Changing Centres for Teaching and Learning:
an analytical review

This analytical review reflects on the ways that centres for teaching and learning in universities are formulated and how they might change to best respond to and address the changing needs of students, academics and institutions in a post pandemic era. Drawing on discussions with experts, personal experience and grey literature, the key considerations to be addressed are articulated, in order to spell out the options for CTLs in a variety of contexts.

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Introduction

This analytical review describes structures, suggests options and provides key considerations for centres for teaching and learning (CTLs) to consider to best serve the needs of students, academics, university strategies and institutional systems in the post pandemic era. It is premised on three assumptions: firstly, that the status of teaching has gained in value since Covid-19 shifted teaching and learning provision; secondly, that many centres of teaching and learning are revising both focus and structures for the foreseeable future of the university; and thirdly, that all solutions are context specific, with no ideal types for CTLs – one size does not fit all.

The standing of teaching has improved since the pandemic's online pivot focused attention on teaching and because teaching online focuses academic attention on teaching processes which had become invisible through familiarity. Centres of Teaching and Learning (CTLs) have been gratefully acknowledged by their institutions during the pandemic and the concomitant move to Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT). Even before the pandemic began, senior institutional positions were being created, even at research intensive universities e.g., Yale now has a provost for teaching and the American University has a Chief Online Officer. At the same time there has been a growth in senior positions responsible for online education, digital education or distance education.

In addition, the various rankings metrics now include teaching as an indicator, which many also consider important. This provides some "wriggle room" for CTLs. What the pandemic has done has provided CTLs with an opportunity for "a huge proof of product, so if you like what we did, give us more funding". In short, "we are past the point of making the argument that TLCs matter".

While the acknowledgement is a shift in perception, the future of CTLs is not assured. The HE sector has suffered financially, and government budgets have been cut. In South Africa alone, in 2021 university funding was cut by R7.701 billion, the National Student Financial Aid Scheme funding was cut by R6.884 billion[1]; and student debt was at almost ZAR14 billion[2]. Even previously well-off universities, already taking strain pre-Covid, are now running at a deficit. This has implications for the stability and growth of CTLs. Expressions of gratitude in the short term may not translate to funding in the medium term.

Notwithstanding financial concerns, alongside broader institutional strategy discussions, CTLs are reflecting on their own roles, and on how best to position themselves for a post pandemic university. Their considerations are framed, *inter alia* by:

A call for *flexibility* on several fronts. For some, the pandemic brought home a realisation of the diversity of the student body and changed demographics, even at "elite" universities. Thus, teaching, learning and curricula need to be "recalibrated". Others point out that a variety of modes of provision will now be expected as options in university offerings.

There is a consensus that *the digital* is going to be part of teaching and learning from now on, even for universities which pride themselves on being residential. "The opportunities offered and that have been learnt over this last period cannot afford to be lost". The extent to which CTLs will have to include some aspects of digital in their scope will be linked to the broader strategic direction of the individual university. For some, digital education services will be at the heart of the work, for others it will be more peripheral.

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[1] DHET 2021/22 Annual Performance Plan, with Deputy Minister, NCOP Education and Technology, Sports, Arts and Culture, 12 May 2021, Available at https://pmg.org.za/committee-meeting/32876/
[2] https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20210318090703152

The acknowledgement of *staff fatigue* – physically and mentally - in the sector. This can be assumed to be the case, particularly given that the pandemic is far from over, especially in countries like SA. While the focus here is on teaching, fatigue applies to all: academics in the disciplines, staff in CTLs, as well as all professional, administrative, service and support (PASS) staff.

The view that disruption is the *new normal* as "this is not the last time we are going to go remote as there will be protests, earthquakes, smoke…". Thus, CTLs are becoming "more of business continuity plans in ways in which they were not previously".

There are no clear-cut Models A, B, and C given the vagaries of context. But there are options and moments of choice where decisions can be made. In this report I aim to: a) provide a broad brush description of the current situation in CLTs; and b) classify options, provide usable categories, and identify points of choice.

The focus is on models and structures, but of course these depend on purpose, focus and emphasis. Re-affirming these is a different process not covered here. Generally, structure follows purpose, but perhaps the descriptors here will point to priorities of purpose.

