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Exploring Academic Promotion Practices within Higher Education Institutions: Enablers and Constraints in the Physical Space

Abstract

This paper explores academic promotion practices in higher education institutions. Promotion of faculty members of universities is one of the major mechanisms in maintaining and improving the quality and efficiency of higher education and research activities in the country. Appointment processes are therefore critical to institutional development; therefore, the study argues for the identification of successful practices by exploring the enablers and disablers within the institutional promotion process in South Africa. This qualitative conceptual paper used literature, not limited to books, articles and chapters written on higher education institutions' promotion practices. There is, however, limited research on institutional promotion practices for academic employees within the South African higher education institutions. The study argues for the identification of successful practices to ensure fair and equitable institutional promotion practices by exploring the enablers and disablers within the institutional promotion process in the South African higher education. The paper serves as a foundational piece in understanding that appointment practices can be regulated to ensure fairness and equity. The appointment practices highlight the importance of shifting academic staff profiles in ways that are more representative of a diverse democracy. The inclusion of South Africa demonstrates a gap that exists in the academic promotions within higher education institutions. Findings reveal power-play and micro-politicking within promotion practices in HEIs. The paper serves as a foundational piece in understanding the regulation of fairness and equity in academic appointment practices.

Keywords: promotion practices, higher education institution, academic staff, institutional goals, equity, fairness

Introduction

Academic promotion practices within higher education institutions in South Africa should attract and recruit qualified specialists, retain and promote academic staff members for efficiency and effectiveness of universities and higher education institutions (Teymouri et al., 2007). The pressure to create and sustain the conditions necessary for the consolidation of democracy (Thaver, 2010) are aimed at promoting academics that are more representative of a diverse democracy. This process is mediated by institutional policy reforms – Education White Paper 3 (RSA, 1997), Employment Equity Act No 55 of 1998 (RSA, 1998), National Plan for Higher Education (Ntshoe, 2002), in South Africa (Thaver, 2010). While much current thinking is at the macro-level and focused on narrow human resource aspects related to “getting the numbers right”, there is limited research on what happens in the daily experiences of academic promotions. The findings are considered in terms of their implications for fairness, and equity, at the levels both of institution and society as a

whole (Teymouri et al., 2007). The scrutiny of HEIs highlights academic promotion implementations looking not only at the scholarship of research, but the scholarship of teaching also (Kivistö et al., 2019). Because of the tendency for academic to be interested more in research, or teaching only, the HEI promotion policy has created a balance in promotion requirements to allow other academic professional activities to be considered (Chabaya, 2015). Chabaya's study (2015) indicates that good researchers are not necessarily good teachers, and that holding a PhD does not translate an academic to be a good researcher.

The need for greater efficiency, productivity and quality in the higher education sector encourages fairness in promotion practices (Kenny, 2008). While a lot of current thinking is on efficiency, productivity and quality in the higher education, there is limited research on daily practices of academic promotions. HEIs are vested with academic freedom and possession of a critical mass and diversity of skills, and are therefore well positioned to develop effective policies to ensure promotion practices are well performed (Chabaya, 2015). Accordingly, without fair and equitable appointment practices in HEIs, no institution can achieve sustainable development. This paper, therefore, aims to narrow this gap by contributing to the future promotion practices of academic staff members (Marini & Reale, 2016; Woelert & Yates, 2015).

The high investment and high expectations in universities demand fair academic appointment and promotion practices, to meet the expectations of stakeholders (Abeli, 2010; Materu, 2007) to avoid conflict among academics. This paper discusses the structure of the academic profession, institutional criteria for academic promotions, equity and fairness in institutional promotions practices, requirements for academic promotion, promotion practices in HEIs, and, finally, enablers and constraints in the appointment process.

