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**SUB-THEME: MAKING ODL WORK – ITS LEADERSHIP, MANAGEMENT AND
ADMINISTRATION**

TITLE: THE ROLE OF TUTOR DEVELOPMENT IN A FLEXIBLE LEARNING SYSTEM

ABSTRACT

Technikon Southern Africa defined its role as distance learning institution with the implementation of the Integrated Learner Centred Distance Learning (ILCDE) model. This model implied the establishment of regional offices as well as the implementation of a tutor system. The tutor system implied the appointment of tutors at the different regional offices. In an attempt to take the distance out of distance learning the following functions of tutors were identified:

- Telephone tutoring
- Conducting contact sessions
- Assessing assignments

The focal point of this study was tutor development within a flexible learning system as no structured learning programmes for tutors exist at TSA. The purpose was to investigate and analyse the learning needs of tutors in a flexible learning system.

Various critical questions stimulated this study. However, the following three questions formed the basis of this study:

- What is the role of training and development in the tutor system?
- Do tutors have a need for continuing professional learning programmes? If so, what should the nature of such learning programmes be?
- What should the criteria be to evaluate and monitor the development of tutors?

A qualitative research approach was followed and the data was obtained by means of interviews and participate observation sessions. The subjects of the study were the tutors of the Subject Group: Management Leadership: Policing appointed for the registration period May 1998 – May 1999.

One of the conclusions of the study was that the following processes regarding the tutor

system need revising:

- Recruitment and selection
- Interviewing and appointment
- Job descriptions
- Orientation, training and development programmes
- Evaluation and monitoring programmes
- Role clarification
- Marketing strategy

The following recommendations were formulated:

- A guide for the recruitment and appointment processes of its tutors should be compiled.
- An assessment of the support needs of learners should be performed.
- Establishing a continuing professional learning unit should be considered.
- A proposal for learning interventions for continuing professional learning should be developed.

1. INTRODUCTION

The key to any change is the ability to transform a problem into an opportunity. It further implicates that the organisational leaders should display a positive commitment and a long-term approach towards continuing professional learning as the ad hoc approach offers staff nothing more than survival skills (Cowan, 1994:149).

Technikon Southern Africa (TSA), which was formerly a correspondence study institution, was forced to transform because of a number of factors, for example political, economic and social factors, and the result was a new vision and mission statement in 1994. This new vision and mission statement was based on the issues raised in the report of the National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE, 1996). Amongst others, the report highlighted a number of deficiencies, which characterised the South African educational system.

In 1997 the White Paper on Higher Education called for an open and flexible system and significant changes in the traditional modes of programme delivery. Flexibility of access, exit, curriculum and learning modes require the adoption of a new teaching paradigm (Moore, 1997:8-10). Moore (1996:11) stated, in his document on the implementation of the new (flexible) system that Technikon SA (TSA) has to start thinking beyond the traditional framework in order to think in a manner that will support innovative breakthroughs in the structuring of this new system. TSA defined its role as a flexible, distance learning institution with the implementation of the Integrated Learner-Centred Distance Education (ILCDE) model in 1994. This model was intended to offer a greater variety of learning opportunities to corporate clients and learners (Moore, 1996:10) and required the implementation of a decentralising process and a tutor system. The decentralising process necessitated the establishment of regional offices in different regions/parts of the country. As a result of this process, the tutor system was implemented.

At the time the tutor system was implemented, no structured learning programme for tutors existed and it was against this background that this study was undertaken. The broad purpose of this study was thus to investigate and analyse the learning needs of the tutors of a specific subject group at TSA. The study was furthermore stimulated by a number of critical questions. The following critical questions, however, formed the basis of this study:

- What is the role of training and development in the tutor system in a flexible learning approach?
- Do tutors have a need for (a) continuing professional learning programme(s)?
- What should be the criteria to evaluate and monitor the development of tutors?

2. THE RESEARCH GOAL

TSA's vision is to be a world-class, flexible learning, higher education institution. The question that immediately arises is: Can this vision be achieved without competent facilitators of adult learning?

The tutors are appointed to represent the lecturers in the regions, and the lecturers are currently fulfilling the role of facilitators of adult learning. Although the tutors are appointed as part-time staff, they play an important role in the learning processes of the learners and therefore it is important to consider the knowledge and competencies they have in order to guide and support the learners effectively.

