Teacher educators in South Africa: something amiss with their academic performance?

Hannes van der Walt, Ferdinand Potgieter, Charl Wolhuter, Philip Higgs, Isaac Ntshoe and Leonie Higgs

Abstract

According to some observers, academics responsible for teacher education in South Africa and elsewhere traditionally have not enjoyed great esteem as academics from their colleagues in other disciplines and university structures. This is not only because of the nature of their subject, but also because they prepare students for one of the less esteemed professions, namely school teachers. Data from the South African part of the 22 country survey known as the Changing Academic Profession Research Project (CAP)(2007/8) confirm that their academic performance was not quite as high as that of their peers in other academic fields. The CAP data further suggest that their lower academic performance, operationally defined as research publication output, might among others be related to them feeling less in control of their professional environment than their peers in other disciplines, especially at departmental level. The discussion also reveals several shortcomings in the CAP survey and the data it provides.

Introduction

There is a widespread notion that teacher educators/educationists are held in low esteem by their peers in other academic schools and faculties. Approximately ten years ago, David F Larrabee (1998) wrote an argumentative article based on personal observations about the development of scientific knowledge entitled *Educational researchers: living with a lesser form of knowledge.* He made a number of observations that did not make pleasant reading for educationists. He firstly mentioned that schools of education made easy targets for criticism, and that education-school bashing had been a favourite sport for a wide range of participants over a long period of time. In his opinion, schools of education and educationists possess a number of characteristics that make them vulnerable to attack. Among these

are their lowly origins in 19th century normal schools, and the low social standing of their primary clientele (disproportionately drawn from the ranks of women and the working class; men and women from the upper classes tend to enter into the higher professions and private business) and the fact that they prepare students for one of the lesser professions, i.e. school teachers. Larrabee (1998, p.4) concluded that: ". . .its curriculum and academic standards are generally considered weak and their faculty and students less able than their counterparts elsewhere in the university".

Already some three decades before this article, King (1965), in his descriptive study of education in the United States, observed that academics from other schools were of the opinion that their counterparts in schools of education 'knew nothing' and had no expertise. Gardiner (2008) recently made similar findings in her literature and documentary study on the history of education faculties/schools at universities in the United States of America, the United Kingdom and Australia. She cites reports testifying to the widespread notion among academics from other fields that educationists are engaged in low level academic work and are regarded with disdain.

Kannemeyer (1990), reflecting on his own experience in academia, registered similar sentiments in connection with how other academics viewed the status of educationists in South Africa. Quite recently, a qualitative empirical investigation, based on a series of personal interviews regarding perceptions of themselves held by the members of a faculty of education at a South African university, as well as those held by external stakeholders, including staff members of other faculties, supported these views about educationists/teacher educators (G3 Business Solutions, 2005).

Research problem

The question that confronted us, in view of the above, was whether there was reason to conclude that there was something amiss with the academic performance of teacher educators at South African institutions of higher learning (also hereafter occasionally referred to as 'academics attached to schools/faculties of education', 'teacher educators', 'educationists'). Is their academic performance indeed in some respects significantly lower than that of their colleagues in other academic disciplines? If so, to what can this state of affairs be ascribed?

Specific research questions

The research problem was broken down into the following research questions:

- What are the contextual demands (in particular the exigencies stemming from the current socio-political dispensation and reconstruction) impacting on South African academics in general and on teacher educators in particular, and to what extent can these conditions be blamed for the alleged lower academic performance of South African educationists?

- How does, according to the Changing Academic Profession Research Project (CAP) (2007-2008) data, the academic performance of teacher educators compare with that of academics in other disciplines?

- If there is a difference between the academic performance of teacher educators and other academics, to what can it be ascribed – according to the CAP data?

Rationale for the study

South African educationists, like all academics in the country, have had to cope with a wide array of extraneous influences since 1994. Investigation was required to determine whether these conditions uniquely impacted on the academic performance of teacher educators/educationists, or whether their level of academic performance could be ascribed to factors reflected in the CAP data.

Methodology

We begin with a brief description of the trying socio-political conditions with which South African academics in general have had to contend since the early 1990s. If King, Larrabee, Kannemeyer, Gardiner and others referred to above are correct in their views and findings, South African educationists/teacher educators' academic performance would be lower than that of their counterparts in other disciplines, despite all of them working in the same socio-political circumstances. We found the CAP data to have vindicated this surmise: South African educationists' academic performance, operationally defined as research publication output, was indeed lower than that of their

counterparts in other disciplines. We then make use of other CAP data that we conceptually connected to the phenomenon of academic performance for discovering possible explanations for this finding.

