Implications of distance educator's changing work roles for academic workload

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Abstract

The changing work roles and resulting workloads of distance educators hold significant implications for the well-being and mental health of academics. New work roles include redesigning curricula for online delivery, increasing staff-student ratios and demands for student-support, management of part-time staff and 24-hour availability. This research was conducted to investigate the perceived importance of various job roles constituting the quantitative and qualitative workload of Distance Educators at an Open Distance Learning university in South Africa. A quantitative, cross-sectional self-report survey design was employed. A stratified random sampling technique was used to ensure generalisability. The questionnaires were completed online and the results were statistically analysed. The findings included a priority list of 40 Distance Educators' work roles that may impact on their perceived workload. The article offers recommendations for policy development to facilitate a healthy workload allocation for Distance Educators.

Key words: academics; changing roles; distance educators; distance learning; faculty; workload; work roles

1. Introduction

Globally, the challenge of balancing open distance learning (ODL) universities' social mandate to provide access to higher education, ensuring excellent quality in programme delivery and supporting learners effectively, with the well-being of distance educators (DEs), is becoming a major concern. This challenge may even be more pronounced in developing countries, such as South Africa, where resources may be less abundant than in first world countries. Pienaar and Bester (2006) found that the increased pressure to produce research outputs, myriad of administrative obligations and a lack of administrative support contributes to the work role overload and role conflict experienced by South African academics. Major changes in what students, institutions and society expect from DEs imply new tasks, responsibilities and roles inevitably resulting in increased workload (Berge, 2008). In addition, trends such as increasing demands for accountability, governance, managerialism, profitability, student-staff ratios, massification, online delivery, management of large numbers of part-time staff, high level of digital literacy requirements, 24-hour a day

availability and the ever present pressure to produce research outputs translate into increased workload. These trends are in sharp contrast to the traditional view of the academic having a certain level of self-determination, academic freedom and autonomy (Kenny & Fluck, 2014). Also, they argue that because of this internal conflict DEs are vulnerable to exploitation in the corporate, managerial culture, embraced by many distance universities.

A comprehensive definition of distance education by Keegan (1996:10) refers to six traditional elements, namely the separation between the educator and the learner, two-way communication between the educator and the learner, the influence of an educational institution, the use of technology, the possibility of occasional meetings and the self-directedness of the learner's involvement. The rapidly evolving nature of the distance learning context has implications for each of the traditional elements listed above, for example the emergence of open educational practices, the increasing range of distance education providers including virtual universities and private providers, the paradox of increased access versus accessibility of the internet in developing countries, cloud-based learning, increasing and sometimes unrealistic expectations of online students, connectivism, and the disaggregation of the academic role (Naidu, 2014). The change in teacher roles from mainly being a content creator, to acting as discussion leader to becoming a critical friend and co-learner (Anderson & Dron, 2011) corresponds with the development of the different generations of distance education. Furthermore, when the job context of DE is considered, the theoretical framework of transactional distance also applies (Moore, 2007). The physical separation between academics and learners, results in an experience of psychological and cognitive distance. Also, it mentions the important work role of the DE to bridge this distance between the DE themselves and the students they support.

While a "role" refers to the expected behaviour in a specific position, in this case being a DE, the "role" may be achieved or ascribed (Stark, 2007). An achieved role reflects the skills, abilities and efforts a person demonstrates in the job, whereas an ascribed role is assigned due to traits beyond the control of the employee and is usually forced upon the person (Stark, 2007). Furthermore, individuals are often rewarded or punished, based on their ability and willingness to conform to the role expectations of a specific position (Smith, 2007). In terms of the new roles expected from DEs, they could thus possibly be rewarded for accepting these new roles and punished for non-compliance with these new roles. Biddle (1986) concludes that the five major role theories include functional role theory, symbolic interactions theory,

structural role theory, organisational role theory and cognitive role theory. Of these five original theories, organisational role theory, pertaining to role development in organisations, and cognitive role theory (Biddle, 1986; Flynn & Lemay, 1999), as referring to the relationship between expected behaviours and actual behaviours, are of specific relevance to this article. Duxburry, Higgens and Lyons (2008) postulate that the critical concept of role overload, where the employee may have too many responsibilities and too little time in which to attend to them, has received little research attention over the past two decades. In addition, Höbfall's (1989) conservation-of-resources theory posits that a continuous increase in job demands (such as increased and changing work roles) together with a decrease in job resources (such as office space, printers, equipment) is associated with increased levels of stress, anxiety and burnout.

