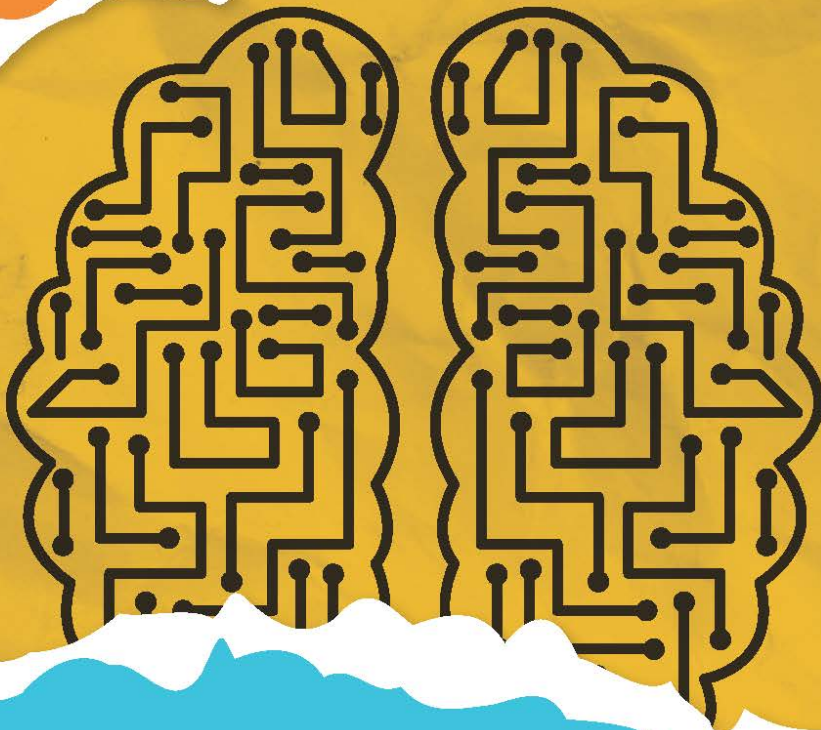


Reimagining South African Higher Education

Towards a Student-Centred
Learning and Teaching Future



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CHAPTER 13

A CRITICAL REFLECTION ON CENTRING STUDENTS: INTENTIONALLY INTEGRATING ACADEMIC PROFESSIONAL LEARNING AND STUDENT SUCCESS PRACTICES

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Abstract

Academic Learning Professionals (ALPs) and Student Success Professionals (SSPs) play a key part in the way higher education responds to and grapples with complex contexts and disruptions to learning and teaching. In this chapter, the authors argue for a more intentional and structured integration of the work done by ALPs and SSPs, drawing on their insights and reflections from working in these areas over several years. They contend that to make a meaningful shift to student-centredness as the South African higher education sector transitions to blended learning and teaching, the work of ALPs and SSPs must be made to intersect. Through critical reflection and by drawing on Gibbs' (1988) cyclical reflective model, the authors explore how integrating the work of ALPs and SSPs, through the intentional centring of students' holistic needs, is key to equipping academics with the insight and awareness required for student-centredness, with the aim of enhancing students' prospects of success.

Keywords: academic advising; academic development; academic professional learning; reflective practice; student centredness; student success

1. Introduction

Over the last three decades, South Africa's higher education terrain has been characterised by an increase in student numbers resulting from the removal of barriers to access (Boughey & McKenna, 2021). This massification (Hornsby & Osman, 2014; Adetiba, 2019) has brought to the fore numerous learning and teaching considerations. The urgency to centre student needs and experiences during the tertiary learning journey is one such focus area. This is hardly surprising, considering the pervasive and radical restructuring of the university student demographic over the last thirty years (Boughey & McKenna, 2021). Against this backdrop, the lockdown period that transpired from the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated a rapid shift to emergency remote teaching and learning (ERTL) (Hodges et al., 2020) across the South African higher education sector (Badat, 2020; Motala & Menon, 2020; Krull, 2022). This meant that higher education institutions (HEIs) whose learning and teaching was predominantly predicated on contact/physical interaction had to adapt their ways of learning and teaching to occur virtually and/or remotely (de Klerk et al., 2021; Krull & MacAlister, 2022).