In the conceptual, theoretical and historical parts of our discussion, we made use of an interpretivistic approach. We also made use of the method of transcendental pragmatism as described by Alexander (2006). 'Pragmatic' here refers to the actual, practical setting in which we find scholars working and how they view themselves and their work. 'Transcendental' refers to how we seek to improve teacher educators' research output as academics.

The empirical survey referred to above is the Changing Academic Profession Research Project (CAP), a survey of the academic profession in general in 22 countries (*see:* http://www.open.ac.uk/cheri/pages/CHERI-Projects-CAP.shtml). The following aspects of academic life and work in those countries' were surveyed: biographic particulars, teaching activities, research activities, international profile, experience of university governance and professional working environment. The CAP survey was done among academics in South Africa in 2007/8.

Theoretical and conceptual framework

Academia in South Africa, including teacher education, in the white waters of transformation

Since the advent of the new political dispensation in South Africa in 1994, teacher education as well as other disciplines have been finding themselves in the throes of three forms of transformation that were taking place simultaneously. There is a possibility that the fact that academics had to deal with the combined challenges of these three forms of transformation had made it difficult for them to concentrate on the scholarly aspects of their disciplines, teacher educators arguably to a greater extent than their colleagues in other disciplines, as will be shown. In the case of teacher educators, their confrontation with the ongoing educational transformation processes could have meant less academic focus on theory development about teacher education *per se*, curriculum theory and development, developing best practice in teacher education, and so on.

The demands of the new socio- political dispensation

The first of the external forces that impacted on the academic work of academics in general was the exigencies of the new socio-political context. The 1994 Interim Constitution (RSA, 1994) and the 1996 Constitution (RSA, 1996) transformed South Africa into a liberal democracy on the Western model, with one of the most progressive Bills of Human Rights in the world. In this context, teacher educators had to contend with the arduous birth of a new education system based on the principles of equality of opportunity, desegregation, multiculturalism, equity, redress, integration and articulation between sectors, levels, and courses (Wolhuter, 1999; RSA, 2008). The new system was being geared towards the realisation of the potential of the entire population, with the societal and national objectives of economic development and the moulding of national unity. Teacher educators, in particular, had to face two major reforms in this regard:

● Outcomes-Based education, the associated curricula of which were repeatedly revised and refined between 1996 and 2008, currently known as the National Curriculum Statement, aimed at replacing the pre-1994 content-based education which was condemned as an apartheid strategy for promoting rote-learning and a culture of submissiveness, and the

● South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) with its National Qualifications Framework (NQF), instituted for creating a network of lifelong learning and training for all South Africans, including standard-setting by SAQA's three Quality Councils.

The introduction of these reforms brought about a radical reshaping of education in South Africa. Many of the principles underlying the reforms were the diametrical opposite of pre-1994 theory and practice. Higher education too had to be reformed in line with the new societal imperatives and concomitant education policies (Kruss, 2008). Programmes offered by universities had to be accredited by the South African Qualifications Authority in accordance with the National Qualifications Framework. The principles of democratisation and equality of opportunity brought about a demand for greater access to higher education ('massification'). Higher education enrolments in South Africa resultantly increased from 495 355 in 1994 to 632 911 in 1999, and to 741 380 in 2006 (UNESCO, 2009).

The neo-liberal economic revolution and government domination

The second of the contextual forces that impacted on the work of South African academics was the advent of a neo-liberal economic revolution (global acceptances of the capitalist or free market system). This is part of a societal trend that has been affecting universities worldwide. The concomitant curtailment of university autonomy has also been a common phenomenon in the history of universities in Africa during the post-1960s' decolonialisation period, a trend characterised by governments taking steps to ensure that their wishes were carried out by harnessing universities to the achievement of their political objectives (Warner, 2004). To this end, governments, as the main sources of funds for most universities, assumed ever more say in the affairs of the universities (Wolhuter and Higgs, 2006). This tends to impinge on the academic autonomy of institutions of higher education in that business principles such as accountability, quality control, managerialism and profitability are applied to their management.

Political commentator Duvenhage (2008) noted that between 1994 and 2003, no fewer than 870 pieces of legislation had been promulgated by Parliament for the purpose of regulating the political transformation processes in South Africa (Pillay, 2006).