Briggs (2005) found supporting evidence that the multiple role expectations involved in online learning are causing increased stress and anxiety in academics. Shaw and Ward (2014) questions the reasons why mental illness is on the rise in academia, specifically in the United Kingdom. They note a steady increase of "dark thoughts" in academia and refer to research indicating nearly half of academics show symptoms of psychological distress. The increased workload and uncaring academic environment are partly to blame for the difficulty academics experience to distance themselves from their work and the feelings of guilt they experience if they don't work seven days a week, resulting in further isolation and loss of work-life balance (Shaw & Ward, 2014) In addition, academics are often "perfectionist" and the constant judgement of their research productivity and pressure to be available to students 24 hours a day, seven days a week add to the problem (Shaw & Ward, 2014). Brown, Lewin and Shikongo (2014) report that 47% of the respondents in a study at the University of Namibia would rather lecture in a conventional manner, as they perceive distance learning to be stressful and time consuming. For this reason, they recommend introducing creative supporting tools for distance educators to manage their anxiety and stress.

Poalses, Joubert, Bezuidenhout and Nienaber (2014) report high stress levels in this specific population. Similarly, Marten (2009), as well as Bates and Kaye (2014) found that the many role demands, the challenge of balancing teaching and research priorities, and increasing workload lead to stress in academics. Maslach, Jackson and Leiter (1996) view the manifestation of burnout as a result of continued stress in employees over a longer period of time. Burnout consists of three core measurable sub-dimensions, namely exhaustion,

cynicism and reduced professional efficacy (Maslach, Jackson & Leiter 1996). It is noteworthy that within this specific context, Bezuidenhout and Cilliers (2010) found early signs of burnout, manifested as increased levels of cynicism. This paper argues that changing role expectations represents increased job demands, increased workload and an increased risk of poor mental health to the DEs involved.

When workload is contemplated and interpreted within the context of transactional distance, Doube (2000), similar to Rockwell, Schauer & Marx (2000) and DiBiase (2000) found that educating over a distance and trying to "bridge" the distance is more time-consuming than contact classes. Doube (2000) specifically refers to the comprehensive and meticulous planning involved in writing material for distance education and the time necessary to support learners effectively over a distance.

Sammons and Ruth (2007) argue that distance learning has altered the roles and responsibilities of academics and had an impact on their workload and academic freedom. Mashile (2014) also identifies the workload of academic staff as a key prerequisite for improving quality assurance and student support. He refers to the difficulties they experience, for example the large student to staff ratios. He further declares that the workload of academics needs to be reduced to allow time to reflect and pay attention to students and support them academically. The implications of all the new roles that faculty are expected to perform, for faculty workload in higher education and specifically for distance education is not clear.

As the pressure to remain relevant in an increasingly competitive environment mounts, many distance universities consider developing workload models (Kenny & Fluck, 2014). However, the fundamental issues of how the workload of DE affect effective learning in students (Visser, 2000) as well as DEs mental health hold important implications for the policymakers of distance universities. This study could potentially contribute to improving the understanding of what academics view as their most important roles and responsibilities for inclusion in the design of these workload models. In addition, an understanding of DEs workload could inform policy on workload allocation and facilitate a fair and equitable work allocation that would improve acceptance of these models by DEs.

The purpose of this article is to explore the implications of changing work roles for faculty workload within the context of this mega ODL university in South Africa.

2. TRENDS IN THE LITERATURE

In an ODL context, it is very difficult to balance improved student access, student-staff ratios, high academic standards, pass rates and excellent quality in an economically sustainable manner. In addition, these issues must be aligned to UNESCO's (2002) ODL criteria of emphasis on open access to education, freedom from time and place and flexible learning opportunities. The impact of these challenges on the DE's job context, stress levels and emotional wellness is immense and many distance learning universities battle to find ways of allocating workload fairly and equitably, within the boundaries of the limited resources available.

As depicted in figure 1, workload can be viewed via two different approaches, namely as an objective measurement of the actual time academics spend on various job roles (Visser, 2000; DiBiase, 2000; DiBiase & Rademacher, 2005; Hislop, 2001) or a more subjective reporting of the DEs' perception of their workload. Perceived workload or overload is not merely a measure of time commitment, as a wide range of different cognitive and affective aspects may influence the perception of workload (Kember & Leung, 2006). Elloy and Smith (2003) postulate the existence of two types of perceived role overload, namely *quantitative* and *qualitative* overload. Quantitative overload is experienced when there are too many tasks that need to be completed within a fixed period of time period (Kyndt, Berghmans, Dochy & Bulckens, 2013). Qualitative aspects of workload refer to feeling stressed, pressured, frustrated, overburdened, overwhelmed and even aggressive and burnt out, because the work may be ambiguous or very difficult to complete.

