



**Enhancing collaboration between academic and professional  
services staff at the College of Agriculture, Engineering, and  
Science, University of KwaZulu-Natal**

**By**

**Nokubonga Mathimba**

**208524635**

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**Supervisor**

**Professor Bibi Zaheenah Chummun**

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## DECLARATION

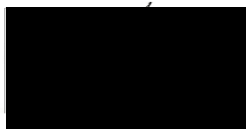
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## ABSTRACT

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The study investigated the collaboration between academic and professional services staff at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) within the College of Agriculture, Engineering and Science (CAES). It has been motivated by the recognition that effective collaboration is a critical enabler of the university's success. The main aim of this research was to determine the key facilitators and obstacles to collaboration and develop recommendations that may serve to support the improvement of working relationships between these two groups. The specific problem was less than adequate collaboration that might restrict operational effectiveness at the University. A quantitative research design was followed, and data were collected through an online questionnaire sent to both the academic and professional services staff within UKZN CAES. This study was analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), where the sample size was 84 respondents: 43 academic staff, 39 professional services staff, and 2 combining these roles. The results showed some variables facilitating collaboration-a shared commitment to the university mission of advancing knowledge, together with societal impact through excellence in teaching, learning, and research. On the other hand, it also found that potential challenges to the collaboration include differences in working styles, limited interaction opportunities, and a perceived disconnect between the two groups. The study recommended targeted interventions at the individual and organizational levels, which included developing more forums where individuals can interact with one another and developing reward systems that will provide incentives for collaborative behaviours. These strategies were supposed to help enhance working relationships and strengthen the capacity of the university to realize its strategic goals. It is thus obvious that the lessons learned through this study would help university leaders create a culture of collaboration and tap into the combined talents of both academic and professional services staff in developing institutional success.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

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UKZN	– University of KwaZulu-Natal
CAES	– College of Agriculture, Engineering and Science
HIEs	– Higher Education Institutions
R.E.A.C.H.T	– Respect, Excellence, Accountability, Client Orientation, Honesty and Trust
PhD	– Doctor of Philosophy
AI	– Artificial Intelligence

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

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### 1.1 Introduction

A strong commitment to excellence in learning, teaching, research, and innovation fosters effective collaboration between academic and professional services staff at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) (UKZN Strategic Plan, 2023-2032). Academic staff members provide subject matter expertise, research capabilities, and teaching prowess, while professional services staff members contribute a wide range of administrative, technical, and support services (Springou, 2023). The potential barriers that prevent the two groups from collaborating are communication gaps, misaligned priorities, limited role clarity, and siloed organizations (Lopes & Macedo, 2019). Therefore, addressing challenges and enhancing collaboration will be crucial in cultivating a complementary environment that fosters excellence in teaching, research, and institutional performance.

The cooperation between academic and professional services staff at the University of KwaZulu-Natal can be effective if existing barriers are overcome and strategies to foster collaboration are developed. Improvement in communication channels, realignment of priorities, and clarification of roles and responsibilities are essential steps. Additionally, breaking down organizational silos and establishing shared goals will help create an environment that nurtures and supports collaboration. The university will, through effective collaboration, be able to tap into the collective expertise and knowledge for driving innovation that improves operational efficiency, educational quality, and research outputs of the institution.

This chapter is structured as follows: it begins with a background and contextualization of the research problem, followed by a detailed problem statement, stating the relevance of the research. The research objectives are then stated, together with the specific research questions guiding this research. Then the significance of the study is stated in terms of how the study can both contribute to literature and university practice. Additionally, the chapter addresses the study limitations, which highlight factors that may reduce the generalizability and validity of the findings, such as the limited sample size and reliance on self-reported data. The study delimitations are also stated, indicating the specific focus on academic and professional services staff within the College of Agriculture, Engineering, and Science (CAES) at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, thereby establishing the boundaries of the research context. Finally, the research methodology employed in the study will be described, giving an

overview of how the research was carried out in a bid to analyze the factors that enable collaboration between the two groups at CAES.

## **1.2 Background and Contextualization**

University of KwaZulu-Natal is one of South Africa's leading research-intensive institutions, boasting a reputation for excellence in teaching, research, and community outreach. The UKZN was formed in 2004 and is ranked among the top six universities in Africa. It offers an extremely comprehensive range of programs in the Arts, Sciences, Health Sciences, and Engineering. The campuses in Durban and Pietermaritzburg have world-class facilities and resources for research and innovation-in general provision (Green Education Organization, 2024). One of the defining operations that take place at the university is collaboration between academic and professional services staff to provide support for the core functions at this institution.

The University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) is dedicated to becoming the premier institution of African scholarship. Guided by its vision, mission, and the R.E.A.C.H.T framework, UKZN strives to enhance collaboration between academic and professional services staff (UKZN Strategic Plan, 2023-2032). The collaboration contributes to achieving the university's goals of teaching excellence, research with impact, and community engagement. There should be collaboration between academic and professional services staff to make the educational environment supportive. The integration of diverse expertise can help in advancing teaching and learning practices to benefit students and the university community. This is particularly so in CAES, where such interface can lead to practical solutions to critical contemporary societal issues.

UKZN's mission calls for academic excellence with a critically engaged approach to society in addressing its inequities of the past (UKZN Strategic Plan, 2023-2032). Success within this mission requires staff to act in oneness through a collaborative spirit that reduces the barriers between departments. It is important to note that mutual respect will enhance inclusiveness by empowering staff to become more effective contributors toward the aims of UKZN.

**Table 1.1: Overview of the R.E.A.C.H.T Framework**

<b>Value</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Source</b>
<b>Respect</b>	Promoting mutual respect, courtesy, and inclusiveness among all university members.	(UKZN Strategic Plan, 2023-2032).
<b>Excellence</b>	Striving for high standards in teaching, research, and community engagement.	(UKZN Strategic Plan, 2023-2032).
<b>Accountability</b>	Ensuring responsibility and transparency in actions towards all stakeholders.	(UKZN Strategic Plan, 2023-2032).
<b>Client Orientation</b>	Meeting the needs of students, staff, and community partners effectively.	(UKZN Strategic Plan, 2023-2032).
<b>Honesty</b>	Upholding integrity and ethical practices in all interactions.	(UKZN Strategic Plan, 2023-2032).
<b>Trust</b>	Fostering trust as a foundation for collaboration and relationships.	(UKZN Strategic Plan, 2023-2032).

The fundamental values of respect, excellence, accountability, client orientation, honesty, and trust are the building blocks and have been popularly referred to as the R.E.A.C.H.T values, which foster cooperation (UKZN Strategic Plan, 2023-2032). These values promote not only interpersonal relationships but also play an important role in making a group succeed in an academic environment. Once these values are practiced, they form a base of mutual respect and teamwork that enables the university to execute its functions. This synergy will be helpful in the realization of:

- **Excellent Teaching and Learning:** Collaborative efforts can lead to innovative programs that enhance student engagement and success (UKZN Strategic Plan, 2023-2032).
- **Excellent Student Experience:** A unified approach to student support ensures graduates are well-equipped for their careers (UKZN Strategic Plan, 2023-2032).
- **High-Impact Research and Innovation:** Joint initiatives can effectively address societal challenges through relevant research (UKZN Strategic Plan, 2023-2032).
- **Community Engagement:** Together, academic and professional staff can foster meaningful partnerships with stakeholders, benefiting the broader community (UKZN Strategic Plan, 2023-2032).

Enhancing collaboration within the context of CAES does not only strengthen the college but also aligns with UKZN's vision of being a world-class African university, dedicated to excellence in all its endeavours (UKZN Strategic Plan, 2023-2032). Thus, this will ensure that academic and professional service staff members make a big input into societal challenges through joint work in embodying R.E.A.C.H.T values and develop UKZN's commitment to excellence in African scholarship. The foregoing alignment will in turn help to make the institution responsive to the needs of the society by promoting innovative solutions reflecting several contexts and challenges that could be experienced within society.

### **1.3 Problem Statement**

The study is inspired by 13 years of work experience as a professional services staff member at UKZN CAES and the observed opportunity for enhanced collaboration between academic and professional services staff to attain the desired institutional outcomes. The extensive interactions that the researcher has had with academics in support of research efforts and student academic services have provided useful insights into the interdependence of these two separate groups. This research study investigates the problem of inadequate collaboration between academic and professional services staff at the university.

The motivation for this investigation stems from the belief that increased synergy and collaboration will lead to improved service delivery for students and enhanced institutional performance, ultimately benefiting the college as a whole. Despite widespread recognition of collaboration as essential for achieving institutional goals, persistent barriers hinder effective cooperation between these two key groups. The real problem on the ground is the existing inadequate alignment between academic and professional services staff, manifested in communication gaps, divergent priorities, and unclear roles and responsibilities. One significant domain of these differential priorities is that professional services staff tend to be guided by procedures and policies in service delivery to ensure compliance and consistency. In contrast, academics are more focused on research output and student performance, driven by innovation and academic excellence. This divergence can create a perception of service delivery versus audit procedures, both of which are crucial to the university's mission. If this problem remains unaddressed, it could result in diminished student support services, lower academic performance, and a decline in the college and university's overall effectiveness in delivering high-quality education and research outputs.

This research also aims to explore the causes of collaboration gaps between academic and professional services staff, as suggested by Lopes & Macedo (2019). They identified key factors contributing to these gaps, including communication challenges, differences in priorities, and organizational silos. By determining these issues, the study will suggest collaboration strategies and activities that promote cooperation and support between academic and professional service staff. To tackle this collaboration gap, the study employed quantitative methods, utilizing an online questionnaire administered to both academic and professional services staff to gather data on existing practices. This approach facilitated the development of targeted strategies that foster synergy between the two groups.

Ultimately, the research seeks to propel institutional performance improvement, enhance student outcomes, and contribute to the University of KwaZulu-Natal's accomplishments in its mission to achieve high-quality research and education outputs (UKZN Strategic Plan, 2023-2032). Through examining existing practices and crafting actionable solutions, this study aims to fill the collaboration gap and create a more cohesive educational environment in support of the university's strategic objectives.

#### **1.4 Research Objectives**

- To identify the current level of collaboration between academic and professional services staff in UKZN CAES.
- To determine challenges to effective collaboration between academic and professional services staff at UKZN CAES, as well as factors that enhance it.
- To provide recommendations and strategies for improving collaboration between academic and professional services staff in UKZN CAES.

#### **1.5 Research Questions**

- What is the current level of collaboration between academic and professional services staff within CAES at UKZN?
- What are the key challenges that hinder effective collaboration between academic and professional services staff within CAES at UKZN, and what factors contribute to and enhance collaboration?
- What specific recommendations and strategies can be proposed to enhance collaboration between academic and professional services staff within CAES at UKZN?

## 1.6 Significance of the study

The significance of this research is multifaceted and contributes to numerous higher education collaboration facets. Conceptually, the research applied the R.E.A.C.H.T framework to highlight how academic and professional services staff rely on one another. In contrast to existing frameworks that often focus on administrative or academic silos, this study highlights respect, trust, and shared goals. By examining the dynamics within the College of Agriculture, Engineering and Science (CAES), it expands the knowledge on collaboration in one context and offers insights that can be transferred to similar learning environments.

Secondly, the study contributes to the knowledge on collaboration in higher education, particularly in the South African context. Although previous research has explored collaboration in various contexts of education, this study addresses the specific challenges and enablers of CAES within the University of KwaZulu-Natal. It finds key variables such as trust, communication, common goals, respect, and institutional support that enhance collaboration, while challenges like organizational silos and resource constraints arise. These findings add to the scholarly literature by providing a balanced perspective, which is crucial in the understanding of the interaction between academic and professional services staff. Further, this research offers avenue for future research, calling upon researchers to study the interaction of such variables in various educational environments.

Methodologically, the research takes a quantitative approach grounded on surveys and analysis of statistical data to study collaboration dynamics. The methodological style improves existing methodologies within the area of study since most existing studies have relied on qualitative or case study methodologies. The use of a stratified sampling procedure and analysis of data through the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) provides a robust framework for studying collaboration within higher education institutions.

Additionally, the results of this study carry far-reaching implication to government, policy makers, and the players in the education industry. In emphasizing the importance of collaborative working among the academic and the professional services staff, the results can be harnessed to inform the formulation of policy that facilitates greater integration in universities. Policy makers can leverage these findings to create supportive frameworks that enhance collaboration, leading to improved educational outcomes and institutional effectiveness. Likewise, stakeholders including college leaders and university administrators

are able to employ the recommendations in developing targeted interventions that promote collaborative practices, hence enhancing the general learning environment.

Finally, the research highlights its multidimensional applicability, emphasizing its significance to conceptual development, literature, methodology, and practical application to significant stakeholders in higher education worldwide. Through its holistic approach, the research not only emphasizes the significance of the research but also positions it as a significant contribution to current debates surrounding collaboration in academia.

### **1.7 Research Methodology**

Quantitative research methodology was adopted for this study, based on a sample of 84 respondents comprising academic and professional services staff at the UKZN CAES. The online questionnaire involved was used to determine the level of collaboration that exists between these two groups of university workers. Data analysis was done using the SPSS, with emphasis on associations of socio-demographic variables with effective collaboration using chi-square tests.

### **1.8 Organization of the study**

The study is presented in six chapters. These chapters consequently reflect the overall design for exploring strategies that best enhance collaboration between academic and professional services staff at the University.

#### **Chapter 1: Introduction**

The introduction chapter provides a background of the research study, stating the problem, research questions, significance of the study, and its organization. It has set the broader context of academic and professional services staff collaboration within the specific setting of UKZN CAES.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

The review chapter is focused on synthesizing literature on collaboration between academic and professional services staff in higher education institutions. It allows for the identification of the importance of collaboration at organizational effectiveness and student success. In this regard, the literature review informs research design, facilitation, and hindering factors and furthers the value of the UKZN study through deepening the understanding and the need for improvement of collaboration among academic and professional staff.

## **Chapter 3: Research Methodology**

The chapter describes the research design, the selection of participants, the method of data collection, techniques for analysing data, and concerns about ethical issues. It provides a justification for the type of research design adopted, describes how participants were selected, and outlines methods of data collection. In addition, the chapter outlines the techniques to be used in analysing data and raises ethical considerations.

## **Chapter 4: Results of the study**

The chapter presents the findings of the study, including participant demographics. An overview of the results and insights obtained on those factors that assist and/or hinder collaboration between academic and professional services staff at UKZN CAES is provided.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion of the findings**

This chapter discusses the findings related to each objective of the study, based on the results provided in Chapter 4. An in-depth analysis of the data collected is explored to understand the current level of collaboration, variables that contribute to it, and resultant challenges faced by both academic and professional services staff at UKZN CAES. Each objective is discussed in turn to allow for linking to the overall aims of the study.

## **Chapter 6: Conclusion and Recommendations**

Key points of the entire study, including its contribution is summarized in this chapter. It outlines the practical implications of the study to UKZN CAES and discusses the benefit and

possible applications of the findings. This chapter also discusses the limitations of the study and offers some recommendations for future research. The chapter does conclude with final thoughts which leave a reader with quite clear ideas about the importance of the study and possible future avenues.

### **1.9 Study Limitations**

The present study conducted within CAES at UKZN has several limitations that would reduce the generalisability and validity of the findings. The sample size was varied and did not represent the population of the university since, due to time limitations, the study was bound by one college. This lack of representation within the participants is an implication that the insights gained may not reflect what takes place in other colleges at UKZN concerning collaborative dynamics. The future research shall, therefore, over-emphasize seeking a larger and representative sample of participants from different colleges for an appropriate understanding of the collaborative landscape within the university.

Such a study would better generalize findings and allow the identification of strategies that have proven effective in facilitating collaboration among academic and professional services. Moreover, reliance on self-reported data introduces a source of bias because participants are more likely to provide socially desirable responses rather than candidly reflective accounts of their experiences. This will result in overestimation of collaborative practices while challenges are underreported. Therefore, observational methods or third-party observations in future studies can add objectivity to the research. A mixed-methods design would have allowed both qualitative and quantitative data and increased the richness of the analysis since collaboration experiences can be nuanced.

Moreover, the cross-sectional design suppresses any possibility to outline causal relationship lines between collaboration and its influencing factors. Longitudinal studies will give a more dynamic view of how collaboration unfolds over time and yield rich insight into the effectiveness of initiatives aimed at fostering sustainable collaborative environments within higher education. It would further add to the breadth of understanding by including the student's perspective inclusive of other stakeholders who are external and would inform strategies that meet the needs of all participants in the educational process.

### **1.10 Delimitation of the Study**

The research specifically targeted academic and professional services staff members in the College of Agriculture, Engineering, and Science (CAES) in the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN). There were 84 respondents who were chosen through stratified random sampling to represent all the different roles, such as academic staff, administrative staff, and support staff. This boundary allows to fully understand dynamics of cooperation between these two communities without assuming the results can be generalized to all colleges or universities.

The research was grounded on the R.E.A.C.H.T framework, which stands for Respect, Excellence, Accountability, Client Orientation, Honesty, and Trust. The framework was employed in identifying the variables that influence collaboration and as a systematic process to examine the significance of trust, communication, and shared goals in fostering collaboration in the university environment. However, this theoretical focus limits the research to the parameters outlined in the framework, with the potential that there are other collaboration influences that would not be fully explored.

Furthermore, the research was conducted in the distinctive environment of CAES, whose principal activities occur at three various locations: Pietermaritzburg, Westville, and Howard College campuses of UKZN. To study CAES only made it possible for the research to analyse the distinctive contextual determinants of collaboration in this college, which might differ from other colleges or university departments. This targeted approach was necessitated by the time constraint of the MBA program, limiting the scope of the study to CAES alone and not the entire university.

In short, by defining these delimitations explicitly, the research is enhanced in terms of clarity regarding the scope and boundaries of the study. This enhances it in terms of its context as well as the specific factors that can affect collaboration between academic and professional services staff at CAES within UKZN.

