

The changing role of the ODL academic: An auto-ethnographical account

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Abstract

New academics struggle to make sense of the role expectations they face in the open and distance learning (ODL) context. The article is qualitative in nature and an auto-ethnographic approach is used. The methodology included thematic analysis, coding and categorising of data. I reflect on my personal journey coming from a conventional university, and having to adjust to the ODL environment. The article explores my lived experience towards finding my place within the ODL context. As a reflective study on the changing role of the ODL academic, I believe that this research could inform human resource policy at ODL institutions. It could also pave the way for a more rigorous orientation programme for new academics in ODL that takes cognisance of the feelings of self-doubt, alienation, de-humanisation and loss. The new academic needs to experience empathy from the employer before he or she can show authentic concern towards his or her students.

Keywords: ODL, academic staff, work experience, orientation, role expectations, auto-ethnographic

INTRODUCTION

The multi-faceted nature of the academic position within the open and distance learning (ODL) university can be compared to the efforts of an artist who has to create a meaningful image from a pile of colourful mosaic tiles. Many new appointees from conventional universities struggle to make sense of the multitude of expectations in the ODL university. As a result, they experience anxiety and stress (Jahanzeb 2010, 45) and struggle to create a coherent picture from the many fragments they have to work with.

Naidu (2007, 3) highlights the different meanings conventional and ODL universities attach to the academic's role. Although studies conducted by Adewale, Ajadi and Inegbedion (2009), Ng (2006, 3 –5) and Jamieson (2004, 22) provide some insight into the complexities of the ODL academic's role, there is no research that addresses how to adjust to this role. Ng (2006), supported by

Jahanzeb (2010, 34), writes that there is almost no research that had been done on the work experience of ODL academics. Furthermore, Phipps and Merisotis (1999) are concerned that researchers ignore the feelings and attitudes of ODL students and academics. As a result, new academics are unprepared. Ng (2006, 9) and Jahanzeb (2010, 34) conclude that future research on the orientation of new academics (i.e. to learn about job responsibilities and the institutional culture) should be receiving priority. Yick, Patrick and Costin (2005) explain that the academic world is largely influenced by the values and norms of traditional universities, not ODL institutions.

Ellis (2004, 142) proposes that even experienced academics feel overwhelmed by the evolving roles they are expected to play. Furthermore, ever-increasing demands lead to stress, depleted personal resources, exhaustion, cynicism and reduced self-efficacy (Bezuidenhout and Cilliers 2010, 7). ODL academics struggle to cope with the main tasks of tuition, research, community involvement and academic citizenship, and often feel confused and overwhelmed. Moreover, the real-life work experience of an academic is much more complicated than these four main pillars of the 'academic job description'.

ODL academics function within a highly complex environment and, as a result, it cannot be assumed that existing academics are capable of or willing to provide guidance to new appointees. The old 'sitting-next-to Nelly' approach, where all new staff members receive general orientation for a day and are then sent off on their own and expected to 'pick up the ropes' from the old hands (the apprenticeship model), is inadequate. The newly appointed ODL academic has probably never been expected to manage a virtual classroom (Conceicao 2006, 29) or use an institutional learning management system (LMS). As a result, alienation, isolation and feelings of hopelessness set in and impact on students – who also feel isolated and alienated.

The purpose of this research is to create an understanding of the difficulties experienced by new academics adjusting to an ODL environment. This qualitative article will provide a personal reflection on the experience of a newly appointed academic staff member during the first months of employment at an ODL university. The research strategy will be contextual in nature and an 'insider perspective' will be provided (Mouton 2006, 169). An auto-ethnographic design will be followed. Auto-ethnography is a reflexive method through which the researcher consciously emerges and, through an intimate autobiographical account, makes sense of a phenomenon under investigation (McIlveen 2008, 4). Care was taken to document all experiences and analyse these experiences meticulously, to ensure the rigour of the research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of the literature review is to provide insight into the complexities of the ODL environment, within the broader higher education landscape in South Africa. Furthermore, Fredrick Herzberg's two-factor theory, one of the most respected motivational theories (DeShields, Kara and Kaynak 2005, 129), is introduced as the theoretical frame of reference for interpretations made in this article.

