The role of student feedback in university teaching at a research-led university

by
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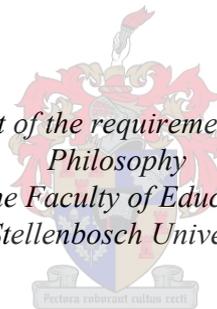
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Declaration

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Abstract

Student feedback is widely accepted as a useful source of information about the quality of teaching and as a potential professional learning tool to enhance university teachers' teaching. A review of the literature, however, revealed a shortage of systematic research about how student feedback influences university teachers' teaching practices. A similar gap in knowledge was identified at Stellenbosch University. Preliminary studies at this institution indicated dissonance between university teachers' perceptions of the potential value of student feedback and how they actually made use of student feedback in their teaching. In research-led university contexts, teaching is often perceived to have lower status than research. This study therefore set out to explore how university teachers at this particular research-led institution experienced the role of student feedback in their teaching.

A case-study research design was followed, with the potential relationship between student feedback and university teaching practice at a research-led university constituting the unit of analysis. Qualitative data was generated by way of semi-structured interviews with 16 purposely selected university teachers. Institutional policies relating to student feedback, teaching and learning and human resource management were also included as secondary sources of data to ascertain how university teachers' experiences of student feedback related to institutional policy directives. Activity theory was used as analytical framework to interrogate the data.

The findings of the study indicate that the research-led context at Stellenbosch University plays a significant role in how university teachers experience and respond to student feedback. The perceptions of research being more valued than teaching in terms of recognition and rewards, limits the optimal use of student feedback for the purpose of improving teaching. Raising the stature of teaching would thus be a necessary requirement for promoting the use of student feedback to improve teaching.

Furthermore, the potential role of student feedback in university teaching practice at Stellenbosch is influenced by other subsystems, in particular the performance appraisal system. A concerted effort should be made at institutional level to come

to a common understanding of what good teaching is considered to be. In the absence of such a common understanding, the growing culture of performativity has led to student feedback being reduced to a mere quantitative measure of the quality of teaching in many cases.

Since mid-level university management carries the biggest responsibility for managing the performance appraisal processes in academic departments, they also exert a significant influence on how university teachers would use student feedback for professional learning and the enhancement of their teaching. The diverse practices followed by mid-level managers in the various academic departments represented in this study further pointed to the possible need for a guiding framework to support an ethics of practice approach to the use of student feedback.

Based on its findings, this study is considered to have made a contribution to the body of knowledge regarding the contextual and relational nature of student feedback, particularly within a research-led university context.

Opsomming

Studenteterugvoer word algemeen aanvaar as 'n nuttige bron van inligting oor die gehalte van onderrig en as 'n potensiële meganisme vir professionele leer ten einde die gehalte van dosente se onderrig te verbeter. 'n Oorsig oor toepaslike literatuur het egter gedui op 'n gebrek aan sistematiese navorsing oor hoe studenteterugvoer dosente se onderrigpraktyke beïnvloed. 'n Soortgelyke kennisgaping is by Universiteit Stellenbosch geïdentifiseer. Voorafgaande studies aan hierdie universiteit het gedui op 'n teenstrydigheid tussen dosente se persepsies oor die potensiële waarde van studenteterugvoer en hoe hulle in werklikheid van studenteterugvoer gebruik maak in hul onderrig. In navorsingsgerigte universiteitskontekste, word die status van onderrig dikwels beskou as laer as dié van navorsing Hierdie studie was dus daarop gemik om ondersoek in te stel na hoe dosente by hierdie spesifieke navorsingsgerigte instansie die rol van studenteterugvoer in hul onderrig ervaar.

'n Gevallestudie is as navorsingsontwerp gebruik, met die potensiële verwantskap tussen studenteterugvoer en onderrigpraktyke aan 'n navorsingsgerigte universiteit as eenheid van analise. Kwalitatiewe data is genereer deur middel van semi-gestruktureerde onderhoude met 16 doelbewustelik geselekteerde dosente. Verder is institusionele beleide ten opsigte van studenteterugvoer, leer en onderrig en menslike hulpbronnebestuur as sekondêre bronne van data ingesluit ten einde vas te stel hoe dosente se ervarings van studenteterugvoer aansluiting gevind het by institusionele beleidsriglyne. Aktiwiteitsteorie is as analitiese raamwerk gebruik om die data te ondersoek.

Die bevindinge van die studie dui daarop dat die navorsingsgerigte konteks by Stellenbosch Universiteit 'n beduidende rol speel in hoe dosente studenteterugvoer ervaar en daarop reageer. Persepsies dat navorsing van hoër waarde geag word as onderrig in terme van erkenning en beloning, belemmer die optimale benutting van studenteterugvoer vir die verbetering van onderrig. Bevordering van die statuur van onderrig blyk dus 'n noodsaaklike voorvereiste te wees vir meer optimale gebruik van studenteterugvoer as meganisme om onderrig te verbeter.

Verder word die potensiële rol van studenteterugvoer beïnvloed deur ander sisteme, veral die prestasiebeoordelingstelsel. 'n Daadwerklike poging sal op institusionele vlak aangewend moet word om 'n gedeelde begrip te ontwikkel van wat as goeie onderrig beskou word. In die afwesigheid van so 'n gedeelde begrip veroorsaak die groeiende kultuur van prestasiegerigtheid dat studenteterugvoer dikwels tot 'n blote kwantitatiewe meeting van die gehalte van onderrig gereduseer word.

Aangesien middelvlak-universiteitsbestuur die grootste verantwoordelikheid dra vir die bestuur van prestasiebeoordelingsprosesse in akademiese departemente, oefen hulle 'n beduidende invloed uit op hoe dosente studenteterugvoer vir professionele leer en die bevordering van hul onderrig gebruik. Die middelvlakbestuurders in die onderskeie akademiese departemente in hierdie studie het uiteenlopende praktyke toegepas in die benutting van studenteterugvoer gedurende prestasiebeoordelingsprosesse. Dit het gedui op die moontlike behoefte aan 'n riglynraamwerk wat etiese praktyke ten opsigte van die gebruik van studenteterugvoer kan ondersteun.

Op grond van die bevindinge word hierdie studie geag om 'n bydrae te lewer tot die kennisveld met betrekking tot die kontekstuele en relasionele aard van studenteterugvoer, veral binne 'n navorsingsgerigte universteitskonteks.

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CHAPTER 1

ORIENTATION TO THE STUDY

1.1   INTRODUCTION

Student feedback has been regarded as an essential source of information about the quality of teaching in higher education for many years (Seldin, 1993; Marsh & Dunkin, 1997; Marsh, 2007a and 2007b; Blair & Valdez Noel, 2014). Ryan (2015) argues that there are multiple contextual factors that may influence the student feedback process and add to its complexity. Factors such as the nature of the university context and the value (or lack thereof) attached to teaching, may exacerbate the challenges that university teachers could face in responding to student feedback (Ryan, 2015). Although student feedback may indeed provide valuable insights into the quality of teaching that is offered at institutions, it does not seem to automatically lead to the improvement of the quality of teaching (Kember, Leung & Kwan 2002; Smith 2008). Understanding the different factors that influence the student feedback process may help universities, university teachers and academic development practitioners to optimise the usefulness of student feedback as a source for enhancing the quality of teaching.

1.2   MOTIVATION FOR THE STUDY

Systematic research about university teachers' attitudes and responses to student feedback is limited (Leckey & Neill, 2001; Smith, 2008). Even though student feedback is collected at many institutions, it is uncertain whether such information is used effectively, especially in terms of providing internal information to guide the improvement of university teachers' teaching practices (Harvey, 2003; Chung Sea Law, 2010b). Some research paints a rather bleak picture of how student feedback is experienced by university teachers.

Douglas and Douglas' (2006) UK-based study showed that academic staff had little faith in the use of student feedback questionnaires as a means of evaluating the

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quality of teaching and learning. Some of the reasons for this include their perception of students' lack of ability to properly complete such questionnaires; that students are novices in their disciplines and might not be able to make judgements about how they ought to be taught; and that teaching is influenced by a myriad of factors (Douglas & Douglas, 2006). However, based on the large body of literature that attest to the value of student feedback (Rowley, 2003; Brennan & Williams 2004; Barrie, Ginns & Symons, 2008; Kember & Leung, 2008; Hativa, 2013a; Hativa, 2013b; Spooren, Brockx & Mortelmans, 2013), I agree that student feedback may be a valuable source of information that university teachers could use to improve their teaching.

Newton (2000) thus makes a relevant argument when he states that serious attention needs to be paid to the conditions and contexts of university teachers' work environments if teachers are to remain pivotal in efforts to improve the quality of teaching. Therefore, if student feedback is expected to play a role in enhancing university teaching, one cannot ignore the context and conditions within which teaching and learning take place.

1.3   THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

The international body of literature about student feedback is extensive. Much has been published about its importance as a source of information regarding the quality of teaching; the information it provides for performance appraisal of the teaching function or administrative decision-making; how to develop student feedback systems; and which pitfalls to look out for when administering and applying student feedback (Ballantyne, Borthwick & Packer, 2000; Brennan & Williams 2004; Benton & Cashin, 2012). By the end of the previous century, Marsh and Dunkin (1997) stated that literally thousands of papers on the use of students' perceptions regarding the quality of teaching were available at the time. A decade later this was again confirmed by Marsh (2007a; 2007b). Sufficient literature is thus available to support the claim of student feedback being a valuable source of information for university teachers about their teaching. Student feedback information also seems to be a useful tool in analysing the teaching and learning dynamics, with the view to implementing changes for improvement, where necessary, or to further strengthen those aspects that are working well (Cook-Sather, 2006; Edström, 2008).

However, student feedback appears to become more effective when university teachers seriously consider feedback data and plan appropriate actions according to such feedback (Harvey, 2011). Yet, it seems that little is known about whether and how student feedback influences university teachers' teaching practices (Leckey & Neill, 2001; Harvey, 2003). There is still surprisingly little evidence to support the effectiveness of such evaluation processes or its contribution to the improvement of teaching (Smith, 2008; Chung Sea Law, 2010b; Boysen, Kelly, Raesly & Casner, 2014).

The lack of evidence on the effects of student feedback points to a need to pay more attention to how university teachers experience the student feedback they receive. The need also extends to how it influences university teachers' approaches to teaching, as well as their professional learning in terms of their teaching role. With teaching often being regarded as of less value than research within research-led university contexts, the need for investigating this phenomenon became even more pressing (Leibowitz, Bozalek, Van Schalkwyk & Winberg, 2015). This study thus has a wider knowledge concern in terms of adding to the body of knowledge about the use of student feedback in university teaching practice.

The perceived gap in knowledge of how student feedback influences university teachers' teaching practices also became apparent at one research-led university after consulting institutional databases and other institutional repositories (Stellenbosch University, 2010a; 2010b; 2010c).The only relevant research found was a 2007 survey under the auspices of the Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL) with the aim of gaining insight into university teachers' perceptions of the use of student feedback (Van der Merwe, 2007). Data from this survey (also see section 4.4.6.1) indicated dissonance between university teachers' perceptions of the potential value of student feedback and how they actually made use of student feedback in their teaching. These findings indicated that university teachers perceived the institutional student feedback system to be lacking in terms of its contribution to the enhancement of teaching. A further small-scale study conducted in 2008 (Petersen, 2008; also see section 4.4.6.2) also indicated that university teachers at the institution under scrutiny perceived student feedback to be lacking in its potential contribution to the improvement of teaching. These preliminary

investigations highlighted the need to explore university teachers' interpretations of and responses to student feedback data.

Under the influence of neoliberalist thinking that currently pervades higher education and promotes the view of students as consumers (Ball, 2012: Lynch, 2013; Phipps & Young, 2015; also see sections 2.3 and 4.2.1), the question arose as to whether the student voice is in fact heard as a potential contributor towards the quest for quality teaching. In the context of this study, it became clear that there was incongruence between the theoretical view of student feedback as valuable information to enhance the quality of teaching, and university teachers' actual experience and use of student feedback information within their teaching contexts. The gap in knowledge about university teachers' engagement with and responses to student feedback in a research-led university context thus constituted the research problem explored in this study.

1.4   AIM OF THE RESEARCH

The aim of this research was to explore and describe how a number of selected university teachers engaged with student feedback in their teaching and whether and how such engagement influenced their teaching practices. It was anticipated that a study of the activities relating to student feedback may deepen insights into the potential links between student feedback and university teaching practices. This study therefore sought to determine how the link between university teachers and their professional teaching practice is influenced by the availability of student feedback, specifically within the context of the research-led university that was the site for the study. The key research question was formulated as:

How do university teachers at a research-led university experience the role of student feedback in their professional teaching practice?

The following subsidiary questions assisted in responding to the key research question:

a) What is understood by the concept of student feedback on teaching?

b) What are the contexts that influence student feedback on teaching?

c) How do university teachers at one research-led university use (or fail to use) student feedback in their teaching?

d) How could student feedback become more useful in improving teaching and learning activities at a research-led university?

It was foreseen that the findings from this study would relate strongly to existing theories and literature on the role of student feedback in university teaching, particularly within a research-led university context – a context that is not always conducive to promoting and acknowledging good teaching. Such findings may assist university teachers in similar contexts to develop meaningful strategies for dealing with student feedback as a professional learning tool. It was anticipated that the research could complement the existing body of knowledge regarding the role of student feedback in university teaching practices and strengthen the theoretical basis for the use of student feedback.

1.5   RESEARCH APPROACH

The study's aim was aligned with an interpretivist knowledge tradition, where "…the aim of the human sciences is defined as understanding (not explaining) people and phenomena" (Babbie & Mouton, 2009:28). Within an interpretivist tradition, human beings make sense of life by continuously interpreting, creating and giving new meaning to things in order to define, justify and rationalise their actions (O'Donoghue, 2006; Denscombe, 2014). In this study, the focus thus was on how university teachers interpret, give meaning to and understand their actions in their teaching with regard to the role of student feedback. The study explored how a total of 16 university teachers constructed their own teaching and learning worlds within their disciplines in the context of a research-led university. An inductive approach to data production allowed for interpretation and making meaning in order to gain insights into the nature of the links between university teachers, their teaching practices and student feedback.

1.6   OVERVIEW   OF   THE   RESEARCH   DESIGN   AND   METHODOLOGY

The following section provides a brief overview of the research design and methodology, which are discussed in more detail in Chapter 5.

1.6.1   Situating the study

The empirical part of the research was conducted at Stellenbosch University (SU), a research-led institution in the Western Cape Province, South Africa (SA). The empirical part of the study was limited to a single institution as a bounded case. The study was thus limited to a single institution to enable gaining access to a wide body of sensitive data in a known university (Kember, Leung & Kwan, 2002). Although the data produced was specific to one institution, it was envisaged that other institutions of higher education with similar contexts would also be able to draw on the research findings. Eisner (1991), for example, argues that inferences from small samples and even single cases could be made through attribute analysis and image matching. This issue is discussed in further detail in section 5.4.3.3.

1.6.2   Theoretical positioning

Johnson and Christensen (2008) argue that educational research which is conducted in theoretically sound ways is important for improving teaching quality, for developing excellence in teaching, scholarship and professionalism. Since the aim of the study was to explore how university teachers engaged with student feedback to potentially inform their teaching, I used activity theory as a lens to better understand student feedback and its relation to university teaching. In this study, teaching is regarded as a social practice which is prone to contextual influences (Ashwin, 2012; Ruth, 2014). It was therefore important to use a theoretical lens that would allow exploration of the links between teaching practices and student feedback, and the factors stemming from the contexts that influence these links. Activity theory, with its focus on studying the work-related activities of human beings as social entities, was deemed appropriate as it provides a framework that would enable the illumination of university teachers' participation in the teaching, learning and student feedback activity system (Engeström, 2000b; Roth & Lee, 2007). The

choice of activity theory as theoretical lens for this study is discussed in further detail in Chapter 3.

1.6.3   Research design

Denscombe's (1998) description of case study design as providing an in-depth study that focuses on specific issues rather than general trends, was applied to this study. Creswell's (2014) reference to case study designs as exploring processes, activities, events, programmes, individuals or multiple individuals also supported its use for this study and allowed for going into sufficient detail to unravel the complexities of a given situation and discover things that might otherwise not be so apparent (Denscombe, 1998; Yin, 2003).

A total of 16 individual university teachers from eight different faculties at SU were selected to participate in this study. The two main criteria for inclusion were university teachers' level of appointment and a variation in the faculties where they were appointed. Other factors that were considered included the extent of university teachers' teaching experience; the level of modules taught; size of academic department; gender; and a range of student feedback results. Another aspect that was considered was to identify those university teachers whose student feedback results showed an improvement between 2010 and 2014 (as was available on the institutional database). The inclusion criteria are discussed in more detail in section 5.4.4.

Data were generated via semi-structured individual interviews with the selected university teachers. Interviews started out with open questions and were further guided by, but not limited to, a semi-structured interview schedule. SU's institutional policies relating to teaching, learning and student feedback also provided documented data as a reference point for interpreting the generated narrative data.

The data from qualitative interviews were analysed through various processes of coding (Lapadat, 2010; Saldanha, 2013). The main task was to explicate the ways in which the participating university teachers came to understand, account for, take action and otherwise manage their day-to-day teaching situations within their particular settings (Miles & Huberman, 1994:7). The coding process also assisted in

organising the data according to an activity theory framework, which was used as analytical lens for interpreting the data (Henning, Van Rensburg & Smit, 2004).

1.7   PRELIMINARY DEFINITION OF TERMS

The title of this study captures three main concepts, namely 'student feedback', 'university teaching' and 'research-led universities'. These concepts are elaborated on in Chapter 2, thus only brief explanations are provided here as working definitions. The concepts of 'professional learning', 'quality teaching' and 'ethics of practice' are also defined in relation to the study and are discussed further in Chapter 2.

1.7.1   Student feedback

Feedback generally refers to information which gives an indication of how a person is performing in his/her effort to reach a certain goal (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Wiggins, 2012). In this study, the focus is on student feedback in particular and refers to information that is provided **to** university teachers **by** their students as direct observers of their teaching performance (Seldin, 1997). Student feedback thus includes information of students' experiences of the teaching they receive and how such teaching influences their learning. Student feedback therefore has the potential to influence university teachers' thinking about their teaching practices and, thus, their professional learning about their teaching (Arthur, 2009; Van den Bos & Brouwer, 2014). In this study, student feedback information could include university teachers' official student feedback reports produced through the institutional system or any other form of in-class or electronic feedback introduced by university teachers' own initiatives.

1.7.2   Professional learning

Professional learning in education is a complex concept that is not easy to pin down conceptually (Gravani, 2007). Sometimes different terms, such as adult professional learning; workplace learning; or professional development are used interchangeably to refer to the concept. In this study, the term 'professional learning' is used and is defined as changes in teaching practices "that are mediated through individual teacher learning and problem-solving processes" (Ellström, 2001:422). Teachers'

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professional learning can thus be described as processes and activities that would enhance the professional knowledge, skills and attitudes of teachers (Hoyle & John, 1995; Guskey, 2000), which they could employ in order to optimise students' learning experiences. Teachers' learning is thus strongly connected to professional goals in order to improve their teaching practice as they advance through their careers (Hoyle & John, 1995; Johnston, 1998).

1.7.3   University teaching

Teaching has been defined in various ways, for example as an activity which includes the transmission of knowledge from the teacher to the students; the active engagement of students through activities in the classroom; the facilitation of student learning; or guiding students to develop critical thinking and the ability to change their own worldviews, among others (Prosser & Trigwell, 1999; Degago & Kaino, 2015). Teaching always takes place within a particular context, with university teaching constituting a very specific context for teaching (Kember, 1997; Walker, 2001).

In this study, teaching is regarded as a relational activity that is subject to influences from the context within which it is practised and, as such, is complex in nature (Ruth, 2014). Due to its relational nature, it requires continuous reflection on the teacher's teaching practice (Biggs, 1999; Johnson, 2000). Barnett (1997) describes this continuous reflection and development of teaching as an important characteristic of a professional teacher.

1.7.3.1 Academics as university teachers

At this point, the meanings of the various references to academic positions and post levels as they are used in this study also need to be clarified:

- The term **academics** or **university academics** broadly refers to staff members who are appointed at a university to conduct research, teaching and community interaction. They function within the ambit of their specific disciplines but also within the broader institutional and education contexts (Frick & Kapp, 2009).

- The term **university teacher(s)** is used when reference is made specifically to the academic in terms of his/her teaching role. Although both male and female university teachers participated, this study will use the male gender form to protect the identities of participants.

- The terms **junior lecturer**, **lecturer**, **senior lecturer** or **professor** refer to the particular post level held by an academic staff member in terms of his/her appointment at a university. The literature uses various terms to refer to teaching staff at universities, such as lecturers, teachers, educators or scholars (Herman, 2015). A distinction is made in this study between university teachers (referring to the function of teaching) and the terms junior lecturer, lecturer, senior lecturer and professor, which refer to the post levels of the participants in this study.

1.7.3.2 Quality teaching

In the midst of the complexity of teaching, there is a wide variety of definitions for the term 'quality teaching' (Crebbin, 1997; Schuck, Gordon & Buchanan, 2008). Berliner (2001), however, describes 'context' and 'practice' as two elements that are essential to the quality of teaching. In the context of this study, quality teaching is regarded as teaching that is responsive to students' learning needs and thus recognises the student voice as a gauge to ascertain whether the teaching that is delivered adequately meets the students' learning needs. Quality teaching thus encompasses continuous reflection on one's teaching practice because the learning needs of students, as well as the context of higher education, are changing continuously (also see sections 2.4.2, 4.2 and 4.3). It also requires of university teachers to be good communicators, show enthusiasm, have a good knowledge base of their subjects and show respect for their students (Schacter & Thum, 2004).

1.7.4   Research-led universities

Research-led universities advocate a particular focus on producing research outputs (Elen, Lindblom-Ylänne & Clement, 2007). The Research Universities Futures Consortium (2012) describes the mandate of research-led universities as including the discovery of knowledge; applying knowledge to generate innovative

solutions to real-world challenges; and as developing the skills and knowledge of students for them to become the next generation of researchers.

Research-led universities, however, are also responsible for upholding excellence in teaching (Barnett, 2011; The Group of Eight, 2013; Harris, Ingle & Rutledge, 2014). These institutions expose their students to stimulating learning environments that are characterised by research-based and research-led activities that encourage the discovery, production and application of knowledge (The Group of Eight, 2013; Baker, 2015).

A dual focus on research and teaching can, however, lead to tensions in terms of providing support, resources, and even recognition to the respective functions. In this study, as further discussed in Chapter 2, the term 'research-led universities' implies universities where research is typically better resourced and acknowledged than teaching (Rice, 2012; Herman, 2015).

1.7.5 Ethics of practice

As a social practice, teaching is a complex phenomenon. It demands of university teachers to show the required professionalism to make sound and informed decisions about their teaching practice and to take responsibility for their actions (Schuck *et al.*, 2008). Although teaching constitutes the main function of a university teacher, being a teacher also encompasses other complex realities such as responding to student feedback (MacFarlane, 2004). To this end, Rowland (1993:35) argues that, as professionals, university teachers should have the ability to make sound judgements based on their anticipated "ability to recognise and face professional dilemmas". The teaching profession thus also includes ethical considerations which underpin university teachers' assumptions about teaching practice (Schuck *et al.*, 2008; Prisacariu & Shah, 2016).

With both teaching and student feedback being such complex phenomena (Hargreaves & Goodson, 1996; Knight & Wilcox, 1998; Zabaleta, 2007), it would be important to provide guidance to university teachers in terms of how to structure ethically responsible approaches to teaching and student feedback matters (Bozalek, Mitchell, Dison & Alperstein, 2016). Ethics of practice, in this study, thus refers to guidelines for facilitating ethically and professionally responsible student

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feedback practices (Crump, Sugarman & Working Group on Ethics Guidelines for Global Health Training (WEIGHT[1]), 2010; Prisacariu & Shah, 2016).

1.8   POSITIONING MYSELF AS RESEARCHER

I stand in agreement with Sikes, Nixon and Carr (2003) that research should be of use to and within its particular contexts or settings. In this study, which was undertaken within a particular higher educational setting, this requirement was of major concern. As an academic development practitioner specifically responsible for the management of the student feedback system and processes at SU, I developed a keen interest in whether and how the student feedback information provided to university teachers had any influence on their teaching practice. It was thus important that the research would provide insights into everyday teaching practices which, in turn, could contribute to enhancing the quality of teaching and learning at SU through the use of student feedback. This study therefore explored how teaching could be influenced by student feedback, which resonates with Paechter's (2003) view that educational research should contribute to the enhancement of educational practice.

Brew (2002) argues that it is important for academic development practitioners to conduct research in their field of work, as this can contribute meaningful insights into everyday teaching and learning practices. Being an academic development practitioner and also being responsible for managing the institutional student feedback system at SU at the time of the study enabled me to apply a very specific lens to investigating a complex teaching and learning issue such as student feedback. The methods that I employed to remain as credible and critical as possible in collecting, analysing and reporting the data, are explained in Chapter 5 (see section 5.4.6).

1.9   ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Academic staff members who took part in the study were fully informed of the purpose of the research and they all gave informed consent to the public use of the

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[1] Working Group on Ethics Guidelines for Global Health Training

data that were collected. Their privacy was protected by not disclosing their names or any other specific details that would enable readers to identify individuals. However, the names of faculties that were involved are mentioned as this is important in terms of contextualising the generated data. As student feedback is generally experienced as a personal matter, care was taken in terms of how and which information would be revealed. Raw data, including digitally recorded interviews and transcripts, were stored securely for the period of this research and will be retained in this manner for a maximum period of three (3) years following completion of the study, after which it will be erased or discarded. Furthermore, an application for approval to do this research among staff at the University was approved by the Ethics Committee for Human and Social Sciences at SU (see Annexure 1).

1.10   STRUCTURE OF THE STUDY

Chapter 1 provides an orientation to the study. **Chapter 2** conceptualises the link between student feedback and teaching practice at a research-led university by drawing together various theoretical perspectives in a conceptual framework. The complexities involved in analysing these links, particularly within a research-led university context, are discussed in this chapter. Activity theory, as described in **Chapter 3**, was used as a theoretical lens for analysing and interpreting the data produced in this study. **Chapter 4** describes the international and national contexts within which the study was situated, as well as the local context of SU as a research-led university and site of research. The research methodology that was used in this study is elaborated on in **Chapter 5**, while **Chapters 6, 7 and 8** present and discuss the data according to the themes as these emerged within the study. **Chapter 9** concludes this dissertation by providing some conclusions based on the findings of the research and pointing to a number of implications for theory, practice and further research.

CHAPTER 2

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

2.1   INTRODUCTION

The aim of this study was to explore how university teachers at a research-led university experience student feedback in terms of their teaching practice. Implied here is the notion that some link could exist between the research-led university context within which the teaching took place, and how the university teachers experienced the role of student feedback in their teaching.

Debates about the use of student feedback in higher education and in university teaching practice, in particular, are multi-facetted (Seldin, 1997; Shevlin, Banyard, Davies & Griffiths, 2000; Spooren, Mortelmans & Denekens, 2007). On the one hand the relationship is described positively, pointing to student feedback as having great value in gauging the quality of teaching (Feldman, 2007; Marsh, 2007a and 2007b; Dunrong & Fan, 2009). On the other hand, the relationship is described cautiously as one that generates information that should be used with great circumspection as such information may be prone to many influences (Kulik, 2001; Sproule, 2002). It is therefore advisable to never use student feedback information in isolation but in conjunction with other forms of feedback, while the context and purpose of the feedback is kept in mind (Chen & Hoshower, 2003; Brennan & Williams, 2004). Despite the divergent debates around the potential use of student feedback and how it influences university teaching practice, the collection of student feedback has become routine practice in many universities across the world (Keane & Labhrainn, 2005; Richardson, 2005; Alderman, Towers & Bannah, 2012). What is less evident, though, is whether such student feedback leads to the improvement of teaching practice (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Harvey, 2011).

To enhance understanding of the role of student feedback in university teaching it was considered to be of crucial importance to interrogate the practices pertaining to

student feedback and **university teaching**. It is, however, important to consider the contexts within which these components are situated. In a **research-led university context,** where research often enjoys higher status than teaching in the hierarchical structures of higher education (Leibowitz *et al.*, 2015), exploring the potential link between student feedback and university teaching was expected to be particularly revealing. This chapter thus reports on relevant literature on *the university*, *the research-led university*, *university teaching as practice* and *student feedback* as key concepts related to this study.

I start with a discussion of the concept of a research-led university to illuminate the context within which the phenomenon of student feedback was explored in the current study. This is followed by insights into what university teaching constituted in this study, including a discussion of some of the pertinent issues of university teaching as these relate to the study. Perspectives underpinning the phenomenon of student feedback within higher education are also discussed. The chapter ends with drawing together these three main concepts into a conceptual framework to provide an explanation of the main aspects that were explored in this study and how these aspects potentially relate to each other (Miles & Huberman, 1994:18).

2.2   BEING A UNIVERSITY

Universities have been linked to teaching since the earliest of times (Marsh, 1984; Perkin, 2007; Barnett, 2011). Though universities have gone through various developments over time, they have always been concerned with "knowledge, the training of professionals and educating people" (Lategan, 2009:57). Lategan (2009) and Waghid (2008) describe universities as academic institutions where research is conducted through inquiry and discovery of new knowledge; where teaching is offered; and where learning and scholarship ought to be pursued.

Barnett (2011) and others such as Etzkowitz (2004) argue that universities could also have different views on the kind of knowledge they generate and how such knowledge is to be used or disseminated, leading to the distinction between different types of universities. In his research, Barnett (2011:11-46) distinguished between four types of universities, namely:

a) **The metaphysical university,** which focuses on creating pure knowledge for the sake of enlightening mankind to see the world as it really is and the relationships that exist between entities;

b) **The scientific or research university,** which is set on the production of knowledge and the value of this knowledge either to itself or to society. The knowledge is disseminated and put to work within the real world for improvement of the world at large;

c) **The entrepreneurial university,** which is focused on increasing its capital (whether it be intellectual, cultural or social capital). Knowledge is sold to the world and thus becomes an economic commodity.

d) **The bureaucratic university** is characterised by an increase in administrative burden and bureaucratic processes, placing academic life under constant and increasing surveillance.

From Barnett's distinction, it becomes clear that universities as institutions may involve a variety of academic roles and responsibilities. How a particular university positions itself will thus determine which aspects of the academic endeavour it would focus on.

As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, the research university is of particular importance to this study. When Barnett speaks about the 'scientific university' he refers to what is also known as the 'research university' (cited in Cole, Hood & McDermott, 1994). In this study, the terms 'research university' or 'research-led university' are preferred, placing the focus on the production, dissemination and application of knowledge. The terms 'research university' and 'research-led university' are thus used interchangeably in this study and are further explored in the following section, along with the implications of what it means to be a university teacher at such institutions.

2.3   THE RESEARCH-LED UNIVERSITY

Altbach (2007) describes the research university as being a central part of the world's academic systems and as being committed to the creation and dissemination of knowledge in various disciplines and fields. Baker (2015) agrees that research-led universities are most often concerned with providing both their

undergraduate and postgraduate students with educational experiences that are informed by and aimed at research, and thus have a strong focus on producing science, technology and knowledge about human society. These universities play a crucial role in today's knowledge-based economy (Gunasekara, 2004) where high research outputs and a culture of excellence become important features (Harris *et al.*, 2014). Upholding the drive to maintain excellence in terms of producing research results is crucial to the existence of research universities, for, without it, these institutions may lose their status (Elen *et al.*, 2007).

Being a research-led university also includes the function of teaching. Research-led universities are expected to take the lead in higher education, both in terms of research and in teaching excellence (The Group of Eight, 2013:4; Harris *et al.*, 2014). This implies that university teachers are expected to perform excellently in both functions, which raises the question of how academics at research universities would respond to demands for research output, while also being required to provide quality teaching.

Research universities are not without their challenges. They typically are resource-intensive and often under severe financial pressure, facing challenges in terms of changing roles and priorities in higher education (Altbach, 2007). Often their autonomy is challenged as they are required to be accountable for how financial resources are spent (Geiger, 2004). This could constrain top quality research. The academic profession is also under strain (Kogan & Teichler, 2007). Often salaries do not compare favourably to salaries earned in similarly educated professions in the private sector; teaching loads can be significant; and career advancement appears bleak, making full academic productivity difficult to maintain (Altbach, 2007). While these may be true for all universities, they can be exacerbated in research universities. Such challenges could also vary in intensity across institutions and even across countries.

League tables for ranking universities in terms of performance, such as the *Times Higher Education* and *QS Rankings,* furthermore appear to attribute more weight to research-related functions than to teaching-related aspects (Graham, 2013). It is the reference to teaching excellence and the lesser weight that it carries in such rankings which holds particular importance for this study. It begs the question as to

what implications the drive for excellence in both research and teaching holds for teaching at research-led universities. This question is further explored in the next section.

2.3.1 Exploring the literature on the relationship between teaching and research

Views on the relationship between teaching and research are varied. In some research it is questioned whether there is a firm link between the two concepts and, if so, it is argued that the link is not automatic (Hattie & Marsh, 1996). Brew (1999), on the other hand, argues that the link is automatically present, while Taylor (2008) posits that the nature of that link could vary across time and different contexts. The relationship between teaching and research includes both conceptual and contextual issues and is thus layered and complex (Jenkins, 2004). While the question about the link between research and teaching, as well as the nature of that link is important to all universities, it is especially crucial at research-led universities (Elen *et al.*, 2007).

Brew's (1999) research on the relationship between teaching and research is one of the seminal contributions to this debate. In her view, there definitely is a relationship between the two concepts, but the nature of the relationship changes as the context of higher education changes. The move to mass education increased the workload of academics, which affected the nature of, as well as the time available for, research and teaching (Elton, 1992; Rowland, 1996; Brew, 1999). The role of context thus is important to bear in mind when considering the link between teaching and research and it points to relevance for this study.

As mentioned above, other researchers have critiqued the uncontested assumption that teaching and research are "inextricably entwined" (Hattie & Marsh, 2004:2). In engaging in a meta-analysis of literature on this topic, Hattie and Marsh found different permutations of this relationship, ranging from negative, to zero, to positive. According to them, the inseparable link between teaching and research is therefore a myth. They also found that most institutional contexts were such that they promoted and rewarded excellent teaching as well as research excellence, but mostly as separate entities. In his comparative study between institutions in the UK

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and Sweden, Taylor (2008) also found that, while academics viewed both teaching and research as important for career advancement, the integration of the two is seldom supported or encouraged by institutions. The increased requirement for quality in both teaching and research is forcing academics to consider the practical impact of the relationship between their teaching and their research and how this relationship would influence their choices in terms of what to focus on (Taylor, 2008).

An institutional study conducted at a research university in SA also reported teaching as residing in an unequal and contested space, with research carrying the highest currency within the institution (Van Schalkwyk, Leibowitz, Herman & Farmer, 2015). Van Schalkwyk *et al.* (2015) confirmed Taylor's (2008) argument that university teachers may sometimes be faced with having to make choices between teaching and research. In order to enhance quality teaching, it would thus be important for institutions to establish an enabling environment within which professional learning about teaching can occur and be made worthwhile for university teachers (Van Schalkwyk *et al.*, 2015). To establish such an enabling environment, it would equally be important for institutions to have insight into university teachers' lived experiences of teaching at a research-led university in particular (Ginns, Kitay & Prosser, 2008).

2.3.2 The context of teaching at a research-led university

At research-led universities, teaching is often viewed as of lower status than research (Rice, 2012). Despite this perceived lack in stature, academics continue to find themselves having to spend much of their time on teaching and teaching- related matters (Hativa, 1997; Esteban Bara, 2014).

To alleviate potential tensions between teaching and research, it is argued that a fit between individuals' personal values and perceptions and organisational priorities in terms of teaching and research are important to achieve job satisfaction, better job performance and commitment to the institution (Verquer, Beeher & Wagner, 2003; Wright, 2005). If the institution, however attaches less value to teaching but still expects its teaching staff to put in the effort to deliver quality teaching, it may lead to contradictory messages being received by teaching staff, which could negatively

influence their morale (Van Schalkwyk *et al.*, 2015). Faculty members who find themselves at odds with their departments' or institutions' perceived institutional culture tend to experience higher levels of job-related stress and less job satisfaction, which could negatively influence the time spent on quality teaching (Blackburn & Lawrence, 1995; Wright, 2005).

In the next section I briefly discuss the general conceptions of teaching within the university context and how they relate to teaching approaches and practices.

2.4   UNIVERSITY TEACHING EXPLORED

People hold different conceptions of what the term 'teaching' constitutes and what is meant by quality teaching. In this section, the conceptions of teaching and what may be regarded as quality teaching, specifically within the higher education environment, is explored.

2.4.1   Conceptions of teaching

Teaching at a university constitutes a very specific teaching context (Becher, 1989; Kember, 1997). University teachers regard themselves as somewhat different to teachers teaching at school level because universities function under very different value systems and traditions (Kember, 1997). In order to better understand university teachers' teaching practices, as well as to enable them to change and develop these teaching practices, it is important to gain insight into their conceptions of and approaches to teaching (Ginns *et al.*, 2008). Conceptions are defined as the meanings and interpretations that university teachers use to describe their teaching and which provide them with a framework for making decisions about how they approach their teaching (Postareff & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2008; Virtanen & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2010). These conceptions thus form the underlying basis for how they would teach, why they teach in particular ways and what informs the decisions that they take regarding their approaches to teaching.

The various conceptions of teaching and the subsequent teaching approaches that these conceptions could inspire are illustrated in Figure 2.1 and are discussed below the figure.
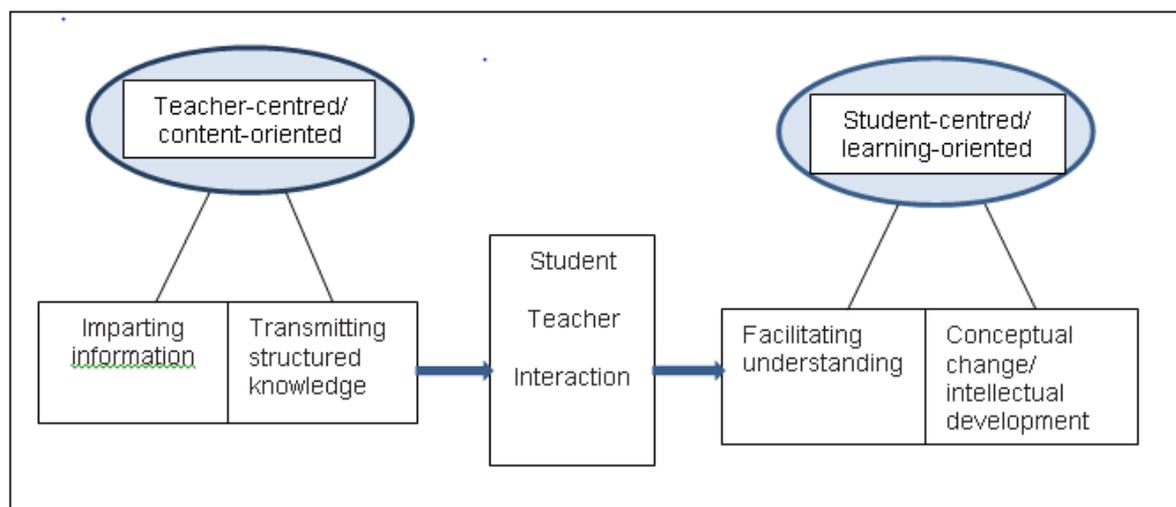
Figure 2.1: A multiple-level categorisation model of conceptions of teaching (Degago & Kaino, 2015:495)

Conceptions of teaching seem to range from teacher-focused or content-oriented to student-focused or learning-oriented teaching (Prosser & Trigwell, 1998; Parpala & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2007; González, 2011; Degago & Kaino, 2015). Teacher-focused conceptions are those where the teacher is regarded as the expert who conveys his/her knowledge to the students as recipients of that knowledge and as prescribed in the curriculum or textbook (Ramsden, 1992; Prosser & Trigwell, 1998; Parpala & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2007). There is no focus on how the components of information relate to each other or to the students' prior knowledge. This way of looking at teaching focuses on the content and "what the teacher does to the students", while the students act as passive recipients of the teacher's knowledge (Ramsden, 1992:112).

In the student-focused orientation, students are expected to be more actively engaged in their learning. The focus is on the students and what the students do in order to learn (Prosser & Trigwell, 1998; Degago & Kaino, 2015). The teacher's role is to help students acquire concepts, understanding and skills within a particular course. Students should thus be enabled to change their worldviews or conceptions about phenomena and construct their own knowledge in the process (Parpala & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2007). The teacher develops teaching techniques and strategies for "connecting the course to students" to assist students in developing their own understandings and the skills required in the course (Light, Cox & Calkins,

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2009:29). This orientation to teaching thus comprises the facilitation of understanding and conceptual change or intellectual development (Light *et al.,* 2009:30; Degago & Kaino, 2015) and is overtly focused on student learning (Parpala & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2007).

Considering the categories in Figure 2.1, one has to be cautious to not see these categories as independent and mutually exclusive (Degago & Kaino, 2015). The conceptions, on the contrary, are related in a hierarchy of inclusiveness (Åkerlind, 2004; González, 2011) which ranges on a scale between less focus on student engagement and more focus on the transmission of content, to less focus on transmission and more focus on student engagement. As Northedge (2003) argues, it is not simply about transmitting knowledge to students or trying to engage students in developing new knowledge in an unfocused way. It is about facilitating well thought-through learning opportunities by which students can be enabled to effectively participate and expand their knowledge.

It thus appears that contemporary university teaching is much more complex than being the mere transmission of knowledge to students. Contemporary university teaching does not only consider **who** is taught, but also **what** is taught, **when** it is taught and **how** it is taught (Maton, 2014:18, 23). On the basis of this view, Maton emphasises that it becomes all the more important to continuously gauge whether teaching practices are effectively addressing these aspects. The importance of student feedback as part of the complete teaching and learning process thus cannot be denied, since students are the ones who have first-hand experience of the teaching practices at universities and how such teaching influences their learning experiences.

In addition to the academic demands, university teaching practice is often required to also include ethical causes such as promoting social justice, social equity, the inclusion of minorities, as well as the personal and moral optimisation of students (Eisenberg, 2006; Biesta, 2007; Waghid, 2008; Esteban Bara, 2014; Prisacariu & Shah, 2016). The role of the university teacher thus extends beyond the design and implementation of pedagogical approaches that are limited to their subjects. It includes the provision of university experiences that develop attributes in students that will impact on their future personal and professional lives. In this sense, a

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university teacher embodies the role of a guide who leads his/her students into discovering a world that they do not know yet (Esteban Bara, 2014). This view supports the notion that teaching within higher education is a complex and challenging task, which includes not only the conveying of content knowledge but also a purposeful orientation towards helping students to learn for the future (Knight & Wilcox, 1998).

In summary, it appears that, based on their personal theories and conceptions of teaching and learning, university teachers could approach the practice of teaching in various ways. It also seems that teaching is not confined to the teacher's conceptions of and approaches to the task at hand. Hargreaves (2000) reminds us that the teaching function is becoming increasingly complex. As professionals, the continuous development of their teaching within ever-changing contexts is deemed to be an important characteristic of effective teachers (Barnett, 1997). This entails constant reflection on how one's conceptions of teaching and learning influence one's teaching approaches and practices, and how these approaches and practices eventually influence students' learning within the context of one's teaching environment (Parpala & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2007).

Student feedback is an important tool in supporting such reflection. Most universities require student feedback to be solicited as a source of information that could indicate whether the university is functioning effectively in terms of the quality of teaching and learning experiences offered to students (Seldin, 1997; Barrie & Ginns, 2007; Ryan, 2015). Student feedback could thus assist university teachers in gauging how their teaching is responding to the learning needs of students and requirements within their particular contexts of teaching. It would, however, require the consideration of the teaching and learning context as well as an explication of what 'quality teaching' is understood to be and how it can be measured.

2.4.2 Quality teaching

Reference to 'quality teaching' has already been made in this chapter. The question that arises is: What is meant by the concept of quality teaching? How do we understand it and how are we able to measure it? The literature seems to convey different opinions in response to these questions.

Though some may view quality teaching as an elusive concept (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001) and thus difficult to measure, Ramsden (1991) argues that it is indeed possible to measure quality teaching; even though it may also require taking cognisance of other more complex indicators of teaching quality in addition to processes such as student feedback (Johnson, 2000; Zabaleta, 2007; Schuck *et al.*, 2008). Feldman (1986), Young and Shaw (1999) and Schacter and Thum (2004), for example, contended that university teachers who are enthusiastic; possess a good knowledge base of their subjects; who are good communicators; and who show respect for their students display desirable characteristics to enhance their students' learning experiences.

In a review ranging across the Australian higher education system, Chalmers (2007:79) distinguished four dimensions of teaching practice which are regarded as more valid for gauging teaching quality at institutional level:

- Institutional climate and systems
- Diversity and inclusivity
- Assessment
- Engagement and learning community

Each of these dimensions contains various indicators that could be measured in order to provide overall indications of the quality of teaching, as well as indications of the performance of university teachers and students. These indicators are captured in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1:   Learning and teaching indicators for four dimensions of teaching practice

Institutional climate and systems	Diversity and inclusivity	Assessment	Engagement and learning community
Adoption of a student-centred learning perspective	Valuing and accommodating student and staff diversity	Assessment policies address issues of pedagogy	Student engagement
Possession of desirable teacher characteristics	Provision of adequate support services	Adopting an evidence-based approach to assessment policies	Fostering and facilitating (academic) learning communities
Relevant and appropriate teaching experience, qualifications and development	Active recruitment and admissions	Alignment between institutional policy for best practice and faculty/ departmental activities	Engaging and identifying with a learning community
Use of current research findings in informing teaching and curriculum / course content	Provision of transition and academic support	Commitment to formative assessment	Staff engagement
Community engagement / partnership	Active staff recruitment	Provision of specific, continuous and timely feedback	
Funding model in support of teaching and learning	Multiple pathways for reward and recognition of staff	Explicit learning outcomes	

(Adapted from Chalmers, 2007:80)

The four dimensions presented in Table 2.1 are interrelated and point to quality teaching being an institution-wide endeavour (Chalmers, 2007). Institutional climate and systems that are committed to the enhancement, transformation and innovation of learning are thus regarded as a key dimension of quality teaching (Peterson & Augustine, 2000; Chalmers, 2007). Supporting the teaching role in various ways, such as the provision of diverse pathways for the reward and recognition of teaching, as well as career advancement, has also been identified as important for promoting quality teaching (Chalmers, 2007:81; Van Schalkwyk, Cilliers, Adendorff, Cattell & Herman, 2012). Given the relationship between teaching and research, as discussed in section 2.3.1, this is of particular importance to university teachers at a research-led university. The alignment of institutional policies with the goal of promoting quality teaching would thus also constitute an important dimension (Chalmers, 2007:97).

McGettrick (2005:5) contended that measuring teaching quality merely for the sake of compliance or adherence to rules, regulations and indicators may rob it of the

value that these processes could have in terms of enhancing the quality of teaching in creative and innovative ways. Here I agree with Harvey (2003) that it is more important to ensure appropriate responses to student feedback information that points to the quality of teaching than to focus only on the act of collecting the data.

From the perspectives generated thus far, it is evident that teaching quality should not be measured simply for the sake of accountability. The quality of teaching should rather be underpinned and driven by professionalism which signifies the "ability to take responsibility for our own actions – to make decisions and judgements based on sound thinking, reflection and knowledge of the context in which we are operating" (Schuck *et al.*, 2008:541). The earlier discussion about conceptions of teaching and the importance of continuously developing one's teaching as part of the professional practice of teachers (see section 2.4.1) also has relevance to the issue of quality teaching. Such a stance calls for professional responsibility to continuously reflect upon one's own practices with the view of enhancing those practices. I thus agree with Golding and Adam (2016) that university teachers who take a reflective stance towards teaching would view their student feedback as formative information and may thus, as part of their professional practice, use it to interrogate their teaching practice for the purpose of enhancing its quality.

2.4.2.1 Professional learning for improving teaching

Professional learning does not only take place through formally organised events such as workshops or training sessions, but also informally through day-to-day interactions and activities as people engage in their professions (Trowler & Knight, 2000; Webster-Wright, 2009). People thus also learn by doing (Berliner, 2001). It is this type of professional learning of university teachers and the role of student feedback in it that is the focus of this study.

In their interactions in the contexts in which people enact their professions, in other words in their workplaces, there may be socio-economic, historical and even personal factors that could enable or constrain professional learning processes (Leibowitz *et al.*, 2015). Eraut, Furner, Maillardet, Miller, Ali and Blackman (2004) found that professional learning is as dependent on the workplace context as it may be on the educational context of such learning opportunities. Context can thus not

be ignored. Eraut *et al.* (2004) even suggested that the focus should be on the activity system within which the teachers function to enhance the effectiveness of the professional development of the teachers.

Professional learning in this study is thus regarded as a systemic process within which various components of the teaching and learning activity system are interrelated. Ashwin (2012) argues that teaching and learning interactions within teaching and learning systems are dynamic and shifting and should thus be analysed in relation to each other. He refers to this as a "structural-agentic" process (Ashwin, 2012:52) within which the context plays an influencing role, but where the individual also has agency to act from his/her own point of view. This agency allows human beings to question existing practices; make sense of new practices; and in the process revise their current practices (Roth & Lee, 2007).

The teacher as a professional would thus have the responsibility to continuously reflect on his/her assumptions about teaching, about what his/her students are learning and also about which opportunities for learning are afforded to both teachers and students (Renshaw, 2003:358). Such reflection also necessitates the consideration of the student voice. Although teachers are considered to be the experts in terms of pedagogical knowledge and experience, students can provide them with information about how they experience the teacher's 'applied' pedagogical knowledge through the teaching. Schuck *et al.* (2008) argue in this regard that students can provide critical inputs which could enhance the quality of teaching. They further reiterate the importance of taking ownership of the feedback, on both the teachers' and students' sides. If student feedback appears to be divorced from the immediate context of the teachers and the students, the teachers may be unwilling to engage with the feedback and the students may regard their inputs as having no value and thus also become unwilling to provide their feedback (Schuck *et al.*, 2008).

Teaching as professional practice should therefore also include ethical considerations which underpin assumptions about and approaches to teaching practice within particular contexts (Schuck *et al.*, 2008; Prisacariu & Shah, 2016). This implies a relationship between the context in which professional practices are exercised and the professional's underlying assumptions and decisions about those

practices. Ethical practice, as subsumed in the notion of professional practice, thus means that professionals who reflect on the assumptions that underpin their practices constantly revise those assumptions, should this appear necessary. Student feedback would thus not be collected simply for measuring the quality of teaching, but also to reflect on what opportunities the teaching and learning context may offer to students in order to enhance their learning experiences (Renshaw, 2003:358).

In the next section, student feedback as it applies to the university teaching context is elaborated on.

2.5   STUDENT FEEDBACK IN UNIVERSITY TEACHING

Many authors point to student feedback being a valuable source of information about teaching (Brennan & Williams, 2004; Nygaard & Belluigi, 2011; Cathcart, Greer & Neale, 2014; Blair & Valdez Noel, 2014); that it could play a significant role in creating effective learning opportunities for students; and that it could also have much value as a professional learning and development tool for university teachers (Christudason, 2006; Ryan, 2015; Golding & Adam, 2016). However, there seem to be fewer studies in which the role of student feedback in teaching practice has been systematically investigated (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

If student feedback is seen to potentially contribute to the improvement of teaching quality, it would require universities to pay attention to particular influences such as the teaching experience that the teacher has; the teacher's motivation to improve his/her teaching and also whether the teacher would know how to improve (Seldin, 1997). An early study by Kulik and McKeachie (1975) indicated the importance of a consultation process with the university teacher after receiving student feedback in order to assist him/her with the interpretation of the results and how to respond to these results in order to improve teaching. This was confirmed by Ballantyne *et al.* (2000; also see section 2.1), as well as Bozalek *et al.* (2016) when they argued for dialogue and the provision of support to university teachers in terms of understanding the purposes of student feedback and how to interpret and apply the results of such feedback to improve teaching. The focus therefore is now turned to better explore the concept of student feedback within the context of university teaching.

2.5.1 The practice of student feedback in higher education

In higher education, feedback can be viewed from at least two different perspectives. Firstly, feedback could refer to teachers sending feedback messages to students about the strengths and weaknesses of their academic work in order for students to use such information to improve the academic quality of their work (Nicol & MacFarlane-Dick, 2006; Boud & Molloy, 2013). Secondly, feedback could refer to information collected from students about what their experiences are of the teaching they receive. This could include students' feedback on the teaching and learning that they experience in classes, as well as how they experience the academic value of course modules and programmes. One of the main purposes for collecting this information is its use for maintaining or enhancing the quality of the education provided (Brennan & Williams, 2004; Boud & Molloy, 2013).

In this study, the concept of feedback refers to the information provided by students about their experiences of university teachers' teaching and how such information may influence the present or future thinking of teachers about teaching, their approaches to teaching and their teaching practices. The term '**student** feedback' has therefore been used extensively in this study and refers mainly to students' expressed opinions about their teaching and learning experiences. Since the study is focused on the role of student feedback in university teaching at a research-led university, the concept is framed predominantly within an institutional context – not neglecting the broader international and national higher education context.

It is well established that receiving feedback about teaching can constitute a learning process through which university teachers may gain better understanding of their own strengths and weaknesses as teachers (Seldin, 1993). Soliciting feedback about teaching is also regarded as a key aspect of professional practice in higher education (Ramsden, 1998; Arthur, 2009). Feedback on teaching activities, tasks or practices can serve as a developmental tool, by which the feedback information can be used to continue with or improve on the task, activity or practice on which feedback was provided (Hand & Rowe, 2001). Recent research by Van den Bos and Brouwer (2014) indicated that giving and receiving feedback supported teachers in becoming more confident about their teaching, which could be an important factor for change. The concept of feedback was thus explored as part of the professional learning process of university teachers at a research-led university.

It is evident from the discussion thus far that the feedback process entails a reaction or response to information received about a past performance, which could thus influence the person's present or future behaviour. As such, feedback can also be regarded as a learning tool to mediate professionals' activities or performances (Mausolff, 2004) as they could use the feedback information to inform future practice (London, 2003).

Purposeful reflective practice with the aim of interrogating one's own professional activities and approaches is regarded as proper professional practice (Biggs, 1999). These processes and opportunities for reflecting on one's own practices could lead university teachers to new or innovative practices and procedures that are needed for their own professional learning. Continuous reflection in order to better understand and improve teaching practice could thus be very important for becoming more knowledgeable about teaching as a professional practice, which emphasises why this study regards student feedback as one of the important sources of information for university teachers' professional learning about teaching.

Gaining better understanding of the nature and role of student feedback in the professional learning of university teachers and developing an appreciation for the dynamics inherent to the practice of feedback, seem important. This could reveal how university teachers' teaching practice may or may not be influenced by the feedback generated from their students.

2.5.2   The nature of feedback

As mentioned above, feedback can be a powerful tool to facilitate personal and professional development (Bhattarai, 2007). However, the process of feedback can be positive or negative in nature. As such, it may or may not have the desired effect on performance. Leung, Su and Morris (2001) found, for example, that lack of interpersonal fairness and justice during the feedback process may impact negatively on the acceptance of the feedback and the response to it. For the feedback process to be effective, it is important to adhere to certain principles in order to ensure that the feedback is constructive and not destructive in nature (Hamid & Mahmood, 2010).

Constructive feedback is clear and easily understood; specific and considerate; frequent and timely; and should be relevant to elements of performance that contribute to task success and which are under the recipient's control (Baron, 1988; London, 1997). Careful consideration regarding whether feedback information genuinely relates to elements that are under the university teacher's control and recognition of contextual influences is therefore very important (Boud & Molloy, 2013).

Hamid and Mahmood (2010) agree to such a view, but also add the importance of using first-hand data; maintaining trust and respect by ensuring the confidentiality of the data; ensuring that feedback is descriptive (non-evaluative), specific and clear in terms of its purpose; and that it should encourage existing good practices. Feedback should thus be used and explained in such a way that the recipient understands the source of the feedback and how the feedback can be applied to improve task performance. If a problem or weakness is evident, suggestions for improvement should be made (Baron, 1988; London, 1997; Boud & Molloy, 2013). In this study, the use of student feedback to encourage good teaching practice is particularly relevant.

2.5.3   Some dynamics inherent to the feedback process

Feedback can be described as a two-way process of communication in which the purpose is to provide information about the quality of work or performance to enhance the task or the person's performance (Hamid & Mahmood, 2010). Shannon (1948: 379-423; 623-656) describes the elements of this two-way communication process as consisting of a sender (who produces the feedback message), a channel (through which the feedback message is transmitted or passed on) and a receiver (who decodes the feedback message in order to make personal sense of it).

Schramm (1954) added that, to make sense of feedback messages, people would have to encode or decode the messages so that it may become acceptable to them (see Figure 2.2). Schramm's model thus allows for the interpretation of feedback messages, a process by which people's environments and personal beliefs, values and experiences also play an important role. Schramm argues that different people could attach different meanings to feedback messages.
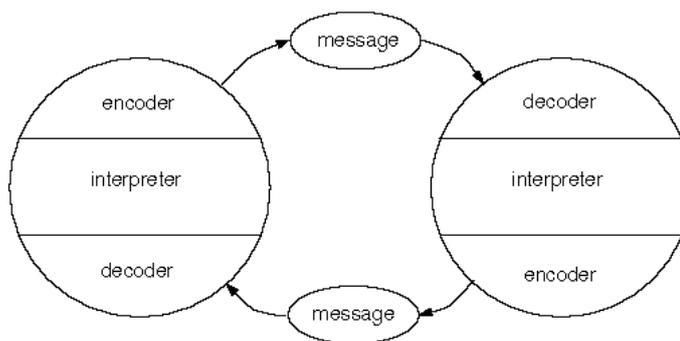
Figure 2.2: Diagram of Schramm's feedback loop (Schramm, 1954:1)

Figure 2.2 depicts feedback as information that is received by the recipient (individual or group) who then becomes aware of certain issues in terms of performance in prior tasks. An analysis of such issues would reveal whether the issues pertain to the individual's or group's competence in performing the task at hand, or whether it refers to aspects of the context within which the task is performed. The recipient may then use this information to affirm, enhance or adjust current and future behaviour either to maintain current good practice or to improve future practice (London, 2003). Response to feedback could thus be influenced by human and contextual factors. Taylor, Fischer and Ilgen (1990) identified a number of aspects that could influence responses to feedback, such as the nature of the feedback (constructive versus destructive, as described in section 2.5.2); the role of feedback providers; and the context within which the feedback process occurs.

2.5.3.1   Role of the feedback provider

An aspect that needs to be taken into consideration in this understanding of communication is the role of the feedback provider. Feedback providers will give their input based on their memory of specific observed performances or events. The possibility of providing accurate feedback is generally regarded as positively related to memory (Feldman, 1981). In order to avoid external influences, feedback should therefore be collected during or shortly after the observed behaviour or event has occurred (Woehr & Feldman, 1993; London, 1997). In terms of the student feedback process, this would imply that feedback should be collected either during the teaching of a course or module, or shortly afterwards.

The feedback provider's attitudes and beliefs about the task or performance, and also about the organisation within which the performance takes place, can also influence the feedback process. Murphy and Cleveland (1991) argued that, if feedback providers believe the feedback process to be used for rewards such as salary increases or promotion, they are more likely to be motivated, lenient and attentive in providing their feedback. If the feedback is perceived to be used for development, supervisors may discriminate against subordinates. Tziner, Murphy and Cleveland (2005) and others have also found that feedback providers who reveal a positive attitude towards the particular organisation which the feedback is collected for, would be more likely to provide feedback that could enhance the success of the organisation. Prior interest in a particular subject has also been identified as an aspect that influences the perceived value of the teaching within that subject (Marsh, 2007a; 2007b).

Recipients' responses to feedback information often depend on how credible they view the information to be and therefore on how trustworthy and valid they regard the feedback providers to be. If the feedback recipient perceives the feedback provider to be a credible source, the likelihood for responding to the feedback is greater. Patton (2008:38) also maintains that receivers of feedback are more likely to use the information if they understand and experience ownership of the evaluation process and findings. This presents an interesting dilemma, given the complexity that surrounds the teacher-student relationship.

With regard to student feedback processes, it would thus seem important to ensure that students have a clear understanding of what the purposes for student feedback are within their particular institutions. They should also be guided in terms of how to effectively provide feedback that could enhance the quality of the teaching that they receive.

2.5.3.2 The importance of context

The context within which the feedback is provided and received also plays an important role in the entire process. When feedback providers feel confident that they can be open and honest without jeopardising themselves, their feedback is less likely to be lenient (Padgett & Ilgen, 1989). This encourages the notion of

providing feedback anonymously because this would create a safe environment for feedback providers to be honest in their ratings and/or comments.

The feedback process could also be influenced by whether the feedback information is intended for formative or summative use. Formative feedback usually has a developmental purpose with the aim of enhancing quality, whilst summative feedback refers to evaluation as validation of the quality of teaching and modules (Leckey & Neil, 2001). In the case of summative or evaluative use, anonymity would be of greater importance than in the case of formative or developmental use.