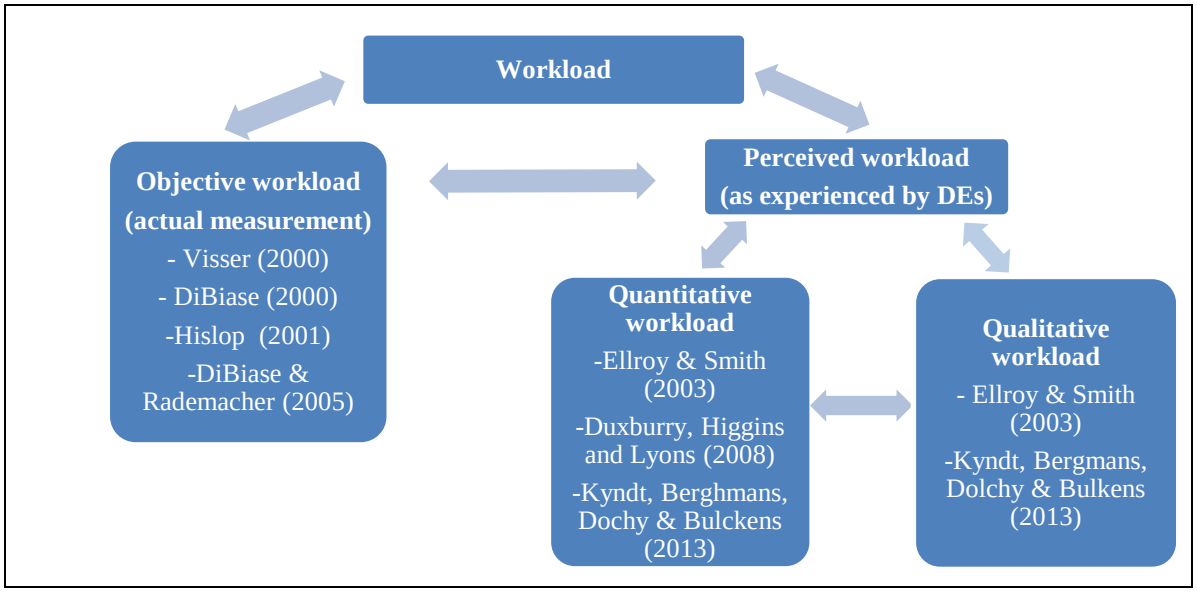

Figure 1: Conceptual framework of workload (adapted from Kyndt, Berghmans, Dochy & Bulckens, 2013)

According to Yuker (1975) research on academic workload can be traced back to 1919. He also asserts that the rise in faculty collective bargaining and the economic crises in the mid-1970's increased interest in faculty workload again. More recently the global recession of 2008 and increasing staff-student ratios have sparked renewed interest in the topic. Previous studies provide ample support for the view that distance learning poses great demands on faculty time, workload, professional status, job security and academic freedom (Doube, 2000; Sammons & Ruth, 2007). Although Doube (2000) found that time spent on teaching activities such as preparation and marking of assignments are similar to traditional contact academics, she found DEs spend significantly more time on preparing learning material and student support than their contact lecturer counterparts.

Due to the transactional distance (Moore, 2007) academics must thus take additional care to design distance education materials in such a way that students understand it clearly, are provided with sufficient opportunity to practice, self-evaluate, reflect and internalise the material. Online courses must be designed for interaction, meaning that simulations, examples, interviews with experts, interactive practice exercises, podcasts, synchronous and asynchronous communications, virtual "master classes" and online self-assessment has become the minimum expected requirement (Doube, 2000). Due to changing expectations from students, sometimes referred to as a "customer entitlement for paid service delivery",

the nature of student support is changing, in turn significantly increasing the teaching (Bates & Kaye, 2014; Berge, 2008), as well as administrative workload of DEs (Mashile, 2014).

The "unbundling trend" (Paulson, 2002) in ODL introduced a separation between instructional activities such as design, development, delivery and assessment (Sammons & Ruth, 2007). Although unbundling helps to assign costs to distinct components, faculty may lose control of the delivery process, as increasing numbers of part-time or adjunct faculty members are employed to "deliver" the subject material. Full-time academics are often expected to manage a team of part-time faculty members, such as e-tutors, contract workers and external postgraduate supervisors. A heavy workload in terms of managing adjunct staff has thus been added to the role of the academic (Sammons & Ruth, 2007).