The higher education context in South Africa

In the South African context, universities are faced with a shortage of qualified and experienced academics. The National Development Plan (NDP) of South Africa (2011, 261) notes that South Africa currently produces only 28 PhD graduates per million of the population, compared with 48 in Brazil and 187 in Korea. Both the Council on Higher Education (CHE) report (2009, 43) and the South African Board for People Practices (SABPP 2012, 19) refer to the staffing of universities as a 'worrying workforce trend'. Given these remarks, one can deduce that universities have to be proactive in dealing with the ever-increasing dilemma of a shortage of academic staff. Therefore, the ODL context in South Africa needs to be described in more detail.

The ODL context in South Africa

The context is a mega-comprehensive ODL university in South Africa. ODL is defined as:

A multi-dimensional concept aimed at bridging the time, geographical, economic, social, educational and communication distance between student and institution, academics, courseware and peers. ODL focuses on removing barriers to access learning, flexibility of learning provision, student-centeredness, supporting students and constructing learning programmes with the expectation that students succeed. (Unisa ODL Policy 2008, 2)

The university has more than 300 000 geographically dispersed students.

To achieve national goals it is essential that academics become productive and committed, and that they do so quickly. At contact universities new academics are expected to successfully complete a structured 'academic' orientation programme for a week or two, addressing academic knowledge, skills and attitudes. The current orientation programme at the ODL institution is more of a general nature. This is especially pertinent in the first six months of employment, since research indicates that this is also the time when new appointees are most vulnerable (Meyer 2007, 398). Because new appointees have not yet formed

strong bonds with the institution, it is easy to decide that they ‘do not fit in’ with the organisational culture and subsequently resign. It is therefore important that the factors that play a role in the motivation of new ODL academics are well understood.

The seminal motivational theory of Herzberg (1968) was used as the primary point of departure to interpret my experiences as a new ODL academic. Herzberg (1968) distinguished between ‘motivators’ and ‘hygiene factors’ (see Table 1). Herzberg showed that, in general, the experiences employees regard as satisfying are not just the opposite of the experiences that gave rise to dissatisfaction. He suggested that there are ‘dissatisfiers’, which he labelled ‘hygiene factors’. These play little part in motivating people (Mackay 2007, 45) but, when they are absent, people feel deeply unhappy. On the opposite side there are the ‘satisfiers’, which he labelled ‘motivators’ (Mackay 2007, 45). An absence of motivators leads to an absence of satisfaction rather than dissatisfaction with the job.

Table 1: Herzberg’s theory of motivators and hygiene factors

Motivators (Job content)	Hygiene factors (Job context)
Responsibility	Organisational policies
Autonomy	Interpersonal relationships
Sense of achievement	Working conditions (office spaces, tearooms, parking)
Recognition	Remuneration
The nature of the job itself	Level of supervision

This theoretical framework has been proven applicable to the academic context in previous studies, such as the studies carried out by Oshagbemi (1996, 389–400) and Schulze (2006, 319). The following factors that emerged from the literature review, can loosely be linked to ‘intrinsic job characteristics’ and thus have the potential to actively improve the satisfaction and motivation of the new academic:

The academic role

Research conducted in the United Kingdom found that academics are susceptible to managerial control and exploitation through being compelled to measure themselves against the norm of the ‘ideal academic’ which, for most, is an unattainable vision (Hardinga, Forda and Gough 2010). They further argue that to be an academic, invariably results in being odd or ‘queer’, because while striving towards the vision of the ‘real academic’, which means being a scholarly person with creative and novel ideas, in reality academics are caught up in the despised demands of administration, meetings, ‘managing through statistics’ and

performance management exercises. These ‘menial activities’, as rated by most academics, are replacing the ‘real academic’ tasks of reading, generating ideas, and sharing these ideas with others. Jamieson (2004, 22) writes perceptively on the concept of becoming an ‘enterprise university’, the move away from a ‘teacher-centred pedagogy’ and idea that the global economy is ‘reshaping the university as a place of work’. It seems that universities are no longer seen as ‘places of scholarship’; instead, the job of the academic is viewed in terms of ‘academic productivity’ (Marginson and Consadine 2000, 48). With reference to the changing role of the academic, the major areas of change include the following:

- *Workload*

A heavy workload is associated with the academic role. Howgego (2012) states that lecturers (together with teachers) are more likely to engage in unpaid overtime work than all other occupations, including managing directors, and that 55,6 per cent of lecturers work an additional 9,6 hours overtime per week. The draft policy framework for the provision of ODL in South Africa (South Africa 2012, 9) notes that the growth in student numbers has not been matched by similar growth in the number of academics, leading to larger classes and increasing the supervision burden of academics. Conceicao (2006, 38) and Mabunda (2010, 240) note that academics report time and work constraints as barriers to the adoption of new computer applications. They also perceive increased pressure to update the curriculum and teaching materials (Sheard and Carbone 2008).

- *Drive towards interactive virtual classrooms*

Jamieson (2004, 21 –27) maintains that universities as ‘places of work’ have historically not adequately assisted their academic staff to learn how to use new information technology, which has resulted in a great deal of stress, especially in ODL universities (Conceicao 2006, 38). Online activities demand motivation, and extended time and effort (Mabunda 2010). Alarmingly, he found that lecturers do not seek feedback from students, because of workload, too much administration, too many modules, too many students and marking responsibilities.

METHODOLOGY

In his framework for researching distance education, Naidu (2007, 5) recommends the use of case studies, phenomenological research and research synthesis. In this article a specific type of case study research, namely, an auto-ethnographic design, as described by Anderson (2006), was followed to ensure scientific rigour

in the research. Such a design is desirable for research in which the researcher is a full member of the research group, is recognised as being such a member in written documents, and is committed to developing a theoretical understanding of broader social phenomena. Auto-ethnography is a reflexive method by which the researcher consciously immerses him or herself in the situation and, through an intimate autobiographical account, makes sense of a phenomenon under investigation (McIlveen 2008, 4).

To ensure accuracy and create rich data, I kept a personal journal and field notes in which I documented my experiences in the first six months of employment at an ODL university. The journal was used to organise personal reflections, with the purpose of forcing myself to think about my experiences, keep track of my ideas, and finally to give direction, shape and purpose to the study. The process of ‘making sense’ and adjusting to the evolving role expectations in the ODL university was documented meticulously. I was deeply emerged in the data because I lived it myself. The journal was analysed systematically using content analysis and the computer program Atlas ti (Archer 2012, 1-61). I assigned codes and themes and selected significant quotes from the document to serve as evidence in the interpretation of the auto-ethnography.

An auto-ethnographical account of the experiences of a newly appointed academic at an ODL institution

I am a married mother of a teenage boy and an academic in a department within the ODL university, previously employed at a residential university of technology. This account is in no way representative of the experiences of all new academics in ODL universities, but rather an invitation to other academics to reflect on their own experiences. I believe that, through recognising our own feelings, we may be sensitised to the experiences of our ODL students. The discussion is offered according to the main themes that emerged from the data analysis.

‘Dying of the heat’

According to Herzberg’s theory, hygiene factors are external to the job (Figure 1). Newly appointed academics commonly mourn the loss of hygiene factors in terms of working conditions at their previous employers. I, for example, felt humiliated when the parking division refused to put my name on a waiting list for parking. For years I took safe, undercover parking space close to my office for granted. The most recent staff satisfaction survey (Unisa 2007) indicated that, six years ago, the lack of parking space was the second highest contributing factor to low staff satisfaction and morale. Though it is doubtful that any person will be motivated by a parking space, the inability to find one often leads to

stress and frustration. Herzberg's theory refers to such factors as 'inhibitors' of performance, as they continue to have a negative effect on the employee's motivation and commitment.