As mentioned in section 2.5.3.1, trust in the provider of feedback information plays an important role in how the feedback receiver responds to the feedback information. Trust in how institutions approach feedback processes also seems to be a crucial aspect in the feedback receiver's response to feedback information. An institutional culture which encourages trust and respect, where the expectations of performance are clearly stated and where the benefits of feedback are perceived to be greater than the risks, could contribute positively to the feedback process and its outcomes (Roebuck, 1996; Hamid & Mahmood, 2010). Management could play a significant role in establishing such an institutional culture. Other contextual issues that could influence feedback include the amount of time made available for providing feedback; making use of peer feedback, where possible; and allowing a safe environment for providing the feedback (Rudland, Wilkinson, Wearn, Nicol, Tunny, Owen & O'Keefe, 2013).

A clear understanding of the purposes for collecting feedback, on the side of both the feedback provider and the feedback receiver may also contribute to the effective use of feedback information for the enhancement of teaching practices. It would thus be important for universities to ensure that clear messages are disseminated regarding their reasons for collecting student feedback and how the information is intended to be used.

2.5.4   Student feedback for professional learning of university teachers

University teachers can obtain feedback about their teaching from various sources, such as class observation by colleagues and/or teaching and learning experts; peer or external reviews; and even from informal conversations with colleagues. In this

study, however, feedback from students to whom university teachers deliver their teaching constitutes the main focus.

Despite criticism and concerns (as mentioned in section 2.1) surrounding the implementation of student feedback about teaching (Braskamp & Ory, 1994; Ory, 2001; Richardson, 2005), there is considerable evidence that student feedback can provide valuable information (Marsh & Dunkin, 1997; Brennan & Williams, 2004). Hand and Rowe (2001) suggest that debates around the use of student feedback detract from recognising the development opportunities that student feedback could provide. In this study, it is argued that student feedback could serve as a prime source of information about the influence of teaching practices on students' learning experiences. In this regard, student feedback could thus serve as a mediating tool between university teachers' teaching practice and their students' learning.

The process of student feedback allows the value of the student voice to be recognised within the holistic teaching and learning process. Students are no longer perceived as passive receivers of knowledge, but are regarded as valid sources of information about the quality of their teaching and learning experiences (Christudason, 2006; Ryan, 2015; Golding & Adam, 2016). Harvey (2003:4) argued that student views should be integrated into a regular and continuous cycle of analysis, reporting, action and feedback for higher education institutions to improve their quality of teaching.

Figure 2.3 provides a useful depiction of such a student feedback cycle. It includes the notion of purpose as an important point of departure for the effective use of student feedback information. What follows is a process of analysis in order to find out the cause(s) of the issue(s) that may emerge from the feedback information; finding possible and creative solutions to address the issue(s); engaging in action by implementing possible solutions; and then evaluating how the changed action influences the quality or effectiveness of the performance. Such an approach places student feedback firmly in the arena of professional learning.
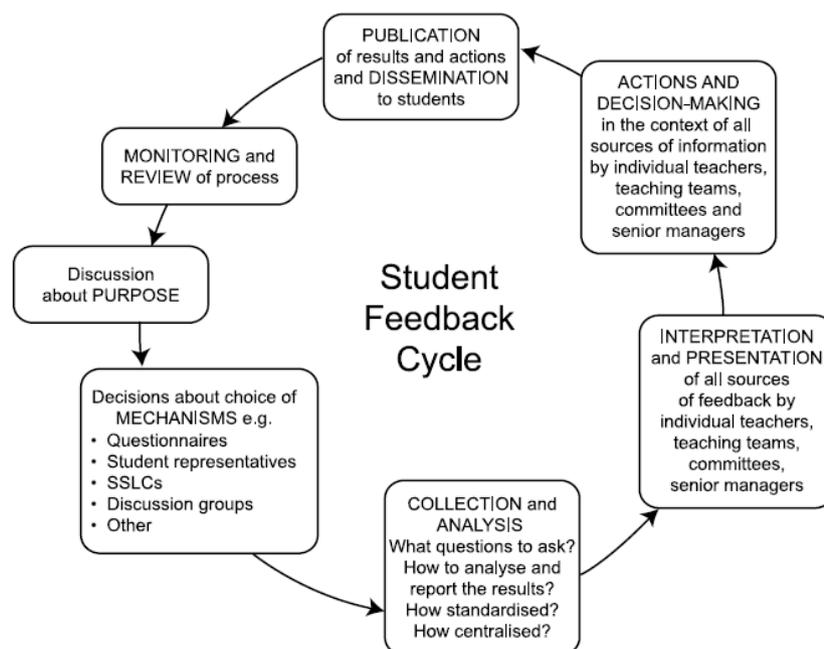
Figure 2.3: A Student feedback cycle (Brennan and Williams, 2004:7)

Although the phases in Figure 2.3 are depicted as if they occur consecutively and in a particular sequence, it might not be the case in reality (Brennan & Williams, 2004). It is important to bear in mind that this interrelated cycle of events takes place within particular contexts that could influence how the cycle plays out in reality (see section 2.5.3).

Professional learning often occurs through doing (almost like on-the-job or in- service training) and cannot necessarily be predicted (Knight, Tait & Yorke, 2006). Professional learning should therefore be viewed as an interplay between individuals and their environment, requiring a clear understanding of the processes by which learning is created and shared in communities of practice. Exploring the role of student feedback in the professional learning of university teachers for the purpose of improving teaching practice, would therefore require careful consideration of the holistic teaching and learning context within which university teachers perform their teaching role.

2.6   TOWARDS DEVELOPING A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE STUDY

I have explored a number of the perspectives on what a university is and have paid particular attention to the concept of a research-led university in this chapter. It has

been established that universities in general continue to be held responsible for the functions of both teaching and research and to perform both excellently. At research-led universities, research tends to be held in higher esteem over teaching and this often leads to tension between these functions. Such tensions could manifest in various ways in university teachers' approaches to teaching.

It was also established that institutional contexts play an important role in how university teachers may approach teaching and the development of their teaching practice especially. Teaching at a research-led university puts particular pressure on university teachers to deliver research results. With other academic functions such as community interaction, administrative workloads and postgraduate student supervision added, this can lead to university teachers feeling overworked and overwhelmed. With teaching being a time-consuming endeavour, this can often deflate the morale of these teachers in terms of their teaching function.

In addition, university teachers are also required to teach in ways that meet an ever increasing diversity of student learning needs. This requirement provides students the opportunity to respond in terms of whether the teaching they experience actually contributes to their learning processes. Student feedback is thus regarded as a valid source of information about the quality of teaching and learning experiences, and is often used in the performance appraisal of university teaching staff. As professionals, university teachers are expected to reflect on and respond to student feedback in ways that would enhance the quality of students' learning experiences at universities. As mentioned above, this may not be such an easy task in light of the challenging context.

Attending to student feedback and responding to it in ways that could enhance the teacher's teaching practice within a context that appears to be challenging, may thus be a process that would neither come about automatically, nor in similar ways for all university teachers and across all universities. This study, as mentioned above, is therefore aimed at exploring this phenomenon at one particular research-led university. Figure 2.4 portrays a provisional visual representation of the relationships between university teaching, the research-led university context and student feedback.
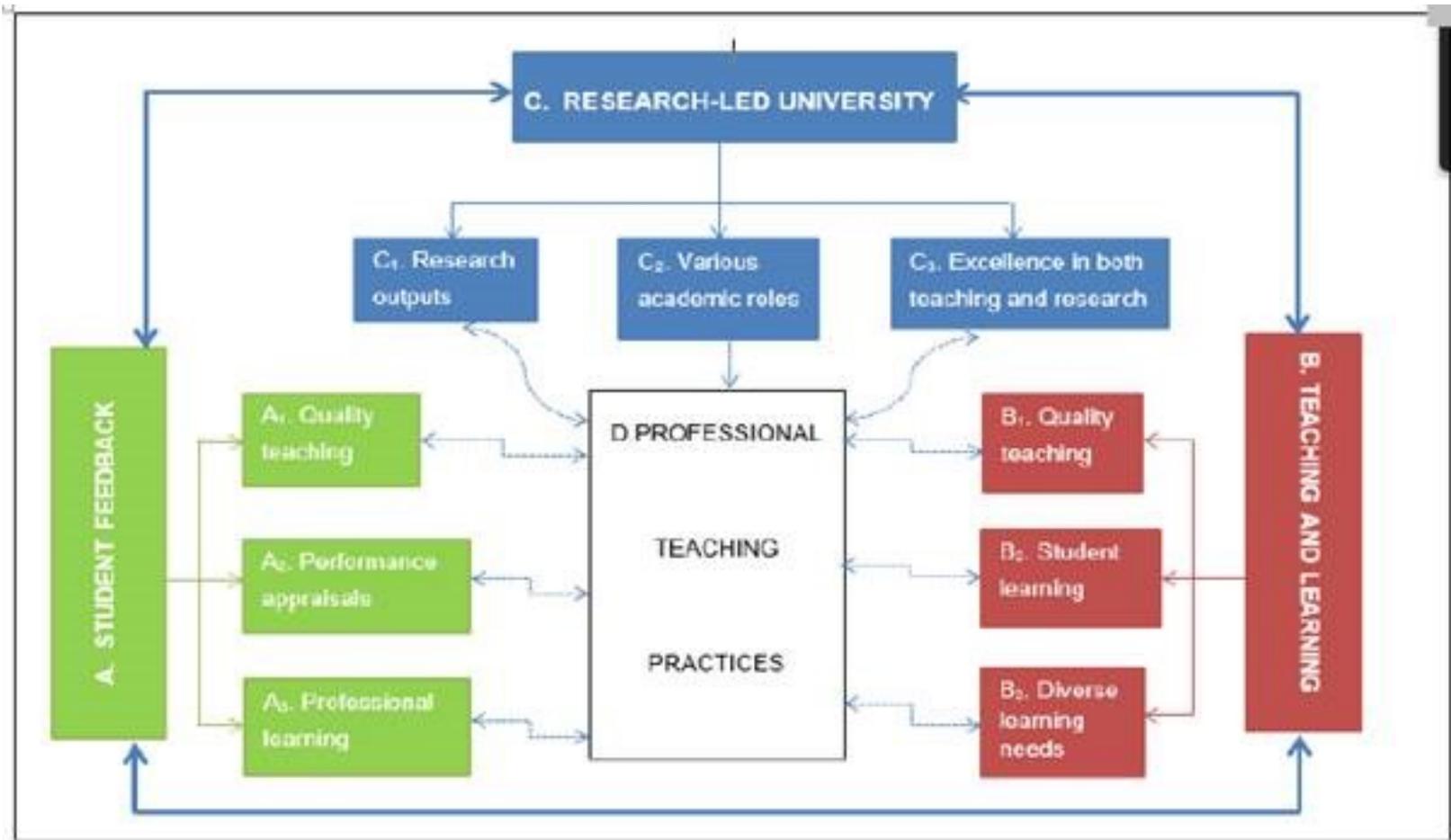
Figure 2.4: Conceptual framework that emerged from exploring the literature on research-led universities, teaching at research-led universities and student feedback

Figure 2.4 portrays the aspects that have been investigated in this chapter and which were significant to the study. This framework could be explained in broad terms as follows:

Relevant literature confirms student feedback (A) as a potentially valuable source of information to gauge the quality and effectiveness of teaching (A_1), despite the critiques that can be brought against it. Christudason (2006), Ryan (2015) and Golding and Adam (2016) all contend that student feedback holds much value as a professional learning and development tool (A_3) for university teachers. The use of student feedback to reflect on one's teaching forms a key aspect of university teachers' professional teaching practice (Ramsden, 1998; Arthur, 2009). I agree with these researchers that student feedback is a valuable tool for university teachers' professional learning about their teaching practices and should thus form an essential part of the professional arsenal of university teachers.

As a professional practice, teaching is also appraised in terms of its effectiveness and as a validation of the quality of teaching and modules (Leckey & Neil, 2001). Student feedback can play a valuable role in such performance appraisal processes (A_2), on condition that certain principles are adhered to, such as encouraging students to provide constructive feedback and supporting university teachers in interpreting and using the student feedback in effective ways (Ballantyne *et al.,* 2000; Hamid & Mahmood, 2010).

In terms of teaching in higher education (B), it became evident that university teaching has become much more complex over time. Contemporary teaching extends beyond the notion of merely transmitting knowledge from teachers to students, and is now also purposefully oriented towards the facilitation of student learning (B_2) (Knight & Wilcox, 1998; Degago & Kaino, 2015). University teachers are thus required to facilitate well thought-through learning opportunities that would enable all of their students to learn and expand their knowledge (Northedge, 2003). With an increase in the diversity of student learning needs (B_3), this poses a tough challenge to university teachers, especially within a higher education context which does not always provide sufficient support and recognition for the teaching function

(Rice, 2012; Leibowitz *et al.*, 2015). Despite these challenges, teaching quality (B_1) has become a growing requirement in higher education (Taylor, 2008).

This chapter has also established that university academics at research-led universities (C) are expected to perform the functions of teaching, research and community interaction (C_2) as part of the academic endeavour (Toews & Yazedjian, 2007; Leibowitz, 2012). University academics furthermore are encouraged to balance these roles by following an integrated approach within which these three roles inform each other reciprocally. Earlier research has, however, found that the integration of these roles may not always be an easy task, since each has its own, sometimes divergent, requirements (Taylor, 2008). Tension is experienced particularly between teaching and research. In a research-led university context, where research appears to be more valued and beneficial than teaching, this tension is driven to higher levels (Rice, 2012). The focus on research requires university academics to perform to required standards in terms of delivering research outputs by way of publications (C_1), which could present university academics with prospects for career advancement. Teaching, on the other hand, is regularly regarded as less valuable than research in terms of rewards and career advancement. University academics thus often have to choose which academic function they would focus on at a particular stage of their careers (Herman, 2015). Research-led universities, however, expect their academic staff to perform excellently in both research and teaching (C_3) (Harris *et al.*, 2014).

From Figure 2.4 it thus transpires that, despite the perceived lesser status of teaching compared to research, high quality results or outputs are still demanded in both areas. These outputs refer to publications in the case of research, while for teaching it refers to creating effective learning opportunities for students to facilitate their learning. There seem to be challenges that could constrain these functions in both teaching and research, as noted from the literature discussed in section 2.3.

University teachers may experience the challenges or contradictions (depicted by the broken lines in Figure 2.4) as constraints or as enablers in enhancing their teaching, which could induce various responses from them. These responses could involve a

variety of teaching practices (D), and could influence how the role of student feedback is experienced in their various teaching contexts.

What therefore emerged from the literature is that the role of student feedback in university teaching, especially at research-led universities, constitutes a complex and inter-relational system. It demonstrates inherent tensions both within and across the different academic domains. Activity theory was seen to offer a framework that would facilitate a deeper understanding of this complex phenomenon within the context of Stellenbosch University. Activity theory lends itself towards studying activities as "evolving, complex structure[s] of mediated and collective human agency" (Roth & Lee 2007:198) and is discussed in depth in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 3

ACTIVITY THEORY AS ANALYTICAL LENS

3.1   INTRODUCTION

The discussion of the literature in Chapter 2 indicated that the context of higher education and the unique institutional contexts hold certain implications for teaching and learning; for how teaching and learning may be understood; and, ultimately, for how the role of student feedback in teaching and learning may be conceived and approached. Aspects such as the effectiveness of teaching and the concomitant evaluation thereof; the stature of teaching; the debates around teaching in relation to research; and institutional policies and cultures, all appear to have some influence on how the teaching and learning process could play out in reality, as well as on how university lecturers would approach their teaching practice and their professional learning in terms of their teaching role.

3.2   KEY ASSUMPTIONS

It has been established in Chapter 2 (section 2.5) that student feedback can have value in terms of directing and motivating teaching practice (Seldin, 1993; Arthur, 2009; Van den Bos & Brouwer, 2014; Ryan, 2015) and providing pathways for career development (London, 1997). Feedback can help to set standards of performance to which university teachers could aspire in terms of performance appraisal processes, but it can also serve as a source of information that could contribute to individual lecturers' learning and growth in terms of their professional teaching practice. It was accepted that the various factors mentioned in Chapter 2 interact with each other in ways, whether positive or negative, which could influence how university teachers perceive, approach and use student feedback information in their teaching practice.

This study therefore set out to explore the possible links between:

(i) **teaching**, which includes aspects such as university teachers' conceptions of teaching and learning in relation to their teaching practice;

(ii) **student feedback**, which would entail aspects such as the purpose(s) for collecting student feedback; university teachers' conceptions of student feedback and the value that they attach to it within teaching and learning processes; their decision making regarding responding to student feedback information; and how and why they generally make use of student feedback within their teaching practice; and

(iii) the **context of teaching at a research-led university**, which includes aspects such as the emphasis on cultivating a strong research ethos and upholding institutional policies in this regard.

These relationships were explored with the direct aim of gaining better understanding of how the effects of these links may influence university teachers' professional learning about teaching and the decisions they take in terms of using student feedback to influence their teaching practice. This was illustrated in Figure 2.4, which emerged from the conceptual understandings illuminated in Chapter 2.

The framework presents the complexity of the phenomenon of student feedback and the matrix of relationships that are evident in the potential role that it could play in university teaching practice. Each of the domains contributes to the matrix of interactions, but it is only once all the domains are considered that the full complexity of the teaching environment at a research-led university, and thus also the use of student feedback, could be better understood.

3.3   USING ACTIVITY THEORY AS ANALYTICAL LENS

There are various factors at play in the teaching and learning space, and in student feedback processes. These include cognitive, emotional, practical, behavioural and social aspects. Theoretical concepts, practical (concrete) activities or issues, and social interactions therefore are involved in how university teachers would approach their teaching practice and how they would engage with student feedback as an integral part of the teaching and learning process. It is thus not only a matter of how

university teachers think about teaching and learning, but also how they use instruments or tools, such as student feedback in this particular study, to facilitate their own professional learning within their particular teaching and learning contexts.

Furthermore, the fact that SU (the site of inquiry) is positioned as a research-led university adds another layer of complexity to the phenomenon under scrutiny in this study. It therefore was important to remain aware of the institutional context, as well as how university teachers conceive of and approach their teaching practice as academic professionals, to gain better understanding of how university teachers respond to student feedback in terms of this practice. Based on these principles, activity theory was deemed an appropriate theoretical lens to explore and analyse the research problem.

3.3.1   A brief description of activity theory

Activity theory presumes that human beings can be understood through their "purposeful interaction with the world in the context of their natural everyday life" (Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006:31). Meaning is thus constructed as people actively engage with other people or socio-cultural artefacts in their daily practices. It is within and through our interactions with particular entities and people in our everyday lives that we learn. The theory proposes that the relationship between people and objects within their environment are mediated (thus influenced) by cultural artefacts which could include anything from physical objects to language, signs and even fellow human beings (Vygotsky, 1982:166, in Daniels, Cole & Wertsch, 2007). Trowler and Knight (2000) present activity theory as a useful framework for exploring these relationships to help us to better understand such social practices.

Activity theory is underpinned by the perspective that human life is fundamentally rooted in participation in human activities that are oriented toward objects (Sannino, Daniels & Gutiérrez, 2009). Activity theory thus proposes that all human endeavours are driven by particular goals (Kaptelinin & Miettinen, 2005). Within this theoretical perspective, the focus is not so much on human beings within their individual capacity, but rather as being part of a collective society consisting of various activity systems. Activity theorists use an 'activity triangle' for revealing the social and material resources that are salient within activity (Engeström, 1991; 1999a). This

activity triangle, as depicted in Figure 3.1, contains the theoretical terms introduced in this theory – *subject*, *object*, means of production (*tools or instruments*), *division of labour*, *community* and *rules* – and it also depicts the higher order processes of production, exchange, distribution and consumption (Roth & Lee, 2007). These terms are discussed below Figure 3.1.
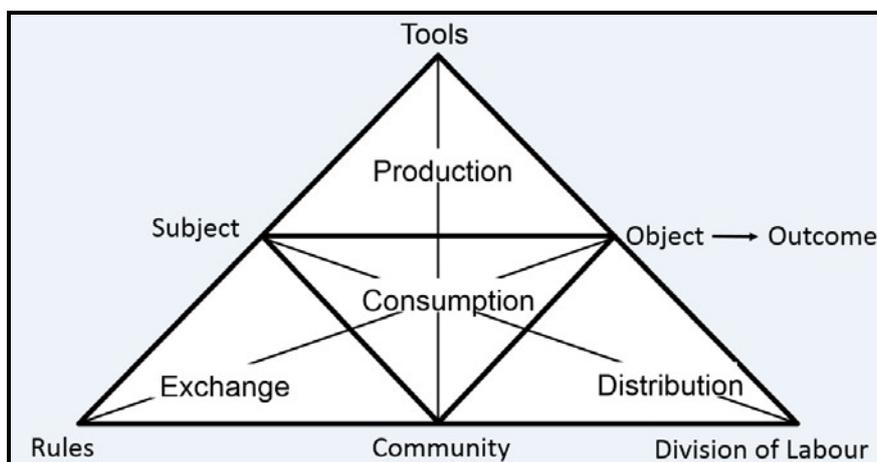
Figure 3.1: The basic structure of human activity (Source: Engeström, 1993:68)

In activity theory, the term *activity* is not seen as a brief or instantaneous act with a defined beginning and end, but rather as an "evolving, complex structure of mediated and collective human agency" (Roth & Lee, 2007:198). An activity system comprises a number of basic elements or components, including:

- a practitioner **or subject**,
- the **object** or motive of the activity,
- its **mediating artefacts** (e.g. tools, signs, symbols),
- the **rules** generally followed in carrying out the activity,
- the **community** of co-workers and colleagues involved in the activity, and
- the **division of labour** within the activity (Hart-Landsberg, Braunger, Reder & Cross, 1992:7).

Activity thus includes objects (motives) and instruments (signs, tools, artefacts), as well as norms and procedures for realising certain expectations, which in activity theory are referred to as outcomes (Bedny, Seglin & Meister, 2000).

Activity theory points to **mediation** of the relationship between the **subject** (the one that acts) and the **object** (the motive that drives the subject's actions) through the use of instruments or **artefacts** available within the system. Within this triangular notion of activity, the process of mediation takes place within and for a **community**, in which participants or stakeholders take on **various roles** in terms of their individual capacity (e.g. the teacher teaches) but also in relation to the broader community (e.g. the teacher may also be a parent or spouse). These communities are organised and governed according to certain **rules** and regulations which exert influence on the triangular system. In this study, the mediation between university teachers (subjects) and what they desire to achieve through their teaching (object) was explored through the use of student feedback as a tool to facilitate their teaching. Object-oriented activities are thus the core of activity theory and distinguish it from other approaches that focus on short-term action only as the unit of analysis (Sannino *et al.*, 2009:2-3). Engeström (2001:56) describes the object of activity as "a moving target, not reducible to conscious short-term goals".

These object-oriented endeavours are always undertaken within particular contexts, which are often riddled with contradictions and challenges (Kaptelinin & Miettinen, 2005). The contradictions most often have historical and cultural roots (Engeström, 1987; Garraway, 2009). As such, contradictions and challenges can be analysed in terms of how they came into existence and what their influences are on the activity system. These kinds of analyses could be helpful in providing information for better understanding of such activity systems, which, in turn, could provide the stimuli for changes within the system.

Activity theory further posits that people are continually shaping and being shaped by their social contexts (Roth & Lee, 2007:189). It thus focuses on analysing how human beings engage in activities as part of their everyday lives through which their social contexts, as well as they themselves, are being influenced and shaped. The concept of 'activity' therefore is the most fundamental concept in activity theory (Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006:31) and is understood as a process in which both subject and object are being transformed (Leont'ev, 1978).

This signifies that activity does not refer to random actions, but is driven by motive (Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006). In and through activities, people develop their skills, personalities and consciousness, and may find solutions to resolve contradictions that could emerge in the activity system. In so doing, people may generate new cultural artefacts in order to attain objects or outcomes, which could lead to the transformation of social conditions and the self. The actual nature of the activity forms the core of activity theory (Sannino *et al.*, 2009:1). Activity theory thus aims at understanding human beings as individuals as well as social entities within their natural everyday life circumstances, through an analysis of how activities originate, how they are structured and the processes involved in particular activity settings (Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006:31).

3.3.2   The historical development of activity theory

Activity theory has its roots in cultural-historical psychology developed by Lev Vygotsky, Alexei Leont'ev and A. R. Luria in the post-revolutionary Russia of the 1920s and 1930s (Engeström, 2008:28). Both Vygotsky and Leont'ev grounded their work in Marxism. Marx perceived human societies in terms of class groupings – differentiating the class that holds the power and who controls production (the rich or bourgeoisie), from those who are dispossessed and provide the labour for production (the working class) (Trainer, 2010). Marx argued that society progresses through conflicts between these classes and that all aspects of society, such as social institutions and systems of law, morality and education, are determined by the economic situation. The relationship to the means of production is thus determined by one's economic class.

While Marx had a strong focus on the economic structure of societies, Vygotsky focused on the broader socio-cultural context of societies and how human beings make sense of their own positions within these societies (Roth & Lee, 2007). Vygotsky (1981) argued that one has to look at individuals within their sociocultural contexts in order to understand the inner mental processes of human beings. The various components of societies, such as the physical, technological, socio- economical, and intellectual environments that manifest as a complex and

interdependent web of systems determine the various ways in which individuals respond and react within their societies (Daniels *et al.*, 2007:21).

This process of sense making and mediated action, as introduced by Vygotsky, is depicted in Figure 3.2. Vygotsky argued that humans (**S** in Triangle A) do not interact instinctively to the environment (**R** in Triangle A), but in terms of how they interpret that environment (**X** in Triangle A) (Bakhurst, 2009). How humans act towards and within the environment is influenced by their interpretation of and the meaning they attribute to that environment. Vygotsky and his followers introduced the concept of "artefact-mediated and object-driven" action (Triangle B), arguing that people (**Subject** in Triangle B) make sense of aspects in their environment (**Object** in Triangle B) through the use of artefacts (**Mediating artefact** in Triangle B) which include cultural means, tools and signs (Vygotsky, 1978:40). These interpretations could also be shaped and transformed over time as people have new experiences (Bedny *et al.*, 2000). Cultural-historical activity theory assists social scientists in studying the ways in which humans shape, and are being shaped by the artefacts which mediate their engagement with the world (Daniels, 2008:2).
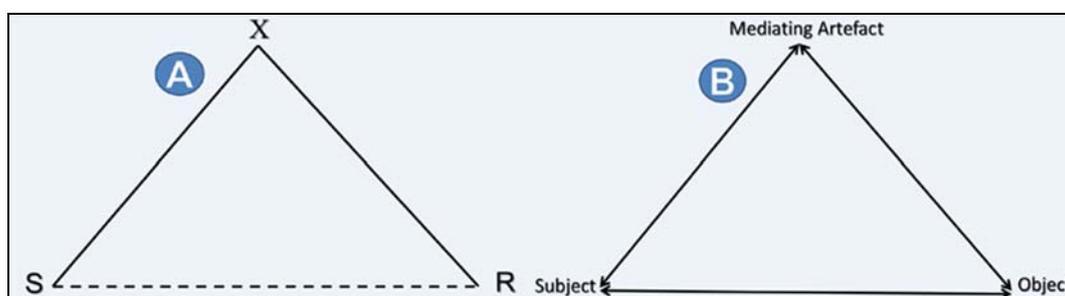
Figure 3.2: (A) Vygotsky's model of mediated action and (B) its common reformulation (Source: Engeström, 2001:134)

Vygotsky's work was mostly focused on personal development and centred around the idea of mediation (Engeström, 2001; Bakhurst, 2009). He described labour as a process that is mediated by tools (in the broad sense). His studies tended to focus on individuals and the relationship between the human individual and objects of the environment through the mediation of the mind by means of cultural tools or artefacts (Roth & Lee, 2007:199). The limitation of this first-generation activity theory was that the unit of analysis remained individually focused (Illeris, 2009).

Leont'ev (1981) overcame this limitation by distinguishing between an individual action and a collective activity. He argued that man relates to nature itself only through relationships with other people, which means that labour is not only mediated by tools or artefacts, but is also socially mediated (Leont'ev, 1981:208). Leont'ev therefore integrated the idea of mediation by other human beings and social relations into the triangular model. This development encompassed the notion of collective object-oriented activity (Engeström, 2001) and inspired the second generation of activity theory, within which the different levels of action become more complex and the distinction between 'activity', 'action' and 'operation' is therefore made (Bedny & Karwowski, 2004:174).

Teaching and learning constitute a social practice (Walker, 2001; Ruth, 2014) which occurs in particular contexts (Gunasekara, 2004; Ashwin, 2012; Leibowitz *et al.*, 2015). The second generation of activity theory affords the opportunity to study teaching practice, not only in terms of mediating artefacts (such as student feedback) which are available within the activity system of teaching in higher education, but also the interactions and relations that are at work between the components of the activity system (the teaching and learning context or environment).

Leont'ev (1981) argued that activities are realised through concrete actions in order to attain certain goals set by individuals. People's active engagement by way of certain sets of actions in the world or in particular contexts are thus motivated by the goals that they intend to achieve within those particular contexts. Particular sequences of actions would thus constitute an activity. How these sequences of actions unravel would be influenced by operations, which entail the conditions that are required for the actions to lead to the attainment of the ultimate goal(s) of the activity (Leont'ev, 1981; Engeström, 1987).

This distinction and the recognition of social influence in man's engagement with the world formed the basis for Leont'ev's three-level model of activity (Figure 3.3). In this three-level model of activity, "[t]he uppermost level of collective activity is driven by an object-related motive; the middle level of individual (or group) action is driven by a conscious goal; and the bottom level of automatic operations is driven by the conditions and tools of the action at hand" (Engeström & Miettenin, 1999:4).
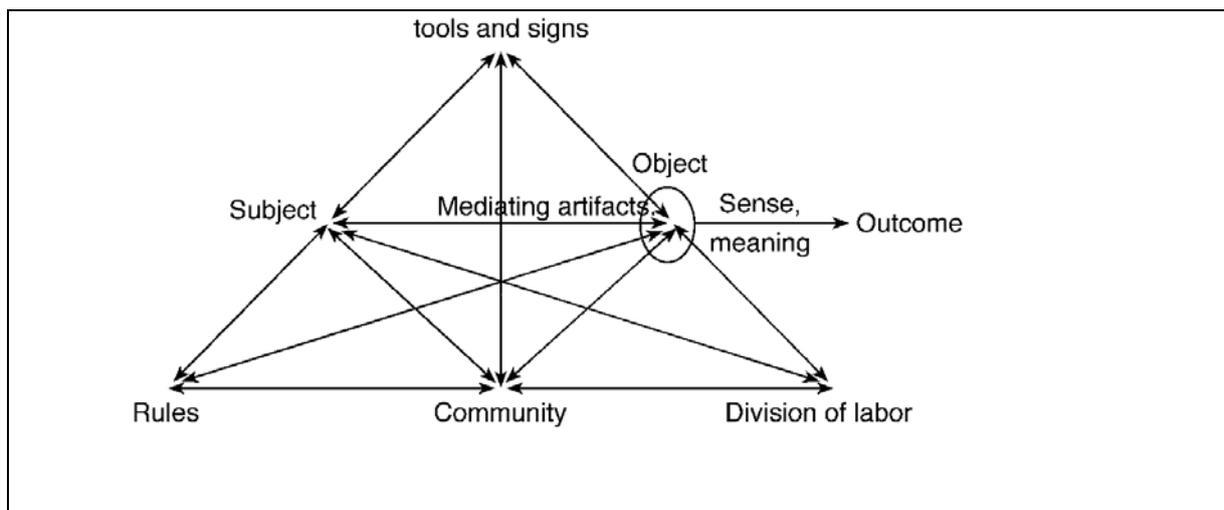
Figure 3.3: The structure of a human activity system (Source: Engeström, 2001:135)

Teaching in higher education, with the focus on using of student feedback as a tool to inform teaching practice, constituted the activity system in this study. To realise this activity, certain sets of actions needed to be taken, such as the act of teaching; collecting feedback from the students about their experiences of the teaching; processing and analysing the student feedback information; interpreting the student feedback information; and responding to it through particular actions. Certain conditions (operations) would create an enabling and encouraging environment. This would include conditions where positive value is attached to student feedback information; where university teachers regard students as a valuable source of information about the teaching and learning experiences in classes; and where university teachers aspire to or find it beneficial to pay attention to student feedback information and respond in ways that would promote and enhance their teaching practice to possibly advance their careers (section 2.5). Other conditions may lead to a disabling or constraining environment where student feedback may have no or little significant value or influence within the teaching and learning process.

Engeström's (1999a) further development of the second generation of activity theory advocates the study of tools or artefacts (instruments) as crucial components of human activity and argues that the focus of the study of mediation should be on its

relationships with the other components of an activity system. The role of context in the form of the broader community with its rules and division of labour (different roles and responsibilities) thus becomes all the more important to study, as it exerts influence on how the subject works on the object (the "problem-space") (Garraway & Morkel, 2015:28).

Cole (1988) contested the second generation of activity theory by pointing out its lack of attention to cultural and social diversity. It was recognised that individuals also bring in their own histories from the social positions that they take up through the division of labour within the activity system. There therefore are many voices playing into the activity system, which could lead to contradictions and struggles in the definition of the motives and objects of the activity. Engeström (2001:135-136) drew on the ideas of "dialogicality and multi-voicedness" in order to expand the framework of the second generation of activity theory into the third generation, in which he saw joint activity or practice as the unit of analysis, instead of individual activity systems. Engeström was of the opinion that even well-defined activity systems do not function in isolation, but are in interaction with other activity systems. It is in this interaction that instability and contradictions could arise and serve as the "driving force of change and development" (Engeström, 2001:135). It is thus not only the subject that can be modified through mediated activity, but also the environment. The third generation of activity theory therefore intended to develop conceptual tools to understand the dialogues, multiple perspectives, and networks of interacting activity systems (Engeström, 2001). This model is depicted in Figure 3.4.
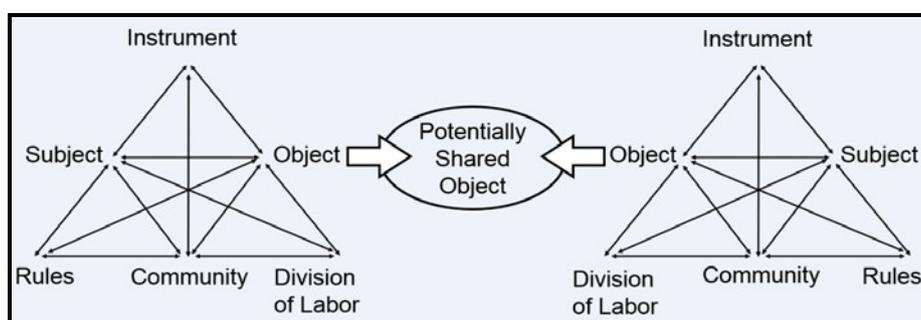
Figure 3.4: Two interacting activity systems as minimal model for the third generation of activity theory (Adapted from: Engeström, 2001:136)

In this iteration of activity theory, Engeström summarised the theory along the lines of five principles (Engeström, 2001):

- **The activity system as a whole**, including the artefact-mediated and object-driven activity (the set and sequence of actions taken by the subject) and how it functions in relation to other activity systems, **serves as the primary unit of analysis**. Goal-directed individual and group actions, as well as automatic operations (motives, individual acts and context), are relatively independent but subordinate units of analysis. However, it is crucial to interpret these actions and operations against the background of entire activity systems in order to better understand the system.

- The second principle is the "**multi-voicedness**" of activity systems. An activity system always consists of a community of participants with multiple perspectives, conventions and concerns. The division of labour in an activity system creates different positions for the participants. Participants have to interpret the different voices speaking into the activity system. They have to make meaning of it for themselves and take decisions on how they will respond to it or how it will shape them in their particular role(s) within that system. The multi-voicedness of activity systems could thus serve as a source of both tension and innovation as participants find their own ways of responding to these voices. Within the student feedback system, these multiple voices include that of the students, the university teachers, university management within the academic departments of the university teachers, and even the teaching and learning policy directives as stipulated in official institutional documents.

- The third principle is **historicity**. Activity systems take shape and are transformed over lengthy periods of time. Their problems and potentials can only be understood against their own histories or backgrounds. History needs to be considered in terms of the local history of the activity and its objects, but also as the history of the theoretical ideas and tools that have shaped the activity. The history of student feedback thus needs to be explored against its local history at Stellenbosch University but also against the more global history of the use of student feedback in teaching and learning. The types of ideas informing student

feedback and how these ideas have changed over time also need to be explored. This is done in Chapter 4 in which this study is contextualised.

- The central role of **contradictions as sources of change and development** is the fourth principle. Engeström drew on Ill'enkov (1977:82) to argue that, where there are contradictions within activity systems, opportunities are provided for transformation and improvement. Contradictions are not the same as conflicts or problems. Contradictions are historically accumulating structural tensions within and between activity systems. This could be of particular relevance in this study when one considers how the use of student feedback for professional learning as well as for performance appraisal within the structures of the University may relate to each other and how contradictions that may arise (for example between the rules and division of labour) may ultimately influence the activity of using student feedback within teaching practice. Though these contradictions may cause disturbance or conflict, it could also create opportunities for new innovations and change to both the activity and the subject.

- Engeström's fifth principle is that of **expansive transformations**. He argued that, as the contradictions of an activity system intensify over time, some individual participants may begin to deviate from the conventional norms and practices. In some cases, this may escalate into a collaborative effort which could change the system. It must be emphasised that such expansive transformation is not a given in all cases where activity systems interact with each other. In some cases it may only be certain individuals within an activity system who would transform their activity without transforming the system as a whole (Knight *et al.*, 2006). The data collected in this study may shed light on whether the student feedback activity system at Stellenbosch University has been or is being transformed by its participants, or whether transformation (if any) is taking place within the individuals.

3.3.2.1 Expansive learning

When practitioners transform their own work, a new kind of learning emerges (Sannino *et al.,* 2009:13). In order to analyse this type of learning that can take place within workplace environments, Engeström elaborated on activity theory by developing the theory of expansive learning (Engeström, 2001). The theory of

expansive learning argues that the participants in an activity system have the capacity to interpret and expand the definition of the object of activity, in other words, the motive that drives the actions within the system, and respond to it in increasingly enriched ways. The object or purpose of activity within a collective activity system could thus constantly be reproduced, continuously setting and informing new goals and actions (Engeström, Lompscher & Rückriem, 2005). Expansive and enhanced professional practice thus occurs in activity settings which enable "expansion of the object of activity" (Daniels, 2008:126). By studying the formation of objects, we are studying the learning that takes place in and across complex and rapidly changing activity systems. One of the aims of this study was to explore how university teachers at SU experienced student feedback in terms of their own professional practice as teachers, thus whether student feedback enables or constrains professional or expansive learning.

Within the expansive approach, learning is not viewed merely as a linear process which takes place in short-lived actions by a particular individual in a particular social space at a particular point in time. It rather is seen as a broader process of development which happens over time (Engeström, 1999b). Expansive learning occurs when subjects become aware of contradictions between current activity and new forms of activity and they respond by transforming the object motives of their activities. They then transcend from performing current actions to engage in new collective activities. In this sense, learning by expanding can be defined as "a thoughtfully mastered learning activity" (Engeström, 1987:210).

The constantly changing nature of the higher education environment (Rowland, 1996; Barnett, 1997; Altbach, 2007) could lead to institutional contexts that hold certain requirements which may vary over time and even cause objects to work in contradiction of one another. This could challenge university teachers to respond in innovative ways. In any student feedback system, there could potentially be contradictions between how a university may perceive student feedback to be used in relation to teaching and learning processes and how university teachers (and even students) may view the role of student feedback in these processes. Such contradictions may cause university teachers to respond in new and expanded ways

by creating new activities and practices (Engeström, 2001:58) in order to improve their students' learning experiences.

This iteration of activity theory thus provides an avenue for exploring the possible network of relations within a student feedback-mediated system in which multiple participants, voices, traditions and perspectives may interpret the object of the system in various ways and thus influence the system in a variety of ways as each of these mediate their path within the system. It opens up opportunities for exploring whether the expectations, purposes and requirements of the multiplicity of participants work towards common goals within the system. On the other hand, it also allows the opportunity to search for possible contradictions that may be yielded as a result of this multi-voicedness of the system, and also to what extent such contradictions may lead to changes and developments within the system. In the context of the student feedback system, for example, one could consider how the practices within such a system may be similar or different with regard to the perspectives of using student feedback for professional development on the one hand, and for performance appraisal purposes on the other.

3.3.3   The relevance of activity theory to this study

As a practitioner-researcher, I was interested in finding out whether and how student feedback plays a role in the teaching practice of university teachers at a research-led university such as SU. In my experience as the person responsible for managing the institutional student feedback system at SU since 2008, I, in conversations and interviews with university teachers, have found that they perceived SU to have a preference for using student feedback as an evaluative tool during performance appraisal processes of staff, rather than as a diagnostic tool for the purpose of professional learning and improvement. A previous research project at SU (Van der Merwe, 2007) had indicated that university teachers perceived student feedback to be used more in terms of performance appraisal and less in terms of enhancing teaching practice. Since the latter is the approach that SU proclaims to advocate through its institutional Student Feedback Policy, it poses a problem when the general conceptions amongst university teachers appear to be the former.

A considerable amount of literature about student feedback is available (Seldin, 1997; Brennan & Williams, 2004; Hativa, 2013; also see section 2.5). Much of the literature focus on student feedback systems and practical issues regarding the collection and distribution of the data; recommendations for analysis and interpretation of the data; and even some suggestions on how to respond to the data. Much less theoretically grounded literature on how student feedback could serve as a professional learning tool to assist university teachers to improve their teaching is available, however (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

Some relevant literature grounds the use of student feedback within theories of effective teaching (Marsh & Roche, 1997; Ramsden, 1998; Young, 2006; Hativa 2013b). This study, however, was focused on analysing the activities related to student feedback and its role in university teaching practice, rather than on effective teaching per se. Questions arose with regard to aspects which would influence university teachers' decisions to respond to student feedback; how teaching and learning processes are experienced by university teachers; and how it eventually influences everyday teaching practice. In this sense, activity theory opened up possibilities for exploring these interactions and processes (Ashwin, 2012), as the activity triangle heuristic provided a theoretical framework for dealing with theoretical problems or questions in a practical way. In this particular study, activity theory has provided a theoretical lens for exploring and analysing the role of student feedback in university teaching practice in a given context (Zurita & Nussbaum, 2006) and how such teaching practice was mediated through the availability and use of student feedback data.

The literature proposes activity theory as useful for analysing professional development (Davies, Howes & Farrel, 2008; Crossouard, 2009; Webb & Jones, 2009) and workplace learning (Worthen, 2008). As this study focused on the role of student feedback in professional learning about teaching, this provided another reason for deeming activity theory to be appropriate as theoretical lens. Activity theory allows a focus on the individual teacher's teaching practice while also considering the broader organisational context (Murphy & Rodriguez-Manzaneres, 2008:444).

Webb and Jones (2009:165) state that the choice of activity theory is often determined by the research context; a system "that produced tensions and difficulties but also provided driving forces for change". The higher education context and particularly that of a research-led university, was portrayed as constantly changing and implying many challenges (Barnett, 1997; Altbach, 2007). Further tension could also be experienced in terms of the binary use of student feedback for both performance appraisal and professional development. According to activity system theorists, it is through the process of engaging with such tensions or contradictions that expansive learning takes place (Engeström, 2001). Whether and how such tensions might encourage or inhibit opportunities for professional learning and improvement thus constituted important aspects to be explored within this particular study. The importance of contextual relations between components within the activity theory framework, as well as its common focus on contradictions and tensions within activity systems, further contributed to its appropriateness as a theoretical lens for this study.

Since activity theory focuses on work-related activity, it also lessens the theory-praxis gap (Roth & Lee, 2007:210) and as such becomes useful in understanding "processes of developmental transformations over time" (Engeström, 2000b:308). In terms of this study, activity theory was useful in analysing and gaining a better understanding of the qualitative changes in praxes (Engeström, 1999b) pertaining to the use of student feedback in professional learning about teaching. Vygotsky (1978) conceptualised this notion of potential qualitative changes in praxis as the zone of proximal development and described it as the 'space' within which learning, and thus development, can occur. The essence of the zone of proximal development is that there is a difference between "unassisted and assisted performance" (Hardman, 2005:379). Vygotsky argued that people are able to operate at higher levels when they are assisted by knowledgeable peers (or other forms of knowledge produced through cultural tools and artefacts) than they would if they function on their own (Wass & Golding, 2014). The zone of proximal development thus proposes that there is a difference between what university teachers can learn about their teaching with the assistance of student feedback and what they can learn on their own, in the absence of such feedback information.

Although current institutional contexts may influence the activities characteristic of the particular activity system, activity theorists believe that human beings also have the power and capability to act from their own point of view (Roth & Lee, 2007:210). This agency allows human beings to critique current practices and engage in new and innovative practices for the future. Activity thus originates from the sense that people make from the results of their actions within their activity system (praxis). From a theoretical perspective, actions are thus always grounded in the sense that people make of the **anticipated** results of their actions. This meaning making from anticipated results provides practical reasons for activity (Ricoeur, 1991; Roth & Lee, 2007:210). Activity theory is thus grounded in practice, both theoretically and concretely (Bedny *et al.*, 2000:168). Establishing this link between theory and practice provides particular strength to activity theory as a practice-based theory (Sannino *et al.*, 2009:7). In this sense, the theoretical framework provided by activity theory is useful for analysing university teachers' conceptions about teaching and learning; their conceptions about student feedback; and how these conceptions as well as contextual factors influence their practical behaviour in terms of applying insights from their student feedback to their daily teaching practice, thus lessening the gap between theory and practice.

In summary, the following aspects of activity theory thus distinguished it as an appropriate theoretical lens for exploring the research questions of this study:

- Activity theory focuses on the relationship between a subject (university teachers) and objects (the goals that drive the teaching and learning system) through the use of social artefacts (student feedback) (Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006). This makes it suitable for exploring the relationship between university teachers, their goal(s) for teaching and how they use student feedback towards achieving those motives or goals.

- With teaching always being situated and contextualised, the fact that activity theory acknowledges the influence of context (in the form of rules, community, division of labour) adds to its appropriateness as a lens for exploring the research questions in this particular study. Student feedback is also an inherently situated and contextualised activity that cannot be properly

understood outside of its context (Chen & Hoshower, 2003; Brennan & Williams, 2004).

- Activity theory also recognises that people possess agency (Roth & Lee, 2007). Based on this human agency, university teachers can decide how they engage within the student feedback system. These decision-making processes would then influence how their activities evolve within the student feedback system. Activity theory provides a framework to study how this agency and decision-making processes could influence professional practice.

- Activity theory asserts that humans are active participants within the activity system and that their activities are driven by particular motives (Leont'ev, 1981; Roth & Lee, 2007). This characteristic provides a supporting basis for exploring university teachers' active participation in and decision making regarding the use of student feedback in their teaching practice.

- Activity theory also recognises the presence of contradictions and difficulties and how these could lead to change in activities and activity systems (Engeström, 2001; Kaptelinin & Miettinen, 2005). As mentioned in section 1.3, previous institutional research at Stellenbosch University revealed that there seemed to be some discrepancy between what university teachers at this institution aspired to use student feedback for and what they actually perceived it to be used for within the institution. It was thus anticipated that such a contradiction could constitute an important aspect of exploration in this study.

- Activity theory aims at understanding human beings as individuals (university teachers) as well as social entities (academics) within their natural everyday life circumstances (teaching and learning environment) (Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006). It thus resonates with the aim of this study to better understand how student feedback possibly influences teaching practice by studying how individual university teachers at Stellenbosch University engage in this activity as part of their everyday teaching practice.

As a lens or vantage point to view and analyse human activities within particular contexts, activity theory thus offers considerable potential for analysing the learning that occurs when people engage in activities, as well as the kind of learning that leads to new activities (Bourke, Mentis & O'Neill, 2013). All the arguments mentioned

above thus provided a convincing case for using activity theory to analyse the possible role of student feedback in teaching as it is enacted in university teachers' daily teaching practice.

3.3.4   Why activity theory was preferred

Activity theory is closely related to and shares various common principles with systems theory and complexity theory (Schneider & Somers, 2006; Ardichvili, 2008; Yawson, 2012). Questions may thus be asked as to why activity theory was preferred in this study and not general systems theory or complexity theory. It is not my intention to provide detailed explanations of the latter two theories, but to briefly put forward basic arguments for why these theories did not provide the appropriate frameworks for this particular study.

General systems theory refers to the theory underlying the study of systems. Systems theory does not represent only one single theory, but "a set of constructs that coevolved with a set of related intellectual streams concerned with the nature and characteristics of systems" (Yawson, 2012:56). To understand a system, one needs to understand the relationships that exist between the various parts that work together within the system to determine the behaviour of the system. This theory thus focuses on the system as a whole and the system's fit and relationship to its environment and not necessarily the individual's role within the structure of the system. According to general system theorists, some systems were thought to be "of almost universal significance in all disciplines" (Boulding, 1956:200). With this notion, the interaction of the individuals with their environment is not understood at the level of the individual as such, but at the aggregated level of populations or aggregations of individuals within the system that is often governed by the principle of equilibrium (Schneider & Somers, 2006).

Systems theory could also be used to study complex systems, but the issue of complexity challenges the systems theory notion that equilibrium was the norm to which a system would return to if there were small deviations (Walby, 2007). A complexity system is viewed as one in which the relationships between the various interacting parts of the system are dynamic and ever-changing. It thus often "produces unintended consequences and renders the universe unpredictable"

(Tetenbaum, 1998:21). This theory therefore posits that the concept of the system could be revised in light of these unintended consequences. The system can therefore never really be described completely and accurately since new and unexpected consequences could continuously arise. The whole system can therefore not be fully understood by analysing the components, as these could experience continuous change. Complexity theorists thus concur that "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts" (Reitsma, 2003:13).

Both systems theory and complexity theory, like activity theory, focus on systems or organisations as whole entities consisting of various interacting elements. The focus on the relationships between these elements and the influence they exert on the system is similar to the notion in activity theory that it is important to understand the relationships in order to understand the system. However, whereas systems theory and complexity theory focus on the structure and relationship of the system as a whole in terms of its environment, activity theory focuses on the role of the human being in the structure of the system by exploring the human being's activities within the system. Activity theorists argue that human beings' interaction with their environment is mediated by cultural artefacts, but that these human beings have the agency or capability to also act from their own sense of meaning. Activity theory therefore does not focus primarily on the system as such, but on the individual and collective participation of individuals in such systems, as well as the possibility for expansive learning. Since this study was aimed at understanding university teachers' participation within teaching and learning as mediated through the use of student feedback, thus their participation in particular in the student feedback activity system, it renders activity theory the more appropriate theoretical framework for this research project.

3.4 THE ACTIVITY SYSTEM OF TEACHING AT STELLENBOSCH UNIVERSITY

The use of student feedback in teaching and learning and the anticipated influence on teaching practice constitute the activity system that was explored in this study. Although the activity is accomplished in the top half of the activity triangle (see

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Figures 3.1 and 3.3) the production of the activity involves the networks of relations between all the components of the activity system.

The subject of the activity may be an individual or groups of individuals who engage in an activity with a similar motive or object in mind. In the student feedback activity system at Stellenbosch, the subjects that could be involved include students (who provide the feedback on their teaching and learning experiences), the university teachers (those who perform the act of teaching) and educational management at the university (such as the heads of departments and deans of faculties). In this study, the focus was on *university teachers*' engagement with the teaching and learning system as mediated by student feedback, therefore university teachers constituted the subjects. Figure 3.5 provides a visual representation of the teaching and learning activity system at SU, as potentially mediated by student feedback.
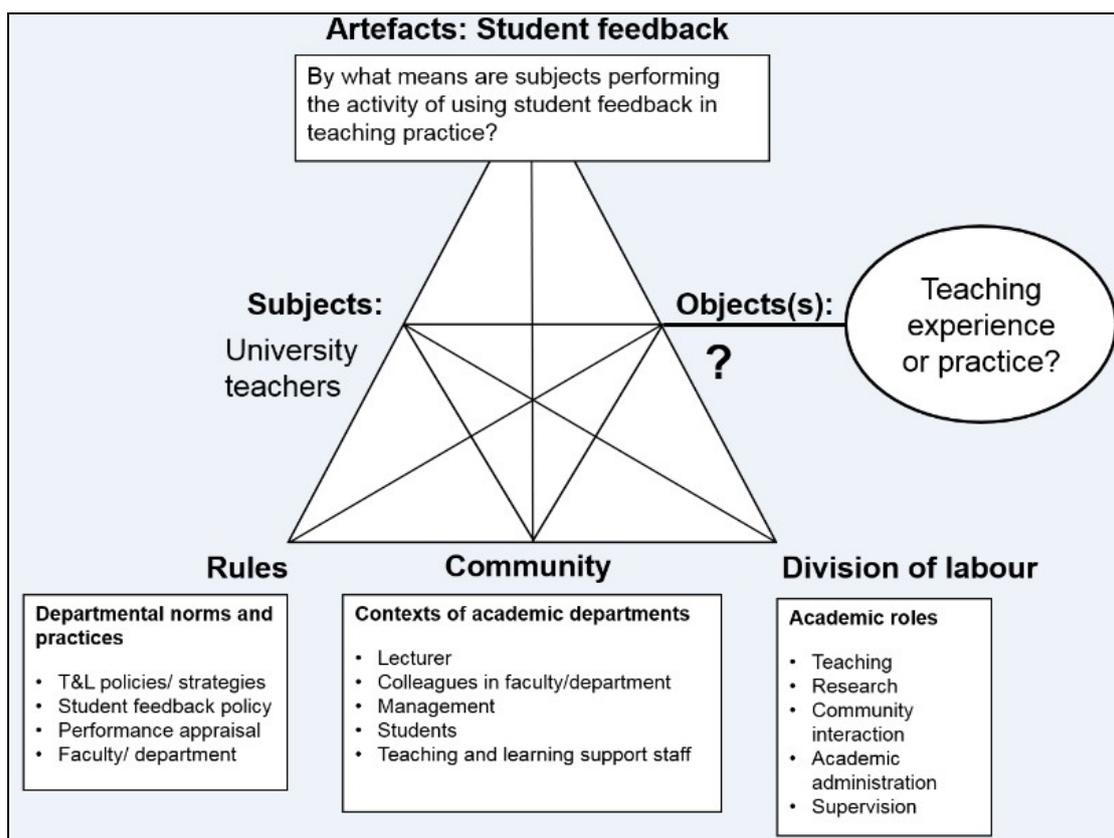
Figure 3.5: The activity system of teaching at Stellenbosch University, as potentially mediated by student feedback (adapted from Engeström, 2001)

Different subjects may define the **objects** of activity differently. It has been established in Chapter 2 that the teachers' conceptions of teaching and learning to a large extent determine how they teach; why they teach in particular ways; and what informs their decisions in terms of how they would use artefacts, instruments or signs to inform their teaching practice (Ginns *et al.*, 2008; Postareff & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2008; Virtanen & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2010). It was therefore anticipated that the object(s) in this study would be revealed through exploring university teachers' *teaching and learning philosophies*.

In mediating these links between the university teacher and his/her motives (or objects) in teaching, the university teacher may make use of various instruments or **artefacts** to attain such objects. Artefacts can thus influence how a subject's activities will relate to the object and intended outcome of the activity (Roth & Lee, 2007; Vygotsky, 1982, in Daniels *et al.*, 2007; Daniels, 2008). In the case of this study, *student feedback* information constituted the mediating artefact between the university teacher and his/her teaching practice and experiences. As depicted in Figure 4.5, the object and its influence on teaching practice serve as the "unknowns" within the activity system. It is these unknowns that this study attempted to explore.

3.5   SUMMARY

Teaching always occurs within a particular context and community (Leibowitz *et al.*, 2015). The broader national higher education context maintains its own demands in terms of norms and standards for teaching. These national demands generally filter down into institutional policies, rules, regulations and processes which govern or mediate the institution's activities. The policies and rules are usually interpreted and enacted in the academic departments where the university teachers fulfil their teaching roles. I shall thus refer to this component of the teaching and learning system in this study as the '*departmental norms and practices*' (see Figure 3.5).

Other participants within this activity system also exert influence on these relationships, namely colleagues (including management) within departments or faculties; other peers; teaching and learning support staff; and the students. The teaching and learning activity system furthermore includes rules (which govern or guide the activities that people engage in); a community (that includes other

participants who form part of the activity system and who may have similar or different goals within the system); and various academic roles and responsibilities held by those involved in the activity system (Toews & Yazedjian, 2007). Since the academic department is the closest context within which university teachers fulfil their teaching roles, I refer to the community of the activity system in this study as the '*contexts of academic departments*' (as depicted in Figure 3.5). The division of labour refers to the various '*academic roles*' that form part of the activities of a university teacher (see Figure 3.5).

How university teachers use an artefact such as student feedback to mediate their professional pathways as academics, keeping in mind the contextual influences within or of the system, could create ongoing opportunities for professional learning that could result in enhanced teaching practice (Knight *et al.*, 2006). This study particularly explored the potential role of student feedback as mediating artefact in university teachers' professional practice as teachers.

In the higher education context, university teachers also simultaneously have to take up other roles that are either required by their institutions or form an innate part of the profession of teaching, such as administrative work; supervising postgraduate students; and engaging in committee work and community interaction (Toews & Yazedjian, 2007; Leibowitz, 2012; Boud & Brew, 2013). At SU a particular research-led context also needs to be taken cognisance of in terms of its influence on the teaching and learning process. These contexts, as they relate to this study, are discussed in Chapter 4.

CHAPTER 4

CONTEXTUALISING THE STUDY

4.1   INTRODUCTION

It was established in Chapter 2 that teaching is a deeply contextualised phenomenon and that the interpretation and use of student feedback cannot ignore the contexts in which it is given. The context as it relates to the phenomenon under scrutiny is described in this chapter. My approach to exploring relevant literature is depicted in Figure 4.1. This includes some exploration of the international higher education context; the SA national higher education landscape; as well as the institutional context of SU as the research site. D'Andrea and Gosling (2005) stated that it is not only the internal context that influences teaching and learning in an institution, but also external factors embedded in international and national contexts. How these contexts relate to being an academic and, in particular, being a university teacher are discussed below.
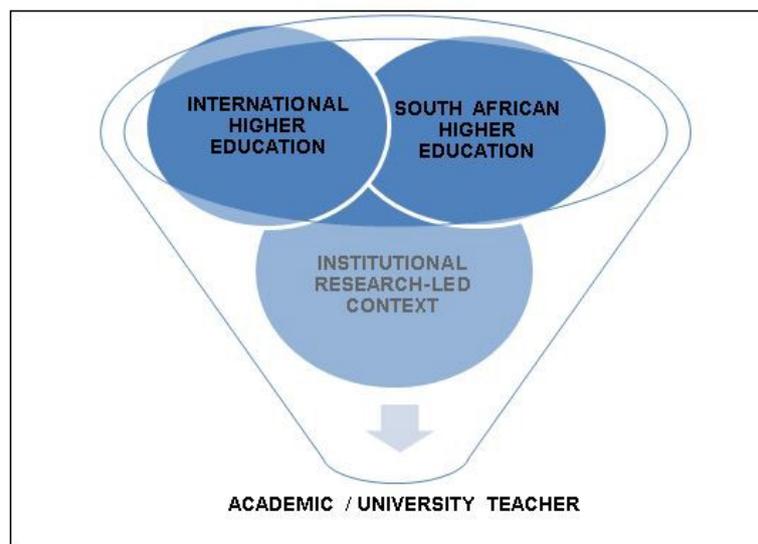
Figure 4.1: Framework for contextualising the study

4.2 HIGHER EDUCATION INTERNATIONALLY

Developments in higher education over the last century were reported to the UNESCO 2009 World Conference on Higher Education as nothing short of an academic revolution (Altbach, Reisberg & Rumbley, 2009:1). This description suggests that the higher education landscape has seen many changes in conditions, ways of working, beliefs, and other changes that are continuously influencing and transforming the landscape. These continuous changes create a higher education landscape that is characterised by complexity and diversity.

4.2.1 Complexity and diversity

Internationally, higher education has developed into a complex and diverse landscape heavy-laden by various challenges as the effects of massification and globalisation intensify (Barnett, 2009). These include challenges such as addressing inequalities; the changing role and nature of higher education; tension between teaching and research functions; the professionalisation of the teaching role; and the evaluation of teaching quality (Lueddeke, 2003; Barnett, 2005; Lindblom-Ylänne, Trigwell, Nevgi & Ashwin, 2006; Altbach *et al.*, 2009). The effects of these challenges are evident in aspects such as expansion in enrolments (Scott, 1995; Altbach, 2013); increased diversification of the student profile (McNay, 2005); increased variation in student preparedness for higher education and thus greater variation in teaching needs. These aspects further lead to increasing demands on higher education infrastructure, resources and innovative ways of dealing with forms of diversity (Teichler, 2008; Altbach *et al.*, 2009).

Further fuelling an already challenging higher education context, seems to be the contentious issue of the roles that university teachers are required to perform as part of their duties as academics (Toews & Yazedjian, 2007). Literature relevant to the relationship between teaching and research (see Chapter 2) points to it being one of the serious issues facing universities (Brew, 1999; Jenkins, Healy & Zetter, 2007; Trowler & Wareham, 2008; Shin, Arimoto, Cummings & Teichler, 2015).

The purpose of higher education moreover has evolved over time to, in addition to producing new knowledge, include the responsibility to respond to societal issues

(Hall, Link & Scott, 2003; Barnett, 2012). Though some argue that it is not the responsibility of universities to prepare students for particular jobs, but for them to be able to function in a complex and unpredictable world (Group of Eight, 2013:8), globalisation and the pressures from industry and government still hold universities accountable to these demands (Altbach, 2007). This neoliberalist approach has promoted a market-driven approach to the governance of institutions of higher education, which seems to challenge the academic freedom and autonomy of academic staff (Rutherford, 2005; Ball, 2012). University education has increasingly been defined as a market commodity, which has promoted the ranking of universities according to league tables (Lynch, 2013). As mentioned in Chapter 2, these league tables attribute more weighting to research and thus pose a challenge to the stature of teaching (Graham, 2013).

