

How lifelong learning shapes the professional development of staff in higher education institutions

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Abstract

Purpose – As universities find new ways to implement professional development programmes (PDPs), very few scholarly studies have focused on how lifelong learning could serve as a tool to enhance the professional development of staff. To address this knowledge gap, this study aims to examine how the integration of lifelong learning modes into PDPs in a university setting in South Africa could enable professional staff to advance their knowledge and skills. Additionally, the study explores how the different PDPs could be conceptualised by way of lifelong learning to enhance the professional knowledge and competences of staff.

Design/methodology/approach – Data were gathered from 41 professional staff in three campuses of the university. The narrative data gathered were evaluated using thematic analysis that consisted of a detailed process of identifying, analysing, organising, describing and reporting the themes that were generated from the data.

Findings – Findings suggest that when the university integrates lifelong learning approaches into its professional development programmes, it allows staff to develop their knowledge and skills through diverse learning approaches. When institutions adopt these diverse learning approaches, it enable staff to situate their learning needs along the different lifelong learning modes, negotiate suitable learning modes and flexible schedules with their heads of department, and learn the accepted norms and values of the university. These findings among others lead to further questions about how PDPs could be designed using the three lifelong learning modes to enable staff to prepare adequately for the future of work in higher education.

Originality/value – This study contributes to the scholarly discourse on lifelong learning by showing how higher education institutions could design PDPs along formal, informal and non-formal learning approaches to enhance the knowledge and skills of staff.

Keywords Professional development, Lifelong learning, Human capital theory, Higher education, Professional staff

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Global shifts in work processes, high employers' expectations and the challenges associated with career mobility in higher education (HE) have placed enormous responsibilities on staff of universities to develop themselves through formal, informal and non-formal learning

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programmes. These challenges also represent the unpredictability of careers, especially in recent times when employees have taken greater responsibility of their careers and individual development (Haenggli and Hirschi, 2020) including the use of technology in work activities (Poquet and De Laat, 2021). A recent study has shown that by the year 2025, 85 million jobs could be displaced because of projected shift in the division of labour between humans and machines, whereas 97 million new roles could arise following the expected new division of labour between humans, machines and algorithms (World Economic Forum, 2020). Similarly, the life and work processes of employees in organisations continue to be shaped by automated data-driven algorithms which serves as part of the artificial intelligence (AI) revolution (Poquet and De Laat, 2021). Indeed, the capacity and ability of employees to cope with evolving technology also depends on the opportunities and resources available to them as well as their preparedness to advance their knowledge and skills through lifelong learning.

What is also important is the fact that the development of the knowledge and skills of a country's workforce is linked to national economic growth and international charters. For instance, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs) highlights the role of educational institutions in the achievement of the SDGs to include: developing human capital that aims at socio-economic advancement; poverty alleviation; good governance; and supporting the construction of equitable societies for the maintenance of peace and stability (Zhou *et al.*, 2020). Along these lines, Billett (2010) has argued that the concept of lifelong learning represents a socio-personal process that is linked to human development and is distinct from an educational provision. Growing global concerns about lifelong learning as well as the promotion of adult learning are characterised by the evolving knowledge and skills required for the world of work and the need to sustain economic development and achieve social goals (Billett, 2010). Other formulations suggest that Universities serve as engines of economic growth with immense capacity to support the transition of countries into knowledge economy (Koryakina *et al.*, 2015).

Four major reasons account for the increasing demand for higher education institutions (HEIs) to support the professional development of their staff, especially through lifelong learning approaches. First is the growing reliance on technology for work processes across different industries and institutions, and the need for employers to support the knowledge and skills development of staff in technology application. Second is the demand for HEIs to identify the specific skills needs of their staff and address them through a range of professional development activities that include formal, informal and non-formal learning processes. As universities focus on developing the workforce of other industries, they also have a responsibility to support the development of their staff through different professional development programmes (PDPs). Evidence suggests that currently, employers provide access to the reskilling and upskilling of 62% of their workforce with a projected increase of 11% (73%) by 2025 with about 42% of employees indicating that they take employer-supported reskilling and upskilling opportunities (World Economic Forum, 2020).

