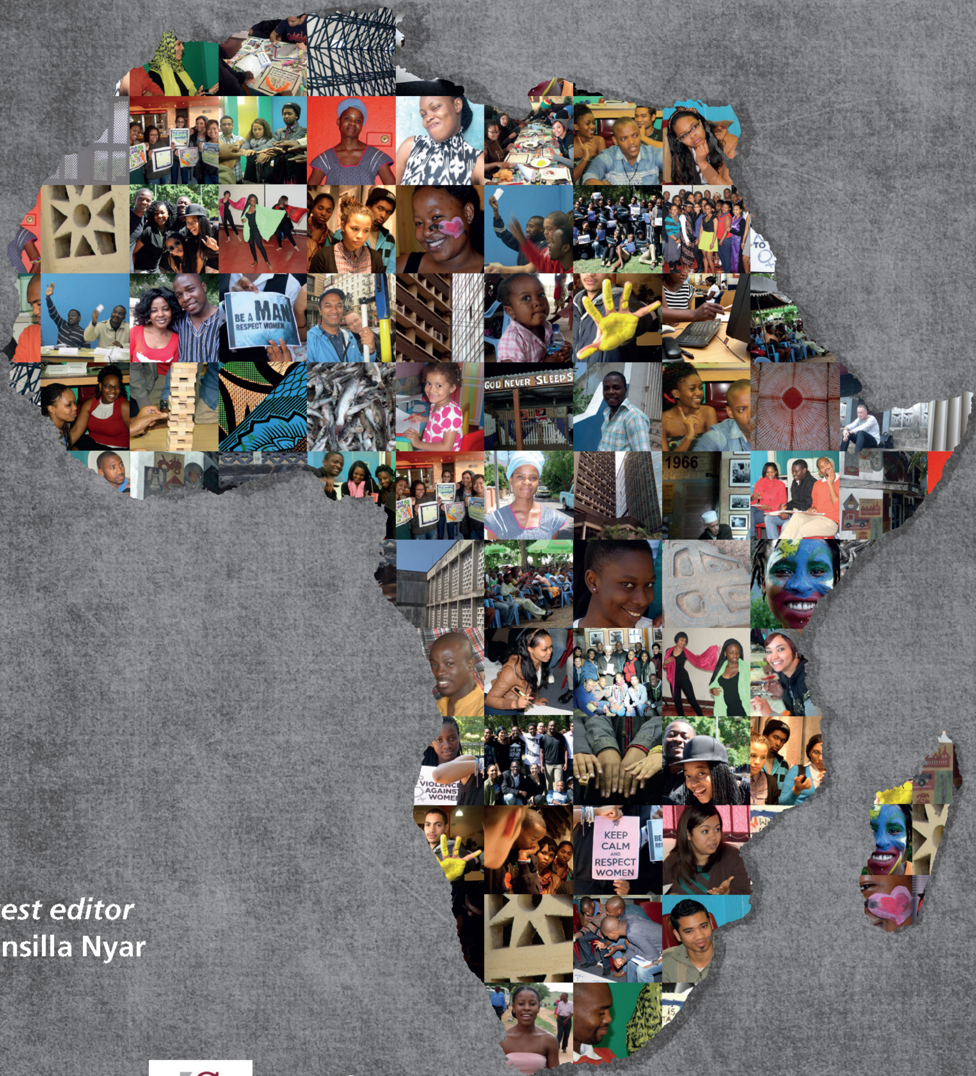
Journal of Student Affairs in Africa

Volume 6 Issue 1 2018

First-year experience in perspective



Guest editor
Annsilla Nyar

AFRICAN SUN MeDIA
UNIVERSITEIT STELLENBOSCH UNIVERSITY
OPEN ACCESS

Journal of Student Affairs in Africa

The *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* (*JSAA*) is an independent, peer-reviewed, multi-disciplinary, open-access academic journal that publishes scholarly research and reflective discussions about the theory and practice of student affairs in Africa.

Vision and mission

The *JSAA* aims to contribute to the professionalisation of student affairs in African higher education by publishing high-quality scholarly articles, research and reflective discussions by academics, professionals, researchers and students about student affairs and services in African higher education.

The *JSAA* strives to be the foremost academic journal dealing with the theory and practice of the student affairs domain in universities on the African continent, and an indispensable resource for national policy makers, the executive leadership of universities and colleges dealing with student affairs, deans of students and other senior student affairs professionals, as well as institutional researchers and academics and students focused on the field of higher education studies and student affairs.

Focus and scope

The *JSAA* considers theoretical, practice-relevant and reflective contributions from across the scholarly field of student affairs and professional domains of student development/student affairs, taking due cognisance that the scope is broad, fluid and context-dependent.

The scope of *JSAA* is indicated by keywords such as: student affairs, student career development, student counselling, student development theory and research, student discipline, student engagement, student experience, student finances and financial aid, student housing, disability/disabled students, student leadership and governance, student life cycle, student living and learning, student movement, student organisations, student orientation, student policy, student politics and activism, student sport, student support, academic development (and its intersection with the student affairs co-curriculum), graduate attributes, and teaching and learning support. This list of keywords is not exhaustive. Our key focus area is the core functions of student affairs and services in Africa.

Submissions are encouraged from scholars and reflective practitioners from across the globe. Submissions must be original and relevant to the mission, scope and focus of the journal. Especially encouraged are submissions from African scholars and professionals working in higher education on the African continent. Submissions dealing with student affairs issues from other contexts (e.g. the African diaspora; other emerging economies; developed countries) that are transferable to the African context are also considered for publication. Submit by email to: jsaa_editor@outlook.com.

www.jsaa.ac.za

ISSN 2311-1771 (print)
ISSN 2307-6267 (electronic)
JSAA is available open access at: www.jsaa.ac.za

Indexed in the Directory of Open Access Journal, African Journals Online (AJOL) at www.ajol.info, and the Education Resources Information Center (ERIC). DHET-accredited scholarly journal in South Africa.

AFRICAN SUN MeDIA
UNIVERSITEIT STELLENBOSCH UNIVERSITY
OPEN ACCESS

Editorial team

Contents

Book reviews

Editorial

Articulation and Continuities: First-Year Experience in Higher Education

Birgit Schreiber,* Thierry M. Luescher** & Teboho Moja***

Discussions around first-year experiences have been focused on student adjustment and inclusion into the culture and discourses of higher education. However, the issue is much broader and includes efforts of articulation of processes and continuity of experience. This guest-edited issue thus focuses on the wider issues and includes discussions on systemic articulation and ruptures in student experiences.

Developmental shifts when entering higher education are experienced by students in a variety of ways. It is incumbent on higher education and the wider system to enable continuity of experience and articulation of systems in such a way that student success is at the centre. Thus, the core articles in this issue focus on systemic articulation, in and out of classroom experience and the operational and ontological engagement of students, beyond the first-year experience. Moreover, while discussions on university success are usually focused on higher education agency, it is essential that the silence around causality and influence of schooling and wider societal issues are recognised. The articles in this issue purposefully bring together such a wider perspective.