Issues of diversity and complexity have thus impacted on universities internationally and they are battling with the implications thereof. As noted, this also has significant influence on how institutions of higher education are managed and governed.

4.2.2   Managerialism and professionalisation

The neoliberalist approach to marketisation of university education, as described above, has led to an increased culture of regulation and performativity. This, in turn, places much emphasis on quality assurance systems in order to monitor the quality of academics' teaching (Ball, 2003:216). In a managerialist system staff productivity takes high priority and therefore the evaluation of staff performance constitutes an essential part of the system (Arthur, 2009). In higher education this has led to university standards increasingly being measured against external factors such as student needs, funding agencies and government requirements (Douglas & Douglas, 2006). Quality assurance has thus become a high priority in many institutions of higher education (Altbach *et al.*, 2009). In addition, the field has become increasingly regulated, with professional bodies and mechanisms for assessing or evaluating teaching quality becoming an ever more important part of the field (Ball, 2003; Brennan, King & Lebeau, 2004).

Being driven by performance and market-related pressures, more emphasis is placed on accountability and quality surveillance (Kleinhenz & Ingvarson, 2004; Department of Education Science and Training (DEST), 2007; Giroux, 2013). Such measures result in academics often feeling that they are being monitored and under pressure to perform at constantly high levels which, in turn, negatively affects the morale of academics (Moore & Kuol, 2005). Universities continue to struggle with measuring a complex phenomenon such as the quality of teaching within market- driven agendas, as quality teaching is difficult to measure by counting and numbers (Tronto, 2010). In being under pressure to produce results regarding the evaluation of teaching, some institutions may be driven towards using student feedback as information pointing towards 'customer satisfaction' (Tronto, 2010:159).

With universities striving to respond to increasingly diverse student populations, as well as to issues relating to standards and quality (Lueddeke, 2003; Altbach, 2013), the professionalisation of teaching practice has gained more prominence over the years. This requires academics to engage with pedagogy beyond the level of acquiring teaching skills to also include critical interrogation of whether their approach to pedagogy is fit for its purpose (Lueddeke, 2003). Professionalism in teaching includes engagement in grappling with who individuals are as educators; what their roles and values are; and how they might go about enhancing their teaching practices as part of their professional practice (Walker, 2001). Walker (2001:12) states that professionality in teaching requires a commitment to taking a stance against policies that "prioritise the external, market-driven goods of the institutions" and sees this as a possible way of "talk[ing] back to the marketisation" trend in higher education (Walker, 2001:6).

While professionalisation of teaching is preferred by many in higher education, it is by no means an uncontested space. Discourses around professionalism often include aspects such as specialist knowledge, the commitment to learn throughout one's career, professional ethics, collegiality and good practice (Sanguinetti, 2000:240 as cited in Arthur, 2009). Performativity, conversely, focuses on value for money (efficiency), accountability (outcomes), competitiveness, and market discipline (Sanguinetti, 2000).

Student feedback lies at the crossing point between professionalism and performativity (Arthur, 2009). On the one hand it could be used as a professional learning tool to improve the quality of teaching, while on the other it forms part of universities' performance management and quality assurance systems to judge whether teaching is performed at the required standards (Ramsden, 1998; Chen & Hoshower, 2003; Arthur, 2009). These represent two divergent purposes which could create tension. While student feedback would have a formative, developmental purpose in its use for professional learning, it would also have a summative, evaluative purpose in its use for performance management and quality assurance. Since universities often end up using student feedback for both purposes (MacLeod, 2000), I would propose that the challenge for such universities would be to find a middle way between these two uses in which practices for the one would not negate the other.

4.2.3   Synthesis

Figure 4.2 provides a broad overview of my interpretation of the challenging nature of the international higher education context.
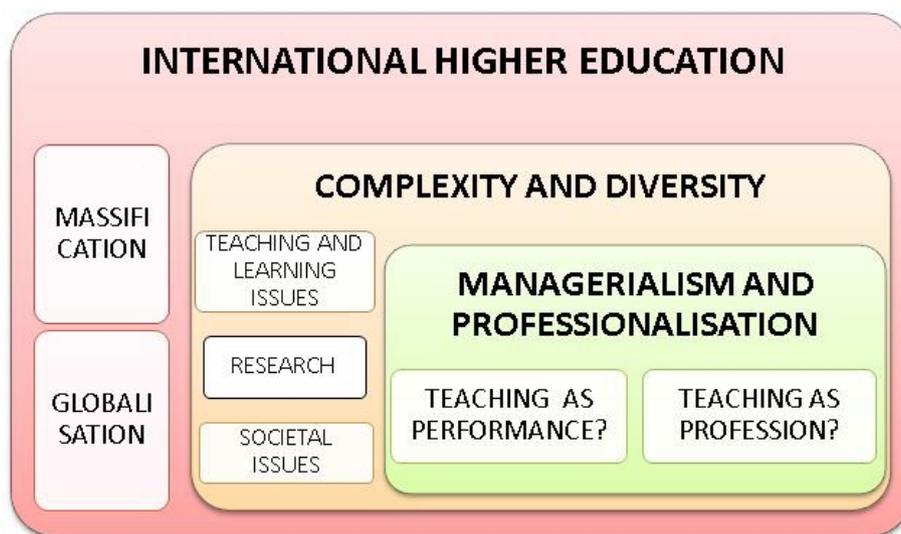
Figure 4.2: The international higher education context

The activities and roles of academics have become more diversified over the years with inclusion of the responsibilities of research, teaching and community

engagement. Meeting the demands of these roles is a challenging and complicated task as the responsibilities are time-consuming, diverse and often in conflict with one another (Toews & Yazedjian, 2007). This introduces competing demands on time and resources available to them, which adds to the complexity and challenges currently faced by academics (Brownell & Tanner, 2012).

With reference to teaching within higher education in particular, the effects of massification and globalisation are adding to the pressures placed on university teachers. They have to prepare for and respond to an increasing array of student learning needs, which may require innovative responses in terms of teaching practice (Teichler, 2008; Altbach *et al.*, 2009). University teachers furthermore have to operate in the midst of the controversial debates between teaching as a performance-driven activity and teaching as a profession (Sanguinetti, 2000, in Arthur, 2009). As such, they may be challenged even more, particularly with regard to how student feedback may be used in their teaching practice (Douglas & Douglas, 2006; Arthur, 2009; Tronto, 2010). In light of these challenges experienced within the international higher education arena, the use of student feedback in university teaching could potentially be influenced negatively. This warrants further exploration.

4.3   THE SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION CONTEXT

Before 1994, SA was known as a country of great political, economic and social divides and inequality due to the impact of apartheid policies (Badat, 2010; Leibowitz, *et al.*, 2015). These inequalities also manifested within the higher education system of the apartheid era (Boughey & Mc Kenna, 2011; Leibowitz, 2012). This manifestation has had a lasting impact on the way in which higher education has evolved in recent years.

4.3.1   Democratising higher education in South Africa

After the demise of apartheid in 1994, the democratic government was set on eradicating the discrimination and inequality created by its predecessors. The Higher Education Act No. 101 of 1997 stated the intention to implement a single co- ordinated higher education system which would promote, amongst others, transformation; the redress of past discrimination; provision of optimal learning

opportunities and equal access; respect for the values associated with human dignity, equality and freedom; and to contribute to the advancement of all forms of knowledge and scholarship (Department of Education [DoE], 1997). This Act, which was amended in 2001, serves as the official act that governs the higher education sector in SA, while the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) was established in 2009 as the official government department overseeing higher education in the country. The act also constituted the Council on Higher Education (CHE) to advise the minister of education. The Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC), a permanent committee of the CHE, is responsible for auditing and promoting quality assurance in higher education institutions. Although these changes occurred as a political response to the national situation at the time, they are similar to the changes taking place internationally due to globalisation (Altbach *et al.*, 2009). Figure 4.2 in section 4.2.3 could thus be seen as containing some information that serves as a backdrop to the changes that occurred in SA.

4.3.2   The transformation agenda

The intentions signalled in the Higher Education Act and subsequent policy documents were made manifest through the introduction of a wide range of transformation-oriented initiatives in order to reshape the SA higher education landscape (Jansen, 2004; DHET, 2013). With mergers among public institutions of higher education, initiatives to increase access to tertiary institutions and the regulation of the private higher education sector, a new institutional landscape arose. By 2004, the foundations had been laid for a single, coordinated but differentiated higher education landscape (Jansen, 2004), which then consisted of 23 public universities. These included eleven 'traditional' universities, six universities of technology (previously known as technikons) and six comprehensive universities (which combine the functions of traditional universities and universities of technology) (DHET, 2013). Two new institutes of higher education (which eventually will evolve into universities) were established in 2013, bringing the current total of higher education institutions to 25. Of the eleven traditional universities, some are identified as research-led universities and Stellenbosch University falls into this group.

In addition to the restructuring of institutions, further transformation initiatives included aspects such as redefining the purposes and goals of higher education, as well as formulating and implementing new policies related to governance (Badat, 2010; DHET, 2013). The implementation of these new policies and structures within the national higher education body impacted on the function and practices of its constituent institutions. The National Development Plan (NDP) identified three main functions of universities (National Planning Commission, 2011:262), namely:

- educating and delivering graduates with high-level skills for the labour market,
- producing new knowledge, assessing new applications for existing knowledge and validating existing knowledge through their curricula, and
- providing opportunities for social mobility and strengthening social justice and democracy in order to overcome the inequities of the past.

These functions were also confirmed by the White Paper for Post-School Education and Training as integral parts of the work of universities (DHET, 2013:34). In addition, new instruments for funding, planning and quality assurance were also put in place, making the transformation of higher education an even more complex process (Jansen, 2004; CHE, 2007; Badat, 2010). The establishment of a national quality assurance framework through which institutional audits, programme accreditation and quality promotion are governed, significantly raised the profile of quality issues across the sector, pushing issues of evaluation, performativity and recognition higher on the agenda (Badat, 2010; Reddy, Le Grange & Fataar, 2010).

Some progress has been made in terms of pushing the transformation agenda, although not at the rate or to the extent that was expected (Badat, 2010; Leibowitz & Bozalek, 2014). After more than 20 years of democracy, tensions, contestations and other dilemmas remain as institutions deal with changes in research cultures, academic leadership and student characteristics (Jansen, 2004; CHE, 2007; Leibowitz, 2014). The twenty year review report by the CHE (CHE, 2016) shows that the issues around access, success rates and equity, among other, are still pressing. The report makes particular mention that the higher education system needs more and better trained academics to meet the need of including a broader spectrum of students. Professional development in terms of T&L is thus foregrounded in this report. The continuation of challenges such as funding, access and equity, however

does not only propose difficulties for academics, but students as well. During 2015, various student protest actions across the country highlighted students' struggles around funding for their tertiary education, as well as various other issues of higher education (Shay, 2016).

4.3.2.1 The student voice as part of the transformation agenda

The wave of student protests during 2015 foregrounded a range of fundamentally important socio-political and economic issues. The issues that students were disgruntled about included not only the escalating tuition fees, but also issues such as slow transformation, language policies, academic and social exclusion, curricula, quality teaching, as well as other issues related to academic policies (SA History Online, accessed on 26 November 2015). Protest actions in October 2015 at the University of the Witswatersrand, where students highlighted their problems with funding and registration, fuelled country-wide protests which led to end-of-year examinations being postponed at many South African institutions and even complete shutdowns at some. The country-wide actions that took place in 2015 probably were a culmination of issues relating to funding and equity of access, having remained unresolved over the years and leaving students with increased levels of frustration, to the extent that they came together as a collective and addressed these issues in their numbers.

These protest actions emphasised the importance of continuously listening and responding to the student voice. Had their issues been addressed at an earlier stage, the situation might not have escalated to the extent that it had by the end of 2015. This also links to the importance of the student voice with regard to the quality and effectiveness of the teaching they receive at universities, as these were amongst the issues raised by students.

All the challenges discussed above and under section 4.3.2 influence the functions of universities in SA higher education. It may also influence the functioning of academics within these institutions, especially in terms of how these contexts would enable or constrain university teachers to improve their teaching as part of their professional practice. How university teachers would respond to student feedback may also be influenced by these challenges, and point to the importance of listening

to the student voice within university structures where so many transformational challenges have to be faced.

4.3.3   Transformational challenges at institutional level

In the following sections the discussion turns to how the transformation agenda poses challenges at institutional level in terms of the roles of university academics, quality assurance and the professional learning of university teachers.

4.3.3.1   Teaching, research and community interaction

The White Paper (DHET, 2013) reiterates quality education and increased knowledge production through research and innovation, as well as capacity building among academic staff and the development of future generations of academics, as aspects in need of serious attention. The strong focus on knowledge production may add to the already existing tensions between teaching and research, as was described in Chapter 2.

The Green Paper (DHET, 2012:24), however, states that teaching "needs to be taken very seriously and a great deal of effort needs to go into improving its quality and supporting teachers at all levels of the post-school system". The "calibre and workload of academic staff" are recognised in both the Green Paper (DHET, 2012:41) and the White Paper (DHET, 2013:36) as crucial to positively influencing student throughput. This creates the impression that academic staff members are regarded as valuable partners who deserve to be cared for and supported in the higher education system.

The realities of university higher education in SA, however, seem to reflect a different image. With the notion of widening access to higher education gaining more momentum, university teachers are now facing classes that have not only increased in numbers, but also in the variation of students' levels of readiness for engaging in tertiary studies, which manifests in a diversity of student learning needs (CHE, 2009). In the context of these growing numbers, the imperative for supporting university teachers becomes even more pertinent. The challenges related to diversity

that were discussed in an international context earlier, are thus particularly relevant in the SA context.

In addition to this, university teachers are inundated with administrative tasks, demands for carrying out research, and supervising post-graduate students (Van Schalkwyk *et al.*, 2015). With universities also facing ever decreasing governmental funding, university teachers often face the requirement of attracting external funding in addition to all other demands (DHET, 2012). Similar funding conditions within the international higher education context have been pointed out by Altbach *et al.* (2009) and Teichler (2008).

Based on the abovementioned, it is clear that the demands placed on higher education are extensive and diverse. Not only should universities create and disseminate knowledge as a distinguished academic function, but they should also deliver on quality teaching in the midst of challenging circumstances - all the while also contributing to the development and wellbeing of a socially just society (see sections 2.41 and 4.3.2). With these demands still far from being resolved, it indeed sets the scene for ongoing complexity and challenge.

4.3.3.2 Quality assurance

As in the case of the international higher education context (see section 4.2.2), the issue of quality assurance has also become increasingly important in SA higher education (Leibowitz, 2014; Reddy *et al.*, 2010). The intensified focus on the development of performance indicators to assess the quality of higher education has shifted the focus towards performance, and away from the traditional rationale of disseminating knowledge through teaching (Cloete, 2014). Surveillance in the form of performance management systems; quality assurance protocols; and institutional benchmarks have become increasingly important aspects in higher education; thus the need to perform has increased.

In this regard, the Higher Education Learning and Teaching Association of Southern Africa (HELTASA) has been established as a body that focuses on the promotion of quality in higher education. HELTASA researches teaching and learning issues in

higher education that are closely aligned to what the CHE have suggested (Herman, 2015).

The increased focus on institutional performance with regard to knowledge production has placed research at the top of the ladder of academic importance, thereby urging universities to increase their research outputs (Cloete, 2012). Thus there seems to be support for SA and other African universities to become research universities. This is the challenging and complex backdrop against which university teachers in SA universities have to function in their teaching role. It requires a focus on what the role of a university teacher ought to include and whether the focus on research serves as an enablement of or constraint to the stature of teaching and the enhancement of teaching quality (Van Schalkwyk *et al.*, 2015).

4.3.3.3 Professional learning of university teachers

It has been established in Chapter 2 (sections 2.4.1 and 2.6; also see Figure 2.4) that continuous reflection on teaching with the view to improvement is a necessary part of university teachers' professional teaching practice (Johnson, 2000:424). It has also been established that student feedback serves as valuable information for university teachers' professional learning about their teaching (Ryan, 2015; Golding & Adam, 2016). As an initiative to recognise the value and need of professional learning for university teachers, the CHE suggested that professional learning in higher education institutions should focus on:

> training, education, or capacity building in teaching practice (including curriculum design and development, and assessment); higher education studies and research; academic management and leadership; organisational development (including quality assurance); and information technology (IT) upgrading.

> (CHE, 2004:5)

These suggestions imply that the professional learning of the university teacher ought to be an important focus of universities.

Based on the preceding information (see sections 4.3.1, 4.3.2, 4.3.3.1 and 4.3.3.2), the context within which universities operate seems to have led to academics being overloaded with various kinds of responsibilities (Habib, 2013). This confirms the

literature pertaining to the challenges of being an academic and teaching at a research-led university as discussed in Chapter 2 (sections 2.3.1 and 2.4.3). In order to address these issues, university teachers ought to be supported in their role as teachers and in developing the professional quality of their teaching practice (Ballantyne *et al.,* 2000; Harvey, 2003; Gibbs & Coffey, 2004; Tinto & Pusser, 2006). Providing advice and support for the interpretation of student feedback data to support the professional learning of university teachers thus has particular relevance here.

4.3.4. Synthesis

Figure 4.3 depicts how democratisation as the driving force influenced the transformation of structures, policies and goals of higher education in SA, which, in turn, has also had an impact on functioning at institutional level.
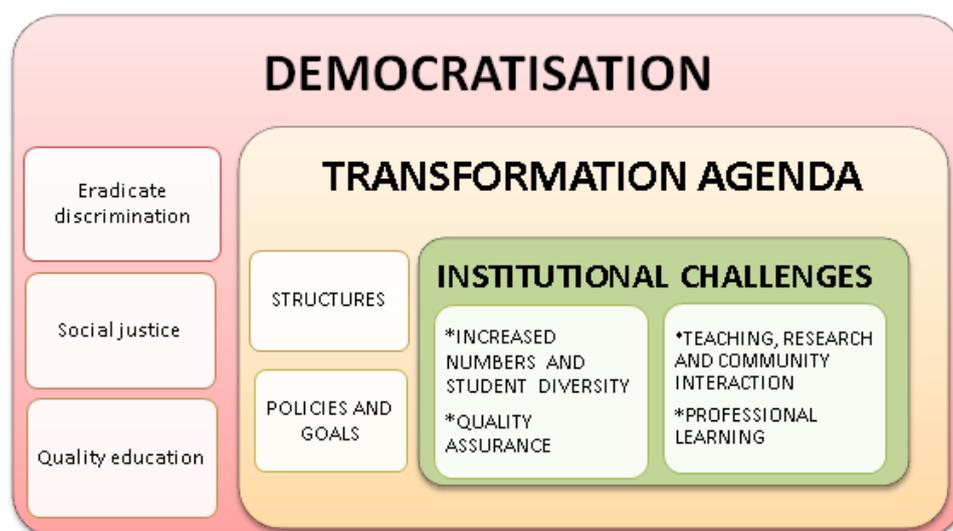
Figure 4.3: The South African higher education context

The democratisation of higher education in SA was aimed at eradicating the discrimination and inequality that marked SA's political history prior to 1994 (DoE, 1997). Purposeful efforts were made to transform the national higher education landscape into one that portrays inclusivity and access, while still recognising the diverse needs of the country and its people. Most of these efforts included national policy changes which were expected to manifest in structural changes on institutional

level (see section 4.3.1). New policies, however, did not guarantee the structural, socio-political, economic and academic transformation that was anticipated.

Institutions are still facing increasing demands on their resources and academics are facing ever-increasing demands in terms of the multiple academic roles that they have to perform. Yet, institutions and academic staff members are expected to deliver quality in all the areas of demand (Badat, 2010; Badsha & Cloete, 2011; Leibowitz, 2014). University teachers are particularly under pressure. Teaching attracts high public interest and thus also carries a significant burden of public responsibility (Fairweather, 2002; Marincovich, 2006). Quality assurance is therefore taken very seriously, pushing a performance-driven agenda (Badat, 2010; Reddy *et al.*, 2010). However, while quality is foregrounded as a key imperative, the student protests of 2015 alerted the nation to a number of other issues as well, for example curriculum development and academic inclusion of a diverse range of students.

These issues, which were foregrounded as problematic during the student protest actions, are indeed included as focus areas in university teachers' professional learning, as per the CHE (2004). Again, it seems that policy directives may not have found adequate practical manifestation within institutional contexts. To explore the potential influence of student feedback on university teaching practice, it thus seems essential to consider institutional contexts where student feedback takes place. I therefore describe the Stellenbosch University context in more detail next, as this institution was the research site for this investigation.

4.4   THE STELLENBOSCH UNIVERSITY CONTEXT

Stellenbosch University is a medium-sized residential university in the Western Cape province of SA. Most of its undergraduate teaching takes place on its four campuses and thus a large proportion of its students are housed in university residences on campus. The University has ten faculties, including AgriSciences, Economic and Management Sciences (EMS), Medicine and Health Sciences (FMHS), Engineering, Military Sciences, Arts and Social Sciences, Science, Education, Law and Theology. The main campus is situated in the town of Stellenbosch in the Western Cape. Eight faculties are situated on the main campus. The FMHS is based on the Tygerberg

campus adjacent to the Tygerberg academic hospital in Bellville, Cape Town and the Faculty of Military Sciences is based at the SA Defence Force Military Academy in Saldanha Bay, Western Cape. The University of Stellenbosch Business School and other postgraduate business and planning programmes of the Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences are located on the Bellville Park campus (http://www.sun.ac.za/english/about-us/Why-SU).

4.4.1   Historical background of Stellenbosch University

Higher education became established in Stellenbosch with the establishment of the Theological Seminary of the Dutch Reformed Church in 1859. As more faculties were added in later years and research chairs were established, the institution expanded into the establishment of Stellenbosch University on 2 April 1918. By June 2015 the University's statistical profile showed a total of 30 150 students, consisting of both undergraduate and postgraduate enrolments, and a permanent staff component of 3 103 of which 1 028 were academic staff members (http://www.sun.ac.za/english/Pages/statistical_profile.aspx,   accessed   on   26 November 2015).

The history of Stellenbosch University is also embedded in the apartheid history of SA (http://www.sun.ac.za/english/about-us/historical-background, accessed on 26 November 2015). Many of the University buildings are currently situated in an area which used to be called the "Vlakte" (Afrikaans for the "Flats"), a residential area in the centre of the town of Stellenbosch for Coloured people at the time. These residents were forcefully removed during the late 1960s (Stellenbosch University, 2015) and brought about a division between the University and the Coloured community of Stellenbosch.[2]

Since the early 1990s, however, especially since the inception of a democratic government in 1994, the University's demographics have changed. Stellenbosch is no longer a predominantly whites-only institution. Black, Coloured and Indian

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[2] From a personal perspective, I remember that we, as children, would not dare set foot on the SU campus as it was regarded as the exclusive property of Whites. Even when I started studying as a first year student at SU in 1990, I felt as much of a stranger to the campus as a foreigner would probably be.

students now make up a third of the student body compared to only a few individuals in 1990 (Reuters, 13 November 2015) .

Stellenbosch also became known as an 'Afrikaans' University in the Western Cape, a province in which the majority of residents are Afrikaans speaking (HEQC, 2007:9; Gilliomee, 2004). According to the SU Language Policy of 2014, the University follows a multilingual approach, with Afrikaans being used and developed as an academic language, while utilising the value of English as an international academic language.

In 2015, *Open Stellenbosch*, a student movement working towards social justice and positive change, challenged SU to revisit the institution's language policy and approach (Open Stellenbosch, 15 April 2015). After a long process of deliberations, a new language policy that promotes the use of both Afrikaans and English as languages of teaching and learning at the University was approved on 22 June 2016 (Stellenbosch University, 2016).

The creation of the *Open Stellenbosch* collective as a space for student voices to be heard by university management and academia has opened up avenues for discussion on sensitive and challenging issues related to discrimination in various forms. Although the language policy was used as a point of departure, *Open Stellenbosch*'s discussions also included issues such as institutional culture; institutionalised racism; academic exclusion; the use of Afrikaans as language of instruction and the influence it has on non-Afrikaans-speaking students' chances of academic success (Open Stellenbosch, 2015). The influence that this forum has had thus far emphasises the importance of listening to the student voice and thus also resonates with the issue of student feedback as a source of information to contribute to the maintenance and enhancement of quality teaching and learning at SU. Through these protests, students were giving voice to issues that they perceived as influencing their learning experiences at the University, as well as pointing out the complexity and challenges that still remain at ideological, political and social levels at the University. The role of university teachers may thus include not only the 'traditional' teaching aspects, but may require from university teachers to also be sensitive to these historically embedded issues.

Against the backdrop of this overview of SU's history, the institutional context is described further in terms of institutional vision, strategies, structures and implementation, as well as how institutional contexts and issues relate to student feedback at the institution. Figure 4.4 provides a visual overview of the discussions that follow.
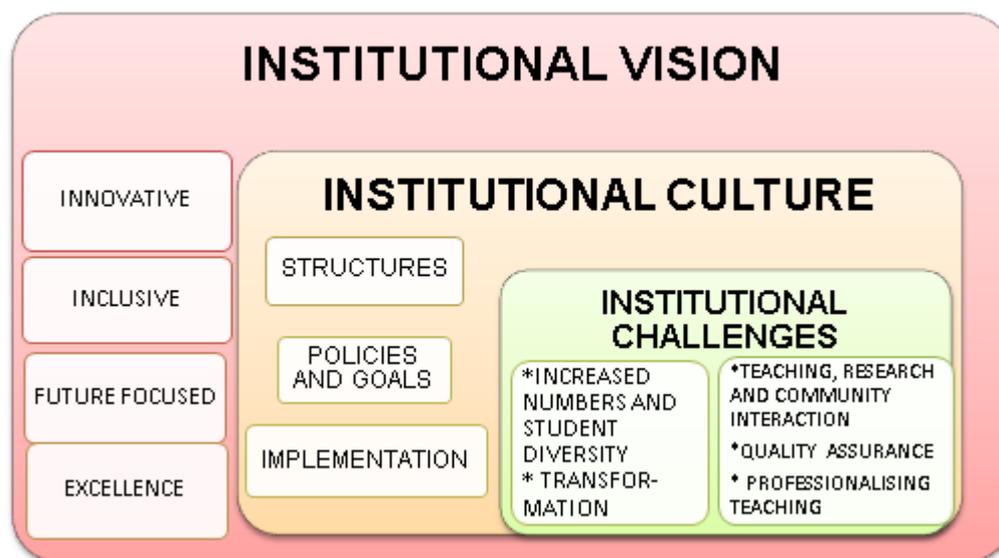
Figure 4.4: Important elements of the Stellenbosch University context

4.4.2 The vision, mission and strategic intent of Stellenbosch as research-led university

In its most recent vision statement, SU has positioned itself as "innovative, inclusive and future focused: a place of discovery and excellence where both staff and students are thought leaders in advancing knowledge in the service of all stakeholders" (Stellenbosch University, 2013a:16-17). To work towards realising this vision, the institutional mission is set on activities such as creating an academic community in which social justice and equal opportunities will prevail; aligning institutional research with the wide ranging spectrum of challenges facing Africa and the world; and maintaining student-centred and future-oriented learning and teaching that will establish a passion for lifelong-learning (Stellenbosch University, 2013a).

Student success, diversity, broadening the knowledge base and systemic sustainability therefore are important strategic focus areas for the University. Support for these focus areas is also encapsulated in the "Vision 2030" document of intent which has been adopted by the University and which includes the following main characteristics: inclusivity, innovation, future focus and transformation (Stellenbosch University, 2013a). Broadening access, sustaining the momentum of excellence and enhancing societal impact are main strategic priorities upon which the University wants to build in order to achieve "Vision 2030". Stellenbosch University's strategic vision and mission statements therefore are not peculiar to the teaching and learning trends and issues mentioned under sections 4.2 and 4.3.

4.4.3   The role and stature of teaching at Stellenbosch University

To better understand the possible role of student feedback in university teachers' professional learning about their teaching, it is necessary to first understand how teaching and learning fits into the institutional system at SU.

The SU Strategy for Teaching and Learning 2014 – 2018 (Stellenbosch University, 2013b:2) portrays the University's aspirations to be:

> A university characterised by quality teaching, by the constant renewal of teaching and learning programmes, and by the creation of effective opportunities for learning/study.

It is the University's intention to deliver graduates who are enquiring, engaged, dynamic and well-rounded (Stellenbosch University, 2013b:6). This aligns with the national imperative of "educating and delivering graduates with high-level skills for the labour market" (National Planning Committee, 2011:262), as mentioned under section 4.3.2. The teaching and learning arrangements of the University thus need to be aligned to support the realisation of such a vision. The policy therefore requires university teachers to serve as role models by being critical and scholarly in their practice, and engaging in dynamic delivery that focuses on the use of active learning via innovative and flexible learning materials (Stellenbosch University, 2013b:7-8). These requirements have also been affirmed in the institution's Vision 2030 document. This too, aligns with another national imperative that has been mentioned

under section 4.3.2, namely "producing new knowledge, assessing new applications for existing knowledge and validating existing knowledge through their curricula" (National Planning Committee, 2011:262).

In a report to a Senate Meeting of 28 August 2015, the Vice-Rector (Learning & Teaching) (VR (L&T)) reported that quality learning and teaching form the basis for the other core functions at SU, namely research and community interaction (VR (L&T) report to Senate, 28 Aug 2015). This alerts us to the significance that student feedback about teaching and learning experiences could have as a source of information for gauging and enhancing the quality of teaching at the University.

With regard to the stature of teaching at SU, the picture appears less impressive. Leibowitz (2009) described stature as including both status and credibility, and thus, quality of teaching. At any research-led institution, of which SU is an example according to its officially declared positioning as an institution (Stellenbosch University, 2000; HEQC, 2007; Stellenbosch University, 2013a), teaching often resides in a contested space where it is relegated to a lesser position in relation to research (Leibowitz, 2009; also see sections 2.3.1 and 2.3.2). Leibowitz' report on the Teaching Management Plan 2009 argued for this situation to be turned around and for the establishment of career pathways which would include opportunities for academic staff to be promoted to professorial level based on their teaching. Research undertaken at SU between 2011 and 2013, revealed that academic staff still perceive research as valued more than teaching and that not enough support and recognition is given to teaching (Van Schalkwyk *et al.*, 2015).

The question thus remains whether university teachers at SU would be inspired or encouraged to approach teaching with the same kind of commitment and rigour that they would approach research. The influence that the institutional context has on approaches to teaching could hold implications for university teachers' use or non-use of student feedback in their teaching.

4.4.4   What constitutes 'good teaching' at Stellenbosch University?

While we know that good teaching is important, it is not always clear what is meant by good teaching. The measures often used for gauging teacher quality, such as

qualifications and experience, only account for a very small proportion of student achievement (Goldhaber, 2002). Upon scrutinising the SU institutional policy documentation pertaining to teaching and learning, it was evident that good or excellent teaching is promoted in all of these documents (see sections 6.2.2 and 6.2.3). However, little evidence could be found of clear indicators that describe how the institution perceives what is entailed in good teaching.

Between 2008 and 2010 attempts were made to address this issue. A task team was established in 2008 to develop indicators for measuring quality teaching. The report from this task team: "*Measurement of quality teaching: Indicators, possible criteria and data resources*" served at the Sub-Senate Committee for Learning and Teaching (CLT) on 18 February 2009 (CLT minutes, 18 February 2009). Following on this report, the CLT introduced a follow-up task team to investigate the possible use of the suggested indicators to develop strategic management indicators for teaching at the institution (CLT minutes, 18 February 2009). On 13 October 2010 this task team reported that the implementation of such strategic management indicators may be premature, as a workable definition of 'quality teaching' could not be agreed upon at the time (CLT minutes, 13 October 2010). This brought the work of these two task teams to a seemingly abrupt standstill. This type of situation is not ideal (Knight & Wilcox, 1998) as it could leave university teachers uncertain about how to approach the enhancement of their teaching practice.

Despite the absence of well-defined indicators for good teaching within SU's institutional policy documents, teaching is included in the performance appraisal of academics in most departments. The strategic drive to maintain excellence at SU could thus create fertile ground for a culture of performativity to advance at the institution in similar ways as the trends found internationally and nationally. This could result in the University over-emphasising the use of student feedback as a major source of measuring teaching quality (Tronto, 2010).

However, in 2014, the issue of indicators for good teaching emerged again when a new task team was appointed to revitalise the reports presented to the CLT in 2009 and 2010. The aim of this task team was to develop institutional guidelines for the promotion, recognition and reward of good teaching at SU. The recommendations

made by this task team were approved by Senate in June 2015 (SU Senate Report, 3 June 2015). The objectives of this document were to encourage good teaching, to promote the recognition of excellent teaching and promote possible career pathways for those staff members who choose to focus on and engage in research in teaching and learning (Stellenbosch University, 2015). Student feedback was mentioned in this document as a possible source of information for evaluating teaching, but with the caution that it may not be reduced to a simplistic quantitative measure, such as only using an average score from student feedback as a primary means of evaluating teaching.

At the request of the University Senate, faculties were tasked to draw up their own faculty-specific plans for how they would implement the recommendations made in this document. In February 2016 faculties had to be reminded by the CLT that they still needed to indicate these plans within their Faculty Business Plans. At the time of the completion of this study, this process was still ongoing. SU, therefore, has yet to come to an agreement as to what it would regard as 'good teaching'.

4.4.5   The professional learning of university teachers at Stellenbosch University

Given the ever-changing nature of the higher education context, it could be expected that university teachers would keep abreast of such changes and the impact it would have on their teaching practices. Continuous professional learning should thus form an integral part of the university teachers' teaching career (Knight *et al.*, 2006).

Professional learning is a complex phenomenon which requires a systemic approach, however (Ashwin, 2012; also see section 2.4.2.1). Two related institutional studies during 2015 confirmed this. Van Schalkwyk *et al.* (2015) explored the factors that enable or constrain the professional learning of university teachers at SU. They concurred that universities bear the responsibility to ensure quality teaching and student learning and that it should therefore be a high priority for SU to create an enabling environment which supports the professional learning of university teachers so as to enhance the quality of teaching (Van Schalkwyk *et al.*, 2015). They argued that creating such as enabling environment at SU would require raising the stature of teaching; ensuring clear messages regarding the value of teaching at the institution;

supporting university teachers in their teaching endeavour; and creating career pathways which could motivate university teachers to focus on their teaching role. The study by Herman (2015), which explored the contextual factors that influence SU university teachers' decisions about whether to engage or not to engage in professional learning processes, also confirmed these findings.

Herman's study also reported perceptions among university teachers that student feedback is mainly used for evaluating their performance as teachers and not as a tool to support their professional learning (Herman, 2015:172). It therefore confirms the need for further exploration of how student feedback is actually used within the institution.

4.4.6   The role of student feedback at Stellenbosch University

The SU Policy on Student Feedback regards student feedback as "an important central process aimed at supporting and promoting teaching at this institution" (Stellenbosch University, 2008:1). The Policy states that the improvement of teaching is one of the main functions of student feedback at the institution. It requires feedback on teaching, as well as on each module offered at the University, to be collected at least once every two years. Feedback is then collected via institutional student feedback questionnaires for undergraduate and taught postgraduate modules (see Annexure 2). Feedback on the compilation, coherence and academic accountability of teaching and learning programmes should also be collected annually from final-year students. This study is particularly interested in the student feedback on teaching that is collected in this process.

Institutionally collected student feedback is dealt with confidentially and students' identities are kept anonymous. The completed questionnaires are forwarded to the Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL), where the data are processed and reports compiled (see Annexure 3). The reports consist of quantitative data, which include the average statistics on each question item, as well as an overall average percentage according to the students' grading of the teaching. The CTL also ensures that the reports are disseminated to the applicable university teachers and their line management, including the head of the department or division and the dean of the faculty.

4.4.6.1 Preliminary institutional study

Centre for Teaching and Learning conducted an institutional survey to gain insight into university teachers' perceptions of the use of student feedback in 2007 (Van der Merwe, 2007). A total of 327 university teachers constituting a response rate of approximately 46% of the academic staff complement at the time participated in this survey. Of the respondents, 211 had been working at the university for six years and longer, with 134 working for longer than 10 years and 11 for longer than 30 years. In terms of post level, 201 were senior lecturers, associate professors and professors, while 101 were at lecturer level and 25 at junior lecturer level. From among the participants, 173 indicated that they performed some management functions, for example as deans of faculties, heads of departments or programme coordinators. Table 4.1 provides a summary of statistics around some of the items in the survey.

Table 4.1: Summarised statistics from survey on university teachers' perceptions of the use of student feedback

STUDENT FEEDBACK SERVES THE PURPOSE OF:	YES, IT DOES	IS SUPPOSED TO
Performance appraisal	56%	49%
Quality assurance	57%	82%
Improving modules and programmes	57%	88%
Giving students opportunity to air their opinions	89%	80%
Improving teaching	69%	93%
Stimulating reflective teaching	37%	75%

This survey indicated that university teachers were not completely satisfied with the role of the student feedback system in the enhancement of teaching. University teachers' opinion on whether student feedback should be used for performance appraisal was reported at a lower percentage (49%) than their reported opinion on the actual use of student feedback for this purpose (56%). The statistics on this survey further indicated a greater desire towards using student feedback for the purpose of enhancing teaching (quality assurance, improving modules and programmes, improving teaching, reflective teaching) than for performance

appraisal. Sixty-nine percent of the respondents stated that student feedback actually does fulfil the purpose of improving teaching, while an even higher percentage (93%) indicated that this is a function that the system is supposed to fulfil. The percentage for whether the student feedback system ought to provide students the opportunity to air their opinions (reported at 89%) was slightly higher than the reported use of student feedback for this function (reported at 80%). Although both ratings are high, the difference in percentages could be an indication of issues regarding inclusion of the student voice.

The findings of the survey alluded to some dissatisfaction with student feedback practices at the time. Even though some of the response figures did not differ much, the fact that university teachers seemed to have a lower preference for the use of student feedback for the purpose of performance evaluation adds to the tension of using the student feedback system for dual purposes (i.e. for both performance evaluation and enhancing teaching). This warranted further investigation.

4.4.6.2 A follow-up preliminary institutional study

Another small-scale research project under the auspices of the CTL was therefore conducted during October 2008. This was done by way of semi-structured interviews with university teachers to further investigate their perceptions of the use of student feedback in their teaching (Petersen, 2008). Individual interviews were conducted with ten university teachers from six faculties and one support services division to explore the following aspects:

i. What motivated university teachers to make use of student feedback in various ways?

ii. How did university teachers use student feedback in reflecting upon their teaching within their particular teaching contexts?

iii. What did university teachers regard as hindering factors in utilising student feedback?

iv. Further suggestions for how university teachers could approach the use of student feedback.

The data from these interviews were analysed by way of thematic content analysis and coded according to the themes as they emerged from the data. From the data analysis, it became clear that most of these university teachers mainly focused on what was happening in their classes in terms of which teaching techniques worked well and which did not work well. The university teachers involved in these interviews, with the exception of one, appeared to regard student feedback as a valuable part of the teaching and learning process and aspired towards using their student feedback to reflect on the quality of their teaching. All of the university teachers involved could provide examples of how they, at some point in their teaching, used student feedback to introduce changes in their teaching or their modules. There was much less focus on why it would be important or valuable to respond to particular teaching and learning issues in particular ways, however. These university teachers seemed to focus mainly on the "how" aspect of teaching and not so much on the "why" aspect.

The participants were also asked about challenges perceived in the student feedback system. Factors hindering the use of student feedback, as identified by the participating university teachers, included issues with timely availability of feedback reports; students being regarded as incapable of providing meaningful feedback; university teachers taking student feedback too personally or feeling intimidated by teaching; university teachers not taking teaching seriously; management using student feedback in a punitive way; and a lack of counselling or consultation for university teachers to deal with the feedback that students provide.

4.4.6.3 Concluding remarks based on the two preliminary studies

The pilot survey from 2007 and the small-scale study in 2008 pointed out the following contradictions within the student feedback system as potential areas for further exploration:

 a) a salient difference between university teachers' reported use of student feedback within their teaching and their opinion about the extent to which they thought student feedback should be used to improve teaching;

b) disjuncture between university teachers' reported use of student feedback in order to reflect on their teaching compared to the extent to which they thought student feedback should fulfil this purpose; and

c) disjuncture between management's use of student feedback and university teachers' perceptions in terms of how they think student feedback should be used by management.

These preliminary findings concerning contradictions in the teaching and learning system as potentially mediated by student feedback, added to the applicability of the activity theory framework as lens for analysis in this study. Contradictions play a central role as a source that creates opportunity for transformation and improvement in activity theory (Ilyenkov, 1977; Engeström, 1999a).

4.5   SUMMARY

Similar issues seem to permeate the debates around teaching and learning in higher education on international, national and even institutional level. The effects of massification, globalisation, democratisation and transformation are felt across the board in manifestations such as large classes; diversity in students' learning and teaching needs; a large number of underprepared students entering into higher education; and decreased financial support for institutions of higher learning (Barnett, 2009; Boughey & McKenna, 2011; Altbach, 2013).

Universities are expected to perform more than their original function of creating and sharing academic knowledge. They now also bear some responsibility for improving conditions in society through the knowledge that is created. Academics are expected to be teachers, researchers and community interaction champions (Toewz & Yazedjian, 2007). With increased workloads and fewer resources, academics are still required to perform all of these functions with excellence (Bitzer, 2009). The focus on excellence has also introduced a culture of performativity (Ball, 2003:216; Badat, 2010; Reddy *et al.*, 2010), leaving academics to try and find their way through a myriad of responsibilities and decisions as best they can. More often than not, tension is experienced in trying to balance all of these roles, especially between teaching and research, with research being perceived as the commodity of higher

value (Rice, 2012; Herman, 2015; Van Schalkwyk *et al.*, 2015). The struggles around the professionalisation of teaching add to these tensions.

It was anticipated that teaching under stressful and sometimes volatile conditions has an influence on university teachers' teaching practice and their use of student feedback. Issues of performativity and struggles around the stature of teaching appear to be some of the bones of contention that could influence how university teachers may or may not respond to student feedback for enhancing their teaching practice. In addition, university teachers could perceive it as less worthwhile to spend much time on matters related to teaching (Blackburn & Lawrence, 1995; Wright, 2005) and may therefore neglect the role that student feedback could play in their teaching.

Research points to student feedback as being a valued source of information regarding teaching and learning, and having the potential to enhance teaching practices at universities. Despite some criticism against its use, SU employs a formalised, institutionally-driven student feedback system into which a significant amount of financial and human resources are poured annually. The question that remains is whether student feedback is making any contribution to enhancing university teachers' teaching practice and thus the quality of teaching and learning at the University.

In the next chapter I discuss the research methodology used in this study to explore this issue.

CHAPTER 5

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

5.1   INTRODUCTION

Although this research was embarked on according to a specific plan or design, it was found during the study that a research design is not cast in stone from the beginning to the end of the research project, but rather that it is an "iterative process" (Maxwell, 2012:76) during which the plan or design may be adapted as the research project progresses.

In the first four chapters I have discussed the theoretical perspectives; the higher education contexts; and the analytical framework as they related to the key research question of this study. In this chapter I describe the research design and explain the processes which informed the methodological decisions taken in this study with regard to the empirical work and analysing the generated data.

5.2   AIM OF THE STUDY

The aim of this study was to explore and describe the relationships between student feedback and teaching practice at Stellenbosch University as a research-led institution. The study therefore focused on explicating university teachers' conceptions concerning teaching, learning and student feedback; how they engage with student feedback information; whether student feedback influences university teachers' teaching practice in any way; and whether, if at all, the research-led context at Stellenbosch University has any influence on these relationships. The key research question under scrutiny thus was:

How do university teachers at a research-led university experience the role of student feedback in their professional teaching practice?

The following subsidiary questions supported the key research question:

a)   What is understood by the concept of student feedback on teaching?

b)   What are the contexts that influence student feedback on teaching?

c)   How do university teachers at one research-led university use (or fail to use) student feedback in their teaching?

d)   How could student feedback become more useful in improving teaching and learning activities at a research-led university?

An institutional case study design was selected to respond to the primary research question and the subsidiary questions of this study as outlined above.

5.3   RESEARCH APPROACH AND PARADIGM

Initially, an inductive approach was adopted in this study as the purpose was to better understand the phenomenon of using student feedback in teaching and not to test or prove any hypothetical stance. An inductive approach to research assists inquirers to develop patterns of meaning that evolve from interpreting the data, instead of starting off with a particular proposition or theory (Creswell, 2014:8). The initial level of inductive coding enriched my understanding of the data and enabled the second iteration of coding and analysis according to the activity theory framework. It was thus an iterative process which required me to first visit the data inductively, then re-visit the data in a more deductive fashion in accordance with the activity theory framework.

In order to obtain credible data on the topic under scrutiny, it was necessary to engage directly with university teachers and provide opportunities for them to verbalise the required information in their own words. This was to generate primary data from the participants themselves. The interest was not in counting the number of instances during which university teachers were making use of student feedback data or not, nor to analyse the qualities of student feedback data itself, but rather to gain better insight into **how** student feedback influences or could potentially influence university teachers' teaching practice. The qualitative or narrative data that were generated in this way provided rich descriptions, which Ryle presents as "thick descriptions" (Ryle, 1949, in Maxwell, 1992:289) and could be used to interpret how student feedback influences, or at least potentially influences, the teaching practice

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of university teachers. This study thus subscribed to an interpretivist epistemology and ontology in order to better understand the phenomenon under scrutiny (Guba & Lincoln, 1994:110).

Adopting an interpretivist research tradition involves understanding people and their views and experiences, not to explain them or their actions (Babbie & Mouton, 2009). How humans interpret or make sense of their life worlds serves as the starting point for developing knowledge about the social world (Prasad, 2005). Social order is also established through the practices of the actors involved (Babbie & Mouton, 2009). Interpretivism thus attempts to understand phenomena through investigating the complexities within the contexts of such phenomena (Matveev, 2002). To take an interpretive stance to scholarly inquiry is to understand the context and "qualities instead of the quantities of the phenomenon" (Henning *et al.*, 2004:3). Such a stance is interested in the "insider" perspective, focusing on social phenomena from the views of the participants.

In this study, university teachers were considered the insiders as they fulfil the teaching role. Analysing and interpreting the insider or primary data sourced from those who are directly involved in using (or not using) student feedback information provided valuable qualitative data to gain a better understanding of particular realities or contexts of university teachers. The interpretive stance taken in this study also presented possibilities for exploring and interpreting unusual, deviant or unexpected aspects as a source of insight (Flick, Von Kardoff & Steinke*,* 2004:3). It thus created opportunity to reveal unknown aspects with regard to student feedback, particularly within the context of a research-led university.

5.4   RESEARCH DESIGN

The following sections present a discussion of the research design applied in this study.

5.4.1   Analytical lens applied in this study

The activities involved in university teachers' strategies regarding whether they would or would not use student feedback as a mediating artefact in their teaching practice and how these activities and processes might be influenced by contextual

factors, were the key aspects of exploration. Activity theory, which provides an analytical tool for exploring how the relationship between a subject and an object could be influenced by an instrument, tool or artefact (Vygotsky, 1982), was used to explore the possible relationship between student feedback data and university teachers' teaching practice. (A detailed discussion of activity theory as appropriate analytical lens for this study is provided in Chapter 3.)

5.4.2   Positioning the study

While studies have shown that the higher education research landscape seems to be undergoing continuous change, leading to varying focuses on particular areas of interest over time, the field of quality promotion in teaching and learning has remained prominent over the years (Bitzer & Wilkinson, 2009; Clegg, 2009). Researching phenomena related to quality teaching and learning, such as student feedback and its potential role within the teaching practice of university teachers, thus remains an important area of educational inquiry.

Educational research is a professionally challenging field to explore (Freebody, 2003) and there are a number of reasons for this. Two of the reasons involve the inherent complexity and the dynamic nature of educational activities. As education is situated within socio-cultural knowledge contexts which are prone to change, the educational practices often also change. Bearing this complex nature of the field of higher education research in mind, it seemed important to explore how university teachers might engage with their teaching within challenging and changing higher education circumstances. The role that student feedback plays or could potentially play in university teachers' teaching is a particular area of concern and contestation which needs to be explored within relevant institutional and disciplinary contexts. It was thus decided to utilise a case study design as case studies enable the enquirer to illuminate the complexities and subtleties of a particular situation or phenomenon within its natural settings (Yin, 2004; Plowright, 2011; Denscombe, 2014).

5.4.3   Case study research

Case study research emerged from a desire to understand complex social phenomena (Yin, 2003:2) and thus focuses on in-depth analyses. Individual people, groups, organisations or events are thus studied as instances of that phenomenon.

The defining characteristic of a case study is its emphasis on an individual unit (Yin, 1994). The term 'unit' does not only refer to a singular person or entity, but could also refer to a group, an organisation or even a set of interactions or particular activities that take place within a bounded system (Yin, 1994; Yin, 2004; Yin, 2012).

An exploratory institutional case study design was decided upon for the empirical part of the current study as such a design explores phenomena and artefacts without visualising clear or singular sets of outcomes at the onset of the study (Yin, 2003). This study carefully discussed the phenomenon of student feedback within the institutional context in which it occurs (Yin, 2003; Baxter & Jack, 2008). As mentioned earlier, SU as a research-led university provided the institutional context within which the link between student feedback and university teachers' teaching practice was investigated.

5.4.3.1 Defining the case (unit of analysis)

Case study research begins by identifying the case or phenomenon that is to be investigated. The case refers to the subject under study and thus serves as the main unit of analysis (Yin, 2012). To qualify as something that can be defined as a case, it is crucial that the unit must have distinctive boundaries that make it distinguishable from other aspects of social life (Denscombe, 2010:56). The definition of the case (thus the unit of analysis) is related to the way in which the key research question is defined (Yin, 2003:23). In this study the particular university was not the main focus of investigation, but rather how the teaching practice of university teachers at this institution related to the availability of student feedback. The potential relationship between student feedback and university teaching practice thus constituted the unit of analysis and SU, as research-led institution, provided the natural setting within which this phenomenon was studied.

Case studies can also be distinguished as either single-case or multiple-case studies. In a single-case study, the case may be a rare, critical or even an ordinary case (Yin, 2012). In single-case studies, the main aim is to study a particular phenomenon in such depth that one comes to a better understanding of the complexities surrounding that phenomenon. The investigation of the role of student

feedback in teaching practice at a particular institution places this study within the framework of a single-case study.

However, the single case sometimes has nested units of analysis embedded within the main case. Since the interest was to look at the particular issue of the role of student feedback in university teaching practice, but from the perspective of various university teachers, this study constituted a holistic case study with embedded units of analysis (see Figure 5.1).
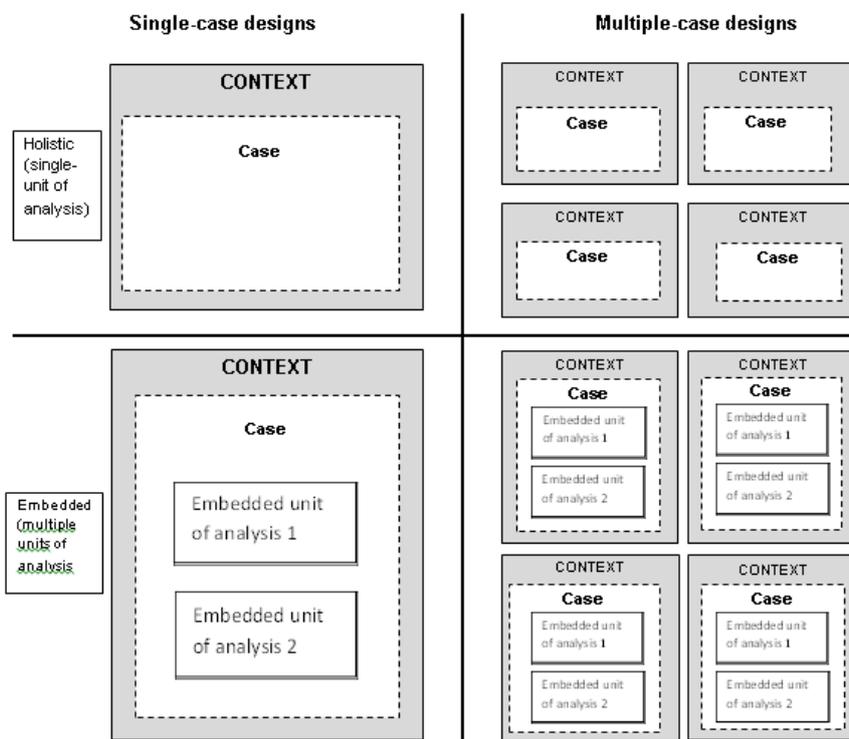
Figure 5.1: Basic types of design for case studies (Source: Yin, 2012:147)

The embedded units of analysis provided more individualised contextual data and explanations, which enabled the exploration of the case while considering the influence of the context of the institution within which university teachers' teaching practice and student feedback were situated (Baxter & Jack, 2008). The nested units of analysis in this study thus referred to (1) the individual university teachers and (2) how their teaching practice were or were not influenced by the availability of student feedback data about their teaching within their particular teaching and learning

contexts. The individual university teachers served as sources for generation of data for exploring these phenomena.

5.4.3.2 Strengths of case study research

The case study design allows the researcher to unravel the subtleties and intricacies of complex phenomena or situations (Denscombe, 2010:62). A case study design is appropriate when the focus of the study is on answering *how* and *why* questions, when contextual conditions that are relevant to the phenomenon are unravelled in order to illuminate the phenomenon under study (Yin, 2004). This approach facilitated making an in-depth study of the complexities surrounding the phenomenon of student feedback and unravelling the relationships between the different aspects involved within the context of Stellenbosch University. It enabled the uncovering of the contextual conditions that were relevant to the phenomenon under scrutiny (Yin, 2003).

A further strength of the case study design is that it affords opportunities to build rapport with participants. The individual university teachers who participated in this study assisted freely by providing details of their individual contexts as related to the use of student feedback. It thus contributed to gaining a deeper understanding of the complexities of using (or not using) such feedback (Yin, 2012).

Case study designs encourage the use of multiple methods as well as multiple sources of data in order to capture the complexity of the situation under scrutiny (Denscombe, 2010). This study employed individual interviews with purposefully selected participants in order to generate qualitative data that could shed light on the topic. Institutional policies were also scrutinised to ascertain how the official policy requirements and principles relate to student feedback and university teaching.

5.4.3.3 Potential weaknesses of case study research

Although the strengths of case study research deemed it the most appropriate design for this study, this research method is not free from criticism. The approach is most vulnerable to criticism in terms of the perceived limitation to generalise from its findings, since case studies are generally focused on one or a very limited number of cases (Denscombe, 2010). Silverman (2000), however, argues that, although each case is in some respects unique, it is also a single example of a broader class of

things. If, for example, the study is based on university teachers at a research university of medium size, as is the case in this study, it is to be treated as an instance of other research universities of medium size.

Babbie and Mouton (2009) also state that the generalisability of case study findings could be demonstrated through showing linkages between findings and previous knowledge. This is referred to as analytic generalisation. Whilst statistical generalisation is aimed at generalising from a sample to the universe, analytic generalisation depends on using a theoretical framework to establish a logic that might be applicable to other situations (Yin, 2012). In this study, activity theory was used as such a theoretical framework.

Other criticisms against case study research relate to the researcher's personal involvement and thus potential influence on the data; challenges in negotiating access to participants in the study; and delineating the boundaries of the study (Denscombe, 2010:62-63). These challenges are addressed in the discussion of the data generation process under section 5.4.5.

Having taken cognisance of these criticisms and having put measures in place to adequately counter such criticism, together with the possibilities that the methodology opened up for me as researcher to think critically in order to gain in- depth understanding of a complex educational situation (Simons, 2006:226), the strengths of case study research outweighed the criticism. In particularly, it was the opportunity that the case study design provided to make an in-depth study of a complex phenomenon such as student feedback within its natural setting and thus being able to unravel the contextual conditions that are relevant to the role of student feedback in university teaching, that won the case study design over to be the more appropriate approach for gaining a better understanding of the phenomenon under study.

5.4.4 Research population and participant selection

SU had an academic staff complement of approximately 850 at the inception of this study. Understanding how university teachers at this institution made use of student feedback within their teaching practice called for in-depth interviews with university

teachers. For this reason a purposive sample of sixteen university teachers were selected to participate in the study. Purposive sampling allowed the selection of university teachers according to the following criteria for inclusion:

- Representation from faculties: participants were selected from four disciplinary clusters, namely Economic and Management Sciences (EMS), Humanities and Social Sciences (Humanities), Science, Engineering and Technology (SET) and Health Sciences (HS);
- Post-level representation: the four levels of academic appointments at SU include junior lecturer, lecturer, senior lecturer and professor. One participant from each of the four levels of appointment in each of the four disciplinary clusters was selected, to thus include 16 participants.

Another reason for the sampling and selection of participants to include university teachers from diverse post levels and disciplinary clusters was to mitigate against possible criticism of using interview data as the main source of data. Inclusion of this diversity in participants strengthened the study as it opened up avenues for different perspectives and lessened the possibilities for biased information from limited perspectives only.

Other aspects not necessarily seen as inclusion criteria but that were important in order to include a variety of perspectives, were:

- Student feedback results (see section 4.4.6 and Annexure 3): ranging from university teachers with lower to higher student feedback scores and also including university teachers whose student feedback results showed improvement over a number of years (particularly between 2010 and 2014 for those who had been teaching at the University during that time). I was able to retrieve this information from the University's institutional database for student feedback;
- University teaching experience: referring to the number of years the participant had been teaching in higher education at the time of the study;
- Nature of programmes offered at undergraduate level: some modules taught by the participants contribute to generic qualifications such as a general Bachelor of Arts degree, while others contribute to professional qualifications such as an LLB or MBChB degree;

- Size of faculty: distinguishing between smaller faculties (with less than 50 academic staff) and larger faculties (more than 50 academic staff);
- Gender: including female and male; and
- Race: including White, Coloured and Black university teachers.

Though university teachers' individual personalities and cultural backgrounds may also play an important role in their teaching activities, the aim of this study was not to investigate the influence of university teachers' personal attributes on their motivation to use or not to use student feedback data in their teaching. The aim was rather to explore how their pedagogical viewpoints (Wong & Moni, 2014) and the institutional contexts enabled or constrained how they acted upon the availability of such information in their teaching contexts. It was thus anticipated that contextual aspects such as the nature of their disciplines and academic departments; their teaching experience in higher education; their levels of appointment; the year levels of their modules; and size of classes would be more important to explore in this study. These aspects were indicated by previous studies as having an influence on university teachers' willingness to respond to quality measurements (Douglas & Douglas, 2006; Harvey & Williams, 2010; Sid Nair, Bennett & Mertova, 2010; Wong & Moni, 2014), of which student feedback is one example. It was anticipated that personal attributes would surface from the data if and where it played a role.

5.4.5   Generating data

The role of student feedback is not necessarily visible in how university teachers teach. Rather, it may be embedded in university teachers' thoughts and decisions when they reflect upon their teaching and mostly implicitly contained in their teaching practice. Observation of the classroom practices of university teachers would thus not have provided the data needed in order to better understand this phenomenon. It required personal contact with the teachers for them to verbalise the perceived links between student feedback and their teaching practice. Interviews thus provided the benefit of generating information that could not be observed directly, while participants could also provide historical information (Creswell, 2014).

5.4.5.1 Interviews

Primary data were generated by conducting semi-structured interviews of between 60 and 90 minutes with each of the selected university teachers, as interviews are generally regarded as a more suitable method for gathering information about complex phenomena (Denscombe, 2010:173). Gaining deeper insight into the use or non-use of student feedback therefore called for engaging in conversation with participants. With the focus of this study on the university teachers' activities as related to student feedback, the interview schedule was developed on the basis of the heuristic triangle as used in activity theory. These components are discussed at length in Chapter 3.

The interview questions that were developed were based on the complexities of teaching and learning contexts and the influences of such contexts; also how university teachers engage with student feedback within challenging environments and the influence that all of this has on teaching practice. The following "researcher's map" (Figure 5.2) is presented to indicate how the interview questions supported the research questions of this study.

SUBSIDIARY RESEARCH QUESTIONS	INTERVIEW QUESTIONS / DATA FROM INTERVIEWS
To explore university teachers' conceptions of teaching and learning and how student feedback fits into those conceptions	• What is your motivation for teaching? In other words, what drives your teaching? *[object-oriented activity]* • How would you describe your own views on what teaching and learning is all about (your 'teaching/educational philosophy' so to speak)? *[own voice; agency?; historicity?]* • What are your views on the possible value of student feedback in terms of teaching and learning in your department? And for you personally? *[context; relationship between artefact and object within the activity system; contradictions?; expansive transformations?]*
To illuminate the activities and decision-making processes that university teachers undertake when they engage with their student feedback data	• Do you generally engage with and respond to student feedback reports? How? *[historicity;artefact-mediated + object-oriented activity?]* • What in student feedback reports would generally motivate you to respond to the feedback? *[role of motivation; process of mediation to attain object; agency?; perhaps contradictions?]*
To make clear how university teachers in this study made use of student feedback in their everyday teaching practice	• Talking about teaching, how do you go about planning for your teaching? For example, how do you prepare for a lecture? (If they don't say anything about sfb, prompt them….) *[teaching practice; object-oriented?]* • What links do you see between student feedback reports and your own teaching practice? *[process of mediation; professional learning; expansive transformations?]*
To establish what university teachers' engagement with and responses to student feedback reveal about the teaching and learning context at Stellenbosch University	• How would you describe your department's view on the importance of teaching and learning? What do they expect from you in terms of teaching? *[collective; multi-voicedness]* • How is teaching evaluated in your department? *[Community; rules; division of labour; contradictions?]* • Do you experience/ have you experienced any tensions between your role as teacher/researcher/CI practitioner at the personal/departmental/institutional level? If so, what is the nature of such tensions? *[Community; rules; division of labour; contradictions?]* • What can be improved regarding the use of student feedback at Stellenbosch? *[expansive transformations]*

Figure 5.2: Researcher's map for the study

A first draft of the interview schedule was piloted with a junior lecturer and amendments based on the feedback from the pilot run were made. Interviews commenced with a few general questions in order to stimulate the conversation, but also to obtain some historical background to student feedback experiences from participants. In later stages of the interview, the questions were guided by, but not limited to, the interview schedule (See Annexure 4).

