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CHAPTER 5

Rethinking support for university teachers in the context of a decolonising higher education: the role of academic developers

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Abstract

In this chapter, the diverse histories of formerly different universities that were merged into one is the focus of this study. It illustrates how academic developers' (ADs) commitment post the merger to continuously re-think strategies to effectively offer responsive academic development support to students and academic staff continues to produce good results. Tasked with a mandate to render academic development support to academic staff, postgraduate, as well as undergraduate students to achieve equity of outcomes, ADs continue to re-think the strategy and approach in fulfilling their mandate. The chapter draws from New Literacy Studies (NLS) as the theoretical lens to advance its argument for the critical role ADs play to professionalise academics as university teachers.

Keywords: decoloniality, academic development, academic support, New Literacy Studies

5.1 Introduction

Since universities are institutions that offer formal education, one of their major tasks is to develop students' cognitive abilities. Kembo (2000:289) defines these abilities as students' "...memory, their ability to generalise, to grasp relationships such as cause and effect, to predict the consequences of events, to grasp the essential message of a speech or a book, and to evaluate situations." Kembo (2000:289) further points out that formal education is meant to develop affective skills, by which she means: "...attitudes to work and study...tolerance for people who may differ... [in view] ... learners' social skills...their ability to work together with other people, to communicate with them, and to support those who need assistance". Taking Kembo's explications into consideration, this chapter presents an argument that, unless teaching approaches and practices in the university are carefully and deliberately planned such that they successfully inculcate and enhance the above skills in students, universities will be bound to fail. This will be a failure not only for the graduate but also for society and the various professional occupations more broadly. Thus a deliberate investigation into university teaching practices accompanied by academic staff development is necessary. Conferring degrees should mean, as Nyerere (1995:5) puts it, that we have educated able students: "to produce logical thinking based on facts, to explain the thought processes and the logic, and to respond to the intellectual challenge of an opposing argument – whether this comes from within or outside their ranks."

These are the skills our ever-evolving society desperately needs. To develop all these skills, I want to argue, requires a sophisticated and deeper knowledge and understanding by academics of the nature of the disciplines they teach and research in, and how teaching practices are shaped by the nature of the knowledge they teach, and what counts as valid ways to transmit it. In a society that sells and buys everything in

exchange for the general equivalence, it is easy for disciplinarity to be lost as disciplinary experts are frantically attempting to respond to the criterion of economic usefulness that tends to influence the acceptance, and therefore success, of any course introduced within the context of tertiary education. Indeed, the context in which we are slowly but surely undergoing an imposition of the “hegemony of instrumental reason” (Blake *et al.*, 1998:3), these are legitimate concerns. Educational authorities and market forces continue to exert pressure on higher education teachers in ways that pose a threat to formative degrees.

This is because disciplines in such degrees are interested, among other things, in the institutional and social importance of ‘non-marketable knowledge’. ‘Non-marketable’ not in the sense that the skills these degrees inculcate in students do not have the material, monetary and practical use, but in the sense that they are not of immediate, vocation-specific marketability like Medicine, Accounting, and such like. The effect of this in some disciplines is, among other things, to re-model teaching in ways that will appeal to instrumentalist reason. Since university education should enable its graduate to develop skills to reflect on the condition of humanity more broadly and are concerned with the articulation of thoughts regarding how humanity experiences the world, a move towards remodelling teaching in ways that succumb to the pressure from the world of markets means the reason for the university could be compromised. For example, in writing about the Humanities as a field of study, Noyes’ (1999:214) perspective is useful in this regard. For him, the Humanities mode of knowledge production focusses on “...the articulation of difficulty is the mode of knowledge production proper to the Humanities. And it is an essential mode of knowledge production in a democratic society, a society that takes its own humanity seriously.” Blake *et al.* (1998:4) understand this role as “the transformation of individuals and of their understanding of their

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world [and]”, and he goes further, “the role is being pushed one side, if not abolished....”

Within this environment, the articulation of difficulty [as] a mode of knowledge production should guide and shape the choices university teachers make as regards teaching approaches. In other words, students’ loyalty to a tradition of enquiry needs to be fostered through teaching practices so that courses can sustain such a tradition. This is the kind of commitment that is at the heart of academic endeavour and is fundamental in higher education values that are quickly marginalised due to globalised economic ethos. It is for this reason that the Scholarship in Higher Education (HE) teaching and learning, particularly in decolonising contexts such as South Africa (SA), constantly emphasises the need for academics as university teachers to engage in a continual and systematic inquiry into student learning (Mgqwashu *et al.*, 2020; Vandeyar, 2020; Leibowitz, 2017)”. This is more urgent in a decolonising higher education context where diverse groups of students, the majority of whom literature (Timmis *et al.*, 2021) describe as non-traditional, have already raised a concern during the 2015 *#Rhodes Must Fall* student protests.

Regarding what students had to say during these protests, Shay (2016:3) reminds us that many curricula “are taught in oppressive classrooms by academics who are demeaning, unprofessional and use their power in ways that discriminate unfairly against students”. Amongst other things, this confirms the fact that as university teachers, academics are not just “...conduits of the curriculum. They are complex beings constituted amongst other things of an identity, value systems, beliefs and lived experiences – all of which inform their practice within particular contexts” (Vandeyar, 2020:784).

It is these identity issues within the academy that make the role of academic developers (ADs) strategic and critical in transforming and

decolonising learning and teaching learning spaces. The professional development opportunities they are tasked to set up are designed to foster a culture of critical reflexivity on the part of university teachers with regard to the extent to which their identities enable and/or constrain student learning. In this chapter, academic development (AD) is understood as an area of practice and research in higher education that intends to create “conditions supportive of teaching and learning, in the broadest sense” (Leibowitz, 2014:359) to “help create learning environments that enhance educational quality” (Pleschová *et al.*, 2012:9). As academics are appointed *primarily* based on their disciplinary knowledge, disciplinary expertise, and research, with teaching and learning receiving *a secondary emphasis*, the contribution by ADs to the academic project cannot be over-emphasised. Writing on what he calls the ‘mystique of merit’ used for academic staff appointments, Thornton (2013:129) points out that:

Faith in the idea of an unequivocal ‘best person’ arises from the belief that merit is a neutral and apolitical variable...The objective element comprises a candidate’s qualifications, employment history, grants, publications, teaching areas [my emphasis], PhD completions, etc - the type of information appearing on an academic’s CV - but a literal approach makes no sense without interpretation. From which institution were the qualifications obtained? What is the standing of that institution? Is the candidate’s work history relevant? Are the publications refereed? What is the standing of the journals in which they appear or, in the case of books, the publishing houses that published them? How significant is the body of research? How original and creative is it? What impact has the candidate’s scholarship had? And so on.