A broader perspective on the student experience of higher education is also the subject of the book reviews published alongside the guest-edited research and reflective practitioner articles. Liezel Frick reviews the book *Going to university: The influence of higher education on the lives of young South Africans* authored by Jenni Case, Delia Marshall, Sioux McKenna and Disaapele Mogashana (Cape Town: African Minds, 2017). The book follows 73 young people who first entered university in South Africa some six years ago, and documents their battles and challenges as they move more or less successfully into, through and out of university studies.

* Dr Birgit Schreiber is Senior Director of Student Affairs at Stellenbosch University, South Africa. She is the Book Review editor and a member of the *JSAA* Editorial Executive. Email: birgitschreiber@sun.ac.za

** Prof. Thierry Luescher is Research Director in the Education and Skills Development research programme of the Human Sciences Research Council, Cape Town, and affiliated Associate Professor in Higher Education Studies at the University of the Free State, Mangaung, South Africa. He is the *JSAA* journal manager. Email: jsaa_editor@outlook.com

*** Prof. Teboho Moja is Professor and Program Director, Higher Education Program, New York University, U.S.A., Visiting Research Fellow at the Centre for the Advancement of Scholarship, University of Pretoria, and Extraordinary Professor in the Institute of Post-School Studies, University of the Western Cape, South Africa. She is *JSAA*'s Editor-in-Chief.

Rejoice Nsibande carefully reviews a timely intervention into the question what meaning and practices of academic freedom apply to students today: Bruce Macfarlane's book *Freedom to Learn: The Threat to Student Academic Freedom and Why it Needs to be Reclaimed* (London: Routledge Taylor and Francis, 2017). Nsibande highlights how the book develops and sustains its argument that university policies are impacting negatively on students' lives; national policies demonstrate a lack of trust and respect for students as adults and the adoption of managerialism and performative culture has led to universities putting administrative processes and reporting to national bodies at the centre, at the cost of student success. Key to understanding Macfarlane's argument is that students – as adults – should collaborate over choices and decisions on what to learn, how to learn, when to learn, and how to live their lives.

Our third book review by Taryn Bernard discusses the first volume in the new Bloomsbury series "Understanding Student Experiences in Higher Education". The book *Negotiating learning and identity in higher education: Access, Persistence and Retention* is edited by Bongi Bangeni and Rochelle Kapp (London: Bloomsbury, 2017). Similar to *Going to University,* it is part of a longitudinal research with students; in this case, they are all young black students who are mostly first generation, working class and from single-parent families. Bernard particularly commends the authors for having been able to resist 'deficit constructions' of the students and rather to focus on the *agency* of the participants, and conducting research which highlights the *agentic* and *enabled* subject positions of the participants. Bernard argues that the book makes an important contribution to the global conversation around widening access and participation by offering an in-depth understanding of student experiences of black students at a historically white research university.

As customary, we publish in the first issue of the year the names of the reviewers of the previous volume and hereby wish to thank them for their time and expertise in evaluating and helping to select and improve the submissions we receive. We also welcome two new editors to the Editorial Executive, Prof. Sioux McKenna from Rhodes University in South Africa and Dr Bekele Workie Ayele from Kotebe Metropolitan University in Ethiopia, and Dr Angelina Wilson Fadiji as new editorial assistant. We are also grateful to Dr Annsilla Nyar for her work on compiling and editing the articles, and Ms Maretha Joyce for managing the publishing process of this *JSAA* guest-edited issue. Since accreditation, we have experienced a significant increase in author submissions; the Editorial Executive of *JSAA* is immensely grateful for the committed work of the editors and reviewers and other collaborators who voluntarily and without any remuneration contribute to the journal and its aims.

Finally, we would like to express our sadness about the untimely passing of Prof. Brenda Leibowitz in April 2018. Leibowitz held the SARChI Chair in Post-Secondary Education: Teaching and Learning at the University of Johannesburg; she was an internationally recognised expert in the scholarship of teaching and learning in the South and recently worked on key projects related to *JSAA*'s publishing scope, such as the ESRC-NRF project on the influence of rurality on students' transition to higher education. Leibowitz was part of the broader *JSAA* community as a reviewer; in addition, her work has featured several times in the journal. In Vol. 2(1), Denise Wood reviewed the book *Discerning Critical Hope in Educational Practices* edited by Vivienne Bozalek, Brenda Leibowitz, Ronelle Carolissen and Megan Boler (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), and Joy Papier reviewed Brenda Leibowitz' book *Higher Education for the Public Good: Views from the South* (Oakhill, USA: Trentham Books; and Stellenbosch: African Sun Media, 2012). Most recently, we published the interview by Gugu Wendy Khanye with Brenda Leibowitz and John Gardner on teaching and learning and the first-year experience (in Vol. 4 Issue 1). *Hamba kahle*, Prof. Leibowitz.

How to cite:

Schreiber, B., Luescher, T.M. & Moja, T. (2018). Articulation and Continuities: First-Year Experience in Higher Education. *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa*, 6(1), v–vii. DOI: 10.24085/jsaa.v6i1.3098

Guest editorial

The First-Year Experience (FYE): Moving Toward a Well-Defined Field of Study in South Africa

Annsilla Nyar*

For too long, South Africa has watched from afar as global FYE scholarship continues to establish and consolidate itself. Now, with the recent array of initiatives to establish the FYE academically in South Africa, including the establishment of the South African National Resource Centre for First-Year Experience and Students in Transition (SANRC) in 2015, the prospects for the FYE as a well-defined field of study appear especially bright. This special edition of the *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* chronicles the FYE in South Africa as an aspiring academic community that is poised for future development.

This FYE edition of *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* represents a significant milestone for the First-Year Experience (FYE) in South Africa. It is the second edition of the journal which is devoted exclusively to matters of the FYE. As such, this journal edition shines a spotlight on the FYE and helps to give this relatively 'new' area of study the rigorous academic attention that it rightly deserves. Thanks are due to the journal for supporting a sustained focus on the FYE. From initially serving as a small subset of the teaching and learning literature, it is now possible through such a journal edition to imagine the FYE as a thriving and well-defined field of study in the next two decades. The kind of academic support that the *JSAA* represents will ensure that the field continues to flourish.

This edition features an interesting collection of papers that addresses a wide range of topics of intrinsic interest to fellow FYE academics and practitioners. The articles are all drawn from different universities in South Africa and are all unmistakably national in character. This suggests that a national body of uniquely South African literature is now in the making.

The collection of articles assembled in this journal edition does not represent a cohesive portrayal of the state of the FYE in South Africa. Rather, it represents different snapshots of varying dysfunctions and fissures in the complex environment of South Africa's higher education sector. The issues in this collection of articles are case-study based but they are not particular to South Africa. There is a universality to these issues that will resonate with all higher education professionals, both locally and globally.