This report draws gratefully on conversations with 6 heads of teaching and learning structures in South African universities – Dolf Jordaan, Francois Strydom, Gerrit Wissing, Jo-Anne Vorster, Mike Swanepoel and Thea de Wet. In addition, experts from outside South Africa with experience of and a serious interest in CTLs contributed their views - David Porter, Nancy Gleason, Joel Mills, Tannis Morgan and Vivian Forsmann. Direct quotations are in inverted commas, unattributed to specific individuals, as requested. The centres mentioned vary in size from a handful of people in a centre to well over a hundred staff. This document also draws on selected CTL websites, rare scholarly articles, some popular media as well as my own observations and experience of setting up such centres over the past two decades.

Models, focus and structure

Models

Models of CTLs exist on a continuum from centralized to decentralized in terms of relationship with the faculties. Most are somewhere in the middle, a hybrid form with some centralized aspects and some faculty aspects.

One differentiator may be the size of the university. A smaller university such Rhodes University with 8000+ students has a central structure with no specific faculty structures or portfolios.

Another differentiator seems to be perceived efficiencies. There are several examples where increased centralisation has taken place bringing together, for example, educational technology, writing centres, multilingualism activities, graduate teacher training and learning spaces.

On the other end of the spectrum, there is some evidence of smaller and more niche structures. For example, early in 2021 New York University closed down their central CTL and only have CTLs in the faculties. These focus on teaching with the IT aspects moved to the central IT division.

Another differentiator might be mainstream regular services and niche activities/ projects. There is an argument that there should be a distributed model for innovation, rooted in the disciplines, while another option is for a mini "think tank" located within the CTL itself.

The model of the centre may also be distinguished by the type of university such as research intensive or teaching focused.

The most common model is a hybrid model. Issues that can arise include: the role of the centre, and the risk of the centre being, or seen to be a gatekeeper to resources or standards; resource sharing, control of budgets and financial charges back to the centre; decisions about work focus and workload in the faculties; and management of staff in the distributed faculties.

While this is the most common model, it is not the easiest. There is a view that each faculty would be best served by its own disciplinary-based CTL, but that this is unlikely for financial reasons.

Scope & focus

CTLs have different names and configurations but names alone provide little sense of scope or focus. At Stellenbosch University the CTL is part of a larger structure - the Division of Learning and Teaching Enhancement; the CTL focuses on academic staff development, while a separate centre for learning technologies falls in the same division. On the other hand, at University of Free State the CTL is the overarching structure which contains the other units and areas of work.

One cannot assume that there is a shared portfolio of activities contained with a CTL structure. As described in the later table, there are several components which may or may not be included.

Some centres are staff facing while some aim to be student facing and many are both.

Several CTLs have multiple mandates with some having more than one line of reporting. For example, the director at some universities reports to both the dean of education and the DVC Academic and Student Affairs, for formal teaching and service functions respectively.

The challenge is to be neither "diluted and confused" nor considered too narrowly focused in terms of skills and expertise. The centre should be addressing the priorities of the faculties ("If you not making the lives of the deans easier you are really vulnerable"), while balancing the need to drive innovations that may not be well seeded in the faculties.

Structures

Reorganisation is common at present, either recently undertaken or in the planning. Existing areas of work are being refocused, or new areas being considered and created. This comment is not unusual:

> *The model we use at CLTD is a bit fluid at the moment. The centre has seen some reconfiguration: the Writing Centre and Student Academic Support have moved out of the Centre to report directly to Snr Director: Academic Affairs who is really active in smoothing the ongoing constructive/collaborative conversations among Asst Deans: T&L and Director: CLTD. Responsibility for systems such as the LMS is now with Wits ICT where it really belongs. Our fully online programmes are gradually moving into the centre, faculties are building their own L&T support capacities and those inter-dependencies have to be thrashed out, and in the midst of all that, we're looking after some grant funded projects too. So quite messy at the moment, but really interesting to be a part of shaping an agile environment to respond to our ever-shifting 'new reality'.*

Other examples include: one university investigating closer collaboration between the different units that support Distance Education, fully online courses, and residential courses; another would like to bring the university's institutional research unit into the CTL; and yet another with a separate academic development centre, a separate CTL, staff development, (some procedural, some scholarly) as well as a separate educational technology structure. They have recently merged under a new senior leadership role above a dean.

