Innovative practices amongst academics working within a VET institution: A grounded theory approach

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Abstract: Innovative processes within an organisation are essential to drive operations forward. These can be driven by individual employee innovation actions and innovative work behaviour. Within educational settings, such academic-driven innovations are important as they tend to enhance both the quality and outcome of the learning process (Messmann and Mulder 2011). The factors that influence innovative behaviours in academics within an educational sphere have been categorised by Thurlings, Evers, and Vermeulen (2015) into three core categories. These comprise demographic, organisational, and individual factors. The need for innovation within Vocational Educational Training (VET) providers is high although challenging when it comes to implementation (Toner 2010), since VET colleges and educators must be significantly responsive to changes in societies and workplace. This provides the learners with optimal learning opportunities and job preparation (Nieuwenhuis, Nijhof, and Heikkinen 2005). Through a preliminary review of literature, a gap was identified in terms of research studies that specifically address and seek to explain the complexity of innovative behaviours adopted by VET academics. This qualitative research project aims to address and contribute to filling in this gap in literature to identify the key factors that affect innovation in educational settings. The study looks into the innovative behaviours and practices being adopted by academics working within a national vocational college in the small island state of Malta. The research question guiding the investigation and the respective supporting objectives are the following: How do academics within a vocational college make use of innovative practices to enhance their students’ learning process?

Keywords: innovation development; innovation management; innovative work behaviour; grounded theory; innovative teaching practices

Introduction

The ability for an organisation to continuously be innovative is vital for it to ensure success and survive in an everchanging competitive environment (De Jong and Den Hartog 2010). Innovations are key to improve the quality processes and effectiveness of internal processes. Innovation will ensure that an organisation will achieve and maintain a competitive advantage and secure the organisation’s long-term survival. The process of innovation occurs at various levels within the organisational structure of an institution (King and Anderson 2002). In recent years, increased attention within the field of innovation management has been given to the importance of the individual professionals’ innovation actions and innovative work behaviour within organisations.

Thurlings, Evers, and Vermeulen (2015) define innovative behaviour as “a process in which new ideas are generated, created, developed, applied, promoted, realized, and modified by employees to benefit role performance” (2011: 430). This definition stems from the
general definition of innovation which has been defined by Messmann and Mulder (2011:64) as “products or processes that are new and applicable for a certain individual, group or organisation and that are useful for the same or a different individual, group or organisation”. This definition allows for a broad view on the understanding of the term innovation and does not limit it to radical novelties or inventions.

Educational organisations work within environments that change rapidly and they are shaped by both internal and external forces. Such influencing factors include changes in learners’ needs, the constant increase in knowledge within fields of study, and new operational endeavours to cope with new expectations and realities. Within educational settings, innovations are important as they tend to improve both the quality and outcome of the learning process (Messmann and Mulder 2011). Thurlings et al. (2015) highlight three main reasons why innovative behaviours by lecturers and schools are required: 1) Innovative behaviours allow both students and lecturers to keep up to date with an ever-changing society; 2) the implementation of emerging educational technologies needs innovative behaviours; and 3) educational institutions should set an example for more innovative behaviours of its students which will in turn reflect in a more competitive- and innovative-thinking society.

The need for innovation within VET providers is high since VET colleges and lecturers must be responsive to changes in societies and workplace. This will provide learners with optimal learning opportunities and job preparation (Nieuwenhuis, Nijhof, and Heikkinen 2005).

To be able to strengthen innovative behaviours amongst academics, it is important to be able to identify what triggers and motivates lecturers to implement innovative practices. Such triggers can be intrinsic and extrinsic and may greatly vary from one organization to the other due to the different contexts they work in. An example of factors that affect innovative behaviours in academics include organisational conditions like connectivity and self-organisation (Kontoghiorghes, Awbrey, and Feurig 2005).

Thurlings, Evers, and Vermeulen (2015) highlight that little research has been carried out which studies the phenomenon of educator-innovative behaviour and which are the influencing factors that affect this behaviour or what are the resultant effects that can be achieved through such behaviour.

This study looks into the innovative behaviours and practices being adopted by academics working within a vocational college in the small island state of Malta. The research question guiding the study and the respective supporting objectives are the following:

How do academics within a vocational college make use of innovative practices to enhance their students’ learning process?