The Council of Higher Education Independent Task Team on Higher Education Institutional Autonomy and Academic Freedom's (CHE-HEIAAF) (2008) inquiry also commented on this trend. According to this Task Team, the bureaucratic arm of government could be seen to have particular potential to threaten academic freedom with overreaching efforts to consolidate power and control within the system in the name of particular goals (e.g. 'efficiency'). It found in an overview of the tendencies in government's steering of higher education (Section 3.1 of the Report) that government had been defining 'steering' progressively more sharply since 1997 through legislative change and policy developments in planning, funding and quality assurance. In its overall evaluation of the regulatory environment in which South African academics work, the Task Team observed that, "even if flagrant instances of government interference are hard to pinpoint, government's steering of higher education has in recent years – most sharply between 2001 and 2004 – grown more directive, less consultative, and occasionally prone to hierarchical decree" (p.xi).

This has impacted especially heavily on the work of teacher educators. They are today doing their professional work under a rather complicated statutory umbrella consisting of no fewer than 13 Acts of Parliament and a variety of other policy documents. Educationist and ex-dean of a Faculty of Education at a prominent South African University, Jansen (2004), pointed out that in addition to all such directives regarding research, student numbers, the trustworthiness of courses and the future of institutions of higher learning, *it was the state that determined teacher education curricula, and decided which programmes and courses would be taught*. In his opinion, "a university ceases to be a university when its intellectual project no longer defines its identity" (Mischke, 2004, p.11). Teacher educators/educationists seem to have arguably lost more control of their professional domain than any other group of South African academics.

Another effect of the neo-liberal trend was that universities as ivory towers began crumbling and stronger links were being forged with community and society. As universities had to supplement dwindling public funds with funds raised from private sector sources, the private sector also tended to gain a bigger say in university affairs. The neo-liberal economic policies to which the South African government has been subscribing (it really had no other option in the post-1990 global environment) also meant that universities, because of lower government subsidies, had to resort to principles of business enterprise. This new mind set began to dictate university management and administration (Mickelson, Nkomo and Smith, 2001; Slater, 2004).

All these factors and circumstances have been contributing to an erosion of academic freedom at South African universities. As government intervention grew in prominence, universities succumbed to accountability requirements, quality control and managerialism (Webster and Mosoetsa, 2002; Ntshoe, Higgs, Higgs and Wolhuter, 2008).

According to educationists Jansen (2004) and Bundy (2005), South Africa's academic community did not enjoy the privilege of being gradually introduced to all the reforms and tendencies after the advent of the new socio-political dispensation in 1994 and after the country's re-incorporation into the international mainstream, as was the case with institutions of higher education elsewhere in the world (these shifts occurred worldwide in academia). It appears from the above that especially for educationists the confrontation was rapid and intense, with the result that they became caught up in the contextual turmoil, and to a certain extent could not apply their minds and energies to their academic work.

Internationalisation

The third major change in South African academics' professional lives was their reintegration into the international academic community after having been cut off for three decades (1960–1990) as part of an international academic boycott. The boycott formed part of the international community's protest against the segregation policies of the pre-1994 South African government (Harricombe and Lancaster, 1995).

In the period 1990 to 2002, South African academics recovered most of the lost ground. By applying the questionnaire of the *Carnegie International Investigation into the Academic Profession* (the first international survey of the academic profession, *see:* Altbach, 1996) to a sample of the South African academic profession during 2001–2002, Wolhuter and Higgs (2004) found that whereas the international academic boycott still had a visibly negative effect on the *ten*-year period before 2001–2002, when considering the *three*-year period up to 2001, the effect had been wiped out by 2001, and that the South African academic profession had by 2002 become even more internationalised than the international norm. However, the CAP International Survey (the second international survey of the academic profession) during 2007/2008 revealed that in the period between 2001 and 2007 the South African academic profession's performance had again fallen to slightly below the international norm (Wolhuter, Higgs, Higgs and Ntshoe, 2008).

Broadly speaking, all three of the transformation forces mentioned above impacted in the same measure, though conceivably in different ways, on academics working in the various disciplines in higher education institutions. In some ways they seemed to have had a greater negative impact on the professional work of teacher educators/educationists. Although the post 1990 socio-political conditions in South Africa and worldwide might have impacted slightly more negatively and differently on the academic performance of South African educationists, the above overview does not provide grounds for concluding that their academic performance should be resultantly lower than that of their academic counterparts who worked under similar conditions.