Also in an African context, Mukamusoni (2006) alludes to the challenges faced by academics due to the heavy workload they have to cope with. These changing role expectations and increases in workload, often create an uncomfortable psychological dissonance and disconnect which may lead to emotional discomfort associated with anxiety, stress, burnout and depression in academic staff (Bezuidenhout, 2014; Surikova & Baranova, 2010). Likewise, Bezuidenhout and Cilliers (2010) found elevated levels of cynicism, a precursor or early sign of burnout among academics in this context. In order to investigate these changing DE role expectations, an empirical investigation was conducted into the perception of DEs on their current work roles.

3. Research design

A brief overview of the research design is presented in the following section.

3.1 Research approach

The study was conducted from a post-positivistic paradigm perspective (Baronov, 2012:35), and comprised a quantitative, cross-sectional, self-report survey design (Shaughnessy & Zechmeister, 1997).

3.2 Research methods

3.2.1 Research participants

This research addresses the way academics perceive their roles in a mega ODL university in a Southern African context. The population consisted of 1614 permanently employed academic staff members, representing from the lowest rank (junior lecturer) to the highest rank (full

professor). It was decided to draw a sample of 25% of the total population, which came to 404 academic staff members. With the help of a statistician, a stratified sample was drawn based on academics age, gender, academic rank and faculty where the academic is working. This was done to ensure that the sample was as representative as possible. Of the 404 academics that received the electronic survey, 134 returned the completed questionnaire, resulting in a 34,9% response rate. The sample was drawn from all seven academic faculties and country wide geographical sites of the ODL university where academics are employed, located throughout the nine provinces of South Africa.

3.2.2 Measuring instrument

A self-report questionnaire was compiled, based on an extensive literature review of the roles of DE. The first section collected data on the participants' biographical characteristics, namely their age, gender, highest level of qualification and academic rank in the institution. The second section of the questionnaire collected data on how participants view the importance of their academic work roles. Participating academics were asked to rate the importance of 40 different work roles they are expected to fulfil on a daily basis, on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from not important at all (1) to very important (5). In addition, space was provided for respondents to mention any additional information that they deemed appropriate to the topic under investigation. These answers assisted in the interpretation of the results.

3.2.3 Research procedure

Research respondents were invited to participate in the study, via an online survey. The survey included an informed consent procedure. A probability sample, namely a stratified, random sampling technique was used to ensure that the results could be generalised (Bradley, 2010). To facilitate the stratified random sampling technique, a complete list of all the names and e-mail addresses of permanent academics in the service of the ODL University were obtained. Permission was obtained from the institutions ethical committee to conduct the study beforehand and care was taken to follow all protocols in terms of confidentiality, anonymity and informed consent (Unisa Ethics Policy, 2007).

3.6 Data analysis

As an electronic survey was used, data was imported directly into Microsoft Excel. The data was checked for errors and cleaned before it was imported into the Statistical Package for

the Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistical analysis was performed on the data set in order to calculate mean scores for every academic role identified.

3.6.1 Reliability and validity

An expert review panel of experienced distance learning educators and policymakers were asked to provide inputs and recommendations before the questionnaire was finalised, to improve the face validity of the instrument. In addition, a pilot study was conducted with 10 respondents to determine if any questions had to be changed and to add to the rigour of the research. Vague or ambiguous questions were identified and rephrased accordingly.

3.6.1 Results

The statistical analysis yielded a number of results. The number of valid cases, after a Listwise deletion was performed was 134. Reliability tests included a calculation of the Cronbach Alpha score for the total questionnaire, yielding a score of 0.955. According to a Welman, Kruger and Mitchell (2012) a score above 0.7 is indicative of a reliable instrument. The instrument in this study (as described in paragraph 3.2.2) can thus be judged reliable. The 40 different DE work roles were rated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from not important at all (1) to very important (5). The scale mean was calculated by dividing the sum of the values (allocated for each work role) by the total number of cases (N=34), as explained by Babbie (2008).

The perceived importance of various work roles as judged by the sample of academics are represented in order of importance in table 1.

Table 1: The perceived importance of specific academic work roles (own compilation) N=134

Distance academic work roles	**N**	**Std. Deviation**	**Mean**	**Corrected Item-Total Correlation**	**Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted**
1. Subject specialist	134	0.647	4.62	0.523	0.954
2. Researcher	134	0.728	4.59	0.417	0.954