As evidenced in Thornton’s (2013) words above, academic appointments appear not to treat the role of academics as *teachers* with

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the same scrutiny as research productivity. As I will attempt to show in this chapter, the role of the ADs in the context discussed is that of fostering synergies between academics' disciplinary knowledge and their development as university teachers, an idea van Dijk (2022) and her colleagues develop well in their *Connecting academics' disciplinary knowledge to their professional development as university teachers: a conceptual analysis of teacher expertise and teacher knowledge*. In our context, employing well-designed seminars/workshops that enhance their professional responsibilities as university teachers, our context shares a commitment with the national government's framework dubbed *National-Framework-for-Enhancing-Academics-as-University-Teachers* (DHET, 2018).

This framework has at its core the improvement of the quality of university teaching, with a primary purpose to serve as a guide to the higher education system in developing and implementing strategies to enhance academics as university teachers. Hence the framework aims to promote professional development and recognition of academics as university teachers, through inter alia, more consistent and equitable access to professional development opportunities (DHET, 2018:3). All these efforts are responses to increase enrolment of students' majority from diverse ranges of demographic, socio-economic, attitudinal, and educational backgrounds. For this chapter, I focus on one of the universities that has experienced enhanced complexities brought about by the 1 January 2004 merging of three historically different institutions, which are spread across two provinces (North-West and Gauteng).

5.2 The research context

This merger of universities included the former University of North-West which is located in the former Bophuthatswana Homeland and is mainly black-dominated in terms of staff and students. The second university is

the former Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education located in Potchefstroom, a town formerly designated to the White Afrikaner population by the apartheid regime, and relatively dominated by Whites in terms of staff and students. The third university that was part of the merger is the Sebokeng Campus of the former Vista University, another Black populated university, in terms of staff and students. Thus staff and students of the three demographically different universities were incorporated into the North-West University (NWU). The NWU's commitment to aligning its academic programmes, qualifications and modules to ensure every student across the three campuses experiences the same educational experience, receives the same quality education and access to necessary resources for success, with a crucial role placed on Academic Development (AD) work.

The academic developer role who are placed in the Faculty Teaching and Learning Support (FTLS) directorate of the Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL) are the focus of this chapter. FTLS is located within the CTL of the NWU. It is one of the three directorates within CTL, with Centralised Teaching and Learning Functions (CT&LF), Specialised Projects, and Research in Higher Education (SPR) as the other two directorates. Of the three directorates, FTLS's core function is that of offering a professional partnership with academic faculties in terms of Student Academic Development and Support (SADS), as well as Academic Professional Development (APD). In line with the NWU's Teaching and Learning Strategy (2021 – 2025:4), FTLS' decision to review its reason for being was so that the Team could contribute to:

- the creation of viable HE access pathways with concomitant foundational support to enhance student success;
- the NWU curriculum project (inclusive of reconceptualization of the first- and the final-year experience, expanding the nature and enhancing the quality of continuing education (short course)

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offerings, critical cross-field outcomes across years of study, work-integrated and service-learning opportunities in preparation of community life and the world of work, and independent research development as the crown of an academic pathway);

- the strategic teaching, learning, and assessment project (inclusive of fit-for-purpose technology integration into all T-L and assessment environments (virtual, physical, and social);
- the professionalisation of higher education teaching and learning; and
- the student academic support and development strategies to enhance student retention and success.

Given the diverse histories of each of the campuses, FTLS's mandate could not be executed the same way across the three campuses *IF* our goal were to achieve equity (*not equality*) of outcomes. This is the reason the FTLS directorate appreciates the 'absence' of CTL from the list of entities within the University that are *obligated* to align their work. Memo 20 spells out in detail (amongst other things) the need for academic and some support entities to align their work across the three campuses. Contrary to the other entities, the nature of CTL's work is, by definition, hard to align. While we concede that, there are common, fundamental, and core SADS and APD needs across the three campuses *that could be aligned*, research repeatedly shows that 'support' is *always* 'situational' and inadvertently, 'contextual'. The needs of a lecturer with a responsibility to lecture in a class with 50% of the students who come from rural contexts who received schooling from the former Department of Education and Training public schooling system, for example, will be different from the type of support that could be given to a lecturer with 70% of the students coming from

former Model C or Independent Examination Board schooling backgrounds. Similarly, support for these groups of students *cannot be aligned*. Going forward, we planned to consider these nuances with faculties as we planned collectively, collaboratively, and collegially the processes and activities designed to support students and academic staff.

This is the role Academic Developers (ADs) took up. Indeed, the merger brought students with a diverse range of needs into the same learning spaces that university teachers in most Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) were either not prepared for /or are insufficiently equipped to respond to (Strydom *et al.*, 2017). The three HEIs and academic staff members had distinct histories and human, financial and educational resources that influenced their classroom practices. This is understandable as, before the merger, these universities separately enrolled and taught student populations that were differentially prepared for tertiary education (Pretorius, 2017). Thus, regardless of these obvious challenges and conundrums, these institutions were expected to attain the same goals. As part of the national building discourse and imperative, they needed to work together to ensure academic programmes and diverse students' experiences were aligned and were of the same quality. Academics quickly realised that the expected tasks required capacitation to build their disciplinary expertise, professionalism and responsiveness. The task included the need to keep the 'Student Voice' in mind as academics were developed. This warranted conversations around a need to embrace responsive curricula through teaching and assessment strategies that ensured equity of opportunity for success.

This challenge is not unique to South Africa. It is equally a global concern as HEIs around the world have had to respond to students with different prior learning experiences from traditional or mainstream

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students (Timmis *et al.*, 2021) they are used to. In post-conflict, decolonising societies globally, this more diversified undergraduate student population has included first-in-family, 'non-traditional', 'historically under-represented' or 'atypical' students, descriptors that have also been applied to students from low-income households (Fry *et al.*, 2009). These students experience exclusionary university education, influenced by their economic backgrounds. In other words, teaching and learning in most HEIs tends to privilege the elite, with a limited number of students whose backgrounds and socialisation articulate the values and norms that shaped higher education. In this context, the privileged often come to university, already possessing the values and norms, practices and aptitude valued in formal learning contexts; thus making a transition from home to university a seamless experience (Mgqwashu, 2009). Due to the global unequal distribution of wealth and societal resources, students from marginalised communities experience tertiary education as alienating and a sense of non-belongingness (Mgqwashu *et al.*, 2020).

It is in this context that the role of ADs is crucial. Their contribution lies in challenging and engaging academic staff as university teachers to consider the pedagogical practices required to enable the marginalised to access the knowledge needed to navigate higher education, without alienating students from privileged backgrounds. This is particularly important in a country where a transition from an education system and policies that privilege mainstream cultures to one that is democratic and committed to equal participation is under way. By pedagogical practices, or what Bernstein (1990) calls pedagogic discourse, I mean a combination of content selection and framing, as well as teaching, pacing and assessment practices.