Third is the important role HE plays in the socioeconomic development of countries especially through teaching and learning, research and engaged scholarship. A prior study has shown that HE now serves as an important space for the production, dissemination and transfer of productive knowledge, innovation and technology that also aim at advancing the economy (Naidoo, 2003). However, while there is so much pressure on HEIs to support the economic development of countries, very few studies have attempted to examine how professional staff could advance their knowledge and skills through PDPs that are also structured based on lifelong learning approach. Fourth is the central role HEIs are expected to play especially in relation to policies and practices that enhance staff development. This

includes developing policies and practices that support the professional development of staff (Antonopoulou *et al.*, 2021; Baba *et al.*, 2021; Leibowitz *et al.*, 2015) and preparing staff for the complex digital work environment (Vallo Hult and Byström, 2022).

Against the backdrop of changes in HE and the increasing attention on the professional development of staff, there have been calls for universities to design strategies that enhance the knowledge and skills of staff to contribute to national development. Particularly, the alignment of knowledge development with national development strategies (Aarts *et al.*, 2020) and the use of education as a driver for economic activity and wealth at individual and national levels (McCowan, 2019; Valero and Van Reenen, 2019) place universities at the centre of lifelong learning and workforce development. Although various scholarly studies have sought to explain how universities can support the career development of staff through PDPs, not much is known about how the different PDPs could be conceptualised by way of lifelong learning to enhance the professional knowledge and skills of staff. To address these knowledge gaps, the current study sought answers to three research question:

- RQ1. How do professional staff perceive and experience professional development in the context of lifelong learning at the university?
- RQ2. What institutional policies and practices can help address the knowledge and skills needs of professional staff in the context of lifelong learning?
- RQ3. How can the university model staff professional development along the different lifelong learning modes to ensure that staff continually update their knowledge and skills? To help explain the scope of this study concerning literature, the section below provides a brief information about the context of the study. The next section discusses the literature on lifelong learning and human capital theory. The fourth section explains the methodology used to gather and analyse data from the participants. The discussion and concluding sections highlight how the integration of lifelong learning modes into PDPs in a university setting could enable professional staff to advance their knowledge and skills?

The context of the study

The Education for All Global Monitoring Report for 2005 suggests, among other things, that context and learner characteristics are essential factors for promoting inclusive education (UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), 2005). Learner characteristics include knowledge and skills, multiple learning contexts, personal attributes and experiences gained through life and career development (Snyman and van den Berg, 2018). The context of learning refers to the physical location where learners converge to receive instruction designed to increase knowledge (Young, 2012), as well as to develop skills for individual and professional use. Also, the context of education is important to the development of the knowledge and skills of learners (Janmaat and Green, 2013) who may be located in specific geographical settings or dispersed in different locations. However, the context of lifelong learning cannot be separated from learner characteristics which are directly linked to modes of learning. Although the trends concerning the policies and practices that affect adult learning in different countries may be similar, they do not have the same effect due to the different traditions and cultural context of each country (Schuetze, 2014). The context of the current study is public university with a total staff (academic and professional) population of 2,521 who are located in three different campuses in a province South Africa. The university's support system for staff can be seen through the study

benefits for employees who wish to enrol in formal programmes that lead to the award of formal qualification.

Lifelong learning

Lifelong learning serves as a tool that transforms the traditional boundaries of education across countries of the world (Barros, 2012; Preece, 2011). Particularly, the *Belém Framework for Action* suggest that lifelong learning is a process which represent a continuum from formal to non-formal to informal learning (UIL, 2010). Goal 4 of the UN SDGs highlights the importance of inclusive and equitable quality education and the advancement of lifelong learning opportunities for all (UNESCO, 2009). Lifelong learning consists of different learning stages from pre-school to post-retirement (cradle to grave) in formal, informal and non-formal learning settings. A recent study has revealed three common research trends in the field of lifelong learning: lifelong learning abilities, policies or conceptual frameworks of lifelong learning approaches and the factors that influence lifelong learning and/or lifelong learning abilities (Thwe and Aniko, 2024). The narrative by Thwe and Aniko (2024) demonstrates the importance of education to the development of human abilities, the institutional and state policies that highlights the provision of learning opportunities to learners and the factors that influence individual learning processes.

Although the current scope of lifelong learning seems endless, it has been critiqued on the basis of its weakness in addressing issues concerning the social foundations of learning. For instance, Regmi (2023) contends that despite the seemingly limitless breadth of lifelong learning today, there are at least two epistemic constraints on the concept of learning that are addressed in the corpus of contemporary research on the subject. The first is the claim that education is limited to the psychological foundations of knowledge acquisition while neglecting the social underpinnings; the second is the claim that education is limited to the system perspective and ignores the lifeworld perspective of education. To address these weaknesses, Regmi (2023) highlights the importance of a comprehensive lifelong learning theory that embeds concepts such as rational learning, communicative learning, intersubjective learning and action learning.