Ian Scott's macro-level analysis of the factors affecting student success in South Africa provides a compelling framework for the collection of articles in this journal. Scott is clear that the higher education sector is not structurally designed to support a strong focus on

* Dr Annsilla Nyar is Director: South African National Resource Centre for First-Year Experience and Students in Transition (SANRC), University of Johannesburg, South Africa. Email: anyar@uj.ac.za

student success. He strongly advocates long-term systemic change and offers a number of key insights in this regard. The other articles in this edition all address different aspects of the student experience which afford the opportunity for South Africa's institutions of higher education to engage in self-reflection about the extent to which institutions are addressing the multi-faceted needs of students.

Nosisana Mkonto's case study of retention officers at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT) reveals insights about the student experience that institutions of higher education would do well to integrate into a fine-grained understanding of the challenges faced by students. Mkonto's data is qualitatively rich and draws on the voices of students in a way that clearly elucidates the difficult circumstances under which some students navigate the institution. Some of the data is poignant, for example the quotation, *"I am not sure whether to drop out with my studies or not, I have been diagnosed with a dreaded disease. What is a point of studying if I am going to die in any case?"* (Mkonto, 2018, p. 71).

In a similar vein, Subethra Pather and Nirmala Dorasamy write about the sobering gap between students' expectations of university life and the realities with which they are actually faced when entering the institution. The article recommends the implementation of first-year experience programmes as a means of bridging the gap between expectations and reality for students.

Mpho Jama provides a study of generic skills training in the medical curriculum at University of Free State (UFS). Jama has previously written on stress amongst medical students.

Tracey McKay and co-authors Anban Naidoo and Zach Simpson make a valuable contribution to this edition with their informative account of student funding and how the matter of financial access to higher education influences prospects for student success. This article is timely in the context of current student protests over the matter of funding and the prevalent atmosphere of instability in the higher education sector.

Academic monitoring systems are one of the most important tools used by institutions of higher education to ensure the retention of students. Toward this end, Rubby Dhunpath and Vino Paideya provide a case study of the academic monitoring system at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN). The authors apply systems thinking – a useful conceptual tool for approaching complex phenomena with a holistic mindset and a sense of how the different elements of a system relate to the system as a whole – to their analysis of academic monitoring systems at UKZN and arrive at a sophisticated critique of current academic monitoring systems at the institution.

The work assembled in this journal edition of *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* provides food for thought for any higher education professional with an interest in institutional change. This edition allows for a consideration of a number of pressing questions. In line with Scott's call for transformative change of the higher education system as a whole, questions can be asked about the current suite of student success initiatives underway at South Africa's universities and the extent to which they can be seen as ameliorative as opposed to truly transformative. Given the vast amount of institutional energy and attention invested in student success initiatives by the sector as a whole, it is worth considering whether current interventions are in fact designed toward addressing symptoms in the manner of a 'band-aid' rather than attending to underlying systemic problems. In light of the various social problems, such as poverty and hunger, which form a central part of the student experience, institutions must also consider how to engage closely with society in order to help support students more effectively. Paideya and Dhunpath point thoughtfully to the imperative of engaging with "the nature of education of a societal system, a system interacting with other societal systems embedded in a rapidly and dynamically changing macro society". This edition underlines the fact that a first-year experience programme can stand at the forefront of innovation and transformative change for both society and institutions of higher education.

How to cite:

Nyar, A. (2018). The First-Year Experience (FYE): Moving Toward a Well-Defined Field of Study in South Africa. *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa*, 6(1), ix–xi. DOI: 10.24085/jsaa.v6i1.3061

Research article

Designing the South African Higher Education System for Student Success

Ian Scott*

Abstract

South Africa's higher education system is falling far short of producing the mix of competent graduates required to meet the country's need for social and economic development. The problem of poor patterns of student success is longstanding, and is persisting despite the policy changes and many educationally sound interventions that have taken place in recent decades. This points to entrenched underlying obstacles, including but going beyond the legacy of apartheid, and indicates that they will not yield to supplementary or ad hoc improvement initiatives, however well-conceived individually. This paper is thus based on the proposition that there is a pressing need to design the South African university education system to focus unequivocally on student success and equity of outcomes. This implies, intentionally, that the current system is not designed around any clear commitment to student success.

Correcting this must involve a re-prioritisation of goals in the higher education sector, aimed at ensuring that student success is accepted as the end goal of the educational mission of higher education. The paper argues that, if this is to be achieved, what is required is a sophisticated, realistic, coherent and comprehensive strategy for positive change. Given the nature of the higher education system, such a strategy must involve not only a clear vision of the scope of the changes and interventions needed to make a real difference to the performance patterns – in terms of equity as well as overall outcomes – but also an in-depth understanding of the responsibilities that must be taken by the key stakeholders and the underlying obstacles that must be addressed.

The paper offers an outline of the major points of the argument, including the importance of applying design principles to any comprehensive response to the need to place student success at the heart of the higher education agenda.

Keywords

student success; skills shortages; higher education policy; educational development; academic development; curriculum reform; teaching and learning approaches; student support; equity; systemic change; strategy for change; design for learning

* Prof. Ian Scott is Emeritus Professor, Centre for Higher Education Development, University of Cape Town, South Africa. Email: ian.scott@uct.ac.za

Introduction

Putting student success at the heart of the higher education agenda

Despite recent official assertions of acceptable progress in performance (DHET, 2015, 2017a), it is widely recognised that South Africa's higher education system is falling far short of producing the mix of competent graduates required to meet the country's needs, in terms of advanced expertise for all forms of development as well as meeting individual educational aspirations and "equity of outcomes". As Statistician-General Pali Lehohla has put it:

> … we have a crisis of producing [graduates with advanced] knowledge for the country. … There is a need to rethink [the inadequate prioritisation of education] as a process by which a discourse takes place to highlight the importance of education. This poses interesting questions for leaders at all levels of government. (*Times Live*, 27 September 2017)

However, there are few signs of decisive steps being taken by national and institutional leadership to give unequivocal priority to student success, as opposed to access alone (Scott, 2017b). In South Africa "just under half of the young people who enter undergraduate degrees (in either contact or distance mode of tuition) never graduate. This is a major challenge for the system…" (DHET, 2017a, p. 20). Especially in contexts where life-chances are strongly dependent on educational attainment, access without success is a hollow achievement. Yet student success remains in the back seat when it comes to state funding and institutional practice.

In these circumstances, it seems essential that groupings concerned about the effectiveness of university education – including academic and student associations and interested civil society bodies – should take the lead in pursuing the reprioritisation of goals within higher education. Thus the theme of the 2017 conference of the South African National Resource Centre for the First-Year Experience – 'Imagining a vision of student success in the 21st century' – should be strongly welcomed. This paper is based on a keynote address at that conference, responding to an invitation to address a critical question: What would it take to place student success at the heart of South Africa's higher education agenda?

The conference theme encouraged big-picture thinking but, since any plans are only as good as their implementability, this must be tempered by realistic appreciation of the obstacles. With this in mind, the central question can be broken down into three key constituent ones that need to be addressed:

1. Why should student success be at the heart of the higher education agenda?
2. What will it take to put it there, at system and institutional level?
3. What kinds of changes and developmental interventions are required to make substantial improvement in performance actually happen?