Potential interviewees were invited via e-mail to participate. Upon positive responses, interviews were scheduled according to the availability of interviewees. Except for one participant, whose office was damaged in a fire at their academic building during the time of the study, all the interviews were conducted in the participants' offices, which constituted natural settings.

Interview data were digitally recorded and transcribed by persons not related to the study. Five participants preferred to conduct their interviews in Afrikaans and the data were subsequently translated by a qualified language translator. All the translated and transcribed interview texts were forwarded to participants for confirmation of the accuracy thereof and to make changes as they saw fit, to guard against any misrepresentation of their actual meanings. Participants had to give their consent to the final content of the transcripts before the data was included for analysis.

5.4.5.2 Document data

Institutional policies that referred to student feedback were analysed as secondary data to this study. The institutional policy documents can be regarded as artefacts that offer a construction of our understanding of a particular social context and can thus have interpretational value in terms of providing information that could help us to interpret and make meaning of the social and cultural worlds that we are part of (Plowright, 2011). For this reason, institutional teaching and learning-related policies and human resources management policies were analysed in order to better understand how all of these aspects related to university teachers' activities in terms of responding to student feedback within their teaching, or even to uncover aspects that could have played a hindering role in this process.

The University's Student Feedback Policy, the Teaching and Learning Policy and the Strategy for Teaching and Learning 2014-2018 were analysed to explore how

institutional guidelines and expectations with regard to aspects of effective teaching and the use of student feedback related to the actual use of student feedback in university teachers' teaching practice. Together with this, institutional human resource management policies that made reference to student feedback were also analysed. These included the "Guidelines for the Appointment and Promotion of lecturers at Stellenbosch" and the "Stellenbosch University Policy on Staff Development". In June 2015, a report: "Recommendations of the Task Team for the Promotion and Recognition of Teaching" was also made available after approval by the SU Senate. This report recommended the development of institutional guidelines for the promotion, recognition and reward of good teaching at SU. It also made reference to student feedback and was thus included in the document analyses.

5.4.5.3 The institutional student feedback system as data source

The student feedback system at SU also produces student feedback reports (see Annexure 3) per university teacher and course module offered at the University, which serve as artefacts that contain information about student accounts of how they experience teaching at the University. These reports contain the processed and aggregated student feedback data per university teacher and per module. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the student feedback reports of the 16 participants were scrutinised to identify participants whose feedback results showed changes between 2010 and 2014, as well as to include participants with feedback results varying between higher and lower results. However, the student feedback content was not analysed, since this study focused on the perceived role of student feedback in university teachers' teaching and did not focus on the feedback information as such. Furthermore, to draw well-supported conclusions related to student feedback regarding individual teachers would require a longitudinal study of such feedback reports. Moreover, the variation in terms of the participants' characteristics, such as years of experience in university teaching, as well as the diversity in terms of their disciplines and academic departments, denied the opportunity of making meaningful assumptions based on student feedback results for individual teachers.

5.4.6 Data quality management

Enhancing the reliability and validity of research is always a crucial part of the research process. Dealing with these concepts could prove to be particularly challenging in case study research that makes use of qualitative data. Because of the methodological diversity in approaches to studies using qualitative data, researchers within the field often prefer to use the terms credibility or trustworthiness of the research (Given, 2008:753). Table 5.1 provides an overview of the measures that were taken in this study in order to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the research.

Table 5.1: Measures to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the research

Quality measure	Enhancing credibility and trustworthiness
Ecological validity	• The phenomenon of student feedback was studied within its **natural setting** in order to give accurate portrayals of the realities surrounding student feedback. • The researcher took particular care not to influence or intervene in the natural setting by contriving, creating or constructing the research context due to her presence (Plowright, 2011:30). • The ecological validity of this study remained high, since the role of student feedback data in teaching practice can only be illuminated when university teachers make these verbally explicit.
Content validity of the data instrument	• An **interview schedule** was developed to ensure that the same questions were put to all participants and that the questions were also set in such a way that university teachers had to reflect on their own practices at the time. • The research questions for the interview schedule were developed according to the concepts encompassed within activity theory, which served as the guiding theoretical framework for the study. • Expert advice[3] was gained during the development of the data instrument to ensure that it would serve its required purpose (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995).
Member checking	• **Participants validated the data** by confirming their satisfaction with and

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[3] This was done by completing a week-long course on interviewing at the African Doctoral Academy at Stellenbosch University. The content of this course was based on the work of international experts in interpretive research, James A Holstein and Jaber F Gubrium. Prof. Max Bergman, chair of Social Research and Methodology at the University of Basel at the time of the study, was also consulted by way of a personal meeting to discuss the interview schedule.

	agreement to the content of the transcriptions of their own interviews.
	• Transcriptions and translations were checked for accuracy by both the researcher and the participants.
Thick descriptions	• Detailed or thick descriptions of the phenomenon under study was provided, as this is regarded as essential for increasing the credibility of data and findings within case study research.
	• Thick descriptions provide **insights into actual situations and the contexts** that surround it. As such it can help the reader to determine whether the overall findings "ring true" (Shenton, 2004:69).
Reflexivity	• Researching one's own institution poses the risk of being too personally involved and causing bias in the generation, analysis and interpretation of data.
	• The **identity of the researcher** as social actor, the **researcher's thoughts** and **research decisions**, as well as **ethical considerations** thus need to be foregrounded. This was done from the onset of the study (also see Chapter 1) (Williams, 2009) and included as aspects such as:
	o Being upfront with participants regarding the reason for embarking on this study and that the data would be used as part of the researcher's PhD studies;
	o Stating clearly that the impetus for the doing this research stemmed from the researcher's personal need to better understand the of student feedback in teaching practice at SU in order to provide more effective advice to university teachers in terms of using student feedback for the enhancement of teaching practice;
	o Making participants aware of the fact that this research project received no institutional or external funding and thus did not have to meet requirements of the institution or any other external parties.
Triangulation	• The researcher's presence may lead to bias in the interviewee's responses or the researcher's interpretations of the data (Creswell, 2014:187). Further to this, not all people are equally articulate. As a measure of compensation for this, case studies allow one the opportunity to make use of **multiple sources of information**, such as interviews, observation, documents and such, rather than depending on only one source of information (Creswell, 2014:185).
	• Therefore, in this study, secondary data were also generated by analysing institutional policies which included references to the use of student feedback, in order to triangulate the data from the interviews.

5.4.7 Data analysis

This study made use of qualitative data, which were compiled from two different sources, namely (i) narrative data from the interviews and (ii) the texts from institutional policy documents related to the matter under study. The narrative data

from the semi-structured interviews with the 16 participants served as the primary source of data in this study.

5.4.7.1 Level-one data analysis: Summarising and organising the narrative data

A first level of analysis, based on inductive coding, was done as issues emerged from the data produced through the 16 interviews (Lapadat, 2010). This first level of inductive coding entailed what Miles and Huberman (1994:86, 92) would refer to as the first interim analysis during which data are prepared, summarised and packaged according to suitable categories. Coding was done by hand. As each transcript was read, segments of texts which could be related to existing literature were highlighted and provided with *a priori* codes in some instances. After carefully reading through every transcript a number of times, the data was divided into segments of information and further coded according to the themes as they emerged from the data.

This process was followed by structural coding of the narrative data, which is regarded as highly suitable for interview transcripts (Saldanha, 2013). Structural coding entails the labelling and indexing of segments of texts (Saldanha, 2013) based on the research questions in the interview schedule. MacQueen, McLellan-Lemal, Bartholow and Milstein (2008:124) describe this process of coding as the application of "a conceptual phrase representing a topic of inquiry to a segment of data that relates to a specific research question used to frame the interview". Structural coding provides a "grand tour" overview of the data and thus helps the researcher to quickly access data that may be relevant to a particular research question (Namey, Guest, Thairu & Johnson, 2008:141).

Analysis of the institutional policies also included descriptive coding to ensure a detailed "inventory of their contents" (Saldanha, 2013:64). In descriptive coding, the basic topic of a segment of text is summarised in a single word or a short phrase and can thus deliver a categorised inventory or a summary of the data's content (Saldanha, 2013). It provides the researcher with an organisational grasp of the study and is thus regarded as essential groundwork for further analysis and interpretation of the data (Wolcott, 1994; Saldanha, 2013). Creswell (2005) refers to the afore-mentioned steps as the initial phases of inductive qualitative content analysis (see Figure 5.3).
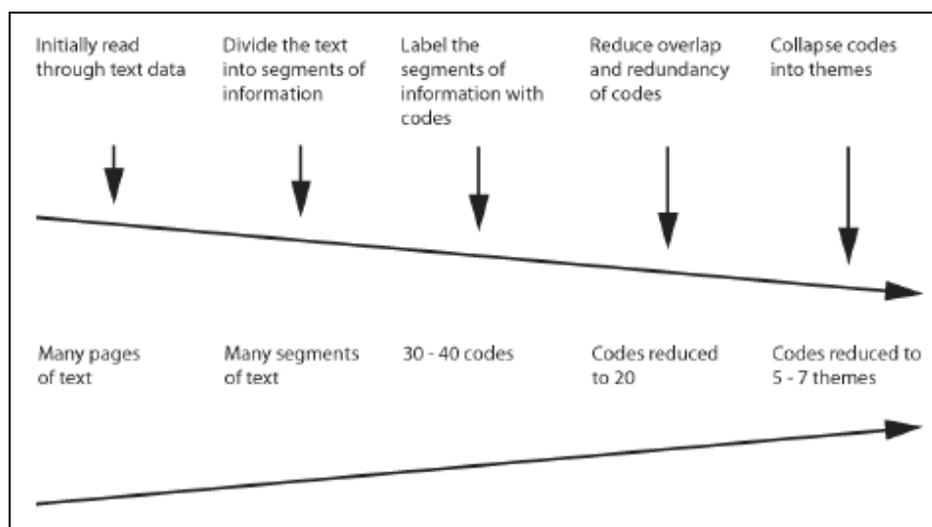
Figure 5.3: The coding process in qualitative research (Source: Creswell, 2005:238)

Many of the themes that emerged in this process eventually appeared to relate to the theoretical perspectives that are discussed in Chapters 2 and 3 and the contextualisation discussion in Chapter 4. The codes, categories and quotes that were identified from these initial stages of analysis are reported on in Chapter 7.

5.4.7.2 Level-two analysis: Re-organising and aggregating the data

Research based on qualitative data could potentially produce huge data sets as participants have the opportunity to provide "thick descriptions" to present their thoughts, actions and contexts, amongst others (Ponterotto, 2006:539). It could therefore become almost impossible for the researcher to capture and analyse all of this data and thus data generation and analysis inevitably becomes a selective process (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Valid data analysis requires systematic organisation of the data so that the researcher may be able to answer the research questions of the particular study. Data are thus re-organised and reconfigured into a smaller and more select list of categories, themes and/or concepts linked to the conceptual framework and research questions of the study at hand (Saldanha, 2013:149). This can also be described as a theoretical organisation of the first level of codes that emerged. Saldanha (2013:188) describes this process as eclectic coding, whereby the first-cycle code choices are refined and re-analysed according to the analytical strategy or framework applicable to the study. This is done for the coding to serve the needs of the study and its analysis.

The codes that were applicable in this study, based on the activity theory framework (as described in Chapter 3), were:

- **Professors**, **Senior Lecturers**, **Lecturers** and **Junior Lecturers**, as the *subjects* engaged in the act of teaching;
- **Teaching and Learning Philosophies**, as these constituted the *object(s)* or goals that underpin and motivate the act of teaching;
- **Student feedback** as the *mediating artefact* or *instrument* in this particular study;
- **Departmental norms and practices** as the *rules and conventions* that govern teaching and learning within the academic department as the closest context to the university teacher;
- **Contexts of academic departments**, which include *all the participants and circumstances* within the university teacher's closest teaching and learning context;
- **Academic roles**, which refer to the different *roles and responsibilities* taken up by participants within an activity system.

During the second level of analysis, the primary interview data were unpacked and re-organised according to the triangular activity theory framework after carefully reading through every transcript again. The interviews were used to explore the teaching and learning conceptions that underpinned the university teachers' teaching approaches and practice within their particular teaching contexts. Evidence of how university teachers reflected on teaching and learning, student feedback, the teaching and learning context within which they fulfilled their teaching roles and how these concepts seemed to relate to each other in the case of each university teacher, were searched for. An effort was also made to search especially for turning points at which academics indicated moments of decisive choices or changes that they had made.

As the data was being worked through, contradictions became apparent. These were evident from statements made by participants in a quandary, as well as their direct articulations of their likes and dislikes; their satisfactions or dissatisfactions; and their verbal representations on the effectiveness of the use of student feedback

within the University's structures. This encouraged the analyses of the narrative data from two perspectives: (i) from the perspective of the post levels of the participants (described in Chapter 7) and (ii) from the perspective of the four disciplinary clusters represented by the participants (described in Chapter 8). It was hoped that these two perspectives of analysis would reveal data that could assist in the interpretation of the data and strengthen inferences made from the data.

As a point of departure, the institutional teaching and learning policies, human resource management policies related to the teaching and learning contexts, and other strategic initiatives that made reference to teaching and learning matters, were also interrogated. This was done to ascertain whether there was congruence between institutional policy directives and actual teaching and learning interactions. These findings are described in Chapter 6.

All the included data points (the interviews together with document analyses of policies) were used to identify pertinent issues and relations in the use of student feedback for professional learning about teaching within a research-led university. These interpretations and a synthesis thereof are discussed in Chapter 9.

5.5   ETHICAL ISSUES

It has been mentioned that this study incorporated various risks in terms of bias and ethics. Ethical practice and research integrity are extremely important when research is participant-centred. Ethical practice in this regard required that participants and their data be respected during all stages of the research (Alderson & Morrow, 2004; Plowright, 2011). The measures that were taken to enhance the integrity of this research project are now described.

Since this research entailed sourcing information from staff members at the University, ethical clearance had to be obtained from the institutional Ethics Committee for Human and Social Sciences to approve the research project. This application had to indicate, among other things, the purpose of the research; how research participants would be selected; how the data would be generated and protected; as well as the possible risks that could be anticipated during the research process. The application for ethical clearance is attached as Annexure 5. The research process could only be embarked on once approval was received from the institutional Ethics Committee, which was granted on 29 March 2010. The letter of

approval is attached as Annexure 1. A requirement for ethical clearance was that the researcher should obtain signed consent from the participants for the public use of the data. All participants whose interviews and student feedback data were included in this study consented to participating in the study and having their data used for public dissemination under the condition of keeping their identities anonymous (see Annexures 1 and 5).

Due to the personal and potentially sensitive nature of the phenomenon of student feedback, the privacy of the participants was protected by not disclosing their names or any other specific details that would enable readers to identify individuals. It was agreed with participants, however, that it would be necessary to mention the names of faculties or disciplinary clusters in order to contextualise the data. All the participants agreed to this. Care was also taken in terms of how and what information was published, so that participants' identities would not be compromised.

The researcher also had to be sensitive to her own position as the person responsible for managing the institutional student feedback system. Care thus had to be taken to gain the participants' trust by assuring them that the data would not be used to jeopardise their professional positions at the University, or to promote the researcher's own career. The purpose of the research as to gain a better understanding of the phenomenon of student feedback at SU and that it would contribute to this PhD study, had to be clearly explained to the participants. It had to be made clear to participants that the outcome of the research would potentially add to the intellectual body of knowledge about this phenomenon in order to understand it better, which could ultimately also inform and enhance practice at SU.

The raw data, including digitally recorded interviews and transcripts, were stored securely for the period of this research. The persons involved with transcribing and translating the interview data were also required to heed the confidential handling of the data. In addition, the accuracy of the interview data were confirmed with the participants before it was included in the analyses.

5.6   SUMMARY

An institutional case study research design was chosen for this qualitative study. Various steps for coding analyses were employed in preparation of organising the

data according to the analytical framework provided by activity theory. The analysis of the applicable policy documents as well as the data generated from the participant interviews are presented in the following chapters.

CHAPTER 6

INSTITUTIONAL POLICY DOCUMENTS

6.1   INTRODUCTION

The research process and research decisions for this study were discussed in the previous chapter. In this chapter, institutional policies relating to teaching and learning at the University and to student feedback in particular, are explored. The content retrieved from the policy documents are mapped according to the cultural-historical activity theory framework (see Chapter 3 for a discussion of activity theory as analytical lens to this study).

6.2   MAPPING OF STUDENT FEEDBACK AND TEACHING-RELATED POLICIES

Since the focus of this study is on student feedback, the institutional Student Feedback Policy of SU is discussed first as point of departure for exploring the relevant teaching and learning policies.

6.2.1   Student feedback as mediating artefact

The SU Student Feedback Policy of 2008 was the official policy that governed student feedback processes at SU at the time that this study was undertaken. This policy describes the aim of student feedback processes as "to support and promote teaching" (Stellenbosch University, 2008:1). The point of departure declared in this document is that student feedback should firstly serve to assist university teachers in improving their teaching. At institutional policy level, student feedback is thus foregrounded as a means for mediating the professional learning of university teachers and the improvement of teaching. This stance is consistent with research that supports the use of student feedback for the enhancement of teaching practice (Moore & Kuol, 2005; Blair & Valdez Noel, 2014; Van den Bos & Brouwer, 2014).

It thus seems logical that the use of student feedback for improving university teachers' own teaching is placed at the top of the list of functions assigned to student feedback at SU. Further to this main function, student feedback is expected to:

- assist module teams and departments with decisions regarding their approach to the modules and programmes that they offer;
- involve and empower students in order to promote learning;
- satisfy faculties, departments and module teams as to the quality of their teaching;
- serve as a possible additional source of information during performance assessment processes;
- help with the identification of outstanding lecturers, and the documentation of excellence in teaching; and
- serve as an additional source of information during quality assurance processes (SU 2008:1).

In order to enhance student learning, the SU Student Feedback Policy (Stellenbosch University, 2008:1) encourages the use of "real-time (formative) feedback" which would enable the students who provide the feedback, to experience the benefits of any changes or enhancements implemented on the basis of their feedback while they are still enrolled in the particular modules. University teachers are encouraged to make use of a variety of suitable ways to collect such feedback in order to avoid questionnaire fatigue.

In addition to improving the quality of teaching and enhancing the learning processes of students, student feedback may also be used in other processes such as quality assurance and performance appraisals. The policy, however, warns against the ill-considered use of student feedback information in such processes, by stating that it should never "be used without being tested, in isolation or out of context" (Stellenbosch University, 2008:1). The policy warns against an over-emphasis on student feedback during processes such as performance appraisals and quality assurance. Instead, it promotes the use of multiple sources of information when student feedback is used during such processes. Therefore, student feedback may never serve as the only source of information to assess the quality of an individual's teaching performance. This also implies that student

feedback should not be reduced to a single quantitative number as an indication of the quality of teaching.

The policy also states that deans of faculties and heads of departments have to take the responsibility of ensuring that student feedback is collected on a regular basis and that proper procedures are followed to protect the confidentiality and integrity of the data. The policy further suggests that support should be available to university teachers who may require assistance in interpreting and utilising feedback from students, so as to optimise the role that student feedback can play in the development of university teachers' teaching. The deans of faculties are also supposed to regularly report to the Vice Rector (Learning and Teaching) about the use of student feedback in their particular environments.

Although institutionally collected student feedback is dealt with confidentially, it is also regarded as important to appropriately inform students about the results of their feedback and the actions taken on the basis of their feedback. The line function management within the various environments may use their discretion in terms of which student feedback information would be relevant and suitable to share with students, as well as what follow-up actions would be required, where necessary.

The policy stipulations and guidelines discussed above, confirm a mostly formative approach to the use of student feedback. The continuous development of teaching, with the help of student feedback as mediating tool, thus seems to be an institutional priority. It therefore makes sense to discuss other institutional policies related to teaching and learning in order to gauge whether and how the University positions itself to support such a formative approach to student feedback in order to promote quality teaching. In view of this, the institutional policy for teaching and learning, which portrays the University's philosophical underpinnings and strategic direction for teaching and learning, is discussed next.

6.2.2   Institutional philosophy of teaching and learning

As explained in section 3.4, the object(s) of the teaching and learning activity system under scrutiny in this case study would be revealed through the teaching and learning philosophies which underpin the university teachers' interaction and engagement within the activity system. So too, the philosophies that underpin the

policy directives as advocated by SU, would represent the anticipated object(s) of the institutional teaching and learning activity system. Teaching and learning at SU is guided by the SU Teaching and Learning Policy (Stellenbosch University, 2007) and the SU Strategy for Teaching and Learning 2014-2018 (Stellenbosch University, 2013b).

Quality and excellence inform all teaching and learning in undergraduate as well as postgraduate programmes (Stellenbosch University, 2007). Furthermore, SU places a high premium on "the interaction between research and teaching and the mutually enriching effect of research and teaching on one another" (Stellenbosch University, 2007:2). In this policy, which serves as institutional directive for the teaching and learning processes at SU, the institution thus advocates a synergistic approach towards teaching and research. This resonates with arguments for integration of teaching and research as advocated by Taylor (2008) and Toews and Yazedjian (2007). The requirement for excellence in both teaching and research could, however, place university teachers under pressure and may even force them to choose between the two functions (section 2.3.1; also see Taylor, 2008; Herman, 2015). By implication, this may also have an influence on university teachers' choices for responding to student feedback and may even cause tension regarding the Student Feedback Policy.

Furthermore, SU's strategic vision for and the philosophies underpinning teaching and learning at the institution are aligned with the student-centred / learning- oriented conception of teaching as described by Northedge (2003), Degago and Kaino (2015) and others (in section 2.4.1). Teaching and learning at the institution is aimed at delivering graduates who have attained the required attributes of being engaged, dynamic and well-rounded individuals. In order to achieve these graduate attributes, the following is required (Stellenbosch University, 2013b:7-8):

Critical and scholarly lecturers who

- Engage in various forms of scholarship
- Are reflective and open to new ideas

Engaging curriculum design which
- Brings the outside world into the classroom
- Is current and self-renewing

Dynamic delivery which
- Is innovative and flexible
- Uses a wide variety of media functionally

Enriched campus experience which
- Encourages learning from diverse perspectives
- Provides and encourages a variety of learning contexts.

Based on this strategy, it is clear that SU regards teaching and learning as a social activity which is deeply embedded in and shaped by the contexts in which it takes place (Walker, 2001; Esteban Bara, 2014; Ruth, 2014). Furthermore, university teachers are required to continuously reflect on their teaching practice and engage in scholarship in order to inform constant renewal of modules, programmes and their teaching practice particularly (Stellenbosch University, 2013b). Student feedback serves as a source of information that could be tapped into during these processes of reflection (Stellenbosch University, 2008).

Having discussed SU's teaching and learning philosophy and strategy, the attention is now turned to further exploration of what the University requires of its university teachers in terms of quality teaching.

6.2.3   What SU required from its university teachers

Stellenbosch University (SU) has positioned itself as an institution of excellence and significance, as was affirmed by the late Professor Russel Botman during his installation speech as Rector of SU on 11 April 2007 (Botman, 2007). Concerning teaching, SU advocates "quality teaching by the constant renewal of teaching and learning programmes and by the creation of effective opportunities for learning / study" (Stellenbosch University, 2007:1). It thus requires of its university teachers, who constitute the *subjects* in this study, to possess the required knowledge and capabilities to guide and facilitate student learning (Stellenbosch University, 2011). University teachers therefore need to be able to design and implement teaching activities that facilitate learning; they are thus regarded as "facilitators – mediators or a type of manager – and innovators of the learning process" (Stellenbosch University, 2007:2).

Although the responsibility for "designing and implementing optimal learning opportunities" (Stellenbosch University, 2013b:3) resides with the university

teachers, it is recognised and advocated at institutional policy level that students themselves also need to take responsibility for their own learning, by making use of the opportunities that are made available to them to attain their degree qualifications, as well as to develop the required attributes that the University hopes to foster in its students (see section 6.2.2). In pursuit of achieving this vision, University management is required to strategically guide and direct the teaching function (Stellenbosch University, 2013b) in ways which would provide a supportive and enabling environment for university teachers to optimise their teaching role. While section 4.4 has provided a detailed description of the broader teaching and learning context at SU, what follows next is a focused discussion of the teaching and learning context from a policy perspective.

6.2.4   The institutional teaching and learning context

According to activity theory, context plays an important role in people's activities as they are continually shaping and being shaped by their social contexts (Roth & Lee, 2007). As mentioned earlier, SU supports a student-centred, learning-oriented approach to teaching and learning and places a high premium on quality teaching. Good teaching is regarded as the responsibility of all university teachers. In order to achieve and maintain high standards of quality, SU has declared itself committed to the support and development of all staff (Stellenbosch University, 2012), and specifically to the provision of opportunities to university teachers to develop appropriate teaching skills as may be required (Stellenbosch University, 2007).

In order to affirm and enhance the value of teaching, the University has stated the professionalisation of the teaching role as one of its strategic priorities (Stellenbosch University, 2013b). By pursuing this, it was foreseen that the morale and professional identity of teaching academics would be improved (Stellenbosch University, 2013b; also see Kostogriz & Peeler, 2007; Maphosa & Mudzielwana, 2014). A challenge that still remains, however, is to "find a comprehensive understanding of the professionalisation of tertiary level teaching that will suitably promote and acknowledge good teaching across faculties" (Stellenbosch University, 2013b:9). To this end, the Vice Rector (Learning and Teaching) appointed a task team in 2013 to follow up on the work done by a previous task team towards developing institutional guidelines for the promotion, recognition and reward of good

teaching at SU. The terms of reference for this task team included (Stellenbosch University, 2015a:1):

- the development of a comprehensive definition of good teaching;
- drawing up principles of good practice, for benchmarking, for measuring good teaching;
- the provision of advice to the Appointments Committee of Senate to support the processes of appointment and promotion of academics based on good teaching;
- the provision of suggestions for the reinstatement of an institutional teaching excellence award;
- the consideration of additional ways to recognise, promote and reward good teaching.

This task team made recommendations in terms of what faculties and/or departments could do to promote teaching and learning. These recommendations were approved by the University's Senate Committee at a meeting in 2015 and included the following (Stellenbosch University, 2015:7-16):

- Peer review and 360^0 evaluation processes: which ought to be tailored to the particular review object (for example formative feedback, annual performance appraisals);
- The introduction of career pathways: which would enable staff to choose, depending on the contexts of their faculties, whether they would want to focus their research and career development on the teaching of their discipline, thus opening up possibilities for academics to be promoted based on their teaching;
- The establishment of teaching and learning hubs in faculties: to generate interest, guidance and leadership with regard to teaching and learning within faculty-based contexts;
- The provision of opportunities for engaging in research on teaching so as to contribute to the professional development of teaching. Teaching fellowships, funding for teaching research and the use of teaching portfolios could make valuable contributions within these processes;
- That teaching should form part of annual performance appraisal processes and that each faculty should develop its own methods of appraising staff members' teaching in accordance with institutional principles, with due regard for the variety of contexts in faculties;
- That the Senate Appointments Committee revise its guidelines or templates which they use when considering academics for promotions or appointments, to specifically include a summary of all teaching activities as part of the person's abbreviated curriculum vitae;
- That recognition for teaching excellence should be given by way of introducing various dedicated internal institutional awards and aligning these awards with national teaching excellence awards such as HELTASA (the national body that promotes quality in higher education; also see section 4.3.3.3).

The first bullet in the above-mentioned list captures the idea of feedback. This task team also recognised that the use of one or two overall average numbers from student feedback questionnaires (see section 4.4.6) during the appraisal of teaching, could lead to teaching practice that would please students, but are counterproductive in terms of effective learning (Arthur, 2009; Tronto, 2010). Although work was well on the way to implement the recommendations made by this task team, it required more reflection to arrive at a common understanding of teaching at a faculty and/or institutional level. Tronto (2010) alerts to the risk that student feedback may be used as a mere quantitative measure if there is a lack of common understanding of quality teaching. It would therefore be important for SU to address this issue satisfactorily in order to ensure proper practices for the appraisal of teaching at the institution and, subsequently, the proper use of student feedback in these processes.

6.2.5   Institutional norms and practices

The norms, rules and conventions that are advocated through its institutional policies and which govern teaching and learning processes at SU, can be described as a pursuit of excellence in teaching and the facilitation of optimal learning experiences for students (Stellenbosch University, 2007; 2013b). This endeavour requires that university teachers have the skills, knowledge and capability to facilitate such effective learning opportunities (Stellenbosch University, 2011). It also requires of students to harness the learning opportunities presented to them and to share responsibility for their own learning (Stellenbosch University, 2013b). The University also recognises that the contexts within academic departments, faculties and disciplines may differ and thus affords these constituencies the opportunity to apply differentiated approaches to teaching and learning, subject to remaining within the parameters of the broader institutional policy frameworks (Stellenbosch University, 2013b; 2015).

Scrutinising the policies related to teaching and learning at SU, the norms and practices advocated by the institution seemed to require a focus on:

- Student-centred / learning-oriented approaches to teaching and learning and thus the facilitation and encouragement of effective student learning, while recognising the diverse student composition;

- The provision of sufficient and suitable resources to support teaching and learning, in relation to both students and teaching staff;

- Appropriate acknowledgement of and reward for effective teaching. The professionalisation of the teaching role thus ought to be an important endeavour across the University; and

- The use of student feedback as a professional learning tool to support the continuous improvement and enhancement of university teachers' teaching practice.

It can therefore be said that it is SU's responsibility to create an environment in which the focus areas mentioned above may thrive and, as such, contribute to the institution's scholarly ideals of excellent teaching and learning (Stellenbosch University, 2007). To promote quality teaching, SU thus probably needs to provide appropriate and sufficient opportunities to its teaching staff to develop their teaching practice and to practice a professional teaching career based on scholarship of teaching and learning principles. Student feedback can play a valuable role in these professional learning opportunities and processes, as is advocated in the institutional Student Feedback Policy (Stellenbosch University, 2008). It would thus be anticipated that the institutional teaching and learning context at SU would promote and foster student feedback practices that would contribute to the enhancement of teaching at the University.

The Student Feedback Policy, the institutional teaching and learning policies, as well as the relevant human resource management policies which were mapped as part of this study, recognise the potential influence of context on teaching and learning processes. These policies advocate that the role of context should always be taken into consideration when implementing and applying the broader institutional policy directives and guidelines within faculty and departmental contexts. However, contextual application and implementation of the institutional policies need to remain within the parameters of the over-arching institutional policies.

How university teachers perform their academic functions within these contexts is discussed next.

6.2.6   Dealing with the required roles of an academic

The Guidelines for the Appointment and Promotion of Lecturers at Stellenbosch University (Stellenbosch University, 2011) articulates four core academic roles which describe the duties of university teachers, namely:

1. Teaching and Learning

    The existence of the University is indicated as primarily aimed at the pursuit of knowledge. Scientific and scholarly teaching constitutes one of the main tasks of the University. Teaching academics are thus required to have the necessary knowledge and skills that will facilitate learning.

2. Research

    The University regards teaching and research to make up an integrated whole. Teaching and research thus ought to stimulate and enrich each other. Teaching academics therefore need to be equipped with the necessary research-methodological skills to be able to engage in supervision of postgraduate students, initiate and manage teaching programmes, participate in research programmes and produce research publications.

3. Community Interaction

    The teaching and research pursued at the University is also expected to be to the benefit of society, therefore community interaction forms part of the tasks of academics. Community interaction can take the form of making academic knowledge available within communities (for example, providing free legal services); participating in committee work within the University or more broadly; and service teaching, where community interaction forms an integral part of teaching and learning programmes and/or research projects.

4. Education and moulding

    The University does not only want its students to complete their academic degree qualifications, but to also develop into responsible citizens.

University teachers are thus required to also invest in fostering a value system in students which will help the students to grow into enquiring, engaged, dynamic and well-rounded professionals and citizens.

These elements are regarded as a holistic set of roles and should preferably not be enacted in fragmented ways. On the contrary, university teachers are encouraged to follow integrated and synergistic approaches towards balancing all these roles (Leibowitz, 2010).

6.2.7 The teaching environment

What emerged from reviewing the institutional policies related to teaching and learning at SU is that university teachers would be required to deliver quality teaching, but that they could expect to be provided with sufficient support and development opportunities to enable them to meet this requirement. In this regard, the SU management is supposed to provide strategic direction as well as the necessary resources to promote quality teaching.

As mentioned in section 6.2.5, the SU policy documents also recognise the differences in context between the various faculties and leave room for interpretation and execution of policy directives within the particular contexts of the faculties and/or academic departments. This seems to set the stage for fair and transparent processes when it comes to supporting, assessing, promoting and rewarding teaching at SU.

6.2.8 Summary and discussion

Based on the relational nature of the components of the teaching and learning activity system (Roth & Lee, 2007) and the portrayal of SU as supportive of the teaching role of academics according to its institutional policies, it was anticipated that university teachers would have positive experiences of teaching at the University and that such university teachers would be able to carry out their teaching practice. These anticipated relations are depicted in Figure 6.1.
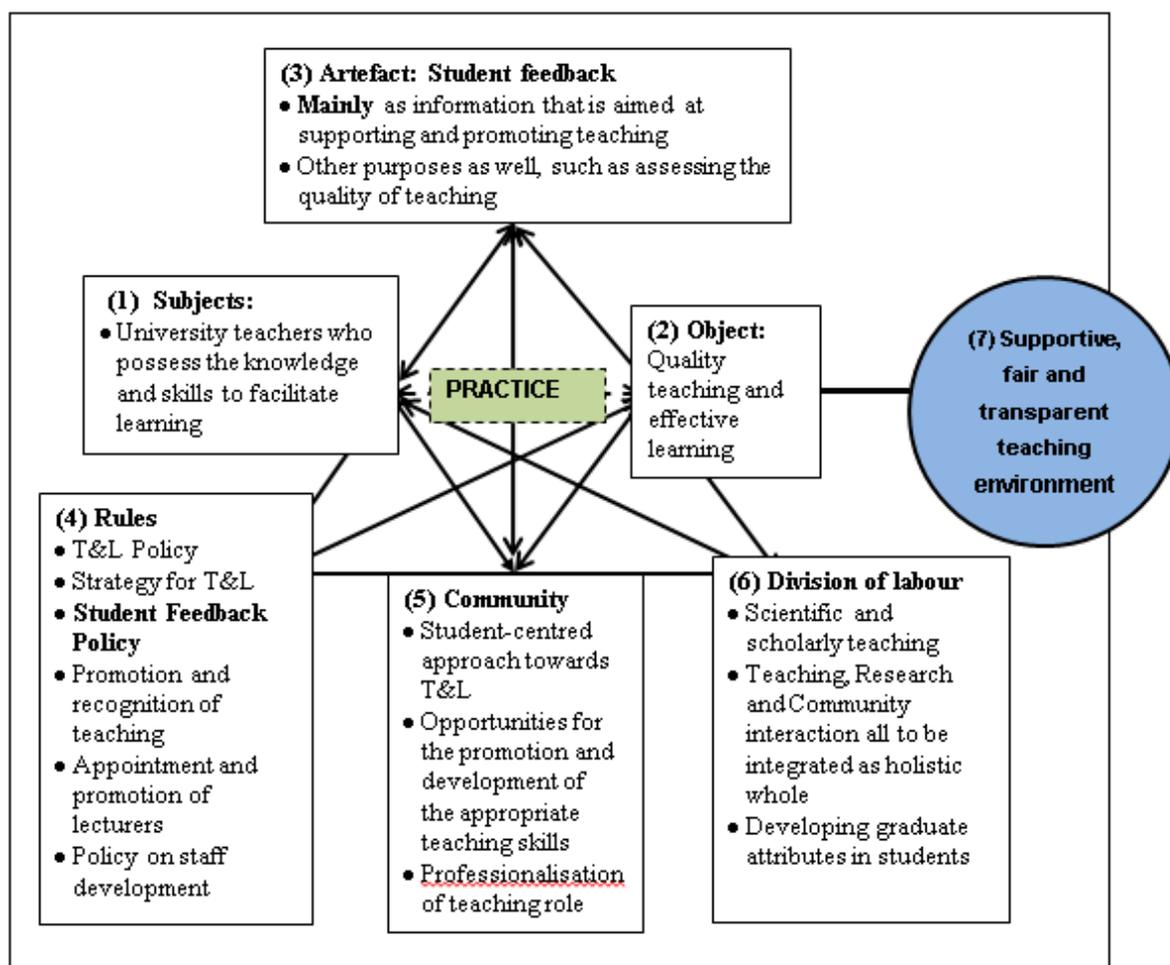
Figure 6.1: The teaching and learning activity system as portrayed in SU policies

Figure 6.1 portrays the SU teaching and learning activity system as revealed after mapping the institutional policies related to teaching and learning and student feedback. The discussions that follow focus particularly on the links between institutional policies and the practice of student feedback.

6.2.8.1 What is understood by the concept of student feedback on teaching according to SU policies?

Based on the activity theory principle of mediation (Roth & Lee, 2007), which implies that the relationship between the teaching practice of university teachers (1), and the object of quality teaching and effective learning (2) can be mediated or influenced by an artefact such as student feedback (3), it could be anticipated that student feedback would be used to support and promote teaching so as to

contribute to quality teaching and effective learning. As one of the resources available to support the process of mediation between university teachers and the teaching object(s) of quality teaching and effective learning, the Student Feedback Policy at SU provides guidance regarding the role that student feedback could play in this process. As mentioned in section 6.2.3, this policy regards the support and improvement of teaching as the main purpose of student feedback. Teaching and learning experts such as Biggs (1999), Kane, Sandretto and Heath (2004) and Blair and Valdez Noel (2014) also argue for student feedback to be used for this purpose. Student feedback furthermore could be used in processes of performance appraisal and quality assurance, but then with great circumspection.

6.2.8.2 What are the contexts that influence student feedback on teaching practice according to SU policies?

In addition to the Student Feedback Policy, other teaching and learning related policies, strategies and guidelines, as well as human resource management policies at SU also aim to provide an enabling environment for university teachers to deliver quality teaching as required (4). With its student-centred approach to teaching and learning, the University has also declared its commitment to providing opportunities to teaching academics to develop and/or enhance the teaching skills required for the purpose of quality teaching and student learning (5) (section 6.2.4; also see Wingate, 2007). Professionalisation of the teaching role, and thus the enhancement of the stature of teaching, was identified as a key priority for SU. Professionalisation, which includes the recognition, promotion and rewarding of teaching, thus serves as a strategy to boost the morale and professional identity of university teachers, a strategy which is also supported by Maphosa and Mudzielwana (2014).

As stipulated in the institutional policy (see section 6.2.3), student feedback could provide valuable information towards these processes (Stellenbosch University, 2008). The context within which the teaching and learning takes place thus seems to be a prime consideration when interpreting and using student feedback information. The policy therefore allows for contextual interpretation and implementation of the policy directives and guidelines.

6.2.8.3 How student feedback may be used by university teachers according to SU policy documents

Based on the principle of multi-voicedness (Engeström, 2001), activity theory also recognises the importance of the context within which practices take place. Multiple participants with multiple responsibilities and points of view are always present in an activity system. According to the policy documents, university teachers, in the case of this study, have various roles and responsibilities. These include research, teaching and community interaction, while they also have to serve as role models to help students develop the required graduate attributes (6) (section 6.2.6).

Students themselves also form a crucial part of this multi-voiced system as they are the ones who have direct experience of the teaching provided at the University. Their feedback in terms of how they experience such teaching and whether the teaching is enhancing their learning, thus is essential to the holistic teaching and learning process (Ryan, 2015; Golding & Adam, 2016). Student feedback therefore ought to be a professional learning tool and an essential part of the professional practice of university teachers as they reflect on their teaching (Ramsden, 1998; Arthur, 2009).

6.2.8.4 How student feedback could potentially be more useful in improving teaching and learning activities at a research-led university

The multiple views, roles and responsibilities within activity systems could lead to tension but could also provide opportunities for innovation (Engeström, 2001). According to the strategic institutional policy documents that were studied for this research project, SU recognises the challenges that these multiple roles could pose to academics. In response, it advocates an integrated or synergistic approach to make it possible to balance all the roles required of an academic.

The SU management is also expected to provide strategic direction as well as the necessary resources to support academics in their endeavour to balance these different roles (Wingate, 2007). The academic, professional and managerial contexts of the University ought to work together to contribute to a teaching and learning environment that would be experienced as supportive, fair and transparent; an environment which would support the use of student feedback for the

enhancement of the quality of teaching – and which could even encourage innovative teaching practice (7).

6.3   CONCLUSION

It has been established that, in terms of institutional policy directives, SU is portrayed as being supportive of the teaching function in terms of providing opportunities to enhance the quality of teaching. This encouraged the expectation that the participating university teachers would describe positive experiences from being a teacher at SU and, in particular, of using student feedback to improve and enhance their teaching practice.

In the chapters that follow, the data collected from the participants in the study are discussed from two perspectives, namely in terms of the four different post levels represented by the participants (Chapter 7), as well as the four disciplinary clusters in which these participants enacted their teaching roles (Chapter 8). An interpretation of the institutional policies as described above against the narrative data provided by the research participants is presented in Chapter 9. This is aimed at illuminating whether and how the participating university teachers' experiences of teaching at SU corresponded to the rules, guidelines and provisions stipulated in the institutional policy documents.

CHAPTER 7

FINDINGS FROM INTERVIEW DATA ACCORDING TO POST LEVELS

7.1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, the findings from the narrative data are presented according to the four post levels of the participants. The rationale for this level of analysis has to do with the hierarchical structures that dominate higher education and which has the potential to induce power issues within the activity system of teaching. Such issues could influence how university teachers approach their teaching practice and the use of student feedback in particular.

As mentioned in section 5.4.7.1, a first level of analysis was done by organising and summarising the data according to emergent themes without the restrictions of a theoretical framework. A brief presentation of this analysis is offered in section 7.2.

The second level of the data analysis process was mainly guided by Activity Theory (described in Chapter 3) as an analytical framework for interpreting the data. Analysis of the data was based on the heuristic triangle which portrays the components of the activity theory framework and their possible relationships to one another (Edwards, 2007; Roth & Lee, 2007). Section 7.3 provides the details of this second level of analysis as it pertains to the four post levels of the participants. This chapter concludes with a summary of this level of findings according to the four subsidiary research questions which guided the study (see sections 1.4 and 5.2).

Findings from this study are substantiated by the inclusion of relevant quotes. These quotes are rendered verbatim. Direct quotes from the interviews are enclosed in quotation marks and are coded, for instance, by the letter "P" for professor, followed by a number, for example P1. In the sections that follow, findings pertaining to the rest of the interview data are reported according to the

three remaining post levels, and "P" is replaced with "SL" for senior lecturers, "L" for lecturers and "JL" for junior lecturers. It is important to note that a single quote is provided to illustrate or support a particular claim in some cases, but similar quotes are available. In certain cases, quotes containing most or all of the information also captured in a number of other quotes have been selected. Where the aim was to emphasise particular aspects or where different parts of information were captured in different quotes, multiple quotations are included.

7.2 LEVEL ONE DATA ANALYSIS: SUMMARISING AND ORGANISING THE DATA THROUGH INDUCTIVE CODING

In this study, transcripts of the interviews with 16 purposely selected lecturers served as the main source of narrative data. A presentation of the first level of analysis, which included summarising and organising of the data from the 16 interviews in order to develop a first level of categories (Miles & Huberman, 1994), is provided next.

7.2.1 Findings from the first level of inductive coding

A number of issues that seemed to be shared across all or most of the 16 interview transcripts emerged through the process of inductive coding (described in section 5.4.7.1). A brief summary of these emerging codes and themes is provided here. I use italics to identify the codes (as labels for segments of the data) and provide brief descriptions of the themes (describing more subtle processes such as patterns or trends) as they were revealed in the data (Saldanha, 2013).

7.2.1.1 Academic roles

In terms of *academic roles*, which in this study refer to teaching, research and community interaction (Toews & Yazedjian, 2007; Leibowitz, 2012), 15 of the 16 participants indicated that it was difficult and challenging to balance all the roles expected from a member of the academic staff. The following quotes support this statement:

- "It is quite somewhat difficult to find a balance in terms of the three roles…I don't think it's sort of an option to be slacking either one." (L1)
- "…it's a tug of war! I think the biggest tension is between teaching and research." (SL4)

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- "It is difficult…When you have more activities that you have to do and often conflicting priorities, makes it more difficult to manage your time." (P4)

Some indicated that they tried to deal with the challenge by taking decisions in terms of where to place their focus at which particular point in time. Only one participant spoke of it being easy to balance the three roles "… if you shape your research in a certain way" (L4).

7.2.1.2 Career trajectory

In terms of *career trajectory* and the *stature of teaching*, teaching appeared to play a rather insignificant role in promotion and recognition. Participants perceived this situation as mostly due to a university context where research carries more weight than teaching, with very little reward or recognition being available for teaching. Statements such as "…I would not have got my promotion without the NRF rating, with all my good teaching" (P3) and "…there's not much formal recognition for teaching" (SL3) support this.

7.2.1.3 Motivation for teaching

Despite the tension between teaching and research, participants indicated that they were *motivated to teach*, using phrases such as "… having a love and passion for teaching" (P1) and "… enjoying the interaction with students" (SL2). The facilitation of student learning underpinned the *teaching and learning philosophies* of all of these participants and they regarded the guidance of their students towards taking responsibility for their own learning as an important purpose of their teaching. Developing abilities such as critical thinking, problem solving and the application of knowledge were themes that cut across all of the responses related to this issue.

7.2.1.4 Quality assurance of teaching

Quality assurance with regard to teaching seemed to be driven mostly through moderation (internal and external) and external accreditation processes, where applicable. The *evaluation of teaching* seemed to vary across departments. Although in variable forms, student feedback was mentioned as playing a role in evaluation processes across all departments, for example:

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- "It is not given a weighting, it's not given a separate mark but it's sort of in support of your performance around." (SL2)
- "Well they use the official feedback. When you go for your interview with the chair of the department then he looks at your percentages." (P3)

7.2.1.5 The value of student feedback

For the participants in this study, the *value of student feedback* seemed to lie in feedback serving as a tool which helped to gauge the effectiveness of teaching in terms of addressing students' learning needs. It thus served to inform and guide their teaching practice in this regard, as indicated by the following quotes:

- "So, definitely, from the feedback that they gave me, I can say that it has directed and informed my practice and it opened up richer debates" (JL3)
- "I mean, our job is to give them a service that works for them and the student feedback gives us a chance to see whether they agree that what we're doing, is actually working for them." (SL3).

Some of the participants have, however, indicated a perceived lack of a common understanding of the purpose of student feedback and the need for SU to provide strategic guidance in terms of how it would expect both management and university teachers to use such feedback in terms of teaching and learning processes:

- "…to get the people together in the beginning and to let them understand what the common goal of student feedback is and what the value of it is and how it helps us, because if people have a shared understanding of it and also the same idea of the value thereof, then it is already a step in the right direction." (JL3)
- "I would say they should give direction on how they would want faculties, departments and lecturers should use it. They must lead in the sense of open communication to lecturers by saying that student feedback are used for this and this and this, and that it is not used for this and that. When you communicate openly, then you will create a playing field where everybody will know the rules of the game." (P1)

As a second level of analysis, this data set was re-organised and aggregated to collapse the first level of coding into categories according to the activity theory framework (see Chapter 3). This was done in two groupings: first in terms of

analysing the data according to the four post levels of the participants including that of junior lecturer, lecturer, senior lecturer and professor. The second grouping of this second level of analysis was done in terms of the four disciplinary clusters from which participant s were drawn, namely (i) Economic and Management Sciences, (ii) Health Sciences, (iii) Humanities and Social Sciences and (iv) Science, Engineering and Technology. The analysis of the second grouping is reported in Chapter 8.

7.3 LEVEL TWO DATA ANALYSIS: RE-ORGANISING AND AGGREGATING THE DATA IN TERMS OF THE PARTICIPANTS' POST LEVELS

In the following sections, the narrative findings from the interviews with the 16 participants are reported.

7.3.1 The Professors

The data collected in the interviews with the four professors were unpacked and re-organised according to the activity theory framework. A discussion of this analysis follows.

7.3.1.1 The subjects

Activity theory contends that the subjects in an activity system refer to the individuals or groups of individuals who act towards a particular goal (Roth & Lee, 2007). In their capacity as teachers, the professors are thus regarded as subjects performing the act of teaching in this study. The biographical details of the four professors are summarised in Table 7 and are elaborated on afterwards.

Table 7.1: Biographical information of the four Professors

	P1	P2	P3	P4
Teaching experience in higher education	26 years	33 years	27 years	19 years
Level of undergraduate modules taught	3rd-year classes		2nd- and 3rd- year classes	1st and 3rd years
Postgraduate teaching	Honours	MPhil classes	Honours	Honours
Postgraduate supervision	Master's	Master's	Master's	Master's
Teaching service modules	No	No	No	No
Teaching modules towards professional degree qualifications, e.g. Engineering, Law, Health	No	Yes	No	No

All four of the professors who were interviewed for this study had long-standing careers at Stellenbosch University. Their teaching experience in higher education ranged from 19 to 33 years at the time they were interviewed. They coincidentally all started their academic careers at SU. They all had experience in undergraduate teaching as well as postgraduate teaching and supervision of master's and doctoral students. Three professors were still actively involved in undergraduate teaching while the fourth one was involved in teaching courses for new teaching staff in his department, as well as managing the ongoing teaching development of more experienced colleagues. He was thus responsible for the training of those university teachers who perform the undergraduate teaching function in their department. Three of the four professors also indicated their involvement in the academic coordination of undergraduate programmes, while two were appointed in top academic management positions in their faculties.

7.3.1.2 Philosophy of teaching and learning

According to activity theory, an activity is always directed towards an object that motivates and gives direction to the activity (Wood, Tedmanson, Underwood, Minutjukur & Tjitayi, 2015). The object thus constitutes the ultimate goal at which the activity is directed. It could therefore be argued that university teachers' philosophy of teaching will influence how they approach their teaching (see section 3.4).

When analysing the interview transcripts of the four professors, it became apparent that they all had one element in common in terms of the aim of their teaching, namely that teaching should enable students to learn. This is indicated through phrases taken from the interview transcripts, such as: "… developing inquisitiveness and a question-attitude in students; …. critical thinking; … the desire to understand; … training students for their future roles as professionals; … student centred teaching; … facilitation of learning; … interaction; … active learning". For all the respondents who were professors, teaching was clearly directed at making a difference in students' learning and development. The professors' teaching practices would therefore be directed towards creating and supporting teaching and learning contexts that would foster optimal student learning. In this process, departmental contexts as well as resources available to support the professors' teaching role also exert an influence on how they may execute and experience their teaching function. Student feedback serves as one such a resource that could influence the professors' teaching experiences.

7.3.1.3 Student feedback as mediating artefact

Activity theorists assert that the interaction (teaching) of human beings with their environment (teaching and learning context) is mediated by artefacts (student feedback) (Roth & Lee, 2007; Daniels, 2008).

Due to their relatively longstanding careers at Stellenbosch University, these professors could provide insight into how the student feedback system evolved at the University over time. A complete historical overview could not be gauged from their interviews, since this information had to be retrieved from their memories. It could, however, be deduced that the nature and purpose of the system originated as a fairly informal system that was mostly used by individual university teachers and departments for the development of teaching and course modules. Over time it evolved into a formalised institutional system that has increasingly been used for performance evaluation purposes. The following quotes are illustrative of such development:

- "The system was less formalised than what we have now and the student feedback was managed in a much more informal, "nice-to-have" way…It has migrated to a performance review, not management…a performance review instrument…" (P1)

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- "There was continuous interaction – intensely – with the students and one got the feedback like that." (P2)
- "I actually think that when I started at the department in 1988, that the department always had a kind of very simple feedback form." (P3)
- "In those days we did not have to do it for assessment or anything. We did it because we wanted the feedback ourselves." (P4)

In terms of strategies for using student feedback in their teaching practices, the professors elaborated as follows:

- "…I also have my own system where I, on a regular basis, contact my students to give me feedback. So I don't use student feedback only at the end of the semester. So I use my feedback to adapt my method of teaching. And I think it only makes it better." (P1)
- "I take it very seriously, especially where I see clear themes, where students react either positively, then it serves as motivation to strengthen that practice or, uhm…if it is negative, then I sit and think…where did I make mistakes…how must I rectify it?" (P2)
- "I'll look at it in some detail. And check what they were and how the scores were. And see if there is anything I can improve on…And so it is to lead to self-improvement." (P4)

Despite the value that the four professors see in student feedback, they also expressed some dissatisfaction with the quality of feedback that is sometimes provided by the students and how they experienced the use of student feedback within their teaching contexts, as some of the previous quotes alluded to as well:

- "You want to get student feedback that would give you ideas, information, suggestions about the things you could do as a lecturer to help your students to learn. So students should be saying what the things are that contribute to their learning…instead of just technical stuff like the lecturer must do this and this and that..." (P3)
- "They take your lowest mark to determine your salary adjustment for the next three years. Thus personnel are not willing to let their performance fall for the sake of innovation." (P1)
- "…especially personal negative comments about the lecturers…negative things that are not constructive in nature…puts one off from the word 'go' to respond to the feedback." (P2)

The two main concerns emerging from these quotes appeared to be (i) the use of student feedback in performance appraisal processes, which could deter these professors from being innovative in their teaching, as well as creating possibilities for unfairness in or manipulation of the process since there seemed to be so much

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variation across departments in terms of how the feedback was used, and (ii) that the comments from students were sometimes too personal or not specific enough for these professors to figure out how to respond appropriately. These challenges thus necessitated a closer look at the teaching and learning contexts of the academic departments where these academics performed their teaching function and the norms and practices that governed how these departments perceived and approached teaching and learning.

7.3.1.4 The contexts of their academic departments

In this study the academic department within which the university teacher is appointed would typically represent the workplace context within which the participants would perform their teaching roles (see also Eraut *et al.*, 2004).

The academic department could consist of fellow university teachers and researchers, a Head of Department or Department Chair, administrative and other support staff, research assistants, technical staff and students, among others. Each of these stakeholders has their particular foci and functions which exert influence on the activity system. From the interviews with the four professors, it appeared that the departments' conceptions of the importance of and their approaches to teaching and learning seemed to differ to some extent. Teaching and learning was perceived to be of crucial importance in three of the departments. In one department, however, teaching was indicated to be of less importance. I provide the following quotes to support these observations:

- "I think the approach of the department is that teaching and learning is central to our department and the University…it is your nursery for outstanding lecturers and outstanding researchers." (P1)
- This is a department with a very strong tradition of good teaching." (P3)
- I think that it's become less and less important…And I'm concerned that many of them are now neglecting the teaching." (P4)

These discrepancies point to the need to further explore the departments or academic communities within which these professors performed their teaching roles.

7.3.1.5 Departmental norms and practices

The rules or norms refer to the regulations, conventions and/or cultures that are generally followed in carrying out the activity and thus exert influence on how interaction between the various components of the activity system is managed (Hart-Landsberg *et al.*, 1992; Bedny *et al.*, 2000). These rules could either enable or constrain such interactions (Engeström, 2001). The policies, rules and regulations that govern teaching and learning in SA as well as at SU, are discussed in section 4.3 and Chapter 6. The SU Student Feedback Policy was analysed in Chapter 6, in particular as reference point for interpreting university teachers' experiences of student feedback in their teaching.

Scrutinising the transcripts of the four professors in this study, it appeared that there was a discrepancy between the professors' thoughts as to what the main purpose of student feedback ought to be and how they experienced University management's use of it. It appeared that, for these professors, the scale was tipping towards using student feedback for the improvement of modules and teaching, while the use of student feedback for performance appraisal processes seemed to carry a heavier weight for management. This is evident in the following quotes from the participating professors:

- "University teachers use student feedback for personal development and development of a module, but the University uses it for performance review." (P1)
- "Official student feedback is used to evaluate teaching in the Department. The Head of Department looks at your overall percentage." (P3)
- "SFB is used in performance assessment but the extent to which it used you have to ask the Head of Department." (P4)

There was further variation in terms of how student feedback was used in performance appraisal processes in these professors' contexts. In one case, student feedback seemed to carry quantitative weighting in terms of determining a summative assessment of the professor's teaching, while for another, it served as evidence to support the appraisal process. It also appeared that only the average percentage mark that was calculated for the professor's teaching was used in one professor's case, while others looked at individual question items. These arguments are based on the following quotes from the relevant transcripts:

- "Different environments have different approaches to performance review." (P1)
- "I think the philosophy is to be careful not to make student feedback a too important component of the performance evaluation. I think they look a bit more global…with student feedback being only one component." (P2)
- "The HOD looks at your overall percentage." (P3)

Within these varying communities, contexts, norms and practices, the professors have to decide how they perform their roles as academics, and particularly their roles as university teachers. This however, does not negate the influence of the broader faculty, university and even national teaching and learning contexts.

7.3.1.6 Dealing with the expected roles of an academic

As described in Chapter 4, higher education finds itself in relatively challenging times with university teachers having to perform increased and diversified roles due to massification, globalisation, democratisation and transformation (Barnett, 2012; Boughey & McKenna, 2011). This all happens within a context where quality assurance and performativity have become increasingly important (Reddy *et al.*, 2010; Leibowitz, 2014). In this context, academics are expected to take up their various roles and to perform satisfactorily in all of them. The four professors who participated in this study concurred that they found the balancing of these roles quite demanding. In some cases, it became apparent that individual decision making and prioritisation played an important role in navigating one's way through all of the demands of being an academic, but also that the role of university systems in fuelling these challenging contexts could not be ignored. In order to corroborate these statements, relevant quotes are highlighted in Table 7.2.

Table 7.2: Factors that influence how professors dealt with the roles expected of them as academics

Individual decision making and prioritisation	University systems
• "I think this is just who I am. I try to play on every field, and I think to my own detriment…something's gotta give somewhere. And I think this is why one develops a stomach ulcer. Your family and your health suffer because it is difficult to juggle all the balls." (P1) • "But I also have, to a large extent, over the years learnt that I must realise that if you are in a leadership or management role, then THAT must be your focus. So I don't feel as guilty anymore… Over the years I have learnt to make peace with my role …I think in my own mind I could pen it out and demarcate it fairly well." (P2) • "I find it stressful to the point that I sometimes become depressed and feel that I simply cannot handle all the pressure…trying to cut down on preparation time for teaching using the same course over." (P3) • "My holiday work was printing them out and got the work done how and where? When I'm on holiday!" (P4)	• "I think tensions are driven by a lecturer's performance that is measured on those three performance areas…The tension between teaching and research are fanned through the systems of the University, by the message that the University sends out – that we are a research institute and therefor research is more important than teaching." (P1) • "Many of our teaching staff is NOT part of university personnel, but are joint staff, because they are paid by *[an external employer]* that struggles to see teaching and research as high priorities. It makes it more complex because in the minds of that staff cadre the function of service delivery is priority, because that is what they get assessed on in terms of performance." (P2) • "It's a lot more money and prestige for the Department if you spend your time on postgrads and doctoral people specifically. So even in a department with such a good teaching tradition, you have this tension." (P3); • "When you have more activities that you have to do and often conflicting priorities, [it] makes it more difficult to manage your time." (P4) • "I would say, since I came here the burden of bureaucracy has become huge." (P4)

The quotes provided in Table 7.2 show that these professors function under pressure from various quarters. The fact that they have to satisfy a range of

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performance areas, each with their own demands, requires ongoing decision making about how to best address all the demands. Their decisions often include sacrificing personal time in order to meet all the expectations. One professor indicated the re-use of the same course in order to cut down on preparation time for teaching. Functioning under such pressure on a regular basis can lead to emotional and even physical disorders in academics, as P1 and P3 indicated.

University systems, in particular the performance evaluation and rewards systems, are therefore described by the professors as adding to the pressures that they endure. The University's positioning as a research-led institution places a higher value on research than on teaching and causes tension for university teachers, as observed by the professors. The perceived disparity between rewards available for teaching and research further fuels these tensions.

Despite the challenges, the four professors who were interviewed remained hopeful of finding ways of dealing with these challenges, even though they may not completely solve the issues mentioned. This is illustrated well by the following quotes:

- "So I think you can choose different things that you want to do. But I think, for example, my research effort has not been constant through all those years. And my teaching effort hasn't been constant over years." (P4)
- "I think that we must start to identify people who feel a passion for teaching and then structure their performance appraisal in such a way that it focuses on their teaching role." (P2)
- "So it boils down to [that] one actually does try where you can to do something of everything but you are constantly frustrated because you feel that you can't do your best." (P3)

Based on the data presented in the sections above, it seems clear that various factors in the teaching and learning contexts of the participant professors have played a role in how they have experienced teaching at SU and, as a particular focus of this study, how these factors were exerting an influence on their experience of the role of student feedback in their teaching. These experiences are aligned with the interactive nature of the components of the activity theory framework.

