BCES Conference Books, 2020, Volume 18. Sofia: Bulgarian Comparative Education Society
ISSN 1314-4693 (print), ISSN 2534-8426 (online), ISBN 978-619-7326-09-3 (print), ISBN 978-619-7326-10-9 (online)

Franciska Bothma

Accountability as a Mechanism towards Professionalizing Teaching in Higher Education

Abstract

In the sphere of higher education (HE) globally the tensions between academic autonomy and accountability, and the research vs teaching debate have been ongoing for decades. Zumeta (2011, p. 133) notes one of the reasons for such tensions to be the view of accountability as a social construct, resulting in its definition varying from context to context and time to time. While professionalism in the higher education context is closely associated to research status of academics, the question addressed in this paper is whether accountability in teaching-related work, if clearly defined and practiced, can be used as mechanism towards professionalizing higher education teaching. The findings of the qualitative study clearly indicate a correlation between the characteristics of teaching-related accountability and professionalism in higher education, underscoring the notion that an accountable and excellent higher education teacher should be able to rise to the coveted position of a professor.

Keywords: academic accountability, accountability characteristics, higher education, professionalism, research, student learning, teaching practice, teaching quality

Introduction and background

In the modern day, accountability expectations within HE have become more diverse and demanding than ever before (Bothma & Rossouw, 2019; Stanley, 2012, p. 3), especially for the spending of ever-dwindling public funds (Altbach, 2013) with a concomitant augmented expectation that lecturers are responsible for successful student learning achievements (Altbach, Reisberg & Rumbley, 2009, p. 90). An over-emphasis on answerability and the ever-changing demands for social responsiveness as time and context require (Teelken, 2012, p. 274), coupled by the obligation of greater student access and teaching quality for student success (DHET, 2013, p. 31), necessitate a balancing act to not lose sight of academic autonomy and freedom, concepts that are already a certainty within the research environment (Stensaker & Harvey, 2011, p. 1).

Unfortunately, the academe is also known for brilliant professors with impressive research track records that passionlessly read their own densely populated slides during valuable undergraduate student contact time (death by power point and all that). Ebersole (2015) cautions not to be overly critical of such poor teaching practices as the regular classroom lecturer (though a brilliant researcher) has had no formal training in the art of teaching. The teaching vs research debate surrounding professionalism in higher education and the criteria to advance towards professorship or tenure has grown old. Yet professionalism as such is always associated with diverse accountability expectations from different stakeholders (Cheng, 2012, p. 790) – a phenomenon as relevant to teaching quality as to research outputs (Bothma & Rossouw, 2019, p. 46).

According to Schuck, Gordon and Buchanan (2008, p. 541), professionalism implies "the ability to take responsibility for our own actions – to make decisions and judgements based on transparent and sound thinking, reflection and knowledge of the context in which we are operating". The Business Dictionary (2020) defines accountability as "the obligation of an individual or organisation to account for its activities, accept responsibility for them, and to disclose the results in a transparent manner…". The correlation between professionalism and accountability is thus an obvious one. These concepts can be attributed to both teaching and research in HE, underscoring the importance of a clear career path for both teaching and research as separate foci towards the coveted position of professor within the academe. Weimer (2010) states that while studies regularly fail to demonstrate any relationship between teaching effectiveness and research productivity, these remain the two distinct yet essential pillars on which HE rest. The nature of accountable scientific enquiry may and can differ – whether the lecturer is responsible to determine the best way to teach and assess for different learning styles and with appropriate technology, or responsible for systematic inquiry into specific subject matter, it remains research in the HE domain. Accountability within the teaching pillar may thus need to be more firmly established to ensure that a lecturer excelling therein can receive his or her due promotion.

Research aim

The discussion above indicates a lack of clarity surrounding the matter of teaching-related accountability of lecturers that negatively impacts the professional recognition and promotion opportunities of an excellent teacher in the HE environment. The findings presented in this paper forms part of a larger research project towards improving lecturer accountability and professional security in South African (SA) HE (Bothma & Rossouw, 2019; Bothma, 2019). The question addressed here pertains only to the characteristics of lecturer teaching-related accountability within SA HE – only one of a number of themes that emerged during the larger study which indicates that HE teaching, when done in an accountable manner, is as professional in nature as the much more coveted career path of a recognised HE researcher.

