LECTURERS’ PERCEPTIONS OF 21ST CENTURY GRADUATES ATTRIBUTES IN UNDERGRADUATE HUMANITIES PROGRAMMES

R. Ditsele, A. Mji
Tshwane University of Technology, Pretoria (SOUTH AFRICA)

Abstract

This paper, situated within a South African Higher Education context, comes against a backdrop of an increased focus on 21st century graduate attributes in higher education and specifically, with regard to undergraduate programmes. This paper explores the perceptions of academics towards 21st century graduate attributes in undergraduate programmes in the Faculty of Humanities, at a South African University of Technology. Conducted within the interpretivist and qualitative paradigm of social inquiry, this paper's goal is to gain a deep level of understanding of Faculty of Humanities lecturers' lived experiences, multiple perceptions and meanings of 21st century graduate attributes in their daily teaching and learning context. The outcomes of this evaluation may provide insights on the development and delivery of appropriate pedagogical strategies that would enhance a 21st century student learning experience in undergraduate programmes.

Keywords: Lecturers’ perceptions, undergraduate curriculum, pedagogy, 21st century graduate attributes.

1 INTRODUCTION

This section foreshadows a detailed overview and background of the study. The study is located in the context of a shift and its associated challenges facing Higher Education (HE) landscape nationally. As a backdrop and in an effort to contextualise the study, firstly, we briefly discuss the paradigmatic shift South Africa's HE landscape on aspects related to undergraduate curricula and 21st century graduate attributes. We then expound on the problem statement and the aim of the proposed study with the intention of highlighting its objectives. We then present the underlying rationale or motivation that necessitate this study, followed by a brief, but relevant review of literature and the theoretical underpinnings of the topic under study. Finally, a brief overview of the proposed research design and methodology to be used in this study is offered.

2 BACKGROUND: SITUATING THE RESEARCH

This study will be conducted at a South African public institution of higher learning. Prevailing literature in HE seems to point, for a variety of reasons, to the idea that changes in South Africans HE have been driven by developments in the international context, as well as particular national conditions and needs. Higher education institutions are constantly confronted with the challenge of improving student learning and to demonstrate programme effectiveness (Simelane-Mnisi & Mji 2014). Higher education institutions (HEIs) are required to become more responsive to societal needs, framed in terms of industry and the markets.

It is pointed out that the world is changing rapidly and curriculum policy makers, curriculum planners and developers as well as educators must respond by preparing their students for the society in which they will work and live. HE in the 21st century will be laced with a project-based curriculum for life aimed at engaging students in addressing real-world problems, issues important to humanity and questions that matter. This is a dramatic departure from the factory-model education of the past. It is abandonment, finally, of textbook-driven, teacher-centred, paper and pencil schooling. It means a new way of understanding the concept of ‘knowledge’, a new definition of the ‘educated person’ and a new way of designing and delivering the curriculum required. The 21st century will require knowledge generation, not just information delivery, and higher education will need to create a ‘culture of inquiry’. Twenty-first-century HE curriculum will have to recognize the critical need for developing 21st-century skills (Amadi & Ememe 2014, Ditsele & Mji 2016, Larson & Miller 2011, Teferra 2004, & Prensky 2005).

Since the dawn of a democratic dispensation, the South African HE sector has been characterised by major changes and the government is of the viewpoint that the higher education, training and
innovation system should cater for different global and societal needs by producing highly skilled individuals (National Development Plan (NDP), 2013:262). This expectation on higher education implies that higher education teaching and learning needs to prioritise the development of curricula that aims to produce graduates who have the requisite attributes to meet the present and future needs of the economy and society (Ditsele & Mji 2016: 1).

In light of the above observation, we are of the view that, graduate attributes are important factors in conceptualizing and planning the curriculum of any university undergraduate programme as such, these attributes can be conceptualised as both outcomes and processes underpinning curriculum, design and classroom teaching and learning (Barrie, 2007).

In this vein, this study finds it pertinent to examine the issues of 21st century graduate attributes within humanities faculty undergraduate curricula at a study at a study university of technology in South Africa. To be specific, this study is compelled by the perceived demand of curriculum that specifically addresses 21st century graduate attributes in HE – this forms the context of this study.