While researchers and policy makers have conceptualised professional development as formal, informal or non-formal approaches to the development of the knowledge and skills of employees, very few studies have attempted to conceptualise professional development as an integrated concept that is underpinned by lifelong learning. Arguably, the global expansion of knowledge and skills will depend on the fundamentals of formal, non-formal and informal modes of learning that are also an integral part of educational system (Singh, 2015). First, formal learning occurs in educational institutions, and it often leads to formal qualifications. A prior study by Shafiq *et al.* (2019) shows that the advantages of obtaining HE degree include labour market benefits, especially in respect of higher earnings received by graduates. This narrative is linked to human capital theory which explains how education controls the marginal productivity of labour that also determines earnings (Marginson, 2019). In the context of professional staff in HEIs, an investment in education represents a future economic benefit that could come in the form of increased remuneration and other financial rewards.

Secondly, informal learning is an experience-based form of learning that is accidental and occurs at different settings such as at home and community centres. Recent development in workplace environments has shown that there is a shift of focus from the traditional learning modes to other forms of learning such as career mentoring and job shadowing that are informal modes of lifelong learning. This is partly due to complexities in employee work arrangement, the need to balance pressing job demands with learning,

increasing reliance on technology in learning and appraisal systems that place greater expectations on employees to demonstrate additional knowledge acquired during a particular period. Central to these informal learning processes are personal agency, confidence, commitment and the level of support and challenges related to the learning processes. Reasons for the seeming neglect of the importance of informal learning at the workplace include the tendency to see informal learning as a taken-for-granted aspect of the work processes and for the fact that it is often not noticed when it occurs within the workplace setting (Eraut, 2012). Finally, in the context of the current study, non-formal learning describes the university arranged programmes for staff that are meant to assist them to acquire knowledge and skills through that do not lead to the award of formal qualifications.

Human capital theory

The current study is underpinned by the human capital theory, which conceptualises learning as a social process and an investment in human competences that enhances productivity. Human capital theory is founded on the neoclassical school of thought in economics which suggest that individuals invest in money and time in education and training in anticipation of obtaining higher income at a later stage in their lives (Tan, 2014). However, other formulations suggest that there is a strong relationship between human capital and productivity (Holland *et al.*, 2013) as well as human capital and economic growth (Rüber *et al.*, 2018; Schugurensky and Myers, 2003; Tan, 2014). By adopting human capital theory, researchers identify the different individual investment that is important in developing competences and the rewards individuals obtain in the labour market (Spurk *et al.*, 2019). Furthermore, learning involves the political, social, cultural and economic processes of society which aim to provide opportunities for people to move out of economic hardship and improve their living conditions (Walters, 2006). In the context of HE, human capital theory has been used to explain how enrolment in educational programmes shape the behaviour of workers who are also learners (Jepsen and Montgomery, 2012). This includes their ability to identify their knowledge and skills needs as well as make suggestion on what form of learning could enhance their work output. Therefore, education is not only important for economic and social development of countries globally (Valero and Van Reenen, 2019) but also for the development of institutions. In the UK, there is a continuous push for employer-directed skills acquisition in the university curriculum which is a human capital theory approach (Higdon, 2016). Another line of argument has been the age, income earnings and marital status set of factors that continue to drive researchers to explore other factors that affect the enrolment of adult learners in HE.

While human capital theory has been used as the theoretical underpinning of different studies that focus on the professional development of employees, it has also been critiqued for various reasons. For instance, Marginson (2019) argues that growing weakness of human capital theory includes its lack of realism that could lead to the elimination of other possible explanations of education, labour relations and earnings as well as its attempt to unify two heterogeneous domains – education and work as a single domain. Similarly, Robeyns (2006) argues that the development of educational policies is often centred on factors such as capabilities, rights and economic development. Notwithstanding the weaknesses of the human capital theory, one of its strength lies in the fact that, investment in education results in increased productivity (Jepsen and Montgomery, 2012), and in the context of education, it represents a social investment that is driven by market needs through further education and lifelong learning (Schugurensky and Myers, 2003). However, one of the gaps in human capital theory is the dearth in research that explains how other

forms of learning – non-formal learning and informal learning could enhance productivity at the work place. As adult learners, professional staff who enrol in educational programmes see learning as a process to enrich their knowledge and capabilities and to achieve their full potential. Therefore, it is important for managers of educational institutions to ensure that the learning experiences of adults are organised based on activities that can enhance the development of their knowledge and competencies (Nair and Bhandare, 2024). For these reasons the current study examines how different PDPs could be conceptualised by way of lifelong learning to enhance the professional knowledge and skills of staff.

