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Early career academic development and talent management in the South African higher education context

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Higher education worldwide is confronted by challenges to develop a new generation of academics and signal academia as an attractive professional career. In South Africa, the number of employed academics in HE falls short of the projected need, necessitating the development of a new generation of academics programme (nGAP), to manage talent in the sector. This paper explores the overlapping relevance of early career academic development and talent management in the implementation of a novel national programme in South Africa to grow a new generation of academics. A qualitative approach, using semi-structured interviews and a review of documents, was used to evaluate the programme. Evidence of effectiveness was gleaned from the number of early career academics recruited, their perceptions, achievements, the benefits derived from the programme and the challenges. The findings indicate that the nGAP is able to steer change at a university and be a nodal point for the growth and development of a new generation of academics, despite capacity constraints and the slow uptake in the initial years of implementation. This study thus adds nuance to our understanding of how a government initiated talent management initiative to grow a new generation of academics was implemented at a university and concludes with how lessons learnt could inform practices and national policy as well as transferability to other contexts.

Keywords: Early career academics, talent management

Introduction

Managing the career paths of early career academics (ECAs) through talent management (TM) is integral to achieving success in higher education (HE). Crome, Meyer, Bosanquet and Hughes (2019) argue that the HE workforce is dependent on ECAs. However, the demand and the need for academics is great but the supply is limited. This supply shortfall is noted in both the Australian (Hemmings, 2012) and South African context (DHET, 2015; Pienaar & Bester, 2006). A gap exists between the current number of academics in South African HE and the projected need and there is limited evidence on possible government implementation to grow a new generation of academics. Accordingly, a national need has been identified in the South African context to recruit and support academics and thus signal academia as an attractive career path.

Extant literature on TM has focused on talent requirements in the international business industry (Al Ariss, Cascio & Paauwe, 2014). Less attention has been given to the form or shape of TM in HE. While early career academic development and TM may be related, they are rarely studied together and little is known about how they intersect at a programme level in HE. This study explores their interaction in an analysis of the implementation of a novel national programme to grow a new generation of academics. Tansley, Kirk and Tietze (2013) recommended investigations at the macro (societal), meso (organisational) and micro (individual) level. The

purpose of the present study was to explore the implementation of a government initiated TM programme for emerging academics at a research intensive university, at the macro, meso and micro-levels. The question posed is how a TM initiative such as the new generation of academics programme (nGAP) could influence career paths of ECAs at a systemic level and how it could add value to individuals, a university, and the HE sector.

nGAP context

National growth projections of student numbers in South Africa indicate a need to increase the recruitment of academics. In order to address this, approximately 1200 new academics per annum are required (DHET, 2015) with a particular wish to recruit black and female academics. A projected number of 3683 additional academics are required by 2019, which equates to approximately 737 per year in the period from 2014 to 2019 (DHET, 2015). At a national level, the intention is to allocate a maximum of 400 posts and a minimum of 100 posts per annum, to meet the maximum number of 2400 scholars (DHET, 2015). At the university level, it was envisaged that at least 15 posts per annum would be filled (DHET, 2015).

The nGAP was implemented in South African universities in 2015. As a nationally coordinated programme, the nGAP was proposed as a strategic TM initiative to grow and develop ECAs. The nGAP is underpinned by the provision of permanent posts supported by programmes to develop an individual's teaching, research and social engagement (DHET, 2017). The programme adopts a phased development approach, with penalties for dropping out. Funding is allocated for salaries on a sliding scale over 6 years; for fees to complete doctoral or master's degrees; for mentoring; for participation in staff development activities; and for research costs and international mobility (DHET, 2017). Participants benefit from a reduced workload; working only 20% of what would have been their expected workload in years one to three; 50% in year four, and a full workload from year five onwards (DHET, 2017). The Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) specifies the duties of the mentors and that the mentors should be senior academics who are recently retired academics (DHET, 2017).