3 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM
The higher education landscape continues to shift under neoliberal forces that are increasingly aligning the goals of business, government and education (Giroux, 2010; Ingleby, 2015; Olssen & Peters, 2005 in Hill, Walkington and France 2016 in Ditsele & Mji 2016). This shift is engendering debate around the world about the role of higher education institutions in producing employable graduates to feed national prosperity in the emerging knowledge economy. As this evolution continues (Hill et.al 2016 in Ditsele & Mji 2016), point out that we (curriculum policy makers, planners, developer’s implementers and recipients) need to consider how we enhance generic graduate capabilities as well as the disciplinary knowledge in undergraduate curriculum.

As the world is rapidly changing, curriculum policy makers, curriculum planners and developers as well as educators must respond by preparing their students for the society in which they will work and live. Desired attributes in graduates have been defined on a number of levels. However it is argued that, the 21st century competences needed in the knowledge society could be regarded as the overall rationale and goals for learning i.e. the intended curriculum. However, there may be a gap between the needs of the knowledge society expressed by the advocates of 21st century competences and the ways in which these competences are addressed in curricula i.e. the implemented curriculum (Voogt, & Roblin, 2012).

In order to avoid deferring to market forces and the consequent commodification of teaching and learning, we can make conscious decisions about our curriculum content and co-curricular activities, pedagogies and the nature and use of learning spaces. Our graduates should possess the knowledge, skills and values to enable them to cope with dynamic employment opportunities, but they must also understand, through the benefits and constraints of their disciplinary perspectives, who they are and how they might contribute positively to the heterogeneity they will encounter in their ever changing local, regional and global communities (Barnett, 2004, Cribb & Gewirtz, 2013 in Hill et al 2016).

A gap in this area of study led us to seek answers to a critical question, which is on perceptions undergraduate lecturers have on 21st century graduate attributes. We will select lecturers in humanities undergraduate programmes at an HEI in Gauteng, South Africa to establish what their conceptions, understanding and perspectives are in relation to the phenomenon 21st century graduate attributes. Graduate attributes are important factors in the conceptualization, planning and delivery of the curriculum of any university undergraduate programme.

3.1 Primary objectives
The following two (2) research objectives will guide this study:

1. To establish what are the current perceptions of lecturers regarding the conceptualization of 21st century graduate attributes in humanities undergraduate programmes; and

2. To establish what are recent orientations of lecturers regarding the design and delivery of 21st century graduate attributes in humanities undergraduate programmes.

3.2 Research questions
The following three (3) research questions will be asked to achieve the set objectives:
1 What are the current perceptions (i.e. the “what”) of lecturers in humanities undergraduate curriculum in relations to the 21st century graduate attributes?

2 What are current understandings (i.e. the “how”) of lecturers in humanities undergraduate programmes towards the conceptualization of the 21st century graduate attributes through their current teaching and learning practice?

3 What is the interface between the perceptions (the “what”) and understandings (the “how”) of lecturers towards the design and delivery of 21st century graduate attributes in humanities undergraduate curriculum?

4 JUSTIFICATION OF THE RESEARCH

South Africa has a long history of using education as a tool to restrict access to power and exert social control, and to marginalise, delegitimise and devalue indigenous knowledge (CHE 2017). The country comes from a past in which apartheid education was used as a tool to divide society as it constructed certain forms of identity among students. Under apartheid, education institutions were divided according to race, and education enhanced the divisions in society. These divisions reinforced the inequalities of a divided society. Many people deemed the curriculum irrelevant and mono-cultural since it served to strengthen the citizenship of one race over others (Msila 2007). South Africa’s democratic government inherited a divided and unequal system of education. Under apartheid, education departments were separated by race, geography and ideology. These education systems prepared graduates in different ways for the positions they were expected to occupy in social, economic and political life under apartheid. In each department, the curriculum played a powerful role in reinforcing inequality (Department of Education (DoE) 2002).

