

Variability in Curriculum Development Basic Skills in Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract Background: Study areas need to be handled by specialists so that they can identify specific areas that are needed to be included as required learning experiences. Curriculum development activities are continuously conducted one way or the other and academics have a vital role to play therein. Curricula have to be developed and if they are already available, they need to be reviewed. **Method:** A qualitative tradition of inquiry was used to conduct the study. Purposive sampling was used to select 20 participants required. A questionnaire was used to collect data from academics. Grounded theory was used because no theory existed that offered an explanation for a phenomenon studied. **Results:** Variations in the attainment of basic skills in curriculum development were revealed. The majority of the participants agreed to having basic skills training offered to them to enable them to perform accordingly. They also noted some implications on employability skills on students due to lack of appropriate skills in curriculum development. **Conclusion:** There are variations in levels of acquisition of basic skills in curriculum development. This study has shown that there are some academics that are in dire need of these basic skills. It is clear from the report that academics need the skills to enable them develop comprehensive programmes. **Recommendations:** There is a need to plan for an in-service training programme for academics in curriculum development. This study needs to be replicated to other higher learning institutions so that results can be generalized.

Keywords: Curriculum, basic skills, higher institutions of learning, academics

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1. Introduction

Higher education institutions (HEI) require expertise in various disciplines. Academics with varying expertise are required to handle these disciplines. Handling of study programmes within disciplines calls for acquisition of core skills, knowledge and abilities (KSA). Study areas need to be handled by specialists so that they can identify specific areas that are needed to be included as required learning experiences. Curriculum development activities are continuously conducted one way or the other and academics have a vital role to play therein. Curricula have to be developed and if they are already available, they need to be reviewed. Experts in specific disciplines are required to contribute towards developing and reviewing these curricula. This is in a bid to improve academic performance in these institutions.

The Ministry of General Education (2019) describes the Standards of Practice for the Teaching Profession (SPTP)

in Zambia which strives to articulate a new vision of excellence in teaching. It further advocates for teachers, teacher educators and educational leaders to aspire for excellence in teaching in order to transform the education system in Zambia. Transformation of the education system occurs at various levels of which higher institutions of learning are part. Academics always strive to attain excellence in their performance and this has a bearing on recipients of the set KSA expected in these different disciplines. Depending on the nature of the discipline, some of the academics possess basic skills in curriculum development while others do not. This corroborates with the Southern African Development Community's (SADC) Protocol on Education and Training signed by the Southern African States in 1997. Its overall objective is "To progressively achieve the equivalence, harmonization and standardization of the education and training systems in the Region" (SADC, 1997: 4; 2007a; 2007b; 2009; Banda & Mpolomoka, 2023) [1,2,3,4,5]. Twenty-Six (26) years have passed since its enactment, yet higher education institutions still face challenges of curriculum

development and research. It has been observed that academics have not trained (Drummond, et al., 1998) [6] in required professional development to enable them to handle and appreciate functionality of study programmes and instructional materials (Simui, Mpolomoka, Sakakombe & Mhango, 2020) [7].

The following were objectives set for this study:

1. To establish acquisition of basic skills in curriculum development among academics.
2. To determine training academics have undergone in curriculum development.
3. To ascertain academics involvement in curriculum development.
4. To ascertain the need for basic skills in curriculum development.
5. To determine the influence of basic skills in curriculum development on courses of study and employability.

2. The Backdrop

Curriculum development is a foundation of study programmes in higher institutions of learning. Academics handle these study programmes by developing and reviewing them. To achieve required standards, academics need to possess basic skills in curriculum development. Some of the academics have basic skills that enable them to address issues arising from curriculum development while others do not. Basic knowledge in curriculum development is crucial to achieving excellence in educational circles. Suffice to say, the basic skills are required in linking study programmes to industries. There are some academics who do not have basic knowledge in curriculum development and this has an implication on the quality of study programmes offered. Consequently, if the lack of enough basic skills in curriculum development is not adequately addressed, compromised study programmes which are not responsive to real needs of communities will continue to prevail.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study used a structural approach to discerning interactions of various components of higher education institutions as regards functionality of academic programmes in relation to requirements of external basic skills. Structural approaches are characterized by an organism that is involved in many internal and external processes that are driven by this internal program. The goal of structuralism is to define these processes and their relation to the internal and external world of the organism (Sturmey and Doran, 2020) [8].