Talent management

Organisations operate in complex contexts and need to manage their staff in a systematic manner. Collings and Mellahi (2009) define TM as, "activities and processes that involve the systematic identification of key positions that differentially contribute to the organization's sustainable competitive advantage, the development of a talent pool of high-potential and high-performing incumbents to fill these roles, and the development of ...competent incumbents, and to ensure their continued commitment to the organization" (p. 304). How talent is managed in an organisation is crucial (Al Ariss et al., 2014) and context can either enable or challenge TM. A key variable is the definition of TM, which can be defined as a new term for common human resource (HR) practices, or as succession planning practices, or as management of talented employees (Lewis & Heckman, 2006). All these definitions however, fail to consider unconventional and innovative HR practices. Indeed, what constitutes unconventional and innovative HR practices in HE is a gap in the literature. An analysis of the growth of a new cadre of ECAs, has the potential to supplement existing conceptions, because unconventional and innovative HR practices are key to the success of ECAs. Universities are ideally placed to strategically grow their talent pool by employing individuals, developing them within the HE context and researching this practice.

Early career academics

Early career academics (ECAs) are defined as those in the first five years of their academic appointment (Vajoczki, Biegas, Crenshaw, Healey, Osayomi, Branfor & Monk, 2011). ECAs

need to develop an academic profile, in teaching, research and administration/service. Vajoczki et al. (2011) argue that ECAs are confronted by competing professional demands. The attention given to their required roles varies and has an impact on their long-term academic identity. New staff tend to have high teaching workloads (Gale, 2011; Pienaar & Bester, 2006) and identifying and balancing priority focus areas, such as teaching and family commitments, is challenging (Debowski, 2013). Consequently, teaching responsibilities often detract from research (Monk & McKay, 2017), which impacts on their academic career.

At the early stage in their career, ECAs require growth and should take advantage of the professional development (PD) afforded to them in the first 5 years (Debowski, 2006). Models for PD are either generic or discipline specific or both. Vajoczki et al. (2011) examined approaches to PD for ECAs from Britain, Canada, Nigeria and America and argue that ECAs are confronted by competing professional demands in the area of research, teaching and service (Vajoczki et al., 2011). Training in teaching strategies (Subbaye & Dhunpath) as well as in research, has been instituted in many universities to capacitate lecturers and is important for ECAs' development.

Establishing a mentor relationship is challenging and some ECAs may be reluctant to approach successful senior staff and follow-up on meetings (Debowski, 2006). Tynan and Garbett (2007) argue that mentoring is an important aspect of ECAs' PD and induction into academia. Types of mentorships include dyadic relationships, peer-based mentoring circles and networks. These models of mentorship can be undertaken on an individual and team level (Combe et al., 2019). However, in order for mentorship to be effective, it must be a strategic priority which is associated with well-formulated and clear career goals (Debowski, 2013). In this manner mentoring is able to feed into a TM programme. Multiple functions may be performed by a mentor, depending on the mentees needs, including acculturation, teaching and research strategies, career, leadership support, and issues related to work-life balance and political interest (Debowski, 2013). Ansmann, Flickinger, Barelllo, Kunneman, Mantwill, Quilligan, Zanini, and Aelbrecht (2014) emphasize the need for career and emotional support, for the mentor to be a role model, and to provide feedback on teaching. Hemmings (2012) argues that mentorship can play a particularly useful role in developing research skills. However, the long-term and direct career effects of mentoring experiences have not yet been extensively evaluated and reported (Tynan & Garbett, 2007).

In addition to mentoring, networking is able to promote career development and leads to career success (Ansmann et al., 2014). Ansmann et al. (2014) argue that developing connections with multiple people is essential for career development and that one-on-one mentoring is outdated and unrealistic when compared to networking. Hemmings (2012) and Gale (2011) view networking as a support strategy and as such the need for cross-disciplinary networking was raised by Gale (2011) as a means of exposing ECAs to networks outside their discipline. In addition to mentoring, networking can thus be a means of peer support for ECAs.