It is necessary to acknowledge here that higher education is not only about education. Its other core functions are knowledge generation and community engagement (DoE, 1997, sec. 1.3).

However, the educational mission of higher education – producing individuals with advanced knowledge and skills – has special importance in developing countries where there are severe shortages of high-level capabilities. It is this educational mission that is the focus of this paper.

The meaning of student success

There is a long history of debate about the complexity of the outcomes of higher education and what should be most valued. However, for the great majority of the key stakeholders – viz. the students individually and the country and society at large – student success carries the essential meaning of mastering a field of learning sufficiently to earn a sound tertiary qualification. A definition of the goal of student success used by the Council on Higher Education (CHE) captures this succinctly: "Enhanced student learning with a view to increasing the number of graduates with attributes that are personally, professionally and socially valuable" (CHE, 2014, p. 1).

It is this meaning of student success on which the argument in this paper is based. The end goal is thus seen as the successful completion of studies, and the key unit of measure is graduates. Particularly in contexts like South Africa, access to higher education has minimal value without successful completion (CHE, 2013, pp. 32–34). Student success therefore has a critical transformative role, for individuals and the country as a whole.

Central proposition

A fundamental judgement that has be made about the higher education system is whether its educational outcomes can be substantially improved – to the level the country requires – by supplementation of the existing mainstream teaching-and-learning system or whether more fundamental, systemic changes are needed. This paper is based on the latter view: that there needs to be a decisive break with the old, persistent, racially skewed and unsuccessful patterns of provision and hence of performance.

Ensuing from this, the central proposition of this paper is that *there is a pressing need to design the South African university education system to focus unequivocally on student success and equity of outcomes*. The purpose is to ensure that higher education makes its full contribution to social and economic advancement and to achieving social cohesion (Pandor, 2005). A key implication of this proposition is that the higher education teaching-and-learning system is currently not designed for this unequivocal focus.

There are two considerations that are inherent in the proposition. Firstly, determining priorities in higher education is complicated by the fact that universities have three major functions: teaching, research and social engagement. Argument about the relative importance of these functions is almost certainly fruitless (though understanding their interdependence is critical), so it must be emphasised that the prioritisation argued for in this paper relates to higher education's formal educational role.

Secondly, effective prioritisation of higher education goals depends on distinguishing between means and ends, as outlined below.

Distinguishing between means and ends

Clearly identifying the end goal, and distinguishing it from whatever sub-goals are needed for achieving it, is essential for setting and prioritising any developmental agenda. It is the basis for identifying effective strategies and directing them where they are most needed, hence making the best use of available resources.

A key element of the argument in this paper is that *the end goal of all formal education is to facilitate student learning and thereby the fulfilment of the students' educational aspirations; this is best manifested in successful completion of the programmes the students embark on, provided always that the programmes are of appropriate quality*. It follows from this that, notwithstanding the complex debate about the purposes of higher education, student success must be at the heart of the educational agenda.

It also follows that all educational provision, developmental initiatives and resources need to be understood and used as means to the end goal of student success in quality programmes. The sub-goals – whether they concern, for example, staff development, educational research or student financial aid – are crucial to achieving the end goal but must not be reified as ends in themselves, lest sight of the end goal should be obscured.

Student Success as the End Goal

This section offers a brief substantiation for seeing student success as the end goal, thus warranting its being placed at the heart of the higher education agenda.

The state of student success: Current realities

Student success in South Africa is currently a scarce resource. Higher education statistics have for decades pointed to severe under-performance, racially skewed outcomes, and waste of talent and material resources across the sector (CHE, 2013, pp. 39–53; Scott et al., 2007, pp. 9–18). This is particularly damaging because, as shown in participation rates, the student body is a small, selected group that should be expected to do well (CHE, 2013, pp. 41–42; CHE, 2017, p. 5).

The country needs to confront these realities. For example, current figures for contact university students (DHET, 2017a; CHE, 2017) show that:

- under 30% graduate in regulation time;
- under two-thirds graduate within 6 years;
- one-third have not graduated after 10 years; and
- significant racial inequalities persist.

If distance education students are included, the patterns become worse.

Moreover, comparing contact cohort performance in the biggest two qualification types since the institutional mergers indicates virtually no improvement over the period, overall or by population group, and persistent racial disparities:[1]

1 The 2006 cohort data are from the early post-merger period, when the institutions had re-stabilised; the 2010/11 cohort is the latest for which comparable data are available. There are minor methodological differences between the CHE and DHET datasets. There has evidently been improvement in the highly selective 4-year degrees, but comparable data are not available.

Table 1: Comparison of contact completion rates of the 2006 cohort (from CHE) and the 2010/2011 cohort (from DHET) by qualification type and population group

Population group	3-Year diplomas: graduated within 5 years (%)		3-Year degrees: graduated within 5 years (%)	
	2006 cohort: CHE	2011 cohort: DHET	2006 cohort: CHE	2011 cohort: DHET
All students	42	41	53	49
African	39	40	47	44
White	55	49	64	62

Sources: CHE, 2013, pp. 45, 49; DHET, 2017b, pp. 26–27

The overarching importance of equity of outcomes

As these figures indicate, the motivation for prioritising student success is not only to improve performance overall but also to achieve "equity of outcomes". This term was introduced in the first higher education White Paper of the democratic era as a critical complement to "equity of access" (DoE, 1997, sec. 2.29).

Transformation – in the sense of fair distribution of the benefits of higher education – depends on achieving both equity of access and equity of outcomes, within a context of strong overall completion rates and quality of outcomes. This is still far from being achieved. Despite major change in enrolment demographics, participation rates are still heavily skewed racially (CHE, 2017, pp. 4–5). To compound this, completion rates remain racially skewed, neutralising much of the improvement in access (DHET, 2017a; Scott, 2017a, pp. 18–22). The resulting failure of equity of outcomes is encapsulated in the fact that only 7% of African and coloured youth are succeeding in higher education.

The extent and the persistence of lack of equity of outcomes have a major effect not only on social justice – particularly in respect of individuals' life-chances – but also on all forms of development. Graduation figures clearly show that unless the system can realise the intellectual potential within all communities, there is no prospect of producing the quantum of advanced knowledge and capabilities that the country needs (CHE, 2013, p. 52).

This situation provides a strong argument that transformation of the performance patterns should be an imperative for the higher education system, being essential to the overall success of its educational mission. Yet the fact that the performance data "still demonstrate apartheid-era patterns of inequality" (DHET, 2015, p. 56) indicates insufficient prioritisation of this imperative. It must be asked why equity of outcomes, as a fundamental element of student success, is not also unequivocally at the heart of the higher education agenda.

The importance of student success: Implications for the higher education sector

The shortcomings in student success are severely hindering progress towards a range of key societal and economic goals (CHE, 2013, p. 32). While the universities depend on co-operation and assistance from the state, business and civil society, in the final analysis responsibility for producing graduates lies squarely with the higher education sector, duly supported by statutory national bodies. It is consequently the obligation of the sector as a whole, including the DHET, to play its full role in societal advancement by ensuring the requisite graduate output and outcomes.