Three primary objectives are being identified for the research project. These are as follows:

1. To identify, describe, and evaluate the various dimensions that influence academics’ innovative behaviour within an educational organisation;
2. To explore any possible common underlying factors that relate the various dimensions to one another;
3. To determine emerging constructs and map these out to develop a preliminary framework/conceptual model of the relationships between the different dimensions.

The purpose of this qualitative study is to discover critical influences on innovative work behaviours for academics at the Malta College of Arts, Science & Technology (MCAST).
The central phenomenon under investigation will generally be broadly defined as the application of avant-garde teaching practices by lecturers to improve their role performance and address job-related problems and challenges. This study will aim to address and fill the current literature gap relating to the factors which influence innovative behaviours in academics and the resulting effects of innovative behaviour. In addition, the study will also investigate the integration of emerging technologies within VET as a means innovation.

Related Literature

The Definition of Innovative Behaviour in Academics

There is no singular consistent definition used within literature when it comes to describing the term *innovative behaviour* within an educational context. Nevertheless, the most commonly used definition is the one proposed by Janssen (2003). He described innovative behaviour as being a three-stage process that initiates with the intentional idea generation, subsequently leading to idea promotion, and finally to idea realisation. This can be within a work role, work group, or organisation and is done in order to benefit role performance, the group, or the organisation (Janssen 2003). Some studies that follow this definition include Yang and Huang (2008), Binnewies and Gromer (2012), and Messmann and Mulder (2011).

Authors such as Voogt (1990), Donnelly, McGarr, and O’Reilly (2011), and Loogma, Kruusvall, and Ümarik (2012) took a more focused approach in their definition and related innovative behaviour solely to the use of adoption of ICT practices within the classroom or the curriculum. Nevertheless, parallels to Janssen's three stages can be seen in such cases. For example, Voogt (1990) described three stages: adoption, implementation, and incorporation.

The Factors that Influence Academics to be Innovative

The factors that influence innovative behaviours in academics within an educational sphere have been categorised by Thurlings, Evers, and Vermeulen (2015) into three core categories, these being demographic, organisational, and individual factors. Several investigations have been carried out to elucidate which factors mostly influence innovation within a particular educational context. The different studies made use of different research approaches and tools. Examples to demonstrate the variety in research approaches are listed below:

- Chang et al. (2011) have conducted a quantitative study to determine the organisational innovation climate and teaching behaviours in urban and rural schools in Taiwan's secondary schools. As part of the study they collected data from 650 questionnaires that were distributed to teachers in 23 schools.

- Horng et al. (2005) explored the factors that influenced creative and innovative teaching through a qualitative study. The tools used included group interviews, in-depth interviews, classroom observation, and analysis of teaching content. For this study, three teachers with a GreaTeachCreative award for creative teaching in the integrated activities field were selected as subjects.

- Messmann and Mulder (2011) investigated how and why innovations within vocational schools in Germany are developed and enacted using qualitative methods. The explorative study consisted structured interviews with vocational teachers.
• Zhu et al. (2013) conducted a questionnaire with 200 teachers from six secondary schools from Beijing during a qualitative study to determine teachers’ core competencies in relation to their innovative teaching performance.

• Tomic and Brouwers (1999) used mixed methods to determine where and in what way secondary school teachers in the Netherlands generate ideas linked to their work environment.

The academic’s gender, age, income, teaching experience, years and level of education, and job tenure are demographic factors that influence innovative behaviours (Thurlings, Evers, and Vermeulen 2015). Yang and Huang (2008) and Runhaar et al. (2016) found that a lecturer’s income and years of education positively affected innovative behaviours. It was found that lecturers possessing less than five years of teaching experience exhibited more innovative behaviours (Nemeržitski et al. 2013). These teachers made use of innovative ICT tools and techniques such as e-learning during their classes. This finding was further supported by Yang and Huang (2008) who identified that the years of teaching experiences negatively influences the innovative behaviours of lecturers.