Methodology

The aim of the present qualitative exploratory study, was to evaluate the implementation of the nGAP at a research intensive university (from 2015-2018). In order to develop a detailed understanding of the implementation of the nGAP, a purposive sampling strategy was used. Participants were intentionally selected (Creswell, 2012) and participated voluntarily. The sample consisted of the eight ECAs who were employed across five faculties. Three ECAs were employed at the end of 2015, four in 2016, one in 2017 and zero in 2018. Of the eight ECAs,

one had a PhD, 6 had master's degrees and one had an honours degree. Five of the ECAs were black female and three were black male academics. The data collection methods included semi-structured interviews and a review of documents available within the University and in the public domain. Ninety minute semi-structured interviews were conducted, audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. An intervention-driven process evaluation served as a data analysis tool. Focus areas included recruitment, whether the implementation followed the design of the policy document, what the perspectives of the ECAs were and whether they were satisfied with the nGAP. The analysis further drew on content and thematic analysis (Bryman, 2012). The content was categorised during the coding process and themes which emerged were reported on.

Findings

Evidence of effectiveness of the nGAP was gleaned from the two themes that emerged from the analysis, and include; the structure of the programme and ECAs' perceptions.

Structure of the nGAP

At the national level, 362 posts were allocated from 2015-2018 but only 239 were filled by March 2018 (DHET, 2018). This means that 123 potential posts were lost. The national imperative to recruit black and women academics, was achieved (DHET, 2018). The majority of ECAs were allocated mentors and some were able to take advantage of National Research Foundation and Newton Research Grants (DHET, 2018). Within the present study, the university listed positions in order of priority and initially planned to offer 27 posts, four in the Faculty of Commerce, four in the Faculty of Engineering, 5 in the Faculty of Health Sciences, 9 in the Faculty of Humanities and 5 in the Faculty of Science. The reality was that from 2015-2018, 8 ECAs were employed, two in Commerce, two in Engineering, one in Health Sciences, one in Humanities and two in Science. Of the 27 proposed in 2015, only 8 were employed by 2018. The ECAs were all allocated mentors and three were able to secure external research funds. Due to the lack of funds, permanent positions for ECAs are limited. The nGAP however presented opportunities for recruitment and long-term career opportunities and all ECAs had expectations of being employed in permanent posts. New recruits acknowledged that permanent posts were scarce and thus appreciated their appointments. As a TM strategy, the University was able to intentionally recruit a small pool of ECAs in accordance with strategic priority fields. As one ECA noted:

it really was the perfect thing because still now there are budget restraints, there is no-one retiring, so there is never going to be new posts coming up. It's only through these funded special posts that you can get an opportunity to do it. (Participant 2)

The structure of the nGAP was only finalised in 2017 (DHET, 2017). Consequently, during the initial years of implementation, the roles and responsibilities of the various stakeholders were not clear (DHET, 2018), especially to ECAs. The DHET experienced challenges accessing the contact details of mentors and ECAs (DHET, 2018). The submission of progress reports from universities (DHET, 2018) was another challenge, together with capacity constraints inherent in setting up the National Staff Development Programme (DHET, 2017). At the university level, not all schools were able to comply with the policy. Some academic schools experienced limited staffing capacity and required the ECAs to take up full teaching loads.

Salaries specified by the DHET needed to be topped up by the University as they were not commensurate with the University salary scales. In addition, the structure of the nGAP does not fund conference attendance. As a result, ECAs used funds from their international mobility

to attend conferences. The funding for the 6 years of the nGAP was transferred to the University without clauses to transfer funds back to the DHET or to other universities. As a retention strategy, contracts tied ECAs to the university. Two ECAs noted their contracts as a constraint and would have preferred to have the option to fulfil the HE mandate at a different university. This was explained as:

You haven't lost any of the progress you have made and the training and workshops is not lost, you are just filling the higher education mandate from a different institution. (Participant 2)

At the university level, making resources available to the ECAs was a challenge. The resources were generally noted as insufficient. One ECA further commented on having to negotiate for office space and a telephone. Access to resources, such as a statistics consultant, was an issue raised by some ECAs. In addition, only one ECA was able to take advantage of international mobility. Barriers included completing their PhDs, insufficient funds despite having a Newton Research Grant, and difficulty obtaining a host institution. Resource constraints were expressed as:

Government sits out there they don't actually know what's happening on the ground which is why they can put out R20 000 for mobility... (Participant 1).