Components and composition

CTLs comprise a constellation of possible components, cohering (or not cohering) in different ways. The options are listed in the table below.

Areas of work/ structural components	Comments
Staff development	Described in more detail later, comprising formal, semi-formal and non-formal teaching. There are instances where all, some or none of these are in the CTL
Formal teaching	On credit bearing courses and programmes
Student support	Organised in many ways, from a narrow focus to a very broad one
Analytics	There are examples of where this is seen to be at the centre of what the CTL does, and other instances where it is not part of a CTL's mandate at all. (For some analytics is "the holy grail", some do none)
Production capacity, often of digital materials	This is not automatically in the CTL. It cannot be assumed that all universities have this capacity
Research	See later section. It is not the general expectation that staff in CTLs do traditional research
Quality assurance/ planning	Not generally included in CTLs Some newer CTLs are playing a role in accreditation & quality assurance
Curriculum Community Engagement	In some cases, community engagement is included in CTL e.g., UP
Blended learning	Generally, but not always located in the CTL. May be in the IT division
Fully online learning	This is often a separate unit with OPM partnerships located separately.
Distance education	This has traditionally been a separate unit, until the pandemic largely paper based, and still partially so
Continuing professional education	There is an argument being that it is place for innovation and should be in the CTL. Other believe that it should be separate, which it mostly is
Institutional planning	Not commonly in the CTL but this does occur
Course evaluations	Relatively rare as a distinct area of work, but does exist (eg UFS)
Tutor training	Often in the CTL
First Year Experience (FYE) and transitions	Part of student support. May be a separate structure which might or might not be in the CTL
Graduate attributes	Occasionally falls within CTL (e.g., a distinct area at FS)
Academic orientation	Sometimes a CTL area of work
HOD development	Sometimes a CTL area of work
Lecture recording	Not a universal service. May be in CTL or in the IT division

Deciding factors for inclusion in a CTL

These are generally not explicit. They may include:

History. Where the original centre was originally located has a lasting effect on its activities, areas of work and focus ("it takes 30 years to turn a ship around").

Politics. There are examples where institutional and personal politics determine which areas of work are grouped together. In some cases, strong opinions are expressed about the situation remaining in place, not matter how "logical" a different structure might seem.

Funding. There are examples where all the "soft funded" projects are grouped together in a structure.

Revenue generation. T&L activities explicitly designed to generate profits are usually – but not always - outside of the CTL.

Formal/informal. Credit bearing and non-credit bearing courses and programmes are often in different structural locations.

Relationships with the faculties and decision-making structures

All CTLs have a relationship with disciplinary faculty structures. How this is framed conceptually and in practice differs which in turn impacts on structures. There seem to be three non-exclusive ways of relating:

A responsive service

In addition to offering reliable, appropriate services needed by educators and students for teaching and learning to be best enabled, the CTL is responsive to changing needs.

This points to adaptability and responsiveness, with appropriate strategies for understanding what is needed, and the ability to change direction.

One strategy is for the CTL director to meet the deans all together once a quarter, as a cross institutional conversation and from this, set three priorities for the next three months of the CTL's work. In another example, daily feedback from students is used to improve services offered.

A partnership

Another perspective is to aim to be a "co-creation centre, not a treatment centre". This means forging strong alliances using various strategies such as the following:

- Second academics into the CTL for periods of time through a faculty–based competitive process. The length of time can vary. Requires funding
- Embed learning designers in the faculties for periods of time
- Appoint faculty-based CTL staff who report to both the faculty and the central CTL
- Locate CTL(s) physically in the faculties
- Have a named lead person allocated to each faculty, with whom relationships can be built.

A leader

Here the role of CTLs is to be proactive, to be aware of possible forthcoming scenarios and to play a central strategic role within broader institutional teaching and learning structures. Having been in this position was one reason that some CTLs were better placed to deal with the pandemic's shift online than others.