## **1.11 Conclusion**

Introductory chapter has outlined the main issues and challenges related to the collaboration of academic and professional services staff at UKZN. Most importantly, it has identified that effective interdepartmental collaboration is a significant enabler for core teaching, research, and engagement functions of the university.

The next chapter shall undertake a critical review of related literature on the collaboration between academic and professional services staff within universities. This chapter shall undertake the critical analysis of existing research and theoretical frameworks relevant to an understanding of the nature of the academic-administrative divide, barriers to effective cross-functional partnerships, and strategies for fostering a more integrated and collaborative work environment at universities. An analysis of literature will also be used to identify knowledge gaps in the existing literature and indicate precisely how the proposed study is intended to contribute to the scholarly discourse on this very critical issue facing universities worldwide.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

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### 2.1 Introduction

Collaboration between academic and professional services staff is essential for the success of any university, as it fosters improved job satisfaction, increased productivity, and enhanced student outcomes (Meyers, 2019). Therefore, it is necessary to explore strategies that improve collaboration between academic and professional services staff at University of KwaZulu-Natal- College of Agriculture, Engineering and Science (UKZN CAES). This section describes how various research studies perceive academic and professional services staff collaboration in various Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Studies mentioned in this preliminary literature all highlight the importance of factors such as communication, trust, recognition of each other's roles and competencies, and leadership in enhancing collaboration between academic and professional services staff.

In Chapter one, the background of the study, the problem statement, and the research objectives were introduced, emphasizing the importance of better understanding the dynamics of collaboration between academic and professional service staff within HEI's. The section emphasized the importance of this issue, particularly in the context of the UKZN-CAES in South Africa. This chapter builds upon the foundation established in chapter one, and thoroughly examines the existing literature on academic-professional collaboration at HEIs. The sections of the review are divided into several main parts that analyse relevant theoretical frameworks, results from empirical research, and practical outcomes to promote a more integrated and effective collaboration between functions in the context of UKZN CAES.

The literature review begins with the investigation into the differences that exist among academic staff and professional service staff at universities, looking into the historical and contextual factors setting up these differences. This study will focus on higher education in South Africa and specifically on UKZN CAES. Thereafter, it will identify those key factors impeding effective collaboration between the staff groupings at UKZN CAES based on the structural and cultural aspects. This chapter discusses strategies and methods proposed and adapted to functionally improve such relations, while critically considering organization transformation through managing a culture of change and enhancement of interpersonal relationships. Finally, the review identifies a gap in the literature that exists with respect to

academic-professional collaboration at the higher education in South Africa. It also provides a conceptual framework that informs the study through integrating several theoretical positions and empirical findings and thus offers a holistic view of factors that affect collaboration at UKZN CAES.

## **2.2 Definitions of Collaboration**

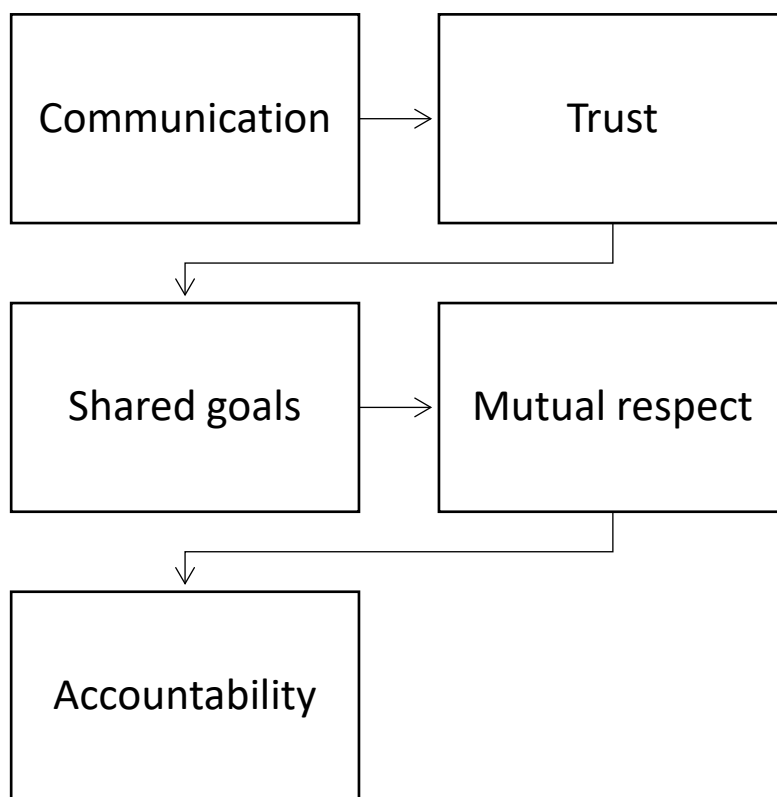
Collaboration in higher education, according to Hober (2023), refers to individuals or organizations working together to achieve a common goal. Regular meetings and online collaboration tools are required for effective communication and information sharing (Team Asana, 2024). These techniques aid in the coordination of activities, the alignment of priorities, and the leveraging of each other's skills, all of which contribute to project and document success (Hober, 2023). Similarly, according to BeforeSunset (2024), collaboration is a dynamic process in which individuals in an institution co-operate to achieve a common outcome. Effective communication, mutual respect, and shared accountability are all critical components of collaboration (Lanoue, 2024). Collaboration is defined by good communication, which ensures that all team members' goals, expectations, and tasks are in line with the overall project objectives (Larsson & Larsson, 2020). This alignment is critical for effective collaboration, particularly among academic and professional services staff at the UKZN.

This study postulates that collaboration is an essential activity between academic and professional services staff within UKZN CAES based on a number of supporting factors. First, effective collaboration fosters effective communication among staff, helping to ensure that the goals, expectations, and tasks of one another are communicated appropriately (Manata, Garcia, Mollaoglu, & Miller, 2021). In an academic setting that is inherently made up of different opinions and ideas, respect for those opinions and integration of various thoughts are necessarily fostered. Accordingly, collaboration enforces shared responsibility due to which ownership and accountability increase (Lima, 2021). By letting people feel responsible for the overall results of joint work, they are likely to be more involved in constructive participation and substantive contribution. Furthermore, the ongoing interchange of ideas and comments allows for iterative changes, which eventually leads to greater task completion and the fulfilment of common goals within the university.

### 2.3 Essential Elements of Collaboration

Effective collaboration is critical for university success because it allows academic and professional services staff to combine their different skills and work toward common goals (Griffiths, Alsip, Hart, Round, & Brady, 2021). Important elements of collaboration in the academic context include communication, trust, shared goals, mutual respect and accountability (Figure 2.1).

**Figure: 2.1: Essential elements of collaboration**



**Source:** (Malak, 2023)

### **2.3.1 Effective Communication and Information Sharing**

Effective communication is the process of communicating information in a clear, succinct, and meaningful way to guarantee that the message is accurately comprehended (Ramadhini & Manafe, 2022). Therefore, effective communication is essential for bridging the gap between academic and professional services staff in the university. This includes developing clear and consistent communication channels, such as regular meetings, cross-functional working groups, and informal networking opportunities (Kolling, Lima-Cruz, & Medeiros, 2022). Through actively listening to each other's viewpoints, exchanging updates on ongoing efforts, and addressing any misunderstandings the two groups can gain a better knowledge of each other's positions. This allows them to collaborate more effectively in finding shared solutions. Improved communication will also aid in identifying areas for potential collaboration and streamlining decision-making processes (Springou, 2023).

Emphasizing these various means of communication, the collaboration level between academic and professional services staff would increase significantly at the university. Fostering collaboration and open communication between departments opens pathways to a more integrated and effective university environment. Consequently, better communication will create a common sense of purpose and a problem-solving culture.

### **2.3.2 Building and Maintaining Trust in Team Dynamics**

Trust is an important quality among colleagues in academic institutions because it creates a foundation for open communication, collaboration, and mutual respect (Awasthy, Flint, Sankarnarayana, & Jones, 2020). If there is an element of trust in institution, people feel safe sharing knowledge and receiving feedback for the good of the institution (Kmieciak, 2021). Building trust entails ensuring that the relationship between academic and professional services staff is transparent.

According to Hreha (2023), for trust to be built, there must be open lines of communication where both parties can express themselves, show concerns, and provide feedback regarding the relationship. Such trust could be achieved through regular meetings and projects in collaboration, enabling interaction and, thus, understanding by staff of the roles and contributions of others (Hreha, 2023). Second, where different perspectives are valued and acknowledged, there is active mutual respect underlying trust (Alshwayat, MacVaugh, &

Akbar, 2021). The commitment to transparency in decision-making processes and the sharing of information may help academic and professional services staff build a trusting environment that encourages collaboration toward shared goals.

### **2.3.3 Joint Planning and Goal setting**

Effective collaboration among academics and professional services staff in a university, as noted by Regan and Dollard (2020), requires establishing shared goals and objectives. Setting goals and objectives is the key to effective functional collaboration in the university as this ensures that academics and professional services staff define goals to be accomplished within their areas of responsibility (Regan & Dollard, 2020). Moreover, the objective should be realistic, and achievable within a given timeframe. According to Momen (2021), the collaborative strategic planning sessions should establish mutual goals. Such sessions may focus on fundamental issues such as enhancing the student experience, increasing research output, or streamlining administrative operations, in accordance with the UKZN Strategic Plan (2023-2032).

Collaborative goal formulation ensures that all stakeholders understand the institutions' desired objectives and can work together to attain them (Momen, 2021). At UKZN, this could involve representatives from academic departments, student affairs, research administration, and other professional services divisions working together to develop collaborative goals and strategies.

### **2.3.4 Mutual Understanding and Respect for Diverse Perspectives**

Mutual understanding and respect between academic and professional services staff are essential for fostering collaboration at the UKZN. When both groups value each other's unique contributions—academic staff for their expertise and professional services staff for their essential roles—it fosters a more cohesive working environment (Team Asana, 2024). This respect promotes collaboration on many levels: it allows for easy communication and teamwork, which in turn enables staff to share ideas and resources (Hreha, 2023).

When people feel that they are valued, they are also most likely to be motivated and engaged in their work, hence further improving the culture of the workplace (Paais & Pattiruhu, 2020). Furthermore, a respectful environment, as noted by Radu (2023), creates opportunities to

embrace diverse perspectives, which can significantly foster creative solutions and enhance decision-making. As a result, collaborative efforts grounded in mutual respect help the university achieve its academic and operational objectives more effectively (Radu, 2023). Key objectives such as improved academic performance, operational efficiency, and professional development can be realized through this culture of respect, as outlined in the UKZN Strategic Plan (2023-2032).

The UKZN strategic plan focuses on goals such as excellent teaching and learning, which directly relates to academic performance, and operational efficiency through effective administrative practices (UKZN Strategic Plan, 2023-2032). Furthermore, such an atmosphere builds community bonding within the university, improving morale in general, and leads toward the mission of the university-to foster a supportive and inclusive environment for all staff and students (UKZN, 2023). Basically, mutual respect contributes to staff relationships and the quality of education and students' experiences that drive the university mission forward.

### **2.3.5 Establishing Accountability in Collaborative Projects**

Accountability, as defined by Tamvada (2020), encompasses the responsibility taken by an individual or a group for activities they have engaged in, as well as reporting on the actions taken and making the outcomes or results of those decisions known. The accountability mechanism in case scenarios of team project execution at academic institutions binds participants to understand their roles within the project and to solidify their commitment to shared objectives (Stewart, Snyder, & Kou, 2023). This concept is essential in the context of exploring the enhancement of collaboration between academic and professional services staff at the UKZN.

It is stated that increased accountability is important in its ability to coordinate activities in pursuit of operational efficiency (Abhayawansa, Adams, & Neesham, 2021). In any collaboration, clear accountability measures are necessary to determine whether the collaboration has been successful. However, this requires establishing shared Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), and regularly reviewing of the progress against these KPIs and holding each other accountable for commitments made (Ventura, 2024). Operating on a culture of accountability will assure the university that the collaborative initiatives are working, whether the set deadlines are being met, and if any obstacle or challenge is being addressed on time.

In doing so, this will increase efficiency and effectiveness in the operation of the whole institution. Emphasizing the elements of collaboration-shared goals, trust, communication, mutual respect, and accountability-will help the UKZN to foster stronger relationships. In turn, this will lead to a more productive and better aligned working relationship between academic and professional services staff.

## 2.4 Roles and Responsibilities of Academic and Professional Services

The roles and responsibilities of academic and professional services staff in educational institutions can vary widely, but they generally encompass several key areas (Table 2.1). Table 2.1 summarizes the roles and responsibilities of academic and professional services staff.

**Table 2.1: A summary of the roles and responsibilities of academic and professional services staff**

Service Area	Role	Responsibilities
<b>Academic Services</b>	Curriculum Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Design and update academic programs</li> <li>▪ Collaborate with faculty to ensure curricula meet accreditation standard</li> <li>▪ Gather feedback for continuous improvement</li> </ul>
	Student Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Provide academic advising.</li> <li>▪ Offer tutoring and workshops</li> <li>▪ Develop resources for diverse student populations</li> </ul>
	Assessment and Evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Design assessment tools.</li> <li>▪ Analyse assessment results.</li> <li>▪ Facilitate peer evaluations among faculty</li> </ul>
	Research Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Identify research funding opportunities.</li> <li>▪ Provide access to research resources.</li> <li>▪ Organize research workshops</li> </ul>
	Faculty Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Offer professional development workshops.</li> <li>▪ Create mentorship programs.</li> <li>▪ Encourage participation in conferences.</li> </ul>
<b>Professional Services</b>	Career Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Conduct career counselling.</li> <li>▪ Organize job fairs and networking events.</li> <li>▪ Provide resume writing and interview preparation resources.</li> </ul>
	Financial Aid and Scholarships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Assist with financial aid applications.</li> <li>▪ Provide information on scholarships.</li> <li>▪ Conduct financial literacy workshops.</li> </ul>

	Administrative Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Manage admissions processes.</li> <li>▪ Maintain student records.</li> <li>▪ Implement efficient registration systems.</li> </ul>
	Information Technology Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Maintain technology infrastructure.</li> <li>▪ Offer training on tech tools.</li> <li>▪ Provide helpdesk support.</li> </ul>
	Student Engagement and Activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Organize extracurricular activities.</li> <li>▪ Support student organizations.</li> <li>▪ Promote diversity and inclusion initiatives</li> </ul>
<b>Human Resources (HR)</b>	Recruitment and Staffing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Manage hiring processes.</li> <li>▪ Implement onboarding programs.</li> </ul>
	Employee Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Organize training and development sessions.</li> <li>▪ Conduct performance evaluations.</li> </ul>
	Policy Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Develop and implement HR policies.</li> <li>▪ Address employee grievances.</li> </ul>
<b>Finance</b>	Budget Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Prepare and monitor departmental budgets.</li> <li>▪ Analyze financial data for decision-making.</li> </ul>
	Financial Reporting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Provide accurate financial reports.</li> <li>▪ Conduct audits for fiscal integrity.</li> </ul>
	Resource Allocation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Allocate funds strategically.</li> <li>▪ Monitor expenditures for adherence to budgets.</li> </ul>
<b>Public Relations (PR)</b>	Media Relations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Develop relationships with media outlets.</li> <li>▪ Prepare press releases and handle inquiries.</li> </ul>
	Crisis Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Establish communication protocols for crises.</li> <li>▪ Train staff on crisis communication strategies.</li> </ul>
	Brand Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Develop marketing materials.</li> <li>▪ Monitor public perception and address feedback.</li> </ul>
<b>Marketing and Communication</b>	Strategic Marketing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Develop marketing campaigns for recruitment.</li> <li>▪ Utilize digital marketing and social media.</li> </ul>
	Internal Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Create newsletters and updates.</li> <li>▪ Organize town hall meetings for open dialogue</li> </ul>
	Event Promotion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Market events to target audiences.</li> <li>▪ Collaborate with departments for consistent messaging</li> </ul>

<b>Technical Services</b>	Infrastructure Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Maintain and upgrade technology systems.</li> <li>▪ Ensure cybersecurity measures are in place.</li> </ul>
	Software Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Provide training on software applications.</li> <li>▪ Troubleshoot software issues.</li> </ul>
	Data Management and Analytics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Implement systems for managing data.</li> <li>▪ Utilize analytics for performance assessment.</li> </ul>