I started my tenure during the boiling heat of a Highveld summer. A new colleague appointed from the Western Cape commented: 'I am dying of the heat. I can't believe that there is no way to control the temperature in my office. Why didn't they tell me this in the interview? I told my departmental chairperson I am very uncomfortable and her answer was merely that I should learn to cope with it.' Five months later, the Highveld winter brought with it frost and icy draughts. When we asked for heaters, we were told that the budget was depleted. Being uncomfortably hot or freezing is not conducive to staff productivity or morale and could therefore also be labelled an 'inhibiting factor' or a 'dissatisfier', based on Herzberg's theory. I noted an analogy between my own sense of helplessness and the feelings that an ODL student, geographically distant, must experience.

Since I was used to having a dispenser in the departmental kitchen with clean, cold drinking water, I assumed this to be 'normal'. During compulsory assessor training I asked the lecturer where I could get clean drinking water. He responded briefly: '*Try the toilet*'. I was shocked. Then I noticed that many people carried a bottle of water from home on their way to their offices. Now I also see water as synonymous with 'care'. As I am reflecting on my own experience of being 'cared for', I think of the university's efforts to improve service delivery to its students. I wonder if this 'lack of care' towards ODL students by academics may be a consequence of not feeling 'cared for' themselves. Apathy and indifference towards freezing academics may breed ODL academics that are in turn, apathetic towards students. From my observations, I believe the presence of dissatisfiers (according to Herzberg's theory) may breed dissatisfied academics, which in turn may lead to dissatisfied students.

Alarmingly, I also found that it eventually spoke to my sense of identity. I started to doubt myself and wondered if I was not being unreasonable or arrogant in my expectations of having, for example, a parking space. These feelings speak to what Herzberg labelled 'recognition'. The theory predicts that an absence of feeling recognised, leads to an absence of job motivation.

'Closed doors and too many academics'

The loss of social connectedness experienced by new academics in the ODL context is a central theme that presents strongly as a sense of alienation or isolation. Because we don't have a tearoom where we can meet each other, I have never met all my colleagues. The isolation is perfectly illustrated by a comment from a male colleague from another department: 'I saw this one guy

with spectacles in my department more often than the others. After a year and a half, I realised that they are actually twins. Him and his brother ... and that is why I saw “him” often. After three years we’ve never had a departmental meeting. We are just too many academics here.’ When I showed one of my older, postgraduate students how to use the ‘virtual classroom’ to cope with his feeling of being alone, he looked in surprise at the comments posted by other students and asked: ‘But can’t I meet them in real life, Professor?’ When the experience of the academic is compared with the reaction of my postgraduate student, the similarities are obvious. Feelings of being invisible, simply being a number and the lack of interpersonal contact reflect in both groups. I am considering the idea that the constructs of ‘ODL student’ and ‘ODL academic’ are mirror images of one another. What affects the one invariably affects the other.

Everyone works behind a closed door in my department. The signs on the various doors become familiar but the faces inside remain a mystery. After two months, there is a departmental celebration. I stand quietly by myself, waiting to be introduced, and feeling very self-conscious. I make no effort to socialise with anyone. When I realise that no introduction or word of welcome is going to happen, I leave for the safety of my office. I close the door carefully behind me. I find comfort in the loneliness. I enjoy my own company and I like being alone in my office. I still miss having a cup of coffee with my old colleagues. I notice how out of place the trophy that I brought from my old office looks here. I am luckier than most I suppose – being an introvert at heart I can cope with loneliness. When I think about my student’s need to meet his fellow ‘classmates’, I understand his need. Herzberg’s theory indicates that the absence of interpersonal interaction will likely lead to newly appointed ODL academics feeling deeply unhappy, dissatisfied and demotivated.