In the wake of the pandemic, there is a focus on how affordances from the pandemic could inform a reimagined higher education future (Dison et al., 2022; van Staden & Naidoo, 2022). To this point, institutions continue to focus on the design and offering of blended modes of learning and teaching (L&T). When it comes to programme and course design and the development of student-centred approaches to L&T, the adoption of blended learning approaches brings its own complexities (Brodie et al., 2022), with Academic Learning Professionals (ALPs)¹ and Student Success Professionals (SSPs) playing a key part in highlighting the difficulties associated with changing practices during complex contexts and the considerations affecting curriculum decisions.

The authors hold L&T positions within the Teaching and Learning Unit of the Commerce, Law, and Management Faculty at the University of the Witwatersrand, a research-intensive public university in South Africa. The Unit includes the faculty's student success and support functions (e.g., academic advising and postgraduate writing development) provided by SSPs, and ALPs that focus on support and professional learning for faculty staff regarding blended and online L&T. While there are centralised services in these areas provided within the university, the faculty offerings aim to extend these and provide more contextualised support to address the needs of staff and students in the faculty.

In this chapter, we argue for a more intentional and structured integration of the work done by ALPs and SSPs, drawing on our insights and reflections from working in these areas over several years. We contend that to make a meaningful shift to student-centredness as the sector transitions to blended L&T, the work of ALPs and SSPs must be made to intersect. Through critical reflection and by

¹ Commonly referred to as Academic Development Professionals in the literature.

drawing on Gibbs' (1988) cyclical reflective model, we explore how integrating the work of ALPs and SSPs, through the intentional centring of students' holistic needs, is key to equipping academics with the insight and awareness required for student-centredness, with the aim of enhancing students' prospects of success.

2. Student Success

The South African Council on Higher Education (CHE) frames student success as “[e]nhanced student learning with a view to increasing the number of graduates with attributes that are personally, professionally and socially valuable” (CHE, 2014, p. 1). This broader notion of student success and what it aims to achieve can be tied to a more nuanced definition offered by Spark et al. (2017), which highlights the complexities involved in the notion of “enhanced student learning”, as captured in the CHE (2014) definition. Spark et al. (2017) define student success within the South African higher education context as a student's capability to:

...cope with the transition from high school to university (McGhie & Du Preez, 2015); progress through the first year of study (Andrews & Osman, 2015; Manik, 2015); graduate from their degree of choice (Andrews & Osman, 2015; McGhie & Du Preez, 2015) within five years of first registration (Scott, Yeld & Hendry, 2007); manage the psychosocial, socio-economic, cultural (McGhie & Du Preez, 2015), and academic demands (Potgieter, Harding, Kritzing, Somo & Engelbrecht, 2015) posed by university studies; and access relevant academic and non-academic support structures on university campuses (McGhie & Du Preez, 2015). (p. 76).

Important to this chapter is the way Spark et al. (2017) incorporate the broader student experience while at university, moving beyond just the academic learning dimension, as well as the way in which the CHE (2014) definition looks beyond the time students spend at university and towards their future potential (whether personally, professionally, or socially). We therefore adopt an amalgamated interpretation of student success, drawing on both the CHE (2014) and Spark et al. (2017) definitions, when referring to it here.