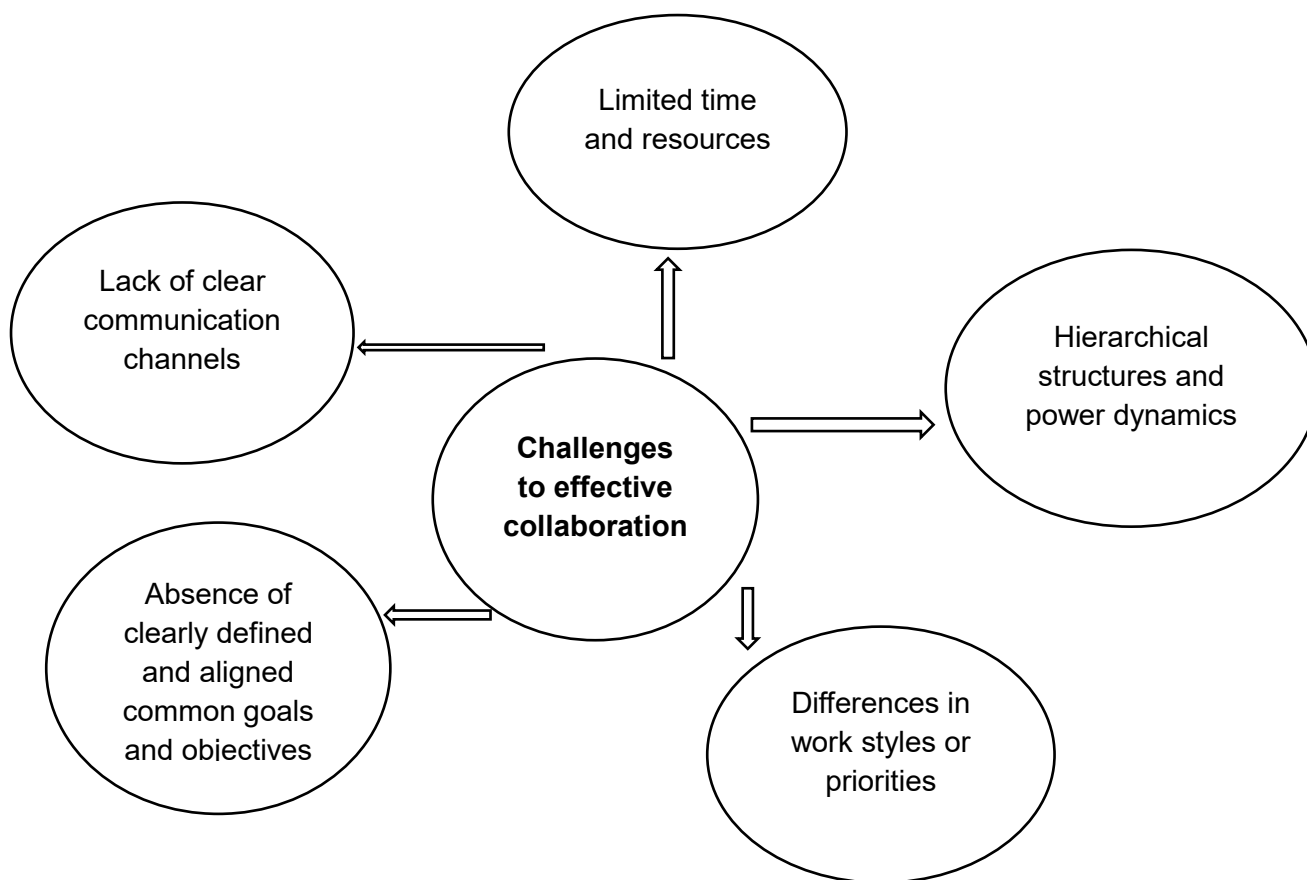
**Source: Adapted from:** (Gander, 2018) and (Springou, 2023)

The table provides a summary of the roles and responsibilities of academic and professional services staff at the university, and indicates ways in which collaboration might be used to enhance the student experience. Some of the major areas of focus for academic services include curriculum development, student support, assessment, research support, and faculty development in pursuit of strong programs and resources that serve the diverse student populations. Professional services include career counselling, financial aid, administrative support, information technology, and student engagement; all these provide important avenues to meet the needs of student success and wellbeing. Overall, these fields can form meaningful partnerships that would ease processes and develop supportive community. In this regard, professional and academic service staff will be better positioned to meet the increasingly complex needs of the students by leveraging their distinct strengths to improve the educational environment and reinforce institutional objectives toward an integrated learning community.

## 2.5 Challenges to effective collaboration between academic and professional services

In many institutions of higher education collaboration between academic and professional services staff can be challenging due to differences in roles, priorities, and work cultures (Gibbs & Kharouf, 2022). As indicated in Table 2.1 academics are often employed for teaching, research and student engagement, while on the other hand professional services focus on operational, administrative, and support functions. Such distinct operations may create communication gaps, misunderstandings and at times conflicting expectations (Whitchurch, 2020). Additionally, varying levels of authority, decision-making processes, and resource allocation can further complicate collaboration efforts (Alexander, Martin, Manolchev, & Miller, 2020). These challenges if not addressed can affect the overall efficiency and productivity of the institution. Key issues include the following:

**Figure 2.2: Challenges to effective collaboration**



**Source:** (Kissflow, 2023)

### **2.5.1 Lack of clear communication channels**

Communication channels between academic and professional services staff might be unclear or inadequate, limiting collaboration and mutual understanding (Maier et al., 2021). According to Sekuru (2023), one major reason organizations fail to communicate is the lack of defined communication routes. When communication routes are not clearly established, uncertainty and misunderstandings can occur, resulting in ineffective communication (Sekuru, 2023). Effective communication is a two-way process that includes both speaking and listening (Business Queensland, 2022). However, in most cases there exist an imbalance between academics and professionals in this regard. This is largely because academics often wants to give commands and be listened to while they view professional services as their inferiors not as people to work with (Caldwell, 2022).

For effective collaboration academic and professional services staff need to actively listen to one another more to ensure that messages are accurately understood and to promote smooth and efficient operation of the university. McConnell and Morrow (2020) supported the approach of "developing effective communication channels between academic and professional services staff" for the ability to cooperate. Effective communication channels can be improved through regular meetings, information platforms, and an open dialogue culture (McConnell & Morrow, 2020). When these channels of communication are missing, there can be a breakdown in the sharing of information, misinterpretation can occur, and transparency will not be realized.

### **2.5.2 Limited time and resources**

Competing demands on the time and limited resources can be detrimental to any collaboration of academic and professional service staff who are trying to find appropriate ways forward in collaboration (Ellemers, 2021). This is since the academic staff often face very heavy teaching loads, research expectations, and administrative service responsibilities that leave minimum time devoted to the collaborations (Szromek & Wolniak, 2020). Professional services staff may be overstretched by demands on them to attend to immediate operational tasks at the expense of avenues of potential further opportunity for teamwork or joint initiatives (Springou, 2023). This struggle to balance individual responsibilities against collaborative engagement provides a source of missed opportunities for synergy and hampers the overall effectiveness of collaborative efforts within the institution. Whitchurch and Gordon (2020) referred to

"boundary-crossing" challenges for staff in higher education, where competing priorities coupled with finite resources can act to constrain collaborative work. Whitchurch and Gordon (2020) also state that the changing nature of professional services staff demands new models of professionalism and collaborative approaches to successfully manage these restrictions. This insight emphasizes the importance of institutions adapting their tactics in response to changing roles and responsibilities within academic and professional services. When both academic and professional services -are stretched, they are far less likely to invest time and energy into collaborative initiatives, as core responsibilities naturally take priority.

### **2.5.3 Hierarchical structures and power dynamics**

Traditional hierarchical structures within HEIs and perceived power dynamics between academic and professional service staff can intrinsically impede effective collaboration. Szekeres (2020) spoke about the "changing role of professional staff in higher education," outlining how several tensions in power and increasingly blurred boundaries between the roles of academic and professional services are relevant. The persistence of hierarchical structures and perceived power imbalances can undermine trust and hinder collaborative efforts (Szekeres, 2020). These hierarchical structures and power balances tend to breed reluctance to share information or make decisions jointly, or to challenge traditional ways of working, which in any case stands in the way of effective collaboration in the universities. In order to respond to these issues, it is very important that an organizational culture be established which can share information openly and empower all employees, regardless of their rank.

This can be achieved by establishing training on collaborative skills and conflict resolution which could help staff navigate the issue of power more constructively. It can also promote teams across different functional areas that involve various hierarchical levels and hence will help create more inclusiveness and diverse viewpoints to support fair decision-making. Continuous feedback mechanisms and discussion forums also provide an avenue for staff to express opinions and make suggestions on how to shape collaboration practices. In return, addressing challenges in hierarchical structures will help build better trust and collaboration between the academic and professional service staff within an institution.

#### **2.5.4 Differences in work styles or priorities**

Variations in style of work, experience, and priority between the academic and professional service staff may be a huge source of misunderstandings and perhaps work against collaboration (McGiffin, 2021). These lead to conflicting problem-solving and project management approaches that inadvertently foster frustration and miscommunication. For example, priorities may be on research and teaching outcomes among the academic staff, while among the professional services staff, it may be operational efficiency and support to students. This can simply create a gap in understanding of each other's goals and constraints, thereby making it difficult to align efforts and collaborate effectively.

Recognizing such differences and understanding them allows these institutions to devise ways to bridge such a gap and facilitate much greater collaboration (Regan & Dollard, 2020). Regan and Dollard (2020) also point out a "need to align academic and professional services priorities." Through this, collaboration is regarding decision-making at an institutional level. Where this has not happened, tension may be evident and makes working toward shared priorities very difficult (Regan & Dollard, 2020). Issues to be faced would include differences in work culture, ways of communication, and means of decision-making among academic and professional services staff because of which identifying common grounds may become quite tedious to work effectively.

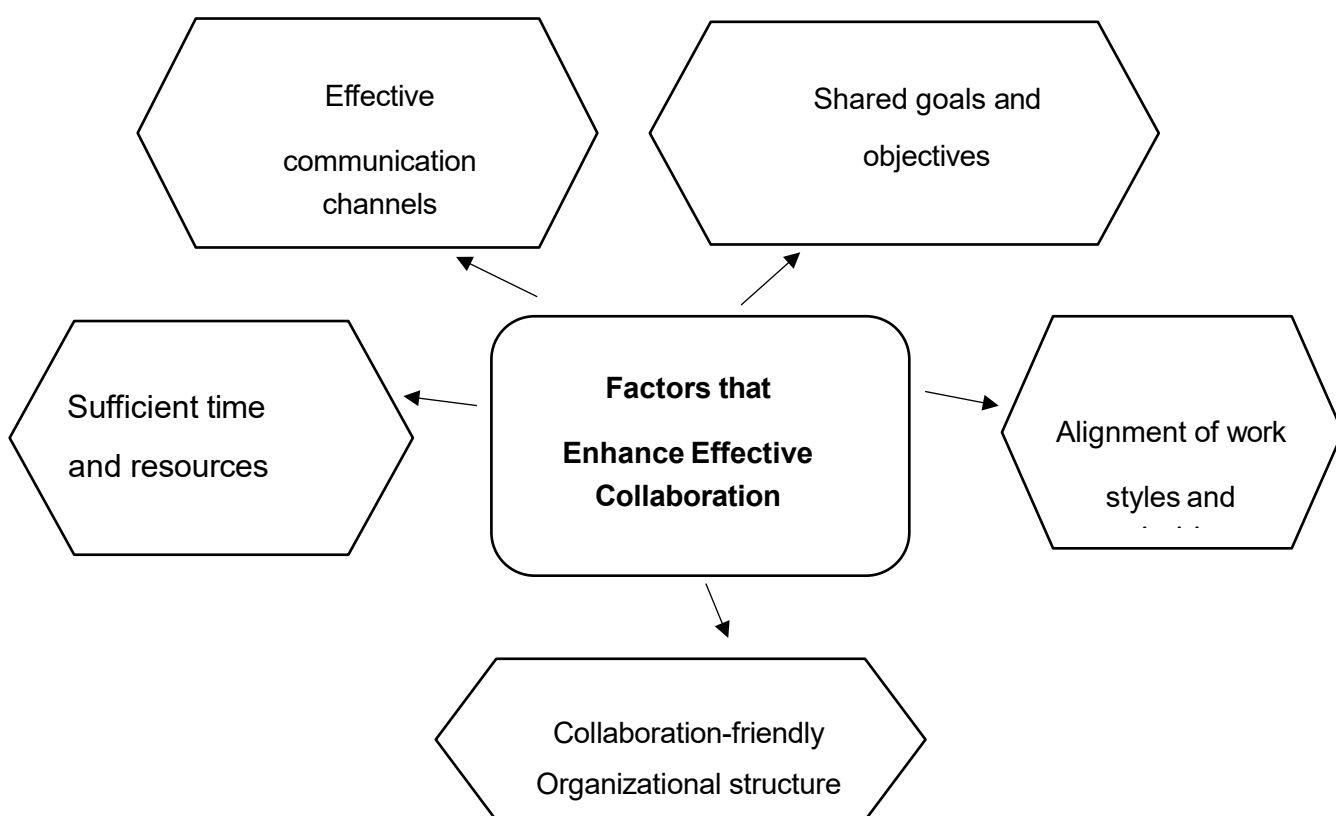
#### **2.5.5 Absence of clearly defined and aligned common goals and objectives**

Without clearly defined or aligned common goals and objectives there can be no effective collaboration. A deficiency in a shared and clear vision will undermine the effectiveness of collaboration (Manata et al., 2021). Whitchurch and Gordon (2020) raise the need for "boundary-crossing" and the creation of "third space" professionals who can bridge the gap between staff in academic and professional services and align institutional goals. If there is not one common vision and mission, some fragmented approach can result because each group tries to go after their own goals rather than work toward institutional objectives.

## 2.6 Factors that enhance effective collaboration between academic and professional

Improving collaboration between academic and professional services is critical to fostering a supportive and vibrant educational environment. Here are some important variables that can enhance collaboration:

**Figure 2.3: Factors that enhance effective collaboration**



**Source:** (Awasthy et al., 2020).

### **2.6.1 Effective communication channels**

Communication channels are traditionally known to be technical and formal processes that facilitate information between two parties which would be a sender and receiver (Crupi, 2022). They encompass systems used to deliver messages and enable feedback, thus ensuring two-way flow of information. Clear and open lines of communication are needed for collaboration to be effectively done by academic and professional services staff. The effectiveness of communication channels depends on high efficiency, reliability and speed of communication (Musheke & Phiri, 2021). Thus, the channel is perceived to be effective when it allows the organization to either send information or to receive responses from the recipient of that information. Defined clear channels of communication in institution foster mutual understandings and harmonization of priorities to realize joint initiatives.

Several approaches are essential in the development of various communication strategies, including regular meetings, shared information platforms, and a culture of open dialogue. These methods would significantly strengthen the communication between these two groups, thereby allowing them to collaborate more effectively (McConnell & Morrow, 2020). It involves creating an environment where clarity of communication is key to making staff in academic and professional services comfortable to share, voice their views, and work together towards common goals.

### **2.6.2 Sufficient time and resources**

Sufficient time and resources can enhance effective communication in UKZN by allowing academic and professional services staff to engage more thoughtfully in discussions, ensure clarity and avoid incomplete exchanges (Nieuwenhuys, 2021). The conflicting priorities and scarcity of resources impede the collaborative work at higher education institutions in many cases. For example, when ample time is allocated, team members can fully process and respond to information, promoting better understanding and reducing misunderstandings. Sufficient time and resources enhance effective communication in a working environment by allowing individuals to engage more thoughtfully in discussions, ensure clarity, and avoid rushed or incomplete exchanges (Garg, 2023). According to the literature, institutional support, committed funding, and flexibility in workload enable people to transcend such constraints, as highlighted by Teague and Vermillion (2020). Where academic and professional services staff have the time and resources to commit to collaboration, there is

greater likelihood that collaboration in projects and initiatives is accorded a higher priority and becomes an active engagement (Whitchurch & Gordon, 2020). Providing adequate time and resources to demonstrate the institution's commitment to collaboration, which can minimize the boundary-crossing challenges staff encounter while balancing the demands of their respective roles.

### **2.6.3 Collaboration-friendly organizational structures**

Organizational friendly structures are systems, frameworks or hierarchies within an organization that are designed and implemented to encourage and support teamwork and cooperation among individuals or departments (Jerab & Mabrouk, 2023). Findings by Ganeshu et al. (2024) state that collaboration-friendly organizational structures create a framework for order and for the coordination of the myriads of activities that are carried out in an institution. Organisational structure is a vehicle through which managers can plan, organise, direct and control the activities in UKZN. These structures promote open communication, shared decision-making, and flexibility, enabling different groups, such as academic and professional services staff, to work together effectively.

Organizations must have "integrated organizational structures" to allow collaboration to occur by breaking down functional silos (Sobotkiewicz & Waniowski, 2021). Strategies such as flatter hierarchies, cross-functional teams, matrix management, and flexible working will help create collaboration-friendly organizational structures (Bolden et al., 2020). Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) could create an enabling environment through adopting collaboration-friendly organizational structures for academic and professional services staff to work together, build on each other's strengths, and deliver better results on core institutional activities. Effective organisational structures matter to the institution and individuals employed by the organisation. Thus, when designing effective organisational structures for collaboration it is important that the interest of the people matter.

### **2.6.4 Alignment of work styles and priorities**

Bridging the gaps in work styles, experiences, and priorities between academic and professional services staff enables them to work effectively with one another (Urquía-Grande & Perez Estebanez, 2020). This involves an understanding and integration of different ways of doing things, communicating, and ways of working (Musheke & Phiri, 2021). Through

mutual respect and commonalities, strategies can be developed by staff that allows others' strengths and perspectives to come into play, furthering the ability for people to work with others toward shared objectives (Kmieciak, 2021). When these factors come together, joint initiatives and projects can be empowered. Building mutual understanding, cross-training, and solving problems are ways, as identified from the literature, to help align work styles and priorities of both groups (BeforeSunset, 2024).

If academic and professional services staff were more cognisant of each other's jobs and priorities, then they would be in a better position to work together and align efforts toward common goals (Regan & Dollard, 2020). A consistent style of working and aligned priorities ensure a more cohesive and teamwork approach to organizational culture where academic and professional services staff understand the contribution of each other's role within the university.

### **2.6.5 Shared goals and objectives**

University shared goals and objectives must be clarified from the outset to enable academic and professional services staff to collaborate effectively effectiveness (Awasthy et al., 2020). That also requires "boundary-crossing" and the development of "third space" professionals who can bridge the gap in aligning institutional goals between academic and professional service staff (Springou, 2023). Such professionals would enable better communication and mutual understanding through the integration of perspectives of both groups, hence fostering effective collaboration (Awasthy et al., 2020).

Their engagement with projects that are interdisciplinary in nature encourages inclusivity and shared responsibility, hence coming up with more creative solutions and increased institutional effectiveness (Ellemers, 2021). Strategies that may contribute to aligning common goals and objectives include collaborative strategic planning, joint ownership of institutional objectives, and shared metrics on performance (Whitchurch & Gordon, 2020).

This approach enables general objectives and goals to be aligned, provides the environment in which HEIs can establish a collaborative scenario where academic and professional services staff work as partners. The development of this partnership will put HEIs in an even

better position to pursue strategic priorities and realize their overarching vision. This collaborative framework not only enhances communication and understanding between different staff groups but also is contributing to the more cohesive effort towards the institutional success of HEIs. These factors have an impact on the progressiveness and possibility for effective collaboration between academic and professional services staff. Discussion of the principal factors shall allow the university to outline the best possible solution to achieve effective collaboration between academic and professional services staff, optimize institutional performance, and enhance outcomes for both the institution and its stakeholders.

