

The Strategic Prospects of Support Staff in the Transformation of an Institution of Higher Learning in the Eastern Cape Province, South Africa

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Abstract

This study was formulated to explore the prospects of participation of support staff in transforming higher education institutions to strengthen their contribution to societal transformation through addressing problems in post-apartheid South Africa relating to inequalities, unemployment, and poverty. The literature review showed that research on support staff has been limited relative to that of academics owing to perceptions that support staff were back-office personnel in higher education institutions. In-depth qualitative interviews were conducted to explore the study objectives. Thirteen support staff members from a selected higher education institution in the Eastern Cape province participated in the study. The findings suggested that there is a strong complementary relationship between support staff and academic staff and desired transformation outcomes are best achieved through mutual and symbiotic functioning of academic and support staff. In other words, a holistic consideration of institutions of higher learning is critical. In the final analysis, the study suggested the inclusion of support staff in strategy matters. It is recommended that the management of higher education institutions should be holistic in such way that includes everyone. The paper addresses an area that has limited studies and provides important views for universities to strategically position themselves to address societal challenges facing South Africa.

Keywords: entrepreneur, higher education, support staff, transformation in higher education.

1. Introduction

Since its emergence in Europe as an organised system of teachers and students, higher education faced constant transformations over the years (Brown et al., 2019). These changes have had different implications on academic and support staff in many

institutions. An early study of Rothman and Essenko (2007) recognized that support staff have been considered from a peripheral position relative to academic staff. Kirillov et al. (2015) noted that support staff are often viewed as less important in higher education systems, thereby making them lower class, with their participation in strategic decision-making not yet well considered. As a result of the low rating of support staff, over the years, they have not been strategically valued. Socio-economic, technological, political, and environmental changes have been critical in shaping educational systems across the globe. In the case of South Africa, the democratic transitions to democracy from apartheid have had implications on the nature and quality of education. Higher education institutions now face the challenge of strategically addressing unemployment, poverty, and inequality that have persisted after apartheid. More recently, and across the international landscape, the Covid-19 pandemic and technological developments associated with the Fourth Industrial Revolution have been phenomenal in transforming higher education. As such, studies on the strategic orientation of higher education institutions are on the rise.

2. Literature review

Ryttberg (2020) considered support staff as both non-academic and non-administrators, making their contribution third category within the higher education system. Graham (2013) provided that support staff are also referred to as administrative, non-academic, or general staff, but the central characteristic is that they are not directly involved in the transfer of knowledge to students as academic staff do. In Ryttberg and Geschwin (2017), the same views were provided. Nonetheless, it is also mentioned that some roles of some support staff are blended in that they may provide both academic as well as some non-academic services, which are important in the higher education institution. Research in European countries, as reported in Wray and Kinman (2021), has pointed out that across the world, support staff are suffering from poor psychosocial well-being, which tends to affect their productivity.

To explore the strategic dimension of support staff in institutions of higher education, the study used Kaplan and Norton's (1992) concept of a balanced scorecard. Bochenek (2019) described the balanced scorecard as a critical concept for the enhancement of holistic strategic management within an enterprise. The rationale for using the balanced scorecard in this study is that it is a tool that has gained importance and enduring relevance over the years (Terziev & Georgiev, 2017^[101]). Additionally, the concept of the balanced scorecard emerged from the observation that the strategic success of an enterprise cannot be measured from the financial perspective only. Taking note of the strategic role that higher education institutions play in order to facilitate societal transformation, both financial and non-financial perspectives as provided within the balanced scorecard are critical for consideration (Van Straaten et al., 2016). As provided in Hamdy (2018) and revealed in Benkova et al. (2020^[102]), the balanced scorecard measures institutional outcomes from four perspectives. These are: the financial perspective, customer dimension, internal institutional processes, and learning and growth dimensions. In consideration of the strategic role of support staff at the research site, this study considered how support staff make significant

contributions to the four perspectives of the balanced scorecard in South Africa's transformation concept. With the strong need to address broad dimension for the achievement of the transformation agenda in post-apartheid South Africa, consideration of all players in any institution is critical for a holistic interpretation of relevant issues. The higher education sector is composed of both academic and support staff, but consideration has been more on the welfare and contribution of academic staff as opposed to support staff (Kirillov et al., 2015; Van Straaten et al., 2016). The balanced scorecard enables the measurement of the performance of higher education institutions in terms of external stakeholder factors and internal performance criteria. Coulbeck (2009) argued that the strategic success of higher education institutions in the transfer of knowledge and contribution to essential skills and competencies needed by industry requires the strategic contribution of all staff, including support staff.