Methods

The empirical study was developed using a qualitative research design and an interpretive approach. A qualitative research design was applied in current study with a focus on the perspectives and experiences of professional staff that cannot be explained using objective measurements (Kyngäs *et al.*, 2020; Castleberry and Nolen, 2018). The interpretive approach is a technique for comprehending social life, human interaction and relationships that is predicated on the idea that each person's actions can reveal the significance of their own gestures and facial expressions (Emery and Anderman, 2020). Purposive and snowball sampling was used to gather data from participants. The participants consisted of 26 females and 15 males. The professional ranks of participants were: senior director (1); deputy directors (3); chief officers (2); senior officers (8); officers (8); senior assistant officers (7); assistant officers (4); messenger (1); and others (7). The geographical and professional diversity of the participants served to provide a valuable set of data with different opinions regarding the perceptions of lecturers on student engagement issues. The researchers further de-identified the participants by allocating them pseudonym (see Discussion section).

Procedure

Formal invitation through email was sent to all participants across all three campuses of the university. Participants who agreed to participate in the study were contacted and the dates for the interviews were scheduled. Also, participants were informed about the purpose of the study and afterwards, requested to sign a consent form before the interview. The duration of each interview was between 45 and 60 min and the interviews were held in meeting rooms or the offices of the participants. A semi-structured interview schedule was used to gather data from the participants concerning their perceptions and experiences about employment equity in the university. One of the advantages of using the semi-structured interview is to allow the interviewers to probe and proceed with follow-up questions when necessary (Walker and Gleaves, 2016). Sample research questions were: 1) What PDPs have been designed by the university to help you address the knowledge and skills gaps in your work? 2) In your opinion, what institutional policies and practices have enabled you to address the knowledge and skills needs in your profession? 3) How do you address the gap between your performance on the job and the additional knowledge and skills required from you through the different learning activities? 4) In your opinion, do the different training you receive on the job provide you with adequate knowledge and skills to meet the work expectations of your line manager or head of department?

To ensure the confidentiality of the information provided by participants, three processes were followed. Firstly, all participants were informed not to provide any personal identifiers that could easily link them to the data. Secondly, only the interviewer and an interviewee were present at the interview venue while the voice recorders were placed clearly at the sight of the interviewee. Finally, each participant was informed of the procedure adopted to safely process and store the data. This process includes storing the electronic data on a password-

protected computer and the hard copies of the transcripts in a safe with lock for a period of five years. The current research was approved by the university's Research Ethics Committee in fulfilment of the requirements for conducting research in the university. In line with the rules of ethical consideration, the rationale of the study, potential risks and benefits as well as the right of participants to withdraw from the interview if they felt they could not continue for personal reasons was explained to all participants.

Analysis

The data gathered from participants were examined using thematic analysis. One of the advantages of thematic analysis is the theoretical freedom and flexibility (Braun and Clarke, 2006) that allows researchers to examine complex and rich data sets (Neuendorf, 2019). To analyse the data, the first step was to read the transcripts thoroughly to ensure that they were clearly written with no language ambiguities. The second step was the indexing of the transcripts and creation of the respondent and cross-case memos based on the three campuses under study. The third step involved the development of codes to categories and themes. The rationale for developing codes, categories and themes of the data gathered was to provide details about the characteristics of the data set and the intended explanation of the study (Korstjens and Moser, 2018; Nowell *et al.*, 2017). In the current study, the data were explored for important phrases and sentences from the participants that particularly addressed the issue of staff professional development and lifelong learning.

The fourth step involved collapsing the codes that emerged into categories. This involved grouping codes that provided similar meanings. The fifth step involved identifying the themes based on the patterns developed from the codes and categories. By adopting the thematic framework and probing the data sets, repeated patterns of meanings from the texts that emerged were finally grouped and analysed according to the themes (Castleberry and Nolen, 2018). Likewise, the detailed process of analysing the data set was to ensure trustworthiness of the research design. Trustworthiness in qualitative research has been explained as the methodical thoroughness of the research design, the credibility of the researcher, the authenticity of the findings and how applicable the research methods are to future research (Johnson and Parry, 2015; Pratt *et al.*, 2020; Rose and Johnson, 2020). Furthermore, specific processes that are used by researchers to ensure credibility in their research include prolonged engagement with participants, persistent observation, triangulation and member check (Korstjens and Moser, 2018).