## **2.7 Synthesis of Literature and Theoretical Application**

The literature defining collaboration in the context of higher education reveals a matrix of considerations to be made, which govern how effective collaborative activity is. Such studies indicate communication, trust, and shared goals as principal drivers for successful collaboration. Frameworks such as R.E.A.C.H.T model recognize mutual respect and institutional commitment as key aspects to be present in order to bridge the gap between the academic and the professional services staff.

In synthesizing this literature, it emerges that while significant advances have been made in theorizing collaboration, there remains a shortfall in the use of theoretical frameworks that are able to deal with context-specific challenges. The application of the R.E.A.C.H.T framework in this research enables the close examination of these dynamics in the College of Agriculture, Engineering and Science (CAES) at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Through the intersection of theory and evidence, this study not only confirms extant literature but also provides a pragmatic solution to understanding the unique collaborative culture in CAES. The incorporation of tested theories within this synthesis highlights their relevance while also paving the way for further study that can analyze these dynamics across other UKZN colleges and other educational settings, adding further richness to the overall conversation regarding collaboration within higher education. This synthesis highlights the relevance of established theories while also paving the way for future research that can explore these dynamics in other colleges within UKZN and other educational contexts, thereby enriching the broader discourse on collaboration in higher education.

## **2.8 Conclusion and further research**

Good collaboration aids in improving efficiency and achieved strategic goals set by the institution. The benefits identified included improved communication and common objectives. The literature reviewed indicated a collaborative culture where there is mutual respect, trust and accountability. Strategies identified include a forum for interaction that is structured and incentive systems to ensure rewards are in place for collaborators. Differences in work style and lack of opportunities to interact were potential barriers. It would be worth considering the introduction of initiatives, which compel academics and professional services staff to interact, for example, interdepartmental sport.

This review argued that institutions of higher learning had a role to ensure specific interventions were targeted in ways, which improved the distinct strengths of each of these groups and brought people together. As such, the chapter outlined the evidence from existing research that provided the basis for further empirical investigation of some identified enablers and barriers to collaboration within CAES. This promotes not only operational effectiveness but also helps UKZN advance its mission of knowledge advancement and societal impact. The next chapter describes the methodology used in realizing the objectives of this study.

## CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

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### 3.1 Introduction

In Chapter 2, a critical review of the literature was carried out on the collaboration within academic settings, including key theories, models, and factors influencing collaborative practices, were reviewed. Then, it explored the role of both academic and professional services staff, the barriers, and facilitators of effective collaboration that influenced the basis of the current study. The current chapter describes research methodology followed in finding the best suitable method of improving collaboration between academic and professional service staff at UKZN within the context of the College of Agriculture, Engineering, and Science. The following sections will describe the research design, participants, methods of sampling, how data was collected, data analysis procedures, and statements on ethical considerations.

### 3.2 Research approach and design

Research design provides the plan or framework for addressing a research question. It outlines how the research will be conducted, ensuring that the methods used are appropriate for answering the research question(s) (McCombes, 2021). The research design also encompasses sets of related choices, which, together set the total research process. It serves as a blueprint, ensuring that the study is systematic, efficient, and valid (Kouam, 2024). A well-thought design will ensure meaningful results in the long run.

The research approach and design are vital in explaining how the study is to be conducted (McCombes, 2021). This study adopted a quantitative research approach in exploring the extent of collaboration amongst academic and professional services staff at the UKZN CAES. Quantitative research focuses on collecting and analysing data uncover patterns, quantification of relationships, behaviours, and insights that can be generalized to larger populations (Godwin, Benedict, Rohde, Thielmeyer, Perkins, Major, and Chen, (2021).

### 3.3 Sampling Method

Sampling method refers to procedures that are developed to create a sample of people from a larger population; the process enables researchers to make inferences about the entire population (Mweshi & Sakyi, 2020). According to the same source, there are different sampling techniques, each having various advantages and suitable depending on the goals of the research: random sampling, stratified sampling, and systematic sampling. In this study, a targeted population of academic and professional services staff in the CAES at UKZN was based on a stratified random sampling technique. Stratified random sampling is a method in which the population is divided into distinct subgroups, or strata, that share similar characteristics (Kallio, 2024).

The academic and professional services staff within the college were stratified across different departments or units. Proportional allocation for the sample size in each stratum considered an adequate number of senior-level personnel, ensuring proportional representation of the overall target population. The study focused on capturing insights and views from academic and professional service staff, the key individuals with major roles in the collaboration of CAES. Thus, this befits the definitions of the target population, which, according to Casteel & Bridier (2021), refers to the total group of individuals that the research aims to study. Sampling is a process of selecting a subset of individuals from the population to estimate the characteristics of the entire group (Casteel & Bridier, 2021).

Stratification of the participants targeted academic and professional service staff within the college across departments or units. Proportional allocation in each stratum's sample size considered an adequate number of senior level personnel so that the sample is representative of the overall target population. The study focused on capturing insights and views from academic and professional service staff, the key individuals with major roles in the collaboration of CAES. Thus, this befits the definitions of the target population, which, according to Casteel & Bridier (2021), refers to the total group of individuals that the research aims to study. Sampling, is a process of selecting a subset of individuals from the population to estimate the characteristics of the entire group (Casteel & Bridier, 2021).

### 3.3.1 Target Population and Sample size

The target population for the current study consisted of 639 permanent staff members in the CAES at UKZN. This group included all senior academic staff and senior professional services staff who played a pivotal role in collaboration within the college. From the target population, the targeted sample was 84 participants. In ensuring a representative sample, the sample size was calculated; the feasibility and resource constraint were considered.

Stratified random sampling technique was used to draw the sample: stratification of academic and professional services staff in the college was done by departments or units. The selection of participants was done in proportion to the size of each stratum, ensuring that each stratum gets represented in the sample. The study used a representative sample in order to ensure the capturing of wide variation in perspective and experience within the target population for meaningful analysis and generalization of findings. These important factors were considerations in determining the sample size:

- **Statistical Power:** A sample size of 84 was regarded as sufficient to achieve appropriate statistical power in detecting meaningful effects, particularly in social science research. This size offered the possibility for valid inferential statistics, such as correlation and regression analysis.
- **Practicability:** The sample size was therefore sufficient in number to make data collection and analysis viable within available resource limitations, allowing variation in responses to be examined in depth without making unreasonable demands on either the researcher or participants.
- **Confidence Level vs. Margin of Error:** Sample size was determined by striking a balance between the ideal confidence level, which is usually considered to be 95%, with that of the preferable margin of error being at about 10%. Calculation for this is:

**Table 3.1: Sample Size for CAES Departments**

<b>Department</b>	<b>Target Sample Size</b>
CAES Leadership	2
CAES Management	3
Academic Leaders	1
Professors and Associate	12
Senior Lecturers and Lecturers	25
Admin Officers and Technicians	28
Specialists - Academic	5
Specialists – Professional Services	8
<b>Total</b>	<b>84</b>

Table created by the author. This table presents the sample size of the study.

Sample size calculation for a stratified random sampling approach, considering a target population of 639, a confidence level of 95%, and a margin of error of 10%:

### **Step 1: Sample Size Calculation**

#### **Sample Size Formula:**

$$n = \frac{Z^2 \times p \times (1 - p)}{E^2}$$

#### **Definitions of Variables**

- $n$  = required sample size
  - $Z$  = Z-value for a 95% confidence level (approximately 1.96)
  - $p$  = estimated proportion of the population ( $p=0.5$  for maximum variability)
- $E$  = margin of error (0.10)

## Step 2: Plugging in the Values

- Z-value for 95% confidence level:  $Z = 1.96$
- Estimated proportion:  $p = 0.5$
- Margin of error:  $E = 0.10$

## Calculation

Substituting these values into the formula:

$$n = \frac{(1.96)^2 \times 0.5 \times (1 - 0.5)}{0.10^2}$$

$$n = \frac{(1.96)^2 \times 0.5 \times (1 - 0.5)}{0.10^2}$$

$$n = \frac{3.8416 \times 0.25}{0.01}$$

$$= 96.04$$

## Step 3: Adjusting for Population Size

Applying the finite population correction since the target population  $N = 639$

$N=639$ :

Adjusted Sample Size Formula:

$$n' = \frac{n}{1 + \frac{(n - 1)}{N}}$$

Substituting in  $n = 96$  and  $N = 639$

$$n' = \frac{96}{1 + \frac{(96 - 1)}{639}}$$

$$n' = \frac{96}{1.1487}$$

$$= 83.57$$

$$n' = 84$$

The sample size calculated from the study is approximately 84 after applying the finite population for the target population of 639. It used a 95% confidence level in order to make the results strong and dependable on the basis that there is a great amount of confidence that the findings are true representative of the attitudes and behaviour of the population. The margin of error taken was 10% to balance accuracy and practical constraints. The methodology, therefore, contributed to the reliability and generalization of the findings on collaboration between academic and professional services staff at UKZN CAES.

### **3.4 Data Collection Methods**

Data collection methods are techniques and processes used by a researcher to gather information to answer a research question (Mazhar, Anjum, Anwar, & Khan, 2021). In addition, methods of data collection refer to systematic approaches used to gather data information for the research; such methods thus empower the researcher to glean data from which meaningful conclusions can be analysed (Bhandari, 2020). These methods, according to Bhandari (2020), are also important for gathering accurate and reliable information that can be analysed to answer research questions, test hypotheses, or assess outcomes. The current study applied a structured questionnaire as the primary method of data collection. It targeted only quantitative data of perceptions, experiences, and practices about collaboration. The types of questions that were integrated included agreement-type questions using a Likert scale, multiple-choice-type questions to state preference, demographic questions for contextualizing the responses, and open-ended questions in which the participants could express their thoughts and suggestions.

The data was conducted through an online questionnaire, and the questionnaires were distributed through the UKZN online system so that all CAES academic and professional services staff could easily access them and fill them out. Once the participant agreed to participate, respondents accessed the online questionnaire site that was approved by the UKZN ethics committee. The participants were allowed to fill out the questionnaire on a preferred device-computer, tablet, or smartphone-connected to the internet. The online platform provided confidentiality and privacy for the participants' responses, electronically submitting answers upon completion. The data collected was then stored in a secure and organized manner for analysis. Hard copies were therefore availed for those participants who requested or preferred in-person or paper-based questionnaires where the online system was

not accessible or preferred. This therefore provided a targeted means of data collection, allowing a more in-depth analysis of the drivers of collaboration. Further, the use of open-ended questions facilitated a richer set of data for analysis.

### **3.5 Data analysis methods**

Data analysis is the systematic application of statistical and logical tools to characterize, summarize, and assess data. It is necessary for identifying patterns, correlations, and trends in data, which leads to informed judgments and insights (Eldridge, 2024). Since the nature of this research study is quantitative, analysis was done using SPSS 25.0 software. Using various statistical techniques in describing the demographic characteristics of the participants and their responses, such as descriptive statistics, the associations between different variables on collaboration were tested through chi square. Descriptive statistics are brief informational coefficients that summarize a given data set, which can be either a representation of the entire population or a sample of a population (Hayes, 2023). In addition, the results were generated and presented in tables and graphs to facilitate interpretation and foster more effective discussion.

### **3.6 Reliability and validity of the study**

The reliability and validity formed major characteristics of this quantitative study at the UKZN CAES, where it was ensured that the findings presented would not in any way be compromised. In all, a sum of 84 respondents included 43 academic staff, 39 professional services staff, and 2 who combined these roles for the diverse representation of the population under investigation. The distribution also ensured that the research captured an in-depth understanding of collaboration dynamics between academic and professional services staff, therefore making the findings relevant and applicable to the study.

#### **3.6.1 Reliability**

Reliability refers to the consistency or stability of the measurement instrument in such a way that if the same questionnaire is administered to the same respondents at different times under similar conditions, the results will be consistent (Aithal & Aithal, 2020). Reliability could be measured by the following methods: test-retest reliability, internal consistency, and inter-rater reliability (Kalkbrenner, 2023). In this study, the questionnaire demonstrated internal

consistency as measured with Cronbach's Alpha, which yielded a value of 0.836. This score is reflective of a high level of internal consistency of the items in this questionnaire, since, in general, Cronbach's Alpha values of 0.70 and above are acceptable, while values higher than 0.80 are indicative of good reliability (Kennedy, 2022). Accordingly, an alpha of 0.836 suggests that the items in the questionnaire are reliably measuring the same thing.

### **3.6.2 Validity**

Validity refers to the accuracy of a measurement tool; specifically, whether the instrument measures what it is intended to measure (Kalkbrenner, 2023). The study focused on ensuring that the questionnaire accurately measured the constructs of interest, specifically collaboration between academic and professional services staff. The questionnaire was designed based on established literature, in line with the objectives of the study, to ensure it would capture the required information appropriately. Additionally, the approval by UKZN governance and administration of the ethics of collecting information provided further credence that the institutional standard and ethical guidelines would be observed while carrying out the research.

### **3.7 Ethical Considerations**

Ethical considerations, as defined by Bhandari (2021), are the set of principles that drive the study designs and procedures. Scientists and researchers must continuously be bound with a set of rules while gathering data from individuals (Bhandari, 2021). The ethical clearance for this study is provided in Appendix 3. Some of the key ethical considerations put in place for this research study included:

- **Informed Consent**

Informed consent to participate needed to be given by the participants about the objectives, procedures, and risks and benefits derived from the research; this was so that they could be voluntarily concerned with this research as their decision and choice, showing respect for their autonomy.

- **Confidentiality and anonymity**

Privacy of participants needed to be protected at all costs. Data that could directly identify participants were anonymized and kept in a secure place, making sure that their privacy was also protected during the research process.

- **Respect for participants' rights**

The research emphasized the treatment of the participants with respect and dignity, protection from violating their freedom and exposing them to harm, discomfort, or even coercion, and ethical responsibility.

- **Research ethics approval**

Permission for undertaking the study was an important part of the research methodology. The study was reviewed for ethical considerations and approved by the UKZN research ethics committee, having taken all regulations and guidelines into consideration.

- **Data security**

Compliance with data protection regulations was, therefore, important in making sure that participants' personal information was handled fittingly, and that the information was safe, further showing how the study attended to ethical integrity. By making these ethical considerations forefront, the study could conduct research that was respectful, responsible towards the participants, and embraced standards of ethical excellence in the field.

### **3.8 Conclusion**

The current chapter presented the methodology for the quantitative study aimed at exploring methods to enhance collaboration between academic and professional services staff within the context of CAES at UKZN. The use of a structured research design, appropriate sampling methods, and robust techniques for data collection and analysis enables the study to offer useful insights that can be used to constitute guidelines for achieving collaboration among staff. Ethical considerations were prioritized with the aim of integrity in the research process. The findings that were based on the data collected were presented in the following chapters together with discussion.

## CHAPTER 4: RESULTS OF THE STUDY

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### 4.1 Introduction

Chapter 4 has presented the results of the study on collaboration between academic and professional services staff at UKZN CAES and gives a critical analysis of such. This chapter starts with discussing the reliability analysis of the data collection instruments using the Cronbach's Alpha for assessing the internal consistency of survey items. Next are the socio-demographic details of the study participants; thus, a very diverse and highly educated sample was realized. More specifically, the educational background of the participants entails 5% having their highest level of education as the Matric certificate, 12% having a Bachelor's degree, 2% with a National Diploma, 16% having an Honours degree, 17% with a Master's degree, and as high as 48% of the participants having a PhD inclusive of Doctors, Professors, and Associate Professors. The distribution indeed shows the high qualifications of the respondents, reflecting knowledge and capability in the workforce. The chapter further discusses the relationships between different socio-demographic variables and levels of collaboration, pointing out important trends across different educational attainment groups, among other things. Moreover, the present status of collaboration is compared, including factors which promote effective collaboration, challenges experienced, and strategic recommendations for improvement. Synthesizing these findings allows this chapter to shed light on CAES collaboration dynamics and hence contributes valuable insight into fostering a more cohesive and productive academic environment.

### 4.2 Reliability statistics

Reliability testing measures the consistency or stability of a test, instrument, or data collection method over time or across items. It determines whether the results are repeatable under consistent conditions (Aithal & Aithal, 2020).

#### 4.2.1 Cronbach's Alpha

Cronbach's Alpha is a statistical test depicting the internal structure and consistency of a construct formed by a set of items or questions in a questionnaire or survey. It gives an indication of how much a set of items as a group relate to the measurement of a specific construct or concept. The range is from 0 to 1, with increasing values suggesting the increased reliability (Forero, 2024).

### Interpretation of Values:

- Cronbach's Alpha of 0.70 or above is generally considered to be acceptable, that items have an adequate level of internal consistency.
- Values greater than 0.80 are often regarded as indicating good reliability, in that the items are measuring the same construct quite well.
- A score below 0.60 may indicate poor reliability and actual problems in items that could not satisfactorily capture the intended construct.

**Table 4.1: Cronbach's Alpha**

Reliability Statistics	
Cronbach's Alpha	Number of Items (N of Items)
0.836	14

Table 4.1 presents the results of the collaboration study in terms of Cronbach's Alpha within the CAES at UKZN. The reliability statistics gave a Cronbach's alpha of 0.836, an indication that there is a good level of internal consistency amongst the 14 items that were used within the questionnaire. This is above the common cut-off of 0.70, considered acceptable to be reliable, and higher than the higher threshold of 0.80, usually considered to reflect good reliability.

The high value of Cronbach's alpha indicates that items on the questionnaire are appropriately measuring the same underlying construct of collaboration between the academic and professional services staff at CAES. Consistency in this is important to the validity of the study in that from the findings, one can understand with assurance the dynamics of collaboration within an institution.

This statistic on reliability therefore reinforced the reliability of the study's conclusions that the instrument used to assess collaboration is robust, hence suitable to capture the subtleties of interactions amongst staff members at UKZN's CAES. The better reliability helps this study makes possibly useful contributions to the literature of effective collaboration in higher education.