In a similar vein another newly appointed colleague’s comment symbolises a sense of de-humanisation. She observed: ‘We don’t have a proper kitchen in our department. I will walk past someone in my department without recognising them. But I know the office furniture and where I saw the fridges.’ I notice an absence of connectedness and feelings of belonging that are essential for teambuilding and collaboration. This should be a concern to the ODL university as many scholarly activities, such as research projects and community engagement, demand synergy and depend on networks with other like-minded academics. Similarly, ODL students miss out on the synergy that characterises effective groups and teams.

‘Mourning the loss of research time’

Another new academic, who also joined the ODL university recently from a residential university, commented: ‘The worst is the loss of flexi-time. I really mourned the loss of the three vacations a year. I used that time to do my research.

I hear some people in other departments may apply for fifty days research time at home a year. We are not allowed in our department, though the performance management system is the same for everyone'. I noted a need for quiet time, specifically in order to concentrate on complex, research-related tasks. In a discussion with another colleague, who also joined from a residential university, about the first year in the ODL context, he/she commented: 'I used to hate it here. At the contact university we had all the flexibility in the world, then you come here and you are an administrative person. But the jobs are not the same; administrators don't take their work home, or do their research over weekends. Their performance is not judged on their research outputs.' After five months, this colleague resigned and joined a residential university again.

When introduced to a section head from another department, he shared his story of alienation and confusion when he joined the ODL university. 'It was very strange in the beginning,' he said, 'academics and administrative people are the same here. You miss your flexibility dearly. It is so entrenched in the job. I missed the contact with my students here. You never see them.' It is noteworthy that these feelings are shared among many of the new academic appointees. Personally, I noticed that I was getting increasingly anxious about not getting enough time to do my own research.

Career theory dictates that the majority of successful academics share the career anchor of autonomy, preferring very little control and regulation (Schreuder and Theron 2001, 141). These individuals are 'notorious' for refusing promotion if it restricts their freedom and independence. They need to have autonomy in their day-to-day activities, they despise micro-management and they cannot be forced to perform. They are internally motivated by the characteristics of the job itself and get extremely agitated by the absence of hygiene factors (in the job context), because this is perceived as a stumbling block to their productivity. As Herzberg classifies autonomy as a motivator, it can be expected that ODL academics need to experience autonomy regarding their day-to-day performance (job content), in order to feel motivated.

'Feeling inferior'

I was taken by surprise by the negative feelings towards work-integrated learning, being a comprehensive university, as well as towards universities of technology, diplomas and specifically any degree with the word 'tech' attached to it. Coming from a university of technology, I felt as if my academic credentials were often questioned. I discovered that I should immediately disclose that I completed my doctorate at the ODL university if I wanted to be taken seriously. This is an attitude that many new academics from other comprehensive universities and universities of technology experience. A colleague warned me very soon: 'Be warned, if you

come from a university of technology you will experience discrimination. I'm telling you. Even though they are a comprehensive university here, they don't like it. They don't want to associate themselves with the old technikons, they look down their noses at us.' I pondered the idea that, in a similar way, many contact universities may have the same negative viewpoint of an ODL institution and the students that graduate from an ODL institution. I again noticed the emergence of what Herzberg referred to as recognition, or an absence thereof, and the danger that this may erode the work motivation of the ODL academic.

'Feeling lost and overwhelmed'

Beginning a new job is associated with a plethora of emotions. Feelings of being lost, overwhelmed and left alone to fend for myself characterised the first inscriptions in my journal. When the Vice-Chancellor mentioned that he realised that some academics feel 'ignored' and 'invisible' during an address to the college (Makhanya 2012), it echoed my experience. Although one academic in the department was allocated the task of 'orientation of new academics', and presented me with a comprehensive orientation file, what I actually craved above all was interpersonal contact, support and guidance from other subject specialists in my own subject.