Heydebrand (2001) [9] describes structuralism is an intellectual tendency that seeks to understand and explain social reality in terms of social structures. In other words, 'structuralism' is a term used in general to denote any kind of analysis that is concerned with exposing structures and relations, with finding orders rather than actions (Smith, 2009) [10]. Structures are defined as the patterns and forms of social relations and combinations among a set of constituent social elements or component parts such as

positions, units, levels, regions and locations, and social formations. Furthermore Sturmey and Erica (2020) [8] define a structure as a collection of major programs at the stage of their present completion. Higher institutions of learning are structures with various programmes of study. The source of this element is internal and is described as a system of macro-functions, linked with one another, in relation to the outer world.

Structuralism tends to proceed on two different analytic levels, as a method of analysis or procedure of knowing (epistemology), and as an ontology or metaphysical design of social reality. Higher institutions of learning are complex entities which need to be understood in terms of how they function (Heydebrand, 2001) [9]. In particular, transference of skills from one area to another so as to address all needy areas, needs to be understood. Possession of expertise in individual discipline is good, but not good enough to enable one to handle emerging issues in the study area. Structuralism holds that meaning in sociocultural life rests in the positional configuration of signs relative to each other in a system. Curriculum development is a component of the system in the academic world which needs to be understood so that appropriate knowledge, skills and abilities are identified and apportioned accordingly.

Structuralism also tends to approach its subject matter under the auspices of two different meta-theoretical perspectives on social reality: Social structure as an empirical and historical reality, and social structure as a model or representation of reality. Applicable to this study was the latter view of structuralism which avails relationships among dynamics of roles for academics in higher institutions of learning. This view provided an understanding of the multiplicity of responsibilities that academics have. Having established the various functions that go with academic work, the theory of structuralism was used to determine requirements in terms of expertise which befit academics. Input into the programmes is sourced from both internal and external (Sturmey and Doran, 2020) [8]. This is described as the organization of stimuli from the external world for the development of programs within the organism. It helped to ascertain that academics function in other ways other than their core areas of expertise. Heydebrand (2001) [9] affirms that the conceptual property space generated by these analytic dimensions accommodates the major theories of structuralism existing today. Mauro, and de Almeida (2015) [11] defines structuralism as a mode of knowledge of nature and human life that is interested in relationships rather than individual objects or, alternatively, where objects are defined by the set of relationships of which they are part and not by the qualities possessed by them taken in isolation.

4. Literature Review

Academics are urged to acquire knowledge, skills and abilities that are somewhat cut across other disciplines and are Chadha (2006) [12] transferable to contexts outside their academic field of study. Department for Education and Employment (1997) [13] in which transferable skills were defined as those skills that are central to

occupational competence in all sectors and at all levels. Academics are supposed to develop and maintain their areas of study within their disciplines in relation to occupational expertise. Broad (2013) [14] researched on development of teachers and in particular mentoring, or work-based support. The study explored another strand of the professionalisation agenda related to work-based support offered to trainee teachers. It was noted as a neglected even area.

4.1. Meaning of Curriculum

Qassim (2021) [15] explains that the curriculum consists of all of the planned experiences that the school provides as part of its educational responsibilities. It comprises knowledge and skills that students are expected to learn. It is a building block of the education system, especially for a particular course, because without it, adequate and organized learning would not be possible (Ornstein & Hunkins, 2018) [16]. Mulenga (2018) [17] defined curriculum as a set of performance objectives or student learning being a very practical orientation of curriculum. This approach focuses upon specific competencies that should be attained by learners. Proponents of this approach argue that if a teacher knows the targets which learners should achieve, it is much easier to organize elements to achieve this end. The strength of this approach is that it focuses upon the learners who are after all the ultimate beneficiaries of the teaching and learning processes.