The primary goal of this study was to investigate and assess the learning needs of the tutors. In an attempt to achieve this goal, the following research goals were formulated:

- to clarify relevant concepts according to literature and within the context of this study
- to explain the need and importance of continuing professional learning for tutors based on literature
- to complete a comparative review of the tutor systems of three distance learning institutions
- to determine the learning needs of tutors by means of interviews and observation sessions
- to make recommendations that could help implementing a more effective tutor system at TSA.

3. METHODOLOGY OF DATA COLLECTION

The researcher followed a qualitative approach with a combination of exploratory and descriptive strategies, but also included a comparative review.

- **Exploratory**, because it includes an overview of the existing tutor system, investigates learning needs and identifies shortcomings. This type of strategy is usually focused on the gathering of insight, comprehension and gathering of accurate data (Mouton and Marais, 1992:45).
- **Descriptive**, because it includes facts that describe the establishment/realisation of the tutor system and the current role of the tutor in the system.
- **Comparative literature review**, because the researcher wants to support her findings and recommendations with both a European and a South African perspective. This lead

to a description of the tutor systems of TSA, the Open University (OU) in the United Kingdom and UNISA in South Africa.

The researcher focused on two ethnographic techniques to collect data, namely interviews and participative observation to investigate and analyse the learning needs of tutors in a flexible learning system. The subjects of the study were the tutors for one specific subject group appointed for the registration period May 1998 - May 1999 as indicated in table 1.

3.1 Interviews

Interviews have two major types of formats (Merriam and Simpson, 1995:150), namely structured and unstructured. In this study the structured interview was used. The main reason for choosing this format is that a relatively large number of tutors, in different regions and over a short period of time, had to be interviewed - both personal and telephone interviews were conducted. The questions were based on the experiences, needs, insights and opinions of the participants as tutors. The interview questions were open-ended and by using an open-ended format, investigators hope to avoid predetermining the subjects' responses and, hence, their *views* of reality (Merriam and Simpson, 1995:106).

Although interviews should be considered as verbal reports, they are subject to problems of bias, poor recall and poor or inaccurate articulation. This is one reason for using participative observation to corroborate interview data with other sources. The same questions were asked to all the tutors who were interviewed (personally and telephonically) in an attempt to be consistent. 18 of the 27 tutors, who have been appointed in the Subject Group, participated in this study - 3 tutors have been interviewed telephonically and 15 personally. For all the personal interviews the researcher ensured:

- a quiet place in order to create an informal, relaxed and tranquil atmosphere;
- that all the required resources, i.e. paper, pens, tape recorder, batteries and tapes were available;
- that all the interviews were conducted on a one to one basis; and
- that appointments/arrangements with the tutors were made in advance.

A total of 18 interviews were conducted, audiotaped and transcribed for this study. Hard copies of the transcribed interviews are filed (refer to annexure C for an example of the questions asked in the interviews).

3.2 Participant observation

According to Mouton and Marais (1992:166) participative observation can be described as the process whereby the researcher links the reality with its theoretical presumptions.

This technique can be used for comprehensive investigation of events/behaviours/skills in their natural setting (Merriam and Simpson, 1995:165).

The researcher attended contact sessions conducted by tutors to observe the actions of the participants. The facilitation skills of the tutors of the Subject Group: Management Leadership: Policing were observed during the contact sessions. In practice it is impossible to describe/include all the components of the learning needs of tutors in one research project. Therefore a checklist was used to document and itemise events/behaviours/skills. One of the most basic ways to collect data is by counting how many times something occurs (Sanger, 1996:52) and this can be done by asking the questions why and what (e.g. why is this so and what are the consequences?). According to Sanger (1996:53) checklists are usually straightforward and relatively unambiguous as they give an indication of the basic structure of events, but they do not indicate the quality of those events.

Participant observation provides certain unusual opportunities for collecting data, but it also involves major problems. The most distinctive opportunity is related to the researcher's ability to gain access to events or groups that are otherwise inaccessible to scientific investigation. The major problems related to participant observation revolve around the subjectivity and the potential biases produced. Therefore the same checklist was used for all observation opportunities and the data gained was indicated on a checklist and hard copies were filed.

The checklist was a guide in the observation process and included a list of elements/components, which are regarded as important for the facilitation of the learning process. The test sample for this study was compiled by collecting information on important aspects in the facilitation of a learning process during the first opportunity, that is the first contact session that was fundamental to the participative observation process and which impacted on the rest (refer to annexure B for an example of the checklist).