All these considerations resulted in the adaptation of FTLS daily operations to respond efficiently to supporting academics as university

teachers. Owing to the changes in student demographics mainly brought about through the merger, the thrust of AD work became that of drawing from the latest scholarship and research to perform the task of supporting academics as university teachers. This involved persuading academic departments to appreciate the learning and teaching implications of the merger of three historically different universities that became one university, the accompanying massification of higher education more broadly; thus the need to make explicit the ‘language’ codes of their disciplines across the curricular as daily classroom practice. In other words, the focus of AD work was to encourage university teachers to embrace pedagogic approaches that would democratise learning and their classrooms as a way to ensure all students had equal opportunity to succeed.

5.2.1. Selected ideas shaping FTLS ADs work

In most decolonising contexts, there are ongoing debates on the extent to which the theoretical underpinnings that inform pedagogical choices and assessment practices in most HEIs still favour the colonial enterprise. By colonial enterprise I mean the tendencies that begin from northern research methodologies to exclude from:

...knowledge production the formerly colonised, historically marginalized, and oppressed groups, which today are most often represented ... [by] broad categories of non-Western, third world, developing, underdeveloped, First Nations, Indigenous peoples, third world women, African American women, and so on (Chilisa, 2012:1–2).

Leibowitz (2017) also expresses concerns about the slowness with which scholarship on theorising teaching and learning from a decolonial lens for higher education has been evolving. She notes that scholarship on theorising teaching and learning has “mainly been produced in the

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West, and within the discourses and paradigms emanating from the West” (Leibowitz, 2017: 95).

The implications for AD work in this regard is that it ought to involve deliberateness in unsettling dominant teaching and learning discourses that are not responsive to the SA context and end with excluding the majority of students. It is the task of an AD to encourage university teachers to appreciate the fact that pedagogic discourse is “a principle by which other discourses are appropriated and brought into a special relationship with each other, for their selective transmission and acquisition” (Bernstein, 1996:47). However, if the theories that produce knowledge on teaching and learning are produced in the north, “... what would be the means for students who do not share social worlds with the world where such theory is developed, to engage with...knowledge? How would they come to know it?” (Leibowitz, 2017:96.)

Thus, through referring to a specific context in which a strategic re-thinking of the approach to support the academic project occurred, this chapter suggests a possible role ADs could play to ensure student diversity and campus histories of the three merged universities can be turned into an opportunity rather than the problem. This is the reason this chapter discusses the rationale for the decisions that informed the re-thinking of the strategy to professionalise academics as university teachers in a merged university. Since NWU committed itself to aligning its academic programmes, qualifications and modules, the change of strategy discussed in this chapter was necessary, for it reflected a commitment to capacitate university teachers in ways that will enable them to be responsive in their curricular development, pedagogies, as well as assessment. This is crucial so that every student from across the three campuses undergoes the same educational experience and receives the same quality education to ensure educational success.

5.2.2. Theoretical lens to understanding the phenomenon

The chapter proposes New Literacy Studies as the overarching theoretical lens through which the re-think of the strategy for AD work was conceptualised. Gee (1990, 1998), one of the founders of the New Literacy Studies group, has contributed to a theory of literacy-as-social-practice through theorising the notion of Discourse. Gee (1990:143) defines Discourse as: "...a socially accepted association among ways of using language, thinking, feeling, believing, valuing, and of acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or 'social network' or to signal (that one is playing) a socially meaningful 'role'." Gee's (1990) definition of literacy is equally pertinent in the way the work reported in this chapter is conceptualised. For him, literacy means 'mastery or fluent control over a secondary discourse' (Gee, 1990:153). Both may be said to present Discourse and literacy as encompassing more than language or literacies, to include not only ways of speaking, reading, and writing within particular contexts but also ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking and believing, that is acceptable within specific groups of people in particular contexts. This understanding offered the ADs team the necessary tools needed to professionalise and capacitate academic staff as university teachers, and to see teaching in the university as an attempt to induct students into specific disciplinary identities. Indeed, according to Gee (in Boughey & McKenna, 2016), a discourse therefore encapsulates a socially recognisable identity and a way of being in the world. As university teachers, academics were enabled by ADs to understand that students acquire ways of being through exposure to the discipline-specific spaces in which they have enrolled. That is why the socio-cultural backgrounds of students either enhance or inhibit success in HEIs. To present the rationale for the shift in the ways ADs previously enacted their roles, and how and why the strategic approach in this work was affected, this

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chapter draws upon three core theoretical constructs emanating from Gee's (2003) work, namely 'semiotic domains', 'affinity groups' and 'design grammars'.

Semiotic domains are contexts characterised by groups that hold distinctive social practices, with content that is constantly changed and negotiated among participants. In many respects, different academic disciplines in which students are enrolled typify semiotic domains. People in disciplines possess very particular meaning-making mechanisms which manifest through interactions through words, sounds, gestures, and images. These are not static objects defined as a body of unchanging content knowledge, but always evolving as new knowledge pushes the boundaries of what is currently known. Strongly associated with the notion of semiotic domains is the notion of affinity groups. This is a group of people who share semiotic domains and among whom familiar knowledge, skills, tools, and resources are distributed and utilised in ways that are valued and accepted within a group. They thus share sets of practices, goals, values, and norms associated with the semiotic domain. Members of each of these groups can also be referred to as 'insiders' (Mgqwashu, 2011). Mastering a semiotic domain can thus be said to involve joining an affinity group as an apprentice. For this reason, academic disciplines are semiotic domains into which students are supposed to be apprenticed by affinity groups within them; the academics who are members or 'insiders'. It is here where the apprenticing of students through a deliberate, inclusive pedagogical approach is crucial.

This pedagogical approach is realised through scaffolding students' learning within a semiotic domain into discipline-specific design grammars. Gee (2003) asserts that every semiotic domain has a design grammar. In simple terms, a design grammar is a set of principles or patterns through which linguistic materials and practices in the domain

are combined to communicate subject-specific meanings. Gee (2003) further distinguishes between the ‘internal design grammar’: ways in which the content of the semiotic domain is presented, and the ‘external design grammar’: the on-going social practices that determine the principles and patterns through which the semiotic domain communicates meanings. Thus, for academic access and success to be a reality, students need to learn how to participate successfully in an affinity group and master the design grammar of the semiotic domain.