Mulenga (2018) [17] explained how curriculum is taken for granted as an easy task that any with basic knowledge can handle issues therein. He observes that most of those who have studied education but without a refined focus on understanding a curriculum take it for granted that through their studies they have also somehow understood what a curriculum is. This explains why he posits that what higher education should strengthen is educating graduates for competencies rather than training them (Mulenga, 2020) [18]. This is an academically dangerous position to find oneself in and can be and has been a source of confusion where curriculum issues are concerned. Because of such assumptions some individuals and educationists end up having assumed understandings of what a curriculum is. Some of those who have assumed the understanding of a curriculum have unfortunately even found themselves at the frontier of decision making about the study of a curriculum in institutions of higher learning and in Ministries of Education have been in the forefront of curriculum development. This is very common in most developing countries in Africa and their fruits have been evident in the poor quality of education that their graduates get and in the confusion that go with the development and implementation of curricula in primary and secondary schools (Ngambi, Kabika, Moonga, Chikopela, Sampa & Mpolomoka, 2020) [19]. Bishop (1985) [20] clearly explained that one of the challenges of curriculum development in Africa was the lack of specialists in the art and science of curriculum development itself. Carl (2012) [21] actually pinpoints the source of this deficiency as emanating from institutions of higher learning where curriculum decisions are sometimes championed by curriculum novices and administrative

staff who have very little ideas in the field of curriculum studies.

The Ministry of General Education (2019) describes the performance, knowledge, skills, competencies and dispositions that education professionals need to improve their professional practice which will ultimately lead to higher learner achievements. This is because HEI are complex as they reflect diversity of teaching service agencies in Zambia and the wide-ranging responsibilities of teachers, teacher educators and educational leaders in a variety of contexts (Ministry of General Education, 2019). Curriculum development is one of the responsibilities of academics in higher learning institutions. It is a crucial aspect of the structure of the educational programmes. The standards are designed for all the three categories of teaching professionals (teachers, educational leaders and teacher educators) to adapt to their own context. They are complementary to the existing job descriptions for teaching professionals, rather than a replacement for them. This means that responsibilities which are external to the core of specific discipline need to be taken on as they contribute to achievement of educational development.

4.2. Transferable Skills among Academics

Developing a study programme also requires extra knowledge and skills which cut across disciplines. These are transferable skills which enable academics to function adequately in their disciplines. Such are skills which contribute to holistic empowerment of academics in their pursuance of excellence in their various disciplines. This is because academics in these institutions get involved in handling tasks that are not their core business. Academics can make a deliberate move and acquire essential skills for them to be functional in other areas which are crucial to development of their programmes. Knowledge and skills in curriculum development are some of the requirements to ensure success in academic programmes.

4.3. Continuous Professional Development

Continuous professional development is complex and highly individualized undertaking. According to Broad (2013) [14] it is dependent on a range of variables such as context, subject or occupational area taught, the development needs of the individual teacher at a specific moment of time and at a specific point in their career. These needs will change as the teacher develops and enhances their professional knowledge. It focuses on development of subject specific knowledge and teaching skill as well as other needy areas which relate to proper functioning of academics involved in development, review and implementation of education programmes. Therefore, professional development was defined as any activity carried out in order to develop the skills and knowledge needed to deepen understanding of the subject or occupational area taught, so as to enhance teaching and learning, whether consciously or not (Broad, 2013) [14]. It is for this reason that gaps in knowledge, skills and abilities are identified among academics so that appropriate learning experiences are designed to bridge gaps identified.

Broad (2013) [14] observes that generalizing provision of professional development only caters for some people and leaves out others. There is a need to have professional development programmes tailored to specific needs of individuals. Doing so, helps to have professional development programmes address particular needs of individuals. In Zambia, the current focus is on ensuring that all academics attain skills in teaching methodology. While this move is appreciated, the risk of neglecting other needy areas is high. Basic skill in curriculum development is one of the aspects in education circles which is not emphasized as a requirement for academics. Despite their responsibility which includes developing and reviewing study programmes, academics are not provided with training in curriculum development so that they can handle their study programmes professionally. It is the only sector of education in primary and secondary education that have basic skills in curriculum development. The other academics sourced from the world of work other than education, are bereft of these skills. It is no wonder that higher education institutions complain about inadequate link of study programmes skills to industries (Mulenga, 2020; Banda & Mpolomoka, 2018; World Economic Forum, 2017) [18,22,23]. Additionally, industries are hardly engaged in developing the curriculum because of lack of appreciation of their contribution to the study programmes. Such a situation hardly promotes employability skills which higher institutions of learning are supposed to instill in the students for them to be of relevance in the communities that provide work environment.