It seems clear that the higher education sector cannot fulfil this obligation – its educational *raison d'être* – without an unequivocal prioritisation of student success. The strategic and social justice motivation for this has existed for many years, so the question must be asked: What is standing in the way?

A Broad Approach to Prioritising Student Success

The need for a comprehensive strategy for change

If the argument is valid that student success is the end goal, then the emphasis must shift to the means required to achieve that end. This section outlines key elements of a broad strategic approach to establishing student success as a top priority of the higher education sector and government, with the purpose of ensuring that effective means of achieving a decisive improvement in student performance can be designed, committed to, and brought to fruition in practice.

The following steps are essential for designing an effective approach to prioritising student success:

- making a convincing case for the centrality of student success, based on analysis of the current inadequacy of graduate output and the national importance of improving it (as outlined above);
- determining what body should lead the development of an effective new approach to advancing student success;
- gaining in-depth understanding, and sufficient acceptance, of the nature and scope of the systemic changes and interventions necessary for optimising student success;
- specifically identifying the authorities and bodies that must take responsibility for making appropriate policy and for designing and implementing the necessary developments at different levels of the system;
- determining what kind of environment and enabling conditions will best foster the work, and, obversely, determining the key obstacles to be addressed.

There is fortunately a great deal of knowledge and experience of higher education development to build on in facilitating student success. A range of innovative and educationally sound interventions has been applied to improving access and success over the last four decades, primarily through academic development and student support initiatives such as personal counselling, tutorial support, fostering academic literacies, and offering foundational provision within extended curricula. Tens of thousands of students have benefited from these, and there can be little doubt that they have played a strong role in the improvements that have occurred (see for example CHE, 2013, pp. 70–90). As the performance figures show, however, they have not had the collective impact needed for a decisive break from "apartheid-era patterns of inequality" (DHET, 2015, p. 56). The central challenge, then, is to establish approaches that can be applied in the mainstream teaching-and-learning process across the sector, to benefit all students who need them.

The complexity, magnitude and persistence of educational under-performance in higher education strongly indicate that achieving a national commitment to student success will require a coherent, sophisticated, realistic and above all comprehensive *strategy for change*. Historically, the impact and the sustainability of developmental initiatives have been greatly limited because the initiatives have been fragmented or have not taken realistic account of contrary interests at institutional or sector level.

Critical elements of a strategy for educational change

Successes and failures in educational development in South Africa suggest that the effectiveness of large-scale interventions depends much on some key characteristics, including:

- intentionality and political will, without which there is no genuine commitment;
- systemic rather than peripheral approaches, to match the scale of the need;
- comprehensiveness in scope, including clear delineation of linkages between related areas of the strategy;
- realism, not pursuing naïve solutions; and
- design thinking, as outlined below.

The significance of design thinking

The value of the concept of design is being recognised in educational development. It incorporates key meanings such as clear purpose, planning, bringing multiple elements together into a coherent whole, employing a range of means towards a specific end, and creativity. All of these are central to effective educational development.

The relevance of 'design for learning' has special features, for example:

- "… design is probably most powerful when conceived as the intelligent centre of the whole teaching-learning lifecycle." (Goodyear, 2015, p. 32)
- The design process can overcome the danger that "being submerged in the taken-for-granted assumptions of both a disciplinary tradition and a teaching tradition can make solutions look deceptively self-evident." (op. cit., p. 31)
- "A common design tactic is to reframe the problem as presented, to see whether a more radical approach … might actually be better." (op. cit., p. 38)
- "Design usually entails resolving tensions between competing objectives." (op. cit., p. 35)

The potential of 'design for learning' to refresh teaching-and-learning approaches, to better match contemporary conditions, is the basis for the case that commitment to coherent design should underpin higher education development.

Examples of analysis for a strategy for student success

Detailed analysis of what needs to go into a comprehensive improvement strategy is beyond the compass of this paper. However, the remaining sections offer examples of analysis in two key areas of the strategy, viz. (a) the nature and scope of the developments needed for optimising student success, and (b) the roles and responsibilities that different bodies need to take to bring about an unequivocal focus on student success.

The Nature and Scope of Educational Development Needed to Optimise Student Success: Three Critical Dimensions

In order to design the higher education sector for student success, the essential first step is to determine the nature and scope of the developmental work to be undertaken, i.e. the range of systemic changes and interventions needed to foster substantial improvement, breaking away from the patterns of the past. This step is critical for effectiveness and also as a basis for shaping the initiative as a whole, including accurately identifying the roles and responsibilities required from different bodies and levels of the sector.

It is fully recognised that student performance in higher education is affected by a range of external factors, especially schooling and socio-economic conditions. However, these factors are beyond the control of the higher education sector and often intractable (Scott, 2017c). Student financial aid, crucial as it is to student success, is primarily a responsibility of national government. The change strategy discussed in this paper therefore focuses on factors internal to higher education, particularly the teaching-and-learning process itself, which is fully within the control of the sector.

In order to provide a view of the scope of a comprehensive educational approach, this section identifies and analyses the role of three major dimensions of the teaching-and-learning process which critically affect student success and in which educational development must be undertaken if student performance is to be substantially improved. (See also Scott, 2017a, pp. 5–7.)

Curriculum content and orientation

While curriculum content and orientation have always been fundamental to the educational process, it is increasingly recognised that expanding the scope of research and development work in this dimension is called for. Content and canon have been subject to ideology and dispute for centuries, but overt contestation over what is being taught, and for what purpose, is increasingly coming to the fore internationally, not least within the current student protest movement in South Africa (Shay & Peseta, eds., 2016).

While content concerns what is taught, orientation here refers to aspects of a curriculum such as ethos and primary area of reference (for example, professionally-orientated, or regionally- or internationally-focused) or dominant pedagogical approach (for example, problem-based learning) (Blackmore & Kandiko, 2012). Content and orientation together constitute the intellectual heart of a curriculum, and have strong effects on learning. In particular, the extent to which students are able and willing to engage constructively with what they are learning can impact on which of them thrive and which are alienated (Shay & Peseta, 2016, pp. 361–363).

For such reasons, especially in a historically divided society, decisions on curriculum orientation and content need to be taken with care and insight, based not only on what suits the discipline or the world of work but also, critically, on what will facilitate sound learning and realise academic potential within a culturally, linguistically and socio-economically diverse student body. The significance of this complex responsibility is illustrated by the passions on both sides of the current curriculum decolonisation debate in South Africa. Taken together with the other major dimensions of educational development, this aspect of curriculum design must have a key place in any strategy for student success, and expertise in it needs to be built and valued.

Delivery of the curriculum

Delivery comprises all the ways in which a given curriculum is communicated and made accessible to students. This dimension consequently covers a wide range of activities, encompassing "teaching, learning support, advice and guidance, coaching, mentorship, peer and collaborative learning, feedback and assessment, personal development planning and tutoring, skills development and practice, and access to resources" (JISC, n.d.). In the South African context, psychosocial student support and academic staff development are also key elements related to delivery.