Use of this technique requires the observer to take the role, at least partially, of a participant. In this study the researcher had the opportunity to participate in the contact sessions and she took the role of co-facilitator. She was thus a participant as observer while observing the tutor's actions/skills.

4. RELIABILITY AND VALIDITY OF THE RESEARCH METHODS USED IN THIS STUDY

The researcher realised that the trustworthiness of the findings of this study is dependent upon the validity and reliability of the study and tried to implement methods to make the findings valid and reliable.

4.1 Reliability

According to Mouton (1996:144) reliability is the requirement that the application of a valid measuring instrument to different groups under different sets of circumstances should lead to the same observations. Consistency is thus a key aspect of reliability.

Merriam and Simpson (1995:102) ask the question of the extent to which one's findings will be found again. One of the problems in this study is that human beings were used as subjects and human behaviour is never static, nor is what many experience necessarily more reliable than what one person experiences (Merriam and Simpson, 1995:102). The researcher tried to be consistent in collecting data by using the same checklist and posing the same questions in the interviews.

The researcher believes that the way in which the data was collected is reliable as the same checklist was used in all the contact sessions and the same questions were posed to all the tutors who were interviewed. The approach in all the interviews and contact sessions was informal and all the participants were informed about the aim and purpose of the interview.

4.2 Validity

Merriam and Simpson (1995:101) distinguish between internal and external validity. To determine **internal validity** the following question should be asked:

How congruent are one's findings with reality?

In qualitative research individuals construct this reality because the researcher gives an interpretation of somebody else's interpretation. In this study the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection in the form of interviews and observations, which means that the researcher is closer to reality than if an instrument had been interjected between the researcher and the researched. For this reason internal validity is considered a strength in this study (Merriam and Simpson, 1995:101).

According to Merriam and Simpson (1995:102-103) **external validity** does not refer to the

extent to which findings can be generalised to other situations, but to the extent to which findings from an investigation can be applied to other situations. The people in those situations determine this and it is not up to the researcher to speculate how findings can be applied to other settings. Mouton (1996:112) identifies the following dimensions of invalidity or error:

- conceptual vagueness;
- measurement error;
- biased samples;
- unreliable data; and
- invalid conclusions.

The researcher believes that some of the above errors could influence the validity of the study, as the interview questions could be vague.

5. ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

According to Merriam and Simpson (1995:195) research in applied fields such as adult education and human resource development nearly always involves collecting data from human beings. Thus, issues of informed consent, privacy, deception and protection are important concerns regardless of the design of the study.

Merriam and Simpson (1995:194) also give guidelines for dealing with the competing values, that centre around protecting participants from harm, preserving their right to privacy, making sure that their consent to participate is informed, and eliminating or minimising deception. In this regard the researcher informed each participant that is each tutor, about the purpose of the research and she made arrangements for the interviews and observation sessions in advance.

Participant observation has its own ethical problems. Diener and Crandall in Merriam and Simpson (1995:196) recommend the following safeguards for ethical problems:

- deceive as little as possible;
- enter private spheres with the research goals;
- plan procedures that absolutely guarantee subject anonymity; and
- review the potential influences of the observer on the group.

Compared to observation, interviews seem to have fewer ethical problems *as they afford the*

participants more control in that they can refuse to answer troublesome questions (Merriam and Simpson, 1995:197). In this regard the researcher used structured interviews where she asked all the tutors the same questions and the questions merely gave the participants/interviewees opportunities to share their own experiences, expertise, opinions and concerns.

The possibility for unethical behaviour in qualitative data analysis is great if the researcher does not have a moral obligation to minimise the possibility of error by checking and rechecking the validity of the data and the conclusions that are drawn from the data (Jackson in Merriam and Simpson, 1995:199).

6. DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

6.1 Interview data

The researcher analyses the interview data in a descriptive manner in table format according to different themes and sub-themes. The observation data is also explained in a descriptive manner according to the different components of the checklist that was used during the observation sessions. In the interpretation of the data the researcher points out comparisons and differences between the responses of the participants. She also identifies possible problem areas and addresses them by means of critical questions.

The researcher conducted personal and telephonic interviews with the tutors. During the interviews 12 structured questions, which were used in all the interviews, were clustered into four categories and integrated by means of colour coding. The four categories were:

- Application and appointment
- Training and development
- Evaluation
- Problems

6.2 Observation data

The researcher made use of a checklist to assist in observing the behaviour/skills/performance of the participants during the contact sessions. Five components are highlighted in the checklist and each component has subheadings.