Conclusions drawn from the reviewed literature are that the curriculum is crucial to ensuring development of quality learning experiences that are reflective of the communities affected. It is for this reason that academics should realize their significant role in framing a curriculum.

5. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative inquiry to conduct the study. Target population was academics from which a sample of 20 was drawn. Purposive sampling was used to get the required number of participants. Researchers purposively select participants and/or data sources that can answer the research question (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Banda, Mpolomoka, Mbono & Sampa, 2017) [24,25]. A questionnaire was used to collect data from academics. This study strived to ascertain acquisition of basic skills in curriculum development. Since not much has been documented on the need for basic skill in curriculum, grounded theory was used too.

As a qualitative research inquiry, grounded theory allowed the researchers to study a curriculum development process, conduct phenomenon or process and discover new theories that are based on the collection and analysis of real world data. According to Birks and Mills (2015) [26] this methodology is appropriate when little is known about a phenomenon with the aim to produce or construct an explanatory theory that uncovers a process inherent to the substantive area of inquiry. Chun, Birks & Francis (2019) [27] confirm that rounded theory sets out

to discover or construct theory from data, systematically obtained and analysed using comparative analysis. Grounded theory was used because no theory existed that offered an explanation for a phenomenon studied. The process of data collection, data analysis, and theory development happened in an iterative process until the researchers reached a theoretical saturation point, the point at which additional data adds no additional insight into your new theory.

Theoretical sampling allowed the researchers to follow leads in the data by sampling new participants or material that provided relevant information. In this case, similar people were included in the study to provide required data basic skills in curriculum development. Birks and Mills (2015:66) [26] define theoretical sampling as ‘the process of identifying and pursuing clues that arise during analysis in a grounded theory study’. During this process, additional information is sought to saturate categories under development. The analysis identifies relationships, highlights gaps in the existing data set and may reveal insight into what is not yet known.

Data were analyzed using constant comparison. It involves comparing data to each other and to existing categories and codes, in order to identify patterns and relationships. Open coding was used to identify concepts and categories, and then use axial coding to organize them into a theoretical framework (Hassan, 2022) [28]. Frequencies in form of percentages were used to analyze numbers of participants according to the way they responded to the given statements and questions.

6. Findings

The results revealed some disparities in levels of acquisition of basic skills in curriculum development. While some academics possess these basic skills, others do not. Such a situation was perceived as a cause for poor quality study programmes which consequently impact negatively on employability of recipients of the learning programmes so developed. The need for basic skills in the curriculum was seen as a necessity.

6.1. Knowledge in Curriculum Development

The majority of the participants indicated that they were knowledgeable in handling curriculum development of their study programmes.

Table 1 shows that 18 out of 20 of the participants were knowledgeable in curriculum development which translates into 90%. Only a few had no skills curriculum development which is indicated by 10%.

Table 1. Knowledge in Curriculum Development

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	18	90.0	90.0	90.0
	No	2	10.0	10.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

6.1. Basic Skills in Curriculum

More than half of the participants showed that they possessed basic skills in curriculum development as opposed to the others who were also close to half who did not.

Table 2 indicates that 12 out of 20 participants showed that they needed basic skills in curriculum development. This translates into 60% of participants who needed skills in handling curriculum issues pertaining to study programmes. However, 12 out of 20 needed basic skills in curriculum development which translates into 40%.

Table 2. Basic Skills in Curriculum Development

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	12	60.0	60.0	60.0
	No	8	40.0	40.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

6.2. Training in Curriculum Development

The majority of the participants revealed that they were not trained in curriculum development. A few of them indicated that they were trained in curriculum development.