3. Academic Development

The work of ALPs and SSPs falls in the broad categorisation of academic development (AD) in higher education. In the South African higher education context, AD has a rich history, and is a growing and varied field (e.g., McKenna, 2003; Volbrecht, 2003; Akoojee & Nkomo, 2007; Scott, 2009; Boughey & Niven, 2012; Vorster & Quinn, 2017; Collett et al., 2018). It includes the support of academics as university teachers, the scholarship of L&T, support for curriculum development and innovation, the integration of technologies for L&T, and support for student success (McKenna et al., 2022). Leibowitz (2014) defines AD as “the

creation of conditions supportive of teaching and learning, in the broadest sense” (p. 359). Often this work is undertaken in support of improving student retention and throughput, which remain significant challenges in South African higher education (Letseka & Maile, 2008; Lourens, 2020). However, McKenna et al. (2022) argue that a transformative approach to AD is required, where prevailing assumptions, the roles of universities, and current AD practices are challenged. This includes engaging with institutional policies, practices, and cultures, and making spaces available for conversations about:

...what resources and structures are needed to ensure that all students and staff are able to access, participate in, and succeed in higher education; how students and others can be recognised in educational interactions; and how students and others can be more fully represented in decisions about curriculum and pedagogy. (McKenna et al., 2022, p. 7).

Boughey (2010) explains that AD within the South African context initially focused on student support through study skills and academic literacies development. Over time, this focus on student support extended to academic staff support and institutional development (Boughey, 2010). Our argument in this chapter is that some of the variations and focus areas within the broader field of AD must be (re) integrated more intentionally, to support and advance student-centredness and student success.

The term *academic development* itself may be perceived as being problematic, as it could be interpreted to imply a deficit (what Boughey & McKenna (2016) would refer to as decontextualised) view of staff or students. For that reason, we have chosen to use the term *professional learning* in our discussion about the work done by ALPs. Consequently, when ALPs are mentioned in the chapter, we refer primarily to individuals within the university who support the professional learning of academic staff involved in teaching (e.g., learning experience designers, curriculum experts, and L&T professionals). Similarly, when referring to SSPs, we refer to those members of staff primarily dedicated to supporting university students (e.g., academic or student advisors, academic writing specialists, and curriculum advisors).

We posit that ALPs have unique insights about academic professional learning and are positioned to influence the trajectory of what happens in physical and virtual L&T spaces at university. Similarly, SSPs have a unique understanding of the student experience and student needs. By intentionally enabling the work of ALPs and SSPs to intersect, we argue that the former could work to address what is learned from SSPs when engaging with academics about curriculum design and assessment. We contend that to make a meaningful shift to student-centredness, L&T support needs to be considered holistically, and the work of ALPs and SSPs must intersect through collaboration and the intentional integration of practices.

4. Student Centredness in Higher Education

The notion of student-centredness, although ostensibly self-explanatory, proves quite complex (even ambiguous) when deconstructed (Farrington, 1991; O'Neill & McMahon, 2005; Baeten et al., 2010; Tangney, 2014). The literature shows that for many in the higher education context, a student-centred approach (also referred to as student-centred learning), applies specifically to teaching, the learning environment created for students, and how students learn (e.g., O'Neill & McMahon, 2005; Baeten et al., 2010; Blackie et al., 2010; McCabe & O'Connor, 2014; Tangney, 2014). In other words, there is an intentional shift away from lecturer-centredness in the design and delivery of curricula and assessments, towards student-centredness (Elen et al., 2007; Blackie et al., 2010). The purpose of creating this kind of learning environment is to enable active participation and responsibility on the part of students, as opposed to focusing on the lecturer or on content (Cannon & Newble, 2000, pp. 16-17). This is important for the advancement of equitable learning where the needs of all students are considered; from the most vulnerable student to those who are better resourced. Importantly, McKenna (2013, p. 1) warns against two potential blind spots of student-centred learning: the risk of losing sight of the knowledge being taught and learned; and the risk of perpetuating the discourse that implies success and failure is inherent to the student, rather than being constructed within complex social contexts.

Within the student-centred learning discourse, some approach student-centredness by adopting a co-creation lens where students become co-creators of curricula and assessment activities (Lubicz-Nawrocka, 2018), or highlight the importance of garnering student input about student-centred learning (Lea et al., 2003). Generally, student-centred learning is achieved by adopting teaching methods that allow students to actively participate in the learning process (Baeten et al., 2010). These include, among others, problem-based learning, project-based learning, case-based learning, and collaborative learning (Baeten et al., 2010, p. 245). In either case, the approach to student-centredness is positioned in relation to the L&T dimensions of students' higher education experience, with the aim of enhancing students' prospects of academic success.