The structure of the academic profession

HEIs are undergoing significant changes due to local and global academic competitions. Academic promotions help improve institutional goals and rankings, as well as student performance. In many universities, unfair practices occur within processes of promotion (Sadiq et al., 2019). There is a global sensitivity that academic hierarchies should be demographically representative (Thaver, 2010). Most South African HEIs have four levels for academic positions, and these are lecturer, senior lecturer, associate professor and full professor. Only lecturers have a Master's degree; all other positions require a doctoral degree. Positions change on appointment to a higher promotion post. For a promotion, an academic has to comply with the required set criteria and satisfy the panel of interviewers. These academic promotion practices are important in terms of their implications for the democratisation process, at the level of both of institution and society as a whole (Sadiq et al., 2019).

Institutional criteria for academic promotions

As institutions move towards entrenching the democratic process, there is pressure manifested at the level of implementation of employment equity measures introduced in 1998. The challenge, however, is the little focus on what happens in

the daily promotion practices within the South African institutions. The criteria for promotion in South Africa are the attainment of the set Key Performance Areas (KPAAs) or more (Unisa, 2018), a goal-oriented process directed towards maximising productivity of academics. Applicants have to complete an institutional application form specifying involvement in tuition, research outputs, community engagement projects, and involvement in collaborative research with local and international institutions, and any other additional achievements related to academic work.

Equity and fairness in institutional promotions practices

Internationally, academics in more junior positions, with higher qualifications enjoy a quicker promotion time, and there is no association between time to promotion and gender (Sadiq et al., 2019). In South Africa there are some differences in time to promotion associated with race, although these are not consistent. Sadiq and other scholars' study provides some quantitative evidence of the University of Cape Town's success at creating a fair system of academic advancement, however, broader demographic transformation remains a priority. Other South African institutions' promotion practices disregard equity and inevitably give rise to tensions and collisions between different forms of power (Thaver, 2010).

Promotions of academics at HEIs are conducted by a panel consisting of the institutional management members, academic experts in the discipline area, and labour representatives, across all colleges. Promotion is efficient only if the promotion activities accomplish set goals (Kotler & Keller, 2012). Anything on the contrary will result in dissatisfactions and disputes, and non-achievement of intended institutional goals (Cochran, 2003; Koch & Emrey, 2001). Promotion integrates and interweaves various activities communicated with the academic staff in terms of personal and professional requests to harmonise interest and willingness (Alonderiene & Klimavičiene, 2013). Decision-making during promotions is a process of reaching a solution with no disputes.

Requirements for academic promotion

Outputs recognised in the promotion process of the University of South Africa, are: research publications (DHET, 2015), involvement in student tuition, involvement in projects benefiting the institutional society and stakeholders, and research collaborations (Unisa, 2018). For research the academic should have published articles in accredited journals, books or book chapters, and conference proceedings in peer-reviewed books or journals. The RAD has put structures and programmes in place to support, empower and develop academics in line with national research policy directives, as well as international best practices (Unisa, 2018). Similarly, Iran's promotion of faculty members to higher ranks, is achieved by indicators determined by the Ministry of Health and Medical Education and is also based on four aspects: educational, research, executive, and cultural activities. Promotion depends on obtaining the score specified for each scientific rank and spending a specified period.

Promotion practices in HEIs

Application for promotion of academics in all colleges differs according to the level occupied by the academic. An academic who is a lecturer may apply for a promotion post to senior lecturer, and has to have a Master's degree (supervision and research output is not a requirement). A senior lecturer may apply for the position of an associate professor, and has to have a Doctoral degree, three-year teaching experience in a HEI, and to have two research outputs within three years, or three within five years. An associate professor applying for a full professorship position has to have a Doctoral degree, five-year teaching experience in a HEI, three research outputs within three years or four within five years. Supervision of post graduate students forms part of the research outputs.

Promotion committee members are important and key elements of HEIs and their practices have direct impact on HE system performance for developing the HEI sector (Tootoonchi et al., 2014). A fair promotion process is ensured through creating a well-structured interview process that reduces the likelihood of bias and increases objectivity (Loft et al., 2016). Using objective and consistent evaluation methods promotes impartiality and neutrality (Teymouri et al., 2007). Any discrepancy during the interview process may result in a dispute.