These core teaching-and-learning activities constitute the intensive day-to-day business of the educational process, and their effectiveness or otherwise clearly has a major bearing on student success. They have to be in place irrespective of the nature of the curriculum, but need to take forms that are appropriate for it and for the students' learning needs.

In the South African context, particular attention needs to be given to the expectations and use of what is known as 'concurrent' student support. This refers to forms of academic support (such as tutorials, workshops, online resources and mentorship) that are made available to students while they are engaged in particular courses in the curriculum. Concurrent support is beneficial in many ways but is bound to take the curriculum content and structure as a given. This means that if the overall design of the curriculum is not well-matched with the profile and needs of the students, the effectiveness of concurrent support is greatly limited.

Structural design: the curriculum framework

Structural design refers primarily to the 'curriculum framework', which means the key structural parameters that frame the curriculum as a whole, including the entry and exit levels, the formal duration (which influences the entry and/or exit level), the extent of flexibility in pathways through the curriculum (which influences the accommodation of diversity), and modularity (which can influence curriculum flexibility and the relationship between depth and breadth).

This is the dimension of the teaching-and-learning process where key systemic obstacles to success and equity are located, including:

- discontinuity between the outcomes of schooling and the demands of higher education, commonly known as the 'articulation gap' (CHE, 2013, p. 60);
- failure to develop language-related and other academic literacies; and
- failure to provide support for major transitions in knowledge domain within curricula.

The curriculum framework therefore has a major effect on both access and success. It influences the categories of students that can responsibly be admitted, and impacts critically on 'epistemic access' and quality of learning, and hence on which students succeed and fail. There is evidence that in the South African context of extreme inequalities in educational background, it is not possible for a single set of curriculum parameters to provide the full range of the student body with a fair degree of equality of opportunity to succeed (CHE, 2013, pp. 35, 97).

Despite this, the curriculum framework is still widely but incorrectly regarded as effectively immutable. Until it is recognised as a key variable in the design of the mainstream teaching-and-learning system in higher education, it will continue to constitute a major constraint on student success.

The consequences of misunderstanding where the roots of obstacles to learning lie

The three key dimensions of the teaching-and-learning system discussed above must clearly work together, as an organic whole, to successfully facilitate learning. Faults or shortcomings in any of them will inevitably impair the outcomes of the educational process. While the dimensions must function in full alignment, each nevertheless has its own unique and essential role. Therefore, when endemic obstacles to learning are discerned, it is essential that their origins in one or more of the key dimensions are analysed and traced, so that faults can be effectively addressed at source.

At the risk of over-simplification, an example of misidentification of where root causes lie may serve to illustrate this key point.

A topical case is that of approaches to addressing the problem of the secondary-higher education articulation gap (for a detailed account, see Scott, 2017a, pp. 37–39). This systemic fault arises from South Africa's major educational inequalities and is manifested in a serious mismatch between the assumptions about academic preparedness made by the universities and the actual knowledge and skills that students bring with them from their schooling. Its existence has been officially recognised since the 1997 higher education White Paper (DoE, 1997, sec. 2.34). The main systemic response, funded by the state since 2004, has been Extended Curriculum Programmes, which are designed to provide foundational learning and alternative pathways through the curriculum, based on realistic assumptions about students' prior learning. A major shortcoming, however, has been that resource allocation has thus far restricted the reach of extended programmes to under 15% of the student intake, with only modest growth in prospect over the next decade. This leaves students in 'mainstream' curricula without access to foundational and extended provision, even though analysis has indicated that a substantial proportion of these have a high probability of failing because of the articulation gap (DHET, 2012, p. 1; CHE, 2013, pp. 98–99). How should this be addressed?

In recent years, while continuing its limited support for extended programmes, the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) has invested the bulk of its mainstream educational development resources in funding a range of concurrent support interventions (via the Teaching Development Grant and now the University Capacity Development Programme). This means that the DHET has decided that concurrent support is the only academic intervention needed to deal with obstacles to learning faced by mainstream students, including structural ones arising from the curriculum framework (Fees Commission, 2017). This flies in the face of longstanding experience and analysis pointing to the ineffectiveness of concurrent support as the primary means of addressing systemic faults such as articulation failure and under-development of academic literacies. The ineffectiveness comes from the anomaly – possibly futility – of expecting students to master preparatory knowledge during a course which assumes that knowledge to be already in place. Concurrent support must therefore be used as a complement to, but not a substitute for, effective structural design – or, for that matter, for appropriate curriculum orientation and content.

The DHET's decision can be seen as an example of assuming that intervention in one dimension (in this case Delivery) can overcome major faults in another (Structure). Such an incorrect assumption is likely to be costly, in that the resources directed into concurrent support will not be effectively used, and more importantly the articulation problems among mainstream students will not be resolved and the current poor performance patterns will persist.

In contrast, seeking solutions in the dimension where the articulation problems really lie, i.e. in the curriculum framework, yields good examples of the value of innovative design (CHE, 2013, pp. 70–90 and Appendix 2). "Reframing the problem, for example by seeing the problem as a symptom of some larger problem, is a classic design move" (Goodyear, 2015, p. 35).

The importance of the inter-relationship between the key dimensions of the teaching-and-learning process in designing for student success: An overview

The following is an overview of the key points arising from the analysis in this section.

- Interventions in one dimension of the teaching-and-learning process cannot compensate for significant shortcomings in another. If not addressed, shortcomings in any dimension put a counter-productive burden on work in the other dimensions, in efforts to compensate that are usually unsuccessful. For example, effective delivery is difficult enough in diverse classes but almost impossible in the absence of an inclusive curriculum framework or orientation.

- The different dimensions each have their own unique and essential purposes and functions, which must be brought to bear on meeting the needs of each particular context. There must thus be fit-for-purpose educational design and development in every dimension.
- At the same time, the different dimensions are necessarily complementary. For example, "Curriculum delivery is part of [a] dynamic interrelationship with curriculum design … Within this process 'delivery' is defined as the point at which learners interact with the designed curriculum" (JISC, n.d.). Effective design and educational development are needed to ensure that content, orientation, structure and delivery are brought into mutually-reinforcing alignment. The underlying principles of Biggs's theory of "constructive alignment" (Biggs & Tang, 2011) are valuable to apply here, albeit in a broader framework. This is a fundamental design challenge.
- The outcome of this alignment must ensure that the teaching-and-learning process as a whole serves the interests of the full range of the student body, effectively accommodating diversity.
- Each dimension must be recognised as a key site of ongoing educational development, to utilise advances in knowledge of teaching and learning, and to adjust to changes in the student body as well as the wider context of higher education, including schooling, technology and the world of work.
- Misdiagnosis of the origins of obstacles leads to ineffective interventions, unproductive utilisation of resources and persistence of poor outcomes, because it results in treating symptoms rather than the underlying cause.
- It is essential that responsibility for educational development in the different key dimensions is taken at the levels that have the requisite authority and capacity to bring the development to fruition. The DHET and institutional leadership have essential roles to play, but they have often not accepted these responsibilities adequately, or have delegated them to levels that do not have the wherewithal to carry them through. This undermines the cohesive effort needed for success.