Factors that may impact on academics' academic performance

Several theorists have identified academic performance as an important determinant of how academics view themselves and compare themselves with

their peers. In the process, they have proffered a number of possible theories that could assist with contextualising and explaining this determinant. For the purpose of the theoretical framework of this investigation, we chose to limit our discussion to the following six interrelated theories: (a) symbolic interactionism, (b) detached pragmatism, (c) social comparison, (d) social identification, (e) social adjustment and (f) perceived instrumentality.

In 1995 already, Osborne (1995) pointed out that *symbolic interactionism* viewed self-concept to be essentially a reflection of others' appraisals of oneself. According to this perspective, positive feedback in Faculties of Education should lead to more positive self-evaluations among individual educationists, whereas negative feedback should lead to more negative self-evaluations. This is corroborated by the theory of *social comparison* and by the theory of *social identification*. Social comparison theory suggests that academics doing poorly in academia would suffer loss of esteem if they were to compare outcomes with somebody doing better (Osborne, 1995) – which is what they are effectively doing when they evaluate the feedback that they receive from their peers' appraisal(s) of themselves as co-academics. Conversely, someone who does well as an academic can compare his or her outcomes with others doing less well, an action that benefits the self-concept of the academic.

There is, however, an important difference in semantic value between the theories of social comparison and social identification. According to Osborne (1995: *passim*), academics' *identification* with their fellow academics (either in their own faculty or in other faculties in the University) relates strongly to their own academic standing within their (academic peer) community. This means that – in general – poor performance in the Faculty of Education may well lead (based on social comparison and social identification) to an overall negative perception of own abilities as academics in such a faculty (Kruss, 2008). It is in this regard that the work of Adler and Adler (1985) on their theory of *detached pragmatism* seems to provide import to the inference that most South African teacher educators who were offered positions in Faculties of Education at universities after the incorporation of the former teacher education colleges into Higher Education institutions in 2001, may initially have been optimistic and may have had idealistic goals and attitudes about their impending careers as academics in Higher Education. The institutional culture in the Faculties of Education in the universities where they were employed seemed, however, to differ in important respects to that of the teacher education colleges to which they had been accustomed for many years (Kruss, 2008).

One of the possible manifestations of this state of affairs may be that poor performance by academics in Faculties of Education represent a lack of mastery over their academic environment; this may then lead to a negative view of themselves as educationists (Kruss, 2008; Osborne, 1995: *passim*). According to the theory of *detached pragmatism* (Adler and Adler, 1985) and the theory of *social adjustment*, put forward by Oliver, Rodriguez and Mickelson (1985), it seems academically reasonable to speculate that this fact, coupled with educationists' academic socialisation, classroom and Higher Education's bureaucracy-related experiences may lead them to become progressively detached from their fellow-academics in other faculties. As a result, they may be forced to start making social, as well as pragmatic adjustments, abandoning their earlier aspirations and expectations and gradually resigning themselves to inferior academic performance on the basis of these adjustments (Adler and Adler, 1985; Oliver *et al.*, 1985).

Finally, the theory of *perceived instrumentality* (which may be viewed as a theoretical extension of the social cognitive perspective of self-regulation proposed by Bandura) claims that the personally valued future academic goals of, for example, educationists serve to increase the incentive value of their proximal academic tasks in all instances where such proximal academic tasks may be perceived as being instrumental to the attainment of their future academic goals (Miller, Debacker and Greene, 1999: *passim*). This theory highlights the important role played by, for example, educationists' perceptions of the supposed connection between their official academically-related duties and their valued future academic goals. It suggests that efforts to facilitate perceptions of the instrumentality of that which academics understand to be their 'academic' work may be critical to fostering increased proximal motivation for (*in casu*) educationists (*ibid*.). Although the available research seems to suggest that the future academic goals of academics might have incentive value, they are typically viewed as too far off, or too general, to shepherd specific actions in immediate situations that present many uncertainties and complexities (*ibid*.). This means that, for example, educationists are obliged to create for themselves proximal guides and self-motivators for courses of action that may lead to distal attainments. The initial commitment to a valued distant academic goal then becomes the catalyst for the process of developing proximal academic goals (*ibid*.).

When educationists commit themselves to personally valued future academic goals, they are in a position to generate purposefully a coherent, instrumental framework or system of proximal academic sub-goals to help guide their actions toward the attainment of those valued future academic goals. In the

case of our investigation, this begs the question whether teacher training is, *de facto* regarded as an important instrumental framework of academia. In this regard, Osborne (1995) suggests that success or failure in any particular instrumental framework will affect an individual's self-esteem only to the extent that that particular instrumental framework is considered relevant or important. Thus, if teacher training in Faculties of Education is considered an important instrumental framework of and in academia, then it should be possible to assume that academic performance within such an instrumental framework will have a strong impact on, for example, educationists' self-esteem (Kruss, 2008).