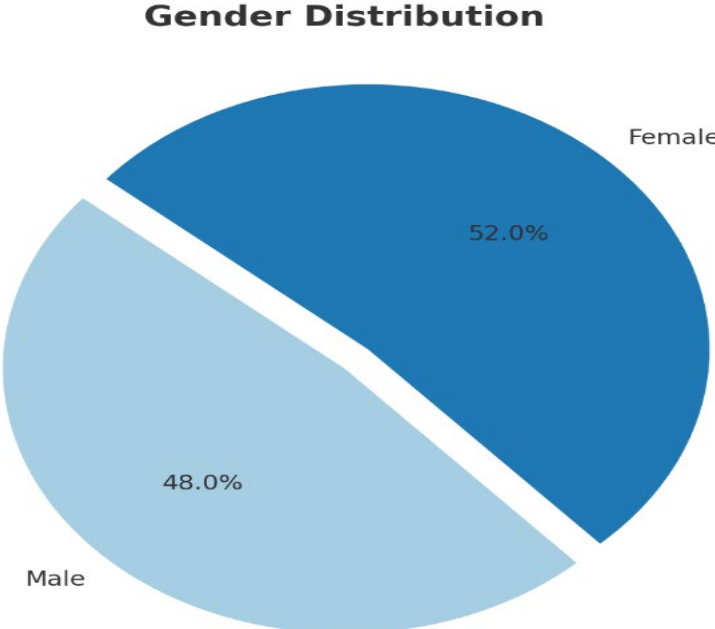
### 4.3 Socio-demographic information of the study participants

Table 4.2 presents the socio-demographic characteristics of the participants involved in the study. From the socio-demographic background information of the participants, a diverse and educated sample is unveiled.

**Table 4.2 Socio-demographic information of the participants (%)**

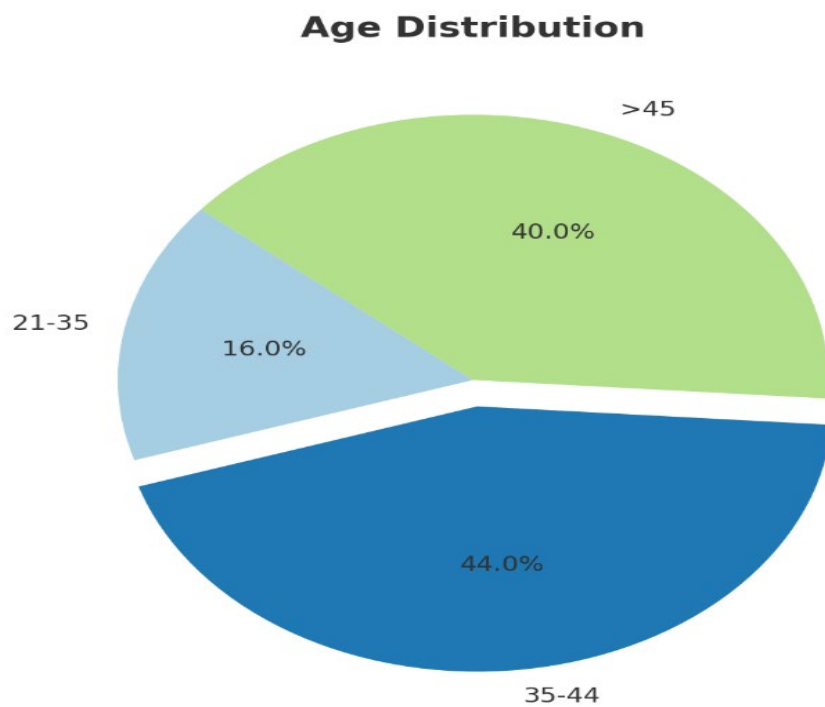
<b>Variable</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	40	48
Female	44	52
<b>Total</b>	<b>84</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Age</b>		
21-35	13	16
35 -44	37	44
>45	34	40
<b>Total</b>	<b>84</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Education level</b>		
Matric	3	4
Bachelor's degree	13	16
National Diploma	2	2
Post graduate degree (Honours, Masters, PhD)	66	78
<b>Total</b>	<b>84</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Profession</b>		
Academic Staff	43	51
Professional service	39	47
Both	2	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>84</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Years of Employment</b>		
<1 year	2	2
1- 5	14	17
6-10	33	39
>10	35	42
<b>Total</b>	<b>84</b>	<b>100</b>

**Figure 4.1: Gender Distribution**



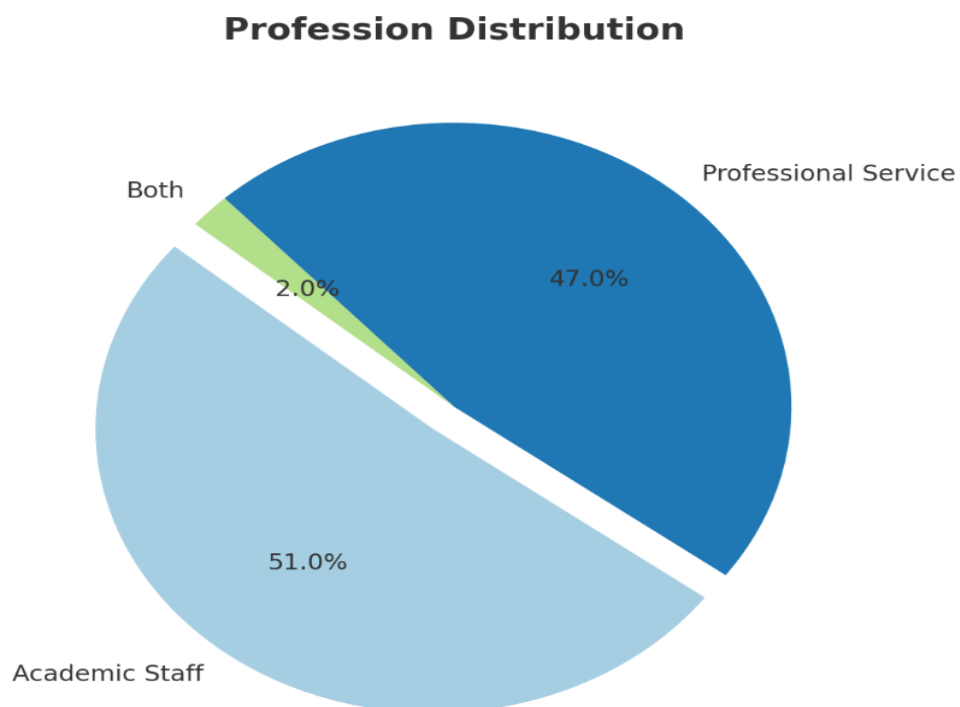
The distribution of male and female participants consisted of, 52% females, while 48% identified were males.

**Figure 4.2: Age Distribution**



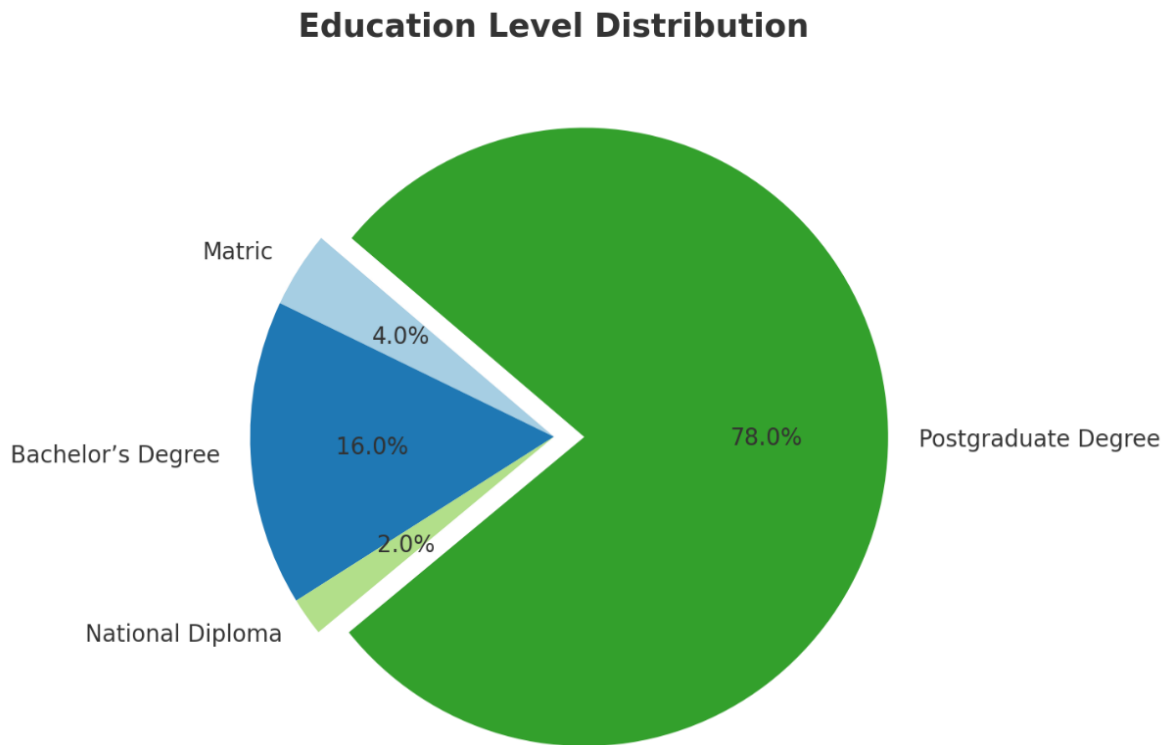
For age, 16 % fall in the range of ages 21-35 years, while 44 %, which is the majority, fall between 35-44 years, and 40 % were above 45 years.

**Figure 4.3: Professional Distribution**



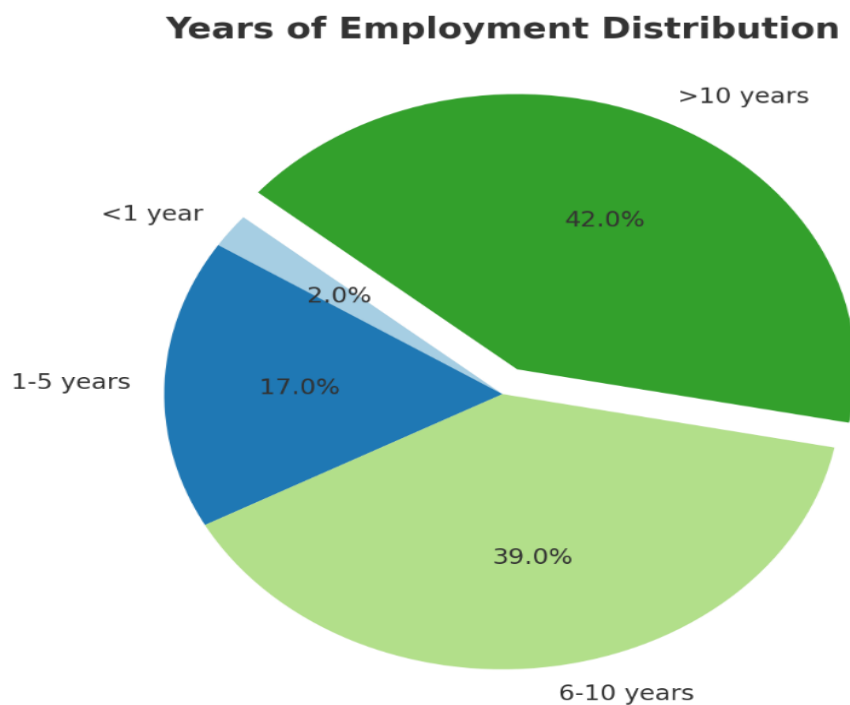
In the participant study, 51% of the respondents were academic staff, while 47% were professional services staff. This distribution indicates a higher representation of academic participants. Additionally, 2% of the respondents work in both areas, allowing them to apply their theoretical knowledge and experience in practice-based roles.

**Figure 4.4: Educational Level Distribution**



The sample under study is highly educated from a liberal perspective, as only 4% of the respondents had Matric certificate as their highest qualification. In addition, 16 % of participants had a bachelor's degree, while another 2 % have a National Diploma. Consequently, 78 % of the participants reported to have postgraduate degrees, which included Honours, Masters, and PhD qualifications with different distributions in each category.

**Figure 4.5: Years of Employment Distribution**



In terms of years of service, 2 % have less than one year working experience, 17 % fall within between one and five years of experience, 39 % have between six to ten years of experience, and 42 % have over ten years of experience.

#### **4.4 Association chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ) between socio-demographic information and collaboration**

Table 4.3 shows the different socio-demographic variables in relation to collaboration among respondents. Indeed, from the table, it is apparent that there is a significant relationship between gender and collaboration among the academic and professional services staff, since the p-value is below 0.05 ( $P < 0.05$ ). In this respect, 83 % of the male respondents reported to have involved themselves in collaborative work, compared to 17 % female respondents.

Further analysis of education attainment done indicates the various qualification groups are collaborative in various ways. The most striking participation in collaborative work was noted from PhD holders, where 48 % of the individuals who included Doctors, Professors, and Associate Professors, reported their engagement in collaborative work. Furthermore, 17% of those with a Master's degree and 16% of those with an Honors degree reported working together. On the other hand, 5% of those with Matric as their highest qualification, 12 % of Bachelor's Degree holders, and 2 % of National Diploma holders were observed to be less likely to collaborate. This trend indicates that the higher the qualification or educational attainment, the more the cooperation or collaborations are presented; from the p-value of 2.44, significant associations were indicated for those possessing National Diplomas. Professionally, 60 % of academic staff were involved in collaborative work, compared with professional services of 40 %, hence developing a significant association with a  $\chi^2$  of 4.00. This portends that academic staff are more likely to engage in collaborative work probably as a reflection of the collaborative culture in most academic environments.

The final important trend comes out in the years of employment data. Whereas only 8 % of the less-than-one-year-of-experience participants were collaborating, 65 % of the over-ten-years of participants could be classified as collaborators. The  $\chi^2$  was 8.79, showing that participants between one and five years of experience were significantly associated below the  $p < 0.05$  level. This would therefore mean that with experience come increased chances of collaborative work, hence the importance of experience in building collaborative relations. The data in Table 4.3 point toward a set of significant associations between socio-demographic factors and collaboration. In fact, strong evidence regarding collaborative practices among participants is present along the variables of gender, education level, professional role, and years of employment.

**Table 4.3 Association between socio-demographic and effective collaboration**

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Proportion (%)</b>	<b><math>\chi^2</math></b>	<b>Significance</b>
<b>Gender</b>			
Male	83	6.33	*
Female	17		
	<b>100</b>		
<b>Education level</b>			
Matric	5		
Bachelor's degree	12		
National Diploma	2	2.44	*
Honours degree	16		
Master's degree	17		
PhD (Dr's, Professors, Associate Professors)	48		
	<b>100</b>		
<b>Profession</b>			
Academic Staff	60	4.00	**
Professional service	40		
	<b>100</b>		
<b>Years of Employment</b>			
<1 year	8		
1- 5	10	8.79	*
6-10	17		
>10	65		
	<b>100</b>		

not significant ( $P > 0.05$ ); significant at \* $P < 0.05$  and highly significant at \*\* $P < 0.01$

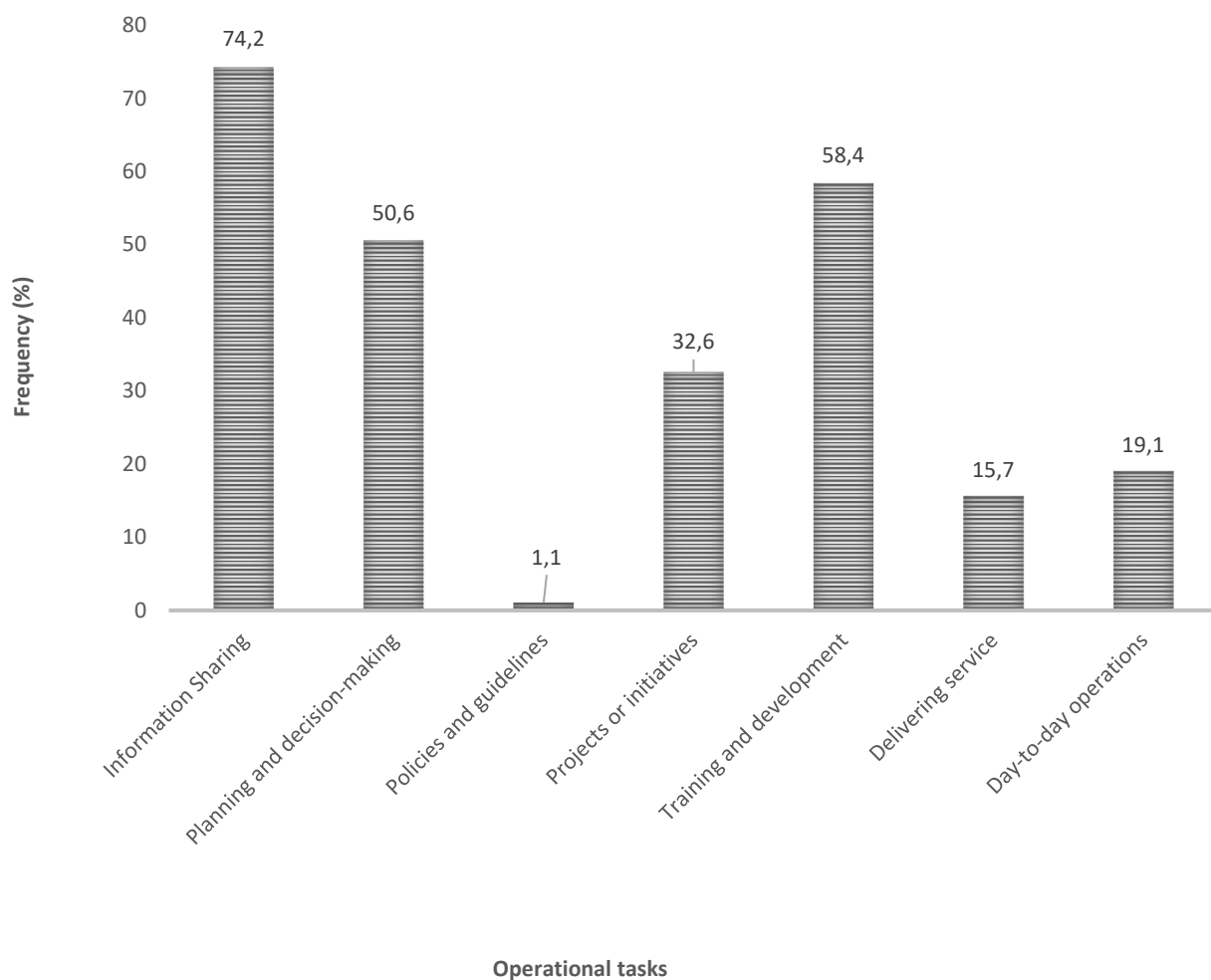
#### **4.5 Current collaboration level between academics and professional services**

Figure 4.6 shows the extent of collaboration currently practiced between professional and academic services staff on a series of university operational tasks. The results tend to show some specific trends in the frequency of collaboration within several key areas. Information sharing stands out at a collaboration frequency rate of 74.2%. The next one is planning and decision-making, with a collaboration level of 50.6%. This postulates that while there is major involvement by both parties in the shaping of strategic initiatives, much space is left to be occupied. Stronger collaboration efforts here might foster more inclusive governance in which the concerns of all are taken into consideration within the decision-making process.