Although the nGAP documentation stipulated the target audience, the target audience for the nGAP was identified by one ECA as being ECAs who already had master's degrees to allow them to gain maximum benefit from the nGAP. This was motivated by a personal challenge to complete a masters and a PhD in the allocated 6 years and was stated as:

I don't know if I am wrong but it looks like it's a programme for people who have masters that are coming in and now doing PhDs, who I think it was tailored for initially. (Participant 3)

ECAs perceptions

Career trajectory

The ECAs reported that they were pleased with their employment and viewed it as a means to fulfil their personal objectives of obtaining a PhD and pursuing a career in academia. The nGAP also facilitated a career path towards achieving full professorships. Some ECAs reported role conflict between balancing their personal and professional life. Having a heavy teaching load and being expected to do research and postgraduate studies was a major challenge. The need for research and publications were raised in probation meetings. One ECA stated that, "the biggest hurdle of probation is to get that publication" (Participant 2). Another ECA noted the need to supervise a PhD student as an area for career development. Issues of workload and not understanding how to deal with a reduced teaching load were noted in one ECA's probation. Additional observations include:

The Head of School wasn't necessarily happy [with my probation] ...but we had a discussion about my research. (Participant 8)

Experience in an ECA post

At the national and university level, the nGAP seeks to ensure quantity and quality of ECAs. The need for nGAP posts, was described as, part of transformation:

When I went this year to the conference there were lecturers just like me doing their PhD, but they were black and it's just so great to see that diversity and transformation that's happening and also that the people, all the people, all the white people, are accepting and okay and happy to have them. It's not like they wanted just a white race thing, but that they are happy to have these students. (Participant 6)

Some ECAs were critical of their experience and reported misrepresentation of women in academia, balancing the requirements of the nGAP, expediting transformation and coping with the stigma of their nGAP appointment. Being in an equity post led some ECAs to emphasize the need to be competent as lecturers and the need for time to develop competence. Two ECAs reported a negative perception by their schools regarding their posts and stated that the School regards them as nGAP lecturers, not as lecturers appointed on merit. In addition, some ECAs reported being treated differently because they were on the nGAP and feeling a sense of social isolation. One ECA attributed this to being young and a junior academic and another reported that they were not taken seriously by the Head of School. Two ECAs commented that their supposedly reduced workload adversely affected their relations with colleagues in the department. Due to the nature of the nGAP, collegiality in the academic context was expressed as a sensitive issue which needed careful management. The social complexity of their position is expressed in the following comment:

I don't want to be treated differently but I want to get what I signed up for. So I feel like the School really doesn't take me seriously. (Participant 3)

One ECA reported that navigating academia was a challenge. Balancing expectations with workload and development opportunities was reported as another challenge. One ECA described their workload as 100% rather than the reduced 20%. This led to the perception by one ECA of "free labour" being undertaken (Participant 2).

I am on 100% workload level but I am not even on the minimum of an associate lecturer so it's like free labour though ...and they not paying me as well as they're paying a colleague who is doing less work and that has less qualifications than me. (Participant 2)

Champions

Mentors were also able to serve as champions by assisting with supervision advice and one mentor assisted an ECA with the conversion of a masters to a PhD. Reflections on how to advance as academics using champions was related by ECAs. One ECA reported that the Head of School was very encouraging, thus championing the ECA. The perception of the Head of School was that leadership involved being inclusive and allowing others to exceed her achievements. An example of a selfless champion is captured as:

She [my Head of School] said to me while you are doing your PhD you can publish and I am willing to help where there is help, but I was thinking you should be worried about getting your senior lectureship and she said yes, but I won't achieve that by cutting people out, if I support you, you might just go beyond what I achieved. (Participant 1)