In relation to this framing of student-centredness, Blackie, Case, and Jawitz (2010) highlight that a student-centred approach includes but moves beyond skills and knowledge acquisition, to focus on "the emergent being of the student" (p. 637). They draw on the work of Rogers (1983), who expounds that student-centredness aims to create environments where students grow to (eventually) become active members of a society through learning (Rogers, 1983; Blackie et al., 2010, p. 638). One may argue that this Rogerian conception holds bearing to a broader interpretation of student-centredness within higher education contexts. Case (2015) contends that:

[i]n the arena of higher education, we are centrally focused on the morphogenesis of student agency; we aim for students to

leave higher education with different knowledge and capacity for action than that with which they entered. (p. 843).

To this end, there are arguments that posit student-centredness means placing the student at the centre of the *entire* higher learning experience. This would include the L&T dimension as discussed above, but also extends beyond it. From this perspective, the implication would be that an institution or the higher education sector would align all its endeavours, policies, and decisions to best serve students, with the aim of enhancing student success. Clewes (2003), for example, adopts a student-centred model for evaluating higher education service quality, thus extending the notion of student-centredness beyond the proverbial classroom. Xulu-Gama et al. (2018) argue for a shift away from deficit perceptions of students entering higher education (i.e., where the student is viewed as inherently lacking certain skills and abilities (Boughey & McKenna, 2016)) to focusing on what institutions can do to be responsive to the needs of their students, regardless of the diversity thereof. They conclude by promulgating for a holistic, student-centred higher education environment that will enable student success (Xulu-Gama et al., 2018, p. 1309).

An institutional approach to centring the student (Kember, 2009) in this way is not impossible, at least not structurally as Grayson (2020) shows, although implementation and cultural shifts may be harder to achieve (Naidu, 2019). Correspondingly, Boughey and McKenna (2021, p. 133) note that “structures require complementary cultures to be effective”. In turn, a sector-wide approach to centring the student may prove far harder to achieve within the infinitely complex overlapping contexts (Leibowitz et al., 2015) that constitute the South African higher education sector. Yet, this should not mean abandoning such an ambitious task.

Scott (2018) proposes such a sector-wide centring of the student by asserting that the country’s existing higher education system is not designed to foreground a commitment to student success. Correspondingly, the author proposes intentionally designing “the South African university education system to focus unequivocally on student success and equity of outcomes” (Scott, 2018, p. 3). Ultimately, Scott (2018) argues that if student success is the end goal of higher education, it must be “at the heart of the higher education agenda” (p. 4).

With this chapter, we aim to contribute to this broader interpretation of student-centring, by offering a possible approach for enhancing student-centredness within South African higher education contexts. As mentioned earlier, our argument revolves largely around the siloed ways in which higher education stakeholders (whether within an institution or on a more systemic level) tend to operate. Consequently, we propose an intentional and systematic integration of elements of the work ALPs and SSPs do, with the aim of enhancing the holistic student learning experience and students’ prospects of success.

5. Reflective Theory and Method

This chapter is the result of our personal and collective reflections on the challenges and opportunities that emerged during our institution's move to ERTL amid the COVID-19 pandemic and thereafter. Reflective practice has a long history in the context of education, with Dewey (1933) being the first to highlight its usefulness (also see: Paget, 2001; Chong, 2009). In more recent times, the work of Kolb (1984), Gibbs (1988), Boud et al. (1985), and Schön (1992) have provided the basis for a variety of reflective approaches and practices in higher education contexts. These include, but are not limited to, those offered by Rolfe et al. (2001), Brockbank and McGill (2006), and Van Manen (2006).