With 58.4%, training and development expresses a collaboration frequency that is reasonably high. However, the implication here is that the opportunity for shared professional development is not sufficiently exploited. Indeed, collaboration in training programs would develop better skills enhancement and knowledge transfer among academic and professional staff. On the other hand, projects or initiatives have a relatively low collaboration index of 32.6%. This can be interpreted to mean that collaboration on project execution is scant, probably due to limited formal mechanisms or adequate means of communicating. Addressing this gap would greatly enhance the efficiency and output of shared projects. These figures turn even lower for delivering service and day-to-day operations, standing at 15.7% and 19.1%, respectively. These figures show possible silos between academic and professional staff in the areas of routine operational tasks; this would mean there is disconnect that will hamper overall efficiency. Basically, collaboration in those areas is essential to ensure that services are delivered accordingly and day-to-day operations run as smoothly as possible.

Finally, the collaboration level for policies and guidelines has been characterized as very minimal at 1.1%, which places it in a domain of very high potential for improvement. This may imply that there are some barriers to collaboration on policy development and implementation that could lead to anomalies and misunderstandings in operational practice.

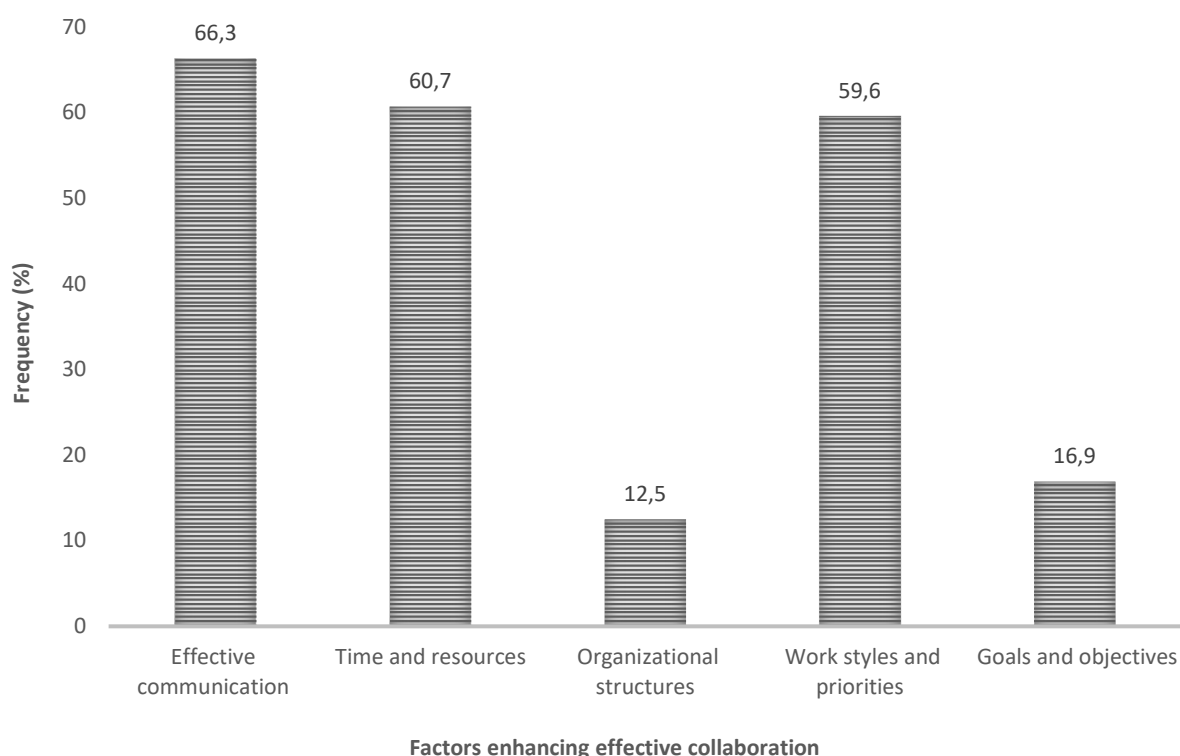
**Figure 4.6: Current level of collaboration between academic and professional services on university operation tasks**



#### 4.6 Factors enhancing effective collaboration

Figure 4.7 illustrates the key factors that contribute to enhancing effective collaboration between academic and professional services staff at the UKZN CAES. The highest factor to emerge in this respect is Effective Communication, with a collaboration frequency of 66.3%. The factor that comes second in terms of influence is time and resources, where 60.7% of the respondents indicated the frequency of collaboration. Work styles and priorities emerge at 59.6% as the main factor. Organizational Culture, relevant only to a limited 12.5 % collaboration frequency, is the relatively less influencer in strengthening effective collaboration. Similarly, goals and objectives, at 16.9 %, appears to be a less important facilitator of effective collaboration.

**Figure 4.7: Factors enhancing effective collaboration between academic and professional services staff at UKZN CAES**



#### **4.6.1 Rankings of factors enhancing collaboration**

Table 4.4 presents the weighted average rankings of factors that enhance collaboration among academic and professional services staff at UKZN CAES. The mean rankings provide insights into the perceived importance of various elements that contribute to effective collaboration. Trust and mutual respect come out as the most important factor, with a mean ranking of 4.80 to enhance collaboration between academic and professional services at UKZN. In addition, transparent decision-making processes had a mean ranking of 4.80, thus ranking as the second most important factor to consider when enhancing collaborative work in a higher institution of learning. The key value of teamwork and cooperation receives a mean of 4.79, indicative of the value placed on collective efforts to achieve a common purpose or goal.

Flexibility and adaptability come next, with an average of 4.69; this would indicate that staff recognize the need for openness to change and the ability to adjust approaches as necessary. Thirdly, rewards and recognition for effort, with an average of 4.68, show that acknowledgment of contribution is important in motivating staff to engage in collaborative efforts. The supportive leadership ranked at 4.48 furthered the leaders' role in creating a culture of collaboration through guidance and encouragement.

The clarity of the roles and responsibilities has also been rated as important with a mean ranking of 4.47 because clarity in such matters averts confusion and ensures that members within a team fully understand their contribution. Effective communication tools, on the other hand, have been recognized at a mean of 4.44 to be quite necessary in facilitating smooth information sharing and coordination among its team members. With an average of 4.34, cross-functional collaboration reveals the heart of collaboration in teams across different departments for innovation and an integrated style of managing university affairs. Finally, even though ranked last, the training and development mean of 4.21 is important, too, insofar as ongoing learning opportunities better prepare staff to collaborate effectively.

**Table 4.4 Weighted average rankings of factors enhancing collaboration**

<b>Factor</b>	<b>Mean ranking</b>
Trust and mutual respect	4.80
Transparent decision-making processes	4.80
Teamwork and cooperation	4.79
Flexibility and adaptability	4.69
Recognition and rewards for efforts	4.68
Supportive leadership	4.48
Clear roles and responsibilities	4.47
Effective communication tools	4.44
Cross-functional collaboration	4.34
Training and development	4.21

\*The mean values represent the average importance of each factor, with higher values indicating higher importance (closer to 5 is more important).

\*Higher mean = More people rated the factor as "Highly important" or "Important."

\*Lower mean = More people rated the factor as "Not important" or "Minimally important."

#### 4.7 Challenges to effective collaboration

Table 4.5 highlights the key challenges that impede effective collaboration between academic and professional services staff at the UKZN CAES. The most crucial challenge reported by the respondents is lack of communication, which was 67 % of them. Coming a close second is limited time and resources, identified by 65.9 % of the participants. Other significant issues include power dynamics, according to 60.2 % of the responses. Contrasting with this, work styles and priorities and misalignment of goals are mentioned by 14.8% each of the challenges mentioned.

**Table 4.5: Frequencies (%) of Challenges in Effective Collaboration**

<b>Challenges of Effective Collaboration</b>	<b>Frequency (%)</b>	<b>Percentage Contribution (%)</b>
Lack of communication	67	30.0
Limited time and resources	65.9	29.6
Power dynamics	60.2	27.0
Work styles and priorities	14.8	6.7
Misalignment of goals	14.8	6.7
<b>Total</b>		<b>100</b>

#### **4.8 Rankings of recommendations and strategies for Improving Collaboration**

Data from Table 4.6 identifies the important strategies to improve collaboration between academic and professional services staff across UKZN CAES, highlighting several recommendations rated on a scale of effectiveness. The most rated strategy is that of joint planning and decision-making, which had a mean of (4.50), indicating that involvement in planning would bring about ownership and shared responsibility among staff. Recognition and reward for teams' initiatives is next at (4.38), which implies recognition of the contribution or participation would be needed to ensure motivation to take part by the staff members.

Joint policy development scored (4.37), which could be interpreted as meaning the making of policies would improve the departments' understanding and alignment. Compliance and accountability scored (4.24). With increasing effectiveness and confidence in the teams, it is indicated that there should be clear expectations. It is further emphasized by laying regular channels of communications (4.22) and interdepartmental meetings (4.13) for a continuous flow of information and formal interaction in sharing ideas and solving problems. Perhaps most surprising, however, are the quite high rankings of interdepartmental sports tournaments (4.11) which reveal the effectiveness of informal team-building events in fostering close interpersonal relationships.

Cross-functional training and workshops are seen at (4.05) to enhance the cooperation of different staff within the university, while at (3.61), training and development programs show the need for specialized training in collaboration techniques. All these recommendations put together argue for a collaborative environment that strengthens cooperation among both academic and professional services staff at UKZN CAES.

**Table 4.6: Recommendations and strategies for Improving Collaboration**

<b>Factor</b>	<b>Mean ranking</b>
Regular Communication Channels	4.22
Clear Communication of Policies	4.20
Joint Planning and Decision-Making	4.50
Joint Policy Development	4.37
Compliance and Accountability	4.24
Regular cross-departmental meetings and forums	4.13
Regular cross-departmental meetings and forums	4.13
Cross-functional training and workshops	4.05
Interdepartmental Sports Tournaments	4.11
Training and Development Programs	3.61
Recognition and Rewards for Collaborative Efforts	4.38

\*The mean values represent the average importance of each factor, with higher values indicating higher importance (closer to 5 is more important).

\*Higher mean = More people rated the factor as "Highly important" or "Important."

\*Lower mean = More people rated the factor as "Not important" or "Minimally important."

#### **4.9 Frequencies of strategies or recommendations for improving collaboration**

Table 4.7 presents frequencies of different strategies and recommendations by the participants for open-ended questions related to improving collaboration between the academic and professional services staff. Information sharing, relationship building through social events, and enhancing the supportive role of professional services staff received the highest frequencies with 2 each. This therefore denotes a high level of agreement on the need for good communication and interaction informally to achieve good collaboration. The focus on clear roles and a participatory approach in decision-making also demonstrates the necessity of clarity in structure and active participation by all concerned. A total of 10 such responses serves to highlight the diversity and interconnection of strategies proposed, indicating a comprehensive approach toward collaboration challenges within an organization.

**Table 4.7: Frequencies of strategies or recommendations for improving collaboration**

<b>Strategy/Recommendation</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
Collaborative culture through defined roles	Clearly define roles and responsibilities to avoid misunderstandings and ensure everyone knows their contribution is valued.	1
Face-to-face communication	Encourage more face-to-face interactions between academic and professional staff.	1
Information sharing and collaboration	Joint information sharing app and digital platforms for seamless communication and information sharing.	2
Challenges with organizational structure	Address the structural challenges posed by different reporting lines between professional services and academic staff	1
Inclusive decision-making	Include academic and professional services staff in relevant decision-making processes.	1
Building relationships through social events	Leverage events like sports days to improve collaboration and relationships.	2
Professional services to support academics more	Encourage professional services staff to adopt a supportive role in teaching, learning, and research endeavours.	2
<b>Total</b>		<b>10</b>

#### **4.10 Benefits of collaboration**

Table 4.8 shows the benefits of effective collaboration between academic and professional services staff at the UKZN CAES. The highest benefit ranked is Improved service delivery, at a frequency of 84.3 %. Increased efficiency had a frequency of 83.1 % as a benefit of collaboration between academics and professional services. Other notable benefits of collaboration included positive organizational culture, with a frequency of 67.2 %. Improved employee relations 79.2 %: Coming in at fourth place is High Quality/Education, 75.3 %. Coming next is strengthened institutional problem-solving at 65 %, follow-through that collaboration has enabled the university to deal with the multi-dimensional challenges more effectively by harnessing the expertise and perspectives of academic and professional staff.

Increased job satisfaction and improvement of institutional reputation both indicate a frequency of 45 %, meaning while collaboration can have positive effects in these areas, they are much about lesser or secondary benefits. Higher research outputs at 16.7 % suggests that collaboration may indeed be beneficial for the research activities; this, however, may not be as prominent compared to the rest of the factors.

**Table 4.8 Frequencies (%) of Benefits of Collaboration**

<b>Benefits of Collaboration</b>	<b>Frequency (%)</b>	<b>Percentage Contribution (%)</b>
Increased Job Satisfaction	45	8.0
High-Quality Education	75.3	13.4
Higher Research Outputs	16.7	3.0
Increased Efficiency	83.1	14.8
Improved Service Delivery	84.3	15.1
Strengthened Institution-Problem-Solving	65	11.6
Improved Institutional Reputation	45	8.0
Improved Employee Relations	79.2	14.1
Positive Organizational Culture	67.2	12.0
<b>Total</b>		<b>100</b>

#### **4.11 Frequencies of additional benefits of collaboration**

Table 4.9 synthesizes the additional advantages of collaboration among the academic and professional services staff as identified from the participant responses to open-ended questions. The data show that building trust and efficiency was the most common mention across the data, with a frequency of 4, to mean there is strong consensus about the role of collaboration in building a collegiate and friendly environment over and above formal duties. Regular meetings and effective lines of communication were also noted 3 times each, pointing out that structured interactions and information flows are necessary to complement the collaborative efforts. Strategy and mutual respect, which enhance collaboration, and accountability and respect, further underscore the importance of defined roles and a culture of responsibility among staff. This also resulted in fewer comments regarding being seen as overstaffed, which represents a gap that could be explored further. Overall, the responses are indicative of a complete understanding of how collaboration can result in greater individual and organizational effectiveness.

**Table 4.9: Frequencies of additional benefits of collaboration**

<b>Benefit</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
Importance of regular meetings	Regular monthly or quarterly meetings would enhance collaboration and communication.	3
Building trust and efficiency	Collaboration builds trust, efficiency, and collegiality, resulting in goodwill-driven efforts beyond formal job responsibilities.	4
Effective communication channels	Clear and effective communication channels facilitate sharing of information, ideas, and best practices.	3
Enhancing collaboration through strategy and mutual respect	Collaboration can be improved by defining roles, establishing open communication, fostering mutual respect, and creating committees/task forces with both academic and professional services staff.	2
Reducing superiority perceptions	Collaboration can be enhanced by reducing superiority complexes among senior managers and fostering a "culture of service." Senior managers should lead by example.	2
Addressing staffing concerns	Addressing perceptions of overstaffing can enhance morale among professional services staff, leading to better collaboration with academic staff.	1
Accountability and Respect	Trust and respect are essential. If an error occurs, the responsible party should take accountability.	3
<b>Total</b>		<b>18</b>

#### **4.12 Conclusion**

This chapter underlined the significance of collaboration between the academic and the professional services staff at the UKZN CAES. The reliability data indicated that the measurement instruments are appropriate for capturing nuances in collaboration; the socio-demographic analysis informed context for understanding participants' perspectives. Notably, as compared to 40% of professional services staff, collaborative work was reported by 60% of academic staff. This therefore showed a significant association with a  $\chi^2$  of 4.00. It therefore seems that academic staff are more likely to undertake collaborative efforts, presumably as part of the collaborative culture that pertains in most academic milieus.

Educational attainment was further analysed and presented that different qualification groups yield a varying sense of collaboration: The most striking participation was noted by the PhD holders, where 48% of the people, including Doctors, Professors and Associate professors, reported their engagement in collaborative work. It shows that higher qualification results in higher cooperation. It is also reflected by the p value of 2.44.