Mentoring

Seven of the ECAs were appointed mentors as part of their university appointment. Six of them had their supervisors as mentors and new mentors were appointed in order to comply with the nGAP. Relations with supervisors became strained when they were no longer eligible to serve as mentors who received remuneration and this caused distress and one ECA reported that, “I don't even want to go over the mentoring part” (Participant 1). The policy imperative regarding mentors led some ECAs to maintain their supervisors as unofficial mentors in addition to contracting retired mentors to satisfy nGAP requirements. Advantages of having retired mentors were subsequently noted since these mentors were established academics. Differences in academic ranking was viewed by ECAs as a benefit because it minimised competition between mentees and mentors. With regard to the frequency of meetings, the number of sessions attended were reported as being adequate. The nature of the mentoring sessions involved personal and professional assistance. One ECA captured this succinctly by stating that mentoring comprised small things, “including office politics, interactions with colleagues and dealing with students”, and big things “including personal goals, teaching and research advice” (Participant 2).

There were some challenges identified with mentoring. One ECA noted that her mentor focussed too much on the nGAP processes and two ECAs had difficulty establishing relationships and meeting regularly with their mentors. Additionally, continuity and commitment of mentors was inconsistent. One mentor was ill which adversely affected the mentoring relationship. Two ECAs reported that after introducing themselves, the mentor did not understand their role, despite receiving guidelines. Mentoring challenges were typified as:

Okay so that didn't work, we hardly made contact uhm besides maybe two, three emails that we sent and I must say it works when we do meet. We've maybe met now thrice, I understand her commitments or workload, also the fact that she's been ill has prevented us from meeting. (Participant 4)

Professional development

The structure of the nGAP made provision for ECAs to attend national training. However, national capacity constraints prevented this. The university provided PD for ECAs, and ECAs also attended external training. Development opportunities were reported by ECAs as being central to their development. One ECA enrolled on the Postgraduate Diploma in Higher Education as a career development strategy. A common finding was that all ECAs conflated personal and career development, and were unable to distinguish between the two. Comments include:

The Early Career Academic Development Programme is complementary to the nGAP. Being part of the ECAD programme has helped me understand academia, what is required of me as an academic at the University and growing my career. (Participant 7)

Some ECAs were not satisfied with the professional development that they received. Duplication and the level at which the courses were pitched was an issue. Two ECAs were also of the opinion that “the workshops were a waste of time and that the structure needed to be revised” (Participants 2 & 7). In addition, one ECA expressed a need for practical discipline-based pedagogical skills.

Discussion

The nGAP highlights the government's desire to systematically manage emerging academic talent to support the growth of a new generation of academics at a sectoral level. A detailed snapshot of the implementation of the nGAP (2015-2018) at a university, was possible through the present study. The findings indicated that the funding structure, salary, international mobility, reduced workload, addressing equity, PD, mentoring, and the very nature of academia, served as both incentives and constraints.

The involvement by the government at a macro-level and by extension universities at a meso-level to implement activities and processes is a welcomed and unconventional method of managing talent in HE. Through national policy imperatives to develop and retain academics in key strategic positions (Collings & Mellahi, 2009) and the application of university selection criteria, key ECA positions have been identified and filled. In this manner a talent pool of high-potential ECAs with the ability to develop competence were employed on permanent contracts to ensure commitment to academia at a micro-level. Creating this talent pool is important and can contribute to a development strategy and development opportunities (Davies & Davies, 2010). The nGAP was thus implemented at the intersection of a TM initiative and ECA recruitment and development. Talent management through the nGAP has consequently moved beyond the traditional economic exchange highlighted by Tansley et al. (2013).

The findings have relevance for those managing the nGAP at a national policy and university practical level as well as for transferability. Neither the DHET nor the University were able to meet the requirement of employing 15 ECAs per university per annum. This inability to meet the projected number of ECAs required by the sector, has implications for transforming academia at a pace that is required. Constraints were evident and may be due in part to a limited pipeline of ECAs, which is in accordance with studies by Hemmings (2012) and Pienaar and Bester (2006). Although movement between universities was not an option, even though it was desirable, the current study is consistent with Crome et al. (2019) who found that the appointments against permanent positions, serves to minimise career uncertainty.