A pedagogical approach that is informed by this theorisation has a decolonising potential. This is because colonial pedagogies tend to be opaque to the majority of students. After all, they pre-suppose cognitive abilities and worldviews about students without verifying their existence. Yet, it is towards these very tendencies to which curricular choices, pedagogy and assessment are biased. These pedagogies tend to ‘speak’ to and favour the elite and marginalise the majority of students who have since become a critical part of HEIs due to the long overdue massification of higher education that occurred in the early 1990s in SA (Mgqwashu, 2009). Decolonial pedagogies, on the other hand, make explicit the invisible meta-linguistic traditions that have been shaping disciplinary discourses for centuries, as well as draw from (or at least point students to) different and/or alternative knowledge traditions to enhance access to thinking and speaking habits of the affinity group into which students are inducted. This is because decolonial pedagogues take seriously the fact that the world is certainly larger than Europe and America, and therefore cannot confine the next generation of knowledge producers to northern hemisphere epistemologies only.

5.2.3. Limitations to an AD’s role

One of the opportunities that NWU’s CTL has compared to similar centres in other merged SA universities, is that it is supposed to support

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academics and students within an overly complex university. First, its two biggest campuses, Mahikeng and Potchefstroom, are 201 km apart. The distance between Mahikeng and Vanderbijlpark is 276.4 km, and between Potchefstroom and Vanderbijlpark campuses, the distance is 76.3 km. To add to this, academic programmes, qualifications and modules are aligned, with the delivery of the same content occurring in all three campuses, sometimes synchronously and online by the same academic staff to students across the three sites, occasionally face-to-face in one campus at a time, and sometimes asynchronously via online recorded videos. With a population of 44,139 (Black: 30,387; White: 11,664; Coloured: 1,574; Asian: 474; Other: 40) students in 2022 (NWU, 2023), and the fact that before the merger each campus was an independent university with its academic programmes, the AD's role required continuous serious strategic rethinking.

While these complications may be viewed as a challenge, they presented the FTLS directorate, in the CTL an opportunity to re-think its daily operations, re-strategize its approach to supporting the academic project, and seriously consider an alternative approach to establish the motivation for offering the type of support, to whom, when and how. These reconsiderations emerged out of the recognition of the real and urgent need to be responsive to the exigencies brought by the merger. In the process, there was recognition of the lack and/or in some cases absence of a scientifically grounded database on which support to university teachers and students was needed and rendered. Most of the work was generated through faculty-specific requests, as well as from the directive by senior management (often from the Deputy Vice Chancellor, Teaching and Learning). From the FTLS side, there seemed to be no research-driven, evidence-based and latest scholarship-led initiatives that informed daily work. Through the help of eight CTL Faculty Leads, who were assigned to each faculty and had a team of ten members or more under them, faculty requests reached the FTLS team.

These requests seemed to be the major motivation for engaging with academic staff as well as with students.

Given the specificity of the challenges owing to the different demographics and histories of both our students and staff at all three campuses, the CTL Faculty Teams Model and its effectiveness in supporting students and academic staff across the three campuses proved to be largely compromised. Having a CTL Faculty Lead stationed at one campus to look after a faculty which has academic staff members and students who are located across the three campuses was a significant reason for the *appearance* of the limited impact and effectiveness of the Model. At best, CTL faculty leads also seemed to have been doing more work themselves than members within their teams of ten or more staff members. In turn, this work by a Team Lead tended to concentrate mainly on the campuses where the Team Lead was located, leaving academics at other campuses less 'attended to' and essentially, fragmenting the FTLS directorate in terms of the support it is meant to offer to all faculty academic staff and students.

The other aspect that seemed to have undermined the CTL Faculty Teams Model was the principle guiding membership. While it is impossible to have expertise, qualifications and experience as the only requirements for colleagues to join a specific CTL Faculty Team, it seemed part of the reason a Team Lead accepted more responsibility than they had to take, had to do with the limited knowledge of the faculty they were assigned to and disciplines in it. In cases where a CTL Faculty Team Lead and/or some of the members qualified the same faculty, healthy working relationships with academics in that faculty were noticeable. These concerns necessitated an urgent need to address the way FTLS worked. There was certainly a commitment to strengthen the work of the CTL Faculty Teams Model, yet without compromising the specific needs of each campus. To realise this, a re-

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look at the FTLS team distribution and structure was the first response. It is in this regard that New Literacy Studies was helpful.

To respond to these concerns, the latest scholarship and research were reliant on the field of higher education studies more broadly, and the concepts discussed earlier from New Literacy Studies. More specifically, to engage with faculties at Teaching and Learning Committee meetings, FTLS drew from Gee's (2003) 'semiotic domains', 'affinity groups' and 'design grammars' to agitate for a need to revisit pedagogic practices, assessment and curricular design and development. These engagements gave rise to the development of healthy and collegial spaces for critical dialogue with academic staff, first at School levels, and then at subject group levels. Senior faculty leadership gave FTLS opportunities to present various scenarios that compromised AD work within the faculties.

5.2.4. Re-thinking an Academic Development support strategy

Under the FTLS leadership, fellow CTL directors from the other two directorates were invited to engage in deliberations that occurred between FTLS and the eight faculties. The FTLS leadership was committed to ensuring that, contrary to the CTL Faculty Teams Model, the new approach to supporting the academic project by ADs needed to enable all FTLS members of staff to support all 8 faculties, without being confined to one faculty. After receiving support from fellow directors within CTL to present '*a revised strategy*' that was to support the academic project in ways that were designed to address all the obstacles revealed by preliminary findings about the CTL Faculty Teams Model, a revised FTLS team distribution and structure across the three campuses was developed. Figure 5.1 is a representation of how the team was revised:

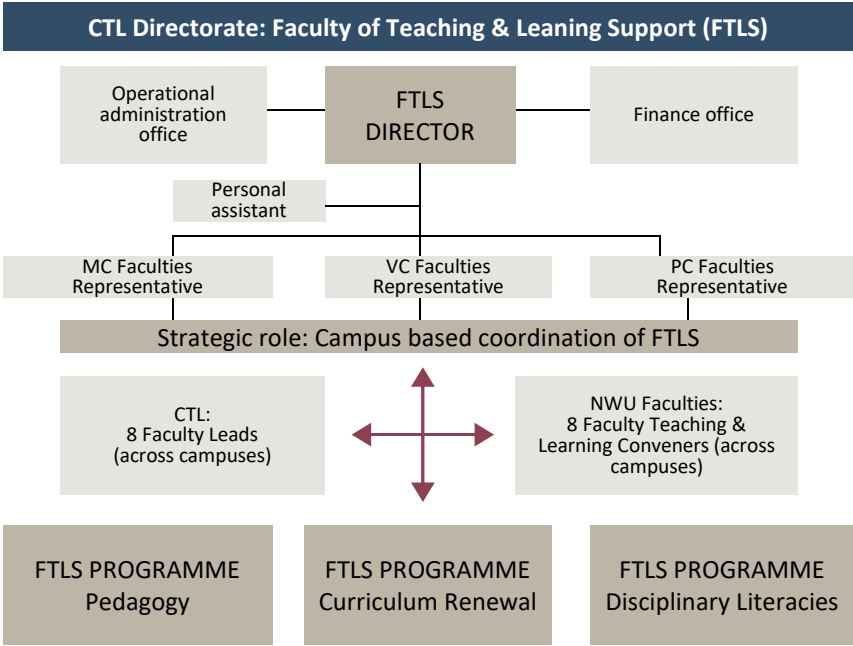


Figure 5.1: Revised team distribution and structure

To realise its goals, the team was changed from having one Faculty Lead per campus (with ten or more team members under them), to identifying a Campus Representative per teaching site. These three representatives, one per campus, had a responsibility to coordinate campus-based faculty requests from all eight faculties. This did not take away the Faculty Lead role. What it did, however, is that it enabled FTLS to extend its footprint in each faculty by having one person coordinate the list of all campus-based faculty needs, a task a Faculty Lead would not add to their already large workload. In addition to this, FTLS negotiated with faculties to create a Faculty Teaching and Learning Convener role. This role enabled FTLS to have a contact point within faculties, someone who assembled all faculty academic development support needs to pass them on to a Campus Representative. These decisions were made to create a smooth work relationship between

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faculties and FTLS and to ensure someone was tracing and recording progress on the support rendered by FTLS. To ensure academic leadership and that the new strategy was research-led, scholarly informed and responsive to the unique character of NWU, a further creation of three sets of teams was undertaken. Unlike the other teams which were designed for operation reasons, these particular teams were to become communities of practice that were to immerse themselves into current thinking on higher education Academic Developer role scholarship.

To realise the objective of being scholarly in our approach to supporting the academic project, we drew from Gee's concepts: 'semiotic domains', 'affinity groups' and 'design grammars' to set up three community of practice programmes, with each assigned 12 – 15 staff members. The name of each community of practice programme was aligned to Bernstein's (1975) pedagogical theory on formal educational knowledge, and how it is realised. For Bernstein (1975), formal education knowledge can be realised through *curriculum*, *pedagogy*, and *evaluation*. FTLS derived the names of the three programmes from this Bernsteinian formulation and gave each programme a name: *Pedagogy*, *Curriculum Renewal*, and *Disciplinary Literacies*.

Figure 5.2 below depicts the academic focus of each of the three-programme teams:

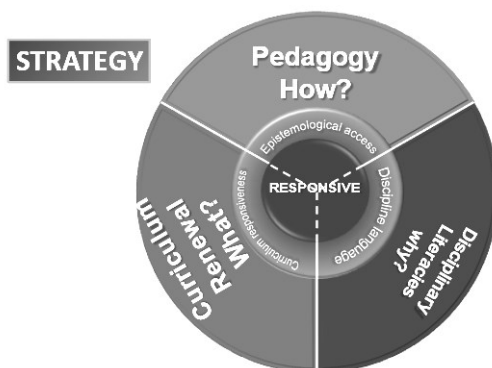


Figure 5.2: Revised Strategy: 3 FTLS Programmes

To ensure cross-campus coordination of scholarly engagement with the latest thinking in each of the three areas, the leadership of each programme came from all staff across the three campuses. One from the MC and one from the VC was responsible for leading *Pedagogy*, one from the PC and one from the MC were responsible for leading *Disciplinary Literacies*, and one from the MC and one from the PC were responsible for leading *Curriculum Renewal*. Since the main task was to support the academic project, it was necessary to ensure conceptual coherence in the team's approach to supporting academic staff and students in all faculties. To achieve this conceptual coherence within and across programmes, a specific theoretical lens that aligns with each concept from Gee's (2003) work was identified. We selected *Transparency in Learning and Teaching* (TiLT) for Pedagogy (aligns with 'affinity groups'), *Legitimation Code Theory* (LCT) for Curriculum Renewal (aligns with 'semiotic domains'), and *Genre Theory* (GT) for Disciplinary Literacies (aligns with 'design grammars').

Put simply, TiLT is a learning and teaching framework that employs a set of teaching strategies with a focus on making transparent to students how and why they are learning and engaging with course content in

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particular ways. LCT is a framework for understanding and changing knowledge practices in different areas of social life. It allows people to explore the 'rules of the game' in different fields and then develop ways of teaching more people to succeed, or to change those rules. GT, on the other hand, is a collective term used to describe theoretical approaches that are concerned with how similar situations generate typified responses called genres, which serve as a platform for both creating an understanding based on shared expectations and also for shaping the social context. While TiLTinHE was helping the team to capacitate academic staff with skills to make explicit to students why certain choices were made during learning events, LCT gave the team tools to empower academics to be transparent about what counts as knowledge in their chosen fields, and GT was drawn upon by the team to capacitate academics in helping students learn how to mean within their disciplines.

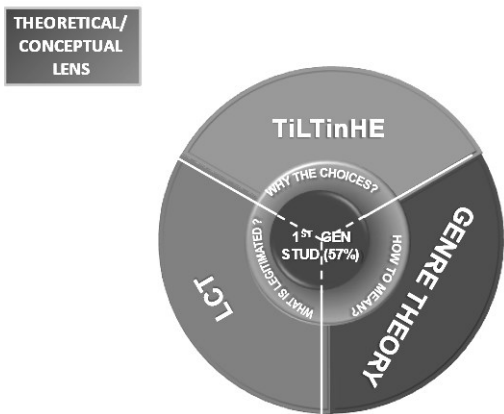


Figure 5.3 illustrates these conceptual choices that enabled the FTLS team to execute its tasks:

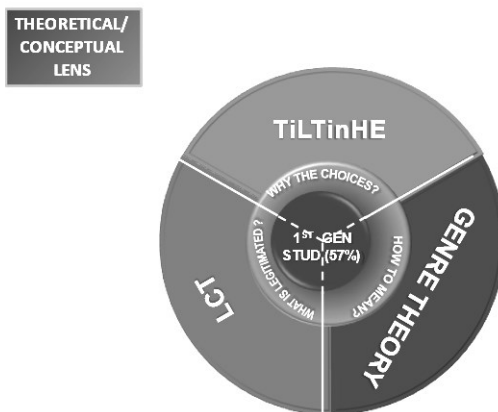


Figure 5.3: FTLS conceptual lenses to support the academic project

Finally, to ensure each member within each Programme was sufficiently capacitated to develop a working knowledge of each theoretical lens and to carry out their tasks within their Programme from a scholarly perspective, but also to create an awareness of how each Programme constructed itself from a scholarship point of view, a series of three workshops on TiLT, LCT and GT were organised. While each FTLS team member was assigned to a specific Programme, everyone was invited to a 3-day workshop at which the theoretical and conceptual ideas upon which each Programme drew were elaborated. This was a strategy to ensure each FTLS staff member carried out their tasks on an informed basis and with confidence and dignity. In addition to this workshop, each Programme had to hold fortnightly *Reading Sessions* on relevant latest literature related to the theoretical lens and concepts (TiLT, LCT, GT) they needed to draw upon as they supported teaching (academic staff development) and learning (student support) in faculties. This ensured that not only a Coordinator on a campus was confident to support academic staff and students in a faculty, but each member could also do so with great skill and confidence.