7.3.1.7 The experience of artefact-mediated and object-driven teaching activity

The outcomes in activity theory constitute the ultimate achievement or product that is being transformed through the activity, and can be described as that which is

expected or hoped for from the interaction between the object and the rest of the activity system. When searching for the outcome of an activity, one could ask the question of to what end the activity is performed (Edwards, 2014). For the participant professors, the desired outcome of their teaching could be described as their goals to teach in ways that would enable students to learn more effectively than they would have in the absence of the professors' teaching and that their students would be able to adequately perform their anticipated professional roles when they enter the world of work. In the sections above, it has already been established that the professors' teaching practices are influenced by their teaching philosophies, as well as institutional and academic department contexts, norms and practices that guide the teaching and learning process within the various contexts. Academics could thus have different teaching experiences even though they all teach at the same university. This study explored these different experiences in order to obtain a perspective of what might be common across differences. The activity theory framework was used to help frame this understanding.

Based on what the four professors in this study shared in their interviews, it emerged that they were aiming their teaching practices towards attaining the following outcomes:

- the facilitation of learning, by which they guided and supported their students in their learning
  o "I see the role of the lecturer as facilitator of learning." (P2)
  o "For me it is a process of facilitation..." (P3)
  o "Well, I think students must learn to think critically and to think for themselves, that's what I try and do." (P4)

- students taking responsibility for their own learning
  o "You develop inquisitiveness in the student so that he or she takes responsibility for their own learning." (P1)
  o "So I think the responsibility lies with us in the first place to prepare our students to take responsibility for their own learning." (P2)
  o "But you can't learn anything for them. They have to engage with it themselves." (P3)

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- delivering graduates who would be able to function efficiently in the world of work and who could contribute to new knowledge within their fields post the completion of their first degrees
  - o "And then you cultivate good researchers and good postgraduate students, because their attitude is right." (P1)
  - o "So I want our students here to get the best teaching that is possible and…to optimally prepare them for the day when they walk out of here." (P2)
  - o "…they must learn to become organised and they must learn stuff like time management. That's how the real world works. That's how job situations work." (P4)

- Making a contribution to society
  - o "We are busy making a difference in the training of health professionals but eventually the impact that it is going to have on the health of this country's population." (P2)

These outcomes are still applicable to the current role of universities and university academics as the pursuit to eradicate inequalities and injustices of the past, which have also affected higher education, still continues in SA (Boughey & McKenna, 2011; DHET, 2013; Leibowitz, 2014). It must be borne in mind, however, that these outcomes are 'mediated' by the teaching and learning context, for example in the instance of the professor who mentioned using the same course in the same format as in the previous year in order to save time. The implications that these expectations hold for the professors are summarised and discussed next.

7.3.1.8 Summary and discussion

The following summary of data pertaining to the professors is discussed in relation to the four subsidiary research questions outlined in Chapters 1 and 5. To assist in this summary and discussion, a visual depiction is provided in Figure 7.1. This is discussed in the sections that follow.

The various components of the activity theory framework are numbered to ensure clear referencing in the discussion. The synthesis and interpretation of the data, together with the remaining data analyses, follow in Chapter 9.

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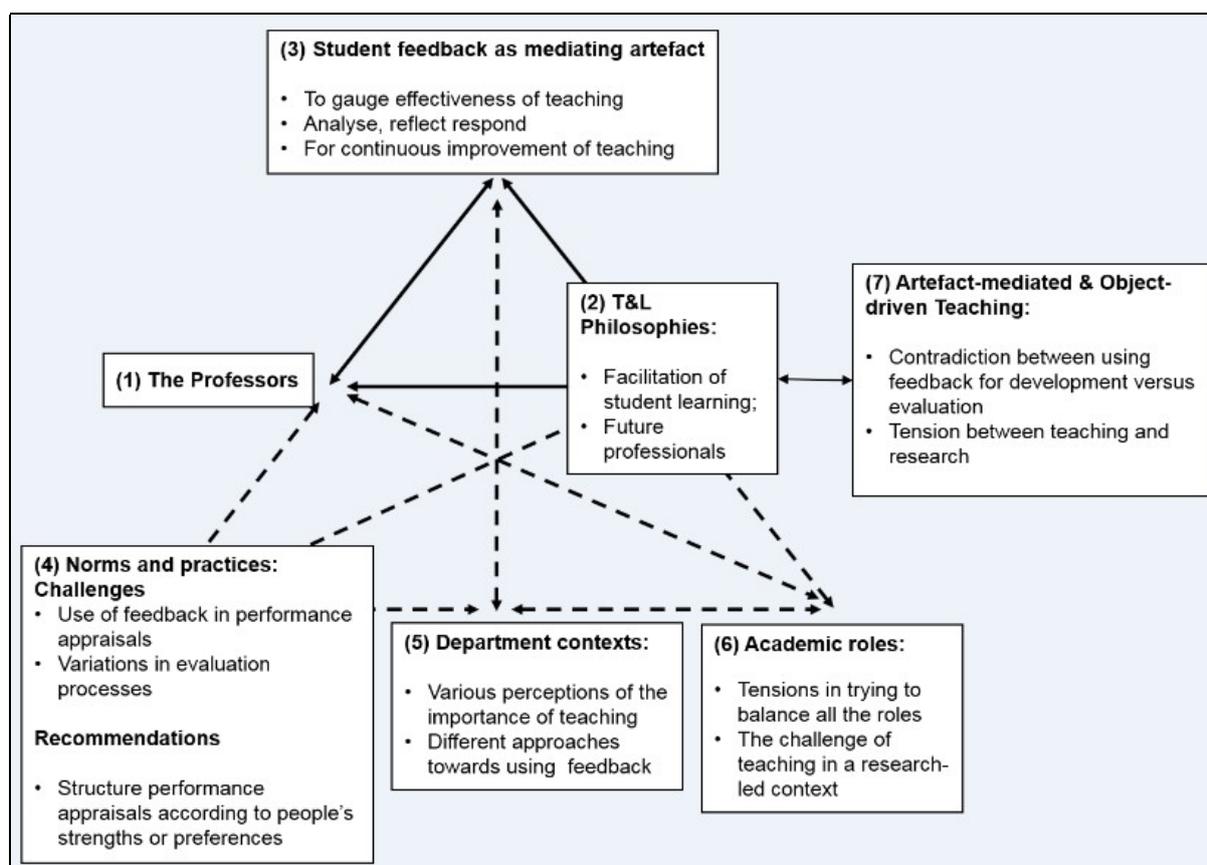
Figure 7.1: The Professors' experience of the role of student feedback (SFB) in their teaching

Figure 7.1 depicts an abbreviated summary of professors' (1) experience of student feedback as mediating artefact (3) in their teaching (7). The common object (2) for these professors seemed to be student learning. They aspired to developing inquisitiveness, a questioning attitude, critical thinking and a desire to understand in their students, so that their students would grow into adequately prepared future professionals. Within this process of mediation, contextual factors such as the contexts of their academic departments (5), departmental norms and practices (4), and their various roles and responsibilities (6) also played a role in how these professors experienced and responded to student feedback in their teaching. The arrow lines in-between the various components of the activity triangle depict the relational nature of the components. Where the lines are drawn in full, it represents relatively positive relations. In the case of the broken lines, either negative or divergent relations are indicated. This pattern of presentation is followed in the remaining sections as well.

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7.3.1.8.i   *What was understood by the concept of student feedback on teaching in the case of the professors?*

The four professors' (1) conceptions of teaching and learning and student feedback are captured in blocks 2 and 3 in Figure 7.1. For these professors, teaching was aimed at the facilitation of student learning (2). This aligned with **a student-centred approach** to teaching and learning where students are expected to be actively engaged in their own learning (section 7.3.1.2; also see Parpala & Lindblom- Ylänne, 2007; Light *et al.*, 2009). The professors were therefore creating and supporting teaching and learning experiences that would facilitate deeper understanding and conceptual development in their students, thus contributing to optimal student learning. This is confirmed by statements such as "…developing an inquisitiveness, the question-attitude, the desire to understand in your students" (P1).

In this process of facilitation, students must take ownership and share in the responsibility for their own learning. Ramsden (1992) and Parpala and Lindblom-Ylänne (2007) argue that students have to critically engage with the knowledge; challenge what they know; and change their own worldviews on the basis of new knowledge. All four professors made statements such as "take responsibility for their own learning" (P2) and "engage with it themselves" (P3) in support of such an approach. This also aligned with the call in the national educational policies of the country for delivering "responsible and constructively critical citizens" (DHET, 2013:34).

In a student-centred approach to teaching and learning, students are also expected to develop habits, virtues and skills which they could apply in their future personal and professional lives (Esteban Bara, 2014). Students must therefore develop into graduates who can go out into the labour market and efficiently carry out the roles required by their professions, while also sharing and using their knowledge and skills to the benefit of the broader society. This outcome was also portrayed by the professors and is corroborated by a quote from P2: "…to optimally prepare them for the day when they walk out of here".

The student-centred approach also calls for the inclusion of ethical practices such as contributing to the improvement of society and the moral optimisation of students

(Esteban Bara, 2014), as P2 stated: "…training of…professionals but eventually the impact that it is going to have on the health of this country's population" and supported by P4: "…they must learn to become organised…stuff like time management".

Despite their many years of teaching in higher education, these professors still regarded student feedback as important information to gauge the effectiveness of their teaching in terms of how their students experienced it (3), as Seldin (1997), Cathcart *et al.* (2014), Blair and Valdez Noel (2014) and Ryan (2015) have confirmed over the years. The professors seemed to have learned over time to look past the personal nature of being assessed or 'evaluated' by their students, to approaching the student feedback in a more objective way. They have developed processes for working through their student feedback data, analysing it, reflecting on it and responding to issues which they regarded as trends or pertinent in terms of the effectiveness of their teaching. This aligned with Van den Bos and Brouwer's (2014) research which indicates that the giving and receiving of feedback supported teachers in becoming more confident about their teaching. These four professors still used student feedback for the continuous improvement of their teaching, alluding to the notion that teaching is a process that requires continuous reflection and adaptation, no matter how long you have been in the profession. Biggs (1999) and Johnson (2000:424) refer to this kind of continuous and purposeful reflective practice as professional practice. Soliciting feedback about teaching is thus regarded as a key aspect of professional practice in higher education (Ramsden, 1998; Arthur, 2009).

7.3.1.8.ii *What were the contexts that influenced student feedback in the case of the professors?*

Teaching, as well as the collection and implementation of student feedback, always happens within a particular context (Parpala & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2007; Hamid & Mahmood, 2010; Leibowitz *et al.*, 2015). It is thus a necessary requirement to consider the teaching and learning context when interpreting and implementing responses to student feedback (Chen & Hoshower, 2003; Brennan & Williams, 2004; Rudland *et al.*, 2013).

The professors' many years of teaching experience at SU revealed various contextual challenges of using and responding to student feedback (4). Although they did not disagree with the notion of teaching being evaluated in some way, the use of student feedback as a performance management tool received fairly negative comments from these professors, for example: "It has migrated to…a performance review instrument that has led to great unhappiness amongst individual lecturers within the faculty" (P1). Their resistance was mostly directed at the divergent ways in which student feedback was used by various managers across the University: "…Some chairmen use the marks, while others don't use it" (P1). Leung *et al.* (2001) argue that a lack of interpersonal fairness and justice during the feedback process could impede the effective use of feedback information. The possibility of this being the case was alluded to in the statement: "…They take your lowest mark to determine your salary adjustment for the next three years. Thus, personnel are not willing to let their performance fall for the sake of innovation" (P1).

For the feedback process to be effective, it is important that feedback is perceived as clear and constructive in nature (Hamid & Mahmood, 2010). The sometimes personal nature of students' comments and the lack of clarity in some of these comments were indeed highlighted by the professors as factors constraining effective responses to student feedback. This was expressed by P2: "…personal negative comments…that are not constructive in nature…puts one off from the word 'go' to respond to the feedback", as well as P3: "…you also look for specific suggestions how you can improve but usually in the standard forms there are not much concrete suggestions".

P4 further indicated uncertainty in terms of whether student feedback, as such, could actually be regarded as an appropriate source for evaluation when it comes to a complicated phenomenon such as teaching and learning: "I'm not sure about the wisdom of using it for performance assessment, but you have to in some way assess the teaching component of our job. So I don't know if it's an easy solution." Ballantyne *et al.* (2000) and Bozalek *et al.* (2016) contend that it is important that university teachers are supported with correct information about and understanding of the purpose of the evaluations and how to interpret their results to render the feedback process effective.

The data from the four professors thus confirmed that, although they regarded student feedback as a valuable source of information about the quality of their teaching, an institutional context where there is a lack of adherence to certain principles for effective feedback processes, as described in Chapter 2, may render the feedback process less effective.

7.3.1.8.iii   *How did the professors use (or fail to use) student feedback in their teaching practice?*

The variations in terms of how their academic departments valued and used student feedback (4 and 5) also led to variations in how these professors were experiencing the role of student feedback in their teaching activities. In one academic department, student feedback was regarded as only one of a number of sources of information about teaching while, in another, student feedback was indicated as the only apparent source of information used for evaluating teaching. In the former case, the professor portrayed a more positive experience of student feedback as contributing to the enhancement of teaching practice in his department, with their department taking "…a more global look" (P2) at various sources of information about the quality of their teaching. Student feedback was seen as a mechanism to "empower lecturers to fulfil their teaching role as best as possible" (P2). In the case of the latter department, the professor indicated that: "…official student feedback is used to evaluate teaching in the department. The Head of Department looks at your overall percentage" (P3). For feedback to remain a powerful tool to enhance the quality of teaching, Harvey (2003), Brennan and Williams (2004) and Biggs (2011), among others, argue that student feedback should never be used in isolation; that it should always be triangulated with other sources of information about teaching; and that the context should always be considered. P3's department thus seemed to run the risk of losing out on some of the valuable insights they could glean from their student feedback, should they take more sources of information into consideration. In their case, student feedback appeared to serve only as a quantitative measure to evaluate teaching and meet quality assurance purposes.

One professor also indicated that he was aware that student feedback was used as part of performance appraisal processes, but that he did not know to what extent. This is contrary to previous studies that described the importance of university

teachers having a clear understanding of the purpose of student feedback and how to interpret the information (Ballantyne *et al.*, 2000; Brennan & Williams, 2004). Another professor explicitly verbalised the disjuncture between university teachers' use of student feedback for the development of teaching and modules, while University management only used it for performance appraisals. MacLeod (2000) contended that universities will inevitably use student feedback both for purposes of development and for evaluation, while Barrie (2000) also argued that it would be ideal if student feedback could enable both university teachers and management to plan effective responses. This dual use of student feedback therefore does not automatically constitute a problem, but if it is coupled with issues such as a lack of understanding of its purposes and a perception of incongruent or unfair practices, it could negate the value that the feedback process could hold (Leung *et al.*, 2001).

Responses from the professors also confirmed that, according to their perceptions, the practices surrounding the implementation and use of student feedback varied quite remarkably among their departments and also across the university (4). This apparently caused a lot of unhappiness among university teachers, as alleged by P1: "…And now you have different environments where the performance management processes are managed differently…it sometimes leads to lecturers playing for the pavilion".

Some explanations for these variations in approaches may be linked to the various reported perceptions that departments have regarding the importance of teaching and learning and, subsequently, the role that student feedback could play in these processes (5). While three of the reported departments pointed to teaching and learning being regarded as very important, it appeared to be so for different reasons. For one department it was about cultivating postgraduate students and future researchers; for another it was about adequately preparing future professionals; while for yet another the importance of teaching and learning was juxtaposed with the importance of research. One professor indicated that teaching and learning was not very highly regarded in his department. These different viewpoints on the importance and purposes of teaching and learning could thus play into fairly different approaches to the use of student feedback.

A common theme that emerged, however, was the tensions that these professors experienced in trying to balance all the roles entrusted to them as academics (6). They all described it as a difficult, challenging and stressful situation which could influence their health in a negative way. Issues regarding which roles would be more beneficial for career advancement purposes; which activities would provide access to greater financial resources or incentives; the implications of performance appraisal processes; and simply the lack of time to fit in all the tasks and responsibilities of being an academic, were mentioned as factors that fuel such tensions. Taylor (2008) also found that increased expectations, together with the growing requirement of quality, often force academics to make practical decisions in terms of how to divide their time between various roles and functions. Teaching at a research-led university, further intensifies these tensions as pressure to publish takes a position of priority (Northedge, 2003). With research generally enjoying higher esteem than teaching (Rice, 2012), this could sway academics' decisions towards research rather than teaching, which, in turn, has implications for quality teaching. This emphasises the importance of creating an enabling environment at universities where the professional learning and growth of university teachers, and thus also the use of student feedback as a professional learning tool, can be promoted and made worthwhile (Van Schalkwyk *et al.,* 2015).

It also appeared, however, that it is possible for university teachers to equip themselves over time to, at least to some measure, deal with the tensions mentioned in more sustainable ways. The professors' longstanding teaching careers, during which they built up their knowledge, skills, teaching and research collaborations, and particularly financial resources, seemed to place them in a more secure position to take decisions in terms of which activities to focus on at which times of their careers. One professor also indicated that one should learn to make peace with where you are at a particular stage of your career. This is linked to the issue of exercising one's own agency, as advocated by activity theorists. Roth and Lee (2007), for example, argue that human beings have the power and capability to question and revise their practices. Feedback theorists and academic developers also agree on the importance of receivers of feedback to take ownership of the feedback process in order to enhance the value that the feedback could hold for them (Patton, 2008; Schuck *et al.,* 2008). This, too, emphasises the importance of

an enabling environment for student feedback to serve effectively as a tool for professional learning.

7.3.1.8.iv How student feedback could be potentially more useful in improving teaching and learning activities at a research-led university

In the preceding discussions of the participant professors' data, it was found that these professors valued the role of student feedback for the enhancement of their teaching practice, but that there were contextual factors which sometimes appeared to constrain effective responses to feedback (7).

P3, for example, pointed to the quality and clarity of student feedback as not always being sufficient for the university teacher to clearly identify what the students' learning needs may be, and thus how to respond to them effectively. This reflected the need for the feedback providers, namely the students in this case, to also have a clear understanding of what the purpose of the feedback process is, as this could enhance the clarity, trustworthiness and thus usefulness of their feedback (Patton, 2008; Tziner *et al.*, 2005). P1 suggested: "…I think it is quite important that students are taught how to give feedback".

One professor also made the recommendation that consideration should be given to identifying people who would want to focus on a particular academic function, such as teaching, and then structuring those people's performance appraisals according to that function. Verquer *et al.* (2003) and Wright (2005) argue that a fit between individuals' personal values and perceptions and organisations' priorities are important to achieve job satisfaction, better job performance and commitment to the institution. This would require of SU management, academic staff and human resource management divisions to engage in dialogue regarding the purposes of the various roles and how to structure such performance appraisals. In the case of teaching in particular, it would require clear direction from the University side as to what the purpose of student feedback ought to be and how it should be incorporated into such performance appraisal processes.

The data pertaining to the senior lecturers are presented and discussed next and the same pattern is followed as for the professors.

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7.3.2   The Senior Lecturers

The data from interviews with the four senior lecturers were also organised according to the activity theory framework and are reported in the following section. To avoid too much repetition, I elaborate less extensively on quotes and literature, where possible.

7.3.2.1 The subjects

As mentioned in the introduction to section 7.3, the four senior lecturers are referred to as SL1, SL2, SL3 and SL4.Their biographical information is presented in Table 7.3.

Table 7.3: Biographical information of the four Senior Lecturers

	S1	S2	S3	S4
Teaching experience in higher education	9 years	8 years	14 years	6 years
Level of undergraduate modules taught	3rd-year classes	1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th years	1st- and 2nd- year classes	4th- year classes
Postgraduate teaching	Honours			
Postgraduate supervision	Master's	Master's	Master's	Master's
Teaching service modules	No	No	No	Yes
Teaching modules towards professional degree qualifications, e.g. Engineering, Law, Health	Yes	Yes	Yes	No

All four senior lecturers came across as being dedicated to teaching. SL1 indicated that the aim of his course is to integrate the different knowledge fields within his discipline: "I really want to teach my students something. In [the other subjects] you learn WHAT to do…I teach you HOW to do it and how you can do it easier". SL2 stated that "I enjoy the stimulation of the academic environment. So I think I am living myself out in the teaching". SL3 pertinently indicated his personal decision making in terms of his preference for teaching: "I like teaching and I enjoy my subject" and "I decided that teaching is important to me and I decided how I was going to innovate." SL4 emphasised the importance of enthusiasm and proper preparation for teaching: "I'm so enthusiastic about my work. I enjoy it…I prefer to be well prepared before going to lectures. I have to, of course, keep myself educated on the subject matter."

These quotations point to the role that the individual subjects' conceptions play in their decision making regarding teaching and the agency that they employ in performing their teaching roles.

7.3.2.2 Philosophy of teaching and learning

For these senior lecturers, the preparation of students as future professionals and thus their ability to apply the knowledge that they had learned in new contexts, are important and underpin their basic philosophy regarding teaching and learning. Aspects such as the empowerment of students, capacity-building and the intellectual engagement of students are therefore mentioned as the "problem-spaces" towards which these senior lecturers are directing their teaching (also see Garraway & Morkel, 2015:28). The following quotes point to the objects of their teaching activities as portrayed through their teaching and learning philosophies:

- "Teaching things to students that they will be able to apply in their future professions and will make their lives better… real life, practical, useful stuff..." (SL1)
- "To get them to think differently, apply their knowledge differently." (SL2)
- "I want them to start developing an attitude of how to approach a problem critically, how to analyse a *[reference to discipline]* problem, how to THINK for yourself rather than to rely on spoon feeding, how to not only parrot fashion learn, but how to practically apply what they learn." (SL3)

With these manifestations of their teaching philosophies in mind, the role of student feedback in these teaching and learning processes is explored in the next section.

7.3.2.3 Student feedback as mediating artefact

This section reports on how the four senior lecturers experienced the mediation of their teaching activities through student feedback.

The participating senior lecturers regarded student feedback as important in the sense that it provided them with pointers as to which aspects of their teaching were working effectively and which aspects required attention:

- "…based on what the students say, I will make changes." (SL1)
- "I think student feedback is a way of keeping your finger on the pulse. It is a good mechanism to identify when there are certain aspects, whether it be of your teaching or assessment

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practices, that are problematic. I think we should see it as a resource, as a support of evidence and it should help us guide our practice." (SL2)

- "…to maintain what is working and probably look at things that are not working." (SL4)

These quotes reflect the notion of student feedback as a valuable source of information for reflecting on and improving one's teaching practice (also see Biggs, 1999; Kane *et al.*, 2004). Keeping in mind that aspects such as empowerment, capacity-building, critical thinking, problem solving and application of knowledge were important issues mentioned by these senior lecturers, it came as no surprise that it would be important to them to find out from their students whether their teaching had contributed to the development of these skills. All four senior lecturers appeared to view student feedback as important information about the influence that their teaching had on their students' learning, as indicated by the following quotes:

- "The things that will force me to change, is when I realise that I am disadvantaging my students or my students are not getting the message or they struggle to learn because of something that **I** do. Then, obviously, I make a change immediately." (SL1)
- "I mean, our job is to give them a service that works for them and the student feedback gives us a chance to see whether they agree that what we're doing, is actually working for them." (SL3)

These senior lecturers have, however, also indicated aspects that they found problematic and which constrained the use of student feedback in their teaching practices:

- "The student feedback never seems to be very specific as regards topics that they seem to struggle with. You know, the student feedback seems to be much more generic in that sense." (SL3)
- "The official feedback normally comes too late. We collect it in the last week of classes, so we can't really give them feedback…" (SL1)
- "I don't know how seriously students take it…especially if you dish it out in the last ten minutes of a class…." (SL3)
- "Something that stood out was just the language that the students were using in the feedback. It is so horrifying sometimes. I didn't know how to interpret that comment." (SL4.

These quotes point to issues around the content and timing of the feedback, as well as the lack of integrity with which some students appear to approach the feedback process. Some of these issues were also mentioned by the professors.

Some suggestions were made by the senior lecturers in terms of how the use of student feedback for teaching purposes could be improved:

- "The scientificness of student feedback must be illustrated… So if there's a way that you can say: this is the feedback, but if you look statistically, if you take the average of questions one, seven and twelve…that will give you a measurement of a particular dimension." (SL1)
- "So there must be some mechanism for that feedback to be assimilated or integrated in the divisions…I think that level of accountability must still be there…There must be some way of dealing with the feedback when it comes." (SL2)
- "I think…sometimes I would really prefer if there was a chance to have the students and the lecturer in one room. And someone, you know, facilitates that discussion…clarify most of the stuff…the things that are really important to improve the course." (SL4)

It became evident that these senior lecturers regarded student feedback as valuable in terms of improving their own teaching practices for the sake of enhancing student learning. However, they were also faced with contextual challenges in applying the feedback to their practice, such as the timing of the feedback; the vagueness of some of the comments in feedback; and the sometimes very personal nature of students' comments. The suggestions that they made for improving the use of student feedback appeared to focus on the ways in which student feedback data could be reported within the official reports that are returned to university teachers and that consideration should also be given to providing support to university teachers to deal with the student feedback data, whether it be in terms of interpreting the data within their contexts or having discussions to clarify the feedback. Ballantyne *et al.* (2000) and Bozalek *et al.* (2016) support this notion. Since it has been indicated that student feedback ought to be interpreted against the teaching and learning context (Schuck *et al.*, 2008; Rudland *et al.*, 2013), a discussion regarding the contexts of the academic departments of these senior lecturers now follows.

7.3.2.4 The context of their academic departments

The four senior lecturers were unanimous in describing teaching and learning as being rated highly important in their departments:

- "In our department, teaching and learning is the primary important thing…it's our main focus." (SL1)
- "I think it's very highly regarded, I think it is very well supported through all levels of our structure." (SL2)
- "I think teaching and learning is important, but I do think that the focus is more on the research." (SL3)
- "The importance actually is made clear… it's known for being a no-nonsense department. You stick to the standards, you know." (SL4)

As was found in the case of the professors, the perceptions of the senior lecturers regarding the availability of opportunities, resources and support in aid of teaching seemed to vary:

- "We have our HOD and then we have our program coordinator, so all our undergraduate modules reside within this committee and then we have module coordinators for the subjects… And each of us plug into that system in multiple places. Actually since I came here… there was a very concerted effort to identify what are best practices around teaching." (SL2)
- "But I think it's not always recognised. There's not much formal recognition for teaching." (SL3)

Though teaching was described as being important within the departments of all four senior lecturers, it appeared that its importance was attached to different factors. For some departments the quality of teaching seemed to be the main focus, while it materialised in adherence to the standards and criteria set by either SU or external professional bodies for others. It thus has to be reiterated that a lack of congruence between the expectations and understandings of the university staff members and SU as an institution could lead to negative work experiences and less commitment to certain functions (Wright, 2005). This lack of congruence could also lead to departments employing their own variations in terms of the norms and practices followed when it comes to teaching and learning, as well as the use of student feedback.

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7.3.2.5 Departmental norms and practices

None of the senior lecturers referred to any teaching and learning policies in particular when they were asked about their departments' views on the importance of teaching and learning or for student feedback. There were no clear indications of how conduct within departments was steered by the appropriate policies. In the same way that the senior lecturers described differences with regard to how teaching and learning was perceived in their departments, so, too, were there differences with regard to processes of evaluating teaching. In some departments teaching was evaluated for two purposes: on the one hand for the performance appraisal of university teachers and, on the other hand, for the purpose of accreditation of programmes by external professional bodies. The use of student feedback for performance appraisal purposes and the variety of practices in this process seemed to be the most pertinent issues mentioned by these senior lecturers, as presented in Table 7.4.

Table 7.4: Departmental norms and practices according to the four senior lecturers

Student feedback for performance appraisal purposes
• "One source of information! The student feedback. Up until now, there has been one question that they looked at…the one about evaluation of you teaching technique. So that student feedback…it's there for only one purpose…the evaluation." (SL1)
• "In our division student feedback is also incorporated as part of the performance appraisal. It is not given a weighting, it's not given a separate mark but it's sort of in support of your performance. It is sort of used as supporting evidence for a good rating." (SL2)
• "I just hope that the Head of Department takes them into consideration in my performance evaluation! *[laughs]* Because they're a plus point for me in that sense, you know!" (SL3)
• "They do interviews with the students in the absence of the lecturer… in the middle of the semester… And of course, then, at the end of the semester you have your student evaluation – the standard one." (SL4)

Student feedback for accreditation of programmes
• "*[Name of professional body]* visits us every five years…an accreditation visit…then they look at our files, our slides…they look at everything…all the year subjects…every subject. So there's that quality control." (SL1)
• "They do a visit every 5 years where they come and they accredit your division to be able to deliver undergraduate or postgraduate *[name of the profession]* students. There are aspects around student teaching, learning and assessment practices, content obviously but then also the use of student feedback. (SL2)

Variations or contradictions within activity systems could lead to tension between the different roles that university academics have to fill and how they would approach those roles (Engeström, 2001; Kaptelinin & Miettinen, 2005). It was thus anticipated that the varying conducts described by the senior lecturers would have an influence on how they approached the various roles that are expected of them as academics.

7.3.2.6 Dealing with the expected roles of an academic

For these four senior lecturers, the demands placed on them in terms of the various roles that they have to perform appeared to be a source of tension. They found it a challenge to try and balance all the roles and certain aspects in their lives often had to be sacrificed in the process:

- "It's an absolutely unbearable challenge! The University measures only one thing, the University WANTS to measure only one thing…how much research have you delivered and that is all that counts…but it comes at a tremendous cost to me as a person because I have to do it outside of my work hours. So teaching, for the department and the university, is actually the most important…effectively the most important…but it's not measured as the most important." (SL1)

- "Very difficult and very challenging! I think in terms of the teaching aspect, on an undergraduate level, it is very time consuming, it is very resource intensive…which means that the other two legs around service delivery and research sometimes takes a back seat in relation to that." (SL2)

- "Well, I don't think I would have been able to successfully juggle them all. So I put the research pretty much on the back burner. And it was a practical decision." (SL3)

- "I have to create some time, no matter what. So it means your family has to suffer. So yah, it's a tug of war!" (SL4)

From the cited quotes it is evident that it was not easy for these academics to meet the range of challenges that they faced. Though they sometimes managed to find ways of navigating through all the requirements, none seemed to offer a complete solution and in most cases required significant sacrifices from these academics. The senior lecturers provided responses similar to those of the professors, indicating that these sacrifices were not limited to their professional academic contexts only, but often spilled over into their personal lives as well, such as working during holidays and sacrificing personal time with families. For some of these academics, it has thus become a case of having to choose between areas of focus at the cost of others. SL4

aptly described it as a "tug of war".

7.3.2.7 The experience of artefact-mediated and object-driven teaching activity

The teaching of these senior lecturers was aimed at delivering qualified and efficient professionals. This aligns with the notions of student-centred teaching as described by Degago and Kaino (2015) and Parpala and Lindblom-Ylänne (2007). It also reflects universities' and university teachers' roles in contributing to the public good of society (also see Waghid, 2008; Botman, 2012). Phrases such as "…it's about capacity building" (SL2) and "…it's to have that understanding that you can think, you can internalise things…it's about how we interpret that and apply in your own context" (SL4) support these statements.

In working towards achieving these outcomes, it has already been indicated that these senior lecturers were facing a number of challenges regarding their teaching roles. Although teaching was indicated as a highly regarded academic function in all of their departments, the provision of support, resources and recognition for teaching seemed to be insufficient, forcing these senior lecturers to sometimes take decisions regarding which academic roles to focus on, at which particular points in time. These could manifest either in working outside office hours, thus in your personal time, or even deciding to choose one role over another, as SL3 did.

With the further challenge of being in academic departments where student feedback was mostly used for evaluation in terms of performance appraisal processes, while teachers would prefer to use it to guide the effectiveness of their teaching, these senior lecturers found themselves in a situation where they were facing contradictory messages regarding the value and stature of teaching. This could lead to a battle between using student feedback either for evaluation purposes or for developmental purposes. The use of student feedback for evaluation purposes is even further complicated by different approaches being followed across departments, which could lead to unfairness and unhappiness among academics. As previously stated, this could negatively influence the usefulness of student feedback for enhancing teaching practices (Leung *et al.*, 2001).

7.3.2.8 Summary and discussion

A visual summary of how the four senior lecturers were experiencing the role of student feedback in their teaching within the teaching and learning contexts of SU

and their departments is presented in Figure 7.2.
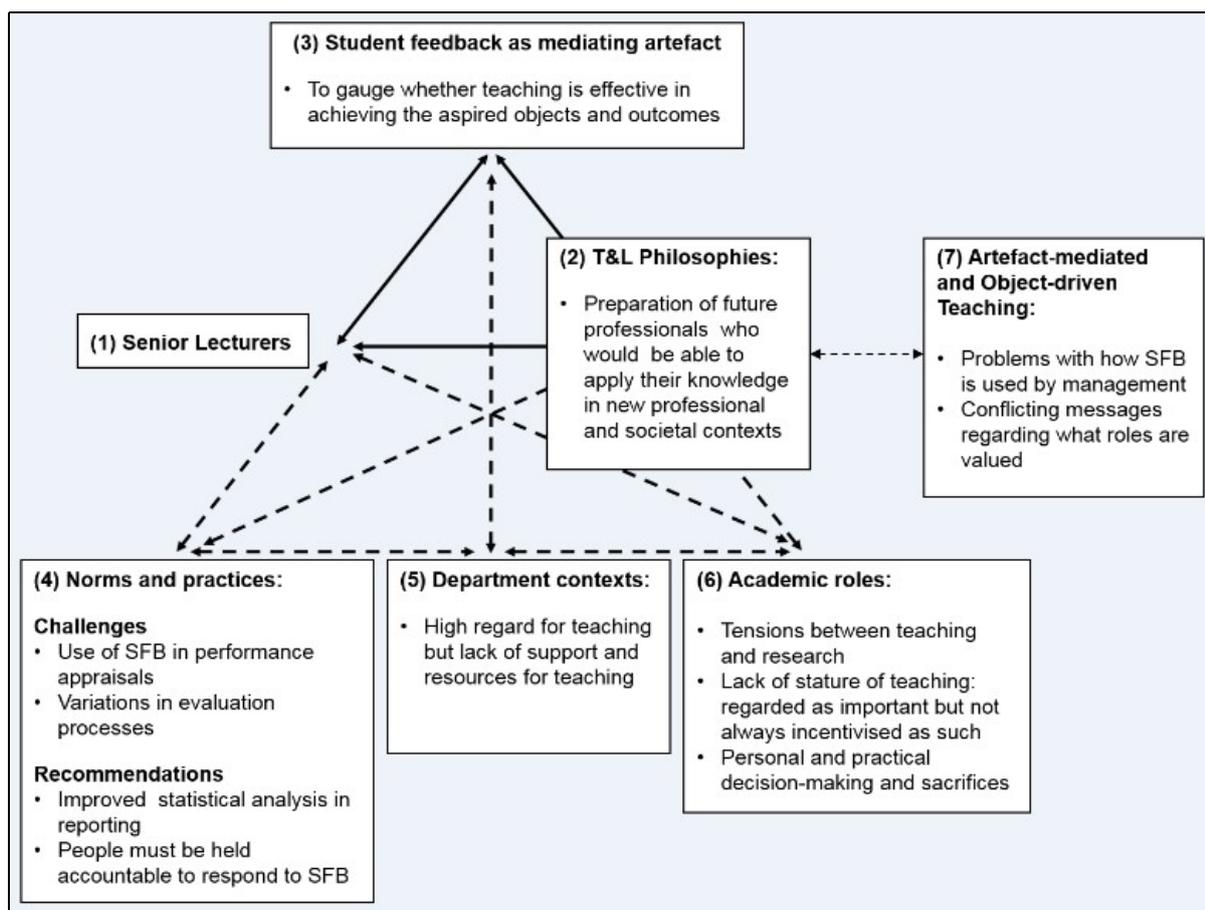
Figure 7.2: The Senior Lecturers' experience of the role of student feedback in their teaching

7.3.2.8.i   *What was understood by the concept of student feedback on teaching in the case of the senior lecturers?*

From Figure 7.2, it becomes clear that the senior lecturers (1) regarded student feedback as a tool to gauge whether they were teaching their students effectively (3) to become competent future professionals who would have the ability to apply their knowledge in new professional or societal contexts (2). Their teaching would thus be focused on equipping their students with academic knowledge but also empowering and capacitating students to apply that knowledge in their future professions (also see Parpala & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2007; Waghid, 2008; Esteban Bara, 2014). In this process, student feedback was regarded as information that could point to the effectiveness with which they were working towards attaining this object or which aspects needed to be improved. Seldin (1997) and Ryan (2015), among others, also confirm the value of student feedback to gauge the effectiveness of teaching. It can thus be said that these senior lecturers regarded

reflection on their teaching practice, particularly through the use of student feedback, as part of their professional practice as university teachers (also see Johnson, 2000; Arthur, 2009).

7.3.2.8.ii   What were the contexts that influenced student feedback in the case of the senior lecturers?

Aspects that sometimes made it difficult for these senior lecturers to apply student feedback information to their teaching practice included the lack of feedback pertaining to specific topics of the content that was taught; the fact that feedback was mostly collected at the end of teaching the module (which then left no possibility of implementing any changes to the benefit of the students who actually provided the feedback); and also the harsh language that students sometimes used in their comments (4). Attention would thus probably have to be paid to procedural issues regarding the timing of feedback processes (also see Baron, 1988; London, 1997; Rudland *et al.*, 2013); the way in which feedback questionnaires are designed so as to solicit more useful information (also see Baron, 1988; London, 1997); as well as the role of the students as feedback providers (also see Tziner *et al.*, 2005) in order to derive greater value from the student feedback process.

Although all of the senior lecturers indicated perceptions of high regard for teaching and learning in their departments, the subsequent provision of support and resources for teaching and learning did not always seem to be available (5). Each of their departments seemed to have their own teaching and learning cultures, which also included various approaches to the use of student feedback and the evaluation of teaching. Similar as to what was found among the professors, the latter emerged as a highly contentious issue in all of the four senior lecturers' interviews. As mentioned previously, perceptions of incongruent and perceived unfair practices regarding the use of student feedback may render the feedback process futile (Leung *et al.*, 2001) and may deflate the morale and job satisfaction of university teachers (see also Braskamp & Ory, 1994; Wachtel, 1998; Wright, 2005). In addition to using feedback for internal purposes, including both development and evaluation, some of the departments also used student feedback for external quality
assurance and accreditation purposes. This further highlights the use of student feedback as a measurement of performativity (Reddy *et al.*, 2010; Leibowitz, 2014).

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7.3.2.8.iii *How did the senior lecturers use (or fail to use) student feedback in their teaching practice?*

All of the variations in student feedback practices alluded to by the senior lecturers seemed to be perceived as conflicting messages sent by the University management, which could be described as the "multi-voicedness" (Engeström, 1999:9) of the student feedback mediated teaching and learning activity system (5 and 7). Whereas teaching was regarded as a very important function in most of their departments, the senior lecturers commented that it was not always recognised as such in terms of evaluation and incentives structures. This added to the tension that these senior lecturers experienced in terms of balancing their academic roles, especially between teaching and research (6).

Although these senior lecturers regarded student feedback as valuable to inform and enhance the quality of their teaching, challenges such as their various academic roles; conflicting practices pertaining to the evaluation of teaching; and lack of recognition for teaching, seemed to constrain the optimal use of student feedback for professional learning purposes (7).

7.3.2.8.iv *How student feedback could be potentially more useful in improving teaching and learning activities at a research-led university*

Recommendations from the senior lecturers were similar to those of the professors in terms of improving the usefulness of student feedback. These included that student feedback data should be analysed and reported in more scientific, statistical ways to support the interpretation of the data; that clear mechanisms should be employed in departments to hold people accountable for responding to student feedback; as well as creating opportunities to close the feedback loop by engaging in well facilitated discussions between students and the lecturer who taught the course, focusing on the teaching and learning issues that would really be important for improving the courses (4).

Within the research-led context of SU, the tensions between teaching and research also surfaced as a significant issue for these senior lecturers. Issues regarding teaching being less valued than research (also see Rice, 2012; Herman, 2015) and fewer opportunities for formal recognition of teaching being available (also see Leibowitz *et al.*, 2015) was indicated as having a negative influence on how these

senior lecturers would respond to student feedback (6). If SU could thus address the performance appraisal processes regarding teaching, as well as the issue of reward and recognition of teaching, it may lead to more effective practices around the use of student feedback for the enhancement of teaching (7).

7.3.3   The Lecturers

In the following section, the narrative data collected from the four lecturers are reported in accordance with the activity theory framework, also following on the pattern that has been established in this chapter thus far.

7.3.3.1 The subjects

Table 7.5 provides a summary of the biographical information of the four participant lecturers.

Table 7.5: Biographical information of the four Lecturers

	L1	L2	L3	L4
Teaching experience in higher education	2 years	5 years	5 years	5 years
Level of undergraduate modules taught	1st- and 2nd- year classes	1st and 2nd years	1st - to 4th- year classes	2nd, 3rd and 4th years
Postgraduate teaching				Honours
Postgraduate supervision				Master's
Teaching service modules				
Teaching modules towards professional degree qualifications, e.g. Engineering, Law, Health	No	Yes	No	No

Three of the four lecturers who participated in this study indicated that they had a total of five years of teaching experience at SU. One of them spent 14 years teaching on a part-time basis at the University of Cape Town before coming to SU. The fourth lecturer had slightly more than two years of teaching experience at SU at the time when the interview was conducted. These lecturers were all teaching classes at undergraduate level, ranging from 1st to 4th years. Two of them indicated

that they also supervised Honours and Master's students. Incidentally, all four mentioned that, in certain modules, they shared the teaching load with between two and six other university teachers. One of the participant lecturers possessed a teaching qualification in the discipline (Arts) in which he was teaching.

7.3.3.2 Philosophy of teaching and learning

Facilitating student learning and critical thinking were revealed as the common motives for these lecturers' teaching practice, which reflects these lecturers' philosophy of teaching. In making this possible, the notions of student interaction and engagement in classes; the 'helping' role of the teacher in motivating and empowering students; as well as making knowledge accessible to students, as described by Northedge (2003), seemed to be important objects for these lecturers. As was the case for the previous post levels, these are objects that fall within a student-centred approach to teaching and learning, as described by Degago and Kaino (2015), and are demonstrated in the following quotes:

- "What I strive for in terms of all my lectures is to have engagement, to interact with the students….then the platform for learning is set. So that students do take some initiative in terms of thinking about the theory, thinking about the concepts…I try to create which I think is an environment that would feed into their learning." (L1)
- "I think it's the helping role…to motivate, inform and empower people and to make the learning material accessible to students who come in new to the field. In addition to the content, there is also a bunch of skills that students need to learn." (L2)
- "… facilitating their capacity to learn how to learn for themselves, because they all learn differently." (L4)

Although assessments and pass rates are generally regarded as indicators of whether the teaching and learning process was successful, student feedback also serves as a valuable source of information regarding teaching (Blair & Valdez Noel, 2014). Student feedback serves particularly to inform university teachers about how students are experiencing their teaching and what influence it has on their learning (Golding & Adam, 2016). How these lecturers perceived the role of student feedback in guiding their teaching activities, is discussed next.

7.3.3.3 Student feedback as mediating artefact

All four lecturers indicated that they regarded student feedback as a useful source of information about what is working and what is not working well in their classes. As such, they use the information to inform their way forward with regard to their teaching:

- "…[it] highlighted things that I was doing wrong and also highlighted things that I was doing right. So it did provide me with information in terms of going forward… So what I get from the feedback I sort of try in the next lecture." (L1)
- "That it is not only used to evaluate the process at the end, but that it is used to inform the process while you are still busy with it. Because our students change every year and it is important to get that feedback in order to know if you and your students are on the same level. So… definitely to continuously inform the process." (L2)
- "…I take the advice from it…so I will implement things if there is a chance." (L3)
- "[The students] are a rich source of information…They will tell you when there is something right and they will tell you when something is wrong and I think they are worth listening to." (L4)

It is interesting to notice that, in comparison with the two previous post levels, the lecturers were more verbal in their acknowledgement of using student feedback in their teaching. They elaborated more on formative approaches to the use of student feedback and their aim for continuously improving their teaching practice, as per the quotes mentioned above. Golding and Adam (2016:1) assert that university teachers who follow such a "reflective, formative, student-centred" approach to the use of student feedback, should be able to improve their teaching.

In terms of personal perceptions, one lecturer stated that he did not regard the institutional student feedback as very helpful in terms of guiding his teaching as it did not necessarily speak directly to his teaching needs at the particular point in time:

- "I still prefer my informal feedback throughout the year. I actually use that informal assessment…It's context, it's the platform from which it comes and I'm asking for it, it's not unsolicited. I asked for it, so I can shape my response according to what they say." (L4)

Like the professors and senior lecturers, the lecturers also reported a perceived lack of support for teaching; the existence of discrepancies regarding the purposes of feedback; and the sensitive nature of the feedback process as issues of contention that may hinder the use of student feedback in their teaching:

- "Well, I normally keep it aside for a while because I am too scared to look at it… because a person is…I am over-sensitive about my own stuff that I could have done differently or better." (L2)
- "The main challenge for me is the philosophy thing – I think it is un-useful for the university to sell the idea that students are clients…this idea that we're to lend ourselves to the students' needs and whims. Then another barrier – there isn't really great support from the HOD, or… a person higher than them." (L4)

Other challenging issues which were also identified by these lecturers are discussed under the following sections in terms of their teaching and learning communities, the rules or norms that are employed within these communities and how these influenced the lecturers' approaches to their various roles as university academics.

7.3.3.4 The context of their academic departments

Two of the departmental contexts within which these lecturers teach appear to hold fairly strong views of teaching and learning as an important component of their academic functioning:

- "…it is consistently emphasized within the department and there is also initiative within the department to sort of improve teaching within the department." (L1)
- "Our lecturers must be able to teach independently and must be able to make topics accessible to the students in a way that resonates with the University's policies on assessment and teaching and learning. There are also checks and balances in terms of the moderation of exam papers, language, etc." (L2)

In the interviews with the other two lecturers, divided approaches emerged:

- "Teaching and learning is a pillar of the university. Well, I think our department is odd. There are a lot of people who think they are beyond reproach…no one else does what I do so no one is gonna ask me, you know. So it's just really what I got to do…the basics." (L3)
- "Part of the Department takes teaching seriously, more so actually the teaching coordinator.

Not so much the Department. I think it's just got to do with not having a common vision or teaching philosophy in our department." (L4)

It appeared that some of their departments regarded teaching as important in terms of quality and the need for continuous improvement, while just doing the basics sufficed for one. One department had a strong focus on strictly following the rules and criteria, and making sure that all the checks and balances were in place, while another seemed to portray a variety of teaching and learning views among colleagues in the particular department. As stated previously in this chapter, contradictions within an activity system could lead to tensions, but also the development of new practices (also see Engeström, 2001a).

In the next section, the norms and practices followed by these lecturers' departments in approaching teaching and learning are explored.

7.3.3.5 Departmental norms and practices

Just as variation was found in terms of views on the importance of teaching and learning, so there was variation in the rules and norms that departments seemed to follow in approaching the teaching function and what they regarded as good teaching. The evaluation of teaching and how student feedback was used in those processes seemed to dominate the conversation:

- "…but there is a high standard that is required of you as a lecturer and it's because in terms of the feedback I've got from the HOD when he viewed the formal feedback. You would have a meeting with the Head of Department just to sort of have an assessment of the feedback itself and how you think your semester has progressed. Yes, it's only the Student Feedback that is used to sort of assess the teaching." (L1)
- "Student feedback is definitely one of the key performance areas on your work agreement to assess the teaching, as well as throughput and pass rates in your modules." (L2)
- "The dean asked what the percentage is, there's that percentage at the bottom. I never used to look at that percentage; then I realized that's the mark he uses to determine the points in your appraisal." (L3)

The variation in approaches to using student feedback became evident from these

quotations. In one case, student feedback was shown to be the only source of information used for evaluation of teaching, while in others an indication was given that the broader teaching context was also considered in including aspects such as teaching load and class sizes. In the case of at least two of these lecturers, there were definite indications of a lack of communication in the department in terms of how student feedback was actually used in the evaluation of teaching. In the two cases that this pertained to, the lecturers did perceive student feedback to be part of the performance appraisal process, but they could not describe in detail to what extent this was done in their departments. It also appeared that student feedback was used more in the evaluative sense across all four of these lecturers' departments, and that not much attention was given to using it for the improvement of the quality of teaching. Although the lecturers indicated their preference for the formative use of student feedback in their teaching (see section 7.3.3.3), their departments' apparent preference for the evaluative use thereof thus seemed to be hindering the enhancement possibilities that student feedback could hold for these lecturers' teaching practices. These issues that emerged from the data derived from interviews with the four lecturers seemed to follow trends similar to what had been mentioned by the professors and senior lecturers in this regard.

7.3.3.6 Dealing with the expected roles of an academic

In this section the focus is placed on how the lecturers made sense of their roles as academics within their particular contexts. Although the various roles that are normally expected with regard to academics applied to these lecturers as well, they seemed to be more focused on their teaching activities at this stage of their careers:

- "I am very interested in research, but teaching in an undergraduate programme takes up most of the time…I allow it because I feel [teaching] is important…" (L2)
- "I spend 10% of my time on communities, 15% on research and 75% on teaching." (L3)

In spite of this focus on teaching and the fact that they carried huge teaching loads, these lecturers also described being under pressure to produce research, as had been the case for the two previously discussed groups. As they also aspired to becoming research experts in their own right, they experienced tension in terms of the development of their academic identity, which then required certain decisions about how to approach their various roles:

- "…So the key message from that is that both are important and it's just a matter of getting your time allocation and time management correct, if it is possible." (L1)
- "When it comes to the three roles thing, I actually think it is quite easy to do if you shape your research in a certain way. I teach on the same stuff, so if my students ask me for real-life examples, I have examples from my research. The research is about this and the community engagement happens automatically because I insist on working in a grounded theory way and a participation action way that offers those people the opportunity to engage with the science. So it's a synergistic way of working across the three roles… I think this was a value decision for me." (L4)

The quote from L4 confirms that student feedback is not the only resource that university teachers could use to enhance their teaching, but that they could also draw on their research and community interaction to enhance their teaching. The integration of these three roles has remained an ongoing debate at SU (Leibowitz, 2010) with no real solutions having been found yet (also see sections 4.4.4 and 6.2.6). Even the previous responses of the professors and senior lecturers clearly showed that many university academics still found it a challenge to integrate their roles as integration places huge demands on the availability of time and resources (also see Graham, 2013). Since the results of teaching are often of public interest, it places even more responsibility on the university teacher (Fairweather, 2002; Marincovich, 2006). Buller (2015) thus argues that it would be important for institutions to provide the necessary support and an enabling environment to assist university teachers in enhancing their teaching practices.

Despite efforts by these lecturers to try and balance all the roles as effectively as possible, certain structures within SU appeared to add to the challenges that they had to face in building their careers as academics. To reaffirm what was discussed

in Chapter 2; teaching is often regarded as of lesser value at research-led institutions (Rice, 2012) and attracts less opportunity for promotion, reward or recognition (Serow, 2000; Leibowitz *et al.*, 2015). The incentives structures at SU have been identified by these lecturers as a particular aspect that could potentially constrain a focus on teaching:

- "…I think one of the things that make it difficult to find that balance, is just in terms of the incentive structure, where the reward for being a good teacher is not necessarily the same reward you get for being a good researcher. So certain things are incentivized much more than others that then do not tend to account the time-effort and the time requirements for each specific one." (L1)

- "… the publications are more important because that is the university's main incentive also. So I understand where the institution's brand sits." (L4)

7.3.3.7 The experience of artefact-mediated and object-driven teaching activity

As described in the preceding sections, the lecturers' teaching experiences were influenced to a large extent by the contexts of their departments and SU as institution. In this section, I discuss the outcomes of these lecturers' practices as deduced from the object-driven activities mentioned above, as well as from other parts of the transcripts from these lecturers' interviews; how the institutional and departmental contexts influenced their teaching experiences; and how they experienced the role of student feedback as mediating artefact in their teaching.

For L1 the ultimate goal for his teaching was to "provide a service" (in terms of teaching) to his students and he regarded "student feedback as a way of gauging whether you are doing a good job in offering that service". His student feedback thus served as information for taking his teaching forward in terms of providing the best possible service to his students.

L2 wanted his students to be able "to think about the implications of what they learn". They had to be inspired to read wider in addition to the materials that they received, so that they could be enriched as whole persons and not just focus on what would be tested in the exams. This would then enable them to "look more critically at knowledge and research". This lecturer indicated that he used student feedback as a tool to track whether he was doing a good job in terms of reaching these outcomes through his teaching.

L3 appeared to strive towards engaging his students in class, challenging them "until they are driven on their own and they think wide enough, so it's really to get that with the thinking. So it's understanding that critically, I can justify why I say what I say…that accountability…so they need to learn that". L3 thus focused on interactive teaching practices that would guide his students to becoming critical thinkers. He would generally interpret his student feedback in light of the teaching context and would implement changes or suggestions based on student feedback. Although he would use his student feedback to take his teaching forward, he also indicated that students should be held more accountable regarding their own behaviour and participation in classes.

L4 revealed that it was his goal to teach in creative ways to enhance his students' learning. He made use of the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) recommendations and outcomes for his subject field to "build on that in terms of critical thinking, reading literature, sourcing other academic and scholarly skills" that he thought the students should develop. For this lecturer, it was about meeting the learning needs of the students, while also "still meet[ing] the current needs of the industry at the time, with the aim that they should be able to do it by themselves after they leave my class." His students thus had to be enabled to learn and work on their own and make a contribution to their industry after completing their studies. L4 indicated that the formal student feedback system did not hold much value for him in terms of guiding his teaching, as it generally came too late. His own informal, continuous feedback system in class was of much more value to him as it provided him with real-time information regarding how the students were experiencing his teaching. This would then provide him with the opportunity to immediately address issues as they arose and thus had a much more direct influence on the students' learning experiences.

These lecturers' teaching practices were thus clearly directed towards developing students who would be able to think critically and argue logically, who would be able to act independently and who would also be able to make positive contributions to society in terms of their professions. Inspiring their students to become more well-rounded people also seemed to be an important aspect. Their teaching thus was student-centred and seemed to extend beyond the academic enrichment of

students, to empowering the student as a holistic person (also see Hearn, 2006; Degago & Kaino, 2015).

7.3.3.8 Summary and discussion

The findings regarding the four lecturers' experiences of the role of student feedback in their teaching is presented in Figure 7.3 and discussed in the sections that follow.
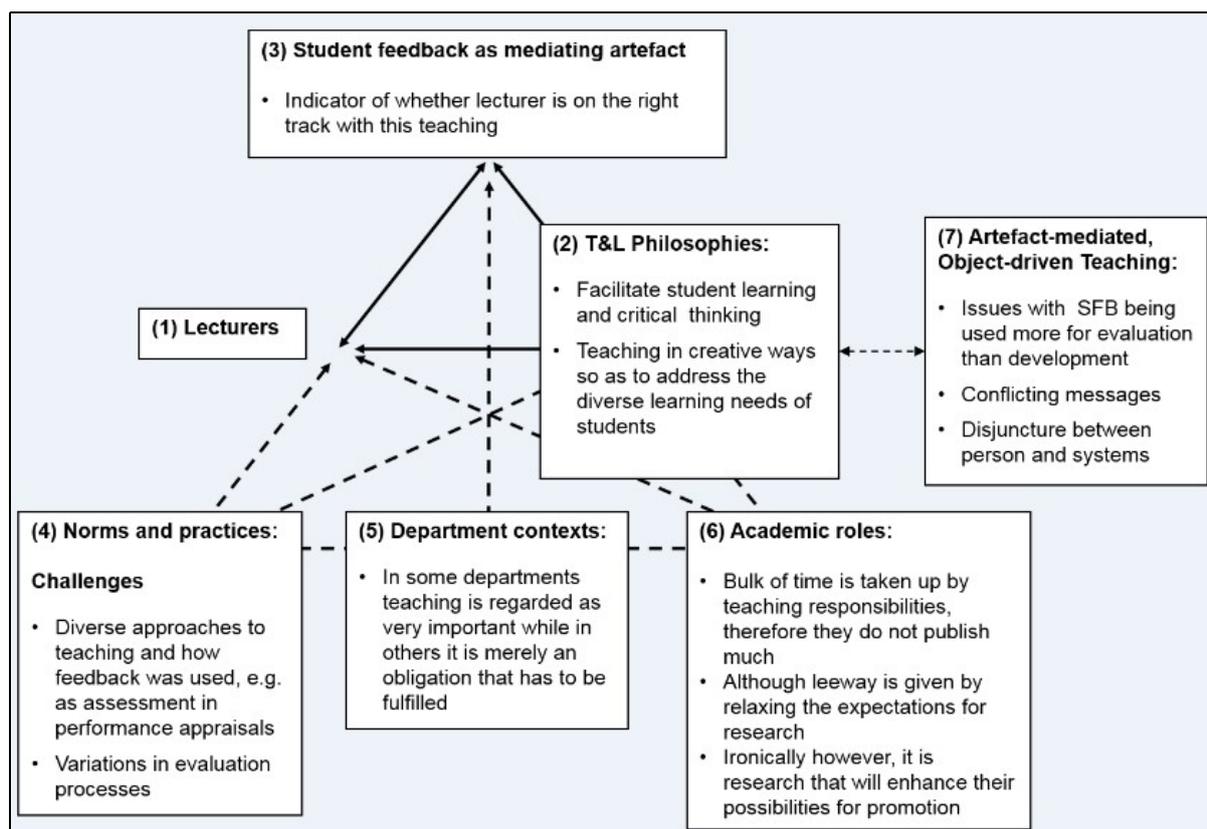
Figure 7.3: The Lecturers' experiences of the role of student feedback in their teaching

7.3.3.8.i   What was understood by the concept of student feedback on teaching in the case of the lecturers?

From Figure 7.3 one may infer that these lecturers (1) followed a student-centred teaching approach (2), with a focus on making knowledge accessible to learners in ways that would enable student learning, the development of critical thinking, interaction, engagement, motivation and empowerment of their students (also see Kuh, Pace & Vesper, 1997; Degago & Kaino, 2015). Because students learn in

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different ways, they should be taught in creative ways to develop their abilities to learn and think on their own and, as a result, be able to make positive contributions to society.

In attaining these objects and outcomes, student feedback (3) served as an indicator of whether the teaching provided in the students' learning needs. The use of student feedback for this purpose is confirmed by Marsh (2007b) and Wright and Jenkins-Guarnieri (2012), among others. Student feedback could thus be described as providing direction in terms of how to take teaching forward to reach intended goals. Although a valuable source of information, student feedback did not come without challenges. The personal nature of feedback in the sense of being 'evaluated' or appraised on the work that you have done and the lack of support for dealing with this process, was mentioned as constraining factors by these university teachers (also see Boswell & Boudreau, 2000; Steelman & Rutkowski, 2004; Cleveland, Lim & Murphy, 2007).

7.3.3.8.ii   *What were the contexts that influenced student feedback in the case of the lecturers?*

The lecturers indicated diverse approaches to teaching and also to the use of student feedback in their departments.

In some departments, teaching and learning was highly regarded and well supported, while in others it appeared to be a mere obligation that needed to meet basic standards or requirements only. The rules or norms followed for using student feedback also appeared to be applied in diverse ways across the four departments. It seemed to vary from using student feedback only as an assessment mark for teaching in some cases, to others also taking the teaching and learning context in consideration when interpreting the data and addressing feedback that seemed to be problematic for more than one year.

The responses provided by the lecturers were also aligned with those received from the professors and senior lecturers, thereby highlighting the effect that these issues could have on creating tension and low morale in university teachers, which could further result in an unwillingness to spend too much time on using student feedback for enhancing their teaching practice (also see Blackburn & Lawrence, 1995;

Verquer *et al.*, 2003; Wright, 2005). In the case of these lecturers, however, it appeared that their commitment to teaching and the formative use of student feedback encouraged them to still make a concerted effort towards enhancing their teaching practice, despite experiencing other academic demands as well. This refers back to the activity theorists' contention that participants in an activity system possess personal agency beyond the conventional norms and practices of the system (Roth & Lee, 2007).

7.3.3.8.iii *How did the lecturers use (or fail to use) student feedback in their teaching practice?*

The variety in approaches to using student feedback seemed to manifest in how these lecturers experienced their roles as academics and how they navigated their career paths. The bulk of their time appeared to be taken up by teaching responsibilities, yet they were also expected to deliver on research outputs and community interaction. On the one hand, these lecturers appeared to have made it a personal choice to prioritise teaching, thus they were committed to continuously enhance their teaching practice (also see Golding & Adam, 2016). On the other hand, despite all the pressures and challenges, some departments seemed to be more lenient towards lecturers in this fairly early stage of their academic careers, as the indication was that some "leeway" was given in terms of lowering the expectations for research outputs at this career stage (L1). This kind of support in the sense of allowing a shift of focus to teaching, served as an enabler for enhancing teaching practice and the more reflective, formative use of student feedback (also see Hamid & Mahmood, 2010; Golding & Adam, 2016).

7.3.3.8.iv *How student feedback could potentially be more useful in improving teaching and learning activities at a research-led university*

As mentioned, the lecturers indicated that they were allowed some scope for them to put research on the backburner during this period in their careers as an apparent solution to alleviate the tension between teaching and research, but it, in reality, negated their chances of career promotion within a research-led university which advocated research as carrying higher value in career advancement processes (also see Rice, 2012; Leibowitz *et al.*, 2015).