Furthermore, strong associations between collaboration and gender, level of education, and years of employment pointed to important trends that will serve future collaborative initiatives. Although the identified challenges including communication barriers and power dynamics, this study pinpointed effective strategies for enhancement through joint planning, recognition of contributions, and fostering a culture of mutual respect. Ultimately, the insights that can be developed in this chapter will add not only to the literature on collaboration in higher education but also provide practical recommendations for enhancing collaborative practices with a view to developing a more integrated and efficient institutional environment.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

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### 5.1 Introduction

Chapter 5 presents an in-depth discussion of findings regarding the research objectives pertaining to collaboration between academic and professional services staff at the UKZN CAES. Such analysis is organized around two objectives: firstly, establishing what the current level of collaboration is between the two groups, and secondly, exploring the challenges and factors that inform effective collaboration. These objectives are elaborated in the questionnaire used in the study through sections addressing collaborative practices and the barriers that hamper them. The findings give a mixed picture about collaboration at UKZN CAES, emphasizing strengths and weaknesses. Through the socio-demographic profiling of the respondents, the level of engagement in collaborative activities, and the impact of communication, trust, and organizational culture, this chapter explains the dynamics that exist at play in fostering effective collaboration within the institution.

### 5.2 Discussion

This section provides a discussion of each research objective. The questionnaire was divided into categories to gain deeper insights into each objective. The first part of the questionnaire focused on identifying the current level of collaboration, while the second part delved into the challenges to effective collaboration between academics and professional services staff at UKZN CAES. The data collected from respondents and the corresponding analysis will be examined to address the research questions of the study.

#### **5.2.1 Objective 1: Identifying the current level of collaboration between academic and professional services staff in UKZN CAES.**

The findings of this chapter therefore reveal useful insights into what would constitute collaboration in practice among the academic and professional services staff at UKZN CAES. The socio-demographic profile, which also indicated good balance in terms of gender and educational background represented by the participants, affirms the possibility of rich collaborative practices within an institution. The high percentage of female respondents (52%) and the prevalence of postgraduate qualifications among them reflect a significant shift towards inclusivity and an educated workforce, which aligns with findings in the literature that

emphasize the positive impact of diverse and highly skilled teams on collaborative effectiveness and innovation (Whitchurch & Gordon, 2020).

This analysis indicated that information sharing is the highest form of collaboration, standing at 74.2% frequency rate, which shows how important open communication is in encouraging team spirit that shall assist in operational efficiency. This finding was able to support the literature showing how effective communication practices enhance teamwork and organizational performance (Kolling, Lima-Cruz, & Medeiros, 2022). On the other hand, low levels of collaboration in the execution of projects at 32.6% and policy development at 1.1% indicate large gaps that need to be addressed. Several of the responses indicated the existence of silos, which, according to Sobotkiewicz & Waniowski, (2021) can reduce effective teamwork and minimize overall organizational success since information flow and coordination are not enabled.

What can also be identified from this data, however, is a trend: the academic staff is more engaged in collaborative activities than their professional services counterparts, at 60% and 40%, respectively. Such a difference could well reflect the intrinsic characteristics of the type of work that academics do, which generally has had a greater emphasis on research and interdisciplinary collaboration (McGiffin, 2021). Closing this gap will go a long way toward developing a more integrated approach to collaboration, drawing on the respective strengths of these two groups (Regan & Dollard, 2020).

The associations of collaboration with socio-demographic variables like gender, level of education, professional role, and years of employment bring into light the dynamics at play. For instance, this strong relationship between higher educational attainment and greater collaboration could suggest that developing more advanced educational opportunities might have a positive effect on collaborative efforts throughout the institution. The data also revealed that length of service determines the level of engagement in collaboration, with the highest being among those with more than ten years of service. Again, this means less-experienced staff should be mentored and offered opportunities to participate in collaborative activities; literature suggests experienced employees can improve the functionality of a team by facilitating knowledge sharing for the benefit of organizational learning and innovation (Bolden, Gosling, & O'Brien, 2020).

### **5.2.2 Objective 2: Challenges to effective collaboration between academic and professional services staff at UKZN CAES, as well as factors that enhance it.**

The findings of the study highlight several challenges and influencing factors to achieving effective collaboration among academic and professional services staff at UKZN-CAES. Indeed, data that was collected showed that effective communication was the most influencing factor in enhancing collaboration-as responded to by 66.3 % frequency rate of the respondents. This goes to reiterate that there must be clear and open channels of communication to allow a culture of collaboration (Musheke & Phiri, 2021). By contrast, the breakdown in communication was asserted by 67 % of the participants as the major challenge-the most important area that needs attention. From the results, it was also shown that trust and mutual respect are the bases for a successful collaboration, which attained a mean of 4.80. This high rating attached to these values postulates that efforts toward building interpersonal relationships and harnessing respect will greatly improve collaboration (Barrane et al., 2021).

Appreciation of teamwork and flexibility highlights adaptive methods which can be adopted to work styles and priorities of the staff (BeforeSunset, 2024). Interestingly, the analysis has also pointed out that although enabling organizational culture scored lowly with a collaboration frequency of 12.5%, its influence should not be understated. An enabling organizational culture could provide a basis on which good communication and collaboration may be built (Maier, Eckert, & Clarkson, 2021). Thus, programs geared towards fostering an enabling culture within the institution could have multiplier benefits for collaboration enhancement. Most notably, recommendations for joint planning and decision-making to enhance collaboration highlight the importance of instrumental processes involving staff from both groups. Indeed, there is a reasonably strong literature base that suggests that inclusive decision-making elicits not only ownership at the individual member levels but also improved collaboration and better outcomes (Lima, 2021). Such practices allow for shared understanding and commitment that eventually enhance organizational effectiveness.

The participatory approach not only allows ownership and accountability but secures alignment of objectives between academic and professional services staff (Malak, 2023). One of the innovative strategies to come out was a suggestion for informal team-building activities, such as interdepartmental sports, as a means of nurturing relationships and dissolving

barriers. Generally, the results indicate that even while there are many challenges to collaboration, a myriad of opportunities exist for improvement. Barriers to communication need to be reduced, trust developed, and shared goals fostered if UKZN CAES is to establish an enabling environment for collaboration among and between academic and professional services staff.

### **5.2.3 Implications of academic qualifications on collaboration**

The research indicates that academic staff, who tend to be more qualified with Master's degrees and PhDs, exhibited more collaboration than their professional services counterparts. This observation is in line with the perspective that those in academic roles who are more likely to engage in collaborative research and teaching activities would be more collaborative due to their training and professional responsibilities.

However, the suggestion that higher academic qualifications automatically lead to more collaboration warrants further examination. While the findings demonstrated a positive relationship between higher qualifications and collaborative practice among academic staff, it is also important to consider the context in which this collaboration occurs. Academics are often exhorted to collaborate for a variety of reasons that include research productivity, grant proposals, as well as the need to enhance student learning experiences. This intrinsic motivation has the potential to increase the collaboration observed, suggesting that the very nature of academic work encourages collaborative tendencies.

In addition, it is important to recognize that while higher qualifications can facilitate collaboration, they do not automatically guarantee it. Organizational culture, communication channels, and interpersonal relationships are also integral factors determining collaborative dynamics. Therefore, the relationship between academic qualifications and collaboration should be viewed as part of a multifaceted framework in which both individual qualifications and external factors determine collaborative outcomes.

In light of this, the conclusion would be more effective if it more explicitly set out that while higher academic qualifications are associated with more collaboration, it is the combination of these qualifications with both the institutional environment and collaborative culture that actually generates successful collaboration. The discussion should reflect this more nuanced thinking by teasing out the implications that institutions need to create enabling frameworks that facilitate collaboration for all staff, independent of academic qualifications. Future

research could further explore this correlation, investigate the ways in which several factors intersect to influence collaborative practice among diverse roles within the university setting.

### **5.3 Conclusion**

In conclusion, the findings from this chapter revealed the multifaceted nature of collaboration between academic and professional services staff at the UKZN CAES. Analysis showed that while a high level of collaboration is expressed, particularly in information sharing, there is a clear deficiency in action project execution, among other areas, and policy development. The data clearly showed that academic staff are more engaged in collaborative activities, compared to their professional services counterparts, hence the need for strategies that will bridge this divide by leveraging the strengths of both.

Communication breakdown, trust and respect were highlighted as some of the critical challenges in collaboration. Specifically, effective communication was noted as the most influential positive factor in terms of enhancing collaboration. However, it is paradoxical because effective communication is also stated as the number one challenge by the participants, which also underscores the importance of clarity in communication channels and interpersonal relationship-building programs.

The chapter further highlights that developing an enabling organizational culture is about encouraging collaboration through joint planning, decision-making, and less formal team-building activities. These strategies facilitate ownership and accountability and objective alignment for professional and academic staff, which in turn enhance organizational effectiveness. Addressing the identified challenges and capitalizing on the ensuing opportunities for improvement, UKZN CAES has a good chance of fostering further integration and collaboration among its members for the benefit of all individual staff and the institution itself.

## CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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### 6.1 Introduction

The findings of this study give a picture that is complex and nuanced, with varying strengths and challenges of collaboration at UKZN CAES. Most respondents (74.2%) said that the current collaborative approach at UKZN incorporates information sharing. Such domination by information sharing suggests that a foundational culture of communication and openness between staff does exist at UKZN. That can be viewed as promising, since communication is an important component in encouraging collaboration and building trust within an institution (Barrane et al., 2021). However, the results also show significant barriers to deeper collaboration, particularly with respect to the implementation of projects at 32.6% and the development of policies at 1.1%. These low levels of engagement in some key areas of collaboration suggest that while staff may be willing to share information, translating that willingness into actionable projects and policies remains a challenge (Kim et al., 2024).

Socio-demographic analysis further complicates this picture. The results indicated that male respondents were likely to be more involved in collaborative work than their female counterparts, since 83.3% of the males reported active participation. This sets up one important gender difference in the case of collaborative practices at UKZN CAES. It is indicative that institutional structures and cultural norms may unconsciously favour one demographic section over others, thereby giving rise to potential feelings of alienation within the underrepresented staff (Afortor, 2024). It will take a conscious process to develop an inclusive atmosphere that truly values the voices of all.

Thirdly, it was observed that higher qualification levels were positively related to collaboration. The PhD holders expressed a much stronger engagement in collaborative activities with 48%, while the lower-qualified were less than half as involved. This observation is supported by the literature, which shows that academic qualification relates to professional engagement practices (Massouti et al., 2023). It also points to the importance of institutions recognizing and capitalizing on their employees' experience, irrespective of educational background, in collaboration (Popo-Olaniyan et al., 2022). This skills gap might be mitigated by promoting

continuing professional development opportunities for lower qualified staff, which would further improve collaboration in general.

These findings have considerable implications for practice at UKZN CAES. This would suggest that there are significant gaps between the collaboration levels of academic and professional services staff and point to the need for more intentional efforts aimed at narrowing this gap. Academic work may engender a culture that side-lines professional services staff through emphasis on research and interdisciplinarity (Purvis et al., 2023). It means valuing the contribution of each staff member, whatever their professional role may be, in developing a more inclusive collaborative environment. Thus, by implication, the key barriers to collaboration, which were communication breakdowns and priorities (Gibbs & Kharouf, 2022), call for measures that institutional leaders need to take in relation to strategies of promoting joint initiatives and shared goals. This adjustment in building the sense of collective responsibility toward the realization of the institution's objectives is important. In this way, a culture promoting collaboration across board levels will allow UKZN CAES to tap into richness and diversity in the skills mix and perspectives within their staff to serve the student experiences better.

Moreover, the study underlines continuous review and re-evaluation of the practices of collaboration. With continuous change occurring in the environment of higher education, awareness of the needs and expectations constantly changing within staff in higher educational institutions would be important. Regular assessment of the collaboration initiative through receipt of mechanisms of feedback may prove useful in gaining insight into the effectiveness of current strategies, and those needing improvement. This would be proactive, ensuring that collaboration is dynamic and a part of the institutional culture. In short, the implications of this study stipulate that UKZN CAES should take immediate interest in the barriers to collaboration identified in these findings by creating an enabling ground for all staff members to collaborate inclusively and equitably-a condition that would enhance the general collaborative culture of the institution for effectiveness in operations and enrichment of students' educational experiences.

## **6.2 Conclusion**

The study has shed light on the complex dynamics of collaboration between academic and professional services staff at UKZN CAES. It was evident from the findings that although there is a strong enabling foundation for information sharing, much more work remains to be done in translating that communication into good collaborative practices, especially within project implementation and policy development. Given the low level of engagement in these critical areas, while staff seem willing to share knowledge, systemic barriers appear to prevent further deeper levels of collaboration. This reflects the general trend within higher education institutions for silos of information to restrict potential interdisciplinary cooperation (Gibbs & Kharouf, 2022). Thus, this calls upon the university to not only see these barriers but to help dismantle them and ensure that collaboration can be encouraged to take place.

The study also established the need to ensure inclusiveness in collaborative engagement especially with respect to gender and education inequality. These noted differences in levels of collaboration, based on socio-demographic factors, raise the importance of developing an equitable playing field where staff members at all levels, regardless of background or professional role, are able to contribute to or engage in collaborative initiatives (Popo-Olaniyan et al., 2022). This will, in turn, lead to a smoothing of inequities regarding the university general culture of collaboration, which will result in an improvement in functioning efficiency and enrichment of educational outcomes for students. The findings underline that collaboration is not simply a system of sharing information; rather, it is a significant part of institutional identity that can enable innovation, engage students, and thereby help the university achieve its mission of excellence in education.

To reach such objectives, leadership would have to position collaboration at the core of strategic priorities and install it into the operational structure of the university. This shall be realized through focused strategies that would nurture communication at all levels, promote collaboration in efforts, and ensure lifelong professional development. UKZN CAES will strive to engage all staff in collaboration that is holistic in nature to know the different interests, needs, and views of all concerned in securing its future as an intending leader within higher education-one which will be better equipped to face these challenging times that have come to characterize modern higher education and ensure the best possible outcomes for both staff and students.

### 6.3 Contribution to Knowledge

Findings of this study offer valuable input towards enhancing collaboration among academic and professional services staff at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, with emphasis on the College of Agriculture, Engineering, and Science (CAES). Benchmarking practices across the various schools in CAES can go a long way in assisting in the identification of effective collaborative strategies. One potential advantage of such benchmarking is the ability to establish cost-effective interventions that improve operational efficiency and resource allocation. By learning from best business practices of like institutions, as well as those of its own schools, CAES can establish proven collaborative models that enhance service delivery while consolidating funding and staffing resources, with the ultimate goal of enhancing educational outcomes and institutional performance. Such benchmarking has the potential to instil a culture of continuous improvement that will keep CAES competitive and responsive to evolving higher education needs. To measure progress, CAES can establish clear performance indicators, such as:

- **Student Satisfaction Rates:** Surveys and feedback mechanisms to gauge student experiences with academic services, advising, and extracurricular activities.
- **Graduation and Retention Rates:** Analysing trends in student retention and graduation statistics compared to benchmarks from similar institutions to assess the effectiveness of support services.
- **Cost per Graduate:** Evaluating the financial efficiency of programs by comparing the total expenditure against the number of graduates produced, aiming to lower this ratio over time.
- **Research Output:** Monitoring the quantity and quality of research published by the college, including citations and impact factors, to ensure that academic contributions are recognized and valued.
- **Time to Degree Completion:** Tracking the average duration students take to complete their degrees against established benchmarks, with the goal of identifying obstacles that may prolong this process.

These benchmarking activities can foster a culture of continuous improvement at CAES. By setting these particular performance measures and monitoring progress toward them on a regular basis, the college can encourage an anticipatory response to challenges and opportunities. This commitment to excellence not only enhances the quality of education and

student experience but also positions CAES as a leader in the university and in higher education at large.

#### **6.4 Recommendations**

To enhance collaboration between academic and professional services staff, the following recommendations are proposed:

- **Strengthen communication channels:** Establish regular joint meetings, utilize collaborative online platforms, and create formal feedback mechanisms to promote open dialogue and effective communication.
- **Promote joint initiatives:** Encourage interdisciplinary projects and collaborative events that bring together both groups to work on common challenges and align departmental goals.
- **Implement professional development programs:** Develop training on collaboration skills, establish mentorship programs, and conduct workshops on best practices to foster mutual understanding and teamwork.
- **Enhance policy development processes:** Involve both staff groups in the policy-making process, create clear collaboration guidelines, and ensure regular policy reviews to remain responsive to institutional needs.
- **Leverage informal relationships:** Organize social events to strengthen interpersonal relationships, encourage cross-departmental collaborations, and recognize successful collaborative efforts to enhance morale.
- **Monitor and evaluate collaboration efforts:** Establish performance metrics, conduct regular assessments, and maintain flexibility in strategies to adapt to staff needs and improve collaboration.

### **6.4.1 Innovative Strategies for Collaboration**

In light of the evidence arising from this study, it is worth considering the notion of bespoke novelty, a notion that refers to tailored and personalized efforts to meet specific needs and contexts (Rafalski, 2024). The model can be employed in enhancing interaction between academic and professional services staff via recognition of certain dynamics within the College of Agriculture, Engineering and Science (CAES) at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN). By integrating traditional multi-theoretical methods with newer worldwide systems, such as the integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI), CAES can facilitate more effective collaboration.

**Presented below are tangible examples that exemplify the proposed initiatives:**

- **Joint AI-Driven Platforms**

Develop a shared digital platform based on AI that facilitates academic and professional services staff collaboration on projects, sharing resources, and tracking progress in real time. For instance, using platforms like Microsoft Teams or Slack, together with AI functions, communication and project management can be simplified to allow staff to collaborate seamlessly across departments.

- **Joint Training Programs**

Design training workshops on both academic and professional services staff with the utmost focus on using AI tools in research and administration tasks. For instance, training both the groups on using data analytics computer software for the purposes of research, in the process enhancing their capability to work as a team together on data-based projects that tend towards teaching and administration.

- **Interdisciplinary Research Initiatives**

Form interdisciplinary research groups with both academic and professional services staff. For instance, a project could be on sustainable agriculture, where academics contribute research expertise and professional services staff provide logistical support and industry collaborations. This can lead to practical impacts that benefit students and the community.