Findings

This section provides an analysis of the data that were gathered from the study participants concerning their perceptions about how the different PDPs could be conceptualised by way of lifelong learning to enhance their professional knowledge and competences. The six themes that were developed from the narrative data analysed are: advancing the professional knowledge and skills of staff through formal learning; staff experiences of the context and content of informal learning; Staff experiences of professional development through non-formal learning; adequacy of training programmes; commitment of line managers and heads of department; and institutional support for staff professional development.

Advancing the professional knowledge and skills of staff through formal learning.

Participants shared their views regarding how they address the gap between their performance on the job and the additional knowledge and skills required from them particularly through formal learning programmes. Maralize explained that she had to enrol

in formal education system to obtain advanced knowledge to stay abreast with time and the demands of her work:

I enrolled in my programme to have a formal qualification and also to develop myself. I was the only office manager who did not have a formal qualification although I had previous experience working in another organisation. I realised I had to do something about my qualification and to my skills upgrade [Maralize].

On her part, Lindiwe stated that she considered her enrolment in a degree programme as useful because it will enable her to meet some of the knowledge demands of her job:

I perceive that my current degree programme will help me bridge the gap between the knowledge I have and the knowledge expectations of my line manager. It is an opportunity for me to be enrolled in a degree programme and to contribute meaningfully to assisting students and lecturers.

Contrastingly, Amahle explained that, “I am not aware of any institutional structures that can support me to address the gaps between my current knowledge and the additional knowledge I require for the job I do in order for me to meet the required output”. The feedback from the participants showed that the university provides support to professional staff who wish to further their education through formal learning programmes. However, the provision of study support for staff should also be accompanied with study leave or flexible working arrangements by the line managers. Also, what was evident was that some staff did not have adequate information concerning the study benefits available to them in the university.

Staff experiences of the context and content of informal learning.

Informal learning occurs in HE settings through day-to-day interaction as well as specially organised gatherings and events that are designed for the purpose of sharing ideas and experiences. Rethabile shared her informal learning experience, “I was an operations person in my previous employment before I joined this university, so I had to find my way through self-learning.” On her part, Lindokuhle explained why she prefers on-the-job training to other forms of training:

I do not think that the short courses provide us with adequate knowledge and skills to address the gaps in our jobs. I am not a fast learner, so I prefer to learn through practice and from my line manager [...] it is a learn as you go process. However, the problem we have is that not many line managers mentor their staff especially through the university’s onboarding mentoring programmes.

Similarly, Priscilla noted that, “I have benefitted from several informal learning activities including retreats, boot camps and brainstorming sessions that were organised by our line manager. I found those [informal] learning programmes to be very useful.” The views of Priscilla were no different from Emelia who indicated that “I tend to learn faster on the job than in training sessions. You know when you work with senior colleagues, they do not only teach you the nitty-gritties about the job, they also advise and mentor you.” The feedback from participants revealed that professional staff identify informal learning as part of the learning approaches available to staff in the university. Although informal learning is regarded as an important form of lifelong learning, not much scholarly studies have been conducted especially in HE settings to reveal its usefulness to the professional development of staff.

Staff experiences of professional development through non-formal learning

The development of staff through training can take several forms including non-formal learning within and outside the work environment. Amogelang stated that she participates in workshops organised by the university to address any knowledge and skills deficit on her

part, “whenever I identify a skills deficit, I register online to enrol in the workshop to learn new things. The university has several staff development programmes that are organised throughout the year”. Contrastingly, Thuto explained that although training programmes are organised for staff online, he could not spend enough time learning because of his job schedule:

We have got quite a good number of programs in terms of capacity development that are offered by the HR department through Lynda.com. However, I need to dedicate an hour or two to sit in front of the computer and listen which is not possible with my busy schedule [Thuto].

He also explained why he feels that the online training programmes cannot be effective as the face-to-face modes:

I think that the online learning arrangement should be reviewed. If I need to learn how to use Excel, it requires a hands-on training, and sometimes you need to ask questions. For instance, how do you transpose? What is the purpose of this or that process? So, I think that it needs more time. If you sit behind the screen only and learn, you will achieve only twenty percent of what you need to learn. The staff should not learn in an office setting with a lot of work around [Thuto].