Table 3 above shows that more than half of the participants were trained in basic skills in curriculum. 11 out of 20 of the participants indicated to have basic skills in curriculum. This translates into 55%. This statistic shows that some participants were skillful in handling curriculum issues concerning development and reviewing study programmes.

Table 3. Training in Curriculum Development

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	9	45.0	45.0	45.0
	No	11	55.0	55.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

6.3. Involvement in Curriculum Development

The Table 4 below shows that 16 out of 20 participants were involved in curriculum development. 16 out of 20 of the participants, which translates into 80% handled curriculum matters pertaining to their study programmes. Four out of 20, (representing 20%) did not participate in curriculum development issues.

Table 4. Involvement in Curriculum Development

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	16	80.0	80.0	80.0

	No	4	20.0	20.0	100.0
	Total	20	100.0	100.0	

6.4. Curriculum Development Skill can Improve Employability of Students

Table 5 below shows that 18 out of 20, that is, 90% of the participants agreed that attainment of basic skills in curriculum development could improve employability of students upon completion of their study programmes. Need for a basic skill in curriculum development was perceived as a necessity among the participants.

Table 5. Curriculum and Employability Skills

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	18	90.0	94.7	94.7
	No	1	5.0	5.3	100.0
	Total	19	95.0	100.0	
Missing	System	1	5.0		
Total		20	100.0		

6.5. Impact of Basic Skills in Curriculum Development on Courses of Study

It was revealed that basic skills in curriculum development were crucial to enabling academics to handle issues properly. One of the participants noted that acquisition of skills in curriculum development “helps in ensuring that both the content and delivery methods are adequate.” The other participant indicated that [forms a basis for developing quality learning programmes which are consistent with objectives.

When participants were asked to elaborate on their perception of lack of basic skills in curriculum development, they all agreed to their being instrumental in compromising quality of study programmes.

One of the participants said that “It brings poor quality preparation of work and poor lecture delivery”.

The other participants observed that “We tend to include recycled information which is outdated in most cases.”

7. Discussion

Variations in attainment of basic skills in curriculum development were reported. This study has revealed that not all academics possess basic skills in curriculum development. This is because while some of the academics were skillful in curriculum development, others were not. While it is assumed that basic skills in curriculum development can contribute to improving quality of study programmes, experts in the field think otherwise. Mulenga (2018) [17] laments that most of those who have studied education but without a refined focus on understanding a curriculum take it for granted that through their studies they have also somehow understood what a curriculum is. He cautions that this is very common in

most developing countries in Africa and their fruits have been evident in the poor quality of education that their graduates get and in the confusion that go with the development and implementation of curricula in learning institutions. This explains why Mulenga (2020) [18] contends that higher education curriculum developers' understanding of what a curriculum is influences the development of it and hence its quality. Ardently, Carl (2012) [21] actually pin points the source of this deficiency as emanating from institutions of higher learning where curriculum decisions are sometimes championed by curriculum novices and administrative staff who have very little ideas in the field of curriculum studies.

8. Conclusion

There are variations in levels of acquisition of basic skills in curriculum development. This study has shown that there are some academics who are in dire need of these basic skills. It is clear from the report that academics need the skills to enable them develop comprehensive programmes. This revelation shows the need for addressing the knowledge, skills and abilities gap among academics where curriculum is concerned. Academics unanimously confirmed the need for a deliberate effort to offer professional development in the area of curriculum development. The training should cater for all the academics so that it can cater for those who are bereft of the skills as well as those who have where it will serve as a refresher course.

9. Recommendations

1. There is a need for Higher Education Institutions and stakeholders should plan for an in-service training programme for academics in curriculum development.
2. This study needs to be replicated to other higher learning institutions so that results can be generalized.

10. Acknowledgements

All authors designed the study. Under the oversight of Dr Selina Banda, Florence, Margaret and Jack collected the data and leaned on all authors throughout the data collection process. Marian, Rose and Daniel conducted data analysis. Selina wrote the first draft of the manuscript, thereafter all other authors revised the manuscript. Daniel advised on the final manuscript. In the end, all authors read, commented on and approved the final manuscript. Selina and Daniel had access to the data, controlled the decision to publish and are the study guarantors.

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