Many practical problems were experienced in attempts to attend the contact sessions:

- As late as October 1998 no dates for contact sessions were arranged between the tutors, the tutor managers and the learners.
- In 6 cases and for various reasons learners did not attend the contact sessions and the performance of the tutors could not be observed.
- In some regions there was overlapping of contact sessions and the researcher could thus not visit all the tutors.
- At some sessions learners arrived so late that they could not gain anything from the sessions.

The researcher visited 15 participants, which provided opportunities for observation during 8 sessions. In 7 regions no learners attended the sessions and in all the cases the participants waited for one hour. Most of the contact sessions were conducted on Saturday mornings, but according to the needs in some regions, the contact sessions were conducted during the week (late afternoons/evenings). The duration of the contact sessions varied between 2-3 hours.

During the observation sessions the researcher made use of a checklist, which consisted of the following five components:

- Learning environment
- Participation of learners
- Facilitation skills
- Evaluation
- Administration

7. DELIMITATION AND LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The researcher is aware of the delimitation of this study and is aware of the limitations that may have an influence on the findings of this study.

7.1 Delimitation

The study was confined to the tutors of one subject group of one specific Programme Group, namely the tutors appointed in the Subject Group: Management Leadership: Policing for the registration period May 1998 - May 1999.

7.2 Limitations

The following limitations of this study should be recognised:

- TSA is only one of the many distance learning institutions in South Africa;
- the majority of the learners of the Programme Group and the tutors are primarily from the South African Police Services (SAPS). The fact that this is just one organisation with its own inherent culture and subcultures, can have an influence on the findings;
- structured interviews were conducted and thus all the opportunities that had arisen could not be explored;
- the researcher took notes during the interviews which could have distracted her;
- the fact that in many cases no learners attended the contact sessions and only a few participants' skills/performance could be observed; and
- the lack of diversity in the test sample who participated in this study.

8. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

8.1 CONCLUSIONS

In view of the literature and findings of the interviews and observation sessions, the following conclusions were formulated:

8.1.1 Organisational structures

Organisational structures should be in place regarding systems and processes when a tutor system (learner support system) is implemented. It seems, however, that the following processes regarding the tutor system need attention:

- Criteria for recruitment and selection of tutors
- Guidelines for interviewing and appointment of tutors
- Job descriptions for tutors
- Orientation programme for newly appointed tutors and training and development programmes for experienced tutors
- A marketing strategy for the tutor system

8.1.2 Role clarification

Role clarification at organisational level is important to ensure effectiveness and success in any process. It is also applicable to TSA's tutor system. According to the findings it seemed that although it is the tutors managers' responsibility, they do not attend to important issues like generic training, training on administrative issues, monitoring the effectiveness and the performance of the tutors. It also became clear that the roles of the tutors are not clarified and shared and subsequently they could not offer a quality learner support service. This lack of role clarification lead to the lack of clarification of tasks and responsibilities, which should enable the institution to monitor the performance and quality of learner support as well as determining the learning needs of the tutors. Clarification for tutor roles in the form of a job description should be explained and shared with newly appointed tutors before they start their tutoring processes.

8.1.3 Structured training and development and monitoring and evaluation programmes

Although the tutors are seen as subject specialists they should still be exposed to structured training and development programmes. These programmes should include orientation courses and focus on the distance learning institution, its goals regarding learner support, its learners and their needs and adult learning practices. According to the findings, the participants indicated a need for training and specifically generic training. The implementation and facilitation of training and development programmes go hand in hand with the implementation of a monitoring and evaluation programme of tutors. Such a programme does not exist currently and thus hampers attempts to determine learning needs of tutors in order to enable them to support the learners effectively.

8.1.4 Administrative problems

The types of administrative problems experienced by the tutors and the researcher are factors of concern as it could lead to organisational chaos. Some of the problems that need immediate attention are:

- Support from the regional offices to the learners and the tutors was insufficient, as they could not provide the learners and the tutors with the necessary material/information.
- Learners do not attend contact sessions. Many factors can, however, play a role in this. Some possibilities are:
 - learners do not want to take responsibility for their own learning processes;

- a lack of a learning culture in the SAPS;
- learners do not want to attend contact sessions facilitated by tutors, as they seem to prefer the lecturer to act as facilitator;
- learners do not want to attend contact sessions facilitated by tutors, who are in a managerial position at the workplace at the same time; and
- learners do not receive information regarding contact sessions in time.
- Tutors do not get paid monthly for their services as contracted.
- Lack of commitment to the learning process from lecturers, tutors and learners.
- Ineffective support to tutors from the lecturers.