The ODL university had a much longer time orientation than a residential university. I was surprised when I read in the orientation file that study guides are prepared eighteen months in advance. I was terrified that I was going to miss a deadline. The one word of warning that was repeated most often was: 'Remember, deadlines are non-negotiable at this university.' The fact that I had no input in the curriculum of the module, nor in the assignments for the rest of the year (because they were all compiled the previous year) made me feel really helpless. After a couple of months, I realised that the recommended e-reserves were not available, which exacerbated the problem. Nor, I learned, could the e-reserves be uploaded to rectify the problem, because this should have been done during the previous academic year. I doubted whether I would be able to guide a group of postgraduate students through a module without them being able to access the required resources. Feelings of self-doubt, helplessness and fear surfaced. During a Department of Curriculum Design workshop, a new academic reflected: 'I inherited the assessment plan and tutorial letters from the previous lecturer. I won't be able to make improvements. For the next year or two it will be status quo. I feel totally overwhelmed. Lecturers are just thrown in at the deep end and expected to know how things work and it is totally different from other universities. You feel so lost.' In my opinion this theme that emerged strongly from the content analysis represents what Herzberg referred to as job context (meaning that it speaks to the nature of the job itself). These motivational

factors lead to job satisfaction, but when they do not present, such as in the case of the new ODL academic, the theory predicts that satisfaction and motivation will be absent.

No one was able to provide any real, practical assistance, since I was the only person lecturing on this new subject. I struggled along through tutorial letters and stumbled through the exam paper. When I shared my experience with a facilitator at a curriculum workshop, she was not in the least bit surprised by my experience. She responded: ‘This is highly pertinent. You get here on your first day and you are directed to an office and there you are left on your own, behind a closed door. You are given a whole lot of tutorial letters and then you are left to fend for yourself. You have no networks to rely on. It is so easy to get lost in a big organisation such as an ODL university.’ I wondered how easy it must be for an ODL student to ‘feel lost’. When the Vice Chancellor spoke about being empathetic, compassionate and caring towards students (Makhanya 2012), I realised that, to show authentic empathy, one needs to experience compassion and caring on a personal level.

‘Happily keeping to myself’

Although I am still having second thoughts about my decision to join the ODL university, more and more positive experiences are happening. I am enjoying the opportunities for learning and development. I am getting to know my new colleagues and I am slowly finding my place at the ODL university. I am happier and more content. I like being in my office and not in the class. I struggle with the new technology, but find it empowering as I master simple tasks. I value the friendship from one of the senior female academics and find that I am slowly being introduced to the intricate world of departmental politics. I am still wary and share only superficial pleasantries with new colleagues, but I don’t feel as if I am on a strange planet anymore. I still park in ‘Bronkhorstspuit West’, but at least now I know the ‘insider’ jargon and am used to walking with the rest of the crowd to the academic buildings.

I keep to myself mostly. I am hopeful when I hear top management express dedication towards a culture of compassion, empathy and caring. I celebrate when a colleague invites me for coffee in the cafeteria and I appreciate a kind word of recognition from my manager. The feelings of ‘invisibility’ and awkwardness are less prominent as I am slowly discovering my identity within this ODL context.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

I conceptualised this article with the aim of clearing up some of the confusion I experienced as a new academic in the ODL context. However, the complexity of the ‘academic role’, the changing environmental demands, managerialisation of the ‘university’, and the strangeness of the ODL context were other major themes that arose from the literature study and personal reflections.