- **Feedback and Iteration Mechanisms**

Establish recurring feedback sessions where academic and professional services staff can

share comments and suggestions on improving collaboration. Using AI tools to scan feedback trends can help create areas for improvement and foster a culture of continuous improvement.

Through the adoption of bespoke novelty in these practical examples, CAES can improve inter-staff collaboration between professional and academic services staff to enable the two teams to be significantly engaged and more capable of responding to the demands of modern education.

### **6.5 Proposed Avenues for Future Research**

The findings of this study suggest several aspects on which future studies can be done. Firstly, studies done on a bigger sample size and more representative, covering colleges and faculties within UKZN, would go a long way in providing an overall picture of collaboration across the university. It would thus provide a wider perspective on collaboration across the university, making more far-reaching comparisons possible and deeper insight into the collaborative practices in different academic settings. By capturing a wider range of perspectives and experiences, researchers would be able to specify unique challenges and successful strategies related to disciplines or departments.

Longitudinal studies may also help in comprehending how collaborative practices vary over time, amidst changes at an institutional level or due to external pressures. These would enable the tracking of collaboration metrics and staff perceptions over several semesters or years to further analyse the trends and effects of whatever interventions would be put into place with the purpose of improving collaboration. Second, qualitative research into the experiences of collaboration at an individual level would be useful to illuminate the cultural and interpersonal dynamics at play for contextualizing quantitative data and enriching the overall understanding of collaboration within an institution. These sets of discussions will not only enrich the literature body on collaboration in higher education, but it would also have implications for practical strategies aimed at developing a better-integrated and effective culture of collaboration at UKZN and elsewhere.

## **6.6 Final Thoughts**

Fostering a collaborative culture at UKZN CAES is not merely an operational necessity but a fundamental component of the institution's identity and mission. By implementing the recommendations outlined in this chapter, the institution can enhance its collaborative practices, ultimately leading to improved student outcomes and institutional effectiveness. As higher education continues to evolve, prioritizing collaboration will be essential for UKZN CAES to thrive in an increasingly complex landscape. The commitment to collaboration will not only benefit staff and students but will also position the university as a forward-thinking leader in the higher education sector, capable of adapting to the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead.

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## **APPENDIX 1: INFORMATION SHEET AND CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH**

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Greetings,

I hope this message finds you well. My name is Nokubonga Mathimba, an MBA student currently pursuing studies at the Graduate School of Business (GSB) at the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

You are cordially invited to participate in a research study that aims to explore and enhance collaboration between academic and professional services staff at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, specifically at the College of Agriculture, Engineering and Sciences. The purpose of this study is to gain insights into the current state of collaboration, identify potential challenges, and develop strategies to enhance collaboration between these two groups. By participating, you will play an integral role in shaping the future of collaboration within our university.

If you agree to participate in this study, the following procedures will be involved:

**Complete a Brief Questionnaire:** Participants in the study will be asked to complete a brief online questionnaire, which serves as the initial data collection method. The questionnaire will gather demographic information and elicit participants' perspectives on collaboration between academic and professional services staff. It will include multiple-choice questions, rating scales, and Likert-type items to collect quantitative data. Additionally, there will be an open-ended question where participants can provide any additional comments, insights, or feedback regarding collaboration between academic and professional services staff. Participants can expect this questionnaire to take approximately 20 to 30 minutes of their time.

**Data Collection:** Upon agreeing to participate, participants will access the online questionnaire through a provided link, which will be approved and permitted by the UKZN ethics committee. They will be able to complete the questionnaire using their preferred device, such as a computer, tablet, or smartphone, connected to the internet. The online platform will ensure the confidentiality and privacy of participants' responses. They will submit their answers electronically upon completion, and the collected data will be securely stored and organized for analysis. In cases where the online system is not accessible or participants prefer an alternative, in-person data collection may be arranged.

**Data Analysis:** The collected data from the online questionnaire will undergo quantitative analysis. Various statistical techniques, such as descriptive statistics, correlations, regression

analyses, or other appropriate methods, will be employed to examine the data. The analysis will focus on identifying patterns, relationships, and statistical significance related to collaboration between academic and professional services staff. Aggregate results will be generated to summarize the findings, ensuring the anonymity and confidentiality of individual participants.

**Risks and Benefits:** Participation in this study will involve no risk, as every effort will be made to ensure the strictest confidentiality and privacy of your information. The benefits of this study include contributing to the understanding of collaboration between academic and professional services staff and potentially improving working relationships within the university.

**Confidentiality:** Your identity and personal information will be kept strictly confidential throughout the study. All data collected will be stored securely and accessible only to the research team. Any reports or publications resulting from this study will not include information that could personally identify you.

**Sample Size and Study Location:** The estimated sample size for this study is approximately 100 participants. The study will be conducted at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, specifically at the College of Agriculture, Engineering and Sciences.

### **Contact Information**

If you have any questions about the study, its procedures, or your rights as a participant, please contact the researcher, Ms Nokubonga Mathimba at [208524635@stu.ukzn.ac.za](mailto:208524635@stu.ukzn.ac.za) or

██████████ / ██████████

If you have any concerns about the ethical conduct of the research, you may contact the Ethics Committee at the University of KwaZulu-Natal at:

### **HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION**

Research Office, Westville Campus

Govan Mbeki Building

Private Bag X54001

Durban

4000

KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA

Tel: 27 31 2604557- Fax: 27 31 2604609

Email: [HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za)

Kindly note that your participation in this research study is entirely voluntary, and you have the right to withdraw at any time without providing a reason. Your decision to participate or withdraw will not affect your current or future relationship with the University of KwaZulu-Natal or any associated organizations. Should you decide to withdraw, please inform me as soon as possible via email at [208524635@stu.ukzn.ac.za](mailto:208524635@stu.ukzn.ac.za), allowing sufficient time for me to find another participant to ensure adequate data for analysis. In the event of the study being terminated for any reason, your participation will automatically cease.

There will be no reimbursement provided for your participation in this study, and you are not expected to incur any costs. Your involvement will be voluntary, and there will be no financial compensation involved. I will ensure that all information, including personal details, is treated with strict confidentiality. Transcripts, emails, and any other correspondence will be securely stored in a password-protected vault within my OneDrive folder. Access to this information will be limited to myself and my supervisor, Professor Bibi Chummun. Any physical documents will be appropriately shredded, while electronic copies will be deleted from the OneDrive folder once the required storage time, as per the university's policy, has elapsed.

Kindly indicate your willingness to participate in this research study by completing and signing the section below.

.....

## **CONSENT**

I..... (Name of the participant) have been informed about the study entitled Enhancing collaboration between academic and support staff at the University of KwaZulu-Natal by Nokubonga Mathimba

I understand the purpose and procedures of the study.

I have been given an opportunity to ask questions about the study and have had answers to my satisfaction. I declare that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time without affecting any of the benefits to which I usually am entitled to. If I have any further questions/concerns or queries related to the study, I understand that I may

contact the researcher at [REDACTED] or at [208524635@stu.ukzn.ac.za](mailto:208524635@stu.ukzn.ac.za). If I have any questions or concerns about my rights as a study participant, or if I am concerned about an aspect of the study or the researchers then I may contact:

HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION

Research Office, Westville Campus

Govan Mbeki Building

Private Bag X54001

Durban

4000

KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA

Tel: 27 31 2604557- Fax: 27 31 2604609

Email: [HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za)

**Additional consent, where applicable**

I hereby provide consent to:

Audio-record my interview

YES / NO/ N/A

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Participant

Date

## APPENDIX 2: PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH



7 March 2024

Ms Nokubonga Mathimba (SN 208524635)  
Graduate School of Business and Leadership  
College of Law and Management Studies  
Westville Campus UKZN  
Email: [208524635@stu.ukzn.ac.za](mailto:208524635@stu.ukzn.ac.za)

[Chummunb@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:Chummunb@ukzn.ac.za)

Dear Ms Mathimba

### RE: PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

Gatekeeper's permission is hereby granted for you to conduct research at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), towards your postgraduate degree, provided Ethical clearance has been obtained. We note the title of your research project is:

*"Enhancing collaboration between academic and professional services staff at the University of KwaZulu-Natal."*

It is noted that you will be constituting your sample as follows:

- With a request for responses on the website. The questionnaire and/or request for responses to "interview questions" must be placed on the notice system <http://notices.ukzn.ac.za>. A copy of this letter (Gatekeeper's approval) must be simultaneously sent to ([govenderlog@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:govenderlog@ukzn.ac.za)) or ([ramkissoonb@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:ramkissoonb@ukzn.ac.za)).

Please ensure that the following appears on your notice/questionnaire:

- Ethical clearance number;
- Research title and details of the research, the researcher and the supervisor;
- Consent form is attached to the notice/questionnaire and to be signed by user before he/she fills in questionnaire;
- gatekeepers approval by the Registrar.

You are not authorized to contact staff and students using the 'Microsoft Outlook' address book. Identity numbers and email addresses of individuals are not a matter of public record and are protected according to Section 14 of the South African Constitution, as well as the Protection of Public Information Act. For the release of such information over to yourself for research purposes, the University of KwaZulu-Natal will need express consent from the relevant data subjects. Data collected must be treated with due confidentiality and anonymity.

Yours sincerely



**MR MA TUFTS**  
Director Governance & Administration

### Office of the Registrar

Postal Address: Private Bag X54001, Durban, 4000, South Africa

Telephone: +27 (0)31 260 7971 Email: [registrar@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:registrar@ukzn.ac.za) Website: [www.ukzn.ac.za](http://www.ukzn.ac.za)

Founding Campuses: ■ Edgewood ■ Howard College ■ Medical School ■ Pietermaritzburg ■ Westville

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## APPENDIX 3: ETHICAL CLEARANCE



25 February 2025

**Nokubonga Mathimba (208524635)**  
Grad School of Bus & Leadership  
Westville Campus

Dear N Mathimba,

Protocol reference number: HSSREC/00006970/2024

Project title: Enhancing collaboration between academic and professional services staff at the University of KwaZulu-Natal

Amended title: Enhancing collaboration between academic and professional services staff at the College of Agriculture, Engineering, and Science, University of KwaZulu-Natal

Degree: Masters

### Approval Notification – Amendment Application

This letter serves to notify you that your application and request for an amendment received on 24 February 2025 has now been approved as follows:

- Change in title

Any alterations to the approved research protocol i.e. Questionnaire/Interview Schedule, Informed Consent Form; Title of the Project, Location of the Study must be reviewed and approved through an amendment /modification prior to its implementation. In case you have further queries, please quote the above reference number.

**PLEASE NOTE: Research data should be securely stored in the discipline/department for a period of 5 years.**

HSSREC is registered with the South African National Health Research Ethics Council (REC-040414-040).

Best wishes for the successful completion of your research protocol.

Yours faithfully



.....  
**Professor Dipane Hialele (Chair)**

/nng

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Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee  
UKZN Research Ethics Office Westville Campus, Govan Mbeki Building  
Postal Address: Private Bag X54001, Durban 4000  
Tel: +27 31 260 8350 / 4557 / 3587  
Website: <http://research.ukzn.ac.za/Research-Ethics/>  
Founding Campuses: ■ Edgewood ■ Howard College ■ Medical School ■ Pietermaritzburg ■ Westville

**INSPIRING GREATNESS**



01 July 2024

Nokubonga Mathimba (208524635)  
Grad School of Bus & Leadership  
Westville Campus

Dear N Mathimba,

Protocol reference number: HSSREC/00006970/2024

Project title: Enhancing collaboration between academic and professional services staff at the University of KwaZulu-Natal

Degree: Masters

### Approval Notification – Expedited Application

This letter serves to notify you that your application received on 03 May 2024 in connection with the above, was reviewed by the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC) and the protocol has been granted **FULL APPROVAL**.

Any alteration/s to the approved research protocol i.e. Questionnaire/Interview Schedule, Informed Consent Form, Title of the Project, Location of the Study, Research Approach and Methods must be reviewed and approved through the amendment/modification prior to its implementation. In case you have further queries, please quote the above reference number.

**PLEASE NOTE:** Research data should be securely stored in the discipline/department for a period of 5 years.

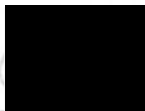
Incidents of adverse events and serious adverse events (AEs and SAEs) should be reported in writing to HSSREC, the study sponsors, and any regulatory authority (where appropriate), within 7 working days of the occurrence for local sites and 14 days for all other South African sites.

This approval is valid until 01 July 2025.

To ensure uninterrupted approval of this study beyond the approval expiry date, a progress report must be submitted to the Research Office on the appropriate form 2 - 3 months before the expiry date. A close-out report to be submitted when study is finished.

HSSREC is registered with the South African National Health Research Ethics Council (REC-040414-040).

Yours sincerely,



Professor Dipane Hlalele (Chair)  
/dd

### Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

Postal Address: Private Bag X54001, Durban, 4000, South Africa

Telephone: +27 (0)31 260 8350/4557/3587 Email: [hssrec@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:hssrec@ukzn.ac.za) Website: <http://research.ukzn.ac.za/Research-Ethics>

Founding Campuses: Edgewood Howard College Medical School Pietermaritzburg Westville

INSPIRING GREATNESS

**APPENDIX 4: QUESTIONNAIRE SURVEY**

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**SECTION A: DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION QUESTIONNAIRE**

Please mark (X) the appropriate box

**1. What is your gender.**

Male	
Female	
Prefer not to say	

**2. What is your age?**

21-25	
25-34	
35-44	
45-54	
55 or older	

**3. How long have you been employed at the College of Agriculture, Engineering and Sciences?**

Less than 1 year	
1-5 years	
6-10 years	
11-15 years	
More than 15 years	

**4. Please indicate whether you are an academic or professional services staff**

Academic Staff	
Professional Services	
Both Academic and Professional Services Staff	
Other (please specify)	

**5. What is your job title and department in the College of Agriculture, Engineering and Sciences? Please specify**

**6. What is your highest level of education?**

Matric	
National Diploma	
Bachelor's degree	
Honours/ Postgraduate degree	
Master's degree	
Doctoral degree	
Associate Professor	
Professor	

## SECTION B: RESEARCH OBJECTIVES QUESTIONNAIRE

### Likert Scale, Multiple-Choice, and Open-Ended Questions

**Objective 1: To identify the current level of collaboration between academic and professional services staff in UKZN CAES.**

Please rate your current level of collaboration with professional services staff/academic staff on the following aspects by putting an (X) on the appropriate box:

**1 = Very low**

**2 = Low**

**3 = Moderate**

**4 = High**

**5 = Very high**

Aspects	1	2	3	4	5
Communication and information sharing					
Joint planning and decision-making					
Drafting of university policies and guidelines					
Cooperative work on projects or initiatives					
Training and development					
Delivering service					
Day-to-day operations					

**Objective 2: To determine challenges to effective collaboration between academic and professional services staff at UKZN CAES, as well as factors that enhance it.**

**2.1 Please indicate the extent to which you perceive the following factors as barriers to effective collaboration by selecting appropriate box:**

**1 = Strongly disagree**

**2 = Disagree**

**3 = Neutral**

**4 = Agree**

**5 = Strongly agree**

<b>Factor</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Lack of clear communication channels</b>					
<b>Limited time and resources</b>					
<b>Hierarchical structures and power dynamics</b>					
<b>Differences in work styles or priorities</b>					
<b>Absence of clearly defined and aligned common goals and objectives</b>					

**2.2 Please indicate the extent to which you perceive the following factors as enhancing collaboration by selecting appropriate box:**

**1 = Strongly disagree**

**2 = Disagree**

**3 = Neutral**

**4 = Agree**

**5 = Strongly agree**

<b>Factor</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Effective communication channels</b>					
<b>Sufficient time and resources</b>					

<b>Collaboration-friendly organizational structures</b>					
<b>Alignment of work styles and priorities</b>					
<b>Shared goals and objectives</b>					

**2.3 Please rate the importance of the following factors in enhancing collaboration by putting an (X) on the appropriate box:**

**1 = Not important**

**2 = Minimally important**

**3 = Moderately important**

**4 = Important**

**5 = Highly important**

<b>Factors</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
Effective communication tools and technologies					
Clear roles and responsibilities					
Transparent decision-making processes					
Teamwork and cooperation					
Cross-functional collaboration					
Trust and mutual respect					
Flexibility and adaptability					
Supportive leadership					

Training and development					
Recognition and rewards for collaborative efforts					

**Objective 3: To provide recommendations and strategies for improving collaboration between academic and professional services staff in UKZN CAES.**

**3.1 Please indicate your level of agreement with the effectiveness of the following strategies in enhancing collaboration by putting an (X) on the appropriate box:**

**1 = Not effective**

**2 = Minimally effective**

**3 = Moderately effective**

**4 = Effective**

**5 = Highly effective**

<b>Strategies</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
Regular Communication Channels					
Clear Communication of Policies					
Joint Planning and Decision-Making					
Joint Policy Development					
Compliance and Accountability					
Regular cross-departmental meetings and forums					
Cross-Functional Training and Workshops					
Interdepartmental Sports Tournaments					
Training and development programs focused on collaboration skills					
Recognition and rewards for collaborative efforts					

**3.2 Please provide any additional strategies or recommendations you have for improving collaboration between academic and professional services staff**

**4. Collaboration Outcomes:** Please rate the extent to which you believe enhancing collaboration between academic and professional services staff would result in the following outcomes by putting an (X) on the appropriate box:

**1 = Strongly disagree**

**2 = Disagree**

**3 = Neutral**

**4 = Agree**

**5 = Strongly agree**

<b>Outcomes</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
High-Quality Education					
Higher Research Outputs					
Increased Efficiency					
Improved Service Delivery					
Improved Problem-Solving					
Strengthened Institutional Reputation					
Improved Employee Relations					
Positive Organizational Culture					
Increased Job Satisfaction					

**5. Open-Ended: Additional Comments**

**Please share any additional comments or insights you have regarding collaboration between academic and professional services staff at UKZN CAES**