Curiosity plays a key role in the development of innovative behaviours during the teaching processes of lecturers. Lecturers who show this personality trait have a more creative and innovative teaching behaviour (Horng et al. 2005; Messmann and Mulder 2011). Being open also impacts innovative work behaviour positively as it “it makes teachers sensitive for exploring opportunities and for allowing conditions and procedures to change” (Messmann and Mulder 2011:78). Intrinsic motivation is a determining factor for adopting an innovative approach (Horng et al. 2005; Messmann and Mulder 2011; Nemeržitski et al. 2013). The willingness of academics to carry out Continuous Professional Development (CPD) was found to relate positively to innovative behaviours (Runhaar et al. 2016). Horng et al. (2005) found that being persistent is a key individual factor that affects the innovative behaviour of a teacher. The study found that no matter what obstacles the lecturers faced, they were able to approach the challenges with humour, perseverance, and confidence, creating a fun and easy learning environment.

Messmann and Mulder (2011) found that in order to innovate, the right spaces and equipment should be at hand. Such spaces should offer a relaxing environment to allow academics to be creative leading to idea generation (Tomic and Brouwers 1999). Several studies have shown that apart from the infrastructure, it is important to have a culture that supports an organisational innovation climate (Yu et al. 2007; Zhu et al. 2013). In line with this, the right leadership and working conditions should be present.

No literature has been found relating to the local context in Malta. This literature gap needs to be addressed in order to be able to identify the key factors that affect innovation in educational settings in the Maltese islands.

Research Methodology

Research Methods Used During the Study

The research process that has been adopted during this investigation is summarized in Figure 1. In this research endeavour, the methodological stance that has been adopted is that of grounded theory (GT). GT is a qualitative research design that originates from the field of sociology (Korstjens and Moser 2017). GT makes use of an inductive approach to understand the general phenomenon under investigation. As a final outcome of GT, the researcher derives a general, abstract theory of a process, action, or interaction grounded
in the views of participants (Creswell and Creswell 2018). This methodology enables the elucidation and development of theory and observation through a structure which is both flexible and rigorous while systematically handling prejudices and bias (Aquilina 2017).

![Research Process to be adopted in the study](image)

**Figure 1: Research process adopted during the study**

Interpretative and constructivist approaches were employed since the main aim of the study is to explore and describe how academics within a vocational college make use of innovative practices to enhance their students’ learning experiences. The research design chosen is suitable for the study of innovative behaviour amongst academics since this allows the research of broad concepts without the need for narrow research questions or hypotheses. Additionally, the adopted method is very good at eliciting insights and understanding the intricacies of organisational behaviour activities (Flick 2009). The method allows the researcher to use theoretical models concerning innovative work behaviour amongst academics based on the data that will be collected from participants working within a VET organisation.

**Data Collection and Research Process**

This study focuses on academics working within a Maltese VET college. A total of five cases were thoroughly examined, using observations, interpretive and in-depth interviews with individuals primarily having a lecturing background. Three of the cases had a dual role, that of being a lecturer but also having worked in academic management. Convenience sampling was used. During the interviews, patterns of academics’ innovation behaviours were analysed. All interviews were carried out in English and ranged from around 40 to 60 minutes. These were digitally recorded and transcribed.

Data analysis was conducted using MAXQDA 2022 (VERBI Software 2021) through which emergent data incidents were elucidated from the transcribed interviews. The analysis of data commenced with the process of initial coding. This step was used to determine in vivo codes, that is, the selection of all the important incidents for each of the interviews. These were in turn used as a basis for the second major stage of data analysis, intermediate coding (Birks and Mills 2015). During this step, the individual concepts were developed by connecting and linking categories and sub-categories together which were derived from the generated codes. As part of this process, the data was connected together to create more generic and abstract concepts from the individual cases. At this stage, the category framework was categorised into three main categories, these being, I.) Consequences/
Outcomes; ii.) Actions/Reactions; and iii.) Contextual Conditions, in line with the conditional and consequential matrix as advocated by Corbin and Strauss (2008). Throughout the entire process, continuous comparison of datasets minimised the risk of bias in the study through the researcher’s preconceived ideas.

During all the stages of this research, adequate records of the researcher’s thought process were kept and summarised through memos. These were vital to support the emergent GT findings of this study.