Amogelang noted that she participates in workshops organised by the university to address any knowledge and skills deficit on his part:

There are workshops organised throughout the year but due to our busy schedules, we are not able to attend most of the workshops. There are times that I identify a skills deficit and register to enrol in the workshop to learn new things but end up cancelling the arrangement because of my busy work [Amogelang].

Feedback from participants revealed that although there are several training programmes organised by the university, staff are not always able to attend these training programmes because of their work schedule. The findings further revealed that female staff were more interested in taking up non-formal learning opportunities as compared to their male colleagues.

Adequacy of training programmes organised by the university.

The study sought from participants their views on the adequacy of the training programmes organised for them. Excerpts below reflect the views of Nokwazi:

When I met with my line manager for the performance management discussion, I included the training that I will require in the training needs section. I must emphasise that the support comes from the department and the training organised by the university is adequate [Nokwazi].

Similar view was shared by Qayiya, “the initial training I received was in line with my job needs because before I enrolled in the course, they sent us a course list and dates from which I selected my preference. I know the work I do, and I know exactly what knowledge and skills I need to do my job well.” Saartjie who has more than 20 years of work experience noted that “I think there are lot of opportunities for staff. It is just that I do not have enough time to attend the training sessions. I would like to enrol in many interesting programmes, but I have work to do in the office. The responses of participants showed that staff are provided with adequate training especially those that are offered through online learning modes. Other participants also indicate that there are several workshops organised by the university to enhance the knowledge and skills of staff.

Contributions of line managers and heads of department to staff development.

The contributions of line managers to the development of the knowledge and skills of their team members is very important. Mulalo explains the support she receives from her line manager, “my line manager supports professional development in every form. At the

beginning of every year, he requests us to submit our training needs for discussion and he also makes sure that we grow on the job" [Mulalo]. Similar view was shared by Kholwa:

I have the support of my head of department to further my education. I feel my department is very supportive. I have colleagues from different departments doing the same programme but they will have to take leave in order to cope with the academic demands [Kholwa].

Amahle touched on the central roles heads of department play in the enrolment of staff in formal learning:

Decisions regarding study approval lies with the Line Manager. The opportunities are there but people I know in employment get frustrated especially when decisions on staff development are made by the line managers. I think that the HR department should take over the process [Amahle].

Similarly, Quinn stressed the important role heads of department play in supporting their staff to secure study approval:

My personal experience with education support is very good [. . .] it depends on the outlook of the line manager. If the manager is someone who is quite happy to support staff to grow, then they will develop a system to allow the staff to study and work. So, my experience is positive because I have a very supportive line manager [Quinn].

The narrative data revealed that heads of department and line managers contribute immensely to the professional development of professional staff. One of the important duties of leaders is to identify the training needs of staff and make recommendation about the type of training that can help address the knowledge and skills gaps of staff.

Institutional support for staff professional development

Institutional support for staff to develop their knowledge and skills through organised and sponsored programmes by way of formal and non-formal programmes are essential to the overall development of staff. The study inquired from participants their views on the level of support staff who wish to further their education receive from the university. Thandolwethu indicated that although the university's policy on study benefit was laudable, there were issues that should be addressed:

I am happy with the university's provision for further studies because that is one of the major advantages I can get. The challenge is that although I know that I can apply for study benefit, I do not know how I can combine my work activities with learning. [Thandolwethu].

She further proposed ways the university could help address the challenges some staff face when they decide to enrol in some formal learning programmes:

There should be clear policy statements that provide staff with the number of hours they can spend in the lecture rooms while they are studying. It bothers on operational issues because the question that is often asked is, who will take over your duties when you are learning. I know that with postgraduate studies it is not a problem because staff can register as part time [Thandolwethu].

Atlehang explained the challenges associated with studying at the university especially concerning study benefits provided by the university, "I am currently pursuing further studies. However, the support I receive is only with respect to my tuition fees. I do not receive any support for my books." Thobeka who is a staff at the QwaQwa campus proposed that the university should allow staff to enrol in distance and online learning programmes that are offered by other universities, "I would suggest two things – the

university should allow us to study at other Universities like UNISA and, provide online studies for staff at QwaQwa campus. Alternatively, they can create the part-time classes.” Feedback from participants revealed that the lack of clear policies on how staff could attend lectures especially during working hours were challenges that need to be addressed. Other participants also indicated that the lack of some programmes at the other campuses constrained their enrolment in formal learning programmes. While some participants stated that the power to approve study permit often lies with the line manager and the HR department, others indicated that the lack of clear policies on how staff could attend lectures especially during working hours were challenges that need to be addressed. Of course one of the ways of overcoming this challenge will be for staff to take study leave to enable them have adequate time to study. Some participants noted that they will be happy if the university provides them with some hours to attend lectures and put in place measures to ensure that staff still perform their work as expected.