Conclusion

The analysis above has identified the need to recognise and align the three dimensions of the curriculum, highlighting the importance of comprehensiveness and coherence in designing an effective teaching-and-learning process. However, this need is not reflected in DHET priorities or most current mainstream practice.

The present imbalance in attention to the three dimensions, with an undue focus on concurrent support, is an impediment to achieving substantial improvement in student success and equity of outcomes. As indicated by the persistence of negative performance patterns, the current design of the teaching-and-learning process is perpetuating the status quo, and the questions must be asked: 'Who is benefiting from this?' and 'What will it take for the need for fresh thinking and more fundamental change to be recognised?'

Placing student success at the heart of the higher education agenda: What will it take?

This paper has argued that a comprehensive improvement strategy must be founded on a full understanding of the scope of the challenge – that is, the broad categories of *what* needs to be done. If sufficient agreement can be reached on this understanding, it opens the way for addressing, in a fully informed way, the core question: 'What will it take to put student success at the heart of the higher education agenda, at system and institutional level?' The answer to this question will form the second major part of the strategy for change, involving the issues of *how* and *by whom* the goal must be achieved.

To date, various performance improvement approaches – ranging in focus from student engagement to structural curriculum reform – have been researched and implemented on a limited scale. However, none of these have been adequately tested in mainstream practice, primarily because the end goal has not been sufficiently prioritised by the decision-makers. This has resulted in a lack of essential conditions for progress, including decisive national debate on the issue, critical engagement by stakeholders, agreed common ground, and leadership. Consequently, interventions have been ad hoc or constrained in scope, and have hence had limited impact in relation to the magnitude of the challenge.

Once the initiative has been scoped and leadership agreed, moving student success to the heart of the higher education agenda requires the following key steps:

- gaining 'sufficient consensus', in the institutions as well as in the national bodies, on the nature and scope of the development required (as discussed above);
- identifying the bodies, actors and decision-makers whose assent, active co-operation, expertise, authority and resources are essential for pursuing the end goal; and clarifying the roles and responsibilities to be expected of each;
- taking realistic account of the obstacles to the prioritisation of student success at the different levels of the system, and thereby coming to an understanding of what conditions, motivation and mindsets need to be engendered; and
- developing the change strategy in detail and implementing it through a realistic operational plan.

This is clearly a complex task. As in the scoping of the initiative, comprehensiveness and coherence are key, but here the need for realism and sophistication in strategy come to the fore, given that the field of higher education is characterised by multiple interests and semi-autonomous bodies and individuals.

Offering any detail on the implementation of the strategy is beyond the scope of this paper, so the remaining sections aim just to highlight key considerations about the issues of responsibilities, obstacles and leadership.

The key decision-makers and what should be expected of them

Higher education has multiple stakeholders but this section is confined to the two most influential decision-making parties, the state and the institutions.

Essentially, the state has two interlinked responsibilities in respect of prioritising student success: providing enabling policies; and ensuring that state funding for higher education is directed at facilitating and rewarding student success and equity. Its biggest challenge is to use these mechanisms to firmly guide the sector in the right strategic direction without undue prescription of approaches. The effectiveness of this role is critical for progress.

Given the distributed nature of power in higher education, the institutions have a pivotal role in shaping how, and with what real effects, national policy is translated into practice. It is only in the institutions that teaching-and-learning approaches can be tailored to specific student bodies and conditions.

If student success is to be prioritised, the universities must be committed to:

- ensuring that their educational mission is recognised and valued as a central obligation to the public good;
- reflecting this priority in all core strategies and operations; and
- accepting accountability for the *outcomes* of their educational role, including graduation rates.

The status quo is far from meeting these conditions, as outlined below.

Obstacles to an unequivocal focus on student success

There are ample indications that the educational operation of the public university system is not designed around student success as its end goal. In particular, universities are not held to account for the outcomes of their educational process, as manifested in the quality and efficiency of their graduate production.

A realistic strategy for prioritising student success will hinge on a thorough, candid understanding of the obstacles to it. Here are examples.

In the universities, arguably the most influential obstacle is lack of 'parity of esteem' for the main functions of higher education. As Leibowitz (2017) sums it up: in universities of all kinds and orientations, the dominant perception is that "research [is] valued – and rewarded – more highly than teaching". If the educational mission is not at least equally valued, it is likely that the majority of the academic community will not willingly prioritise it, and may resist formal accountability for the outcomes of their work as educators. Since culture and attitudes cannot be imposed by fiat, sophisticated strategy will be needed to create alternative incentives and conditions to modify institutional culture.

Within the state, the university education management system is not designed around student success as the end goal either, despite recent attention to student performance (DHET, 2017b, p. 3). This shows particularly in the funding system, which is geared to enrolments rather than graduates, chronically underfunds operating budgets and interventions designed to improve student success, and tolerates major wastage of resources arising from under-performance (CHE, 2013, pp. 136–137).

The fact that, in the recent contestation over financial access, the issue of student success has been absent (Scott, 2017b) is telling. The low priority of student success evident in such examples constitutes a primary obstacle to any strategy for change.

Who will take leadership in fostering a focus on student success?

There are two major leadership tasks: (a) achieving sufficient consensus on what developmental action is needed, and (b) creating the conditions that will enable the prioritisation of student success.

Considering who should assume leadership is beyond the scope of this paper. Two key points warrant noting, however. Firstly, in terms of authority and political power, the DHET must exercise leadership, but it is impeded by factors such as shortage of capacity. Strong support would therefore be needed from national bodies (like the CHE), relevant professional organisations, and new organisations arising from the reconstruction of student financial aid.

Secondly, there is an opportunity for the higher education development community – made up primarily of academics and professionals in fields such as academic development and the first-year experience, student affairs professionals, and regular university staff with particular expertise in education – to play a special role: to mobilise around the student success goal and to contribute intellectual leadership, informed advocacy, and support for national bodies.

Conclusion

There is at present no indication – in the state or the institutions – of a vision of the higher education system that is designed to break decisively with the performance patterns of the past.

The prevailing systemic conditions, including dominant academic culture and the funding regime, influence universities' behaviours and priorities much more powerfully than statements of purpose in policies or public-interest arguments, and the dominant culture and management system favour the status quo. It can therefore be said that the current design of the higher education system is an obstacle to placing student success, including equity of outcomes, at the heart of the higher education agenda.

The obstacles are weighty and complex, but they must be confronted. They cannot be expected to yield to ad hoc or small-scale interventions. The situation calls rather for a sophisticated, comprehensive, coherent and realistic strategy for prioritising student success as a goal and facilitating student success in practice through a system that is designed explicitly for this purpose.