Findings and Discussion

Analysis of the Emerging Constructs

A series of constructs emanating from the data generated from the study were compiled to elucidate the influential factors of the innovation behaviours of VET academics. The framework of constructs was created by placing the emergent constructs within a hierarchical structure consisting of a top-down approach linking together categories, subcategories, and properties. As illustrated in Figure 2, the framework consists of three categories and thirty-two sub-categories. The main categories comprise i.) the contextual conditions, ii/) the consequences and outcomes, and iii/) actions and reactions. This follows from the coding paradigm of the conditional and consequential matrix as proposed by Strauss and Corbin (2008).

The contextual conditions are the factors that have an impact on the way and extent academics engage with innovative practices and techniques. These include the lecturer’s background and academic experience, the tools and resources available, and the organisational culture of the VET institution. Academics respond to the environmental innovation context that they are working in through a series of actions and reactions which

Figure 2: Evaluation of the emerging constructs of the influential factors on innovation behaviours in VET academics

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in turn result in a series of consequences and outcomes. The latter have impacts on the outcome of the learning process whilst affecting both the educators and the students.

**Defining Innovation Behaviour in VET Academics**

The general definition of innovation behaviour was consistent amongst the participants. Innovation behaviour was described as a process that changes the status quo and provides experimentation with a new idea and tries to validate whether these are effective within the context in which they are implemented. In all cases, the definition included a bottom-up approach in which initiatives are applied by academics in order to benefit their role performance and ultimately enhance the process of student learning. De Jong and Den Hartog (2010) identify this as self-initiated innovative behaviour.

A broader definition of innovation behaviours amongst academics was provided by one of the participants, which includes the educator creatively supporting students to adopt innovative approaches through self-efficacy. The latter may be defined as persons’ beliefs about their capabilities to deliver designated levels of achievement through influencing over events that affect their lives (Bandura 1997). According to Ibus et al. (2020), several studies have provided empirical shreds of evidence that self-efficacy enhances creativity and may influence innovative work behaviour. A study by Hsiao et al. (2011) found that high self-efficacy teachers are more innovative in performing their work.

**Overview of the Participants**

The participants of this study were connected together to an extent given that they all worked at the same VET institution. Nevertheless, they had a diverse background both in the subject area they lectured on and background experience. Two of the participants lectured in the domain of ICT, another participant lectured on engineering subjects, another taught science programmes, whilst the other participant lectured entrepreneurship, management and business both to business and non-business students across a number of institutes. They all lectured programmes ranging from European Qualification Framework (EQF) levels 4 and above. This is of particular interest as during the interviews it was evident that that innovation practices adopted by the participants varied depending on the programme EQF level being taught.

Although the participants were coming from distinct age groups, an evident commonality was the passion for what they were doing as they all shared a common drive to change the status quo. They were also very fond of utilising novel technologies and techniques to enhance the teaching and learning process in their classes.

**Factors Influencing Innovative Behaviours of VET academics**

**Background, Experience and Portfolio Enrichment**

The academics interviewed strongly emphasized that industrial experience is imperative for a VET educator to engage in innovative approaches in class. Emphasis has been made on the fact that experience outweighs subject-specific academic expertise. The former can be used to support the educator in times where the academic does not have vast expertise in particular fields of studies. In such cases, the lecturer’s background will be able to support the academic to relate to past experiences and develop creative solutions to deliver the knowledge, skills, and competences to the students. Participant A highlighted the importance of merging industry experience and a strong academic background as an integral component for VET academics adopting innovative practices:
I think my background, given that I had 35 years working experience behind me and then had the academic experience as well, when you mash them together, this is what led me to find it easy for me to adopt innovative teaching techniques and guide students to become innovative.

International exchanges have been identified as an important component to the portfolio enrichment of lecturers adopting innovative practices. It is fully understandable that such mobilities may offer ample opportunities for educators to explore novel and innovative practices by foreign counterparts. This might be of particular relevance to lecturers working at MCAST, possibly due to the fact that MCAST is the sole VET provider on the island and thus lecturers might be confined by a sense of insularity.