3.Life-long learner, continuously improve own knowledge, skills and attitudes	134	0.702	4.51	0.519	0.954
4. Assessor	134	0.763	4.48	0.324	0.955
5. Designer of subject material	134	0.750	4.36	0.626	0.953
6. Supervisor of post graduate students	134	1.040	4.34	0.522	0.954
7. Writer of subject material	134	0.831	4.34	0.515	0.954
8. Creator of new knowledge	134	0.860	4.31	0.483	0.954
9. Facilitator of the learning of subject material	134	0.853	4.28	0.578	0.953
10. Course manager	134	0.941	4.26	0.498	0.954
11. Advisor to students	134	0.888	4.25	0.522	0.954
12. Communicator	134	0.971	4.22	0.656	0.953
13. Reviewer of peer's work	134	1.003	4.18	0.583	0.953
14. Teacher	134	0.995	4.16	0.657	0.953
15. Instructor of students	134	0.937	4.13	0.459	0.954
16. Team member	134	0.958	4.10	0.700	0.953
17. Intellectual mentor	134	1.069	3.97	0.662	0.953
18. Motivator	134	1.080	3.93	0.750	0.9521
19. Academic citizenship	134	1.051	3.89	0.531	0.954
20. Creator of a friendly social online environment	134	1.069	3.88	0.667	0.953
21. Organiser	134	1.034	3.88	0.712	0.953
22. Pedagogical expert	134	1.181	3.87	0.613	0.953
23. Publisher	134	1.368	3.69	0.474	0.954
24. Police person to detect, for example	134	1.265	3.69	0.474	0.954

plagiarism					
25. Online experts	134	1.167	3.68	0.727	0.952
26. Administrator	134	1.175	3.68	0.603	0.953
27. Leader of students	134	1.246	3.58	0.601	0.953
28. Computer specialist	134	1.174	3.54	0.561	0.954
29. Professional (e.g. psychologist/accountant)	134	1.353	3.50	0.415	0.955
30. Tutor	134	1.248	3.46	0.563	0.954
31. Student interaction facilitator	134	1.185	3.43	0.635	0.953
32. Strategist	134	1.349	3.34	0.675	0.953
33. Change agent	134	1.24	3.31	0.324	0.955
34. Transformation agent	134	1.300	3.22	0.650	0.953
35. Provider of emotional support to students	134	1.186	3.17	0.653	0.953
36. Community developer	134	1.274	3.16	0.561	0.954
37. Counsellor	134	1.257	3.00	0.618	0.953
38. Peacekeeper during online student debates	134	1.301	2.99	0.629	0.953
39. Librarian	134	1.341	2.56	0.570	0.954
40. Graphic designer	134	2.23	2.23	0.557	0.954

The empirical results, arranged in the form of a priority list of the most important academic work roles, are presented in table 1. As can be seen from table 1 the mean scores calculated for every academic work role were arranged in ascending order of importance to compile the priority list, for example the “subject specialist” role (highest mean score) is indicated in first place and “graphic designer” role (lowest mean score) is placed in the least important (40^{th}) position.

4. Discussion

The main aim and findings of this study revolve around the (1) nature and scope of the changing work roles DEs themselves perceived as important; and (2) the possible implications of the 40 diverse work roles for the workload of DEs presented in table 1. In terms of the nature and scope of the DE work roles (table 1), the priority list presented in table 1 has important implications for an improved understanding of the academic workload of DEs.

The sheer number of work roles (related to quantitative workload) DEs indicated as important in their jobs is noteworthy. While 22 roles were rated as *important*, DEs perceived 16 roles to be *very important*. Therefore, a combined total of 38 work roles were perceived as important tasks in the DEs job and this indicates a wide range of job tasks. The respondents judged only two of the 40 work roles as not important (represented by scores below 3). One of the most prominent causes of work role overload has been identified as a large number of tasks and commitments for the time available, resulting in unrealistic deadlines and multiple competing priorities for academics (Bates & Kaye, 2014; Duxbury, Higgens & Lyons, 2008).

In this mega ODL university, the four main pillars of the academic job includes teaching and learning, research, academic citizenship and community engagement. As would be anticipated, the work roles in table 1 can roughly be categorised according to these four pillars (although not mutually exclusive and open to different interpretations). Therefore, the discussion will be structured according to these four pillars.

The first pillar, referring to teaching and learning, is influenced heavily by increased student-staff ratios, massification and redesigning modules for online delivery (Kenny & Fluck, 2014). The roles in table 1 that would be associated with this pillar would include, for example acting as a subject specialist (role 1), assessor (role 4), designer of subject material (role 5), postgraduate supervisor (role 6), subject material writer (role 7), knowledge creator (role 8), facilitator (role 9), advisor (role 11) and teacher (role 12). The sheer number of "teaching" associated roles and their high ranking in the priority list indicates the relative importance of these roles as perceived by the DEs.