Research design

An interactive qualitative methodology grounded in the interpretive paradigm was employed to study personal context-specific lecturer experiences of the characteristics of teaching-related accountability, and to deduce meanings attributed to those experiences (Creswell, 2009, p. 13). Understanding of these phenomena is thus located within a particular context not to be randomly generalized.

Face-to-face semi-structured individual and focus group interviews were employed to generate data via a semi-structured interview schedule of which the broader themes and initial questions had been pre-determined during the review and analysis of existing literature, and of legal sources that form the foundation for lecturer accountability. Through the method of non-probability purposive sampling, and for maximum variation in data, the participants were lecturers from various

institutions and disciplines, but all in permanent positions, in possession of at least a Master's degree, and involved in undergraduate teaching.

Through in-depth inductive analysis and interpretation, knowledge and understanding were developed of the context-specific multiple realities that the participants attach to their teaching-related accountability. Atlas.ti was used for support in the management, coding, exploring, and comparing of the raw data. Subsequently, the main findings of the inquiry are reported.

Research findings

Three categories of required characteristics of lecturer teaching-related accountability, also associated with professionalism (Schuck, Gordon & Buchanan, 2008), emerged during the analysis of the data, namely answerability, clear task requirements, and clear consequences for accountability negation.

The first category identified by many of the participants comprises the concept of answerability, "the responsibility we have to answer for the things we're supposed to do, the decisions that we make which affect other people". This is in keeping with the view of Hall et al. (2006, p. 88) that accountability is only evident when an employee is answerable to someone for the fulfilment of stated responsibilities as derived from an employment contract. The analysis of participant responses revealed three different sub-categories for answerability, namely (i) the existence of an account-giving relationship, (ii) transparency in decisions and behaviours, and (iii) context as determinant for accountability.

Hall et al. (2007, p. 408) identify "accountability intensity" (the degree to which an individual is held accountable to multiple persons and/or for multiple outcomes in the same organisation) as one of the four main elements of felt accountability that is indicative of how accountable an employee feels in the workplace. According to their definition, the accountability intensity of lecturers is significant in that, as evident from the participant perspectives, the accounters (stakeholders) of lecturers in their teaching-related work are numerous:

- A number of participants identified faculty management or line managers as one group of accounters with high expectations, especially for student through-put rates. One participant stated that "if I sign my task agreement, my line manager expects of me to deliver on my promises, as I then agree to the duties stated therein".
- Students were mentioned by a majority of the lecturers as their primary accounters, not only in terms of what they learn, but also in terms of their "professional development and personal growth". One of the participants added that "I'm also accountable to treat students equitably and fairly", clearly linking the account-giving relationship to the expectation of professional and ethical conduct.
- Other accounters identified were future employers, industry or the broader public where "students will one day work and demonstrate what we as lecturers taught them", neatly summarized by a participant who said that "we have a responsibility to society to deliver graduates who can perform their work role effectively and in a professional manner since we use public funds and resources".

- Participants also perceived colleagues as accounters in their teaching-related work, referring to the importance of "collegiality" and the "establishment of communities of practice" that hold their members accountable. Especially the focus group participants mentioned collegial accountability as effective for maintaining teaching quality since they believe that "peers know and understand what teaching is about". This is in keeping with the notion of peer review as the accountability mechanism of choice for research.
- Professional bodies as accounters for the requirements of curriculum content and graduate outcomes were mentioned by a few lecturers teaching in professional degrees.
- Self-accountability, also referred to as personal or ethical accountability (closely related to professionalism), was noted by many participants as a main motivator for taking their responsibilities seriously.

The issue of transparency was identified as "non-negotiable" for determining accountability. One lecturer noted that transparency is not only about demonstrating commitment to teaching, but also to demonstrate "openness to accept critique, to grow and to honestly assess my own work". Transparency and self-accountability were often used inter-changeably, one participant stating that true accountability means that you are transparent in what you do "even when no one is looking".

The final sub-category that emerged for the concept of answerability as an accountability element was the participants' perceptions that answerability is usually context-specific. Focus group participants especially alluded to the importance of context for the expectation of answerability, one noting that "in some departments lecturers are being held to account for everything from office hours to student through-put. In others lecturers are only answerable to themselves and for their research outputs… accountability is something that is micro-managed and not standardised". Another lecturer added an appropriate example of the context-dependency of accountability definitions, explaining that "it would mean something different for a doctor than it would for me. In my context, the outcomes of my teaching determine if I'm accountable or not. A doctor is responsible for physical life of a patient. I guess a lecturer is responsible for the intellectual life of a student".

