my approach remained largely performative and I knew that deeper engagement with contexts, examining whose interests are really being served (or not served) by higher education, what kinds of knowledges we are legitimating, and why, who and what's been centred or marginalised - became central and critical questions for my AD practice. These imperatives underpinned by a decolonial focus have been instrumental in my own transformative learning. They have significantly influenced and shaped my academic staff development practice and research following my participation in NATHEP. Currently, I am leading a large institutional project on epistemic decolonisation and a scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) programme underpinned by a decolonial lens.

My developing PhD thesis on academic staff development promotes a southern gaze for academic staff development - this approach entangles contextualised knowledge, being and ethical commitment for a truly transformative and socially just higher education, society and world - an ethico-onto-epistemology, following Barad (2007). Such an approach compels us to question and recognise who and what matters in higher education, society and the world, and to contest and rework who and what is excluded. Academic staff development I believe, has this ethical and moral obligation to humanity and the more-than-human world.

I promote collaboration, co-creation and dialogue for my staff development programmes. I have experienced this first hand being enacted during the NATHEP

engagements. Our project leader Prof Kasturi Behari-Leak has been a key driver for nurturing our own professional learning as well as co-learning with our SC members and participants that have been invaluable to me. This demonstrates Ubuntu in action. I recognise that I am on a continuous spiral of learning, unlearning, relearning and becoming-with, entangled within the fabric of higher education. My NATHEP journey has been a significant moment in this process.

Nalini Chitanand

Dr Zinhle Mthombeni



Research Coordinator, Academic Staff and Professional Development Unit University of Cape Town

I joined NATHEP at the beginning of the book compilation project as a Research Coordinator. Reading through the journeys of academic developers as they navigated the redesign of their institutional induction programmes, as reflected in the case studies, has been quite enlightening. Each case study offers insights that can be gleaned for the different types of universities our country offers.

As the NATHEP project, in part, aims to deepen academics' understanding of the conditioning structures and culture that influence classroom practices and enable academic developers to conceptualise well-theorised induction programmes for new academics, insights contained in this book provide value for academic developers in the higher education sector.

Zinhle Mthombeni



Avrill Dawson

**Administrative Officer, Academic Staff and Professional Development Unit
University of Cape Town**

My journey with New Academics Transitioning into Higher Education (NATHEP) started in 2017 when the Dean of CHED and Director of ASPD, Assoc Prof Kasturi Behari-Leak and I were attending our New Academics' Transitions Regional Colloquium (NATRC) regional programme's first planning meeting which brought together new academics in the region, and we thought about doing the same programme nationally. I mentioned to Kasturi that in two years, the programme could be offered nationally. With her dedication and commitment to academic staff development, she started with a proposal, and not even a year later, in April 2018, the first planning meeting was confirmed.

Starting the NATHEP journey as the administrator of the programme was a new challenge for me and included administration duties on an advanced level of communication, logistics and planning as the project brought together 10 universities across the country and seven SC members.

Working with the NATHEP steering committee (SC) and participants over the past few years, I have built different relationships with each university's groups. Being part of the programme even during COVID-19, with online meetings, I have learnt and shared my experience as well as being an administrator. With the book launch and the NATHEP programme coming to an end, I share the joy and success of the project. I am grateful and blessed with the opportunity and experience I was graced with from God. With humbleness, I would like to thank all involved for giving me the opportunity to serve as the NATHEP Administrator.

Avrill Dawson



Ms Deidre Schippers

**Programme Coordinator, Academic Staff and
Professional Development Unit
University of Cape Town**

I joined NATHEP in the book production process, and it allowed me to learn about the project, its goals and its outputs. It also allowed me to learn about the importance and value of true collaboration in the national space.

To me, not only did this project become a platform to knowledge-share and co-create systems and structures to support new academics, but it also provided a contextual and meaningful account of staff development at the 10 participating universities, acknowledging the associated challenges and more importantly the collaborative effort towards creating consistent programmes so that ALL new academics can benefit from the same kinds of support regardless of what institution they teach at.

It has been a beautiful and humbling experience to be part of a project with such a far reach. I truly believe that if these types of projects would be embarked on as a means of standard practice and provide this kind of critical reflection and conceptualisation on practice at all the different points in an academic's journey, it could transform the academy as we know it, making space for academics to be supported, capacitated and enabled in their role as university teachers, and ultimately translating into student success.

Deidre Schippers



From
NATHEP,
this book
is born...

This book emerges out of NATHEP, as a tribute to the academic staff developers on this project and their meaningful contributions to professional development capacity building, in particular. These project participants, through their commitment to professional advancement and expansion of the sector, ensure that teaching and learning is facilitated by university teachers who are appropriately supported and capacitated. Authors' imprints on the collection of case studies which form the substantive spine of this book, are acknowledged and valued. The case studies provide a snapshot of institutional staff development practices in a differentiated national landscape in sharp relief to contextual challenges, documenting the rich and nuanced journey that project participants embarked on, to create well-considered, theorised and relevant models of induction for new academics, under the guidance of the NATHEP SC members who acted as mentors to each university partnership.

As we launch the NATHEP book, I acknowledge the full circle this project has come. From its humble beginnings in a doctoral study to its extended reach into the national landscape as a research output, the book illuminates the meaning of taking the road less travelled, to show how we can make a difference, each step of the journey, together.