In many respects, the above-mentioned six theories appear to be conceptually complementary. Combined, they provide an understanding of the reasons why educationists' academic performance may not always be on par with that of their peers in other faculties within the university. They do not, however, provide us with a sufficient means of measuring – in operational terms – educationists' academic performance (relative to that of their peers in other faculties). This particular hiatus forced us to also reconceptualise the measurement of academic performance in operational terms.

Measuring academic performance

There has been some controversy about the use of so-called operational definitions in empirical research. Scriven (1988, p.136), for instance, argued convincingly against the neo-positivist doctrine of using operational definitions, i.e. "the kind of definition which equates a concept with the results of certain measurements". In his opinion, operational definitions are not helpful or accurate accounts of the concepts or constructs that they are supposed to define, and that hardly gives one confidence about how they would reflect the new concepts that they embody . Research expert Neuman (2000, p.158), on the other hand, sees a place for operational definitions in empirical research: "Conceptualization is the process of taking a construct (such as 'academic performance') and refining it by giving it a conceptual or theoretical definition. A conceptual definition is a definition in abstract, theoretical terms. It refers to other ideas or constructs". Blackburn (1996, p.222) concurs, and refers to this process as "logical construction".

After weighing several pros and cons regarding the use of operational definitions, we decided to use an operational (measurable) definition of 'academic performance' but to augment the process of 'operationalisation'

with further conceptualization. We operationalised the construct 'academic performance' as: quantitatively measurable output in terms of books, scholarly articles and research reports (note: the CAP survey does not provide qualitative data). Mindful of the six theories discussed above, we then conceptually connected five sets of variables from the CAP survey to this operational definition of 'academic performance', based on our interpretation of these theories: academics' working hours (perceived instrumentality, social adjustment); how academics rated the physical research facilities at their disposal (perceived instrumentality, detached pragmatism); their assessment of their relations with management at different levels (social comparison, social identification); their perceptions of their influence on their academic environment at different levels (symbolic interactionism), and their job satisfaction (detached pragmatism, social comparison). We conceptualized these five sets of variables in terms of causation, explanation, intention, meaning and valuing with the purpose of showing that all five of them cast light on the notion of 'academic performance' and can provide insight into a certain group of academics' (*in casu*, South African educationists') higher or lower academic performance.

We conceptualised the link between academic performance and the five sets of variables as follows: (a) working hours relate directly to academic performance in the sense that, if educationists/teacher educators worked the same number of hours as all other academics, their academic performance should be roughly the same; if not, there must be another explanation for their lower performance; (b) optimal working conditions, good physical facilities and good support structures are conducive to high academic performance, and vice versa; (c) good relations with management at the various levels create an institutional climate conducive to higher academic performance; strained relations will be detrimental to academic performance; (d) respondents' perception that they were exerting meaningful influence on their academic surroundings at the various levels would be conducive to higher academic performance, and vice versa; and (e) respondents who experienced optimal job satisfaction would arguably perform better than those who were frustrated in and by their profession.

In conclusion: bearing in mind that the CAP survey referred to in the next paragraph does not work with or provide qualitative data, we proposed – for purposes of this investigation – that the construct 'academic performance' be understood: *operationally* as quantitatively measurable output in terms of books, scholarly articles and research reports and *conceptually* as the function of one or a combination of the following six theoretical indicators, namely

detached pragmatism, perceived instrumentality, social adjustment, social comparison, social identification and symbolic interactionism.

Empirical research design/CAP survey

Aim of the investigation

The CAP data were used for finding answers to the three research questions (see *Specific Research Questions* above).

Sampling
In South Africa, the CAP survey instrument was completed by a random sample of 700 academics from all organisational levels, faculties/schools, departments and disciplines, drawn from a random sample of 11 universities. 174 of those who completed the questionnaire were attached to faculties/schools/departments of education. The sample included distance as well as predominantly/historically Black as well as historically White Afrikaans and historically White English universities, and technical universities, i.e. institutions that had not enjoyed university status before 2000. The sample was also geographically diverse in that it contained urban, rural as well as Northern, Central, Southern and Eastern Sea Board institutions.