Discussion

The current study illustrates the importance of lifelong learning to the professional development of staff of HEIs. Further, the findings of this study point to the importance of conceptualising lifelong learning through formal, informal and non-formal learning approaches to enhance the knowledge and skills development of staff in HEIs. This is against the backdrop that recent literature on lifelong learning do not incorporate the lifeworld perspective of education (Regmi, 2023) such issues concerning the social, psychological and economic foundations of learning. It is indeed a reality that lifelong learning has become relevant to the global expansion of knowledge (Snyman and van den Berg, 2018; Singh, 2015), as a tool for addressing the different knowledge and skills needs of staff, and as a learning approach to obtain the desired learning impact. Particularly, a desired learning impact is linked to the main tenets of human capital theory which include: the development of the competences of staff (Spurk *et al.*, 2019), how education shapes the behaviour of individuals through the knowledge they acquire (Jepsen and Montgomery, 2012) and how education enhance the economic and social development of countries (Rüber *et al.*, 2018; Valero and Van Reenen, 2019).

The six themes that emerged from the narrative data analysed: advancing the professional knowledge and skills of staff through formal learning; staff experiences of the context and content of informal learning; staff experiences of professional development through non-formal learning; adequacy of training programmes; commitment of line managers and heads of department; and institutional support for staff professional development.; adequacy of training programmes; commitment of line managers and heads of department; and institutional support for staff professional development align with lifelong learning and human capital theory. First, the findings revealed that the university plays a major role in providing support structures and systems that allow professional staff to obtain formal qualifications. Particularly, the responsibilities of managing the professional development of employees have moved from the traditional individual roles to shared roles where management of HEIs are also involved in the career development of employees through structured and sponsored programmes for staff including lifelong learning approaches. Feedback from the participants showed that the provision of study benefits serves as incentive to staff to continually work for the university and as a form of lifelong learning investment that enable staff to develop their knowledge and skills while they stay abreast with emerging practices in their profession. The value of investment in education represents the earnings of individuals especially when they apply the knowledge and skills, they obtain from education to work settings (Marginson, 2019). Notwithstanding

the importance of study benefits and other institutional provisions, feedback from some participants revealed other inherent challenges associated with the process of combining work and schooling especially when there is no study leave or flexible work arrangements for them.

Second, while informal learning is considered as an important form of lifelong learning, there are a very few scholarly studies that have addressed its importance to the development of the knowledge and skills of staff in HEIs. Findings of the current study revealed that through self-directed learning, retreats and other learning events in and outside the university, professional staff can develop their knowledge and skills by sharing ideas, interacting with colleagues and providing solutions to work-related challenges. This further demonstrates the importance of institutional support structures in addressing the knowledge and skills needs of staff especially through PDPs. Institutions that have clear arrangements for staff professional development also encourage staff participation in various professional development programmes (Leibowitz *et al.*, 2015), especially through the different lifelong learning modes. This includes positioning line managers as central to the professional development of staff (Antonopoulou *et al.*, 2021; Baba *et al.*, 2021; Leibowitz *et al.*, 2015).

The findings revealed that continuous staff development programmes that include online learning courses, short learning courses and workshops serve as some of the tools that the university use to address the knowledge and skills needs of professional staff in the context of non-formal learning. However, the narrative data showed that there are challenges associated with non-formal learning activities in the university. One of such challenges is the lack of concentration by staff who enrol in online training programmes and work in their offices at the same time. Notwithstanding the challenges associated with the non-formal learning activities, the findings of this study has shown that the use of retreats, technical boot camps and brainstorming sessions are important non-formal learning approaches that allow staff to learn in different environments. The current study makes a clear distinction between informal and non-formal learning activities in the university setting. Therefore, while informal learning may take place through activities such as self-directed learning and retreats non-formal learning may take place by way of short learning courses and workshops.

Implications for policy

The current study has shown that the conceptualisation of lifelong learning along the three modes of learning formal, informal and non-formal is important for enhancing the professional development of staff in the university. Such initiative can be implemented through institutional policies that recognises all the three modes of lifelong learning as well the strategies for implementing the policies. Secondly, the findings of this study show that the commitment of line managers to the professional development of staff is important to addressing the knowledge and skills needs of staff through formal, non-formal and informal learning modes. However, feedback from some participants showed that some heads of department do not support their staff to enrol in formal and non-formal learning programmes. This seeming indifferent approach to staff development by heads of departments calls for a strong culture of professional development and institutional policies that will challenge the heads of department to address the knowledge and skills needs of their staff. A prior study in South Africa has shown that it is important for universities to develop a culture that promotes the knowledge and skills of staff through PDPs (Leibowitz *et al.*, 2015).