A number of lecturers noted that accountability of lecturers was ultimately linked to the quality of their teaching practices, one participant stating that "you need a clear definition of what quality teaching is if you want to measure a lecturer's teaching practice and judge accountability in those terms". This is aligned to global perspectives on the importance of a uniform institutional definition of teaching quality to determine accountability (Devlin & Samarawickrema, 2010, p. 115).

The second category that emerged from the interview data to represent another essential characteristic of accountability in the eyes of most of the participants, is clear task requirements, with two associated sub-categories, (i) clear responsibilities and standards for task performance, and (ii) the importance of consensus between the lecturer and his accounters in terms of expected tasks.

Participant responses gave evidence that lecturers were unsure as to which specific tasks they had to account for in their teaching-related work, especially for promotional purposes. Many of them viewed through-put rate in their respective courses (unfairly) as the primary standard against which their teaching effectiveness was measured. Others alluded to the fact that they would rather be measured against

standards for effective use of technology, student participation in classes and even participation of students on their online teaching platforms rather than classroom attendance. “Times are changing, students don’t want to sit in classes all day. Yet teaching effectiveness seems to still require talk and chalk or interactive PowerPoint slides.”

A number of participants felt that clear expectations in teaching-related work were lacking while “the only thing that is always clearly stated is the number of publications that you have to deliver”. The focus on research outputs was further debated in the focus group, one participant saying: “We are here to teach, right? Yet we are more responsible for research outputs than for teaching quality.” The research vs teaching debate clearly still an issue.

The issue of consensus between a lecturer and line manager regarding teaching work is a legal requirement for the validation of an employment contract (Van Niekerk et al., 2008, p. 106). A few of the participants mentioned the importance of consensus as an essential element for the determination of lecturer accountability. In the focus group interview a number of participants indicated that workload and teaching allocations were planned with their line managers, but as one participant pointed out “you agree to certain tasks and goals for the coming year, but every single year you do a lot more than was initially agreed on”.

A clear delineation of teaching-related task requirements in the form of clear standards to measure the quality of task completion, and consensus between the lecturer and his or her line manager regarding these expectations, would have a positive impact on lecturer accountability and professionalism in teaching.

The last category that emerged for this theme, is clear consequences for negation of accountability expectations. The data analysis revealed two sub-categories that are related to clear consequences: (i) transparency of disciplinary penalties, sanctions for offences or inadequate performance, and (ii) consistent enforcement of appropriate penalties, thus in line with general labour law principles.

The significance of clear consequences for accountability expectations is underscored by the following utterance by one of the participants: “Accountability is about regulation, but also about development… They want us to be accountable, but there are no incentives for adherence to expectations, no clear consequences for inadequate performance, and certainly no motivation for development. I feel that there’s a conflict there, which means that accountability mostly makes us weary and distrustful of one another. If I know what I’m accountable for, and to whom I must account, and what the sanctions or rewards will be, there will seldom be a problem with my accountability.”

From many of the participant responses on the issue of penalties for neglect of duty or more serious offences, it was evident that although they were aware that serious misconduct like “inhumane treatment of students” or “sexual harassment claims” may lead to dismissal, they were unsure of consequences for less serious offences. Most of them alluded to verbal warnings for first time offenders, and written warnings if “bad behaviour continues”, but they mostly agreed that with regards to teaching per se, “lecturers in permanent positions are not sufficiently held to account, as long as you are publishing”. There thus seems to be an absence of clear institutional consequences for disregard or repudiation of teaching-related responsibilities.

In the focus group discussion a few of the lecturers mentioned that they thought continuous negative student evaluations or complaints of bad teaching practices would negatively affect their chances of merit bonuses, and ultimately negatively affect their chances of promotion. Yet others had strong opinions to the contrary in that "if you are excellent in research and you have a good publications list, then they'll keep you in the system at all costs, irrespective of how badly you teach".

The analysis of the participant data demonstrates the presence of characteristics of accountability that can be closely aligned to professionalism. It also clearly validates that the tension between the recognition of research vs teaching excellence for promotional purposes is still alive and problematic.

