

HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE AGE OF AIDS: TRANSFORMATION OF UNDERGRADUATE CURRICULA

Background and rationale

Research conducted by the Higher Education AIDS Council (HEAIDS) (Mitchell, 2008) revealed a gap in the literature in terms of HIV prevention education. Although much has been written on the need to integrate HIV into undergraduate curricula, very little research has been done in terms of HOW it should be done. The recent gaps and needs analysis conducted by HEAIDS (2009) indicated that, only 14% of higher education institutions in South Africa have already mainstreamed HIV & AIDS into the curriculum; 64% of lecturers had not received any training in this regard. The results indicate that teaching about the general nature of HIV & AIDS is by far the most common form of infusion, which indicates that a mostly bio-medical approach is being followed, rather than focussing on how the curriculum needs to change to prepare students to work in a world with HIV & AIDS. This gap has to be addressed so that guidelines and recommendations can be made to assist the developers of undergraduate programmes to effectively transform the curriculum to make it relevant for living and working in a world characterised by HIV & AIDS. This will result in graduates being better prepared for the realities of living and working in a South African context and will enable them to better fulfil the citizenship roles the institution professes to prepare them to fulfil.

The bulk of HIV initiatives in Higher Education are *extra-curricular* rather than *curricular* in nature. Abebe (2004) observed that staff involvement, particularly among the academic staff, in HIV & AIDS response initiatives is almost invisible. Student-based activities are more dominant and staff involvement is the exception rather than the rule, hence undermining effectiveness and sustainability of intervention programmes.

The former Minister of Education, Ms Naledi Pandor, recognised the role that higher education should play in the formation of policy and shape the development of the nation by directing their research into strategic areas such as HIV and AIDS (Council for Higher Education South Africa (HESA), 2008). HESA has developed a policy framework on HIV and AIDS to guide higher education in their initiatives to fight the pandemic. Objective 1(b) of this policy reads:

“Develop graduates with relevant personal and professional skills on HIV and AIDS who can become leaders in society and are able to address the impact of HIV and AIDS among all communities. The development of relevant personal and professional skills on *HIV and AIDS is integrated comprehensively into all faculties*” (HESA, 2008:15) Likewise, the monitoring and evaluation framework for this policy suggests that the following indicator be in place at institutional level by 2013:

“A strategy for curriculum responsiveness by all faculties is developed and implemented” (HEAIDS, 2008:25). It is therefore clear, that higher education policy is supporting curriculum development in terms of HIV and AIDS education.

This poses the question of how do we refocus HIV & AIDS education to ensure that it contributes to curbing the pandemic and not to unwittingly spreading it? Unless we have a global, informed and critical approach to AIDS education, then we can in fact make things worse. Even if we take no action to integrate HIV & AIDS into our curriculum, we will, by default, contribute to the spread of HIV.

Research purpose and aims

The aim of this project is to research, develop and evaluate best practices for the transformation of the curricula of undergraduate programmes so that they are relevant and responsive to the realities living and learning in the age of AIDS. The goals to reach this aim are:

1. To conduct a literature study on what practices and theories exist for HIV & AIDS education and transformation of the curriculum.
2. To conduct an empirical study to assess the current perceptions, competencies and experiences of faculty for working with undergraduates in the field of HIV & AIDS education.
3. To assist faculty to develop contextually relevant strategies for HIV & AIDS education that prepares prospective professionals to fulfil their requirements as agents of prevention, care and support.
4. To assist faculty to report and document examples of best practices within the cohort.

Based on the above goals, the main research question can be formulated as:

“How can educators of undergraduates be supported to develop, implement and evaluate contextually relevant teaching and learning strategies and practices to better prepare undergraduates for living and working in the age of AIDS.”

Research Design

This research adopts both an interpretive and critical orientation. It is qualitative and has as its goals understanding and engaging with transformative pedagogies. It uses a variety of research methods including participatory action research (PAR) and interpretive methodologies. According to Reason & Bradbury (2001), AR is a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes, grounded in a participatory worldview which seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities. As AR diverges from the power-control model, the research is instead tentative, evolving, and cyclical in nature. In the context of this project, the AR approached will be used to build communities of practice committed to critically assessing their teaching to learn where it could change to ensure that students are better prepared to work and live in a world characterised by HIV & AIDS. Faculty will therefore, generate context-bound, values-based knowledge and solutions from their systematic enquiries into their own practice.