To address the challenges associated with formal learning processes, especially through study benefits, the current study recommends that there should be clear

policies that guide heads of department on how to organise the work schedule of staff who enrol in formal programmes. Additionally, the university should create policies that allow staff to take some time off their busy schedule to concentrate on training programmes that are organised by the university, especially through online learning modes. In relation to the theoretical implications, the current study has revealed that human capital theory serves as one of the theoretical underpinning that enables the conceptualisation of formal, informal, and non-formal learning in educational institutions, and the provision of support structures for staff to increase productivity.

Study implications for practice

Although some participants highlighted the adequacy of the training programmes to their learning needs, others also noted that not all the workshops are designed to suit their knowledge and skills needs. One of the practical ways of addressing this challenge is for the university to develop bespoke training programmes for such staff to enable them to develop their professional knowledge and skills. Other challenges highlighted by participants concerning their enrolment in non-formal programmes include workload concerns, conflicting schedules with lectures and communication gaps. This means that the university will have to schedule PDPs in the context of lifelong learning that allow staff to learn and work through a structured approach. Also, some participants indicated that they did not have detailed information about the study benefits available to staff. To address this challenge, there is the need for broad dissemination of information on study benefit to all staff and this responsibility should be shared between the HR department and heads of department. Of course, the implementation of HR practices in institutions such as PDPs is a shared responsibility between the HR department and managers of departments and units (Nishii and Paluch, 2018). Also, some participants indicated that they face challenges when they combine their busy office work schedules with learning. However, the university could provide such staff with support through reduced workload as well extended leave periods to enable them cope with their demands of the formal learning programmes. Similarly, there could be flexible modes of learning such as evening and weekend schools to ensure that staff enrol in formal programmes without challenges.

Limitation and future research directions

The findings of the current study should be interpreted in relation to two major limitations. First, is the limitation of conceptualising lifelong learning in a large public university with different departments, faculties and administrative units. Therefore, the findings may be limited to the learning approaches highlighted by the study participants. Secondly, findings of the current study may not apply to other public universities in South Africa that may have unique staff development programmes that could also be examined through the lenses of lifelong learning. To address this research gap, studies could be conducted in future to examine how other universities support the development of the knowledge and skills of staff through the lenses of lifelong learning.

Conclusion

The central issue explored in the current study has been how the integration of lifelong learning modes into PDPs in a university setting in South Africa could enable professional

staff to advance their knowledge and skills. The opinions and experiences of the study participants also revealed how line managers in the university address the knowledge and skills needs of their staff especially through lifelong learning approaches. As HEIs are confronted with providing solutions for the future world of work in industries and designing strategies that will keep employees in their jobs, especially in the wake of AI and robot systems, it has become necessary for universities to explore various learning modes that can enhance the knowledge and skills of their workforce. Three major findings concerning the significant contributions of the university to the development of the knowledge and skills of staff through lifelong learning emerged from the current study. First are the benefits the university could derive from continuous staff development programme by way of non-formal learning activities that include face-to-face and online training programmes. With evolving industry work setting that include technology application in the work processes, the use of online learning programmes has become important learning modes for employees to development their knowledge and skills. Also, non-formal learning programmes serve as sources of knowledge and skills transfer from experts within specific disciplines to staff of the university. Similarly, staff acquire important values and learn the accepted norms of the university through non-formal learning programmes.

Second, through institutional policies and practices such as the provision of study benefits that allow staff to enrol in academic programmes that lead to formal qualifications, some staff can obtain advanced knowledge and skills that could lead to enhanced service delivery, increased productivity and increased remuneration. Furthermore, institutional support by way of study benefit serves as an incentive to retain highly skilled professional staff, promote lifelong learning through formal programmes and support a high-performance culture through learning. Third is the importance of informal learning activities such as the university's onboarding and mentoring programmes that allow staff to learn from experienced colleagues in the university who serve as mentors. Finally, a nuanced approach to filtering the different layers of lifelong learning, especially through institutional policies and practices is essential to positioning academic leaders and line managers as change agents who will work with staff to prepare them for the complex future world of work in an evolving HE space.

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