This study focused on a specific area of TSA's tutor system, namely the learning needs of tutors in a flexible learning system. The following recommendations should assist the institution in addressing some of the problems in its tutor system.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

9.1 The recruitment and appointment processes

TSA should develop a guide for the recruitment and appointment processes of its tutors. This guide should be a working document that represents good legal practices and includes standards for tutor qualifications and experience in specific subjects in order to recruit tutors according to those standards. Such a guide could help TSA to identify the best people for the tutoring positions and to have fair and effective procedures in place.

9.2 Learner support systems

The tutor system is part of TSA's learner support system and it has the infrastructure to support its learners effectively in their learning processes. It is, however, important to identify and determine the real learner support needs of its learners. This recommendation was stimulated by the fact that so few learners attended the contact sessions during the registration period May 1998- May 1999.

9.3 Establishing a continuing professional learning unit

TSA needs a framework for continuing professional learning and development and therefore the establishment of a Continuing Professional Learning (CPL) unit where all academic, support as well as part-time staff are included, is recommended. Such a unit could:

- have a working group consisting of people interested in staff development;
- provide for regional academic staff to support the tutors in the regions;
- facilitate workshops/seminars/learningshops/course (centralised and decentralised);
- provide a consultation service as well as centralised and decentralised staff training programmes;
- offer mentorship programmes for newly appointed tutors;
- develop a tutor toolkit for tutor training purposes on a modular basis; and focus on the following themes for tutor development:
 - Orientation programme
 - Open and distance learning
 - Adult learning principles
 - Facilitation skills
 - Tutor roles
 - Active learning
 - Assessment techniques
 - Telephone tutoring
 - Conducting contact sessions
 - Assessing assignments, portfolios and learning guides and providing constructive and meaningful feedback
 - Learner needs
 - Diverse learner groups

9.4 A conceptual framework of continuing professional learning at TSA

This recommendation is an extension of the previous recommendation as the researcher is of the opinion that there is a link between establishing a Continuing Professional Learning unit and creating a culture of learning within the framework of a learning organisation.

In figure 1 (attached as Annexure A) the researcher explained the twofold role of TSA regarding continuing professional learning. She also explained the responsibility of TSA towards its academic (both full-time and part-time) and support staff, learners, partners and employers. According to literature the people need competencies and information to be effective and to make an impact on the competitive market in which they are functioning. In this figure the researcher explains some learning interventions, which could assist TSA in creating a climate in which individual staff members are encouraged to learn and to develop their full potential. It should also extend to a learning culture, which includes customers,

suppliers and other significant stakeholders. It should make the human resources development (people development) strategy central to business policy, which would stimulate a continuous process of organisational transformation.

In view of this the researcher recommends some serious learning interventions for academic staff (part-time and full-time) as well as support staff. This will, however, mean that TSA should commit itself to change from a bureaucratic, hierarchical institution to an intelligent, learning organisation and create continuous professional learning opportunities for its staff (both academic and support).

10. FINAL REFLECTION

The research goal was to investigate and analyse the learning needs of tutors, which has been addressed. Although the researcher could not find answers to all the critical questions, that stimulated this study, she could formulate satisfactory conclusions and recommendations. The researcher believes that this study could make a contribution to the institution at large in its endeavour to become a world-class, flexible, higher education institution, responsive to human development needs in Southern Africa.

At the moment TSA is facing many challenges such as declining student numbers, low pass rates of learners, demotivated staff, lack of leadership on various levels and restructuring of different departments. The researcher is of the opinion that one of the solutions to these problems lies in the creation of effective support mechanisms. An example of such a support mechanism is continuing professional learning programmes where the staff (academic, supporting and part-time) can be provided with new skills and competencies.

The fact that TSA makes use of many part-time staff who directly work with the learners, stresses the importance of having competent and well-equipped academics and tutors to accept the challenges facing distance learning institutions.

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FIGURE 1
LEARNING INTERVENTIONS FOR STAFF DEVELOPMENT AT
TECHNIKON SOUTHERN AFRICA