The nGAP was implemented differently in different faculties and schools due to varying resources. This resonates with Su (2011), who found that differences in resourcing across departments has an impact on ECAs experiences. Similarities with Su's (2011) study included conducting research in the context of a research intensive university. Other similarities included disparities in resource allocation across departments and the stratified nature of the academic departments in which ECAs are employed. The major difference is that Su's (2011) study focused on postdoctoral training of scientists and engineers, whereas ECAs on the nGAP were pursuing masters and PhD studies in various disciplines. In the present study initial access to physical resources was inadequate which is contrary to research that stresses access to practical resources (Crome et al., 2019).

The current study highlighted remuneration hurdles that needed to be overcome. This is similar to a study by Sutherland (2017), who found that ECAs experienced low salaries. The findings in the current study indicated that black male and female ECAs found that their salaries were inadequate, which is contrary to a South African study by Pienaar and Bester (2006), where no female black ECAs mentioned financial remuneration as a concern. However, Crome et al. (2019) found that rewards such as fair remuneration were important for ECA engagement. National policy changes to remuneration could thus improve the nGAP. Conferences provide spring boards for publications and opportunities to network. However, in the current study, no

funding was available for conference attendance. International mobility funds were used to attend conferences. Networking at conferences builds research confidence and enables ECAs to connect with other ECAs. Hubbard, Gretton, Jones, & Tallents (2015), found that networking at conferences is important to create career-enabling connections. Regional discipline networks with ECAs from different universities on the nGAP were lacking but could be formed even on an online basis. Research by Ansmann et al. (2014) highlighted benefits of cross-disciplinary networks for career development. Provision in the nGAP for separate conference funds would then enable conferences to serve as discipline networks and international conferences could serve as international contact points to foster international mobility.

High workloads were found amongst ECAs amounting to between 80-100%. Reduced teaching load, with all good intentions, is a luxury due to Schools being understaffed which resulted in them topping up ECAs' salaries to compensate for high workloads. The "effort-reward imbalance" (Crome et al., 2019; p. 718), then became a challenge and led one ECA in this study to a perception of 'free labour' since workloads were high and salaries were low. High workloads are not unique to this study; Gale (2011) found that new staff have high teaching workloads. In support of this, Crome et al. (2019) also noted high workloads amongst ECAs. In the current study, ECAs had multiple expectations and demands on their time, resulting in increased workloads. The DHET expected ECAs to complete their PhD's in 6 years, the university expected ECAs to teach, research, publish, complete a PhD and understand university processes and ECAs themselves had expectations of sufficient funds, fair treatment and remuneration. Vajoczki et al. (2011) reported that ECAs focus on teaching to ground their academic identity and career and that they gain legitimacy in this manner. However, institutional expectations of ECAs revolve around teaching and research, although the role of teaching in probation is not as highly ranked as research (Rath et al., 2013). Tynan and Garbett (2007) argue that research has a greater value than other roles in HE and should be taken more seriously by ECAs if they wish to survive the current performative climate. Hemmings (2012) further stresses the importance of research and argues that ECAs may be under pressure to publish early in their career. As evidenced in this study, research and publications are a critical component upon which probation and performance are assessed.

Integrating ECAs into the Schools was challenging. This may be due to the equity related nature of the posts. Addressing the misrepresentation of women in HE was viewed as a positive outcome of the nGAP. The need to build capacity and ensure quality in the sector was an imperative raised by ECAs. Treating ECAs on the nGAP fairly was emphasised in order to facilitate their career trajectory. However, developing an academic identity and maintaining collegiality was tricky. The findings indicated that isolation was experienced by some ECAs although the literature notes this as being common (Hemmings, 2012; Debowski, 2007). Appointing ECAs in equity related posts and the subsequent perceptions related to their appointment, has implications for diversifying the HE academy and should be undertaken with sensitivity in order to have a transformative and a positive effect on ECAs career trajectory.