This ability was one of the reasons that so many CTLs were ready when the "online pivot" happened. In an op ed on CTL directors, Kim (2020) spoke of the experience CTLs have of leading institutional change initiatives, positioning them well for leadership.

Management and systems

Along with rethinking structures, and to some extent focus, there is thought being given to management systems within CTLs. It is of interest that several people mentioned matrix options: "matrix management", "matrix systems" and a "matrix organisation" respectively. This signals that traditional hierarchical structures have not been effective for the complexities of the inter-connected work.

Also on the agenda are issues pertaining to scaling up, with, for example, tools for "ticketing systems" being mentioned as needed. One particular challenge articulated is the need for learning design scaling up, somewhere between "the model of having LDs work on your course, teaching a few things, doing everything and the handing back to the faculty, which doesn't scale after a certain point".

In terms of a CTL structure that would cover the scholarly and the professional aspects, one person suggested that "in a perfect world you would have a COO and an academic role, 2 directors with different roles".

A key consideration regarding structures and processes, has been the need for flexibility and agility. "The real issue is the ability to change mode quickly and often". It also means "breaking lots of rules" as needed.

Key considerations

Staff development for teaching

Included here are formal teaching, semi-formal teaching and non-formal teaching. There are differences of approach to staff development for teaching.

For some staff development is not the best focus for a CTL ("you are preaching to the converted") and course design is likely to have more impact, especially as learning designers are informally providing a type of staff development when they work with academics and educators. The decision here is about whether it makes sense to provide institutionally specific staff development activities, or whether the required skills and practices can be learnt from outside the institution. There might even be a case for educators attending events provided by universities more qualified in this domain. This view supposes limited resources and considering what the best impact is likely to be, especially for the students.

There is a difference between formal teaching, formal staff development and non-formal staff development.

Formal teaching is when CTL staff teach on credit bearing programmes.

These may be more professionally focused such as post-graduate diplomas level or more scholarly and theoretical in approach, such as at master's level. In this case the CTL staff are likely to be on academic terms of service.

For example, Rhodes University offers post-graduate diplomas aimed at different groups, one specifically for academic developers. These are taken by staff from a few other universities.

Semi-formal teaching might also be called formal staff development. This has 2 distinguishing features: a) it is not part of a formal credit bearing programme and b) it tends to focus on the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SOTL).

There are a growing number of professional courses for academics/educators within universities. In some places these are compulsory. Staff teaching these courses may or not be on academic terms and conditions themselves.

At Rhodes University, new academics have to show they meet the requirements on assessment. If they don't attend the course, they have to produce a portfolio.

There are also cross-institutional semi formal and formal courses offered through regional consortia. In some cases, these partnerships cross borders. For example, at FS, staff can take a structured programme through FS and the University of Virginia on a Curriculum Redesign Programme. While it is not compulsory, there is senior leadership support. It is now a requirement that a portfolio is handed in when applying for promotion and the recognition and rewards system is being realigned.

Non-formal teaching or professional staff development comprises events, seminars, webinars etc. which are not connected in a structured way. These are taught or facilitated by all staff. A typical example is UP which provides a significant amount of staff development, offered by educational consultants and instructional designers, with a current focus on educational data.

There is also a different view which distinguishes between professional development and professional learning. The latter is owned by educators themselves; it is "an approach for CTLs to support through collegial, constructivist approaches that result in digital fluency, and a personal professional presence attuned to the needs of today's learners".

Research

Research is one of the areas least agreed on within CTLs across the sector. In summary:

Approach to research	Comment
No /little research produced	The CTL staff have no requirement or support for undertaking research
Institutional research	Some universities have institutional research units; this is not usually located in the CTL
Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SOTL)	The research undertaken and knowledge produced is focused on teaching and learning practice
Education research	Research is undertaken and contributes to the field/s of education
Disciplinary research	Staff produce research in their home disciplinary areas

No research produced

Where there are no - or limited - research outputs this is due to the predominant support focus in CTLs. This does not mean that research is not valued. In most cases, it is important that the CTLs work is taken seriously and is evidence-based. Many CTLs describe themselves as "research informed".