CPD helps to manage an academic’s learning and growth. CPD was another ingredient that was highlighted by two of the participants which is essential to support educators engaged in innovative practices. CPD can come in various forms, including dedicated workshops on innovative teaching practices and the use of novel technologies, dedicated one-on-one pedagogy training, and industry visits. CPD creates a more innovative and dynamic organisational culture (Georgy 2011).

**Personal Attributes**

A deep knowledge and understanding of the industry and its needs relating to the field of study of the lecturers has been highlighted by the participants as being a critical attribute for innovative behaviours in VET educators. Awareness of the latest industry developments together with the latest research in the field allows educators to deliver knowledge, skills, and competences that are in line with the latest industry needs. Owing to the competitive nature in which organisations operate and their ever-changing needs, the industry consistently evolves and innovates to catch up with these pressures. Educators who are well-versed in such developments and able to include them in their teaching and learning in an innovative fashion are deemed to be successful innovators.

Table 1 summarizes other key attributes which emerged from the study relating to VET educators adopting innovative behaviours in their practice possess.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Innovation attributes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Process and master change effectively</td>
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<tr>
<td>Awareness of industry needs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Flexibility</td>
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<tr>
<td>Engage in open discussion with an open mind</td>
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<td>Able to keep learners motivated</td>
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<tr>
<td>Able to keep learners engaged</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adapt learning content to the students’ needs and optimise content</td>
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<tr>
<td>Identify and match the innovative tools to suit learner’s needs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ability to Experiment</td>
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<td>Work in a team</td>
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*Table 1: Key characteristics associated with innovative VET educators*

Participant C highlighted that a fundamental attribute is the ability to adapt to enhance the teaching and learning process:
An innovative teacher is able to adapt the learning material to learning outcomes/the content in ways that are optimised for the students in front of you in class.

Participant D supported this viewpoint and added that experience supports better decision-making:

A good lecturer has a repertoire of different teaching techniques so that he/she can choose change according to the circumstances. Sometimes it is a question of trial and error, too. But obviously there is the research component and if you’re up to date with research methods and have research experience, this helps too. I remember that when I was younger I would do much more trial and error until I got it right. Now I am a bit wiser and I have better evaluation skills than when I was much younger.

For optimal innovation, educators must be able to function in a team. One of the participants highlighted one negative incident when a fellow lecturer removed all collaborative materials from a shared platform. He noted that without such trust bonds, innovation would not prosper. Knowledge and experience transfer is key to the successful implementation of innovation.

Organisational Culture and Change

Innovation challenges the status quo; in particular, it challenges how an educational organisation functions. An organisation’s environment affects educators’ motivation and willingness to adopt innovative approaches and in turn both creativity and innovation are impacted by organisational factors (Sagnak 2012). Such factors include the institution’s structure and strategy, resources available for academics, and the culture and climate (Jung, Chow, and Wu 2003).

Moolenaar et al. (2010) described the innovative climate of an organisation as “the shared perceptions of organisational members concerning the practices, procedures, and behaviours that promote the generation of new knowledge and practices” (PAGE NUMBER). This implies the need for a concerted effort from the various members of a management team to be able to create an environment in which academics feel comfortable in deploying novel practices. One of the participants suggested that in order for the innovative process to be successfully implemented within a VET institution, the culture of the organisation has to be right, the management has to be credible and consistent, and top management must be clear in its innovative drives and ensure that everybody rows in the same direction. Various studies identified the importance of good leadership in the creation of effective innovation climates (Jung, Chow, and Wu 2003; Moolenaar, Daly, and Sleegers 2010; Scott and Bruce 1994; Sagnak 2012).

The majority of the participants stressed the critical importance of change in cultures to bring about innovation. Participant A summarized this in the following statement: “One could come up with very bright ideas on how to innovate but the culture will have definitely to change.”

Change brings about the fear of the unknown and a sense of loss of control which threatens the stability of an educational setting. This contributes to educational managers steering away from the promotion and adoption of innovative cultures. Participant B recounted that:

In my last two jobs, both in a private higher education sector and also in a public education sector, I would always relate to the expectations of innovation by the institutions to be at a different pace than the one that I would want to undertake
myself. Usually the organisation would have been quite happy with much lesser levels of innovation, where innovation is gradual, very limited in. Why? Because it would favour stability, whilst in my mind there is value in driving change; most of the time driving cultural change which is much harder to get not just yourself to innovate but rather the people you are innovating with to own this new approach.