5.1. Reflective model and method

Out of the range of reflective theories and models mentioned above, we have chosen Gibbs' (1988) Reflective Cycle to underpin and guide our critical reflections. Within this cycle, we have also brought in aspects of the work of Rolfe et al. (2001) by considering not only what has happened, but rather to attempt to make sense of what is happening, as well as looking forward. We have found Gibbs' model a useful reflective tool during previous projects, both large and small, within the Teaching and Learning Unit where we work. The model's purpose is to provide a guiding framework for experiential and reflective learning, and, most importantly, to result in a plan of action. Its reflective process moves through six stages: experience, feelings, evaluation, analysis, conclusion, and action plan (Gibbs, 1988). For the purpose of this chapter, we sub-divided these stages into two phases, with phase one covering the first three stages and phase two covering the remaining three.

During the first phase, each author embarked on an individualised critical reflection exercise through means of freewriting (Li, 2007), exploring their experience of and emotional responses to L&T in the institution and faculty, both during ERTL and in the period immediately thereafter. These reflections were then evaluated and refined by the individuals, before being shared with the other authors via a shared folder in the cloud.

In phase two, all four authors followed an iterative, inductive approach (Bertram & Christiansen, 2014) to analyse each of their co-authors' reflective pieces, making comments and observations about categories (or focus areas) emergent from the data (p. 133). This was done both to ensure rigour during data analysis and to mitigate against potential researcher bias by having fellow authors review and moderate one another's reflection data and inferences. Several recurring themes and novel ideas were identified for further analysis during this iterative process, which the authors subsequently explored in more depth during a collaborative meta-analysis (Timulak, 2014) session. Finally, conclusions were drawn from these explorations and have led to the discussion and arguments proposed in this chapter, which are intended to stimulate ideas for further research and form the foundation for acting on (i.e., implementing) the proposed approach.

5.2. Criticisms of reflective practice

Various criticisms have been levelled at the use of reflective practice in both professional and educational contexts. Brookfield (1995) argues for the use of critical theory in reflective practice in order to examine the nature and influence of power dynamics and norms of institutional culture. Finlay (2008) levels a similar criticism at Gibbs, in particular pointing out that the model is too basic as it does not include a critical component. In order to mitigate this challenge, we (the authors) adopt the dual role of researcher-participants to explore the proposed integration of the work done by ALPs and SSPs, strongly guided by a critical reflective approach. While Probst (2016, p. 85) highlights that it may be uncommon for researchers to hold dual roles in a study where they both provide and analyse data, she explains that their mutual transparency and shared experiences can allow for enhanced insights into the topic being studied (Probst, 2016, p.90).

6. Findings and Discussion

In this section, we present the synthesised meta-commentary from our analysis of the reflective free-write pieces, which are used to make inferences and draw conclusions. Our observations are clustered into three broad thematic areas, each of which has two or three sub-categories. Collectively, these findings are used to support our argument for the intentional integration of ALP and SSP work to advance student-centredness within South African higher education contexts.

6.1. Theme 1: Decontextualisation and silos

6.1.1. *Continued decontextualisation of students*

A continued challenge in the university sector seems to be the lack of meaningful shifts in the way institutions (or even the sector) respond to concerns about student wellbeing and mental health (Martin, 2010; Van der Walt et al., 2020; Bantjies et al., 2021; Ruswa & Gore, 2021), and the impact this, as well as broader socioeconomic factors, have on student success (Bantjies et al., 2021; Essop, 2017; Ruswa & Gore, 2021). While some of these realities were foregrounded and amplified during COVID-19 (Czerniewicz et al., 2020), they existed long before the pandemic. Students who do not succeed in their studies appear still to be viewed through the lens of their own identities, backgrounds, and worldviews by some higher education stakeholders. This serves to perpetuate decontextualised notions of students (Boughey & McKenna, 2016). To this end, Author 1 observes:

[i]n this day and age, there are still lecturers who view students as having deficits, who lament the poor quality of students coming to university [...] who do not believe the way they teach or assess could possibly change their students' prospects of success. [Author 1].