Analytical techniques
Analyses were made of the responses to items in the CAP questionnaire pertaining to academic performance and to the five sets of variables that we conceptually linked to academic performance. Use was made of the t-test to determine whether the average response of teacher educators differed statistically significantly from that of other academics (i.e. whether a particular difference cannot be ascribed to chance, cf. Scriven, 1988, p.134).

We discuss the results of the CAP survey of 2007/2008 in terms of the responses of academics attached to schools/faculties of education as compared to those of academics in other fields in respect of the above-mentioned sets of variables. In order to place the CAP findings in broader perspective, they will occasionally be compared (at the risk of being somewhat outdated) with the findings of the Carnegie International Investigation of the Academic Profession in the early 1990s in 14 countries worldwide. For some items, the Carnegie Survey data are still the most recent. (As mentioned above, the CAP project provides only quantitative data; no inferences can therefore be made about the quality of, for instance, research output.)

Findings flowing from the CAP survey of 2007/2008

Table 1 confirms the surmise that South African educationists'/teacher educators' academic performance, operationally defined as the publication and editing of scholarly books, academic articles and research reports, was lower in all categories than that of their counterparts in other disciplines.

Table 1:   Research output of South African academics (averages)

Category of Academics Indicator of Research Output (number of)	Academics attached to Schools/Faculties of Education	Academics in other fields	t-test
Scholarly books authored or co-authored during past 3 years	1.33	2.56	t=0.13* p=0.8993
Scholarly books edited or co-edited past 3 years	0.85	2.11	t=0.18* p=0.8597
Articles published in academic journal or book past 3 years	3.68	3.71	t=2.60** p=0.0097
Research reports written for funded projects past 3 years	1.12	2.41	t=0.95* p=0.3413

*   Difference not statistically significant
**   Difference statistically significant

The question is: to what can their lower academic performance be ascribed? Can it be ascribed to any of the sets of variables from the CAP data that we conceptually linked to academic performance? For instance, can their lower academic performance be ascribed to a lower number of hours spent on academia? The CAP data show that academics attached to faculties/schools of education spend approximately the same amount of time as their colleagues in other disciplines on teaching activities, including lecture preparation, classroom instruction, advising students, and reading and assessing student work. The average time spent on these activities by academics in Schools of Education was 21.21 hours per week, which was somewhat less than that of academics in other fields whose average was 21.62 hours (not statistically significant; t=1.97; p=0.0502). Since South African educationists in 2007–2008 roughly had the same amount of time at their disposal for research and publications as their colleagues in other disciplines the research output of the two groups should have been approximately the same.

Can their lower academic performance then be ascribed to their working conditions? According to the 2007/8 CAP survey, teacher educators' perceived their physical working conditions to be more favourable than those of their counterparts. Teacher educators/academics attached to faculties/schools of education were working in circumstances that had, according to their responses, improved marginally since they had entered the profession as academics, as opposed to those of their counterparts in other faculties, who opined that their working conditions had deteriorated. They (i.e. academics attached to Schools of Education) responded with a mean of 2.57 (i.e. on the positive side of neutral) on a five-point semantic differential rating scale ranging from: 1: very much improved, to 3: neutral, to 5: very much deteriorated. Their counterparts in the other disciplines and university structures responded with a mean of 2.81 (i.e. also positive, though more neutral).

Their ratings with respect to their working conditions (in terms of facilities and resources) were consistently (with respect to seven (7) items, statistically significantly) higher than those of academics in other schools and faculties. According to Table 2, only research funding received a slightly lower rating compared with that of their colleagues in other disciplines. Since both groups of respondents' mean was on the positive side of neutral, it cannot be concluded that this aspect of their work can be blamed for the formers' lower academic performance.

Table 2:   Evaluation of facilities, resources and support personnel by South African academics

Average academic's rating of facilities, resources and support personnel	On a semantic differential scale ranging from 1: excellent to 3: neutral to 5: poor		
	Academics at faculties/schools of education	**Academics at other academic units**	
Research equipment and instruments	2.66	2.96	t=2.96** p=0.0033
Computer facilities	2.12	2.42	t=3.07** p=0.0023
Library facilities and services	1.89	2.16	t=2.28** p=0.0232
Office space	2.22	2.55	t=2.55** p=0.0112
Secretarial support	2.91	3.12	t=2.85** p=0.0047
Telecommunications (internet, telephones)	1.90	2.24	t=2.26** p=0.0244
Teaching support staff	2.96	3.37	t=2.70** p=0.0074
Research support staff	3.32	3.38	t=o.07 * p=0.9479
Research funding	3.18	3.11	t=0.79* p=0.4275