For example, at FS CTL, the approach is explicitly evidence-based change. Their mantra is "If there is no data it did not happen". They are committed to a data driven student voice.

Institutional research

Focused only on the institution, the research outputs might be confidential. For example, UP has a small research unit focused on institutional teaching related research to support data driven student success projects.

Such research is unlikely to go through research ethics clearance given that it is not intended for formal research publication.

It is possible that such research may be formally published. This would make it more palatable for staff on academic terms and conditions. At the outset, the research approval process would need to be formalised, given that it cannot be done retrospectively.

SOTL

SOTL – the scholarship of teaching and learning – is narrower in focus and scope than educational research. It can be considered "a form of scholarly teaching using the classroom as an action-research laboratory".

For some, SOTL does not have to be published in peer reviewed journals as it can take different forms where it is more likely to have an impact and change practice. Here, public engagements, op eds etc. are valid forms of research engagement.

SOTL has its own communities and conferences and publishes in SOTL journals.

There is money for SOTL in some universities through teaching scholarship funds. In addition, some CTLs offer grants to academics in the faculties to undertake SOTL research in their disciplines.

There is a concern that SOTL does not get taken seriously by the disciplines and needs better communication strategies.

Educational research

Some call this "pure research" as opposed to "scholarly teaching research" or SOTL. The focus would be on educational fields within the broader educational disciple, such as higher education studies, educational technology and curriculum studies. It is not unusual for there to be tensions with education departments and faculties, although: "in a perfect world CTLs should have connective tissue with faculties of education".

Disciplinary research

Disciplinary research allows for CTL staff to continue undertaking research in their original disciplinary areas of study. This has the advantage of CTL maintaining legitimacy in those disciplinary areas, as well as enabling a better understanding the disciplinary challenges in those knowledge areas.

Whether this kind of research is an option will depend on the balance between contract staff and permanent academic staff, as well as on other factors such as tenure track funding.

Funding

The forms of funding which support the work of CTLs are described here. CTLs are constrained in the amount of control that they have; nevertheless, these are the options that they may be able to leverage.

Central university budget is the most common form of funding.

Government ear-marked grants In South Africa, this would be Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) funding – such as university capacity development grants. For example, in one university an entire programme - comprising nine posts - is all government funding.

Endowments In the US the centre for teaching and learning at Yale has an endowed director's position. It is named the Yale Poorvu Center for Teaching and Learning. Some CTLs are actively seeking philanthropic or private sector endowments.

Fundraising within CTLs for research, innovation work, networks and cross funding across the centre is rare, but does take place. In some instances, funding is found for what is essentially core institutional work.

Staffing

Conditions of service

In summary

Conditions of Service	Pros	Cons	Comment
Academic	Produce formal knowledge Contribute to research and theory Contribute to the field Contribute to practice	Pressure to meet criteria for academic promotion and build a niched area of knowledge	Tension between academic autonomy vs specific job descriptions Requires flexibility from individuals
Professional	Clear and specific KPAs Can use and draw on knowledge/ research	Loss of professional knowledge to the field Research and publishing done in own time	
Third "space" hybrid	Can undertake research related to the job Research explicitly SOTL	Not a traditional academic route, nor a path to one	These kinds of roles have not yet mainstreamed in SA despite efforts over the years

The most common conditions of service for CTL staff are professional (non-academic) terms of service. There are places where there are some staff on academic terms (e.g., Wits, FS), and many where there are none (e.g., UP). In South Africa, Rhodes' CHERTL is almost entirely on academic terms.

The conditions of service partly depend on the primary mandate of the centre, which is generally historical.

In one stated view, CTLs exist to provide infrastructure and service for data driven analysis and need to be neutral. Therefore, the staff should be on professional terms.

This is contested though: there are instances from several CTLs where staff on professional terms argue that they should be on academic terms. "This has been an institutional debate for a few years with no change to the status quo" is a comment echoed by others.

There is also an argument made for the director to have come from an academic background, but to be appointed on professional terms. This brings the "prestige and understanding of academic life", but

not the specific requirements in the job. In some cases, the director holds an academic position in a department while being on professional terms in the CTL. There are also cases where everyone in the Centre is on professional terms, except for the director who is seconded for a contracted period as an academic from one of the disciplinary faculties.

