

# Perceptions, reflections and experiences of Teaching Advancement at Universities Fellows in Health Professions Education

**A Abrahams,**<sup>1</sup> PGDip (Health Professional Education), PhD ; **J du Plessis,**<sup>2</sup> BRad Hons, PhD (Health Professions Education); **L Hudson,**<sup>3</sup> DRad

<sup>1</sup> Department of Human Biology, Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Cape Town, South Africa

<sup>2</sup> Department of Clinical Sciences, Faculty of Health and Environmental Sciences, Central University of Technology, Bloemfontein, South Africa

<sup>3</sup> Faculty of Health and Wellness Sciences, Cape Peninsula University of Technology, Cape Town, South Africa

**Corresponding author:** A Abrahams ([amaal.abrahams@uct.ac.za](mailto:amaal.abrahams@uct.ac.za))

The Teaching Advancement at Universities (TAU) Fellowships Programme aims to advance experienced academic staff into socially just leaders and mentors in teaching and learning. Using a reflexive lens, three academics express and share their collective experiences and insights as TAU Fellows at three South African universities.

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## Uprooted and replanted

Using the iconic African acacia tree as an analogy (Fig. 1), three health professions educators reflect on their expectations, observations and experiences of the Teaching Advancement at University (TAU) Fellowships Programme.<sup>[1]</sup> We highlight how the Fellowship allowed us to transform deeply rooted disciplinary practices by ‘uprooting’ us into change agents with fresh yet critical perspectives. Engagement in the TAU Fellowships Programme stimulated an awareness in each of us of the social context needed for more effective learning. We became aware that this social context should provide a conducive environment that offers a secure and mistake-forgiving learning platform to all students, regardless of their background. While the assessment performance of students is important, the value of developing soft skills such as study methods, time management, information access and self-esteem is equally important to address the inequalities between students from privileged and disadvantaged backgrounds.

As TAU participants, we had the opportunity to engage with educationalists from diverse backgrounds teaching in many different professions. We came to realise that despite our diversity, we all share the same challenges when it comes to the education of the youth in our country. The challenges that were emerging from ignorance were hampering our plans and progress towards the nurturing of holistic graduates ready to take their place in society. Ironically, we agreed that it took a coronavirus pandemic to uncover and exacerbate many social inequities that now need our urgent attention.

The visual representation in Fig. 1 summarises our experiences of the TAU Fellowships Programme, where a supportive community of practice (CoP) and collaborative engagements are essential elements enabling our proverbial tree to grow and blossom. Diversity, inclusion, and social justice in health professions education framed our reflections.

## Growing a strong, supportive and nourishing trunk

Using *ubuntu* (an African philosophy, translated as 'I am because we are') as its philosophical framework, the TAU Programme expertly scaffolded our understanding of teaching and learning in both the South African and global contexts, while continually challenging us to engage with historical

and current inequalities in higher education systems. Encapsulating our spirit of *ubuntu* was a strong sense of the importance of collaborative engagement and CoP where, as academics, we should strive to improve the quality of learning, teaching and academic scholarship. We became change agents at our institutions, drawing inspiration from the TAU Programme to implement new educational practices to improve our students' experiences.

**Growing our foliage to advance teaching practices and develop socially accountable health professionals**

TAU was the catalyst that inspired and motivated us to promote inclusive and collaborative spaces of learning. From the data accumulated for our individual TAU projects, reflections on and the implementation of what was learned about contextual initiatives such as mentorship programmes, curriculum transformation and creating social awareness and critical thinking are presented in the following sections.



*Fig. 1. The acacia tree as a visual representation of the authors' experiences and reflections.*

## University of Cape Town

At the University of Cape Town, my (AA's) TAU journey was pivotal in deepening my understanding of the scholarship of teaching and learning and allowing me for the first time to see the impact of my project from a social justice perspective. Here the goal was to develop an interactive theoretical and practical-based tutor training course for those who will tutor health science and science students studying anatomy and physiology. The objective of the new course was to change the traditional approach to tutoring, making tutorials more active and inclusive spaces of collaborative learning.<sup>[2]</sup> The specific aim was to provide tutors with the facilitation skills to effectively promote deep learning, group work and social inclusion. From a social justice perspective, TAU ignited a passion in me to drive this pedagogical change that involved students and tutors seeing themselves as co-learners and importantly as mediators of a sociocultural model of learning.

## Cape Peninsula University of Technology

At the Cape Peninsula University of Technology, repositories where student application and registration data are housed were unpacked as either information dumpsites or treasure troves of rich information about first-year students. The insights gained from statistical analyses of the data sets led to the introduction of robust faculty-specific student orientation activities, creating a sense of social awareness. The ongoing project aims to allow for data-informed decision-making by creating holistic views of who our students are, what the strengths and weaknesses in the system are, and what support services are available to develop those strengths and support the weaknesses. Thus, rooted in data, these initiatives are used to unlock first-year students' willingness to learn and lay the foundations for critical thinking even before they enter the university system. My (LH's) TAU project highlighted the 'closing-the-loop phase' of student support interventions in our faculty and the importance of linking such interventions back to the individual student and/or student group.

## Central University of Technology

The opportunity to engage with a variety of educationalists from diverse backgrounds who are teaching in many different professions made me (JdP) realise that we are not addressing social justice efficiently at the Central University of Technology and that the challenges that are emerging from our ignorance are hampering our plans and our progress towards the

nurturing of holistic graduates ready to take their place in society. This realisation made me delve deeper into the opportunities presented by my institutional project on peer-assisted learning to address some of the social justice inequalities in my department. When reporting on my project at my institution, I therefore emphasised the aspects of peer-assisted learning that can address the challenges and issues hampering the learning and progression of students from disadvantaged backgrounds in the classroom and during clinical training. Focus was placed on the training of mentors to guide students to become more self-centred and collaborative learners who can work effectively as part of a team towards successful mastery of their goals at the university and during clinical training.<sup>[3]</sup>

## Conclusion

TAU stimulated the Fellows' awareness that change agents are emotional champions, developmental strategists, intuitive adapters, and continuous improvers. Through an interconnected and inspiring lens, we as health professions educators were empowered to bring to life the true spirit of *ubuntu*. The establishment of a network of educationalists who can learn from and benchmark with one another on all aspects related to the successful delivery of teaching and learning towards moulding quality graduates is an asset for the development of their expertise and the skills of the academic staff cohort.

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