Ziegler (1985) identifies the creation of subcultures within the corporate culture is an important part of the innovation process. This was echoed by two participants of this study. Nevertheless, participant A recalled from his past experiences that persons who creates a subculture might run into problems with the top management because they are adverse to the main culture of the organisation. The informal organisation is more powerful than the formal organisation.

The Innovation Process – VET Academics’ Perspective

I would say that, to an extent, the introduction of innovative practices always stemmed from the same scenario. Usually it started the year after I would have failed the first time round. I vividly recall in the three instances I mentioned having spent a lecture trying to explain something that in my mind is all panned out and yet I was unable to deliver it successfully to the entire class through what I was doing. (Participant B)

![The innovation process adopted by VET academics](image)

**Figure 3: The innovation process adopted by VET academics**

The need for the adoption of innovation practices and the onset of the innovation commences when educators feel that their traditional method of delivery has failed to produce the desired outcomes. During the interview with participant B, it was clearly evident that the lecturer’s frustration was a key driver to adopt innovative practices for subsequent classes. In addition to the need to improve student learning, Hannan et al. (1999) found that changes in student intake and demands from external stakeholders are the two other main reasons for innovation.
The need for adequate planning has been identified by all three participants of this study as a crucial stage in the adoption of innovative practices by VET academics. Planning is the next stage in the innovation process prior to the implementation of innovative practices, techniques, and exercises by the academic in the classroom. Planning has to be conducted to match innovative practices for the particular students’ needs. This includes the identification of the most appropriate pedagogies, educational technologies and tools that will ensure success within the particular context for any particular cohort of students. It has been observed from the interviews that the readiness to change and experiment are evidently integral key behavioural characterial traits that the three lecturers possess. The planning stage requires a lot of thought process and time. Hunter (2008) further notes that planning for innovation is an incremental activity in which plans slowly unfold over time.

Interactivity between lecturers and their students, and also amongst the students themselves, was an emergent phenomenon VET lecturers related to during the implementation stages of innovative practices in the classroom. When describing the innovation practices deployed in their classes, the interviewees identified that the majority of the innovation practices involved practical exercises in class. Participant B recalled that an element of competitiveness between the students helped out in achieving the goals of the innovative exercises.

The implementation of innovative practices brought along their own challenges. Lecturers found that it was harder to be in control over the teaching and learning process in such an implementation when compared to less innovative and more traditional approaches. Apart from the direct challenges encountered in class, they recounted challenges associated with divergences from the organizational culture and management.

Management Involvement in Innovation Processes in Educational Settings

Berg and Östergren (1979) distinguish between three different types of leaders within innovative systems, these being innovation leaders, secondary leaders, and formal leaders. Within an educational context, academics can be seen as being innovation leaders driving innovative practices within their learning environments. On the other hand, academic management are the formal leaders managing and orchestrating innovation-driven initiatives throughout the entire organisation. The key for successful implementation of innovative processes is balancing the ownership of innovation amongst the different types of leaders withing the education setting. Participant A identified the need for a top down coordination and constant communication amongst all stakeholders:

_There has to be a culture change together with more coordination between the institutes. From what I could see, there should be more cross-functionality between institutes. Everybody should be rowing in the same direction. The main barrier is the communication barrier. Unfortunately most of the institutes work in solo mode. When one works in such a way there might be a duplication of services. If you unite, the whole would be greater than all the institutes put together. Each one of us needs to feel secure in what they are doing and needs to be treated with respect. These intangibles are sometimes overlooked. If we manage to win all these then I think to implement innovation would be easy._

Leadership which provides a safe feeling amongst VET lectures to creatively innovation within their environment is imperative. Academic managers must adopt leadership styles that promote academics exhibiting innovation behaviours. The management should provide full support to innovation champions for these to be catalysts of cultural change and to act as a reference point for other lecturers to be inspired and in turn adopt innovative
practices. Additionally, it is important that leaders within the organisation share a common vision and try to bring all the people involved together to understand the challenges and see the need for change and encourage them to own them.