Based on my own experiences as I adjusted to the ODL culture, I conceptualised the stages of adjustment that I went through as follows:

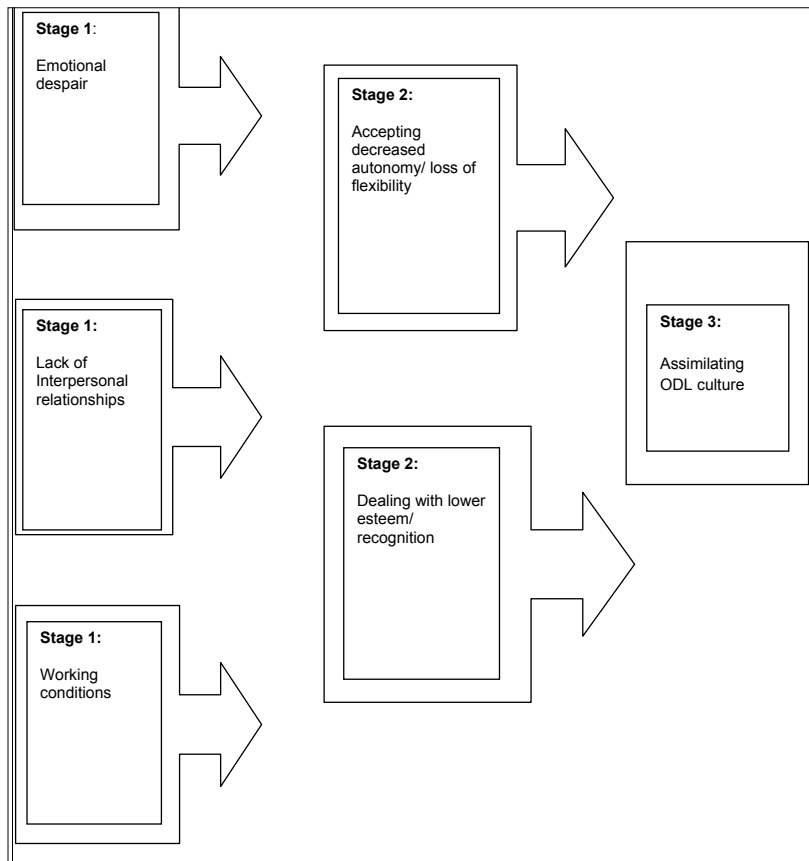


Figure 1: Graphical representation of the adjustment of a new academic to the ODL institution’s culture

When the above visual display is considered in the light of Herzberg’s theory, the manifestation and importance of the ‘hygiene factors’, namely interpersonal relationships, working conditions and autonomy, is noteworthy. The nature of

the reflective account offered required me to think critically about myself and to acknowledge my own personal weaknesses. It is possible that the solitary nature of the self and feelings of inferiority may have manifested in the form of ‘difficulty in adjusting’. The personal awkwardness in social situations may therefore have exaggerated the difficulty I experienced in adjusting and ‘making sense’ of the new environment.

The findings of this article could be used to further inform human resource policy at the ODL university. The Human Resources Development section of ODL universities could use the outcomes of this article to transform the current orientation programme into a customised and effective skills development programme to address the findings of this research, for example the isolation, helplessness and de-humanisation experienced by many new ODL academics. It is also recommended that new academic staff members be supported on an emotional level to expect and cope with the feelings of anxiety, stress and helplessness they will almost certainly experience.

I would have preferred to attend a customised ODL academic orientation programme for a week or two that was specifically geared towards the requirements of the academic job and to prepare myself, before joining my academic department for further subject-specific orientation. It is also strongly recommended that the absence of hygiene factors such as air-conditioning and parking be addressed and that policy decisions are taken that would allow ODL academics dedicated research time on a weekly basis, to enable them to sustain research outputs. This would also help them to meet performance management targets and achieve a reasonable work-life balance.

Instead of providing ‘an answer’, this article merely offers a few ideas and adds a few more sub-dimensions that need further exploration and reflection from academics and management within the ODL context. One of the major limitations of qualitative research - namely that the findings cannot be generalised, should be kept in mind when this article is read. I have tried to shed some light on the complexities of becoming a successful ODL academic and the emotional rollercoaster I experienced during the first six months of my personal journey at this ODL university. I still have not found an answer to the question of how to ensure that my students experience ‘care’. That might be the next step in becoming a successful ODL academic.

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