If less attention is paid to teaching and learning for the sake of academic career advancement, university teachers would make less formative use of student feedback, as a focus on performativity could lead to an over-emphasis on using student feedback as a measurement of quality of teaching and "customer satisfaction" (also see Tronto, 2010:159). The interrogation of university structures for performance appraisal of university teachers and promoting reward and recognition in relation to all the roles expected of university academics thus seemed to be of particular importance for lecturers in the earlier stages of their academic careers. It may have benefit, not only for enhancing teaching practice, but also for promoting more effective strategies for using student feedback to reflect on and improve one's teaching.

7.3.4   The Junior Lecturers

I now turn to the narrative data of the four junior lecturers, which was also organised and analysed according to the activity theory framework.

7.3.4.1 The subjects

The teaching experience in higher education of the four junior lecturers ranged from one to six years, all at SU. The junior lecturer with one year of university teaching experience has had 19 years of teaching experience at a secondary school before joining the University. The junior lecturers mostly taught at undergraduate level; only JL4 indicated that he also taught at postgraduate level. Three junior lecturers were teaching modules that formed part of professional degree qualifications, while the other one was teaching a module in an applied sciences field. Three of these junior lecturers indicated that they took up posts at SU because they wanted to further their own studies and pursue research, but that they also loved teaching and the interaction with students.

7.3.4.2 Philosophy of teaching and learning

Although all four junior lecturers spoke about transmitting content knowledge to their students, they all seemed to regard the teaching function as more than just a process of transmission. They identified the following in this regard:

- "…developing personally…not necessarily only as an academic but in other aspects also." (JL1)

- "It's basic knowledge but I also want to try to impart some of the passion for that work and uhm… some of the thinking behind the methodology so that they can kind of grasp that and take that with them." (JL2)

- "…that children like me, who were raised in difficult circumstances, are being moved and inspired by teachers to rise out of their circumstances." (JL3)

- "…learning how to think for yourself and how to actually make a contribution one day in your environment…and that involves actually your whole person…I'm facilitating the learning experience actually." (JL4)

The development of the student as a whole person – to learn to think critically and become someone who can work independently, who can apply their knowledge in order to solve problems (also see Degago & Kaino, 2015) and make a positive contribution to their environment, as well as moving students from situations of hopelessness to hope (also see Waghid, 2008; Botman, 2012) – seemed to be the most important objects towards which these junior lecturers' teaching activities were oriented. How they experienced the role of student feedback in these processes is reported in the following section.

7.3.4.3 Student feedback as mediating artefact

All four junior lecturers indicated that they made use of both the formal institutional feedback system as well as their own formative, in-class systems to provide them with feedback on their teaching. The latter included regular discussions with students during the course of the module, as well as using assessments to gauge how students' learning had progressed. In terms of the strategies they applied in responding to student feedback, these junior lecturers indicated the following:

- "I will kind of see if there is one thing that pops up kind of a lot. So the volume of one criticism would kind of lead to me to an action. I mean, if it's a big issue, then I try and speak to that big issue. I think on a content basis and on the manner that you …I think that what they say directly influences the way you teach." (JL1)

- "I will just look for whatever seems to be a problem. Then I get to the verbal feedback and I try and find common threads within that. Then I write my own little report where I highlighted what I think is the common three or four problems that keep popping up. And then I can look at those things and address them." (JL2)

- "…made summaries and I tried to make an analysis of what the most general or overlapping aspects were that emerged…that is informative to me because it informs how I need to work in future." (JL3)

- "I will look at where the score was quite high. You know you don't have to worry… And then I seriously look at the stuff that they're not happy about and see if there's something I can change. So the things I can change I will systematically go through and see how I can change it and what can I do to adjust it." (JL4)

Based on these quotes, it appeared that it was a fairly common approach among the junior lecturers to have some process of analysing the student feedback information and identifying pertinent trends that held significance for the quality of the teaching and learning process. Brennan and Williams (2004:33) endorse the "sceptical" or systematic approaches that these junior lecturers took towards analysing and aggregating their student feedback data, instead of merely responding to extreme responses from a few students. As with the participating lecturers' interview responses (section 7.3.3.3.), these junior lecturers also appeared to be more expressive than the professors and senior lecturers in terms of the strategies that they used to analyse and respond to feedback. With teaching being a highly contextualised phenomenon, the contexts of these junior lecturers' academic departments and how these may influence their teaching and use of student feedback, is reported on next.

7.3.4.4 The context of their academic departments

The previous trends with regard to variations in departmental contexts were also found in the responses of the junior lecturers. Three junior lecturers gave clear indications that teaching was regarded as a very important function in their departments, while one portrayed a different picture:

- "We heavily emphasize teaching and learning and at a much lesser extent research…for us, we need to spend approximately 60% of our time on teaching and learning and being available to students." (JL1)

- "So, so I think in our department… we all realise that teaching is a major component of our work." (JL2)

- "Look, right at the beginning I was told that this department is research driven, but that teaching forms a core part of us…we cannot do research and separate our teaching from that…quality teaching is non-negotiable…" (JL3)

- "The older guys…I don't think they think it's that important. They just want to do the lecturing and get done with it and do the research, but I think the young guys…for us it is quite important, we go for extra training." (JL4)

In three of the departments, teaching seemed to be juxtaposed against research, while one department followed an integrated approach. JL1 further indicated that, although teaching was highly regarded in his department, very little support was available for new lecturers to prepare them for their teaching function. With reference to the importance of quality teaching, JL4 was of the opinion that a focus on the quality of teaching was more of a personal issue than it was for the department. On the other hand, JL3 described his department as very focused on quality teaching and the importance of continuously reflecting on your teaching to ensure that quality was maintained.

The notion of "older" university teachers being less committed to teaching was alluded to by JL4. However, research by Hickson and Oshagbemi (1999) and Oshagbemi (2007) showed contradictory results for the influence of age on the job satisfaction of university teachers. One study found that teaching satisfaction decreased with age (Hickson & Oshagbemi, 1999), while the others reported an increase in job satisfaction with age (Oshagbemi, 2007). This perception of JL4 as a younger university teacher could not be confirmed in the data received from the professors either, since the participant professors all indicated their continued commitment to teaching. This led me to believe that age in itself may not be indicative of job satisfaction, commitment to teaching or the use of student feedback for professional learning.

7.3.4.5 Departmental norms and practices

The four departments included in the study had different conceptions of and approaches to teaching, yet they appeared to be unanimous in the use of student feedback for evaluation of teaching:

- "I think student feedback is often used in performance evaluation. You see this is the percentage and if you have made the percentage, okay...you can move on with your life..." (JL1)

- "So I realised at the onset of the module that I was going to be evaluated at the end of that. Well, uhm…the department evaluates teaching primarily…with the feedback." (JL2)
- "Apart from the student evaluation, on our performance appraisal forms we also get evaluated but it's very…well basically it comes down to if there weren't any complaints then you did a great job." (JL4)

Although these junior lecturers all agreed that student feedback could play a valuable role in the evaluation and promotion of quality teaching, they also shared some dissatisfaction with how these evaluation processes were conducted and the specific ways in which student feedback was used as an evaluative tool:

- "I think it is not something that you can leave till the end of the year…sometimes it is easy to manipulate, especially at the end of the year. I also think that at the moment what it is, is the only thing they look at for the students' feedback is a quantitative value…" (JL1)
- "I think it is a problem…the timing of some of the feedbacks is problematic simply because there's just too much of a time delay. So they saw the lecturer like a month ago, they can't even remember who you are! So the timing is a practical problem.´(JL2)
- "Universities across the world stand under the…in the era of high productivity…to place quantitative above qualitative…So what initially was meant to be a good reflective instrument now becomes a paper exercise because it has a different purpose now. So the contradiction does not so much lie within the system itself, but in how it is used and how it is managed." (JL3)
- "I don't think there's enough focus on it in the University to actually give recognition to the guys that actually do a good job at teaching. I think it's still lacking…" (JL4)

The ill-considered or unadvised use of student feedback, especially as a quantitative measure, seemed to be a major constraining factor in using student feedback as a source of information for developing teaching. In this regard, JL2 recommended that:

"Maybe not to the exclusion of all else…I think on a practical sense it might be more beneficial to give people the freedom to focus on their strengths. So if you have somebody that's really a good lecturer, let him lecture more than do research. While if you have a good researcher, then rather let them do research!"

7.3.4.6 Dealing with the expected roles of an academic

The differences in conceptions of and approaches to teaching and the use of student feedback to inform teaching practices seemed to also lead to differences in how these junior lecturers experienced their various roles as academics at SU. The institutional systems for evaluating the quality of teaching at SU, as well as the apparent lack of sufficient support and resources for teaching and learning, were mentioned as major challenges to these junior lecturers. The apparent difference in the institutional value attached to research versus teaching, was also highlighted as a factor that caused tension. Although their tensions appeared to be similar to those mentioned by the participants on the previously described three post levels, the fact that most of them were still relatively new in higher education appeared to make it even more difficult to balance all the roles expected of them. I propose the following quotes to support these statements:

- "I find it very challenging, purely because I am relatively inexperienced with my teaching. So I spend a lot of time trying to improve my teaching and I often do a lot of things to prepare for my classes, prepare my readings and my techniques about things…So at the moment what I am kind of trying to do is to weigh up the research and the teaching side." (JL1)

- "I think all of us almost struggle a bit with the balance between our different roles because a person feels the University wants you to be 100% researcher and 100% lecturer. I sometimes become frustrated because you feel that there is a lot that is required of you in different divergent fields…and that, yes, it's just difficult." (JL2)

- "We are a small department and we do bring in, I think, the smallest amount of money in our faculties. So there's a lot of pressure on us to actually increase our research outputs. We're just a number. So to increase the teaching load is just not viable." (JL4)

The quote by JL4 seems to suggest that departments that registered smaller numbers of students generated less income for SU through student fees, and therefore greater pressure was placed on them to generate income through their research outputs.

7.3.4.7 The experience of artefact-mediated and object-driven teaching activity

The motives for these junior lecturers can be summarised as the enhancement of teaching quality in order to enhance student learning. In this process, student

feedback is seen as a valuable source of information to gauge whether teachers are working effectively towards attaining this object and to act upon the things that emerge as problematic. I substantiate these claims by providing the following quotes:

- "Student feedback directly influences the way you teach… I use it sort of to see where my weakness is and try to speed it up." (JL1)
- "I think in the end the big value lies in that it gives you the opportunity to adjust your teaching to the students so that they obviously get the best out of the service you're busy rendering so that they can learn optimally." (JL2)
- "I think student feedback gives you, although it is one-sided, it gives you an idea of your practice. If student feedback is done to reflectively or analytically look at your practice, then it will have more value because then it will give you the opportunity to use the data to inform your practice." (JL3)
- "I think student feedback helps us to do our jobs better."(JL4)

An important contradiction was found between how these junior lecturers perceived the purpose of student feedback as a tool to support the development of teaching, and their academic departments which were more inclined to use student feedback for evaluation purposes. The various ways in which this occurred caused dissatisfaction among these junior lecturers. JL3 articulated this dissatisfaction as follows:

"It creates a disjuncture between the personal commitment to the project - the personal inputs that you deliver, the energy that you bring – and this incentivist tradition that is created through rewards…monetary rewards."

In light of this, student feedback could then become a mere obligation, instead of being explored and used to enhance teaching:

"I almost want to say that there is a disjuncture between the personal connection with that thing, with the instrument… and why I really do it. It is an add-on, it is just yet another thing that needs to be done." (JL3)

7.3.4.8 Summary and discussion

Figure 7.4 provides a visual overview of how the four junior lecturers experienced the role of student feedback in their teaching. It is discussed in the ensuing sections.
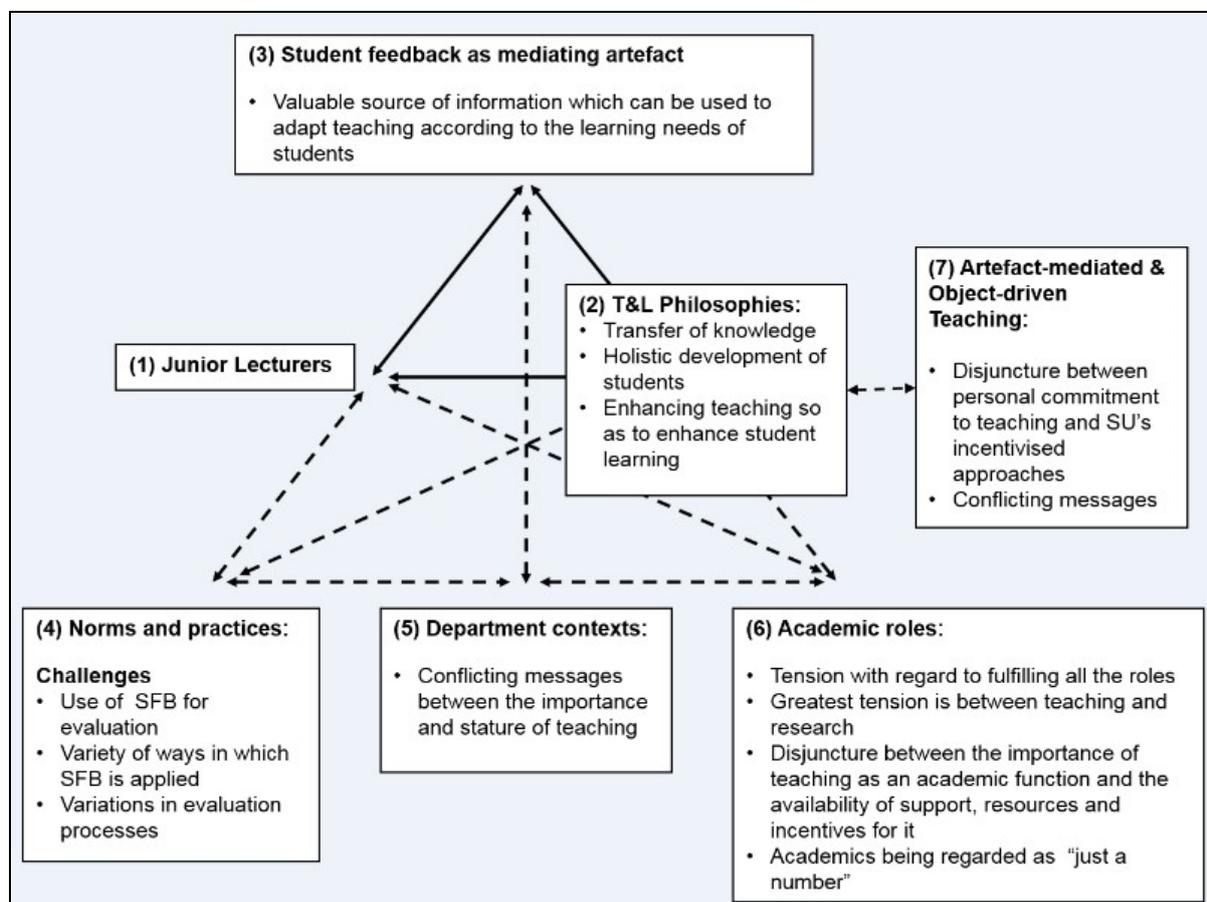
Figure 7.4: The Junior Lecturers' experiences of the role of student feedback in their teaching

7.3.4.8.i   *What was understood by the concept of student feedback on teaching in the case of the junior lecturers?*

What emerged from the data as portrayed in Figure 7.4 was that the transfer of content knowledge together with the holistic development of the student as a person emerged as the main object-oriented activities (2) in the teaching practices of these junior lecturers (1). Enhancing their teaching so as to enhance student learning could thus be described as the major anticipated object of their practice (2). The junior lecturers' approach to teaching could thus also be described as student-

centred according to Degago and Kaino (2015) but with transmission of knowledge still featuring fairly prominently in their teaching and learning philosophy.

Student feedback (3) was described as a valuable source of information which they used for adapting their teaching to meet the learning needs of their students. In following such a formative approach to responding to student feedback, they were encouraged to identify trends and pertinent issues emerging from student feedback which would require a response from them in order to enhance their students' learning (also see Golding & Adam, 2016).

7.3.4.8.ii What were the contexts that influenced student feedback in the case of the junior lecturers?

The contexts of the junior lecturers' academic departments seemed to vary along similar lines to the data that was provided by the previous post levels (5). Although three of the junior lecturers shared perceptions of teaching and learning as being an important academic function in their departments, teaching still remained juxtaposed to research. Requiring university academics to perform excellently in both roles could fuel issues of competitiveness and performativity (6) (also see Moore & Kuol, 2005; Badat, 2010; Reddy *et al.*, 2010) on the one hand, but also low morale on the other, if working conditions are not conducive to the support of both roles (Wright, 2005; Boughey & McKenna, 2011).

The academic departments in which these junior lecturers were situated tended to use student feedback mostly as an evaluative tool for measuring teaching quality (4). The junior lecturers also indicated a lack of sufficient support for new university teachers in terms of preparing them for their roles as teachers. Buller (2015) and others argue that it is important for universities to provide sufficient support to university teachers in terms of enhancing their teaching practice (6) if universities expect their teachers to deliver quality teaching. Lack of such support, as indicated in the case of these junior lecturers, could thus inhibit the possibility of university teachers using opportunities such as student feedback to improve their teaching practice.

7.3.4.8.iii *How did the junior lecturers use (or fail to use) student feedback in their teaching practice?*

As mentioned before, all four departments made use of student feedback for the evaluation of teaching. Though the importance of the evaluation of teaching for quality purposes was not denied by these junior lecturers, they expressed concern about the methods that were employed by their management in using student feedback in the evaluation process (4). In some instances, student feedback seemed to be reduced to a mere quantitative measure of teaching quality without recognising the broader teaching and learning context at play, or the effort that university teachers put into delivering good teaching. The fact that departments applied a variety of ways for using student feedback in the evaluation of teaching could thus set the scene for potential problems (also see Leung *et al.*, 2001). The junior lecturers also voiced dissatisfaction with the timing of collecting student feedback and the sometimes long wait for the results to be disseminated to them.

This type of environment could demotivate both students and university teachers from approaching the feedback process with the necessary integrity, which could lead to less effective responses in terms of teaching enhancement (Chen & Hoshower, 2003; Rudland *et al.*, 2013; also see sections 7.3.1.8.ii and 7.3.2.3). The data from these junior lecturers have shown, however, that they actually employ systematic processes of analysis for working through their feedback data and reflecting on how to respond appropriately (3) (also see Brennan and Williams, 2004). This could probably be ascribed to their student-centred philosophy of teaching and learning (2) and the transformative and reflective stance (3) they have taken as individuals towards the purpose of student feedback, as illuminated in the quotes provided in section 7.3.4.3 (also see Golding & Adam, 2016).

7.3.4.8.iv *How student feedback could be potentially more useful in improving teaching and learning activities at a research-led university*

In a context of conflicting messages regarding the importance and value of teaching, university teachers could experience tension with regard to enacting the roles that are expected of them as academics (6) (Toewz & Yazedjian, 2007; Brownell & Tanner, 2012). The greatest tension is often experienced between teaching and research (Serow, 2000). While teaching was regarded by SU as a

pivotal academic function and consumed the bulk of these junior lecturers' working hours, it did not always attract the same level of support, resources or incentives (7) (also see Herman, 2015). There also appeared to be a lack of regard for the academic as a person, as JL4 put it: "We are just a number". Issues with regard to the support of teaching, as well as the university teacher as a professional, and increasing the stature of teaching as an academic function, would thus require serious attention if the improvement of teaching and learning activities is to be promoted, particularly at a research-led university such as SU.

In terms of advancing the use of student feedback for improving the quality of teaching, JL4 recommended that feedback could be collected more often within the duration of the module, especially shortly after the beginning of the module. He therefore called for a more formative approach to student feedback. In this way lecturers could find out at an early stage what the students' "aims and expectations" for the modules are and could use that information to enhance the teaching and learning experiences of their students.

7.3.5 Summary

Overall, the findings from the narratives across the four post levels revealed some similarities as well as contradictions. A synthesis of the data across the four post levels is depicted in Figure 7.5, with a discussion following afterwards.
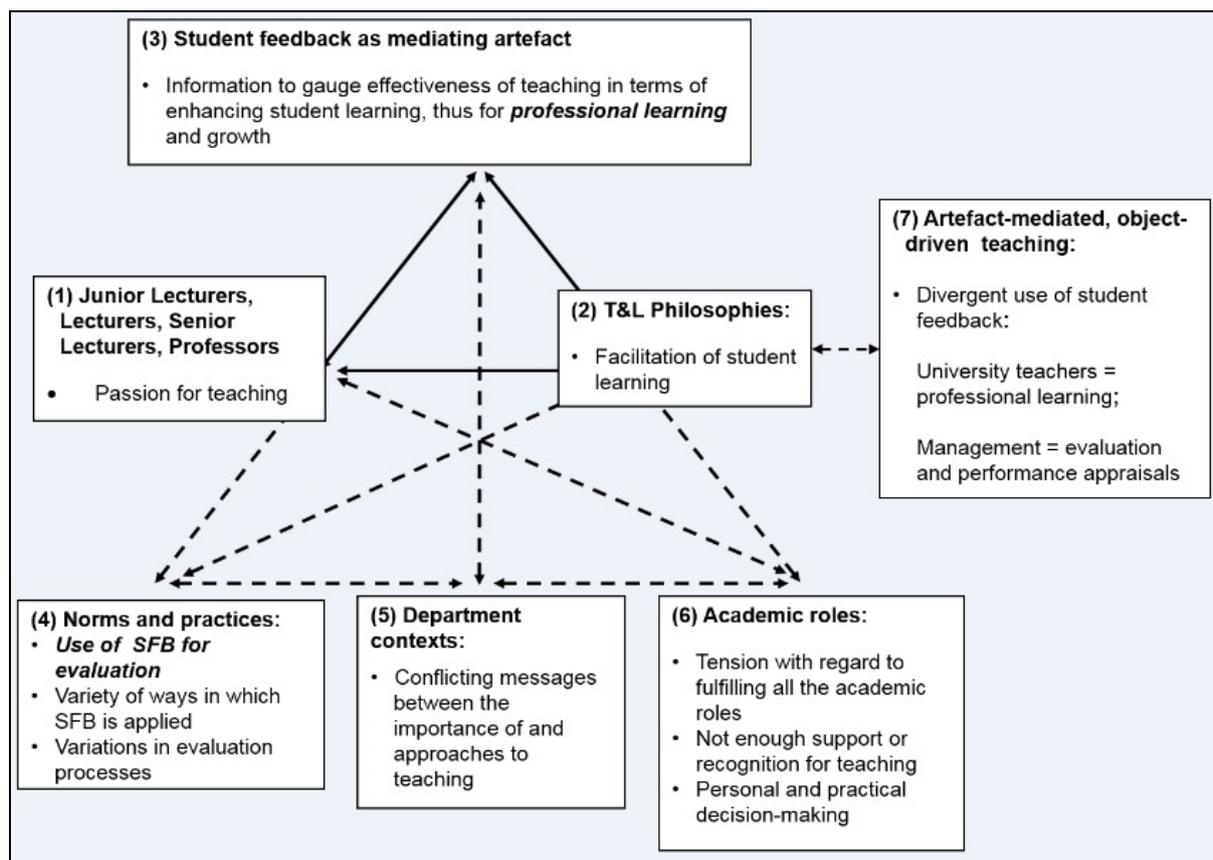
Figure 7.5: Synthesis of the narrative data across the four post levels

7.3.5.1 What was understood by the concept of student feedback on teaching across the four post levels?

All 16 participants indicated a love and passion for teaching and interacting with students (1). They regarded the facilitation of student learning (including aspects such as critical thinking) as an important motive (2) in their teaching practice. Their teaching approaches, as underpinned by their teaching philosophy, could thus be described as student-centred. All of them regarded student feedback as a valuable source of information (3) for gauging the effectiveness of their teaching in achieving these objects.

7.3.5.2 What were the contexts that influenced student feedback across the four post levels?

It became clear that the academic departments of the 16 participants showed significant differences in how they conceived of and approached teaching and learning (5). These variations subsequently also contributed to differences in approaches towards the use of student feedback in teaching processes, particularly in terms of the evaluation of teaching (4).

7.3.5.3 How student feedback was used (or not used) in teaching practice across the four post levels

Because of the mixed messages regarding teaching and learning processes and the lesser status that it held as one of the three academic functions that formed part of SU's institutional mission, these academics mostly described it as a great challenge to satisfy all the roles expected of them (6). It has been found that the institutional and departmental contexts were not always supportive enough of the teaching function (5) and that academics were often challenged to make certain personal and practical decisions to try and cope with all the demands (6). The most significant contradiction was found to be the disjuncture between university teachers' conceptions of student feedback as a tool to continuously develop their teaching (3) and their perceptions of how SU mid-level management seemed to conceive of student feedback mainly as a tool to evaluate the teaching performance (4) of university teachers.

7.3.5.4 How student feedback could be potentially more useful in improving teaching and learning activities at a research-led university

An aggregated summary of the applicable data revealed a variety of suggestions made by the 16 university teachers in terms of how student feedback could potentially become more useful in improving teaching and learning activities at SU (7). These included:

1. Interrogation of SU structures for performance appraisal of university teachers and promoting the reward and recognition of teaching;
2. Providing support to university teachers in terms of interpreting and responding to student feedback;

3. Ensuring clear and shared understanding among all stakeholders (students, university teachers and university management) of the purpose of student feedback;

4. Encouraging a more continuous cycle of feedback collection during modules for formative purposes and not only at the end, which then mainly serves for evaluation purposes;

5. Educating students on how to provide constructive and useful feedback according to the purpose of the feedback process;

6. Providing more statistical analyses and correlations of student feedback data to support the interpretation of the data;

7. Closing the feedback loop through creating opportunities for well-facilitated discussions with students in the presence of the university teachers, during which important teaching and learning issues pertaining to the improvement of the course module could be clarified.

It thus appeared that many of the issues with regard to improvement would need to be addressed within the broader institutional teaching and learning context and not only by the individual teacher himself. A supportive institutional context could, however, encourage willingness among university teachers to continuously reflect on their teaching practice with the aim of improving the quality thereof (Leibowitz, 2014).

In the following chapter, the data from the same 16 interviews are organised and reported in terms of the four disciplinary clusters in which the participants were performing their teaching duties, namely (i) Economic and Management Sciences, (ii) Health Sciences, (iii) Humanities and Social Sciences and (iv) Science, Engineering and Technology.

CHAPTER 8

FINDINGS FROM FOUR DISCIPLINARY CLUSTERS

8.1   INTRODUCTION

Subsequent to organising the narrative data according to the participants' post levels at the time of the interviews, the data were organised according to the four disciplinary clusters represented by the participants, i.e. (i) Economic and Management Sciences, (ii) Health Sciences, (iii) Humanities and Social Sciences and (iv) Science, Engineering and Technology. This was done in order to illuminate whether disciplinary cultures played any role in how university teachers would approach and respond to student feedback as part of their professional teaching practice.

In this chapter, the data are reported according to these clusters and, as in Chapter 7, the reporting sections are organised according to the components of activity theory as analytical framework. This chapter also concludes with a summary of the findings according to the four subsidiary research questions as identified in sections 1.4 and 5.2. Since much of the data are described and quoted in detail in the previous chapter, not all of the details are repeated in this chapter and quotes will in some instances be more concise and cross-references only to other sections are presented.

8.2   ECONOMIC AND MANAGEMENT SCIENCES

Following is a discussion of the data for the four participants from the Economic and Management Sciences cluster.

8.2.1   The subjects

The Economic and Management Sciences (EMS) disciplinary cluster at SU is based in one faculty, the Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences. This Faculty

consists of various departments (such as Economics, Accounting, Management Sciences and the Stellenbosch University Business School). In terms of size, the Faculty is the largest at SU, comprising approximately 200 academic staff, 4500 undergraduate students and 3000 postgraduate students (Stellenbosch University, 2015b). Some of the departments in this Faculty, for example the Department of Economics, have more students and staff than faculties such as Theology or Law.

The research participants from this disciplinary cluster included a junior lecturer (JL1), a lecturer (L1), a senior lecturer (SL1) and a professor (P1). Their biographical information is portrayed in Table 8.1.

Table 8.1: Biographical information of participants from Economic and Management Sciences

	JL1	**L1**	**SL1**	**P1**
Teaching experience in higher education	2 years	2 years	9 years	26 years
Level of undergraduate modules taught	1st- and 2nd - year classes	1st- and 2nd- year classes	3rd-year classes	4^{t}- year classes
Postgraduate teaching	-	-	Honours	-
Postgraduate supervision	-	-	Master's	Master's and PhD
Teaching service modules	No	No	Yes	No
Undergraduate modules taught by the participant are essential for obtaining a professional degree qualification, e.g. Chartered Accountancy	Yes	Yes	No	Yes

It is evident from Table 8.1 that these participants represent a range of teaching experience in higher education. All of them gained their teaching experience in higher education at SU. All were involved in undergraduate teaching, from first-year level teaching up to the fourth year. One participant taught at postgraduate level and two were involved in postgraduate supervision, as well. Three of the participants taught modules that formed an essential part of professional degree qualifications, while one was teaching a module that services other faculties as well.

8.2.2 Philosophy of teaching and learning

All the participants from EMS described student learning as the object or "problem-space" of their teaching (Garraway & Morkel, 2015:28), as well as adequately preparing students for their future professions:

- "I come from practice, I kind of know what practice expects you to do..." (JL1)
- "…to engage with the students and I think that is the platform for learning that is set." (L1)
- "…teaching things to students that they will be able to apply in their future professions..." (SL1)
- "…you develop inquisitiveness in the student so that he or she takes responsibility for their own learning. It is important to me that a student makes this mind shift so that I as the lecturer can facilitate the learning." (P1)

To ascertain whether they were achieving these expressed goals, student feedback was available to them to provide insight into how their students were experiencing their teaching. Student feedback is discussed next as a potential mediating artefact between the participants' teaching and their students' learning.

8.2.3 Student feedback as mediating artefact

All four participants indicated that they used student feedback to adapt or inform their teaching, even though the degree to which student feedback may have mediated their teaching practice, varied:

- "I think that what they say directly influences the way you teach…" (JL1)
- "It did provide me with information in terms of going forward… So what I get from the feedback I sort of try in the next lecture." (L1)
- "I try to make the changes if I feel that it has value. When I realise that I am disadvantaging my students or my students are not getting the message or they struggle to learn because of something that I do. Then, obviously, I make a change immediately." (SL1)
- "I don't use student feedback only at the end of the semester. I use my feedback to adapt my method of teaching. And I think it only makes it better." (P1)

From the remark by SL1, one can deduce that, although student feedback may inform teaching practice, there are certain conditions under which student feedback actually becomes a mediating artefact. When the feedback is regarded as valid in terms of how it influences the students' learning experiences, the university teacher would be urged to respond suitably (also see Patton, 2008). Other strategies that the participants indicated for responding to student feedback included the following:

- "… I try to distinguish between what were criticisms whether it would be constructive or whatever it was. Then I try to distinguish between whatever had been said about me

personally… I check what they have said constructively… it's more about the way I teach that has an effect… I will see if there is one thing that pops up a lot. So the volume of one criticism would lead me to take action." (JL1)

The other three participants from EMS mentioned similar strategies to those mentioned by JL1 and therefore these are not repeated. In addition, P1 also mentioned the role of quantitative scores attained through student feedback:

- "I look at the 'magical scores' below, because this is used for achievement judging. This I look at first, and then secondly I look at the verbatim comments… I look at specific items, especially if the marks are low – below 4. Afterwards I look and see what it is and try to adapt according to this." (P1)

JL1, L1 and SL1 similarly referred to the quantitative scores as being used as a measure or judgement of their teaching performance. The quantitative scores thus seemed to be used for evaluation of teaching. It has been stated earlier that Arthur (2009) and Tronto (2010) argue that quality teaching cannot be measured simply by quantification and that such a practice would be counterproductive to the effective use of student feedback for professional learning.

8.2.4   The contexts of their academic departments

All four participants indicated that teaching and learning was regarded as a core function in their departments and thus occupied substantial amounts of their working time. For JL1 and L1 the bulk of their time (as high as 60%) was taken up by teaching responsibilities. SL1 also indicated that teaching has a prime focus in their department and that research is considered as a far second. It was only P1 that alluded to integration between the functions of teaching and research:

- "You can't separate teaching and learning from research. We feel that when you nurture good teaching and learning, that research forms an integral part thereof and that the lecturers can't just teach and learn, without research."

When the bulk of the university teacher's time is spent on teaching and teaching related matters, it places pressure on the requirements for producing research (Hattie & Marsh, 1996; Esteban Bara, 2014). Since research is perceived as the more beneficial academic role in terms of reward and promotion (Rice, 2012; Herman, 2015; Van Schalkwyk *et al.*, 2015), lack of time for research may lead to dissatisfaction and work stress which, in turn, could negatively influence academics'

commitment (Wright, 2005). However, the requirements for research outputs did not seem to be too high for the participants from EMS, since teaching appeared to take the highest priority.

8.2.5   Departmental norms and practices

In terms of the norms and practices that governed the teaching and learning in their departments, all four university teachers referred to the use of student feedback in performance appraisal processes. The use of student feedback for the development and enhancement of teaching as a departmental practice did not surface at all. It was the use of student feedback especially for evaluation purposes, coupled with the variations in practices that were followed in the evaluation processes, that seemed to cause much dissatisfaction:

- "…if you don't make 70% then you have problems in your career but not sort of growing in lecturing." (JL1)
- "It's only the student feedback that is used to sort of assess the teaching... There is a sense that the feedback system or the way it currently functions, does not provide a very clear picture in terms of what would have happened within a semester in the class." (L1)
- "So that student feedback…it's there for only one purpose…that's the stick that you're hit with if it's bad. If it is good, well, it is 'You did well, so let's move on. How much research did you do?' That's it. That is the context of teaching within the department." (SL1)
- "…a performance review instrument that has led to great unhappiness amongst individual lecturers within the faculty… And now you have different environments where the performance management processes are managed differently…" (P1)

These quotes point to a number of problematic issues, namely the quantitative use of student feedback as the only measurement of teaching; the lack of using student feedback for the improvement of teaching even though teaching is claimed to be a high priority; and the absence of congruent performance appraisal processes as well as a clear understanding of the purposes of student feedback (see also Ballantyne *et al.*, 2000; Tronto, 2010). Such practices are not conducive to the optimal use of student feedback as a professional learning tool.

8.2.6   Dealing with the required roles of an academic

In the midst of varying contexts and practices, these four participants pointed to balancing all their roles and responsibilities as being a huge challenge, but that they simply "have to try and fit them all in" (JL1). The younger university teachers seemed to struggle more because they, as novices, still spent the bulk of their time on teaching-related activities:

- "I find it very challenging purely because I am relatively inexperienced with my teaching. So I spend a lot of time trying to improve my teaching and I often do a lot of things to prepare for my classes, prepare my readings and my techniques about things…which takes a lot of time." (JL1)

- "As a young academic and still trying to find my feet, it is quite difficult to find a balance in terms of the three roles…" (L1)

For JL1 and L1 it would thus require measures of personal sacrifice if they wanted to produce research in addition to their teaching load. Even though the more senior university teachers seemed to be in a slightly better position in terms of finding time for research, they also indicated that this often came at the cost of sacrificing personal time:

- "… it comes at a tremendous cost to me as a person because I have to do it outside of my work hours. So teaching, for the department and the university, is actually the most important…effectively the most important…but it's not measured as the most important." (SL1)

- "…It places a tremendous amount of personal stress to maintain a research record and a NRF grading,…so something's gotta give somewhere." (P1)

SL1's observation also pointed to the tension experienced between teaching and research in terms of institutional reward and recognition. Rice (2012) and Leibowitz *et al.* (2015) argue that if research is valued more highly than teaching, consequently resulting in insufficient recognition and reward of teaching, it may deter university teachers from taking up professional learning opportunities such as may be provided by student feedback. The demands of the various academic roles and the unequal recognition available for the various functions, could thus constrain a focus on using student feedback to enhance teaching.

8.2.7   The experience of artefact-mediated and object-driven teaching

The teaching activities of the university teachers from EMS were driven by particular goals despite the challenges they faced in terms of varying contexts and practices. Since student learning was found to be a common purpose of these participants, they aimed to teach in ways that would effectively contribute to their students' learning (also see Northedge, 2003; Degago & Kaino, 2015). These four participants described their teaching practice for achieving this aim in various ways.

For JL1 it came down to adapting his teaching practice according to the students' learning needs. He therefore used student feedback to keep track of the effectiveness of his teaching:

> "Student feedback directly influences the way you teach because when you taught something one way last year and you see you totally lost it, then the second year you apply it better and those are the things that I know I need to work on better."

For L1 it was a matter of providing a good service (in terms of teaching) to his students and he regarded "student feedback as a way of gauging whether you are doing a good job in offering that service".

SL1's teaching philosophy manifested in teaching his students the things that they would need in order to function efficiently in their future professions:

> "…real life, practical, useful stuff...that is what they must get from my classes. Because I am in a professional field, it is easy. It's not dead content, it's things that they're going to use."

For SL1, student feedback further served as a form of "external validation" from his students and a guide to change the things that appeared to influence his students' learning experiences negatively.

P1 directed his teaching at creating optimal learning experiences for his students and actually preparing them to become lifelong learners:

> "…And then you cultivate good researchers and good postgraduate students, because their attitude is right."

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All four participants further indicated similar strategies towards interpreting their student feedback by making thematic analyses of the feedback data to identify areas where they could adapt their teaching in order to attain their teaching goals. Even though SU may be perceived by these university teachers as an institution that favours research over teaching, good teaching that addresses the learning needs of students still remained important to them.

8.2.8   Summary and discussion: EMS

A visual representation of how EMS participants (1) experienced the role of student feedback in their teaching is provided in Figure 8.1 and discussed in the sections that follow.
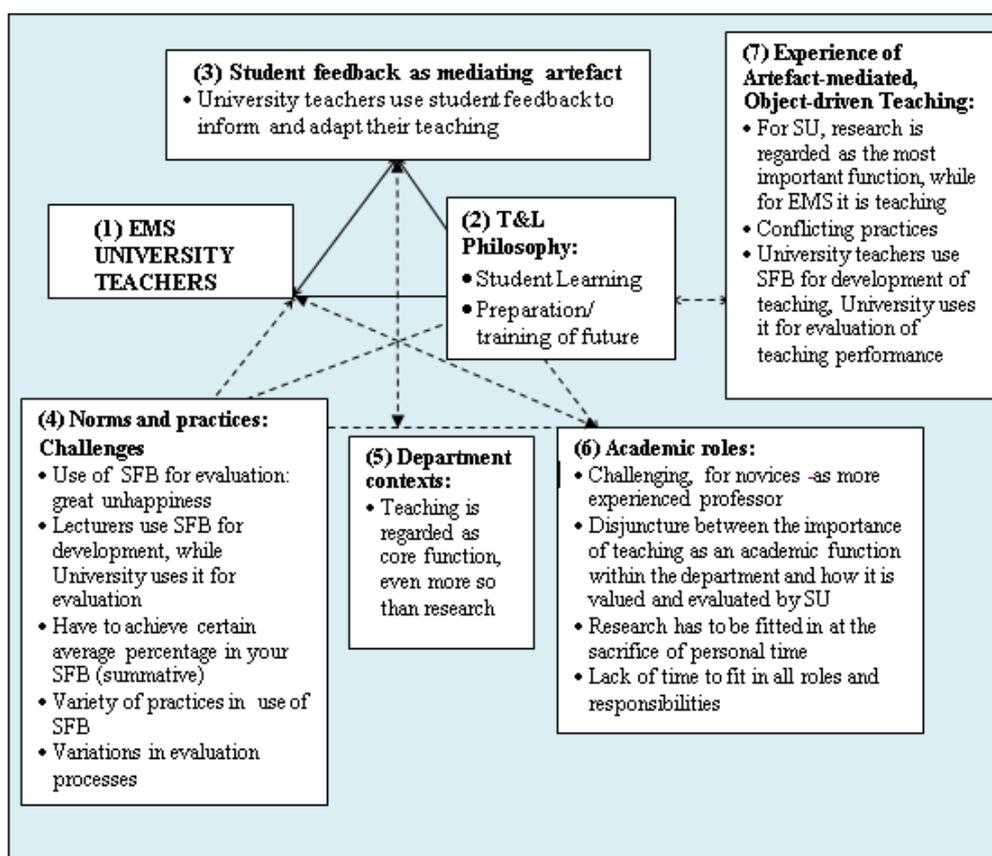

Figure 8.1: EMS university teachers' experiences of the role of student feedback in their teaching

8.2.8.1 What was understood by the concept of student feedback on teaching in the case of EMS participants?

The teaching activities of the participants in EMS (1) were mostly oriented towards the facilitation of student learning and the preparation of students for their future careers (2). Student-centred, learning-oriented teaching (Light *et al.,* 2009; Degago & Kaino, 2015) thus compelled them to practise flexible, adaptive teaching that would meet the diverse learning needs of their students (Teichler, 2008; Altbach *et al*, 2009). Student feedback (3) helped them to gauge whether their students were experiencing their teaching as making a contribution to their learning (Brennan & Williams, 2004; Blair & Valdez Noel, 2014). Teaching practices would be adapted if issues were identified through the student feedback and if those issues were perceived to be valid in terms of improving the quality of teaching and the learning experiences of the students (Ballantyne *et al.,* 2000; Hamid & Mahmood, 2010). These participants thus preferred to take mindful decisions about when and how they would respond to student feedback. Their responses would be based on their premises regarding the validity of the student feedback information (Patton, 2008).

8.2.8.2 What were the contexts that influenced student feedback on teaching in the case of EMS participants?

Teaching was regarded as a core function in all of the departments represented by these participants (5). Functioning within a research-led university did not negate the importance of the teaching function. JL1, L1 and SL1 all indicated that teaching took up most of their time, while even P1 indicated that teaching was as important as research and that these two functions ought to be integrated in one's practice as an academic. In this regard, SL1 pointed to an important contradiction, namely that, although teaching was regarded as a crucial academic function at SU and in their department, it was not "measured' as such. Although SU as research-led university was thus expected to perform excellently in both teaching and research (Harris *et al.*, 2014), the institutional reality in terms of the evaluation and rewarding of teaching portrays contradictory practices.

Concerning the practices around the evaluation and quality assurance of teaching (4), all four of these participants alluded to student feedback as a quality assurance

mechanism, in the sense that it helped them to gauge the effectiveness of their teaching and to improve in areas that appeared to be problematic according to the students. In their individual capacity, they used the student feedback in a formative manner, in other words for the development and improvement of their teaching. The management in their departments however, used the student feedback mainly for performance appraisal processes. This was an important contradiction that was revealed by interviewing these university teachers. Furthermore, departments followed diverse practices in terms of using student feedback during performance evaluation processes.

8.2.8.3 How did EMS participants use (or fail to use) student feedback in their teaching practice?

An institutional study by Herman (2015) found that many university teachers at SU struggled to balance all the academic roles expected of them. The four EMS participants also indicated that they experienced the same challenge (6). This seemed to be especially pertinent for the more novice university teachers (JL1 and L1) as they still spent most of their time on teaching related matters. SL1 and P1 gave the impression that they were slightly better positioned to balance these roles but that it still required personal sacrifices, such as working outside of office hours (in addition to the normal working day) and not taking proper care of their own wellbeing. The decisions that university teachers have to take in terms of which roles to focus on, appeared to cause personal turmoil within these participants, which in some cases even led to physical illnesses. Situations such as this could demoralise staff members and have a negative influence on their commitment to teaching (Verquer *et al.*, 2003; Wright, 2005; Van Schalkwyk *et al*, 2015).

The divergent use of student feedback for professional learning and for evaluation further intensified these tensions. The participants, however, remained committed to delivering quality teaching that would enhance their students' learning and to using student feedback to realise this purpose. However, the contradiction between management's use of student feedback and these university teachers' use thereof was mostly experienced negatively and seemed to place an impediment on a more robust use of student feedback for teaching development.

8.2.8.4 How student feedback could be potentially more useful in improving teaching and learning activities at a research-led university

It seemed as if there was consistency between the departments with regard to the importance of teaching as a core function. I would, however, argue that these four university teachers understood quality teaching as teaching that would enhance student learning, while they perceived the management within their departments to view quality teaching as meeting certain evaluative standards during performance appraisals of teaching staff and the quality assurance visits of the external professional boards (7). According to Patton (2008) and Wright (2005), discrepancies amongst staff regarding the purposes of certain activities may lead to ineffective participation in such activities. This applies to the use of student feedback as well. Shared understanding of the purposes of student feedback and how to interpret and apply the results of such feedback could lead to more effective improvement of teaching (London, 1997; Ballantyne *et al.*, 2000). One may thus conclude that efforts to develop congruent understandings between university teachers and university management about the purpose and application of student feedback may improve its use in improving the quality of teaching.

8.3   HEALTH SCIENCES

The data pertaining to the four participants from the Health Sciences cluster is discussed next.

8.3.1   The subjects

The Health Sciences (HS) disciplinary cluster at SU is also situated in a single faculty, namely the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences (FMHS). The Faculty consists of ten academic departments which include Medicine, Inter-disciplinary Health Sciences, Biomedical Sciences, Pathology, Psychiatry and others. Most of these departments are organised along disciplinary or programmatic lines. The five undergraduate programmes offered by FMHS include Medicine, Physiotherapy, Human Nutrition, Speech, Language & Hearing Therapy and Occupational Therapy. The biographical information of the participants from this disciplinary cluster is provided in Table 8.2.

Table 8.2: Biographical information of participants from Health Sciences

	JL2	L2	SL2	P2
Teaching experience in higher education	4½ years	5 years	8 years	33 years
Level of undergraduate modules taught	1st- and 2nd- year classes	2nd- and 3rd- year classes	2nd, 3rd and 4th years	-
Postgraduate teaching	-	-	-	MPhil
Postgraduate supervision	-	-	Master's	Master's and PhD
Teaching service modules	Yes	No	No	No
Undergraduate modules taught by the participant are essential for obtaining a professional degree qualifications, e.g. Chartered Accountancy	Yes	Yes	Yes	-

All of their university teaching experience was gained at SU. JL2 taught only at undergraduate level (a service-learning module across the whole faculty), while L2 co-instructed in undergraduate modules. SL2 taught at undergraduate level and also supervised Master's students. P2 did not do much teaching any more as he had been appointed in a leading management position in one of the centres at the faculty. He had, however, gained many years of undergraduate teaching experience prior to moving into the management position. At the time of the interview, he was teaching in an MPhil degree programme offered by the faculty. All the undergraduate programmes in FMHS lead to professional degree qualifications that are accredited by the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA).

8.3.2   Philosophy of teaching and learning

Within this disciplinary cluster it was regarded as important for students to learn certain skills that are particular to the HS discipline and its various components:

- "There is a certain set of knowledge components which they must master." (JL2)
- "In addition to the content, there is also a bunch of skills that students need to learn." (L2)

Spencer and Jordan (1999) assert that the active participation of students in the learning process and the development of deep approaches to learning will produce doctors who will be able to meet the changing needs of their patients. Further to the skills that students need to acquire, the university teachers in this study also aspired

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to nurturing deeper understanding of the knowledge gained by students and empowering the students in preparation for their professional fields:

- "Empowerment of others… it's not just the teaching, it's about capacity building, it's about building up someone else…to get them to think differently, apply their knowledge differently." (SL2)
- "…to know whether we've prepared our students adequately to serve in the needs of the health services of our country… empower our students to use their learning opportunities as best as they can." (P2)

The Lancet Commission, which is a global commission for the education of health professionals, also recognises the importance of health professionals being able to apply their knowledge in order to be responsive to local and global health issues (Frenk, Chen, Bhutta, Cohen, Crisp, Evans *et al.*, 2010), while Mann, Gordon and MacLeod (2009) promote reflection as a learning strategy to assist students to integrate new knowledge with existing knowledge in order to act and think professionally.

With the aspirations as reflected by the quotes above, these university teachers also provided insight into how they used student feedback to achieve their teaching aspirations.

8.3.3 Student feedback as mediating artefact

With student learning and the preparation of future professionals being such important objects for these university teachers, student feedback became a valuable source of information for gauging whether they were teaching effectively towards these goals. These participants indicated that student feedback helped them to identify effective and less effective practices which they could either continue or which they needed to adapt in order to enhance the teaching and learning process. Student feedback thus served as a resource that continuously informed and guided their teaching practice. It was also mentioned that student feedback provided them with opportunities to be innovative in terms of responding to feedback information, otherwise their teaching practice would remain "business as usual" (P2). Student feedback was also described as being a valuable mechanism for quality assurance purposes.

These participants also provided some insights into the strategies that they followed in order to deal with and respond to student feedback:

- "…trying to analyse it, especially the comments, trying to figure out what are the themes? If they're valid and if we should respond to it? In the process we're trying to respond to some of the concerns which we felt were valid and we can address actually." (JL2)
- "So I normally take a while until I get to a point where I feel…now I am sort of ready and then I would read my feedback." (L2)

The practices they engaged in to work through their feedback and interpret the data, included activities such as analysing their scores and graphs, identifying common themes which emerged from the verbal comments, and reflecting on whether feedback comments could be accepted as valid and thus worthwhile to respond to, for example:

- "…I tend to look at the written comments first and then I look at the graphs." (SL2)
- "I tune myself specifically to look at trends within the feedback. So if there was a substantial amount of open comments, then I read them all. But I try to identify where there is clear consensus amongst students that here we have a problem…then I will reflect on how to solve that issue." (P2)

Although their specific methods for working through student feedback data and responding to it may have varied slightly, it seemed to be a general tendency among them to look for trends and pertinent issues that arose from the feedback, which they would then respond to if such issues were perceived to be valid. They generally seemed to take the context of the teaching situation into consideration when interpreting the data, as would normally be advised by teaching and learning, as well as student feedback experts (see also Seldin, 1997; Rudland *et al.*, 2013). Similar trends were found among the participants from EMS (see section 8.2.7).

In some cases, the personal nature of the feedback process and data emerged as issues from their interviews, with SL2 actually recommending that a mechanism should be put in place to help university teachers to deal with the student feedback when they receive it. This links to two issues which could influence the effectiveness of the feedback process: one being the possible need for consultation in order to assist university teachers to deal with the process of student feedback (see also

Ballantyne *et al.*, 2000; Bozalek *et al.,* 2016), while the other refers to perceptions regarding the validity of feedback information (also see Patton, 2008).

8.3.4   The contexts of their academic departments

When considering the departmental contexts of these university teachers, there was general agreement regarding the importance of teaching and learning as a core function of their departments. Teaching was portrayed as being taken seriously and seemed to be well supported in terms of structures that were available to ensure the quality of teaching, to empower university teachers and to deal with teaching and learning issues:

- "….we all realise that teaching is a major component of our work. We try to streamline our activities as a group that we are on par and that the quality is good." (JL2)
- "…to make topics accessible to the students in a way that resonates with the University's policies on assessment and teaching and learning. There are also checks and balances in terms the moderation of exam papers, language, etc. The Department wants to know what is going on in the classes so student feedback is taken very seriously in the Department." (L2)
- "I think it's very highly regarded, I think it is very well supported through all levels of our structure…" (SL2)
- "When we started in the department…our first priority was to launch teaching and learning programmes within [the specific professional field] education. The second priority was to establish research within teaching and to catalyse that within the faculty. And the third step was to develop a faculty development or capacity building strategy or plan… We developed a special course for [teachers] to support them in their teaching role and to empower them." (P2)

It was evident from these quotes that aspiring towards quality teaching is not only an individual approach, but a faculty-wide concern. The influence of student feedback also extended beyond the individual university teacher's teaching practices to faculty generated staff development initiatives.

The quality assurance role of the external professional body that governs the accreditation of the programmes offered within FMHS was also mentioned by these university teachers. The HPCSA is the national accrediting and Standards Generating Body for all training programmes in the health professions in SA. They visit FMHS every five years for programme accreditation purposes. The feedback from these accreditation visits is thus crucial to the faculty as it determines whether

they remain eligible to offer professional undergraduate and postgraduate training programmes.

8.3.5   Departmental norms and practices

The rules or norms that guide the practices within FMHS and its constituent departments are embedded in the processes of the external professional body to which the faculty has to report in terms of their programmes. Above and beyond SU's own teaching and learning policies, quality assurance is also guided by this professional body, as P2 confirmed:

> "Teaching is mainly evaluated based on internal feedback and also the external Professional Board accreditation process."

The main purpose of the five-yearly accreditation inspections is to ensure that the standard of education offered by the health sciences faculties in SA is maintained or improved as required. JL2, SL2 and P2 all referred to the HPCSA conducting focus group interviews with students as part of these accreditation inspections. Student feedback thus appeared to be an important source of information for the professional body as part of their quality assurance processes, as well as for the departments and the individual university teachers. The university teachers, however, appeared to be cautious in terms of how much weight it carried in the evaluation of teaching:

- "In our division student feedback is also incorporated as part of the performance appraisal. It is not given a weighting, it's not given a separate mark but it's sort of in support of your performance. It is sort of used as supporting evidence for a good rating." (SL2)
- "I think the philosophy is to be careful not to make student feedback a too important component of the performance evaluation. I think they look a bit more global…with student feedback being only one component." (P2)

The norms and practices followed within these departments thus appeared to be compatible with what is advised in the literature in terms of enhancing the effectiveness of student feedback processes. Such practices include the triangulation of student feedback information with other sources of information to evaluate the quality of teaching (see Kulik, 2001; Sproule, 2002), taking into consideration the context within which teaching and learning happens, as

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suggested by Chen and Hoshower (2003) and Brennan and Williams (2004), and having personal consultations with both teachers and students (see also Ballantyne *et al.,* 2000; Wright & Jenkins-Guarnieri, 2012; Bozalek *et al.*, 2016).

8.3.6 Dealing with the required roles of an academic

Although much support seemed to be available for teaching, all the participants from HS agreed that it was very challenging to try and balance the roles of teaching, research and community interaction:

- "…but I think all of us struggle a bit with the balance between our different roles because a person feels the University wants you to be 100% researcher and 100% lecturer. And uhm, you have two 100%'s in each. You actually need two individuals *[laughing]* to do the work." (JL2)
- "I am very interested in research, but teaching in an undergrad programme takes up most of the time…" (L2)
- "Very difficult and very challenging! I think in terms of the teaching aspect, on an undergraduate level, it is very time consuming, it is very resource intensive and most of our staff are very dedicated to that. Which means that the other two legs around service delivery and research sometimes take a back seat in relation to that." (SL2)
- "My biggest tension is between my administrative responsibilities and my research and teaching responsibilities." (P2)

The HS participants identified various reasons for these tensions. One of their reasons was that the teaching function at undergraduate level appeared to require a substantial amount of time and effort in terms of preparation, logistics and administration, as alluded to by SL2 above. These participants elaborated further on the tension that they experienced, as follows:

- "…I, sometimes become frustrated because you feel that there is a lot that is required of you in different divergent fields…and that, yes, it's just difficult." (JL2)
- "I allow it because I feel [teaching] is important but it comes at an extreme cost to my research. It influences my performance appraisal…The biggest tension is between teaching and research." (L2)
- "Because of the nature of my position here…a lot of my work is administrative." (P2)

Esteban Bara (2014) argues that the relational nature of teaching and learning calls for university teachers to incorporate a variety of functions and responsibilities into their teaching role, such as designing pedagogical approaches that extend beyond the subject content to include the development of habits and virtues in students which would enable their students to effectively function as professionals and responsible citizens in future. This is of particular importance for FMHS, due to the nature of their professions, which require the integration of theory and practice from the onset of their professional training for their students to perform competently in their future professions (section 8.3.2; also see Mann *et al.*, 2009). The problem-based learning and evidence-based teaching approach that is followed in some programmes in this faculty, as was indicated by SL2 and P2, could also add to time constraints. Maudsley (1999) as cited in Spencer and Jordan (1999) considers problem-based learning as placing huge demands on teaching staff time. Time pressures are thus not only caused by the demands placed on university teachers to practice various roles only, but are also influenced by the teaching and learning strategies employed in faculties or departments.

Within the FMHS, they also have to deal with the issue of joint staff appointments between SU and the Department of Health (DoH). This places an additional burden on university teachers, as described by P2:

> "Many of our teaching staff is not part of university personnel, but are joint staff, because they are paid by the government that struggles to see teaching and research as high priorities…It makes it more complex because in the minds of that staff cadre the function of service delivery is priority, because that is what they get assessed on in terms of performance."

Although joint appointments have benefits such as bridging the gap between theory and practice and promoting clinically relevant research (Ogilvie, Strang, Hayes, Raiwet, Andruski, Heinrich *et al.*, 2004), it could also lead to tensions such as those mentioned by P2 above. With the performance appraisals of these staff members being focused more on service delivery, enhancing teaching and thus using student feedback for formative purposes, may not receive due attention in the case of university teachers in such joint appointments.

8.3.7   The experience of artefact-mediated and object-driven teaching

Given the general agreement across the faculty regarding the importance of teaching and supportive structures to their availability, these university teachers came across as committed to delivering quality teaching that would contribute to delivering well-equipped graduates and professionals. Quotes in support of this claim include:

- "…because I am not lecturing to scientists but especially to medical people who are gonna become doctors. So I want to try and impart something of an interest and a passion for science." (JL2)
- "They mustn't just get knowledge and regurgitate it…like at school. They must be able to think further than just the knowledge, to what the implications are of that knowledge." (L2)
- "…we are busy making a difference in the training of health professionals or health scientists, but eventually the impact that it is going to have on the health of this country's population." (P2)

Their contribution to society in terms of improving the health conditions of the nation thus also seemed to be an important aspect embedded in these university teachers' teaching function. The importance of meeting the requirements of the HPCSA has already been mentioned.

In general, it came across that the FMHS followed a much more supportive and formative approach to teaching and the use of student feedback in the process. Moreover, the university teachers from this environment did not indicate a quantitative or evaluative use of student feedback in terms of their performance appraisal processes. They appeared to be the only faculty following this non-evaluative approach towards the use of student feedback.

8.3.8   Summary and discussion: Health Sciences

A visual representation of the findings regarding HS university teachers' experiences of the role of student feedback in their teaching is provided in Figure 8.2 and discussed in the sections that follow.
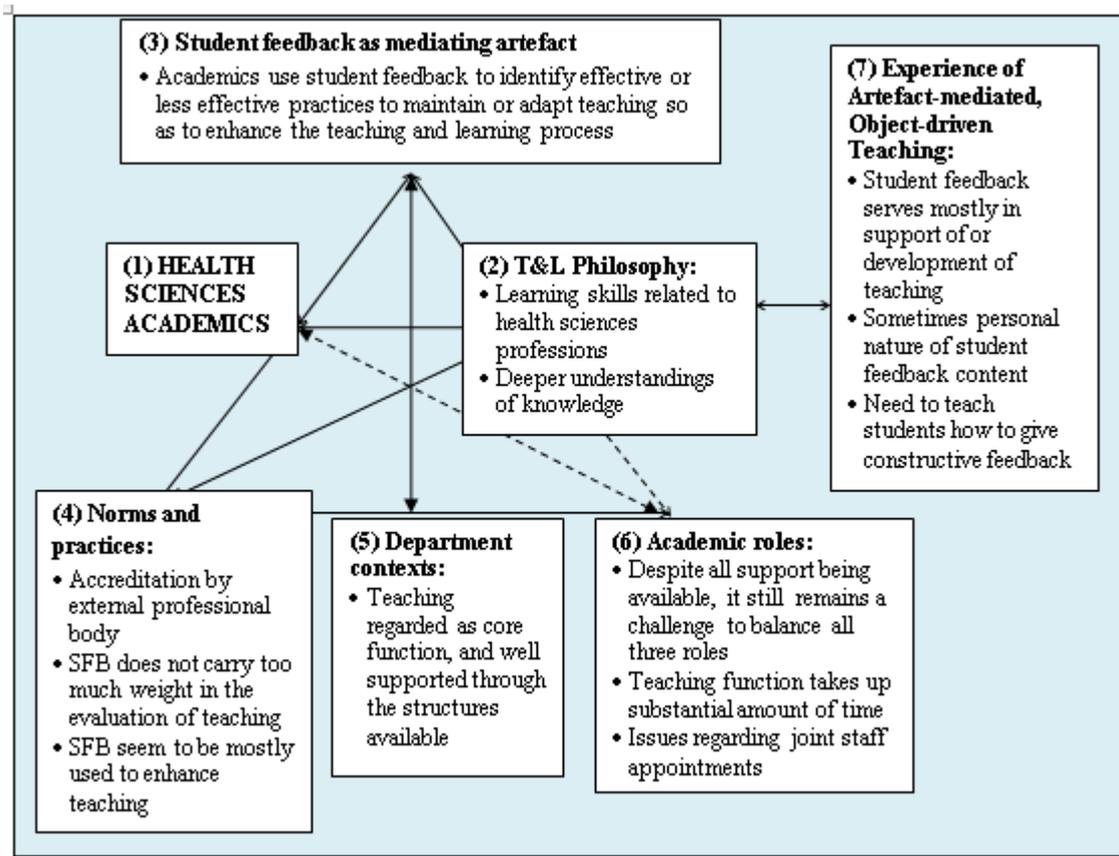
Figure 8.2: Health Sciences university teachers' experiences of the role of student feedback in their teaching

8.3.8.1 What was understood by the concept of student feedback on teaching in the case of HS participants?

The data from the HS participants (1) made it evident that it was important that their students learn particular skills as required in the various health sciences professions. In addition to this, their students had to develop deeper understanding of the knowledge and be capable of analysing, synthesising and interpreting both current and new information so that they could apply it in real-life situations. Their teaching thus had to be directed towards enabling students to develop a balanced approach between acquiring the knowledge, technical skills and professional attitudes and behaviours which would put them in good standing when they started practising professionally (2) (also see Feather & Fry, 2003). The teaching practice of the participants from this learning environment was therefore directed at delivering well prepared and equipped professionals.