It is this history of South African education that necessitated the South African government since the establishment of a new political dispensation in 1994 through the Department of Education (which in 2009 was split into Basic Education, and Higher Education (HE) and Training), to place emphasis on the introduction of policies and mechanisms aimed at redressing the legacy of a racially and ethnically fragmented, dysfunctional and unequal education system inherited from apartheid (Ditsele 2015). Section 17 of Chapter 4 of the White Paper states that “the curriculum, teaching methods and textbooks at all levels and in all programmes of education and training, should encourage independent and critical thought, the capacity to question, enquire, reason, weigh evidence and form judgements, achieve understanding, recognise the provisional and incomplete nature of most human knowledge, and communicate clearly” (DoE 1995: 22). In spite of the objectives of DoE and CHE, competency-based curriculum of producing graduates with 21st century graduate attributes in HE, transformation has not happened as quickly or as universally as hoped or envisaged (CHE 2017: 9). Therefore, a study to investigate perceptions of lecturers regarding the conceptualization of 21st century graduate attributes in HE is essential.

5 LITERATURE REVIEW

Curriculum is a highly contested notion in higher education, including in SA (CHE 2017). Mkhize (2014) claims that, in SA, the restructuring of the HE system curriculum and the transformations of HEIs in general are located within the country’s broad political and socio-economic transition to democracy. This study focuses particularly on curriculum reform, thereby paying attention to perceptions and understandings of lectures towards the conceptualisation of curriculum in a university learning environment and 21st century graduate attributes in undergraduate programmes. According to the Department of Education (2002), the 1996 Lifelong Learning through a ‘National Curriculum Framework’ document, which was the first major curriculum statement of a democratic SA, sought to promote “a prosperous, truly united, democratic and internationally competitive country with literate, creative and critical citizens” (Letseka 2012). The Framework further states that one of the aims of the school curriculum should be to “create a lifelong learner who is confident and independent, literate, numerate and multi-skilled, compassionate, with a respect for the environment and the ability to participate in society as a critical and active citizen” (Letseka 2012).

Parsard (2002) argues that the concept of curriculum remains elusive and epistemologically ill-defined, this, because of the fact that education is everyone’s concern, from the students, parents to educational professors. There are, therefore, important social and political dimensions to the curriculum. The way in which knowledge is organised in the HEIs curriculum is a social activity that produces a social product. The curriculum is not a “thing”, but curriculum embodies social
relationships. It is drawn up by particular groups of people; it reflects particular points of views and values, it is anchored in the experiences of particular social groups; and it produces particular patterns of success and failure. Assumptions about what counts as valuable knowledge, as basic skills and essential learning experiences for the curriculum are themselves socially influenced and contested. Viewed in this way, the curriculum can never be neutral or stand outside of patterns of power. Rather than viewing curriculum as an abstract, idealized prescription for the education process, this study views the curriculum as contextual and historical. Curriculum policies are developed in specific circumstances involving political and economic consideration, thus curriculum conceptualization and development is not a neutral or technical process (Parsard 2002).

The term curriculum may encompass many dimensions, though there are different definitions and understandings of curriculum in this study the focus is on the conceptualization, structure of the degree and diploma programmes, the term curriculum as used in this study refers primarily to the formal curriculum, that is, the planned learning experiences that students are exposed to with a view to achieving desired outcomes in terms of knowledge, competencies and attributes. A programme is a purposeful and structured set of learning experiences that leads to a qualification. Undergraduate, in the interest of brevity, refers to diplomas as well as degrees (CHE, 2004, 2013).

Havenga (2015) points out that, the aim of higher education does not only include the teaching of knowledge but also how students learn specific content; apply various skills; and adapt to new challenges. After completing their studies, graduates are required to: apply their knowledge and skills in the work place; adapt to a continuously changing world; and provide for future demands. As a result appropriate knowledge and skills must be taught more intentionally in higher education. Therefore curriculum design and development must interweave these relevant skills, knowledge and attitudes.