The prodigious new technologies used in distance education redefine the scope of faculty workload and responsibilities (Sammons & Ruth, 2007) and may require new competencies, digital literacies (Van Deursen & Van Dijk, 2009) and pedagogies from DEs (Makoe, 2011). Additionally, knowledge construction within the online environment is not a simple, nor a quick process. For this reason, Baran Correia and Thomson (2011) emphasise that DEs need to reflect on the interaction between technology, pedagogy and the complex online context. The DEs responsible for online courses face many challenges in terms of integrating applicable teaching practice, digital literacy and effective student support (Packham et al. 2001; Van Deursen & Van Dijk, 2009).

As DEs ranked assessment as the fourth most important work role, one can accept that they view the assessment process, including assignments and exams a very important work role. The "distance" between the DE and the learner may compound the problem of plagiarism via the internet (Schulte, 2010). In turn, this may give rise to the DEs perceived role of "policeperson" or "detective"(role 24) in trying to judge if an assignment or chapter in a dissertation or thesis is the student's own work, plagiarised from the internet or has been "sub-contracted" to a more experienced colleague, friend or family member.

Previous research found empirical support that teaching and learning over a distance is frustratingly time-consuming (Rockwell, Schauer & Marx, 2000; DiBiase, 2000; Doube, 2000: Mukamusoni, 2006). The fact that all communication must take place in writing and the comprehensive nature of material that must be designed (Doube, 2000). This involves planning, coordination, teamwork and subject expertise results in a heavy workload for DEs (Mukamusoni, 2006). The importance that DEs in this study attached to the "teaching" related roles such as having subject expertise (role 1) and being a designer of subject material (5) seem to support previous research findings that these roles are indeed a major element representing work activity and therefore workload.

Mukamusoni (2006) refers to the importance and time consuming nature of providing student support. Specifically, in terms of student support in an online environment, DEs often find that students expect support regarding access to electronic resources, online submission of assignments and various other digital literacy skill gaps (Van Deursen, & Van Dijk, 2009). Many academics', appointed for their subject expertise, are unprepared for these technological challenges (Makhanya, 2013:6). As a result self-doubt and helplessness set in

and are reflected in the experiences of ODL learners – who may also feel powerless and frustrated by some of the technological challenges they face. In addition, Mabunda (2010) found that online activities increased workload, administration, the number of modules taught and student-staff ratios and for this reason DEs may avoid feedback from students as a coping mechanism. Mashile (2014) notes that to allow academics sufficient time to reflect and pay attention to students, and to support them effectively on an academic level, the workload of academics need to be addressed and student-staff ratios need to be considered.

According to Dabbaagh and Kitsantas'(2011) framework for self-regulated learning in personal learning environments (PLEs), information sources such as blogs, wiki's, google calendar, flickr, social networking and social bookmarking are widely used by distance learners to facilitate their own learning. This change in the availability of subject related information results in the DE's role as dispenser of information being replaced by the importance of acting as a facilitator, stimulator of online debate, coach and mentor to distance learners, in order to make sense of different fragments of information (Berge, 2008: Naidu, 2010). The nature of this kind of communication requires a much deeper level of involvement, commitment and time spent on facilitating online class interactions (table 1, roles 11, 12, 14, 15 and 20) than previously required. Also, it gave rise to the whole notion of the "24 Hour Professor" (Young 2002). In addition, the pressure to respond rapidly (Young, 2002), provide comprehensive feedback, download assignments and mark online (Sammons & Ruth, 2007) may keep faculty away from other professional activities and foster the perception that they are "chained to their computers".

Another new role contributing significantly to the workload of DEs is the "course manager role" (role 10). It refers to the responsibility to manage large numbers of part-time academic staff members, or adjunct faculty (Samson & Ruth, 2007), called "e-tutors" in this specific university. The situation in this university is similar to what Ashburn (2006) found, in that faculty, or full-time DEs, accept a major new work role in recruiting, selecting, training, supporting and managing large numbers of e-tutors. As the university has more than 300 000 students, but less than 2000 academic staff members, e-tutors are appointed for each group of 200 students. This means that DEs will be responsible for managing anything between 0 and 50 e-tutors (for groups of 10000 students). Moreover, full-time faculty is also expected to continuously monitor the performance of e-tutors, evaluate their facilitation skills and make decisions on whether their contracts will be renewed or not. Mukamusoni (2006) speaks to

the importance of relationship building between full-time faculty and tutors, especially since there may be a disconnect between the lecturer, designer of the subject material, and the tutor, who may accept responsibility for supporting students in mastering the material. These findings thus illustrate some changes in the work roles and workload of DEs.