This highlights some academics' sense of institutional and academic identity, their assumptions of the roles of lecturers and students, and the way in which that identity is fostered within the culture of the university. Author 3 asserts that some:

[L]ecturers do not see the need for any sort of insight into the lives of their students and the lived experience of the students at university [...] there is a need for a shift in academic identity and institutional culture [...] what it means to be an academic. [Author 3].

Equally, students should be encouraged to explore their own identity, assume responsibility for their own success, and should be supported to play an active and collaborative part in efforts to shift towards student-centredness. For example, the pandemic highlighted the need for students to be more self-directed in their learning (Krull, 2022). To this point, Author 3 poses a series of critical questions to be explored:

What is the sense of identity amongst academics when they are interacting with students? Is this identity separating them from their students? How are they characterising their students? How are they characterising support staff? What is their idea of student identity? What is the students' sense of identity? How are the students characterising themselves? [Author 3].

For meaningful shifts towards student-centredness to occur, further discussions about the multiple and complex roles of the lecturer and the student in a changing world are required. ALPs and SSPs could play collaborative mediating roles in facilitating these discussions.

6.1.2. Siloed support efforts

While concerted efforts were made to support staff and students to transition to emergency remote L&T within our university, the support interventions for staff (Krull & MacAlister, 2022) and for students (de Klerk et al., 2021) were largely siloed in our own faculty, with separate strategies and approaches adopted to orientate and support each group. This mirrors a general trend in approach across these areas pre- and post-pandemic. In relation to the fragmented way in which the transition to ERTL occurred, Author 1 contends that:

[t]he problem with this is that the risks of gaps or oversight is not mitigated. SSPs, arguably, had unique insights into the lived realities of students. By working with ALPs and academics, SSPs would have been able to advise on matters of design and implications for student L&T during the pandemic. [Author1].

In addition to the reality that some lecturers inevitably failed to consider the lived realities of their students, the siloed approach to student and staff transition could mean that ALPs also failed to comprehend the lived realities of students (both during ERTL and more generally). Author 2 (a practicing ALP) observes:

I often feel a sense of disconnect in terms of what is happening for students in the faculty, how they are learning and what the students' learning experiences are really like. [Author 2].

This could be addressed by integrating the work of ALPs and SSPs. As a starting point, the ALPs and SSPs in our faculty are starting to plan joint research projects and future staff and student support opportunities in an attempt to dismantle these established silos.

6.2. Theme 2: Enhancing learning and teaching

6.2.1. Realising holistic and contextually relevant learning and teaching approaches

In an attempt to mitigate some of the challenges raised in the previous section, there should be a shift towards more holistic and contextual approaches to the ways in which L&T is practiced. In terms of curriculum development, Author 3 reflects that:

...the focus should be on how students learn and for lecturers to consider multiple means of access and engagement. [Author 3].

To this end, lecturers could start the process of curriculum design or facilitation by getting to know their students. Consider this reflective observation by Author 4:

Who are our students? This seemingly straightforward question is not asked nearly enough as it should be by lecturers and course designers. [Author 4].

Often, courses (or even programmes) are designed and facilitated without serious consideration of the intended and actual students who will be engaged in the learning. As students are diverse and have different and varied needs, there must be a shift in approach where ALPs and SSPs work collaboratively to help course designers and implementers:

...become aware of these different [student] needs and what can be done to be responsive to these needs, in a way that does not overload lecturers themselves. [Author 2].

One of the most viable avenues for meeting the diverse needs of students without overburdening lecturers, is to shift institutional culture by incorporating equitable L&T practises that support both staff and students. The American Achieving the Dream (ATD) Network (in their holistic student support toolkit), explains that:

[f]ully embracing and sustaining the shift to a holistic student supports approach often requires deep and broad changes to an institution's culture. (ATD, 2018, p. 9).