3. Methodology

To attend to its aim of exploring the strategic role of support staff in aiding the transformation of the South African higher education sector so that it effectively addresses inequalities, poverty, and unemployment, the qualitative research tradition was adopted. The choice for the qualitative research design was appropriate as it is considered most effective in the collection of detailed, in-depth, and context-relevant data that address phenomena of interest (Christensen et al., 2015; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007). The study was therefore aligned to the social constructivist paradigm based on the acceptance that reality is a social construction based on the language, perceptions, and beliefs of individuals (Van Straaten et al., 2016). Consistent with these views, open-ended discussion-based interviews were conducted, with the responses being recorded and then coded for the study of patterns within the data. There are many categories of support staff in educational settings (see Table 1). With the support of the head of support services of the selected university, a meeting was arranged with 60 support services personnel and a convenience and purposive sampling technique for the participants was implemented. The purpose of the study was explained by the head of university support services. Those staff who were willing to contribute to the study and had relevant ideas to contribute were asked to indicate their availability for the study. At the end of this process, 13 support staff were available for the study, as presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Participant categories and numbers

Participant category	Number interviewed
Building and grounds maintenance	1
Security services	2
Food services provision	1
Health and student services	2
Paraprofessionals (instructional and non-instructional aides)	2
Secretarial, clerks, and administrative services	2

Technical services	1
Trades, crafts, and machine operators	1
Transportation, delivery, and vehicle mechanics	1

4. Findings and discussion

This study intended to establish views on the strategic role that support staff provide to the overall strategic success at a selected higher education institution against the background of limited research in matters of academic staff as well as the need for transformation in education. It was considered that the transformation from apartheid, which was characterized by the need to address poverty, inequality, and unemployment in South Africa, called for the need to have views and perspectives of all stakeholders. As such, it was accepted that support staff represent a critical group for consideration. Participants had to respond to the question: How does the job responsibilities you perform contribute to the vision of this university to transform and contribute to skills, knowledge, and competences for effective transition from the apartheid system? Some participant responses are provided in Table 2. The balanced scorecard was used as a lens to examine and explore the responses provided by participants. This implied the use of deductive themes which emerged from the literature.

Table 2: Interview excerpts

Excerpt	Thematic categories from the balanced scorecard	Subcategories
<i>"This university cannot effectively acquire its academic mandates without us giving it the right image. In my section, we interact significantly with parents and officials from outside. We interact should be seen as important in influencing how these people see this university"</i>	Financial	Continued student interest within the university
<i>"It should be known that there are many issues that students benefit and require from us. For them to succeed and achieve in their academic endeavors, they rely on the support of us here ... Additionally, the academics themselves also rely on us for certain information and support that assist them in delivering the knowledge and skills as appropriate in their work"</i>	Client perspectives	Satisfying the interest of students
<i>"Imagine what will happen to this university if the ground and building maintenance that I do is not provided. In many cases, both students and outsiders want to take a picture of themselves and their colleagues within the school premises. It can be on the lawn or even the buildings because they find them attractive and well maintained. Do you not see that this is one reason why</i>	- Client perspectives - Internal operations dimension	Developing a good image

<i>there are so many students here, including the international ones ..."</i>		
<i>"... do the dirty work of this institution. If such dirty work is not done, who do you think will do it? We need enough motivation and good rewards for us to deliver as expected. The academics are office people who rely on us for the functioning of their offices."</i>	- Client perspectives - Internal operations dimension	Developing a good image
<i>"Do you know that we represent the entry point for people at this institution and we are the first people to interact with important people who come to the institution? So, we are the first service providers ..."</i>	- Growth and learning - Internal processes - Client satisfaction - Financial growth	Complement academic staff
<i>"Do you know that we have many observations which we suggest to the top management of this institution for the initiation of change for improving the institution? What would happen without such advice"</i>	Maintenance of internal processes	Information providers
<i>"Look, I just believe that everyone is strategically critical, and the management of this institution should holistically attend to every issues affecting the university. We should be part of the strategic meetings so that that we buy-in and will further the strategy in the various sections we operate from"</i>	- Growth and learning - Internal processes - Client satisfaction - Financial growth	Complement academic staff
<i>"... our work here complements each other. The university cannot effectively function without us; we also cannot do without the academic staff. So, the basic idea is that we are simply a unit and together we can then achieve, just like parts of a machine. Without one small part, the entire machine may not be functional"</i>	- Growth and learning - Internal processes - Client satisfaction - Financial growth	Complement academic staff
<i>"... we are a source of important information and we highlight problems affecting the growth of the institution"</i>	Stakeholder perspectives	Interaction with stakeholders
<i>"The work that we do here create an environment that is suitable and necessary for the attainment of strategic objectives."</i>	Internal processes	Creating a favourable environment