The second pillar of the DEs work role referring to research, may include among other roles (table 1) being the primary researcher (role 2), a life-long learner (role 3), a supervisor to postgraduate students (role 6), a creator of new knowledge (role 8), peer reviewer (role 13), research team member (role 16), intellectual mentor (role 17) and publisher (role 23). The empirical evidence shows that in this university the DEs view the "research pillar" work roles as very important based on the high ranking they assigned to the majority of these roles. Rockwell, Ferguson and Marx (1999) refers to the conflict many academics face in terms of the time they need to plan, design and deliver distance learning material and the time needed to produce quality research outputs. Supporting this viewpoint Bates and Kaye (2014) also believe that a key feature of the role of academic staff relates to the role conflict they experience in terms of the pressure from teaching workloads and the increased expectations for producing research outputs.

A major contributor to the qualitative workload academics' experience is the institutional expectations in terms of the performance agreement. To illustrate the point, in this ODL university on the professorial level, academics are expected to sole author seven research outputs in five years, in order to score an "average performance" score of three out of five. Co-authoring would imply doubling the amount to fourteen articles in five years. If the DE aims for an "above average score of four out of ten, the expectation is raised to eight to ten sole authored outputs in five years. Within this context Prinsloo (2014) reflects upon the feelings of trepidation and anxiety that is commonly associated with the experience of one's performance constantly being judged through article reviews, performance management systems and contract renewals. . Also, balancing these demands with a heavy teaching workload may add to the high stress levels and poor mental health academics are reporting in this DE context (Poalses, Joubert, Bezuidenhout & Nienaber, 2014).

Kenny and Fluck (2014) speak to the sense of powerlessness and frustration among academic staff, and argue that these feelings may be a result of the perception that they have no control

over their work and that universities are setting unrealistic demands on their time. Duxbury, Higgins and Lyons (2008) also found the causes of work role overload to include a loss of personal control, a lack of support and understaffing. Previous research mentions that it is commonplace for academics to do their "personal" research after hours, at night, in their own time, their family time, over weekends and during their yearly breaks, in an effort to cope with unrealistic work demands, often exceeding the 48 hour maximum work week set by the European Union time directive (Bates & Kaye, 2014; Kinman & Court, 2010). The fact that the DEs in this study rated the research roles so highly indicates the high importance they ascribe to these roles. And this probably explains why they are willing to sacrifice personal and family time in an effort to meet institutional expectations.

These findings must be interpreted within the whole notion 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" (Jamieson, 2004: 22). One could argue that universities are no longer seen as "places of scholarship"; instead, the job of the academic is viewed in terms of "academic productivity", translating into the DE being viewed as a "producer" of a number of research outputs, instead of being viewed as a "scholar" in search of truth. This may speak to the perception among academics that they cannot consistently perform as they view "the ideal academic" should be able to, in terms of being a competent researcher (role 2), lifelong learner (role 3), supervisor of postgraduate students (role 6) and consistent creator of new knowledge (role 8). DEs regularly feel that they have to sacrifice "quality" for "quantity" of publications, in order to measure up to the managerial expectations they face.

On a national level, South Africa is lagging behind in terms of the number of PhDs produced yearly. To achieve national goals of PhD production, it is essential that more academics are enabled to embrace this role and support postgraduate learners effectively (National Development Plan, 2011). Theron, Barkhuizen and Du Plessis (2014) refers to the "talent void" in South African academe, where the retirement swell, turnover and retention are resulting in a high demand for experienced academics. Highly qualified and experienced academics are ageing at an alarming rate and HESA (2011) proposes that more than half of the South African professoriate will retire within the next decade. As it will not be easy to fill

the void left by retiring professors, while increasing the PhD graduation rate, the importance of the supervising role (role 6) is clear.

The third pillar dealing with academic citizenship may include work roles such as reviewer of peer's work (role 13), team member (role 16), intellectual mentor (17), academic citizenship (role 19), organiser (role 21), administrator (role 26) and acting as a professional in their chosen field of specialty. Although the DEs ranked the "academic citizenship roles" somewhat lower than the teaching and research roles, the mean scores still indicate "very important (roles 13, 16) to "important" work roles (for example roles 17, 19, 21, 26). DEs at this university are expected to participate in "citizenship" activities such as acting as peer reviewers of articles submitted to academic journals, assessing dissertations and theses for other universities, mentoring younger developing academics, acting as editors and co-editors of academic journals and maintaining a respectable professional profile in their respective professional bodies. The variety of citizenship roles may not be judged most important, but certainly add to the number of different work roles DEs are expected to perform and thus contribute significantly to their quantitative workload.