*   Difference not statistically significant
**   Difference statistically significant

Can their lower academic performance then be ascribed to their relations with management? Table 3 shows that as a group, educationists did not seem to have strong opinions about the effectiveness of the communication between management and themselves (their response was slightly on the negative side of neutral). They tended to experience the style of institutional management rather less top-down than their counterparts in other disciplines (2.25 as opposed to 1.99 of their colleagues). While they largely agreed with their colleagues in the other disciplines that the administrative processes at their

institutions were cumbersome (both slightly on the 'agree' side of neutral), and that administrative staff was not supportive of their research (both slightly on the negative side of neutral), their responses differed slightly as to whether top management was providing competent leadership (academics in Education slightly on the positive side of neutral; academics in other fields slightly on the negative side of neutral). Put differently, they were more positive than their colleagues in other faculties etc. that top management was providing competent leadership. They were likewise more positive about being informed about what transpired at the institution, and about administration supporting academic freedom.

The data in Table 3 inform us that as far as relationships and communication at their respective institutions were concerned, teacher educators perceived their experiences to be more positive than those of their counterparts in other structures and disciplines (statistically significantly in three items). Despite the fact that their colleagues in other structures and disciplines seemed to feel more negative about these matters, their academic performance was higher. Educationists' relations with management can therefore not be blamed for their lower performance.

Table 3:   Responses to items relating to relations with management

Question	Mean response on 5 point scale ranging from 1: strongly agree, to 3: neutral, to 5: strongly disagree		
	Academics at Schools of Education	**Academics at other units**	
At my institution there is:			
– good communication between management and academics	3.16	3.70	t=2.61** p=0.0096
– a top-down management style	2.25	1.99	t=1.96* p=0.0707
– a cumbersome adminstrative process	2.37	2.06	t=1.97*
– a supportive attitude of administrative staff towards research	3.12	3.37	t=1.10** p=0.2738
Views on following issues:			
– top level management is providing competent leadership	2.89	3.52	t=3.20** p=0.0015
– I am kept informed about what is going on at my institution	2.71	3.24	t=3.10** p=0.0021
– the administration supports academic freedom	3.07	3.39	t=1.40* p=0.1624

*   Difference not statistically significant
**   Difference statistically significant

Can educationists' lower academic performance then be ascribed to their perception of how influential they thought themselves to be in helping shape key policies at each of the following levels: department, faculty/school, and institution? Table 4 might contain a key to understanding why teacher educators did not perform as well as their counterparts in other structures and disciplines as far as research output was concerned.

Table 4: **Mean responses to question: 'How influential are you in helping shape key academic policies?' Mean ratings on 4-point scale ranging from: 1: very influential, to 2: somewhat influential, to 3: a little influential, to 4: not at all influential**

	Academics at Schools of Education	Academics at other units	
At departmental level	2.49	2.19	t=2.01* p=0.0352
At faculty/school level	2.90	2.90	t=1.13** p=0.2595
At institutional level	3.31	3.59	t=0.35* p=0.7253

*   Difference not statistically significant
**   Difference statistically significant

This Table shows that while teacher educators and their colleagues in other disciplines and structures felt slightly on the negative side of neutral (2.50) as far as their influence at faculty/school level is concerned, and whereas all of them (their colleagues more so) felt that they had minimal influence at institutional level, the teacher educator respondents indicated that they were less influential at departmental level than their counterparts. This finding may hold the key to the conundrum that we have been dealing with so far, namely why teacher educators' academic performance was not as high as that of their colleagues in other disciplines. Since the CAP data do not provide qualitative information about this phenomenon, one can at this stage only conjecture about the reasons for it. Could it be that their immediate supervisors at departmental level denied them meaningful influence in how they should practise their particular sub-discipline in education science? Could it be that their immediate departmental heads forced or coerced them into, for instance, administrative and committee work to the detriment of their scholarly work? Could it be that at departmental level they were so inundated by extraneous exigencies that influence at that level was to no avail anyway? Could it be that the practical

work associated with teacher education distracted their attention from academic work? Or could it be that at departmental level their work was less effective (less able to reach stated aims and goals) and efficient (less able to reach stated aims and goals with the resources available)? Or could it be that teacher educators do not place a high premium on research – that they see themselves as teachers/educators rather than as researchers?