The promotion committee should practice transparency and fairness, and appropriate qualitative and quantitative indicators should be developed for measuring the activities by specialised academics in promotion committees of universities (Gilavand, 2016). A fair promotion process should involve a process of judging people on their ability and competence, and should contribute to adding credibility to the panels' decisions. Interview notes are pivotal to a panelist's case and should be stored in a secure, centralised location until a case has been lodged and closed. If it is found that the promotion committee failed in proving their unfair practice, the academic should be promoted. The labour union's role is to ensure that promotions are free from discrimination and retaliation. Reprisal for participation in the dispute process should be prohibited.

In one South African university in Pretoria, one out of four colleges within the institution had a differing promotion criterion (Unisa, 2018). All stipulations in the promotion policy were similar except for the number of research outputs for the college of education. Differences in appointment criteria practice meant unfairness and inequity across colleges. The union had to be involved for the analysis of the appointment policy, and the review of the criteria was done after meeting with management. Similarly, obstacles were also identified in a study by Karimimooneghi et al. (2014). The challenges were lack of assessing the quality of activities, lack of homogenisation in the promotion process, and lack of using expert academics in faculty committees. Unfairness results in discursive tensions about what constitutes competence and who is authorised to pronounce on it (Goldberg, 2000). Recommendations are that aspects of academic activities and the effect of research and scientific activities should be regulated.

Enablers and constraints in the appointment process

South Africa's history of inequality and the different social realities in each college have resulted in universities experiencing challenges of proper academic

promotions. A study by Chabaya (2015) revealed that South Africa lacks a fair and equitable academic promotion practice. A major factor that emerged is the intergenerational comparisons that reinforce the desire to initiate application soon, and the promotion of non-deserving candidates to promotion posts. Because many scholars overvalue their own contributions, they apply for promotion too early thinking they deserve this recognition because of several full professors who may have been promoted when academic standards used to be lower in the earlier decades (Thaver, 2010). A negative outcome at promotion time could breed lasting discontent and awkward encounters for years to come (Weyland, 2015).

Research methodology

This conceptual paper employed a descriptive research methodology using local and international literature analysis of documents as sources of information. The study focused on fairness and equity regarding academic appointments in HEIs. In recognition of the importance of proper promotion practices, the paper is conceptualised on the assumption that appointment criteria are well-structured to improve performance in departments (Gurr & Drysdale, 2013). The appointment of academics to promotional posts are intended to increase organisational efficiency. This conceptual paper therefore utilised this research methodology to get deeper understanding of academic promotion practices within higher education institutions and interpret HEIs' application of promotion practices from reviewed research in an attempt to set appropriate benchmarks for transformation (Swanepoel, 2010). The reviewed literature and databases were analysed, triangulated and the main ideas of experts summarised. Promotion indicators of HEI academics were based on regulations of faculty member promotions passed by councils of the different HEIs.

Conclusion

Universities need capable academics, therefore, promotion policies should be formulated to ensure the appointment processes and procedures are fair and equitable. Therefore, the diverse and complex ways of academic promotions should result in institutional success. Successful implementation of the university promotion policy depends on panelists being well prepared to ensure recommended candidates improve institutions. There is power-play among the different stakeholders and micro-politicking in the appointment procedures (Mampane, 2015). Policy realities and stipulations for academic promotions do not always influence reform ideals and university realities nor do promotion outcomes always match institutional expectations or promote group advancement, leading to tension and conflict (Sayed, 2002). There is a need for a fair and equitable application of academic promotions to deserving candidates (Weyland, 2015), thus the need for further studies to develop intervention models that address this gap. Unfair appointment practices, if not addressed, may impinge on academics' interaction and prospects for development.

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