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This approach proved effective as it ensured that every member acquired the necessary ‘theoretical working understanding’ about what they needed to do and how to execute their tasks from a theoretical base. As they attended to academic staff or students’ needs across disciplinary areas, the latest thinking and scholarship on Academic Development continued to be the resource from which to draw. What this did for FTLS as well was that it ‘broke the wall of separation’ between Academic Developers and Student Advisors. This is because the theories selected offer ideas and practical strategies for both student support and academic staff development in their role as university teachers. Thus any member of the Programme could now be called upon to support teaching and learning in any faculty and all campuses, and students or academic staff alike. As a strategic meeting point, it was prudent to identify entry points into faculties. The custodians of the academic project within faculties were such points of entry, as illustrated in Figure 5.4.

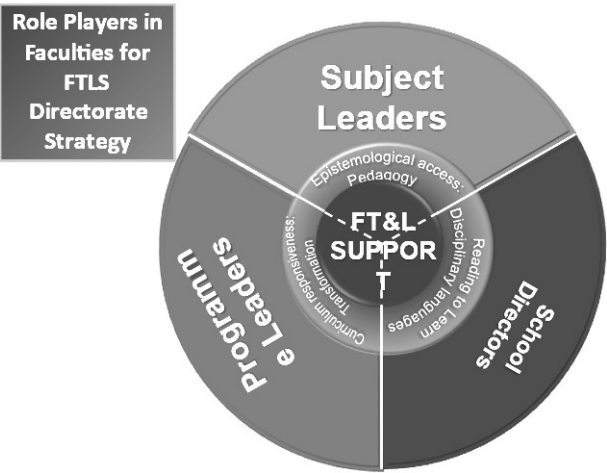


Figure 5.4: Strategic entry points into faculties

As middle-management roles, School directors oversee the disciplinary cognateness and affinity in ways that facilitate a School's academic identity, Programme leaders need to quality assure the academic integrity of the Programme as far as module and course combinations are concerned, and Subject leaders have a task to oversee the extent to which pedagogic practices 'enabled learning' and academic success for all students. This understanding of the role of each role-player within faculties empowered the FTLS team to understand how to engage with each of the faculty members.

To further strengthen this scientific and scholarly approach to supporting the academic project, FTLS decided to add the generation of baseline data based on which the FTLS teams could approach faculties. This was designed to add the reason for approaching a faculty to offer support to academic staff and students. We identified data sources to include middle managers of Schools and student representatives within faculties who are spread across the three campuses. Such data was generated and added to the already existing individual day-to-day requests from lecturers. The team was convinced that a systematic, scholarly, and triangulated approach to generating data that will inform our Student Academic Development and Support (SADS) as well as Academic Professional Development (APD) initiatives was the best option.

All these choices ensured a collaborative approach between FTLS and faculties to develop faculty support activities that needed to be planned and put in place for the duration of one-year. Decisions on ***when, why, and how*** we developed workshops for students and academic staff, organised seminars and/or curriculum conversations within faculties, or invited international scholars, and innovative local and international researchers in specific fields of study, were made collegially and collaboratively with faculties. **Figure 5.5** illustrates this triangulated data

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generation system we came up with to ensure the running of consultative meetings because of which support was to be provided to faculties:

Collaborative events leading to the identification, design and implementation of support strategies by the CTL Directorate for Faculty Teaching & Learning Support

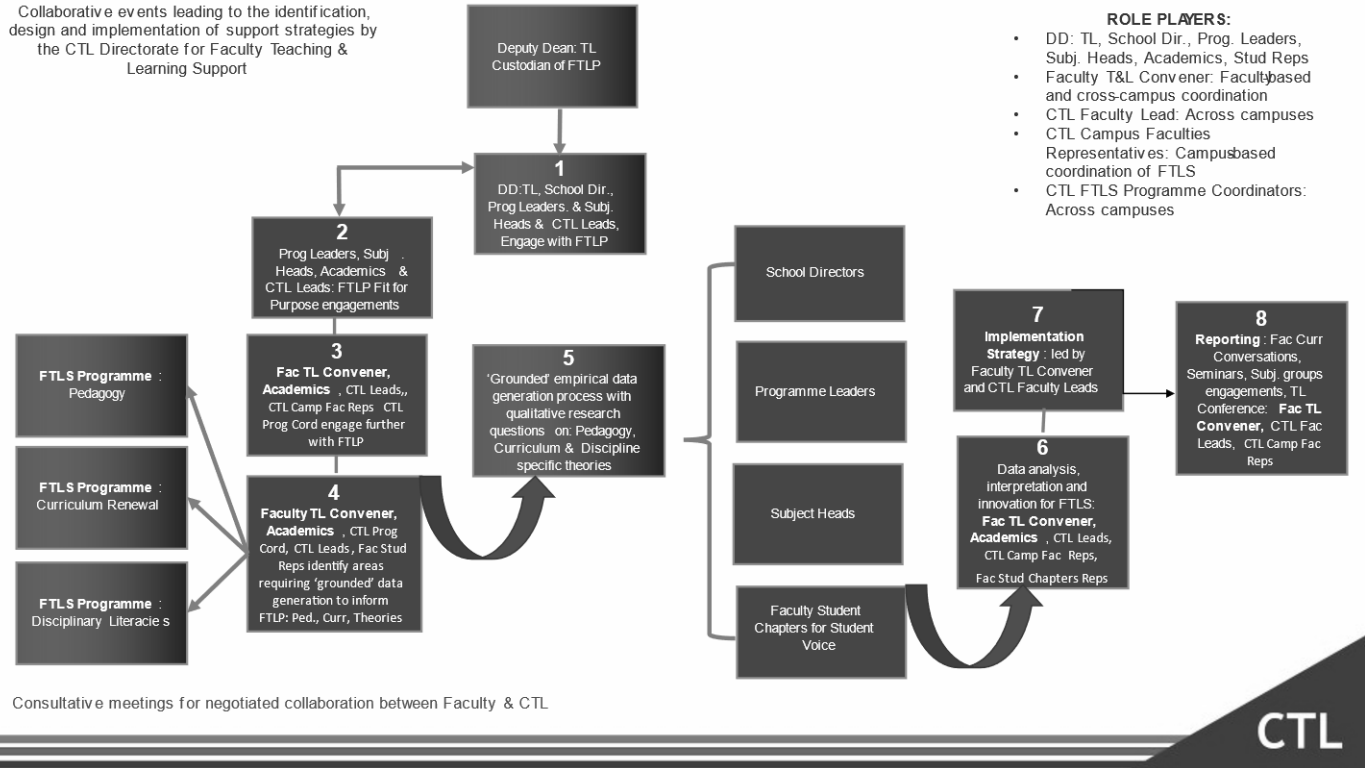


Figure 5.5: Consultative meetings for negotiated collaboration between faculties & CTL