Conclusion

In conclusion, although context specific, the findings clearly voice required action on the part of national and institutional bodies to reconsider the status of teaching as a focused career path for academics. The study offers some clarity on the matter of teaching-related accountability of lecturers that can be associated with the characteristics of professionalism.

As further reading is recommended the findings and conclusions of the larger research project towards improving lecturer accountability and professional security in SA HE (Bothma & Rossouw, 2019; Bothma, 2019).

References

Altbach, P. G. (2013): *The International Imperative in Higher Education (Global Perspectives on Higher Education)*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.

Altbach, P. G., Reisberg, L. & Rumbley, L. E. (2009): *Trends in Global Higher Education: Tracking an Academic Revolution*. Report Prepared for the UNESCO 2009 World Conference on Higher Education. New York: UNESCO.

Bothma, F. (2019): Towards Improving Lecturer Accountability and Professional Security in South African Higher Education. In J. Pool & M. Fernandes-Martins (Eds.) *A Scholarly Approach to Student Success in Higher Education* (pp. 1-20). South Africa: Ivyline Academic Publishers.

Bothma, F. & Rossouw, J. P. (2019): The accountability and professional security of the South African higher education lecturer. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 33(2), 29-51.

Business Dictionary (2020): Accountability. http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/accountability.html (Accessed 15 January 2020).

Cheng, M. (2012): Accountability and Professionalism: a Contradiction in Terms? *Higher Education Research and Development*, 31(6), 785-795.

Creswell, J. W. (2009): *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*. 3rd Edition. London: Sage.

DHET (Department of Higher Education and Training) (2012): The Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (Notice 1040). *Government Gazette*, 36003, 14 December.

DHET (Department of Higher Education and Training) (2013): *White Paper for Post-School Education and Training: Building an Expanded, Effective and Integrated Post-School System*. Pretoria: Department of Higher Education and Training.

Devlin, M. & Samarawickrema, G. (2010): The Criteria of Effective Teaching in a Changing Higher Education Context. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 29(2), 111-124.

Ebersole, J. (2015): A Discussion on Higher Education Accountability. https://www.forbes.com/sites/johnebersole/2015/02/23/a-discussion-on-higher-education-accountability/#3615ec97717b (Accessed 4 December 2019).

Hall, A. T., Bowen, M. G., Ferris, G. R., Royle, M. T. & Fitzgibbons, D. E. (2007): The Accountability Lens: a New Way to view Management Issues. *Business Horizons*, 50, 405-413.

Hall, A. T., Royle, M. T., Brymer, R. A., Perrewé, P. L., Ferris, G. R. & Hochwarter, W. A. (2006): Relationship between Felt Accountability as a Stressor and Strain Reactions: the Neutralizing Role of Autonomy Across Two Studies. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, 11(1), 87-99.

Schuck, S., Gordon, S. & Buchanan, J. (2008): What Are We Missing Here? Problematizing Wisdoms on Teaching Quality and Professionalism in Higher Education. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 13(5), 537-547.

South African Qualifications Authority (2012): Level Descriptors for the South African National Qualifications Framework. *Government Gazette*, 35548, 586, 27 July.

Stanley, G. (2012): Challenges in the quest to create global qualifications and standards are driving change in education systems. In W. Bienkowski, J. C. Brada & G. Stanley (Eds.) *The University in the Age of Globalization: Rankings, Resources and Reforms* (pp. 3-25). London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Stensaker, B. & Harvey, L. (2011): Accountability. In B. Stensaker & L. Harvey (Eds.) *Accountability in Higher Education: Global Perspectives on Trust and Power* (pp. 1-22). New York: Routledge.

Teelken, C. (2012): Compliance or Pragmatism: How do Academics Deal with Managerialism in Higher Education? A Comparative Study in Three Countries. *Studies in Higher Education*, 27(3), 271-290.

Van Niekerk, A., Christianson, M. A., McGregor, M., Smit, N. & Van Eck, B. P. S. (2008): *Law@Work*. 6th Edition. Durban: LexisNexis.

Weimer, M. (2010): Moving Past the Old 'Teaching vs. Research' Debate. https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/faculty-development/moving-past-the-old-teaching-vs-research-debate/ (Accessed 10 December 2019).

Zumeta, W. M. (2011): What Does It Mean to Be Accountable? Dimensions and Implications of Higher Education's Public Accountability. *The Review of Higher Education*, 35(1), 131-148.

Dr. Franciska Bothma, North-West University, South Africa