Van Schalkwyk, Herman and Muller (2010) claim that, most SA universities have some description of the sort of graduate they would like to send out into the ever changing 21st century world of work. However, many different terms have been used in the higher education literature to describe the 21st century skills of graduates and these commonly include the following: graduate attributes, competencies, qualities or outcomes; generic attributes; transferable, employability or soft skills; and core capabilities (Barrie, 2004, 2006; de la Harpe, Radloff, & Wyber, 2000) in Hill, Walkington and France (2016).

The viewpoint that the term ‘graduate attributes’, appears to have achieved fairly widespread acceptance in the most recent literature reviewed (Barrie 2006, 2007, 2004, Moalosi, Oladiran & Uziak, 2012 & Van Schalkwyk et al 2010) and given its usage in the South African context (Griesel & Parker 2009) has been adopted in this overview (Ditsele & Mji 2016). However for this study we adopt the term 21st century graduate attributes (TFCGA) which is used to encompass the terms/phrases 21st Century Skills (TFCS), graduate attributes and graduate profiles. TFCS include competencies such as critical thinking and problem-solving skills, communicative skills, information and media literacy skills, contextual learning skills, and an ever important collaboration skill set (Kaufman 2013:79). For the purpose of this study, research will be conducted on the following 21st century skills:

- Critical thinking and problem-solving skills,
- Communicative skills,
- Information and media literacy skills,
- Contextual learning skills,
- Collaboration skill set (Kaufman 2013:79).

In summary, Ogude, Nel & Oosthuizen (2005) argue that, the need for globally equivalent skills raises the debate about curriculum relevance. Productivity and competitiveness depend on the ability to produce highly skilled and adaptive knowledge workers who can manage and manipulate knowledge and information and adjust to volatile and unpredictable global markets. Such knowledge workers need to have well-developed problem-solving skills and be able to continually adjust their repertoire of knowledge and skills to changing environments. In such a context, it is frequently argued that the role of higher education shifts from an induction into the specialised knowledge of specific disciplines to the development of broad, generic and transferable skills. In essence, higher education institutions worldwide are being called upon to become more responsive to the needs of the knowledge economy. However, Mkhize (2014) contends that, although SA HEIs are now open for all students, regardless of race, colour or creed, the question at hand, is whether or not the SA HEIs are able to address in their curriculum, global societal demands in terms of social needs. The following section will address the research approach espoused for this study.
6 RESEARCH APPROACH

The purpose of this section is to discuss the research approach that will be applied in this study. All scientific research is conducted within a specific paradigm, or a way of viewing one's research material. Researchers must, therefore, decide within what paradigm they are working, know the nature of their selected paradigm very well, and spell this out in their research report in order to keep communication with their reading public and clear unambiguous (Strydom 2013: 41). Whereas theories seek to explain, paradigms provide ways of looking. In and of themselves, paradigms don’t explain anything, but they provide logical frameworks within which theories are created. Theories and paradigms intertwine throughout the search for meaning in social life (Babbie 2014: 31). This study will be set within a constructivist-interpretivist paradigm and will be based on qualitative research methods using a case study as research approach to investigate the qualitatively different ways in which people experience, conceptualise, perceive and understand various aspects of the phenomenon (Henning et al 2011: 20). As this research study is framed with the qualitative paradigm, the research methods will be selected in coherence with the research design and research questions. These methods will include a pilot study, purposeful sampling techniques, various data collection methods and qualitative thematic analysis.

7 CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, this paper provided a detailed overview and background of the proposed study of which locates the study in context of a shift and its associated challenges facing Higher Education (HE) landscape nationally. As a backdrop and in an effort to contextualise the study, we briefly firstly, discussed the paradigmatic shift South Africa’s HE landscape on aspects of related to undergraduate curricula and 21st century graduate attributes. We then expounded on the problem statement and the aim of the proposed study with the intention of highlighting its objectives. We then presented the underlying rationale or motivation that necessitate this study, followed by a brief, but relevant review of literature and the theoretical underpinnings of the topic under study. Finally, a brief overview of the proposed research design and methodology to be used in this study was offered.

REFERENCES


[38] Levine, P. (2012). We are the ones we have been waiting for: The philosophy and practice of civic renewal. New York: Oxford University Press.