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Data that emerged from these consultative meetings were analysed, interpreted, and presented thematically for discussion at the respective faculty's Teaching & Learning Committee meetings by the FTLS teams, together with Campus-based faculty representative coordinators. Input from faculties via the faculty's Teaching and Learning Committee meetings was invited to shape further deliberations within CTL. Such deliberations took place between the FTLS director and the CTL faculty representative coordinators. Thus the nature and form that faculty interventions took were determined by grounded data generated concerning a faculty at a specific site of delivery. Where there was evidence from data that an intervention for a specific faculty needed to be aligned across the three campuses, this was done. In cases where data revealed that each campus' data suggested a different intervention or some variations of the same intervention, even though it is the same faculty, a response was developed accordingly. This is where the role of the CTL faculty representative coordinators is crucial. In collaboration with other directors within the three CTL directorates, the FTLS director offered academic leadership that eventually determined the nature of the interventions that will endeavour to be campus-, faculty- and discipline-specific.

5.3 A synoptic discussion of findings

In broad terms, the findings generated through these data generation strategies revealed that developing students' awareness of the fact that, as Montgomery and Stuart (1992:7) put it: "meaning [is] a function, not of particular words or wordings, but rather of the discursive formation in which...expressions occur" was an aspect requiring urgent attention. By this I mean when language is in use (whether in writing or in speaking), discursive formation functions as a set of regulative principles

that underlie actual discourses. Within this context, meaning becomes an effect upon the human subject, but not a stable property.

What emerged was that pedagogic practices in most disciplines required further attention to ensure they landed themselves to principles underpinning reflexive pedagogy. It appears the latter is seen by most academics as too elementary and is therefore rejected because it clashes with their pedagogical philosophy that what a lecturer says is so self-explanatory that a student who fails to unpack it is not supposed to be in the university in the first place. What this philosophy ignores is the fact that learning implies acquiring both knowledge itself, and the code of transmission used to convey a particular body of knowledge. Assuming that students will understand the academic discourse, without explicitly reflecting on its constructedness, is to ignore the fact that language is not simply a collection of words but provides us with a system of transposable mental dispositions. Given the demographic changes experienced by NWU, it would be self-destructive for the academics to maintain a teaching practice that is essentially content-centred and insular, thereby ignoring making explicit the role language plays in learning and the construction of specific disciplinary constructs.

More often than not, reflexive pedagogy was seen as a practice with the potential to 'water down' the 'noble' aims of university education, instead of a practice that allows practitioners of pedagogical communication methodically and continuously to reduce to a minimum the misunderstanding arising from the use of an unfamiliar code. As ADs engaged with academic writing by students across faculties, this was evidenced by the kind of essays students produced. Most of these essays displayed poor mastery of language as students sought to reproduce the academic discourse, and thus found themselves constrained to write in a poorly understood language. Defined by their lesser knowledge of academic discourse, students could do nothing that

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did not confirm the most pessimistic image that the lecturer, in her most professional capacity, was willing to confess to. It was a common thing to hear lecturers making comments such as “they understand nothing because they do not want to do their work”.

Ironically, while this is the kind of attitude many lecturers had toward students, the former still expected the latter to manipulate language academically. This expectation betrays a rather flawed image of students by institutions of higher learning: that students are a socially homogeneous group who differ only according to individual talent and merit. Because of this image, comprehension and manipulation of language are the first points on which students’ knowledge is judged. I argue that assessing students on such premises ignores some facts about human knowledge, and of course, about learning. Two issues were basic to AD inquiry into the nature of human knowledge: first, how language contributes to our understanding of the world, and secondly, how our beliefs about the world inform our understanding of language. It is the view held by FTLS that language consists of a set of forms that can be described at various levels - at the level of sounds, word formation, sentence formation, and discourse structure. Some aspects of meaning can be associated with each of these levels. Presented in this way, language becomes not simply a vehicle of thought, but also a system of categories; a means of communication which, without a reader (or listener’s) ‘accurate’ interpretation, can be of no use. This is the reason it emerged that interpretation during pedagogic communication was a difficult and risky process with no guarantee of a satisfactory outcome, even if one correctly identified the words and correctly worked out the syntactic structure of the sentence. Bourdieu (1989:8) presents reasons for such difficulty in a persuasive manner:

This is because language does not reduce, as we often think, to a more or less extensive collection of words. As syntax, [language]

provides us with a system of transposable mental dispositions. These [mental dispositions] go hand in hand with values which dominate the whole of our experience and, in particular, with a vision of society and of culture. They [mental dispositions] also involve an original relationship to words...

Engagement with data revealed that this conception calls for university practitioners to identify, recognise, and deal with the factors that separate them from students and, in particular, to acknowledge the importance of students' knowledge of the nature of the code of communication and the dependence of this knowledge on factors such as social origin and school background. This requires explicit teaching practice that will consider, first, the fact that academic language is no one's mother tongue and, secondly, that the existing divorce between the language of the family and the language of learning only serves to reinforce the students' feeling that the university education belongs to another world and that what lecturers have to say has nothing to do with daily life because it is spoken in a language which makes it unreal.

By choosing to mystify the language which includes them as members of the group, while ignoring the fact that they are not 'authors' of such a language (but are simply "interpellated", to use Althusser's terminology, by specific discursive formations), academics "conceal the contradictory character of their discourses to both themselves and to students" (Montgomery & Stuart, 1992:5). It is not surprising that the subtle social meanings posited in several disciplines are quite hard even for native speakers of English from outside the (academic) group to pick up, and are particularly difficult for non-native speakers. This breakdown in the teaching relationship is largely the consequence of the nature of disciplinary languages and how they are applied. Because of this, pedagogy loses all meaning, for it does not reflect the intention to communicate self reflexively, and thus to establish true communication (true dialogue) between a teacher and a learner.

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We concluded that understanding in the university needs to be conceived as a function of the social group in which it is embedded. In the lecture hall, for instance, the desired outcome of the interaction that takes place between students and lecturers is the understanding of the language being taught and learnt. Because of this, understanding needs to become a social institution from which students can borrow and to which they can contribute. Meaning has to be negotiated between the participants in an interaction, for communication is a risky undertaking, requiring not simply the exchange of linguistically packaged ideas, but an effort of imagination on the part of the listener or reader. The implication for this, among many, is the fact that “understanding could be in [constant] state of flux; of augmentation, of modification, of radical transformation, of restructuring of its patterns of silence, or even of fading from current consciousness” (Bourdieu, 1989:7). The task for ADs is to raise academic staff awareness of the extent to which this fact underpins teaching and learning within their disciplines.