Student feedback helped them to identify how effective their teaching practices were in meeting the learning needs of their students and how they would need to adapt their teaching according to the students' learning needs (3). Hounsell (2003:203) argues that feedback from students can provide the university teacher with insight into the "learners' eye-view" and that students are qualified to comment on certain aspects of the teaching and learning process, for example the "clarity of presentation" and "pacing of material". Feedback was thus perceived as an important and valid source in enabling these university teachers to gauge the effectiveness of their teaching (see also Fry, Ketteridge & Marshall, 2003).

8.3.8.2 What were the contexts that influenced student feedback on teaching in the case of HS participants?

According to these participants, quality teaching and learning was very highly regarded in their learning environment (5). The faculty seemed to have well-established structures in place to deal with teaching and learning matters and to ensure the quality thereof. The departments seemed to be serious about empowering their students by providing them with the best possible learning experiences, as well as empowering their teachers by providing them with support, training and resources so that they could teach to the best of their abilities, as were explicitly confirmed by L2, SL2 and P2.

In HS, student feedback about modules was shared openly at the various faculty committees and ways to improve the modules were discussed regularly (5). Literature on reflection and self-assessment substantiate the use of multi-source feedback (Mann *et al.*, 2009:613). Ballantyne *et al.* (2000) and Penny and Coe (2004) also agree that feedback contributes more effectively to the improvement of teaching practice when it is shared and discussed with others. FMHS thus followed examples of good student feedback practice.

Student feedback also formed part of quality assurance processes in this disciplinary cluster (4). The quality assurance of teaching was governed by a two-pronged process. The faculty and departments had established their own structures and systems for ensuring the quality of their teaching, such as the various module and programme committees that existed in the faculty. On the other hand, there

also was the HPCSA, the external professional body that governed and accredited the training of health sciences professionals.

Over the years, student feedback questionnaires have become a common feature of quality assurance systems of higher education institutions worldwide (Chung Sea Law, 2010a). Chung Sea Law (2010b), however, argues that the quality culture in most institutions tend to favour institutional aspects (such as external accountability) rather than aspects of quality regarding students (such as improvement of learning). Chung Sea Law (2010a) further points out that quality assurance should focus on students' experiences of their programmes, rather than on individual modules. In this regard, the Health Sciences environment seemed to follow a fairly balanced approach in terms of using programme feedback for the purposes of quality assurance and accreditation of their programmes, as well as for the improvement of their students' learning experiences (4). They are not neglecting the value of module feedback in the improvement of student learning, either.

8.3.8.3 How did HS participants use (or fail to use) student feedback in their teaching practice?

Even though teaching and learning was portrayed as very highly regarded and structurally well supported in this faculty, it still appeared to be a battle to balance all the academic roles (6). Maudsley (1999) and Spencer and Jordan (1999) describe the problem-based approach to teaching and learning as time-consuming. It was therefore not unusual to find that the university teachers from HS, which follows a problem-based approach to teaching and learning in some of their programmes, experienced their undergraduate teaching as very time consuming, thus making it difficult to fit in the various requirements of all the academic roles. The professor, with a total of 33 years of university teaching experience, found peace in accepting the practical realities of his management role that constituted priority position in his appointment at the time. He accepted that he would not be able to perform excellently in all the roles and decided to focus on his main responsibility as the head of one of the divisions in the faculty.

The FMHS also faced the added challenge of hosting joint appointments as many of their staff members are jointly appointed by SU and the Western Cape Department

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of Health (DoH). The challenge was experienced mostly with regard to the fact that SU and the DoH were not seen to be holding the same views about the importance of the various academic roles. The DoH appears to place a higher premium on service delivery in the form of patient care, while FMHS requires a greater focus on teaching and research. This discrepancy poses a huge challenge to the university teachers in these joint appointments as they try to fit in all their responsibilities to the satisfaction of both the faculty and the DoH.

Despite all the challenges, the faculty still remains dedicated to promoting and supporting quality teaching (5). The departments of the participant university teachers also still seem to prefer to engage with student feedback for formative purposes during performance appraisals and accreditation processes, instead of reducing it to a mere quantitative mark. Student feedback is much rather used to address problematic teaching and learning issues on the one hand, or as evidence to support a good rating in performance appraisals on the other. When student feedback is used in such a constructive, consultative manner, it becomes more useful in improving the quality of teaching (Wright & Jenkins-Guarnieri, 2012).

8.3.8.4 How student feedback could be potentially more useful in improving teaching and learning activities at a research-led university

Although the teaching and learning and student feedback practise in the HS learning environment has been described as good in many ways, some tension nevertheless was experienced (7). The institutional perceptions of teaching's lesser status compared to research also had its influence in the HS environment (also see Herman, 2015). This, along with other challenges such as time constraints and having to perform various, often divergent roles, could potentially constrain effective engagement with student feedback information.

Two particular issues that have also been raised by the HS participants relate to the nature of the feedback content, which sometimes appeared to be inappropriately personal, and to perceptions of students not being properly informed about how to provide constructive feedback (7). The suggestion by SL2, namely to consider the implementation of support structures for consultation with university teachers after receiving their student feedback, could be an important issue to consider (also see

Chung Sea Law, 2010a; Bozalek *et al.*, 2016). Further to this, the proper training or preparation of students regarding how to provide constructive, useful feedback, as suggested by P2, may also be a worthwhile consideration for enhancing the usefulness of the feedback (7) (also see Patton, 2008).

8.4   HUMANITIES

Following, is a discussion of the data relating to the four participants from the Humanities cluster, according to the elements of the activity theory framework.

8.4.1   The subjects

The Humanities disciplinary cluster includes four faculties at SU. These faculties are the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and the Faculties of Education, Law and Theology. Two of the participants from this disciplinary cluster were appointed in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, one at Education and one at Law, at the time of their interviews. Their biographical details are captured in Table 8.3.

Table 8.3: Biographical information of participants from Humanities

	JL3	L3	SL3	P3
Teaching experience in higher education	1 year	5 years	14 years	33 years
Level of undergraduate modules taught	1st- and 2nd- year classes	1st- to 4th- year classes	1st and 2nd years	-
Postgraduate teaching	-	-	-	Honours
Postgraduate supervision	-	-	Master's	Master's and PhD
Teaching service modules	No	No	No	No
Undergraduate modules taught by the participant are essential for obtaining a professional degree qualifications, e.g. Law	No	No	Yes	No

The teaching experience of the participants from Humanities ranged from the junior lecturer being in his first year of teaching in higher education, to the professor who had already been at SU for 33 years. Although the professor was not actively teaching at undergraduate level any more, he had many years of applicable experience and was also still teaching at honours level. Furthermore, only the professor was involved in supervising doctoral candidates, while the senior lecturer

was supervising Master's students. Except for the senior lecturer, who taught modules which were essential for obtaining a professional degree qualification, the other participants all taught modules that contributed to generic Bachelor degrees.

8.4.2 Philosophy of teaching and learning

For these participants, the enhancement of student learning and the development of critical thinking in their students seemed to be the most pertinent objects at which their teaching was directed. These objects are in line with what Degago and Kaino (2015) and González (2011) describe as student-focused or learning-oriented conceptions of teaching. These conceptions and objects became evident from the following quotes:

- "I wanted to expose them so that they can make up their own minds and decide… but also incrementally lead them to critical thinking… the idea is that it should incrementally lead the students to where they will find their own voices." (JL3)
- "It's things that we have to teach them, to learn to speak for themselves... So there is a lot of work that goes into that critical…that in fact they can be reflective on what they do" (L3)
- "They're not necessarily going to remember the content of my module but I want them to start developing an attitude of how to approach a problem critically…how to THINK for yourself rather than to rely on spoon feeding, how to not only parrot fashion learn, but how to practically apply what they learn…" (SL3)

It can be deduced from the quotes, above, that development of students' confidence in terms of "finding their own voices" (JL3), the ability to analyse problems and to apply their knowledge to new situations constituted important objects underpinning the teaching of these university teachers.

8.4.3 Student feedback as mediating artefact

How these university teachers viewed the role of student feedback in directing their teaching activities towards the attainment of the objects described above, is portrayed in the following quotes:

- "[The analysis of the student feedback] is informative to me because it informs how I need to work in future. I feel there needs to be a marriage between practice and theory and I feel that …lecturers should constantly reflect on their practice because the world is a fast changing

place. If student feedback is done to reflectively or analytically look at your practice, then it will have more value because then it will give you the opportunity to use the data to inform your practice." (JL3)

- "You will actually have to construct the possible meaning to [the feedback] according to the context that we teach in…I look at it as a snap shot of what happened… then I take the advice from it and then I see again what this snap shot look like now, so I will implement things if there is a chance." (L3)

- "I mean, our job is to give them a service that works for them and the student feedback gives us a chance to see whether they agree that what we're doing, is actually working for them. Just to show you what the trends are so that you are in touch with how the students are feeling about what you are doing." (SL3)

- "…you also look for specific suggestions how you can improve." (P3)

From these quotes it became clear that student feedback served as information that the university teachers used to see whether their teaching contributed positively to students' learning and how they could adapt their teaching when problems or challenges arose. Where their student feedback indicated that the teaching practices had been working well, they would continue with or strengthen those practices. In the cases where students experienced problems within the teaching and learning situation, the university teachers would use the student feedback information to reflect on what went wrong and how to address or improve the situation. This corresponds with Hattie and Timperley's (2007) argument that effective feedback should answer the questions of (i) what the goals are for an activity; (ii) what progress is being made towards achieving the goals; and (iii) what activities need to be undertaken to improve the progress.

8.4.4 The contexts of their academic departments

When looking at how the departments which these university teachers were attached to valued and supported teaching, there seemed to be variation. Although most of the departments appeared to place a high premium on teaching and learning, there were mixed perceptions about this among individuals in two of those departments. Further to this, one department gave the impression that they supported the integration of teaching and research, while another department appeared to be more focused on research. These claims are based on what the participants shared in their interviews:

- "Look, right at the beginning I was told that this department is research driven, but that teaching forms a core part of us…we cannot do research and separate our teaching from that. The two must speak to each other… what we try to do here in terms of our research and what we write, that it speaks to the content that we deal with in our classes." (JL3)

- "Teaching and learning is a pillar of the university. Well, I think our department is odd. There are a lot of people who think they are beyond reproach … no one else does what I do so no one is gonna ask me, you know… So it's just really what I got to do…the basics." (L3)

- "I think teaching and learning is important, but I do think that the focus is more on the research." (SL3)

- "This is a department with a very strong tradition of good teaching…but of course we all have this tension between teaching and research…" (P3)

It has already been established that discrepancy between the institution's priorities and those of the staff members could negatively influence staff members' job performance and commitment to the institution (Verquer *et al.*, 2003; Wright, 2005). The tension between teaching and research could thus cause university teachers to feel overwhelmed and less motivated (Boughey & McKenna, 2011; Habib, 2013).

8.4.5   Departmental norms and practices

During exploration of the narrative data from the four participants within Humanities, it appeared that the norms which guided teaching varied across the departments. The information shared by these four university teachers also pointed to varying approaches in the use of student feedback by the HoDs. It appeared that, from management's side, student feedback was mainly used for performance appraisal processes, but the extent to which it is used varied among the departments.

JL3 stated that teaching was evaluated through student feedback, pass rates and dropout rates. In the case of L3's department, it was by chance that he discovered that the dean of the faculty used the general impression mark (as a percentage)[4] at the end of the student feedback reports to determine his mark for teaching for his performance appraisal (see section 4.4.6 and Annexure 3). SL3 showed that he was uninformed about exactly how student feedback was used in performance

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[4] This is the average percentage that is calculated from the percentage marks that students give with regard to their overall impression of the lecturer's teaching. These percentage marks are not statistically related to the individual question items in the student feedback questionnaires.

appraisals when he stated that he "just hopes that the HoD takes the student feedback in consideration" as he normally received fairly positive feedback. He could only provide calculated guesses in terms of how teaching was evaluated in his department, as he had never had a meeting or discussion with the HoD regarding this, despite the fact that he had been at the Department for 14 years. P3 indicated that official student feedback was used to evaluate teaching in their department. In his case, the HoD also used the general percentage mark at the end of the student feedback reports but would ask the university teacher to give himself a mark for his teaching as well. The HoD would then compare the university teacher's mark to the general feedback percentage and, if correlated, would accept the teacher's mark. This HoD also took the teaching and learning context into consideration during the performance appraisal process:

> "but that is taken into account that it's an interplay between how you present the course, what you expect of the students, what they are able to put in, what their abilities are, but if there is a real crisis and bad throughput, that would be discussed" (P3).

The variety of strategies and procedures for using student feedback, especially in terms of performance appraisals, could foster tension among and across individual staff members and departments, which, in turn, could discourage the effective use of student feedback for the improvement of teaching and learning (Ballantyne *et al.*, 2000).

8.4.6   Dealing with the roles of an academic

Although teaching did not seem to be regarded in the same way across all departments, research indeed appeared to be pivotal to all these departments. Having to practice all the roles of an academic was portrayed by these university teachers as quite challenging, as represented by these words from P3:

> "But we all have this tension between teaching and research, and there's also community interaction and admin…And it does get said also in this department: don't waste your time on working too hard on undergraduate preparation, because it's a lot more money and prestige for the department when you spend your time on postgrads and on doctoral people specifically. So even in this department with such a good teaching tradition you have this tension."

It appeared that it also came down to taking decisions in terms of what would be important for them to focus on for some of these university teachers, as SL3 pointed out:

> "Well, personally, I've been focusing almost too much on the teaching…and yes, my research has been neglected…Well, I don't think I would have been able to successfully juggle them all. So I put the research pretty much on the back burner. And it was a practical decision."

Herman's (2015) study also found that university teachers at SU often have to make such choices. The quote above revealed that decisions are sometimes made on the basis of practical realities and possibilities as perceived by the individual (also see Barnes, 2012). For others it seemed to be less challenging to integrate all the roles and ease the tensions which were experienced, particularly between teaching and research. One way to do this was to use one's research in one's teaching and vice versa, as JL3 indicate (section 8.4.4). L3 decided to limit his research to the completion of his doctoral degree qualification and to incorporate his community interaction into this research as well:

> "With having these three pillars, obviously my priority is teaching and learning. That's what my qualification is…and research in the sense that I am still busy with my PhD. The research I do is in the indigenous knowledge systems so there's always something happening and there's always something that needs to be done and the community interaction has grown."

It thus appears that these university teachers were able to find innovative ways of dealing with the tensions between the various academic roles. This resonates with the activity theory argument that tension and contradiction could create opportunities for change and new practices (Engeström, 2001). Although they could find various ways of addressing such tensions, it could not resolve the challenges completely, however, since the systems within the departments or university often negated the prospects of these attempts:

- "People become indifferent to the system and they do it as mere tick-box exercises. It creates a disjuncture between the personal commitment to the project …and this incentivist tradition that is created through rewards…monetary rewards." (JL3)
- "…it has impact on you…professionally on you if teaching is so high and research is much lower." (L3)

- "I find it stressful to the point that I sometimes become depressed and feel that I simply cannot handle all the pressure…" (P3)

8.4.7   The experience of artefact-mediated and object-driven teaching

In all the departments from which these four participants were selected, research appeared to be a pivotal function, regarded in higher esteem and of more financial benefit and reward than teaching. Although this could have a negative influence on university teachers' morale in terms of teaching (Moore & Kuol, 2005; Boughey & McKenna, 2011), these participants from Humanities still indicated their desire and commitment towards the facilitation of student learning and guiding their students to develop their potential, as elaborated on in section 8.4.2. Their teaching approaches were aimed at enhancing critical thinking and accountability in their students, as these were perceived to improve the possibilities for their future success (also see Candy, 1991; Felder & Brent, 1996; Fielding, 2006). During the processes of facilitating student learning, continuous reflective practice was mentioned as an important part of enhancing the quality of teaching (see also Mann *et al.*, 2009):

> "Teachers in my opinion must be… the people who unlock the stumbling blocks…and to be able to do that, one needs to continuously look at your own practice, your skills, your knowledge that you have." (JL3)

All data from participants in the Humanities, as reflected in section 8.4.3, point to the role of student feedback in reflecting on their teaching and using student feedback information to guide and improve teaching practice.

8.4.8   Summary and discussion: Humanities

Following the activity theory frame, a visual representation of the findings regarding the Humanities teachers' experiences of the role of student feedback in their teaching is provided in Figure 8.3 and discussed in the sections that follow.

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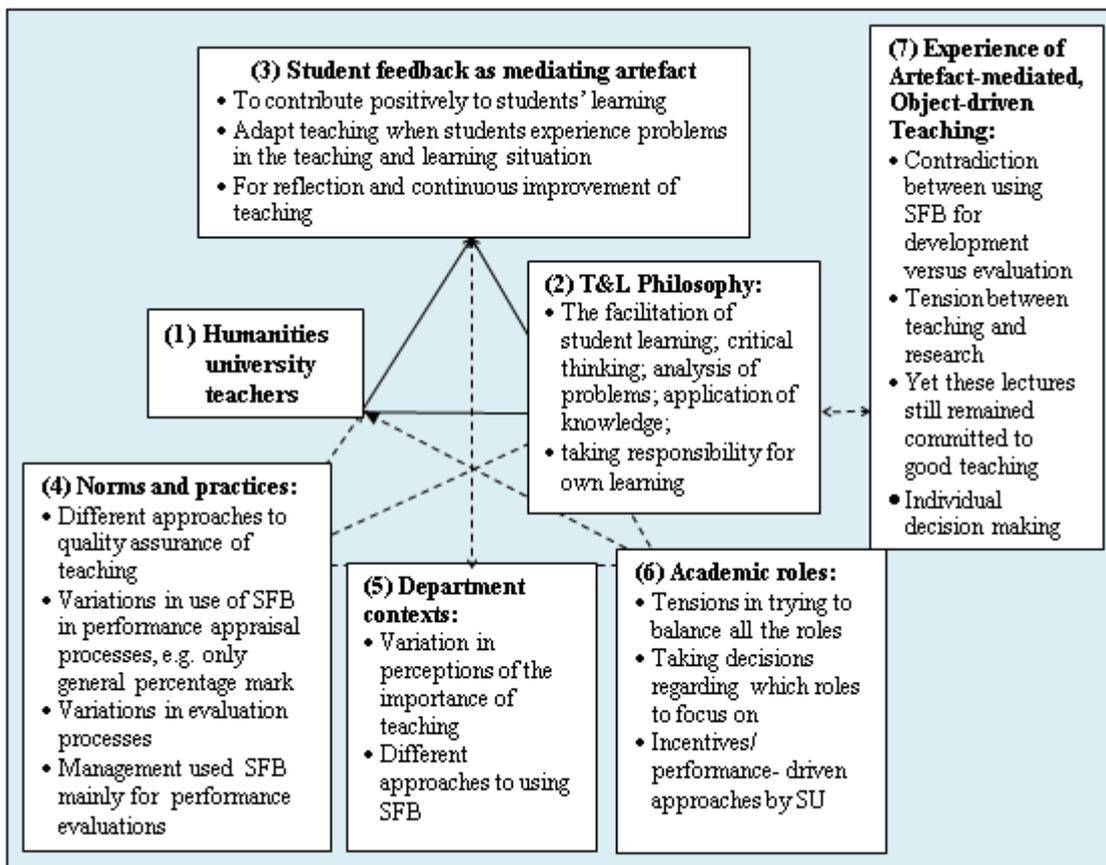
Figure 8.3: Experiences of university teachers in the Humanities of the role of student feedback in their teaching

8.4.8.1 What was understood by the concept of student feedback on teaching in the case of Humanities participants?

The four participants from the Humanities disciplinary cluster (1) described the objects or goals towards which they orientated their teaching as the facilitation of student learning and the development of critical thinking (2). Being driven by these intensions, they regarded teaching as a facilitative process during which students are guided towards deeper understandings of the knowledge and taking responsibility for their own learning. In this process, student feedback served as an indicator of the effectiveness of their teaching practice in terms of moving their students forward in their learning and understanding (3). Student feedback thus served as an instrument to support them in their reflection on their teaching (see also Schön, 1987; Mezirow, 1997; Gustafsson & Fagerberg, 2004).

8.4.8.2 What were the contexts that influenced student feedback on teaching in the case of participants from the Humanities?

The practices with regard to quality assurance and evaluation of teaching in the departments represented by these participants appeared to vary (4). Although student feedback was apparently used by all these departments to evaluate teaching, the ways in which they utilised student feedback information differed from one to another. While one department used only the general impression mark that was calculated at the end of each student feedback report, others also took certain aspects from the teaching and learning context, such as pass rates and class sizes, into consideration.

What seemed strange was that SL3, who had been at SU for 14 years at the time of the interview, did not know exactly how his department used student feedback in their performance appraisals or in evaluation of teaching. This indicates the extent to which the understanding and practice around student feedback varied across this disciplinary cluster, a situation which could, in some cases, be detrimental to the optimal use of student feedback for the improvement of quality teaching and learning. Ballantyne *et al.*, (2000) warn against the negative effects that a lack of common understanding regarding the purpose of student feedback could have on the usefulness of such feedback.

8.4.8.3 How did participants from Humanities use (or fail to use) student feedback in their teaching practice?

The importance of teaching and learning varied across the departments where these participants were fulfilling their teaching duties (5). For some, teaching and learning was very highly regarded while research seemed to be the more important function for others (6). In one department at least they attempted to follow an integrated approach towards teaching and research. The individual participants, however, all regarded teaching and learning as an important function. With the facilitation of student learning as a key object or intention of their teaching, they also regarded the feedback from their students as important to the teaching and learning process (3). Data provided in section 8.4.3 present how these participants verbalised how they valued and used student feedback as information which guided

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and helped to improve their teaching. These teachers used their student feedback data to reflect on how their teaching practice was influencing their students' learning. They would then try to adjust those practices that did not seem to contribute positively to their students' learning.

8.4.8.4 How student feedback could be potentially more useful in improving teaching and learning activities at a research-led university

In general, the participants from Humanities agreed about the importance of enhancing students' learning and critical thinking abilities and that student feedback helped them to reflect on whether their teaching practice was contributing to the achievement of these objects. While they perceived student feedback as a tool for formative use, their sense was that management seemed to focus on the summative use of student feedback to calculate a quantitative mark for the evaluation of teaching as part of their performance appraisal processes (7). This apparent disjuncture in purpose and use of student feedback may be an issue in need of attention, as divergence in the understanding of the purposes of student feedback could negatively influence the use thereof as a professional learning tool for university teachers (London, 1997; Ballantyne *et al.*, 2000). The development of a shared understanding regarding student feedback may thus improve its usefulness.

8.5   SCIENCE, ENGINEERING AND TECHNOLOGY

Following the preceding pattern, the data for the four participants from the Science, Engineering and Technology cluster is discussed according to the activity theory framework.

8.5.1   The subjects

The Science, Engineering and Technology (SET) disciplinary cluster at Stellenbosch University includes the Faculties of Science, AgriSciences and Engineering. The four participants in this group came from all three of these faculties, with two being attached to AgriSciences. Further biographical details of the participants are provided in Table 8.4.

Table 8.4: Biographical information of participants from SET

	JL4	L4	SL4	P4
Teaching experience in higher education	6 years	5 years	6 years	19 years
Level of undergraduate modules taught	3rd- and 4th-year classes	2nd, 3rd and 4th years	4th-year classes	1s- and 3rd-year classes
Postgraduate teaching	Honours	Honours	-	Honours
Postgraduate supervision	-	Master's	Master's	Master's and PhD
Teaching service modules	Yes	No	Yes	No
Undergraduate modules taught by the participant are essential for obtaining a professional degree qualifications, e.g. Engineering	No	No	Yes	No

The higher education teaching experience of the university teachers from SET spanned over a range of six to 19 years. All of them taught various levels of undergraduate modules, while three also taught honours classes. L4, SL4 and P4 all supervised Master's students while P4 was also involved in supervising doctoral candidates. SL4, who taught a service module to 4th-year students across all the departments of his faculty, held a qualification in an applied sciences field and not in the particular professional field of the faculty in which he was teaching. Although SL4 taught a service module, this module was essential for obtaining professional degree qualifications in the faculty. This person furthermore was a foreigner and represented a minority group in his department. The professor (P4) was a programme coordinator for one of the undergraduate programmes in his faculty as well.

8.5.2 Philosophy of teaching and learning

The facilitation of student learning, together with the development of critical thinking and taking responsibility for one's own learning as a student, were indicated as important motives for these participants' teaching. They aspired to developing their students' abilities to develop deeper understanding of knowledge and of how to apply it; to learn and think independently; and to be able to successfully step into various roles where they as future professionals could make their contributions as citizens of SA. These claims are substantiated by the following statements from the lecturers:

- "So I don't believe in just fact based, memorizing facts…its learning how to think for yourself and how to actually make a contribution one day in your …I'm facilitating the learning experience actually." (JL4)

- "…we should be teaching them to learn, because if you do that, they can be adaptive in their own learning…we should be getting our students towards learning… facilitating their capacity to learn how to learn for themselves, because they all learn differently." (L4)

- "So, for me, learning is not about passing the exams, but it's to have that understanding that you can think, you can internalise things... It's about how we interpret that and apply in your own context." (SL4)

- "Well, I think students must learn to think critically and to think for themselves." (P4)

Based on the quotes presented above, it can be deduced that these participants were subscribing to student-centred, learning-oriented teaching approaches as described by Gonzáles (2011) and others. The active participation of students in the learning process (also see Spencer & Jordan, 1999) and the development of the ability to make personal meaning of new knowledge by "transforming information and ideas in terms of their own previous knowledge and understanding" (see also Entwistle, 2000:2) thus represented core elements of how these university teachers approached their teaching. All four disciplinary clusters thus revealed student-centred, learning-oriented approaches to teaching and learning.

8.5.3   Student feedback as mediating artefact

It became evident that student feedback played an important mediating role between the learning-oriented problem spaces towards which these university teachers' teaching activities were oriented and the aims they wanted to achieve through their teaching:

- "I think student feedback helps us to do our jobs better so I think it's really a necessary thing to do." (JL4)

- "So I value the student feedback very much but I also understand that I don't need to be popular with them…" (L4)

- "I take it [student feedback] as something that is there for you to improve…the teaching, and to maintain what is working and probably look at things that are not working." (SL4)

- "The value of student feedback is to tell you… is to give you encouragement when you're doing well and to point out specific things that you are not doing well. And so it is to lead to self-improvement." (P4)

These quotes revealed that student feedback, although it may be useful in gauging effective teaching practices, needed to be approached with circumspection (see L4's quote). As Franklin (2001) also indicated, student feedback needs to be interpreted against the context within which teaching and learning takes place and therefore needs to make sense in relation to other information applicable to the context. These university teachers thus showed characteristics of professionalism, which requires of university teachers to be able to make such informed decisions and judgements based on "sound thinking, reflection and knowledge of the context in which [they] are operating" (Schuck *et al.*, 2008:541).

8.5.4   The contexts of their academic departments

In describing their perceptions of the importance of teaching and learning in their departments, three of the participants painted rather mixed pictures. According to JL4, teaching was more important to the younger colleagues in the department, while the older colleagues did not care much for it. In general it appears that his department did not have a high regard for teaching and that it came down to a personal decision whether you regarded teaching as an important function or not. Also, in the case of L4, there seemed to be a split situation in their department, with only a few colleagues and the teaching coordinator showing commitment to teaching and learning, while the rest of the department seemed to be content with merely following the basic rules. In this department there was little to no communication between university teachers in terms of what they were teaching and how they taught.

In SL4's case, the situation was quite different. Here, teaching was highly regarded and university teachers were expected to perform this function with excellence. Their department was "…known for being a no-nonsense department. You stick to the standards" (SL4).

In the same vein, P4 indicated that "… there are quite a lot of my colleagues that don't regard teaching as a high priority". There seemed to be stronger management

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of producing research outputs, while teaching seemed to come across as less important:

> "The HoD might call in someone and say…you know you haven't published journal papers in the last 2 years. He is not going to call in someone and say you need to jack up your teaching… you get young people coming in very much wanting to establish their research priorities. They won't get promoted unless they do that. And I'm concerned that many of them are now neglecting the teaching." (P4)

These mixed messages regarding the importance of teaching and learning, as well as the perception of teaching being less valued than research, could have a negative influence on the commitment to and the quality of teaching of university teachers in Science, Engineering and Technology (Blackburn & Lawrence, 1995; Wright, 2005).

8.5.5   Departmental norms and practices

Although the participants from the SET departments seemed to present a diverse picture regarding the importance of teaching, the evaluation of teaching seemed to be regarded as a necessary function by all. They all indicated the use of student feedback in the evaluation processes, but the evaluation processes and the ways in which student feedback were used seemed to differ quite significantly across these departments:

- "Apart from the student evaluation…you are only as good as the number of articles you published and the number of research contracts you have and not the quality teaching you do." (JL4)
- "Well, there is the KPA's that we have to fill out every year. For me that is quite a dysfunctional system because I engage with that document under pressure once a year and they never care about the development." (L4)
- "They do interviews with the students in the absence of the lecturer…and that is done just in the middle of the semester…so that if there is any corrective measure, it has to be done before the end of the semester. And of course, then, at the end of the semester you have your student evaluation – the standard one." (SL4)
- "…[for evaluation of teaching] there is also some kind of contact hours and then, if you have big classes, the lecturing is… there is a weighting for that. The extent to which the HoD uses

student feedback, you must ask him. I don't know how the HoD deals with someone that has had systemic problems."

The variety of uses (a lack of uniformity) and even the lack of clarity on the part of some of the university teachers in terms of how student feedback was used, could result in perceptions of unfair interpersonal practices (as alluded to by L4) and could influence the morale around teaching, as well as the enhancement of the quality thereof negatively (Leung *et al.*, 2001). If feedback practices are perceived to lack fairness and justice, it may deter university teachers from accepting and responding to the feedback (Leung *et al.*, 2001; Bozalek *et al.*, 2016).

8.5.6 Dealing with the required roles of an academic

In terms of balancing the roles of an academic, three of the SET participants pointed to it as mostly being a challenging experience for them. Only L4 indicated that he found a partial solution to this challenge in shaping his research in such a way that he could integrate his teaching and community interaction with his research work:

> "When it comes to the three roles thing, I actually think it is quite easy to do if you shape your research in a certain way…I teach on the same stuff, so if my students ask me for real-life examples, I have examples from my research, the research is about this and the community engagement happens automatically because I insist on working in a grounded theory way and a participation action way that offers those people the opportunity to engage with the science. So it's a synergistic way of working across the three roles."

For the other three participants challenges seemed to be linked to issues such as heavy teaching loads, insufficient available time and frequently conflicting priorities in the various roles:

- "So to increase the teaching load is just not viable. I think the biggest problem is time." (JL4)
- "It depends on the teaching load…they don't take into account that there are…some of the administrative issues that might take time…especially of you deal with bigger classes, that the time that is allocated, is not realistic. And that makes you not to fulfil the other roles adequately." (SL4)

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- "When you have more activities that you have to do and often conflicting priorities, it makes it more difficult to manage your time…" (P4)

The synergistic approach followed by L4 was suggested by JL4 as a possible recommendation for alleviating the pressures experienced in trying to balance all their roles:

"The ideal would be if you can use your time in such a way that it benefits the community interaction at the same time you do research and at the same time the students learn, but it's very difficult for me to find the projects where I can incorporate all three." (JL4)

P4, on the other hand, was of the opinion that university teachers should be able to choose the area on which they would like to focus at a particular time in their careers:

"So I think you can choose different things that you want to do. And you don't want to do the same thing all the time. But I think, for example, my research effort has not been constant through all those years. And my teaching effort hasn't been constant over the years." (P4)

The suggestions for alleviating the pressures of the various academic roles presented by participants from SET would require institutional changes such as amending the work agreements and performance appraisal processes of university teachers.

8.5.7   The experience of artefact-mediated and object-driven teaching

The objects or motive-driven teaching activities mentioned above translated into various anticipated achievements for the SET university teachers. JL4 was focused on enhancing his teaching in order to enhance the students' learning:

"Yes there is a set of information you have to learn but it's also about, it must also be an enriching experience. You're learning a skill but with that also enriching yourself on different levels".

L4 aspired to teach in creative ways to enhance the learning process for his students. He aimed to stimulate his students to develop critical thinking; the ability to gain insight from scientific literature; and the ability to apply knowledge and skills

to their future professions. He emphasised this point quite clearly: "[We should] still meet the current needs of the industry at the time, with the aim that [the students] should be able to do it by themselves after they leave my class." L4's approach is aligned with the learning-oriented approach as proposed by Ramsden (1992), Entwistle (2000) and Degago & Kaino (2015).

In this process, student learning was not just about memorising facts in order to pass exams, "but it's to have that understanding that you can think, you can internalise things. It's about how we interpret that and apply in your own context" (SL4).

P4's aim was that his "students must learn to think critically and to think for themselves". His teaching practice was therefore directed at moving his students towards taking responsibility for their own learning (also see Felder & Brent, 1996):

> "So if you set your students right: 'You read this yourself and then when you have the tutorial we can discuss it'. And then I make them all answer the questions within the tutorial. So I will go and make sure everybody in that group could talk two or three times in that tutorial. That's a better way of learning. People actually learn themselves."

P4 expected that developing these attributes would help his students to perform efficiently when they eventually enter the job market after completing their studies, as also suggested by Parpala and Lindblom-Ylänne (2007) and Esteban Bara (2014).

> "…they must learn to become organised and they must learn stuff like time management… you need to plan your time so that you can get all your assignments in on time. That's how the real world works. That's how job situations work." (P4)

SL4 saw teaching and learning as a two-edged process which could be described as teaching for learning and learning while you teach:

> "…in terms of teaching, actually, it's two ways. One would be to expect that the lecturer would be teaching the students. But I've always given room for myself to be taught as well, from the students."

SL4's quote pointed to the role of the student voice to inform the professional learning of university teachers. In Section 8.5.3, it is mentioned that all four SET

participants declared that student feedback played an important role in their professional learning about teaching. It has, however, also been shown (see sections 8.5.4 and 8.5.5) that the academic departments of these participants mostly regarded student feedback as a tool for evaluation and did not pay much attention to the value it could have for enhancing teaching quality. Furthermore, the approaches followed in these departments towards the use of student feedback within their evaluation processes were mixed, which could lead to negativity among university teaching staff (Leung *et al.*, 2001; Verquer *et al.*, 2003; Wright, 2005). Despite the challenges that these university teachers faced, as mentioned in the previous sections, it appears that they still remained dedicated to the teaching project.

8.5.8   Summary and discussion: SET

A visual summary of the experiences of university teachers from SET of the role of student feedback in their teaching is provided in Figure 8.4 and discussed in the sections that follow.
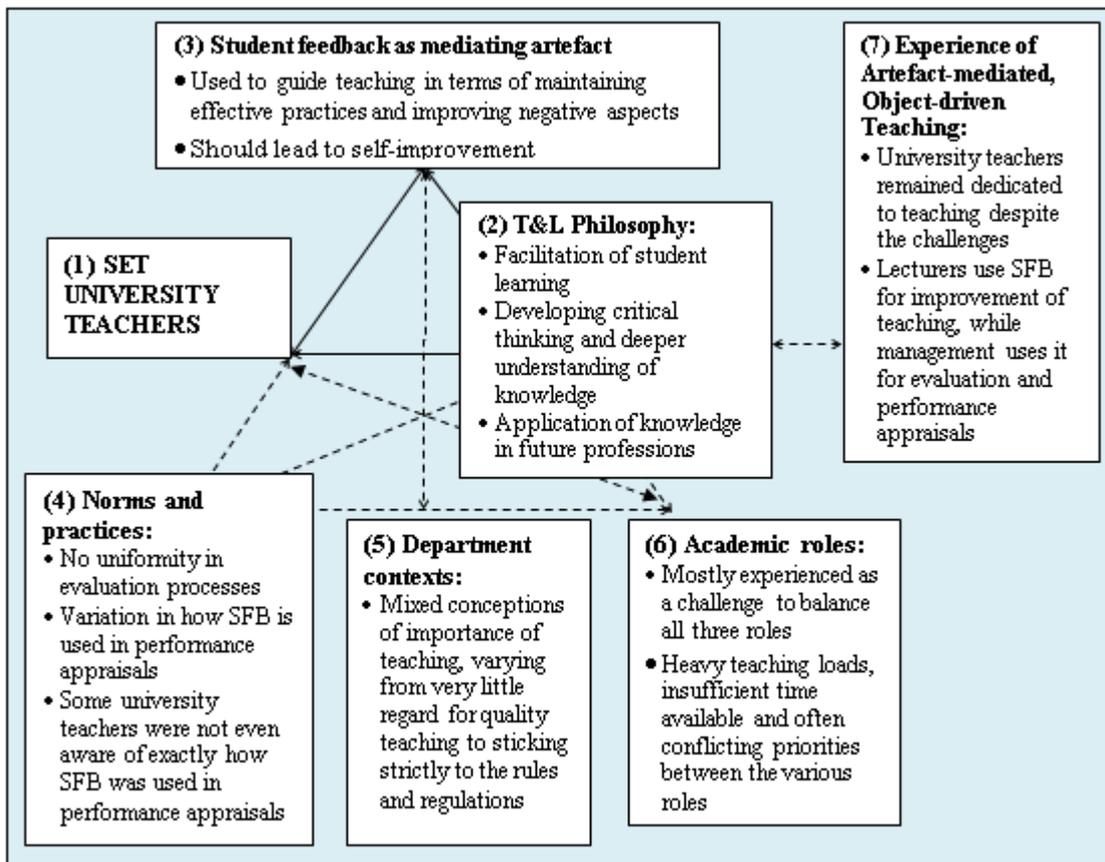
Figure 8.4: Experiences of SET university teachers of the role of student feedback in their teaching

8.5.8.1 What was understood by the concept of student feedback on teaching in the case of SET participants?

The facilitation of student learning, the development of critical thinking and their students taking increased responsibility for their own learning (2) appeared to be the main focus areas that the university teachers in the SET disciplinary cluster (1) wanted to address through their teaching (see also O'Neill & McMahon, 2005). They expected their teaching to deliver students who would be able to show insight in their future professions and what it required, as well as being able to apply their knowledge and skills in professional situations to the benefit of the greater society. To this end, Ten Cate, Snell, Mann and Vermunt (2004:219) agree that teaching should be oriented towards the learning process if the goal of teaching is to facilitate learning. Following this student-centred, learning-oriented approach, their teaching should thus be creative and reflexive to ensure that students' learning needs and

future professional requirements are met (see also Gustafsson & Fagerberg, 2004; Altbach *et al.*, 2009).

Student feedback (3) as a source of information about students' teaching and learning experiences, was thus regarded by these university teachers as a valuable source of information about the effectiveness of their teaching and how to take their teaching forward. They perceived student feedback as helpful for improving their teaching. Student feedback thus served as a professional learning tool for these university teachers (see also Knight *et al.*, 2006).

8.5.8.2 What were the contexts that influenced student feedback on teaching in the case of SET participants?

According to these university teachers, their departments portrayed a variety of views about the importance of the teaching function (5). This could be expected, as this disciplinary cluster straddles three different faculties (see section 8.5.1). In some cases, teaching was regarded as more important to the younger or novice teachers than to their more experienced colleagues, whereas others seemed to be content with rigidly sticking to the rules and standards as laid down by SU or external professional accreditation bodies. Mention was also made of cases where some university teachers simply did not have any regard for teaching as an academic function.

Since there was so much variation in terms of the importance of teaching between the departments from which these participants came, it came as no surprise that the practice for guiding teaching and learning in the departments was also varied (4). Quality assurance of teaching seemed to take on various forms in the departments. The same can be said for the use of student feedback.

A synopsis of the teaching and learning activity system in these departments, as depicted in Figure 8.4, indicated that student feedback was used to address any issues that emerged from the student feedback in order to improve their teaching (3). For management, however, quality assurance of teaching seemed to boil down to the calculation of a mark based on student feedback information to give an indication of the university teachers' teaching effectiveness (4) in most of their departments. One department, however, pointed to using student feedback for

formative, developmental purposes by having focus group interviews with student representatives during the semesters and providing their teachers with the opportunity to respond to any issues that emerged. As in the previous three disciplinary clusters, discrepancies with regard to university teachers' use of student feedback and that of management were thus also found in SET (4).

8.5.8.3 How did SET participants use (or fail to use) student feedback in their teaching practice?

Student feedback was portrayed by the SET participants as useful in terms of improving their teaching practice (3) (also see Hattie & Timperley, 2007). In terms of SU management's approaches to student feedback, however, their perceptions pointed mainly to its use for evaluation and performance appraisal processes (4). Even with regard to the latter there were variations in terms of the processes or procedures that were followed.

Research seemed to have higher value in the case of JL4's department when it came to performance appraisal processes, while the evaluation of teaching seemed to hinge on a quantitative figure deduced from student feedback information. The latter raises concern regarding the effective use of student feedback for improvement of quality teaching (as also averred by Wright, 2005), while L4 also shared serious concern about the performance appraisal processes and the evaluation of teaching as "once-a-year" events with little or no engagement around issues of improvement or development.

SL4's department seemed to engage more actively in the quality assurance processes by actually going around during the semesters and having focus group interviews with student representatives. University teachers then had the opportunity to address issues that arose from these focus group interviews before their formal performance appraisals at the end of the year. It can thus be said that they followed a more formative approach toward the quality assurance of teaching (Chung Sea Law, 2010a).

For P4, however, the increased mechanisms put in place over the years have led to an increased burden of bureaucracy which could have an undesirable effect on university teachers' morale in teaching (Habib, 2013). In this particular case, there

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was also an indication that this university teacher did not have a clear sense of how management used student feedback in the evaluation of teaching, despite his 19 years of teaching in this department.

Once again it emerged that various practices were followed in terms of how student feedback was used for teaching and learning purposes, pointing to possible incongruence in the understanding of various stakeholders regarding the purposes of student feedback (4 and 5). These appeared to be cross-cutting themes in all four disciplinary clusters.

8.5.8.4 How student feedback could be potentially more useful in improving teaching and learning activities at a research-led university

For most of the SET participants, pursuing the requirements of all the academic roles appeared to be a serious challenge (6). The pressures of having to publish, despite the perceived lack of time and resources, frequently left these university teachers feeling disheartened and they often had to sacrifice personal time after hours or during holidays to catch up on their research or other academic responsibilities. This may also result in low teaching morale and, together with teaching being regarded as of lesser value in higher education, could create unwillingness in university teachers to spend too much time on aspects such as analysing student feedback and interrogating one's teaching practice, as it may not be perceived as worthwhile (also see Blackburn & Lawrence, 1995; Wright, 2005).

The narrative data from the SET participants revealed the main issue was not unwillingness or lack of trust, or of understanding, regarding student feedback on the part of the university teachers. The issue seemed to point more strongly to the institution and management's approach in using student feedback mostly for evaluation and performance appraisal purposes (7), as well as the variety of practices that emerged across this cluster. The same inference can be made for the other three disciplinary clusters.

It would thus seem that, if student feedback were to be made more useful as a professional learning tool for enhancing teaching and learning in this disciplinary cluster, and at SU in general, it may be necessary to develop common understanding of the purpose(s) of student feedback; how to analyse and apply it

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effectively; and how to respond in appropriate ways (also see Ballantyne *et al.*, 2000).

8.6 SUMMARY

In this section, a summary is presented of the findings from all four disciplinary clusters. As in previous sections, a visual representation is offered (Figure 8.5), followed by a discussion of these findings.
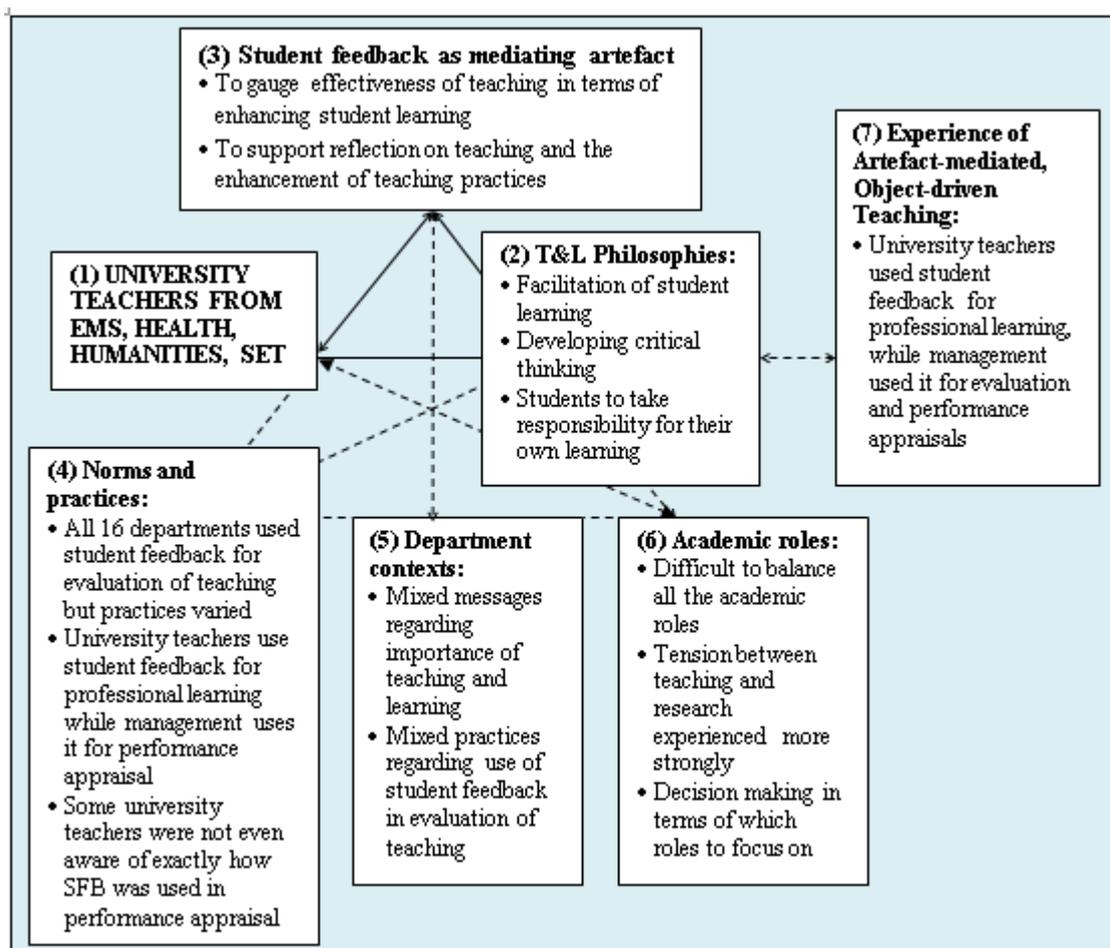

Figure 8.5: Overall summary of the findings across the four disciplinary clusters

8.6.1 What was understood by the concept of student feedback across the four disciplinary clusters?

The participants across all four disciplinary clusters (1) indicated the facilitation of student learning, including the development of critical thinking, as an important function of their teaching (2) (see Figure 8.5). They anticipated their teaching to contribute to students developing deeper understanding of knowledge and for students to take responsibility for their own learning (2). Student feedback was seen

by all of these participants as a professional learning tool that supports them in reflecting about their teaching with the aim of enhancing their teaching practice (3).

8.6.2   What were the contexts that influenced student feedback on teaching across the four disciplinary clusters?

The contexts within which these university teachers practiced their teaching function seemed to vary to a large extent (5). The EMS and Health Sciences environments were shown to have quite a high regard for teaching and perceived it as a crucial academic function, while in the Humanities and SET environments there seemed to be mixed messaging in this regard. On an individual level, though, all 16 participants seemed to agree that the quality and effectiveness of their teaching remained important to them.

Furthermore, all the participants regarded student feedback as a valuable source of information towards informing their teaching (3). If students experienced difficulties in their learning which may be related to their experiences of the teaching, the teachers would analyse that information to determine whether the issues were legitimate and required them to respond. They would therefore take the context in which the teaching occurred into consideration, together with the student feedback information, in order to make informed decisions about taking their teaching forward. Most of their departments, however, used student feedback mainly for evaluation and performance appraisal processes, but in various ways (4). The latter situation often led to mixed messages regarding the purpose of student feedback and particularly the use thereof in performance appraisal processes (5).

The HS disciplinary cluster was the only one that was described as not following an evaluative approach to using student feedback. Their approach towards using student feedback was seen as more formative. The information generated through student feedback was mainly used to improve teaching quality, and was regarded as only one of many sources of information in support of performance appraisal.

8.6.3   How did participants from across the four disciplinary clusters use (or fail to use) student feedback in their teaching practice?

Under these contrasting conditions, these university teachers generally found it difficult to balance all the requirements they were expected to meet as academics

and often had to make choices in terms of where to focus at particular points in time (6). Focusing on the teaching function and student feedback, in particular, seemed to be quite a challenge.

The narrative data from these participants also revealed various approaches to and practices regarding the use of student feedback in teaching and learning processes, especially in terms of using student feedback in evaluation and performance appraisal processes. The most significant contradiction that was found in three of the disciplinary clusters, which was of particular significance to this study, occurred in how student feedback was used for a different purpose by institutional management, compared to the use made of it by university teachers. While these individual university teachers were focused on teaching that would enhance student learning and using student feedback to enhance these processes, their management seemed to focus on issues of performativity. This led to unhappiness and dissatisfaction in many cases.

As mentioned already, only FMHS placed a greater focus on using student feedback as a professional learning tool to enhance teaching practices. FMHS was also the only disciplinary cluster that indicated commitment from the faculty's side to provide faculty-driven capacity building and professional learning opportunities for their teachers to enhance their teaching practice. Student feedback was indicated as playing an important role in the faculty's approaches towards maintaining and improving the quality of their teaching.

8.6.4　How student feedback could be potentially more useful in improving teaching and learning activities at a research-led university

EMS, the Humanities and SET were the three disciplinary clusters in which management used student feedback mainly for evaluative purposes, while the university teachers used the feedback for professional learning and development. The participants from these three clusters also indicated dissatisfaction with the variety of ways in which management applied student feedback in the evaluation processes, some of which clearly violated good practice in using student feedback as part of the teaching and learning process and even transgressed policy directives portrayed in the institutional student feedback policy. Since these incongruent understandings and practices could constrain the optimal use of

student feedback to enhance teaching practice and student learning, it is suggested that the development of shared understanding regarding student feedback may improve its usefulness in these disciplinary clusters.

Since the HS disciplinary cluster did not have such a pertinent focus on the use of student feedback for evaluative purposes, they identified other matters for possible improvement of the usefulness of student feedback. One of their suggestions was that a structure be put in place to provide the option of consultation to those university teachers who may need assistance in analysing, interpreting and responding to their student feedback. Another suggestion was to educate students about how to give constructive feedback that would be more useful for enhancing the quality of teaching and modules.

Chapter 9 provides a synthesis and interpretation of the summaries and discussions of all of the data sources in relation to the applicable literature (as discussed in Chapter 2) and the conceptual framework for this study (as described in Chapter 4). This will allow the drawing of a number of conclusions in response to the research questions initially posed for this study.

CHAPTER 9

SYNTHESIS, CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

9.1   INTRODUCTION

In Chapters 6 to 8, the narrative data from interviews with university teachers at one research-led university, as well as the institutional student feedback policy and other teaching-related policies were analysed and discussed. Here the findings reported in Chapters 6 to 8 will be discussed along the lines of the subsidiary research questions that guided this study (see sections 1.4 and 5.2), with the aim of providing a response to the key research question: **How do university teachers at a research-led university experience the role of student feedback in their teaching?** This question was generated from experience and academic concerns related to being involved as an academic development practitioner and being responsible for the institutional student feedback system at the institution that has been investigated.

Although student feedback is regarded as a powerful source of information in teaching and learning processes (Blair & Valdez Noel, 2014), few recent studies have systematically investigated how university teachers experience student feedback and its influences on their teaching practice (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Student feedback is regularly used in the evaluation of teaching, but many university teachers do not use it to inform or improve their teaching (Golding & Adam, 2016). How university teachers experience the phenomenon of student feedback and the dynamics of the contexts within which their teaching and student feedback practices take place, were thus important issues needing investigation (Ryan, 2015) in order to narrow this existing knowledge gap.

The process of responding to the research question commenced with a discussion of the theoretical perspectives underpinning the practices of student feedback and university teaching within a research-led university context (Chapter 2). Arguments

regarding the relevance of using activity theory as lens of analysis to interrogate the data generated in the empirical part of the study were presented in Chapter 3. Theoretical perspectives explored in Chapter 2 revealed the necessity of engaging with the international, national and local contexts related to this study (Chapter 4), while Chapter 5 was focused on the methodological decisions taken and processes employed to execute the empirical part of the study.

9.2   SYNTHESIS OF FINDINGS AND FACTUAL CONCLUSIONS

This section draws together the data as analysed from three vantage points, namely institutional policies (Chapter 6), the four post levels of the participating university teachers (Chapter 7) and the four disciplinary clusters in higher education (Chapter 8). Table 9.1 provides a summary of how the various findings relate to each other and to the four subsidiary research questions.

The institutional policies relating to teaching and learning, including that of student feedback, were analysed as a point of departure in order to establish how university teachers' experiences of student feedback on their teaching are linked to institutional policy directives. The $\sqrt{}$ symbol indicates positive links between institutional policies and findings from the university teachers' experiences of student feedback according to post levels and disciplinary clusters, while the $\neq$ symbol indicates discrepancies or the absence of such links. A discussion of the synthesis presented in Table 9.1 and factual conclusions based on the findings from Chapters 6, 7 and 8 follow after Table 9.1.

Table 9.1: Synthesis of findings in relation to subsidiary research questions

RESEARCH QUESTIONS	FINDINGS ON INSTITUTIONAL POLICIES	FINDINGS ON FOUR POST LEVELS	FINDINGS ON FOUR DISCIPLINARY CLUSTERS
WHAT IS UNDERSTOOD BY THE CONCEPT OF STUDENT FEEDBACK	• Mainly used as a professional learning tool for support and improvement of teaching, to enhance student learning • Afterwards, for other purposes such as evaluation and quality assurance	• To gauge effectiveness of teaching in terms of meeting student learning needs √ • To enhance teaching practice for enhancement of student learning √	• To gauge effectiveness of teaching in terms of meeting student learning needs √ • To enhance teaching practice for enhancement of student learning √
WHAT THE CONTEXTS THAT INFLUENCE STUDENT FEEDBACK ON TEACHING ARE	• SU committed to providing opportunities to teachers to enhance their teaching practice • Essential to a holistic teaching and learning process • Part of professional practice of university teachers as they reflect on their teaching	• Management used student feedback mainly for evaluation processes ≠ • Diverse and even conflicting practices ≠ • Requirements of various academic roles • Lack of stature of teaching ≠	• Significant differences in how academic departments used student feedback ≠ • One disciplinary cluster used student feedback for improvement of teaching and learning; the other 3 for evaluation √
THE USE (OR FAILURE TO USE) STUDENT FEEDBACK IN UNIVERSITY TEACHING	• Student feedback can provide valuable information with regard to improving teaching quality and evaluation of teaching • Role of context is crucial • SU would be supportive of the teaching function in terms of providing support and resources	• University teachers found student feedback valuable for reflecting on and improving their teaching √ • Management in academic departments used student feedback mainly for evaluation of teaching, neglecting its formative value ≠ • Mixed messages ≠	• Unhappiness in 3 clusters where management used student feedback mainly for evaluation, while university teachers used i t for improvement of teaching and learning ≠ • In Health Sciences teachers had more positive experiences in terms of using feedback for improvement of teaching and learning √
HOW STUDENT FEEDBACK COULD BE POTENTIALLY MORE USEFUL	• University management to provide strategic direction and necessary resources to support academics • Create enabling environment that is supportive, fair and transparent	• Structures for recognition and reward of teaching ≠ • Support teachers to deal with feedback ≠ • Shared understanding ≠ • Educate students about feedback ≠ • Closing the feedback loop ≠	• Developing shared understanding of purpose of feedback ≠ • Support in terms of how to analyse, interpret and apply student feedback results ≠ • FMHS could serve as example of good practice ≠

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9.2.1   What is understood by the concept of student feedback on teaching?

The institutional student feedback policy provided evidence of direction to the student feedback processes at SU (section 6.2.3). This policy states the main purpose of student feedback as the support and promotion of teaching, while the evaluation of teaching and quality assurance are stated as secondary purposes (section 6.2.3). From an institutional point of view, student feedback could thus be regarded **mainly as a professional learning tool** for university teachers to enhance their teaching.

The participating university teachers indicated that their main concern with student feedback related to how their teaching influenced their students' learning (see sections 7.3.1.3, 7.2.3.2, 7.3.5.1 and 8.5.7). The student voice thus constituted a crucial part of the activity system, allowing students' agency in the sense that they could exert influence on the teaching and learning activity system by way of their feedback about their teaching and learning experiences (sections 7.3.4.7 and 8.5.3). These university teachers used such student feedback information to adjust their teaching practice with the aim of enhancing their students' learning. The university teachers therefore also perceived and used student feedback as a **professional learning tool** to enhance their teaching practice.

The conception of student feedback as professional learning tool also links to the notion that university teachers, as professional practitioners, need to **continuously reflect** on their teaching practice, as the learning needs of their students change continuously (sections 7.3.4.7 and 8.6.1; see also Daniels, 2004; Knight *et al.*, 2006). The variety of learning goals and outcomes required in different disciplinary contexts also call for continuous reflection on practice. In EMS and HS the development of skills and techniques related to their applicable professional fields were important objects for the university teachers in these disciplinary clusters (see sections 8.2.2 and 8.3.2). In Humanities and SET the university teachers aspired to supporting students in making personal sense of new knowledge and finding their own voices as scholars, as well as becoming responsible citizens (sections 8.4.2 and 8.5.2). These objects are also in line with the imperatives of developing students' intellectual abilities and aptitudes, as called for by the National Development Plan of 2011 (National Planning Commission, 2011) and the

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Stellenbosch University Strategy for Teaching and Learning (Stellenbosch University, 2013b).

Regarding the issue of how student feedback and its role is understood in the SU context as a research-led institution, one may thus conclude as follows: Selected teachers' understanding of student feedback and the purpose it serves, namely the improvement of their teaching, in general are congruent with what the institutional student feedback policy states as the main purpose of student feedback at the institution.

9.2.2   What are the contexts that influence student feedback on teaching?

In its teaching related policies, SU is portrayed as committed to providing **opportunities to teaching academics to enhance their teaching skills** (section 6.2.4). **Professionalisation** of the teaching role and the enhancement of the stature of teaching are indicated as key priorities at institutional level, together with the expectation that **student feedback could contribute valuable information** towards the educational project (sections 6.2.4 and 6.2.5). The inspected SU policies allow faculties and departments to interpret and implement policy directives as applicable to their particular contexts, within the parameters of policy directives. It therefore seems necessary to consider the dynamics of contextual differences between faculties and departments (sections 6.2.5. and 6.2.7; also see Blair & Valdez Noel, 2014; Ryan, 2015; Golding & Adam, 2016).

The relevant student feedback policy states that, **in addition** to the improvement of teaching, student feedback could also be used for purposes of **evaluation and quality assurance,** but that caution should be taken with how it is used in these processes (Section 6.2.3). The policy clearly states that student feedback should never be used in isolation or without considering the particular teaching and learning contexts of university teachers (section 6.2.3). The narrative data from most university teachers who participated in the study pointed to university management using student feedback during evaluation processes in ways that did not correlate with policy instructions. Examples of such **conflicting practices** included the reduction of student feedback information to a singular number without considering the particular teaching and learning context and using student feedback

as the sole source of information to evaluate university teachers' teaching performance (sections 7.3.1.5; 7.3.3..5 and 8.4.5; also see Leckey & Neil, 2001; Arthur, 2009; Tronto, 2010). Furthermore, mid-level or departmental managers also employ **diverse practices** in applying student feedback during evaluation processes, which generally cause dissatisfaction and unhappiness among teachers (7.3.2.4; 7.3.3.8.ii and 8.2.8.2). However, the **main discrepancy** that emerged was that university managers used student feedback mainly for evaluation purposes, while the university teachers considered student feedback to be more important for improving their teaching (sections 7.3.5.3 and 8.6.5). The perception was that on management level, student feedback was mainly used to evaluate and validate the quality of teaching instead of using it towards capacity-building and the professionalisation of teaching, as promised by institutional policies (sections 7.3.5.3 and 8.6.5; also see Leibowitz, 2014).

Only respondents from the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences (FMHS) indicated that their faculty management mainly used student feedback for the improvement of teaching and learning (sections 8.3.5; 8.3.7 and 8.6.5). Their performance appraisal system would consider student feedback as available additional information, but not as a quantified evaluation of teaching (section 8.3.7). FMHS was also the only faculty that indicated the active functioning of a faculty-driven capacity-building strategy to support their teaching staff in developing and enhancing teaching (section 8.6.3).