Yet shifting institutional (or even sectoral) cultures are notoriously challenging (Benvenuti et al., 2022). Another challenge is that courses are often designed around content and topics rather than learning activities, which makes it easier to decontextualise courses from the students that take them. However, the integration of ALP and SSP work could support both shifts towards more holistic and contextually relevant L&T approaches, while also working to counteract the decontextualization dilemma discussed in thematic area one.

6.2.2. Adapting to new forms of learning and teaching

The post-pandemic period has seen the university where we work advance on its strategy to transition to blended L&T, where some learning activities take place online and others take place face-to-face (Bates, 2022). However, our experience has been that many students and staff within the university have struggled to adapt to the online dimensions of L&T, which seems to have been the case at other institutions as well (Coman et al., 2020; Moorhouse, 2020). A particular challenge experienced by some students appears to be the integration of both in-person/contact and online L&T. Author 2 observes:

...some students have struggled adapting to blended L&T. Some students have not made the connection or are able to integrate what is happening in the face-to-face and online learning environments. Some students may only watch the pre-recorded videos and then feel that they do not need to come to class. Or other students attend face-to-face lectures or tutorials but do not prepare for these by engaging with the readings, videos, or other prescribed resources beforehand. [Author 2].

It appears that both staff and students need more support than is currently being provided to succeed in a blended L&T environment. This requires an integration and expansion of the support work by ALPs and SSPs. Importantly, there is a distinction between being present (simply attending face-to-face lectures and tutorials) and learning. A key consideration is that ALPs and SSPs working together could support lecturers to use more active learning strategies and support students to transition to more active forms of learning in a blended environment (Armellini et al., 2021).

6.2.3. Forms of communication and engagement

Another important dimension to enhancing L&T is to address how important information is communicated within the institution. While lecturers may be more accustomed to email as the primary mode of correspondence, the way in which students are communicated with and how they engage with official correspondence, remains less than ideal. Author 1 observes that:

...there is a disjuncture between how the university communicates (mostly emails or through pushed to email [via the institutional Learning Management System]), yet students do not seem to use email much. One told me they had thousands of unread emails. [Author 1].

Effective communication among students, lecturers, and management is essential to dismantling entrenched silos and ensuring all university stakeholders remain informed about strategic shifts and decisions, like the transition to blended L&T at our university. Lecturers communicating with their students must ensure that key messages unambiguously relay why certain L&T approaches and methods are being used, as well as the value such methods and approaches hold for learning. This includes what is expected and required of students to be successful. Author 4 also explains that both what and how we communicate with our students is vital:

...if you want students to engage effectively with what is being communicated, it makes sense to communicate in a “language” they speak. [Author 4].

This may mean in all official languages to which the institution is aligned but could also mean broadening communication methods to include more visual forms of correspondence (e.g., infographics) and multi-media (e.g., short videos). ALPs and SSPs are positioned to sensitise lecturers to how communication occurs, learn from students about preferred modes of communication, and amend the ways in which they themselves communicate and engage with staff and students.

6.3. Theme 3: Context and belonging

6.3.1. Consideration of broader context

As noted earlier, there is a danger of decontextualising students from their lived realities. Any L&T environment or support thereof cannot be devoid of context, with different contextual factors affecting and influencing L&T in complex ways:

Asking the questions of what is happening and what has been happening allows us to think more broadly as we assess the circumstances surrounding student support and its evolution on a global and local basis. The question of ‘what has been happening’ also provides the lens needed to look at the relationship between student support and students’ academic learning, and how it

has evolved or stagnated and how this affects students' academic progress. [Author 4].

This requires SSPs and ALPs to formulate a deliberate approach to understanding the complexities of the higher education space and interrogating the roles of ALPs and SSPs in enabling or constraining student success. In our context, we need to critically reflect on the ways in which our support may help and not hinder student success. In turn, the affordances gained from realising this approach, could then be articulated to engagements with both students and staff.