Participant E highlighted the need for concrete action to induce innovation:

*If we want the educators to be more innovative we need to have policies set by the top management and not for these not only to be left as policies; concretely, we need to start training sessions for educators so that we engage them more. If we manage to engage them then they will start using innovative practices with their students. I think there needs to be more importance given by the top management to this issue.*

**Outcomes of the Adoption of Innovation Processes within VET**

All participants in this study were surprised beyond their expectations with the outcomes after the introduction of innovative practices. This was a key motivator for them to embark on further future deployment of such practices. Students were also pleasantly surprised with the outcomes at the end of the innovation process. In the initial stages of the innovation process, learners were sceptical about the process. In the midst of the process, learners were out of their comfort zone. Students appreciated the fact that innovative approaches were being adopted and they were overwhelmed with the way that learning was being delivered.

**Research Propositions**

The emergent propositions from this research study are the following:

**Research Proposition 1**

The educator’s background, both in terms of academic and work experience, has a great influence on the ability of a VET lecturer to introduce and adopt innovative practices in their teaching and learning.

**Research Proposition 2**

Characteristic behaviours found in lecturers who adopt innovative practices include the ability to process and master change effectively, an awareness of industrial needs, and an ability to engage in flexible and dynamic approaches.

**Research Proposition 3**

Being surrounded by the right circumstances and right people is critical for innovation to flourish in VET settings. To this extent, organisational culture and sub-cultures contribute to success or failure of the implementation of innovative practices.

**Research Proposition 4**

The need to introduce innovative practices arises from the failure to achieve desired learning outcomes in previous years.

**Research Proposition 5**

The application of innovative practices results in enhanced learning experiences for students and educators who exhibit a high degree of personal satisfaction with the outcomes.
Conclusions and Recommendations

Implications and Significance of the Outcomes of the Study on Stakeholders

This study has shed some light on innovation practices in academics and in turn has a number of implications for the promotion of innovation behaviour of lecturers. The drive for a lecture to innovate is not governed by only one factor but by a number of direct and indirect phenomena. Hence, academic managers should consider the contextual conditions and utilise a combination of different approaches to ensure that innovative behaviours thrive within their organisation.

The research conducted in this study shows that management should consider organisational factors, such as culture, leadership, and good communication for them to be able to foster a good innovation ecosystem. In addition, they should also support academics when it comes to enhancing personal attributes such as self-efficacy, motivation, and industry connections. It is vital that academics are provided with opportunities for professional development to support portfolio enrichment.

Another implication focuses on the academics themselves. This study shows that collegiality and working in teams with other like-minded academics is essential for academics to succeed in innovating. Building trust bonds in co-workers and management is important.

VET institutions wishing to increase innovation behaviours amongst their academics must be agile and create the right structures and frameworks to harness the complexity innovation brings with it. Additionally, the educational organisation must match the speed of innovation and expectations of academics.

Limitations of the Study

During the study, the researcher adopted a constructivist approach which influenced the way the research was conducted. The study focused on the participants’ own experiences. Whilst it is acknowledged that the researcher was a subjective active participant in data generation with participants, the use of grounded theory methodology allowed the researcher to distance himself from the data. The researcher works in the field of education innovation and such professional experiences have informed the interpretation of the results.

Another shortcoming is that this was a small-scale study during which only five cases were analysed. Theoretical sensitivity was not reached, which made the development of theory at this stage not possible. Nevertheless, the outcomes of the study can harmoniously guide the progression of the study by directing the researcher to more cases, thus adding to the richness of the data.

Recommendations for Future Research Directions

This research study constitutes a preliminary investigation on the use of innovative practices within a vocational college to enhance students’ learning processes. Its results should represent a starting point for further research in the area. As indicated in the limitations section, this study had a small sample size. It would be recommended that future studies include a larger number of cases in order to be able to further undercover the phenomenon under investigation.

Innovative behaviour has distinct regional, cultural, and historical characteristics (Guan et al. 2019). Future research endeavours can look into expanding the collection of samples for
other VET institutions—possibly in small island states—to obtain more general results for the innovative behaviour in VET academics. Meanwhile, the outcome of this study can serve as a reference point for future researchers to conduct research on innovation practices and the behaviours of VET academics.

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