The empirical data also indicated that student feedback operated within a context where **tension was experienced between the various academic roles**, especially so between teaching and research (sections 7.3.5.3 and 8.6.3; also see Brew, 1999; Taylor, 2008). The participating teachers expressed a general feeling of lack of support, resources and recognition for teaching, while research seemed to be well supported in terms of resources and recognition (sections 7.3.2.7; 7.3.2.8.ii; 8.2.6 and 8.5.8.4). Another major issue was the lack of time available to adequately meet the requirements of all the various roles of teachers, despite their particular academic contexts (7.3.1.8.iii; 7.3.3.6; 8.2.8.3; and 8.3.6). The fact that teaching also was not perceived to be as rewarding and beneficial as research (sections 7.2.1; 7.3.3.6; and 8.4.7) appeared to be a further constraint in spending sufficient

time on teaching-related matters, including student feedback in many cases (sections 7.3.3.6 and 8.4.6; see also Rice, 2012). Although student feedback was thus seen as a potentially powerful professional learning tool, university teachers did not always adequately reflect on and respond to student feedback issues in ways that could enhance their teaching (7.3.3.8.iv; 7.3.4.5; and 8.4.3). The research-led university context thus seems to have played a significant role in terms of how university teachers respond to student feedback. The tradition at SU of collecting student feedback mostly at the end of modules further hindered the optimal use of and response to student feedback, since the group of students to whom the feedback was applicable, had mostly moved on to the next module by the time the university teachers received the feedback (sections 7.3.2.3; 7.3.4.5 and 8.5.5).

In terms of contextualising student feedback on teaching and its use, one may conclude as follows: The participating university teachers experienced the institutional context and mid-level-management at SU as constraining the use of student feedback for the development and enhancement of teaching. This is despite the promises of support to the professional learning of university teachers as portrayed in institutional policies.

9.2.3   How do university teachers use (or fail to use) student feedback in their professional teaching practice?

While institutional policies promise support for teaching and the improvement of the quality thereof (see sections 6.2.4 and 6.2.8.2), and that student feedback serves as a professional learning tool for teachers as they reflect on their teaching (sections 6.2.2 and 6.2.3), the university teachers reported mixed messages in terms of how they experienced the role of student feedback in their teaching.

From an individual perspective, the 16 participants all indicated strategies for analysing their feedback with the aim of enhancing their teaching practice, such as:
- looking at quantitative scores in the feedback reports as an indication of the effectiveness of a particular aspect of their teaching and identifying which aspects could be maintained and which ought to be adapted;

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- identifying prevalent themes in written comments from their students - the more consistently a theme occurred, the greater the validity attached to the feedback and the more important it became to respond appropriately;
- interpreting the feedback information in terms of the context within which the teaching took place;
- separating personal comments from those comments which are actually significant to the enhancement of teaching and learning.

These strategies thus pointed to student feedback being much more than just a quantitative set of data to 'score' these teachers' teaching performance. Rather, the participants regarded it as important information to enhance their teaching practice so that their students could have better learning experiences (sections 7.2.3.2; 7.3.4.7; 7.5.3.1 and 8.6.1). These strategies, however, also point to certain conditions under which student feedback would become a mediating artefact, such as the perception of validity of the information and its perceived significance to teaching and learning.

Whereas these university teachers used their student feedback scores as indications of areas that may need improvement, the university management was, however, perceived to use it as a summative score of their teaching performance (see section 8.2.5 for example). A summary of the findings according to the post levels of the 16 participants portrayed university teachers' dissatisfaction with the diverse use of student feedback for evaluation and performance appraisal processes as if it cut across the whole of SU (section 7.3.5.3). The analysis of the data according to the disciplinary clusters, however, pointed to the FMHS differing in this regard (section 8.6.3).

The FMHS did not focus on using student feedback mainly for evaluation purposes. In general, the participants from FMHS indicated more positive experiences of how student feedback contributed to the development and improvement of their teaching. In their case, it did not remain an individual act or decision to use student feedback as a professional learning tool, as was mostly the case in the other three disciplinary clusters. The use of student feedback for professional learning was portrayed as a faculty-driven activity within FMHS. They were also the only

disciplinary cluster among the four that had established an active faculty-wide capacity-building strategy to assist their teachers in developing their teaching skills.

I must reiterate here that the participants' dissatisfaction was not primarily directed at the notion of using student feedback for evaluation purposes. Many of them stated that they regarded the evaluation of teaching as a necessary function and part of the holistic teaching and learning process (see examples in sections 7.3.1.8.ii and 7.3.4.5). Their dissatisfaction was much rather directed at management's neglect of the formative value that student feedback could hold, and at the divergent ways in which management applied student feedback during evaluation processes, a situation which was perceived to potentially set a platform for the manipulation of student feedback data and thus unfair practices.

From the discussion above, it can be concluded that the most salient disjuncture was between the university teachers' formative use of student feedback while university managers mainly used it for evaluation of teaching. This perceived disconnect caused most of these university teachers to have rather negative experiences of student feedback on a broader institutional level in terms of the evaluation of their teaching, despite their individual experiences of how student feedback positively influenced the quality of their teaching practice.

9.2.4 How student feedback could be potentially more useful in improving teaching and learning activities at a research-led university

The institutional policies relevant to this study declare that **SU management** have the responsibility to provide **strategic direction** to teaching and learning at the institution, as well as to provide the necessary **resources and support** to university teachers. University management are thus expected to create environments which support and enable university teachers to develop their teaching practice as may be required, while also making this a worthwhile endeavour for them in terms of recognition of and reward for the teaching function.

The experiences shared by most of the participants in this study, however, suggested that **University management and the institutional context at SU were not always experienced as very supportive** towards the professional learning and development of university teachers. The research-led context placed a higher

premium on research, which caused tension with regard to the recognition and reward of teaching. Across the board, participants thus suggested that attention be paid to the **revision of the institutional structures for the recognition and reward of teaching**.

Another issue which arose as significant to most of these participants was the disjuncture between university teachers' approaches towards using student feedback for professional learning, while management used it mainly for evaluation and performance appraisals. In this regard, the suggestion was that **shared understanding regarding the purpose(s) of student feedback** should be developed. Such shared understanding could restrain role-players from applying student feedback in divergent and potentially unfair ways.

A number of the participants also indicated that they would prefer the content of the feedback to provide them with clear direction in terms of how they should adapt their teaching to meet the learning needs of their students. Since the students' verbal feedback was often found to be unclear, non-specific and sometimes inappropriately personal, these university teachers recommended that **students be educated about how to give constructive feedback** that would actually be helpful in terms of improving the teaching, so that it could ultimately improve the students' learning.

Related to this issue was the suggestion to **close the feedback loop** by setting up well facilitated focus group discussions with students at which the university teacher could be present. During these facilitated sessions, the focus ought to be on clarifying issues that would be significant in improving the modules, programmes and teaching and not on personal defences or justifications, either by the students or the university teachers.

Many of the participant university teachers also indicated that they would appreciate the availability of a **consultation structure** to support them in dealing with the student feedback once they receive it. Since student feedback could be susceptible to contextual influences and could sometimes also be very personal in nature, these participants pointed out a need for assistance with analysing, interpreting and responding appropriately to student feedback data.

At this point I would like to point out that, although FMHS did not use student feedback in an evaluative manner, many of their suggestions for the improvement of the usefulness of student feedback correlated with those of participants in the other three disciplinary clusters.

In conclusion, it appeared that most of the suggestions for improving the use of student feedback as a professional learning tool pointed to the need for institutional changes or initiatives to be put in place. It emphasised the responsibility of university management to create an enabling environment for university teachers to make optimal use of student feedback for improvement of their teaching practice.

9.3 CONCEPTUAL CONCLUSIONS AND ADAPTED CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Chapters 2 and 3 provided insights into potential influences on the role of student feedback in university teachers' teaching practice. Reporting of the empirical work that followed further highlighted two important issues: firstly, that the potential role of student feedback in university teaching practice is influenced by more than university teachers' conceptions of teaching, student learning and student feedback and, secondly, that there is a disconnect between institutional policy directives on how teaching and student feedback practices are expected to operate at SU, and how such practices are executed in reality. A number of conceptual conclusions could thus be drawn. These are summarised as follows:

1. **Within a research-led university context, student feedback seems to make a limited contribution to improving the teaching practice of university teachers**. Two significant factors seem to have a constraining influence on the positive link between student feedback and the improvement of teaching:

   - With research being valued more than teaching in terms of academic stature, monetary rewards and academic career advancement (sections 7.3.3.6, 8.2.4 and 8.2.6), it exerts pressure on university teachers to excel in research. University academics thus often have to **choose between the academic functions** of research, teaching and community interaction (section 7.3.1.6, 7.3.2.6; 8.5.6; see also Herman, 2015). Since research is perceived to be the stronger pulling force, teaching and teaching-related

matters such as student feedback are seen to be of lesser value compared to research.

- The research-led context seems to foster a **culture of performativity**, which has less fortunate implications for teaching in a university context where common understanding of what is to be considered good teaching still remains a challenge (sections 7.2.1; 7.3.3.4; 8.4.6 and 8.5.8.4). In the absence of such a common understanding, the evaluation of teaching often results in the use of average numbers based on student feedback to assess teaching performance.

2. **The potential role of student feedback in university teaching practice is influenced by other subsystems within the teaching and learning context**. From the findings in this study, it emerged that the student feedback system historically evolved from a rather informally structured process driven by university teachers themselves for the purpose of developing their own teaching, to one that is centralised and institutionally driven and now also serves a key function in the performance appraisals of university teachers (section 7.3.1.3). In this regard, it thus appears that the student feedback system has been transformed over the years from having an individualised, developmental focus to increasingly becoming more institutionalised and evaluative in purpose. This links to the growing culture of performativity as mentioned previously.

The extent to which student feedback may contribute to the improvement of university teachers' teaching practice, is influenced by the interaction between the university teachers and their respective teaching and learning environments (sections 7.3.1.8.iii; 7.3.4.8.iii; 8.2.4 and 8.4.4). It is within these environments that professional learning opportunities may arise and where student feedback has the potential to become a mediating artefact for professional learning.

The shift of the student feedback system to becoming increasingly focused on performance appraisals seems to have manifested stronger on middle management level at SU, with these managers using student feedback mainly for performance appraisal purposes. The empirical work revealed that, from an individual perspective, university teachers still seem to focus mainly on using student feedback for the development of their teaching. Furthermore, university

teachers' decision-making about using and responding to student feedback, also seemed to be related to where these university teachers found themselves in terms of their academic career trajectories at the time of the study. P3, for example indicated that he learned to accept and prioritise his management responsibilities related to his appointment at the time, while for beginner teachers such as JL1, they still spend much of their time on preparation for improvement of their teaching (section 7.3.4.6). Expansive transformation thus seems to happen differently for individual university teachers.

Professional learning therefore seems to be dependent on whether and how university management practices, student participation, institutional policies, structures and processes within academic units, as well as university teachers themselves, contribute to enable the use of student feedback. A systematic approach which includes all levels of participation in the teaching and learning activity system thus seems to be important for the optimal use of student feedback.

3. **Mid-level university management can significantly influence the extent to which student feedback is used by university teachers for professional learning and the enhancement of teaching.** The empirical work showed that where university management used student feedback mainly for the evaluation of teaching, university teachers were often deterred from being innovative in their teaching to avoid risk to their performance appraisals and career advancement possibilities (sections 7.3.1.3; 7.3.4.5 and 8.5.5). Consideration of the multi-voicedness of the teaching and learning activity system as it pertains to the dual use of student feedback may thus be an important aspect for SU to consider if a shared object regarding the role of student feedback in university teaching is to be achieved (see Figure 3.4 and section 3.3.2).

4. **Conflicting practices in mid-level management's use of student feedback in the evaluation of teaching can create perceptions of unfair practices** (sections 7.3.1.3; 7.3.1.8.iii; 7.3.2.7 and 8.5.5). This results in perceptions of distrust in the use of student feedback for the evaluation of teaching and points to a possible need for a guiding framework for the use of student feedback. It is recognised that, due to the variation in the teaching and learning contexts

across academic departments, a singular, rigid set of rules may not be appropriate to address this issue, but rather that a guiding framework for ethical practices may be useful in promoting better student feedback practices.

These insights have contributed to an adaptation of the original conceptual framework for this study (see section 2.6), which is visually presented in Figure 9.1.
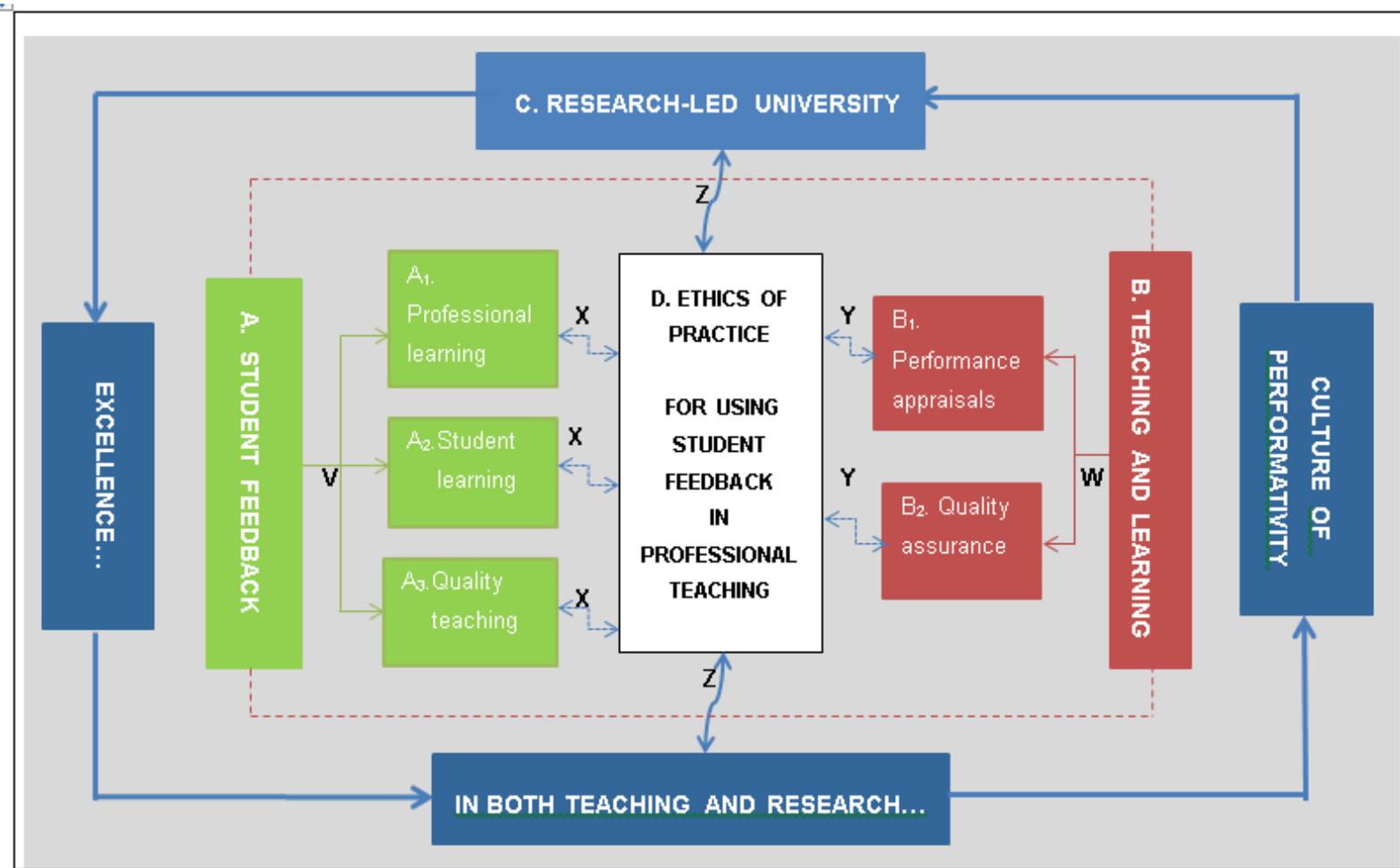
Figure 9.1: Adapted conceptual framework

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Based on the findings of the study, a number of factual and conceptual conclusions were drawn. These conclusions emphasise that a research-led university context such as at SU (C) exerts significant influence on the role that student feedback plays in university teachers' teaching practice (V), as well as on how mid-level managers use student feedback (W). Although section 2.6 has indicated the complexities that are inherent in a research-led university context (Figure 2.4), this study revealed the importance of the role of mid-level managers in effectively using student feedback for the evaluation of teaching. Moreover, the diverse practices employed during such evaluations, which include the processes of performance appraisal and quality assurance of teaching, seem to constrain the usefulness of student feedback as a mediating artefact for professional learning about teaching (W). These diverse and often conflicting practices create possibilities for unfair, and sometimes even unethical, practices in the use of student feedback.

Whereas it was initially stated in section 2.4.1 that ethical concerns form an inherent part of university teachers' professional teaching practice, it now seems even more important that an ethics of practice is required at middle and institutional management level if student feedback is to be promoted as a professional learning tool for the enhancement of teaching ($A_1 - A_3$) and as a tool for the evaluation of teaching ($B_1 - B_2$). At institutional level, principles for such a guiding framework in support of ethical practice, is already encapsulated in institutional policies, but it is in the implementation on faculty and departmental level where conflicting practices arise (Y). These uneven practices point to a need for foregrounding ethical practices at middle-management level in faculties and departments, which include aspects such as developing common understanding regarding the dual purposes of student feedback and guidelines for how to effectively harness student feedback information for these purposes within faculty and departmental contexts. At the level of the individual university teacher (V), where the value of student feedback is experienced mostly in terms of professional learning, such ethical practices may support university teachers to better analyse, interpret and respond to student feedback to enhance student learning (X). In this sense, academic development

practitioners can play a valuable role in providing such support to both university teachers and mid-level managers.

Establishing such a guiding framework for ethical practices on all levels could be beneficial to creating a fair, supportive and transparent teaching and learning environment across an institution – especially a research-led institution (D). Such a supportive environment would improve the use of student feedback as mediating artefact in professional learning about teaching and the enhancement of teaching practice (D). For this to happen, however, another pertinent issue that needs to be addressed at institutional and presumably also at national level, is the elevation of the stature of teaching for teaching to be experienced as worthwhile for career advancement also, and not research only (Z). Raising the stature of teaching could also encourage the formative use of student feedback which, in turn, could be considered as a significant contributor to the professional development of university teachers for the teaching role, and thus the enhancement of their students' learning.

9.4   IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

The findings and conclusions drawn based on the empirical work that was done in this study, point to implications on various levels. These include implications for theory, practice and future research and are discussed next.

9.4.1   Implications for theory

This study found that few studies provide sufficient theoretical foundation for the influence of student feedback on university teaching practice, especially within the context of research-led universities. Student feedback on teaching is more often linked to notions of effective teaching (section 3.3.3), while less research is available that describes the practices and activities which university teachers engage in to transform student feedback information into useful professional learning opportunities. Information on how to facilitate effective teaching practice (section 2.5), particularly in institutions where teaching is not highly regarded, is therefore limited. In the perceived absence of sufficient existing theories regarding the role of student feedback in teaching, the use of activity theory as analytical framework in this study provided a sound theoretical framework for investigating this

issue (section 3.3.3). The theory-praxis gap was thus narrowed by describing **how** student feedback could possibly enable qualitative changes in university teaching practice.

The activity theory framework used in the study proved useful for unearthing practices enacted by university management that constrain the use of student feedback. The contradictions and diversity reported, particularly with regard to the use of student feedback in mid-management evaluation processes, were revealed by studying the links between these practices and how university teachers subsequently experienced and responded to student feedback. These enhanced insights imply the need for a guiding framework for ethical practice across all levels of participation in the teaching and learning activity system as a response to the issue of better understanding and employment of the notion of student feedback on teaching in a research-led university context.

Although the teaching-research nexus has been described widely (section 2.3.1), not much attention has thus far been paid to how this relationship influences the use of student feedback. This study has shed light on how a research-led university context often leads to a culture of performativity (sections 7.3.1.6; 7.3.2.8.ii; 7.3.4.8.ii; 8.6.3) which, in turn, leads to an over-emphasis on quantitative evaluation processes. This poses challenges to the use of student feedback for both evaluation and enhancement of teaching. The study thus highlighted the danger of turning student feedback into a quantitative measure instead of benefitting the professional learning of university teachers.

9.4.2   Implications for practice

The conclusions from this study hold implications for institutional practices, as well as the practices of university teachers and academic development practitioners at SU.

9.4.2.1 Implications for the institution

This study presents the argument that student feedback can play a valuable role in mediating the professional learning of university teachers, but that institutional context plays an important role in how university teachers approach the

enhancement of their teaching practice (section 2.6). Universities thus have the responsibility to ensure enabling environments which will support the use of student feedback towards this purpose. The findings and conclusions from this study point to the following aspects that would require attention at an institutional level:

- Firstly, common understanding regarding the dual purpose of student feedback across all institutional levels so as to encourage fair, transparent and supportive practices is preferable. The development of a guiding framework for the ethical use of student feedback may help to clarify what the institution regards as good teaching and to set a broad set of flexible criteria to apply in various faculty or departmental contexts.

- Secondly, elevating the stature of teaching and the promotion of recognition and reward for teaching seem to be of particular importance within a research-led university context, where teaching is considered as of lesser value. This elevation in stature is required if university teachers at a research-led university are to be encouraged to put effort into enhancing the quality of their teaching and using student feedback to this effect.

- Thirdly, the institution may consider the introduction of support structures through which university teachers could consult with their departmental managers as well as teaching and learning experts regarding appropriate ways to deal with and respond to student feedback, especially at faculty and departmental levels. The availability of appropriate consultation could enhance the usefulness of student feedback.

- Fourthly, closing the feedback loop by informing students about the use and effect of their feedback, as well as educating students on how to provide constructive feedback that would be useful for enhancing teaching practice, could also contribute to enhancing the quality of student feedback practices.

9.4.2.2   Implications for university teachers

The study has shown that university teachers experience significant challenges in balancing all the roles required of academics. Integration of the functions of teaching, research and community interaction may be an appropriate endeavour to overcome these challenges (sections 7.3.1.6; 7.3.2.6; 8.2.6; 8.4.6). This implies that university teachers also have the responsibility to use their own knowledge and

skills to alleviate the challenges that they face as academics. Implicit here is the notion that university teachers have individual agency to make decisions and to generate innovative ways of integrating their academic roles. They thus have power of agency to take decisions that may improve their own teaching circumstances to some extent (sections 3.3; 7.3.1.8.ii; 7.3.2.1; also Roth & Lee, 2007).

The agency of university teachers also allows them to actively engage with their student feedback information and use it to reflect on how to adapt or transform their teaching practice for the sake of enhancing students' learning experiences. This implies willingness on the part of university teachers to develop effective processes for analysing and interpreting student feedback information and to ascertain responses that would effectively inform and enhance their teaching practice. It furthermore implies that institutional criteria for the recognition and promotion of university teachers should be clear and firmly based on teaching proficiency.

9.4.2.3   Implications for academic development practitioners

The relational nature of the teaching and learning activity system has been established by relevant literature as well as the findings and conclusions of this study. It clearly shows the need for academic development practitioners to be duly aware of the systemic nature of the role of student feedback in university teaching practice. This implies that academic development practitioners, in engaging with individual university teachers, need to consider the broader departmental, faculty and institutional contexts as these pertain to the professional learning of such university teachers.

Academic development practitioners could also play a strategic role in assisting university managers to properly engage with student feedback for the purposes of professional learning and the evaluation of teaching. Academic development practitioners could assist in interpreting institutional policy directives in ways that would accommodate faculty and departmental contexts. Based on the findings regarding management's diverse approaches to student feedback, academic development practitioners may initially have to take the lead in developing faculty and departmental understanding regarding effective responses to student feedback. This may require academic development practitioners to work close to or within

faculty-based contexts, since this would help to develop clearer understanding of the particular faculty contexts (see also McAlpine & Harris, 2002; Blackmore & Blackwell, 2006; Gibbs, 2013).

9.4.3   Implications for future research

This study took the lead in investigating how university teachers at one research-led university experienced and engaged with student feedback. The findings of the study and the conclusions that were drawn reveal insights into student feedback activities on various levels, thereby generating deeper understanding of the contextual and relational nature of the student feedback process at a research-led institution. Although these insights strengthen the body of knowledge pertaining to student feedback, a number of issues that may provide for a future research agenda in this field of inquiry remain.

- Firstly, it remains unclear how mid-level management at a research-led university conceive of the role of student feedback in educational management. This study was focused on the role of student feedback in university teaching practice and thus on the university teacher perspective. Studies focusing on the educational management perspective may generate valuable insights in terms of either confirming or refuting the perceptions of university teachers as explored in this study.

- Secondly, instituting a guiding framework for ethical practices in student feedback on teaching, applicable to various faculty and departmental contexts, requires further exploration. An ethics of practice approach links to issues of professional accountability and moral principles and may require substantive dialogue and consideration of the many voices involved in university teaching and learning.

- Thirdly, further research into how student feedback could contribute effectively to the recognition and reward of teaching may prove valuable in enhancing the usefulness of student feedback for improving teaching and learning activities at a research-led university. This may help to arrive at clearer options for academic managers about how to apply student feedback more effectively in performance appraisal processes as well as the professional learning of university teachers. This could consequently attribute more value to student

feedback and to teaching broadly, also adding to the potential of raising the stature of teaching at research-led universities.

- Fourthly, now that this study has pointed more prominently towards links between student feedback, university teaching practice and the research-led university context, further studies using the third generation of activity theory may reveal even better conceptual tools for understanding the network(s) of interaction between student feedback as a professional learning tool and student feedback for the evaluation of teaching.

9.5   CRITIQUE OF THE STUDY

This study was undertaken at one research-led university only, which goes hand in hand with the limitations of typical institutional case study research designs. The replication of this study at other research-led universities may, however, provide comparative data which could strengthen the understanding of the role of student feedback in teaching at research-led universities. Furthermore, the study revealed a number of complex issues at play within the South African higher education context, particularly pertaining to research-led universities. Within the boundaries of this study, these complexities could unfortunately not all be explored in sufficient depth. However, the use of activity theory as theoretical framework could prove valuable in further research to highlight these significant societal and educational issues.

As mentioned in section 9.4.3, this study only focused on a university teacher perspective and did not include the perspectives of mid-level managers or students. Including management and students may have provided added insights into the role of student feedback. Another possible angle of investigation would have been to analyse student feedback data for each of the teacher participants. This, however, would have required a longitudinal approach to the study and an unravelling of the nature of student feedback content, which was not the aim of this study.

9.6   CONTRIBUTION OF THE STUDY

The study confirmed the value that student feedback has as a professional learning tool for individual university teachers. The study, however, revealed the important potential influence of a research-led university context on the role of student

feedback in university teaching practice. It further brought to the fore the crucial role of mid-level management as a potentially enabling or constraining factor in the use of student feedback for the enhancement of teaching practice. The foregrounding of an ethics of practice approach towards the use of student feedback at research-led universities has also been instructive in strengthening the theoretical foundations of student feedback as a professional learning tool. It can thus be stated that this study arrived at plausible answers to the research questions that were initially stated. As such, it is hoped that this study may have made a small but important contribution towards better understanding of the contextual and relational nature of student feedback and what would be required at research-led universities if student feedback were to be promoted as a professional learning tool for the improvement of university teaching.

9.7   RESEARCHER'S PERSONAL REFLECTION

I started on this PhD journey six years ago with the hope of finding answers to the question that was continuously mulling over in my mind since I started managing the student feedback system at SU: "What happens with the student feedback data or reports when it reaches university teachers and their line management?" I was particularly interested in whether university teachers actively made use of the data to improve the quality of the teaching and learning experiences of their students. Initially I felt strongly that university teachers' use of student feedback was mainly embedded in their conceptions of teaching and learning and thus their personal reflections upon their teaching. This conviction caused me to dwell on the theory of transformative learning for a long time. This approach, however, did not sufficiently address my questions about how university teachers at SU engaged with the institutional student feedback information they received from their students.

It was only when I came across the activity theory framework that my thoughts and arguments began to take shape. I do not regret the time I was 'stuck' on the theory of transformative learning, as this was part of the process of refining my thoughts around the purpose and approach of this study. The activity theory framework also allowed me to develop an appreciation for university teachers as individuals and the challenges that they face as they carve out their professional identities as academics with various roles at a particular research-led university.

Furthermore, the case study research design followed in this study enabled me to delve into the phenomenon of student feedback and unravel some of its complexities. This study has made me realise that higher education as a field of research is much more complex than I initially thought, and particularly so in the case of student feedback. The influence of context, ranging from the international to local context, can simply not be denied nor ignored. This study has also highlighted the importance of listening to the student voice and the need for the University to achieve congruence in its institutional messaging to university teachers regarding the role and use of student feedback in teaching and learning related processes.

Also, the search for appropriate literature, together with the reading and writing for this dissertation, has helped me to develop research and analytical skills, but moreover, to gain a deeper understanding of a complex phenomenon such as the role of student feedback in university teaching practice within the particular context of a research-led university. I have also learned that the research process, though it may be very challenging and overwhelming at some points, is much more important than the product that is eventually delivered in the form of a dissertation. Overall, I believe that this study has helped me to grow academically, professionally and as a person as well. I have not only become more knowledgeable on the topic of student feedback, nor just gained research skills; I have also gained confidence in using this knowledge and skills to contribute to my practice as academic development practitioner and scholar.

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LIST OF ANNEXURES

Annexure 1: Approval by the Ethics Committee for Human and Social Sciences at SU to do this research among staff at the SU

UNIVERSITEIT·STELLENBOSCH·UNIVERSITY
jou kennisvennoot · your knowledge partner

29 March 2010

Tel.: 021 - 808-9183
Enquiries: Sidney Engelbrecht
Email: sidney@sun.ac.za

Reference No. 271/2010

Mrs M Petersen
Department of Curriculum Studies
University of Stellenbosch
STELLENBOSCH
7602

Mrs M Petersen

APPLICATION FOR ETHICAL CLEARANCE

With regards to your application, I would like to inform you that the project, *The role of student feedback in reflective university teaching,* has been approved on condition that:

1. The researcher/s remain within the procedures and protocols indicated in the proposal;
2. The researcher/s stay within the boundaries of applicable national legislation, institutional guidelines, and applicable standards of scientific rigor that are followed within this field of study and that
3. Any substantive changes to this research project should be brought to the attention of the Ethics Committee with a view to obtain ethical clearance for it.

We wish you success with your research activities.

Best regards

MRS. MALÉNE FOUCHÉ
Manager: Research Support

Afdeling Navorsingsontwikkeling · Division of Research Development
Privaat Sak/Private Bag XI · 7602 Stellenbosch · Suid-Afrika/South Africa
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Annexure 2: Institutional student feedback questionnaires for undergraduate modules

Universiteit Stellenbosch University

VOORGRAADSE MODULE - VRAELYS / UNDERGRADUATE MODULE - QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Maak u merke slegs binne die grense van die blokkies, bv. ☒
2. Gebruik 'n donker potlood of swart pen.

1. Make your marks only within the boundaries of the boxes, e.g. ☒
2. Use a dark pencil or black pen.

MODULE   bv. Duits 178 / e.g. German 178 : _____

i.	Geslag / Gender	Manlik / Male ☐	Vroulik / Female ☐
ii.	Huistaal / Home language	Afrikaans ☐ English ☐	isiXhosa ☐ Ander / Other ☐
iii.	My Matriekgemiddeld val in die interval: / My Matriculation average falls in the interval:	50-59 ☐ 60-69 ☐ 70-79 ☐	80-89 ☐ 90+ ☐
iv.	Dui aan hoe gereeld jy klas bywoon. / Indicate how often you attend class.	Selde / Rarely ☐ Gereeld / Regularly ☐	Altyd / Always ☐

v.	Moeilikheidsgraad van module, relatief tot ander modules wat jy hierdie jaar gevolg het, was... / Module difficulty, relative to other modules you followed this year, was...	Baie maklik / Very easy ☐ Medium ☐ Baie moeilik / Very difficult ☐	Maklik / Easy ☐ Moeilik / Difficult ☐ N.v.t. / N.A. ☐
vi.	Werkslading van module, relatief tot ander modules wat jy hierdie jaar gevolg het, was... / Module workload, relative to other modules you followed this year, was...	Baie laag / Very low ☐ Laag / Low ☐ Medium ☐	Hoog / High ☐ Baie hoog / Very high ☐ N.v.t. / N.A. ☐
vii.	Die tempo in hierdie module was... / The pace in this module was...	Baie stadig / Very slow ☐ Stadig / Slow ☐ Medium ☐	Vinnig / Fast ☐ Baie vinnig / Very fast ☐ N.v.t. / N.A. ☐
viii.	Gemiddelde aantal ure per week wat jy buite die klas aan hierdie module bestee het. / Average number of hours per week spent outside the class on this module.	1-2 ☐ 3-4 ☐ 5-6 ☐	7-8 ☐ 8+ ☐ N.v.t. / N.A. ☐
ix.	My vlak van belangstelling in hierdie module voordat ek daarmee begin het, was... / My level of interest in this module before the start of the module was...	Baie laag / Very low ☐ Laag / Low ☐ Medium ☐	Hoog / High ☐ Baie hoog / Very high ☐ N.v.t. / N.A. ☐
x.	My vlak van belangstelling teen die einde van die module was... / My level of interest in this module at the end of the module was...	Baie laag / Very low ☐ Laag / Low ☐ Medium ☐	Hoog / High ☐ Baie hoog / Very high ☐ N.v.t. / N.A. ☐

1. Beoordeel die module op 'n skaal van 1 tot 5:
Assess the module on a scale from 1 to 5:

		Verskil sterk / Disagree strongly	Verskil / Disagree	Neutraal / Neutral	Stem saam / Agree	Stem volkome saam / Agree Strongly	N.V.T. / N.A.
i.	Die module-uitkomstes is aan my gekommunikeer. / The module outcomes were communicated to me.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
ii.	Die module het die gestelde uitkomste bereik. / The module achieved its stated aims.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
iii.	Die relevansie van hierdie module tot die program was vir my duidelik. / I was able to see the relevance of this module to my programme.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
iv.	Die assessering (bv. toetse, werkopdragte) in hierdie module het my gehelp om te leer. / Assessment (e.g. tests, assignments) in this module assisted me to learn.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
v.	Ek het voldoende terugvoer oor my werk in hierdie module ontvang. / I received adequate feedback on my work in this module.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
vi.	Duidelike riglyne vir alle assesserings-take is in hierdie module gestel. / There were clear guidelines for all the assessment tasks in this module.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
vii.	Die bronne vir leer wat vir hierdie module voorsien is (bv. die handboek) het my gehelp om effektief te leer. / The learning resources provided for this module (e.g. the textbook) helped me to learn effectively.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
viii.	Die keuse van temas en voorbeelde was relevant tot die module-uitkomste. / The choice of themes and examples were relevant to the module outcomes.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
ix.	Die fisiese onderrig- en leerruimtes (bv. klaskamergroottes, beligting, ens.) wat vir hierdie module gebruik is, was voldoende. / The teaching and learning spaces (e.g. classroom size, lighting, etc.) used for this module was adequate.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
x.	Die module was goed gestruktureerd. / This module was well structured.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
xi.	Hierdie module het my vaardighede in analise en oplossing van probleme help ontwikkel. / This module has helped me develop my skills in analysis and problem solving.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

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2.	Addisionele kommentaar / *Additional commentary*	
i.	Wat was die beste aspekte van hierdie module? *What were the best aspects of this module?*	
ii.	Watter aspekte van hierdie module kan verbeter? *What aspects of this module need improving?*	

DOSENT / *LECTURER* : ....

1.	Beoordeel die dosent se onderrig op 'n skaal van 1 tot 5: *Assess the lecturer's teaching on a scale of 1 to 5:*	Verskil sterk *Disagree strongly*	Verskil *Disagree*	Neutraal *Neutral*	Stem saam *Agree*	Stem volkome saam *Agree Strongly*	N.v.t. *N.A.*
i.	Die dosent was entoesiasties. / *The lecturer was enthusiastic.*	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
ii.	Die dosent se verduidelikings was duidelik. *The lecturer's explanations were clear.*	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
iii.	Die lesings was goed gestruktureerd / *Lectures were well structured.*	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
iv.	Die dosent was goed voorbereid. / *The lecturer was well prepared.*	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
v.	Terugvoer op take en toetse het stiptelik plaasgevind. *Feedback on tasks and tests was given promptly.*	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
vi.	Studente is aangemoedig om deel te neem aan module (bv. vrae te vra, voorstelle te maak). / *Students were encouraged to participate during the module (e.g. to ask questions, make suggestions).*	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
vii.	Studente het betekenisvolle terugvoer ontvang. *Students received meaningful feedback.*	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
viii.	Die dosent was toeganklik vir studente. *The lecturer was accessible to students.*	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
ix.	Die dosent was intellektueel stimulerend. *The lecturer was intellectually stimulating.*	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
x.	Die dosent het my belangstelling in die onderwerp laat verdiep. *The lecturer has increased my interest in the subject.*	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
xi.	Studente in hierdie module is regverdig en met respek behandel. *In this module, students were treated fairly and with respect.*	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

2.	Addisionele kommentaar / *Additional commentary*	
i.	Aspekte van dosent se onderrigstyl wat behou moet word. / *Aspects of the lecturer's teaching style that should be maintained.*	
ii.	Aspekte van dosent se onderrigstyl wat verbeter kan word. / *Aspects of the lecturer's teaching style that need improvement.*	

TAAL / *LANGUAGE*

i.	Is jy tevrede met die taal van onderrig in die klas? *Are you satisfied with the language of tuition in the class?*	Ja / Yes ☐	Gedeeltelik / Partially ☐	Nee / No ☐	Neutraal / Neutral ☐
	Motiveer asseblief jou antwoord by (i). *Please motivate your answer at (i).*				
ii.	Is die taal van onderrig in die klas, na jou mening, in lyn met taalspesifikasies vir die betrokke module? / *In your opinion, is the language of tuition in the class in line with the language specification for the particular module?*	Ja / Yes ☐	Soms / Sometimes ☐	Nee / No ☐	Weet nie / Don't know ☐
iii.	Wat is die beste aspek ten opsigte van die taal van onderrig in die klas? / *What is the best aspect with regard to the language of tuition in the class?*				
iv.	Op welke maniere sou jy taalgebruik in die klas anders wou sien? / *In which ways would you prefer to see language used differently in class?*				

GEHEELINDRUK: Aan die hand van jou terugvoer op die voorafgaande items, gee asseblief jou geheelindruk van die module en jou deurdagte geheelindruk van die kwaliteit van die dosent se onderrig deur 'n persentasie toe te ken.
GENERAL IMPRESSION: Based on your feedback on the previous items, give your general impression of the module and your considered general impression of the quality of the lecturer's teaching expressed as a percentage.

Persentasie Module / *Percentage Module* ☐☐☐ %   **Persentasie Dosent / *Percentage Lecturer*** ☐☐☐ %

Annexure 3: Template of processed student feedback reports

Fakulteit AgriWetenskappe   **Faculty of AgriSciences**

Module / *Module* :	0
Departement:	0
Dosent / *Lecturer*:	
Datum / *Date* :	00-01-1900

Sentrum **SOL** Onderrig en Leer

Aantal respondente: Module *Number of respondents: Module*	0	Aantal respondente: Dosent *Number of respondents: Lecturer*	0

Biografiese data / *Biographical Data*

	Manlik/*Male*	Vroulik/*Female*
Geslag	0	0
Gender	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!

	Afrikaans	Engels/*English*	IsiXhosa	Ander/*Other*
Moedertaal	0	0	0	0
Mother tongue	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!

	50-59%	60 - 69%	70 - 79%	80-89%	90%+
Matriek-gemiddeld	0	0	0	0	0
Matriculation average	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!

	Selde *Rarely*	Minder gereeld *Less regularly*	Altyd *Always*
Dul aan hoe gereeld jy klas bywoon	0	0	0
Indicate how often you attend class	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!

	1-2 ure / *hours*	3 - 4 ure / *hours*	5 - 6 ure / *hours*	7 - 8 ure / *hours*	9+ ure / *hours*
Gemiddelde aantal ure per week buite klas spandeer aan module	0	0	0	0	0
Average number of hours per week spent outside the class on this module	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!

	Ja/ *Yes*	Gedeeltelik/ *Partially*	Nee/ *No*	Neutraal/ *Neutral*
Tevrede met die taal van onderrig?	0	0	0	0
Satisfied with the language of tuition?	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!

	Ja/ *Yes*	Soms / *Sometimes*	Nee/ *No*	Weet nie / *Don't know*
Is die taal van onderrig in lyn met taalspesifikasies vir die module?	0	0	0	0
Is the language of tuition in the class in line with the language specification for the module?	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!

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Module / *Module*

	Gemiddeld Average [1]	Stadig *Slow*	Medium	Vinnig *Fast*	N.v.t. *N/A*
Tempo van die module:	#DIV/0!	0	0	0	0
Pace in this module:		#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	

	Gemiddeld Average [2]	Maklik *Easy*	Medium	Moeilik *Difficult*	N.v.t. *N/A*
Moeilikheidsgraad van module, relatief tot ander modules hierdie jaar gevolg:	#DIV/0!	0	0	0	0
Module difficulty, relative to other modules followed this year, was:		#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	

	Gemiddeld Average [3]	Laag *Low*	Medium	Hoog *High*	N.v.t. *N/A*
Werklading van module, relatief tot ander modules hierdie jaar gevolg:	#DIV/0!	0	0	0	0
Module workload, relative to other modules followed this year, was:		#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	
My vlak van belangstelling in hierdie module, voordat ek daarmee begin het, was:	#DIV/0!	0	0	0	0
My level of interest in this module, before the start of this module was:		#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	
My vlak van belangstelling in hierdie module teen die einde van die jaar was:	#DIV/0!	0	0	0	0
My level of interest in this module, towards the end of the year was:		#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	#DIV/0!	

(1) **Gemiddelde tempo gebaseer op 'n skaal van 1 tot 5 (1 = Baie stadig en 5 = Baie vinnig):**
   Baie stadig en Stadig is saam gegroepeer as Stadig en Vinnig en Baie vinnig as Vinnig.
   Average pace based on scale 1 to 5 (1 = Very slow and 5 = Very fast)
   Very slow and Slow are grouped as Slow and Fast and Very Fast as Fast.

(2) **Gemiddelde moeilikheidsgraad gebaseer op 'n skaal van 1 tot 5 (1 = Baie maklik en 5 = Baie moeilik):**
   Baie maklik en Maklik is saam gegroepeer as Maklik, en Moeilik en Baie moeilik as Moeilik.
   Average difficulty based on scale 1 to 5 (1 = Very easy and 5 = Agree strongly):
   Very easy and Easy are grouped as Easy, and High and Very High as High.

(3) **Gemiddelde gebaseer op 'n skaal van 1 tot 5 (1 = Baie laag en 5 = Baie hoog):**
   Baie laag en Laag is saam gegroepeer as Laag en Hoog en Baie hoog as Hoog.
   Average based on scale 1 to 5 (1 = Very Low and 5 = Very High):
   Very Low and Low are grouped as Low and High and Very High as High.

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Module / Module :	0	00-01-1900

	Gemiddeld / Average (4)	Getal / Number			
		Verskil Disagree	Neutraal/ Neutral	Stem saam Agree	N.v.t. N/A
1. Die module uitkomste is aan my gekommunikeer *The module outcomes were communicated to me.*	#####	0	0	0	0
2. Die module het gestelde uitkomste bereik. *The module achieved its stated aims.*	#####	0	0	0	0
3. Die relevansie van hierdie module tot die program was vir my duidelik. *I was able to see the relevance of this module to my programme.*	#####	0	0	0	0
4. Die assessering (bv toetse, werksopdragte) in hierdie module het my gehelp om te leer. *Assessment (e.g. test, assignments) in this module assisted me to learn.*	#####	0	0	0	0
5. Ek het voldoende terugvoer oor my werk in hierdie module ontvang. *I have received adequate feedback on my work in this module.*	#####	0	0	0	0
6. Duidelike riglyne vir alle assesseringstake is in hierdie module gestel. *There were clear guidelines for all assessment tasks in this module.*	#####	0	0	0	0
7. Die bronne vir leer wat vir hierdie module voorsien is (bv die handboek), het my gehelp om effektief te leer. *The learning resources provided for this module (e.g. the textbook) helped me to learn effectively.*	#####	0	0	0	0
8. Die keuse van temas en voorbeelde was effektief t.o.v. module-uitkomste. *The choice of topics and examples were effective w.r.t. module outcomes.*	#####	0	0	0	0
9. Die fisiese onderrig- en leerruimtes (bv klaskamer groottes, beligting) wat vir hierdie module gebruik is, was voldoende. *The teaching and learning spaces (e.g. classroom size, lightning) uses for this module were adequate.*	#####	0	0	0	0
10. Die module was goed gestruktureerd. *The module was well structured.*	#####	0	0	0	0
11. Hierdie module het my vaardighede in kritiese denke, analise en oplossing van probleme, kommunikasie ens. help ontwikkel. *This module has helped me develop my skills in critical thinking, analysis and problem solving, communication, etc.*	#####	0	0	0	0

(4) Terugvoer oor module op 'n skaal van 1 tot 5 (1= Verskil sterk en 5 = Stem volkome saam).
   In die tabel hierbo is Verskil sterk en Verskil saam gegroepeer as Verskil en Stem saam en Stem volkome saam as Stem saam.
   Feedback on module on a scale of 1 to 5 (1= Disagree strongly and 5 = Agree strongly)
   In the table above Disagree strongly and Disagree are grouped as Disagree, and Agree and Agree Strongly as Agree.

Geheelindruk van module / *General impression of module* (2)			
Gemiddelde persentasie / *Average percentage*	#####		
Verspreiding van module punt *Distribution of module mark*	Bo gem. *Above avg.*	Gem. *Avg.*	Onder gem. *Below avg.*
Bo gemiddeld >=75%, Gemiddeld 50-74%, Onder gemiddeld <50% *Above average >=75%, Average 50 - 74%, Below average <50%*	0	0	0

293

4

Dosent / Lecturer:					
0					

00-01-1900

		Gemiddeld (5)	Getal / Number			
			Verskil Disagree	Neutraal/ Neutral	Stem saam Agree	N.v.t. N.A.
1.	Die dosent was entoesiasties. *The lecturer was enthusiastic.*	#####	0	0	0	0
2.	Die dosent se verduidelikings was duidelik. *The lecturer's explaining was clear.*	#####	0	0	0	0
3.	Die lesings was goed gestruktureerd. *Lectures were well structured.*	#####	0	0	0	0
4.	Die dosent was goed voorberei. *The lecturer was well prepared.*	#####	0	0	0	0
5.	Terugvoer op take en toetse het stiptelik plaasgevind. *Feedback on task and test was given promptly.*	#####	0	0	0	0
6.	Studente is aangemoedig om deel te neem aan module (bv vrae vra, voorstelle maak). *Students were encouraged to participate in module (e.g. to ask questions, make suggestions)*	#####	0	0	0	0
7.	Studente het betekenisvolle terugvoer ontvang. *Students received meaningful feedback.*	#####	0	0	0	0
8.	Die dosent was toeganklik vir studente. *The lecturer was accesible to students.*	#####	0	0	0	0
9.	Die dosent was intellektueel stimulerend. *The lecturer was intellectually stimulating.*	#####	0	0	0	0
10.	Die dosent het my belangstelling in die onderwerp laat verdiep. *The lecturer has increased my interest in the subject.*	#####	0	0	0	0
11.	Studente in hierdie module is regverdig en met respek behandel. *In this module, students were treated fairly and with respect.*	#####	0	0	0	0

(5) Terugvoer oor dosent op 'n skaal van 1 tot 5 (1= Verskil sterk en 5 = Stem volkome saam):
 In die tabel hierbo is Verskil sterk en Verskil saam gegroepeer as Verskil en Stem saam en Stem volkome saam as Stem saam.
 *Feedback on lecturer on a scale of 1 to 5 (1= Disagree strongly and 5 = Agree strongly).*
  In the table above Disagree strongly and Disagree are grouped as Disagree, and Agree and Agree Strongly as Agree.

Geheelindruk van dosent / *General impression of lecturer*			
Gemiddelde persentasie / *Average percentage*	#####		
Verspreiding van dosente punt *Distribution of lecturer mark*	Bo gem. *Above avg.*	Gem. *Avg.*	Onder gem. *Below avg.*
Bo gemiddeld >=75%, Gemiddeld 50-74%, Onder gemiddeld <50% *Above average >=75%, Average 50 - 74%, Below average <50%*	0	0	0

294

5

Averages for
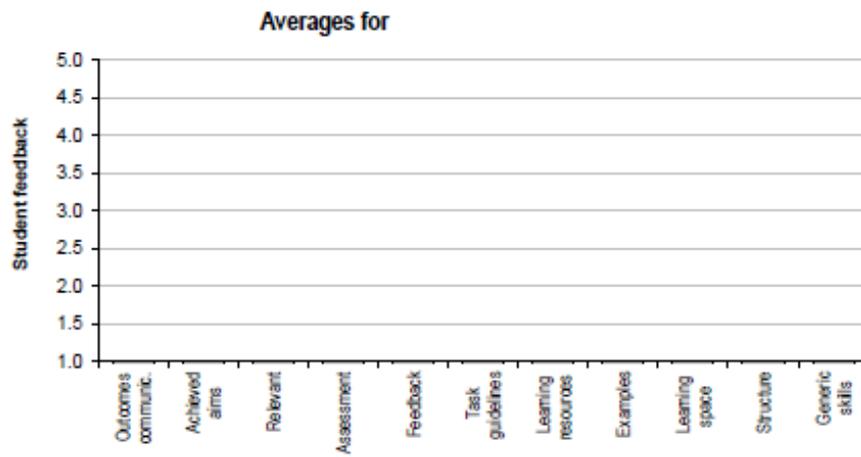
Aantal respondente = 0

Averages for
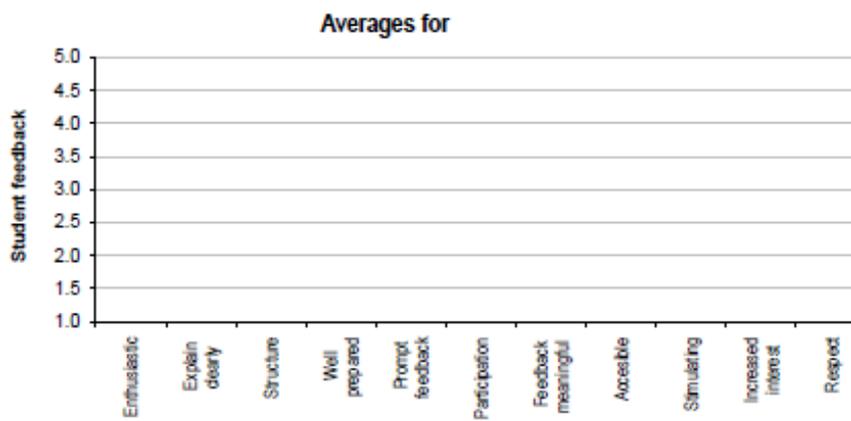
Aantal respondente = 0   Number of respondents small; handle results with caution

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8

Wat was die beste aspekte van die module ?
What were the best aspects of the module ?

-

9

Watter aspekte van die module kan verbeter?
What aspects of the module need improvement?

-

10

Aspekte van dosent se onderrigstyl wat behou moet word.
Aspects of the lecturer's teaching that should be maintained

-

11

Aspekte van dosent se onderrigstyl wat verbeter kan word.
Aspects of the lecturer's teaching that need improvement.

-

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Annexure 4: The interview schedule

Opening questions

- How were you first introduced to student feedback? *[historicity]*
- What do you remember about the most recent student feedback report (or previous feedback reports) that you received from CTL?
- How did that make you feel and what did you do about it? *[object-oriented activity?]*
- Do you get feedback on your teaching from any other sections/sources? How do you make use of that in your teaching? *[community eg colleagues, peers, CTL staff etc; multivoicedness; various artefacts eg CATS;class visits etc]*

Subsidiary questions:

- What is your motivation for teaching? In other words, what drives your teaching?*[object-oriented activity]*
- How would you describe your own views on what teaching and learning is all about (your 'teaching/educational philosophy' so to speak)? *[own voice; agency?; historicity?]*
- Talking about teaching, how do you go about planning for your teaching? For example, how do you prepare for a lecture? (If they don't say anything about sfb, prompt them….) *[teaching practice; object-oriented?]*
- What links do you see between student feedback reports and your own teaching practice? *[process of mediation; professional learning; expansive transformations?]*
- Do you generally engage with and respond to student feedback reports? How? *[historicity;artifact-mediated + object-oriented activity?]*
- What in student feedback reports would generally motivate you to respond to the feedback? *[role of motivation; process of mediation to attain object; agency?; perhaps contradictions?]*
- We have been focusing on your own interaction with and thoughts about teaching and student feedback. Let us shift the focus now to the department where you teach. How would you describe your department's view on the importance of teaching and learning? What do they expect from you in terms of teaching? *[collective; multivoicedness]*
- How is teaching evaluated in your department? *[Community; rules; division of labour; contradictions?]*
- Do you experience/ have you experienced any tensions between your role as teacher/researcher/CI practitioner at the personal/departmental/institutional

level? If so, what is the nature of such tensions? *[Community; rules; division of labour; contradictions?]*

- What are your views on the possible value of student feedback in terms of teaching and learning in your department? And for you personally? *[context; relationship between artifact and object within the activity system; contradictions?; expansive transformations?]*

- What can be improved regarding the use of student feedback at Stellenbosch? *[expansive transformations]*

Would you grant me permission to also look at your student feedback reports in order to help me to contextualize and better understand your responses during this interview? Your feedback data will be dealt with confidentially and anonymously.

Thank you for your participation in this study.

Annexure 5:   The application for ethical clearance

STELLENBOSCH UNIVERSITY
CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

TITLE: THE ROLE OF STUDENT FEEDBACK IN UNIVERSITY TEACHING AT A RESEARCH-LED UNIVERSITY

You are asked to participate in a research study conducted by **Melanie Petersen (BA, HED, B ED, M ED)** from the **Centre for Teaching and Learning** at Stellenbosch University. The results of this study will contribute towards a PhD dissertation. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you are a permanently appointed academic staff member, involved in the teaching and learning process at Stellenbosch University.

1. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to explore the role that student feedback plays when selected lecturers reflect on their own teaching practices within their particular contexts. The focus will thus be on the role that student feedback plays in promoting teaching amongst the selected lecturers. This aim is linked to one of the main purposes for collecting student feedback, as identified by Marsh and Dunkin (1992), namely to serve as diagnostic feedback to lecturers about the effectiveness of their teaching. It will investigate how student feedback fits into these individual lecturers' teaching philosophies and which aspects about student feedback affect their reflection. The study will seek to explain why these lecturers use student feedback in particular ways within their particular teaching contexts, or if so, what contributes to the lack of using student feedback as a reflective tool. The focus of the study therefore is not merely to seek generalisable information about the use of student feedback, but to gain deeper understanding of specific lecturers within specific teaching contexts and how student feedback affects their reflective teaching practices. The product of this research would thus be to provide an in-depth description of these particular lecturers (cases) and the role that student feedback does (or does not) play in reflecting on and developing their teaching. It is therefore hoped that this research would provide some answers to the question whether the ideal of teachers/lecturers as reflective practitioners, as envisaged in the NSE policy document (Department of Education, 2000) and as encouraged by Boughey (2001), is a reality in the lives of practicing teachers/lecturers. It will investigate whether lecturers interrogate the assumptions that underpin their practices and whether their reflection is aimed at educational reform. Moreover, it will specifically focus on the role that student feedback plays in these reflective processes and how it affects practice in each of the individual cases.

The aim of this study will thus be to answer the key research question:

What role does student feedback play in lecturers' professional teaching practice at Stellenbosch as a research-led university?

A further number of sub-questions will also guide the study.

Much has already been published on the use of student feedback and the potential it holds for contributing to quality improvement or enhancement. However, an in-depth study amongst lecturers at Stellenbosch University, aimed at gaining a deeper understanding of how the use of student feedback can contribute to lecturers' reflection on and developing their teaching, have not yet been done at this institution. It is therefore hoped that this study, by attempting to answer the research question as well as the sub-questions guiding the study, will address this gap. It is the intention that this study will contribute to the current body of research that is focusing on the challenges experienced in one higher education institution to create an institutional environment in which lecturers would feel free to explore and improve their teaching skills without fear of being penalised. As Boud & Walker (1998) emphasises that issues of power can have an adverse effect on reflection, it is hoped that the outcome of this research will provide deeper understanding of the subtleties and intricacies of a complex situation (Denscombe 1998:35) such as the teaching and learning context within which each of these lecturers find themselves. More specifically, this research will aim to contribute to deeper insight into the use of student feedback within these particular teaching contexts.

2. PROCEDURES

If you volunteer to participate in this study, we would ask you to do the following things:

Subjects participating in this study will be required to be available for at least one individual, in-depth interview with the researcher. The interview will take a minimum of one hour but could be longer, depending on how the interview progresses. If necessary, follow-up interviews will be arranged at the participant's convenience. Interviews are scheduled to take place between May 2010 and December 2010. Interviews will be conducted on the Stellenbosch and Tygerberg campuses, depending on the participant's location.

3. POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

Participants might experience some discomfort in sharing information regarding their own student feedback, as it could be of a very personal nature. Participants will, however, be guaranteed anonymity and their personal identities will be protected at all times. Although faculties and departments may be identified in the study for the purpose of contextualising the data gathered, no reference will be made to the personal identities of the participants. Academics' participation in this research will be based solely on the input they can make regarding how they make use of student

feedback within their own teaching contexts, so as to give us a better understanding of how the use of student feedback could inform teaching practices within higher education. The scope of their participation will thus be limited to the sharing of information about how student feedback influences their own teaching practices at their own discretion. Any quantitative information from their own student feedback reports will only be disclosed at their own request or permission. Should participants agree to share such information, it will always be done in such a way that the person's identity will remain protected. It is also planned to conduct interviews with at least four heads of departments, one from each of the four educational environments. Should the head of department of some of the participants be interviewed, the participant is assured that their participation within this research project will remain anonymous. All the information that they disclose within their interviews will remain confidential and will not be disclosed to the head of department. This also implies that their information regarding their teaching practices will under no circumstances be used for any other purposes outside of the aims of this study, such as staff performance assessments, etc.

4. POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO SUBJECTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY

Benefits arising from this study will be in the form of generating new knowledge in order to gain better insight into and understanding of how lecturers use student feedback as a reflective tool within the teaching and learning process. The larger University community could thus benefit by gaining access to this information and applying it within their own situations. These participants' stories could serve as examples of practice that could be useful to others within the Higher Education environment. The University itself could also gain by using this information to streamline or enhance its current student feedback system.

5. PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION

There will be no monetary benefits to participants in this study.

6. CONFIDENTIALITY

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law.

Academic staff taking part in the interviews will have to give informed consent to the public use of the data that will be collected as the findings from this study will contribute to a PhD dissertation. They will thus be fully informed about the research which the interviews are going to be used for. Their privacy will be protected when publishing the results of this study. The names of faculties and departments involved will, however, have to be identified as it would be important in terms of contextualising the data that will be collected. When reference is made to lecturers in particular departments, it will be done in such a way that the lecturer's identity will not be compromised.

Raw data, including digitally recorded interviews and transcripts, will be stored securely for the period of this research. Only the researcher, assisting data analyst and promoter will have access to

the recorded interviews and transcripts. These records will be kept in safe storage at the Student Feedback Office for a maximum period of three (3) years after completion of the study, after which it will be erased or discarded.

Furthermore, an application for approval to do this research amongst staff at the University will be tabled to the Ethics Committee of Stellenbosch University. As student feedback is generally experienced as a very personal matter, care will be taken in terms of how and what information will be published.

7. PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

You can choose whether to be in this study or not. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind. You may also refuse to answer any questions you don't want to answer and still remain in the study. Participants will, however, be encouraged to remain involved for the full duration of the study and to be as open and honest as possible in sharing information, as the purpose of this study is to contribute to a better understanding of the use of student feedback as reflective tool within the real world of teaching and learning at Stellenbosch University. The investigator may withdraw you from this research if circumstances arise which warrant doing so.

8. IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATORS

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact:

Principal Investigator: Mrs Melanie Petersen
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Stellenbosch University
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Stellenbosch
7600

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Fax: 021-8864142
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Promoter: Prof EM Bitzer
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Education Faculty
Stellenbosch University

Tel (W): 021-8082297
E-mail: emb2@sun.ac.za

Co-promoter: Dr SC van Schalkwyk
Deputy Director: Education
Centre for Health Sciences Education
Faculty of Health Sciences

Stellenbosch University

Tel (W): 021- 9389874
E-mail: scvs@sun.ac.za

9.   RIGHTS OF RESEARCH SUBJECTS

You may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty. You are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies because of your participation in this research study. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research subject, contact Ms Malenè Fouché at the Unit for Research Development.

SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH SUBJECT OR LEGAL REPRESENTATIVE

The information above was described to me by Melanie Petersen in *Afrikaans/English* and I am in command of these languages or it was satisfactorily translated to me.   I was given the opportunity to ask questions and these questions were answered to my satisfaction.

I hereby consent voluntarily to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

_____ _

Name of Subject/Participant

_____ _

Name of Legal Representative (if applicable)

_____ _   _____ _

Signature of Subject/Participant or Legal Representative   Date

---

SIGNATURE OF INVESTIGATOR

I declare that I explained the information given in this document to_____ _ [*name of the subject/participant]* and/or [his/her] representative _____ [*name of the*

*representative]. [H*e/she] was encouraged and given ample time to ask me any questions. This conversation was conducted in [*Afrikaans/*English/*Xhosa/*Other*] and [*no translator was used/this conversation was translated into_____* by_____ _*].*

_____ _   _____ _

Signature of Investigator   Date