Early career academics have been identified in the literature as unique with their own circumstances and needs (Monk & McKay 2017). Professional development for ECAs on the nGAP was limited to what the university was able to offer even though national training was a funded activity. However, participation in the National Staff Development Programme was not forthcoming from the DHET's side. Unlike examples of PD which span over two years (Debowski, 2007), ECAs on the nGAP were able to complete the training courses in one year. Continuous development is thus required from the time ECAs on the nGAP complete specified development courses to the time they become mid-career academics. It is alarming that PD

programmes in the current study were not perceived as being useful. This is similar to the study by Crome et al. (2019) who found that generic skills were not valued. However, Vajoczki et al. (2011) argue that generic models are better able to develop pedagogic skills. Professional development programmes for ECAs should nevertheless ensure that ECAs have access to appropriate training and PD opportunities to build competence (Crome et al., 2019). This could then inform university practices.

University practices ensure that new staff are assigned mentors and the nGAP duplicated this practice. Once the nGAP mentoring process ends, the relationships may be terminated. The ECAs will also not have funds to remunerate their nGAP mentors. Whereas, if the University process was followed, where a senior academic mentors an ECA, the relationship could be sustained for a prolonged period. However, the value of mentoring by experienced researchers is supported in the literature (Tynan & Garbett, 2007). Mentors in the current study were not provided with leadership or mentor training because it was assumed that their experience as retired academics would be sufficient. This is at odds with other research (Crome et al., 2019), that indicated training in leadership and mentoring skills to build mentoring competence.

Transferability to other countries needs to be conscious of local contextual realities. Lessons learnt from the nGAP indicated that the reasons for undertaking a national initiative need to be of strategic importance, clearly articulated and supported with an appropriate funding structure over a long-term period in order to be a viable means of developing a pipeline of ECA who contribute to TM. At the international level, transferability considerations should include developing ECAs as a sectoral initiative which allows ECAs to move within the sector rather than being confined to a particular university. Within the National Staffing Framework, the gap highlighted in the current study between the nGAP and the Existing Academic Capacity Enhancement Programme (EACEP) is too wide. An Emerging Scholars Programme is required to move from discovering talent in the nGAP, to developing talent and finally sustaining talent in the EACEP. As a prerequisite for transferability, policy documents should be finalised before implementation. In addition, monitoring and evaluation mechanisms should be built into the policy framework to inform the effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability of such an initiative. The structure of a nGAP, should also include administrative support funds in addition to the employment of dedicated managers at the point of implementation. This study highlights that duplication of university processes and mentors should be eliminated, for such a programme to flourish in other contexts. A national data management system should also be designed to accommodate the details of the multiple role players involved in such a programme. Within the current economic climate, a suitable scale for implementation should be chosen and piloted for a three-year period before full implementation is undertaken. Additionally, ECAs on the nGAP should be integrated as lecturers into the School/Discipline in a similar manner to any new lecturer.

A limitation of the present study is that it focuses on the initial implementation even though an outcomes evaluation may prove useful for continuous improvement. Although ECAs experiences on the nGAP may differ across institutional types and departments, the sample was drawn from all five faculties and various disciplines to minimise selection bias. Future studies could include a national project to explore the wider impact of the implementation at a sectoral level. A more informed understanding of the needs of ECAs is required and a longitudinal study of the career trajectory of ECAs and the effects of mentoring could make a contribution to the literature.

Conclusion

The current study adds a nuanced understanding of how a government led TM initiative was implemented to recruit and develop a new generation of academics. The findings indicate that the nGAP is able to steer change at a university and be a nodal point for the growth and development of a new generation of academics, despite capacity constraints and the slow uptake in the initial years of implementation. Pre-requisites for transformational change are signalled by overcoming role conflict and overload, remuneration hurdles, isolation and the misrepresentation of ECAs with mitigating factors such as exercising agency, maintaining collegiality and viewing mentors and supervisors as champions. The contribution this study makes is that it provides ECAs with a voice to influence practices and national policy enhancements and inform transferability to other contexts. How the government implemented the nGAP at a macro-level, university benefits and challenges at a meso-level and ECAs experiences at a micro-level, indicates that all three strata need to communicate to add value and to ensure the effectiveness of the nGAP. In order to retain ECAs, and provide them with an enriching experience, universities will need to manage talent in a manner that allows a new generation of academics to thrive in their academic careers through their own engagement and critique of the nGAP.

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