Finally, could South African educationists' lower academic performance be ascribed to lower job satisfaction? When the respondents were asked to rate their overall satisfaction with their current jobs on a five-point scale ranging from 1: very high, to 3: neutral, to 5: very low, academics at faculties/schools of education responded with a more favourable mean than other academics (2.47 as opposed to 2.66). One would have expected greater job satisfaction to reflect in higher academic performance. Is this finding also proof that educationists indeed do not place such a high premium on research as their counterparts in other disciplines?

Discussion and recommendation

The transformation processes in post-1994 South Africa affected all South African academics to approximately the same extent, though arguably in different ways. Despite this, the academic performance of the educationist-respondents in the 2007/8 CAP survey was lower in all categories than that of their counterparts in other academic fields. Why this should be the case is not clear from the CAP data. The CAP survey does not provide pertinent answers to this qualitative question.

The CAP data also suggest that, with the exception of educationists perceiving that they had somewhat less influence on the decision-making processes in their immediate academic surroundings, i.e. in their academic departments, educationists' lower academic performance can be ascribed to none of the sets of variables that we had conceptually linked to academic performance. Why their lower academic performance can be linked to their perceived lack of influence on their immediate academic surroundings – their departments – remains unclear. A number of possible reasons were enumerated above. This finding should be subjected to further qualitative research. Among these count the possibility that teacher educators tend to see themselves as educators, and not necessarily as researchers and publishers of scholarly articles.

Generally speaking, educationists were slightly more positive about their academic experiences than their counterparts in other academic fields. This was, however, not reflected in their research output. While their responses constituted an encouraging indication of the relative well-being of a part of the South African education project, namely that of teacher education, there is scope for improvement. A mean of only 2.47 on a five-point scale (on the positive side of a neutral 3) for job satisfaction implies that a long road still has to be travelled for providing an optimal professional environment for teacher educators.

The low research output of academics at faculties/schools of education at South African universities is a weakness in higher education. Given the magnitude of South Africa's problems in the field of education, the challenges of the fundamental reconstruction of education, and the need to guide these with research outcomes, the rather poor research output remains a cause of concern.

This study has unmasked a shortcoming of the CAP survey, namely its inability to offer qualitative data about a key issue in higher education – academic performance. The CAP research team should consider incorporating the following four essential changes into the CAP instrument. Firstly, they should rethink academic performance as the function of one or a combination of theoretical indicators such as detached pragmatism, perceived instrumentality, social adjustment, social comparison, social identification and symbolic interactionism. Secondly, they should operationally conceptualise the construct (concept) 'academic performance' and provide items for testing for each of the operational definitions that emerge. Thirdly, they should provide opportunities for the inclusion of qualitative data about key issues in higher education, such as the reasons for higher or lower than expected academic performance. Finally, they should conceptually link the material (socio-political) conditions that could impact on academic performance to the construct 'academic performance', and provide for items that would test for this impact. Further qualitative research will have to be done for the purpose of discovering to what extent the extraneous socio-political circumstances and forces impacted on the work of teacher educators/educationists. This study suggested that these circumstances and forces might have had a unique effect on the academic performance of educationists, but this has to be pertinently verified.

Conclusion

Having subjected the problem of the alleged lower academic performance of South African educationists to investigation from several angles based on the CAP data, we found that the academic performance of teacher educators in South Africa, defined as measurable research output, was indeed not as high as that of their counterparts in other faculties and schools in the three years prior to 2007/8. We also found that while they had to cope with the same wide array of extraneous influences that other academics were confronted with, and though these circumstances arguably impacted differently on their professional lives and work, their lower academic performance cannot be ascribed to the impact of these transformation forces alone. The CAP data suggested a possible reason for their lower academic performance: teacher educators having the perception of exerting less meaningful influence on their own immediate working conditions than their colleagues in other disciplines.

Academics working in faculties/schools of education and their management structures should apply their minds to the removal of this obstacle, the first step of which should be to explicate the factors behind their lack of power over of their immediate academic environments.

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Hannes van der Walt
Ferdinand Potgieter
Charl Wolhuter
Faculty of Education Sciences
North-West University

hannesv290@gmail.com
ferdinand.potgieter@nwu.ac.za
charl.wolhuter@nwu.ac.za

Philip Higgs
University of South Africa

higgsp@unisa.ac.za

Isaac Ntshoe
Central University of Technology

intshoe@cut.ac.za

Leonia Higgs
University of South Africa

higgslg@unisa.ac.za