5.3.1. Institution-wide ADs contributions: broadening debates on pedagogy

After the re-envisioning of FTLS strategic interventions that led to research-led AD interventions in faculties, and the results as reflected in the above section, a shift at the institutional level became the next level of intervention. This work began in March 2021. FTLS developed a conceptual document towards a series of 3 colloquia on Teaching and Learning scholarly conversations. *Responsive Curriculum Development* and *Decolonising Christianity*. By June 2021, several cross-faculty teams had successfully collaborated with CTL, and a notable scholar in Teaching and Learning from the United States, an equally leading academic in Philosophy from a South African university, and an eminent Christian minister for over 30 years availed themselves to be keynote speakers on each of the three colloquia. The three colloquia were: 1)

Transparency in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education, 2) *Instantiations of Decolonised Curriculum*, and 3) *Decolonising Christianity: Implications for Preparing Future Ministers*. From 6 to 8 September 2021, NWU was visited by audiences of students and academics alike from within and outside SA borders, including Europe and the US. All three events were delivered in Hyflex mode, with direct participants such as two keynote presenters and most panellists in one venue, and the audience attending online synchronously. Engagements allowed ‘*Student Voice*’ to feature in ways not always possible, with a virtual space enabling students to express their thoughts with little to no fear.

For 2022, after consultative conversations between CTL, Theology and Health Sciences faculties, a topic for a follow-up, interdisciplinary Colloquium was developed: *Rethinking Health and Wellness in the Post-COVID Era: Implications for Teaching and Learning*. The plan culminated in a follow-up Colloquium on 15 June 2022. This time ‘*Student Voice*’ dominated the first 4-hour event, followed by eminent scholars in the fields of Higher Education Studies, Health Sciences and Theology. These institution-wide interventions by FTLS ADs extended beyond academic faculties. They extended to student residences.

In this regard, FTLS developed an idea for turning NWU residences into spaces for continuing learning. This was designed to enable student learning, and in the process offered academic support to students who lived in university on-campus residences. To achieve this, we drew from Kuh *et al.*’s (1997:371) observation that:

...students spend the majority of their time out of class, how they spend their time is influenced by their peers, students acquire valuable skills often not presented via the curriculum [and that] involvement in out of class activities enables the student to experience a sense of community.

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Against the background of similar ideas, the Student Academic Development and Support (SADS) Team established the NWU residence-based academic learning communities. These were to be implemented in addition to the already existing support initiatives that were designed to enhance student success by CTL. Concisely, the strategy was born out of a recognition that we needed a rethink on how diverse students who live together and share a common academic focus (classes, courses, modules, disciplines, majors) may be grouped to establish formal academic learning communities within their residencies. Since this required stronger cooperation between faculties, CTL, the Division of Student Life and NWU campus residences, endless consultations were held with each of these stakeholders, culminating in a successful persuasion and the establishment of an integrated student support strategy that emphasised the continuity between in-class and out-of-class learning. This led to the promotion of students' academic success by coordinating several support strategies that (systematically) targeted academic and non-academic barriers to academic achievement.

This work aligned with Kuh *et al.*'s (1997:374) observation that "All aspects of the institution's environment contribute to student learning and personal development." Residential education is internationally commonly referred to as living-learning communities (LLCs). LLCs were established by the affiliates of the Association of College and University Housing Offices International and are based on the philosophy of learning beyond the classroom. The idea is to bring like-minded people together; hence LLCs are established around a wide range of thematic topics. Inkelas and Soldne (2011:1) define LLCs as "residence hall-based undergraduate programs with a particular topical or academic theme". This is the reason why an initiative on residence-based learning communities, commonly known as residential education, was supported by all stakeholders, including the Executive Director of Student Life. Following several iterations at different meetings within

CTL and Student Life, it was recommended that all Student Life Campus directors strengthen their support, and indeed involvement, in this initiative to ensure the academic project is the reason all entities in the University existed, and our goal to synergise our efforts was maximised. As we continued with this intervention in residences, it emerged that postgraduate students who stayed in residences, and those who were part-time, also required some intervention.

The main reason this became our priority was a recognition of the fact that CTL support tended to focus mainly on undergraduate students, and not on postgraduate students. It appeared CTL had generally focused mainly on undergraduate student support, and little to no available similar opportunities for postgraduate students. In the middle of 2020, we put together a University Capacity Development Grant (UCDG) application for funding with a focus only on postgraduate students' support. The application was successful, and we received three-year funding with a focus on supporting 'the pipeline, of South African Black and female postgraduate students. Consequently, we were able to establish the postgraduate research support project (PGRS), offering academic and research writing workshops, writing retreats and research hubs across the three campuses. Through the Research Office, we received an invitation to give a presentation to all NWU 'pipeline' Honours, Masters and Doctoral students. Our focus was on possible areas that could delay postgraduate research and how to overcome the delays. This cross-faculty institution-wide webinar received encouraging feedback and students who could not join requested another slot. We then gave the same presentation twice, something that was not part of the initial planning. With the assistance of the Division of Strategic Intelligence, it was easier to invite all 'pipe-line' postgraduate students from all the faculties. It was this group that gave us the privilege to address critical components of the postgraduate studies journey. Since the funding enabled us to appoint three (one-per-campus) senior-level

ADs, astounding support from various faculties emerged as academics saw the healthy contribution FTLS was making; this time at the postgraduate level.

5.4 Concluding reflections

Despite the challenges that came with being one university as a result of the merging of three formerly distinct HEIs, senior leadership in FTLS (one of the directorates in the CTL at NWU) initiated a scholarly informed and research-led rethinking of the academic support strategy offered to university teachers. This rethinking of the strategic approach to supporting the academic project was accompanied by the reorganisation of the team within FTLS, as well as making bridges that enabled ADs to enter faculties as partners with middle managers and academics. This strategy proved useful because it resulted in support that had a decolonising effect on pedagogic practices that tended to be opaque, and thus exclusionary. The construction of grounded data between faculty membership and ADs engendered the collaboration between the CTL and faculties with a collective commitment to see the problem as that of NWU, and not only for one of the parties. The fact that there are three campuses did not deter FTLS. There was recognition that even though some academic development work could be aligned, engagement in supporting the academic project repeatedly proved that support is always situational and, inadvertently, contextual. The New Literacy Studies' three concepts, combined with the conceptualisation developed from TiLT, LCT, and GT, enabled the FTLS team's rethinking of its strategy to reach this conclusion. The work is ongoing, but the foundation that has been laid as discussed in this paper, will remain a strong point of departure for years to come.

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