The fourth and last pillar reflects community engagement projects, where the DE is expected to make a positive change via community service in a registered community project. In fulfilling this role DEs are expected to volunteer their expertise with the community, use this involvement to inform their teaching and also to conduct research and produce research outputs on the project. Although the understanding is that these community engagement roles should be performed during paid university time, having time available is a prerequisite for compliance by the DEs. It is noteworthy that the respondents did not rank the transformation agent (role 34) or community development (role 36) very highly. A possible reason might be that DEs use all their time and energy to fulfil their teaching, research and citizenship work roles and simply do not have any reserves left to spend on this role. Another possible reason might be that academics may see themselves as subject experts and ill qualified to fulfil the role of community developer. Further research is necessary to determine the underlying reasons for this relatively low ranking.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

The main findings of this study included the wide range of traditional and new work roles DEs perceived as important to fulfil their jobs successfully. From the above discussion, it also emerged that the nature of the "academic job description" has undergone major changes over the past decade. Furthermore, DEs face a highly complex task in balancing teaching, research, academic citizenship and community engagement roles, translating into work role conflicts between student success, support, quality demands, maintaining high academic standards, and producing both quality and quantity research outputs.

The limitations of the study include that DEs' own perceptions were used via self-report surveys, which may represent distorted viewpoints. It is possible that other factors causing personal or occupational stress in respondents, the pressures of the academic cycle at the time of data collection or any other relevant factor may have influenced perceptions.

It is possible that DEs may suffer from high stress levels, mental health problems and poor work-life balance due to the changing work role expectations they perceive. Distance universities need to act proactively and provide counselling and support for educators who are suffering from anxiety, stress and depression due to the demanding workload. Through cognitive therapy these educators may be empowered to make healthier choices in terms of balancing work and family life. Universities also need to educate academic employees in terms of the health risks of being constantly available, fading boundaries between home and work life and working seven days a week. The findings also suggest that academics might be susceptible to increased absenteeism in order to cope with increased stress levels, presenteeism (where they report for work even when mentally unwell, due to a fear of being stigmatised), lower commitment towards their jobs, decreased productivity and eventually a decision to leave the employment of the university. It is not presumptuous to assume that these negative outcomes may have a negative effect on the sustainable survival of ODL universities. Employee assistance programmes that serve to sensitise employees to the symptoms of distress and educate them in terms of where to turn for assistance, as well as regular monitoring of the wellbeing of this group of employees should be the minimum standard required. As mentioned by Brown, Lewin and Shikongo (2014) creative supporting tools and processes are needed to help distance educators cope with the wide range of demands of the academic job.

The importance of supporting DEs with effective training in terms of educational technology, digital literacy and on-going technological support was highlighted in this study. However, it

is recommended that future studies should investigate the specific nature of the training that DEs perceive as necessary. Another pertinent question for future studies would be what the long-term effect of changing DE work roles on the sustainability of university productivity would be, in terms of increased DE absenteeism and turnover. Finally, the long-term effect of changing work roles on the mental health of DEs must be investigated in order to establish a sustainable work-life balance.

In order to remain successful, universities, like any other business need healthy, energetic and creative human capital to maintain competitive advantage, in the increasingly competitive global higher education sector. This need might even be more pronounced in distance universities that compete for learners in a global environment, free from geographical boundaries. For this reason, it is necessary to pay attention to the perceptions of academic staff on their workload, including feelings of being overwhelmed, frustrated and deprived of academic freedom and autonomy.

It is therefore necessary to recognise the human being fulfilling the “DE” role. It is easy to compile a checklist with numerous “new work roles” required from academics. However, the complex identities and work roles of faculty from an organisational psychology perspective is essential to “give a voice” to academics. As academics are in the unique position of being able to reflect on pedagogical practices that were successful or not in their subject fields, in their virtual class rooms and with their postgraduate students, their input into their work roles and resulting workload is essential. It is furthermore recommended that ODL universities adopt work allocation models that protect DEs from burnout and poor mental health. This translates into restrictions on the staff-student ratios, improving administrative support to provide relief to educators, lower research output expectations to what is realistically possible and reconsidering the number of different tasks expected from DEs simultaneously.

From a people (human resource) management and human resource development perspective, it seems that the work roles of the DE need to be integrated into a “whole” that makes sense to DEs. The job demands and the job resources needs to be aligned in a scientifically sound manner, by using valid human resource management theories and models guiding job design, to ensure DEs perceive these as realistically attainable. This might, for example, mean that more flexibility must be built into work allocation models so that DEs are able to focus their energy, instead of trying to do too many different things at once. The previous research results indicate that there is a generalised and widespread disconnect between the quantitative

and qualitative workload expectations of DEs and the time they have available to meet expectations in terms of teaching and learning, research productivity, academic citizenship and community engagement. The impact of this disconnect on the mental health and sustainable work-life balance of DEs need to be reconsidered and managed responsibly as DEs sustained performance are of critical importance for students, institutions and national success.

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