6.3.2. The relationship between belonging and student centredness

Many factors within higher education affect students' sense of belonging, feeling seen, and their overall tertiary education experience². Part of that extends to a sense of belonging in a course and to a discourse community (i.e., to the community of their discipline) (Hyland, 2004; Northedge & McArthur, 2008). Author 1 observes that:

[l]ecturers have a crucial role to play in this regard. If students do not feel like they belong, they are likely to feel alienated and lost. This is proven to affect their chances of success. [Author 1].

An integration of ALP and SSP work could help sensitise lecturers to student realities, but also help them adapt their teaching approaches and methods that support a more student-centred approach that can enable a sense of belonging both in formal academic spaces and the broader institutional context.

7. Implications for Practice and Key Considerations

Without plans for practical implementation of the proposed integration, the risk remains that the status quo will be perpetuated. Consequently, realising the intentional integration of the work done by ALPs and SSPs will require a plan of action, a process for monitoring and evaluating progress, and the intentional link of theory and practice. An example of how this could be achieved is found in open and distance learning literature, where curriculum or course design is done as a team rather than in an individualised manner (Youngman et al., 2000; Bates, 2022).

Following on from our findings and discussion, we offer four key considerations towards the implementation of an ALP-SSP integration approach to advance student-centredness within the South African higher education context.

2 See, for example, the special issue of the *South African Journal of Higher Education* on belonging (Volume 36, Number 6, 2022).

7.1. Key consideration 1

There is merit in integrating the work of ALPs and SSPs more intentionally, to the benefit of student learning and success, and to enable the centring of the student within the broader higher learning context. Collaborating in this way offers the opportunity to merge the world of the student and the world of the lecturer, and to look for ways to involve students in curriculum decisions. In this way, some of the current challenges associated with a decontextualised view of students and siloed support efforts can be mitigated. The relationship between belonging and student-centredness needs to be foregrounded.

7.2. Key consideration 2

To address the concern of siloed support efforts, integrating the work of ALPs and SSPs more intentionally could begin by identifying areas or spaces for intersection. For example, SSPs could benefit from engaging in academic professional learning opportunities for staff to be able to provide better pedagogical support to students. Similarly, ALPs could benefit from SSP involvement in the design of academic professional learning initiatives. Collectively, these roles could collaborate around supporting the implementation of active blended learning and teaching practices in specific contexts.

7.3. Key consideration 3

Integrating the work of ALPs and SSPs more intentionally supports a shift towards a team-based approach to curriculum development, thus deliberately enabling lecturers, students, and other stakeholders to work together. This could contribute to dismantling entrenched silos, counteracting the decontextualisation of students, and centring the student in the higher learning experience. This also requires the realisation of holistic and contextually relevant L&T approaches and the adoption of additional forms of communication and engagement with students.

7.4. Key consideration 4

Within the broader sectoral context, the ALPs and SSPs driving the integration, as well as their managers, must commit to the approach. This will require appropriate planning, orientating all stakeholders involved, regularly engaging with stakeholders throughout the process to identify challenges and implement mitigation measures, and executing a monitoring and evaluation framework to track progress, and make amendments where necessary. This means a critical reflective stance is required, while considering structural and cultural enablers and constraints. It also requires the alignment of support efforts at university, faculty, and departmental levels.

8. Conclusion and Further Research

In this chapter, we drew on Gibbs' (1988) cyclical reflective model to explore the notion of intentionally integrating the work done by ALPs and SSPs, to enable more meaningful shifts to a student-centred South African higher education future.

We acknowledge that ours is but one perspective, limited to our own institutional context, and that further research into how integrating the work of ALPs and SSPs can be realised (and the impact thereof), is necessary. To this end, one possible line of inquiry could be to explore the function and potential of pre-university schools (or initiatives), and how collaborations between ALPs and SSPs at this early stage in the student lifecycle could set the tone for continuous partnership. Another possibility is to include ALPs, SSPs, lecturers, and students in curriculum (re)design retreats, where courses or programmes are designed collaboratively with the aim of foregrounding the student in the learning experience. Regardless of the angle from which such an integration is approached, our intention with this chapter is to open the door to possibilities for ALP and SSP collaboration to the benefit of student success.

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