As illustrated in Table 2, there was a clear indication that the contribution of support staff to the strategic direction of effective knowledge, skills, and competences transfer was within the strategic lens of the balanced scorecard. The perspectives were closely linked to the four elements of the balanced scorecard. There was a significant indication among participants of the existence of an interdependent ecosystem

between the support staff and the academic staff. The responses were well saturated with assertions that academic staff cannot achieve institutional visions as well as missions and objectives alone. At the same time, the participants strongly believed that they are in employment because of the academic requirements as provided by academic staff. This was taken to mean that there is a strong need for coordination and interdependence among all staff categories within the higher education institution. Mushemeza (2016) revealed that academic staff face many challenges, including an increased number of students, remuneration, and infrastructural and governance inadequacies. Following the results, it can be argued that the role of support staff can be considered to be essential to lessen the challenges faced by academic staff. A related study (Ryttberg & Geschwin, 2017) found that support staff are often considered as back-office staff in many academic institutions, resulting in them not being seriously considered in the strategic activities of the institution. The results of this study suggest a need to ensure that support staff are not considered from the back office but as critical in all strategic activities of the institution. Evidence from the present study also indicates a need for support and academic staff to complement each other. Figure 1 illustrates the nature of the relationships between academic and support staff as established in this study.

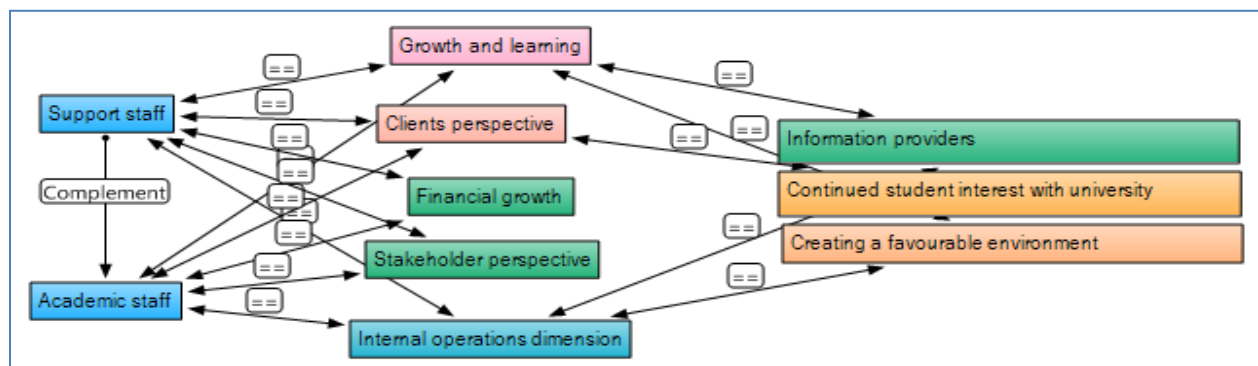


Figure 1: Nature of relationships between academic and support staff in higher education

Figure 1 is a diagrammatic interpretation of the data presented in Table 2. The diagram was created through a process of thematic links as provided by the participants. The figure shows the essence of the relationship between support staff and academic staff, which is complementarity. The study also showed that both support staff and academic staff have an impact on the attainment of the strategic thrust of the educational institution from which the participants were selected. Additionally, support staff were also found to be critical information providers and essential in sustaining student interest in the organization as well as creating a favourable environment for students. Furthermore, the study found that the points from which most support staff operate are such that they meet a large number of stakeholders, making them critical in building the image of the higher education institution. In the final analysis, this study suggests the equalization of the role of support and academic staff in achieving the strategic goals of adequate transformation of society and the effective transfer of knowledge and skills to the society. The symbiotic or complementary relationship established in this study is imperative for a holistic and broad interpretation of the expectations of higher education. Evidence in this study

suggests that the link between academic and non-academic cannot be considered causal but complementary, with all groups being critical.

5. Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to explore the prospects of support staff in contributing to the strategic transformation of an institution of higher learning in the Eastern Cape province, South Africa. The transformation that this study focused on was in respect to addressing societal inequalities, unemployment, and skills transfer in post-apartheid higher educational systems. The results of the interviews conducted in this study indicated that support staff strongly complement academic staff and it is important to consider their participation in strategic issues within the institution. These findings support the literature in advocating for a holistic consideration of higher education institutions to succeed in transforming them and the society at large. A complementary relationship was found to exist between support and academic staff in a way indicating that academic staff cannot realize desired objectives on their own but strongly need those services that are provided by support staff. In addition, the participants highlighted that they also cannot be considered alone. These results suggest that there is a need for further research on ways of fostering the complementary relationship between support and academic staff. Higher education institutions are recommended to consider support staff in strategic development, implementation, and evaluation. In other words, this study has established evidence that considering support staff as back-office personnel is inappropriate in attaining institutional objectives.

6. References

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