There is an argument that what is more important is for CTL staff to have had teaching experience.

A long-standing discussion has surfaced yet again, about a third category of staff, a "dual professional". This is a "third space" professional, one who has both practice and scholarly knowledge, whose expertise, knowledge practice and applied research can be legitimated.

There is also a fourth – and relatively new - category which occurs: a professor of practice. This is a way of acknowledging knowledge developed outside of academia. There are examples of CTL directors in this category.

The issue of bringing in academic and disciplinary expertise is being addressed in some CTLs by academic secondments of staff from the disciplinary structures. This goes by various names, most such as fellowships or associates. In some places, these secondments are long term positions; examples range from two years to six years in length. There are instances where these are the only people in the CTLs who are on academic terms.

It is also common to employ post-graduate students, tutors, research assistants and consultants in a wide variety of roles.

Permanent/ non-permanent

In general, there seems to be a core staff on permanent conditions of service and a larger group on contract. The ratio between these differs a great deal. There are still some centres where none of the staff are on permanent conditions.

Whether staff are on permanent or non-permanent conditions is not simply linked to the nature of the role (e.g., if it is a project with a beginning and end date) but to funding. Many SA universities depend on DHET grants and all such staff are on contract.

Students as staff

While post-graduate students have always had a role to play, there are interesting examples of how students are being employed in CTLs especially in academic staff support roles.

At one university, for example, a University Capacity Development Grant (UCDG) is being used to pay 9 creative arts and media students who work in the studio together with 3 permanent staff members. There are also 2 post-graduate students as "e-technologists" per faculty.

Changing roles

CTLs are seeing the need for new roles and competencies. They either need new people with specific capabilities or their existing staff have had to reskill.

With the online pivot, there was need for production capacity, which had largely been grown in CTLs. There were mentions of UX design skills, and additional technical capacity. In one case graphic designer staff were retrained as learning designers.

A widespread observation from across different contexts is that equity and inclusion had become more important. Premises of the CTL were being rethought, for example, "previous notions of development had been middle class…assumptions about space, time and noise had to be revisited".

Linked to this is the additional observation that in addition to Covid, over the past years, the student body had changed which required rethinking the curriculum as well as the pedagogical and design activities that CTL staff have to support.

Personal professional development

While keeping up with changes in the field has always been a priority, personal professional development arose from the discussion about research, as there was an emphasis that CTL staff should draw on research, keep up to date with current scholarship and keep studying. One person felt that all staff, no matter their conditions of service, should have PhDs.

There was also an observation that it is also valuable that student assistants are located in cognate disciplines.

Collaboration

Collaboration happens on an informal basis when it is mutually beneficial (one person commented that everyone is too tired to collaborate). There are numerous examples of informal collaboration. There are also a surprising number of formal inter-institutional partnerships in faculty development, as collated in this crowdsourced list.

Conclusion: key choices

This analytic review has mapped out the many options that exist for centres for teaching and learning, identifying the range of considerations to be taken account when thinking about a post-pandemic future. In summary, the key questions are:

Dimension	Decision
History	Which aspects of history need to be taken into account? Social? Political? Institutional? Cultural? Which are not worth the costs of trying to change even if they are not "logical"?
Institutional alignment	To what extent is/must the CTL mission align with relevant institutional strategies, when they exist?
Main role	What is the primary nature of the CTL's role? Does the centre prioritise providing a responsive service, developing mutual partnerships, providing strategic leadership to the university?
Main focus	Who is the main audience or users for the CTL? Staff, students, senior leadership, the HE sector?
Areas of work	Which aspects of teaching and learning should the centre prioritise? How important is an explicit alignment between the various aspects of work, such as technical support, learning design, and research?
De/centralisation	Which aspects of the work are more effective centralized and which are better decentralized?
Research	What type/s of research will the centre focus on, if any?
Buying in services	Which aspects of the work should best be offered using an external provider?
Collaboration	How important is collaboration as a principle and in practice? When is collaboration appropriate?
Staff development	What type/s of staff development will the centre offer?