References

Biggs, J. & Tang, C. (2011). *Teaching for Quality Learning at University* (4th ed.). Buckingham: Open University Press/McGraw Hill.

Blackmore, P. & Kandiko, C. (Eds.). (2012). *Strategic Curriculum Change: Global Trends in Universities.* Oxford: Routledge, with the Society for Research into Higher Education.

CHE (Council on Higher Education). (2013). A proposal for undergraduate curriculum reform in South Africa: The case for a flexible curriculum structure. Pretoria: Council on Higher Education. Retrieved 18 Oktober 2017 from http://www.che.ac.za/sites/default/files/publications/Full_Report.pdf

CHE (Council on Higher Education). (2014). Framework for Institutional Quality Enhancement in the Second Period of Quality Assurance. Pretoria: Council on Higher Education. Retrieved 18 October 2017 from http://www.che.ac.za/media_and_publications/frameworks-criteria/framework-institutional-quality-enhancement-second-period

CHE (Council on Higher Education). (2017).VitalStats Public Higher Education 2015. Pretoria: Council on Higher Education.

DHET (Department of Higher Education and Training). (2012). Foundation Provision in Ministerially Approved Programmes. Pretoria: Department of Higher Education and Training.

DHET (Department of Higher Education and Training). (2015). 2nd National Higher Education Summit 15–17 October 2015, Annexure 3, *Are we making progress with systemic structural transformation of resourcing, access, success, staffing and researching in higher education: What do the data say?* Pretoria: Department of Higher Education and Training. Retrieved from http://www.dhet.gov.za/summit/Docs/2015Docs/Annex%203_DHET_Progress%20with%20transformation%20_What%20do%20the%20data%20say.pdf

DHET (Department of Higher Education and Training). (2017a). 2000 to 2014 first time entering undergraduate cohort studies for public higher education institutions. Pretoria: Department of Higher Education and Training.

DHET (Department of Higher Education and Training). (2017b). Ministerial Statement on the Implementation of the University Capacity Development Programme. Pretoria: Department of Higher Education and Training.

DoE (Department of Education). (1997). Education White Paper 3: A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education. Pretoria: *Government Gazette* No. 18207.

Fees Commission. (2017). Transcript of Public Hearing Set 8 Hearing 3: Testimony of the Department of Higher Education and Training 24-03-2017. Retrieved 18 October 2017 from http://www.justice.gov.za/commissions/FeesHET/hearings/set8/set8-d8b-Transcript_24-03-17.pdf (Session 2).

Goodyear, P. (2015). Teaching as design. *HERDSA Review of Higher Education*, 2, 27–50.

JISC (JISC Design Studio) (n.d.). Transforming Curriculum Delivery through Technology. Retrieved 11 April 2017 from http://jiscdesignstudio.pbworks.com/w/page/40379712/Transforming%20Curriculum%20Delivery%20through%20Technology

Leibowitz, B. (2017). There's pressure on academics to learn how to teach. But they need more support. *The Conversation*, 4 May 2017. Retrieved 24 October 2017 from https://theconversation.com/theres-pressure-on-academics-to-learn-how-to-teach-but-they-need-more-support-76022

Pandor, N. (2005). Education key to improving economic growth and promoting social cohesion. Edited extract from address by Minister of Education Naledi Pandor. *Cape Times*, 7 September, p. 15.

Scott, I. (2017a). Response to testimony of the Department of Higher Education and Training on 24 March 2017. Invited submission to the Commission of Inquiry into Higher Education & Training (Fees Commission) 25 April 2017. Retrieved 24 October 2017 from http://www.justice.gov.za/commissions/FeesHET/hearings/set8/set8-d8-ResponseDHET.pdf

Scott, I. (2017b). Without success, access will fail. *Mail & Guardian*, 6 October 2017. Retrieved 24 October 2017 from https://mg.co.za/article/2017-10-06-00-without-success-access-will-fail

Scott, I. (2017c). No quick fix for university crisis. *Mail & Guardian*, 13 October 2017. Retrieved 24 October 2017 from https://mg.co.za/article/2017-10-13-00-no-quick-fix-for-university-crisis

Scott, I., Yeld, N. & Hendry, J. (2007). *A case for improving teaching and learning in South African higher education.* Higher Education Monitor No. 6, Pretoria: Council on Higher Education. Retrieved 24 October 2017 from http://www.che.ac.za/media_and_publications/higher-education-monitor/higher-education-monitor-6-case-improving-teaching

Shay, S. & Peseta, T. (2016). A socially just curriculum reform agenda. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 21(4), 361–366. https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2016.1159057

Shay, S. & Peseta, T. (Eds.). (2016). Curriculum as contestation. Special Issue. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 21(4).

Times Live. (2017). SA is skills-hungry, says statistics chief. 27 September. Retrieved 24 October 2017 from https://www.timeslive.co.za/news/south-africa/2017-09-27-sa-is-skills-hungry-says-statistics-chief/

How to cite:

Scott, I. (2018). Designing the South African Higher Education System for Student Success. *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa*, 6(1), 1–17. DOI: 10.24085/jsaa.v6i1.3062

Research article

Exploring the Challenges of First-Year Student Funding: An Intra-Institutional Case Study

Tracey McKay,* Anban Naidoo** & Zach Simpson***

Abstract

Amongst the first of the challenges facing prospective first-year university students is the need to procure funding for their studies. Indeed, demand for funding for students to access higher education far exceeds supply in South Africa. One solution has been the creation of a government loan scheme, the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), but this scheme does not cover all students. Outside of NSFAS, student bursary funding remains limited and universities are being increasingly pressurised to allocate bursaries to ensure students are not excluded due to funding constraints. Despite this, to date, little work has been undertaken regarding university policy and management of bursary applications and funds. Thus this study represents an attempt to fill this gap. The study explores the current student funding model deployed at one particular large tertiary institution as a means to gain an understanding of current funding challenges and attempt to find ways in which funding decisions can be improved. A qualitative approach was used, which involved conducting in-depth interviews with senior university staff involved in a range of student support directorates. The study demonstrates the complexity of the challenges associated with student funding.

Keywords

student funding; higher education; first-year experience; education management; South Africa

Introduction

Entry into higher education is a daunting proposition: competition for offers of placement is intense, the culture and 'ways of doing' at university are usually far-removed from what many entrants might be familiar with, and there is a gamut of new social experiences to face. Despite their significance, these challenges have, in recent years, been superseded by the challenge of student funding. In South Africa, specifically, the higher education sector has faced a series of rolling protests, dubbed #FeesMustFall, that have drawn acute attention to the high cost of undertaking a university degree. Any meaningful response

* Prof. Tracey McKay is Associate Professor, Department of Environmental Science, University of South Africa. Email: mckaytjm@unisa.ac.za

** Anban Naidoo is Director, Student Academic Services, Gordon Institute of Business Studies, University of Pretoria and University of the Free State. Email: naidooa@ufs.ac.za

*** Dr Zach Simpson is Senior Lecturer, Faculty of Engineering and the Built Environment, University of Johannesburg. Email: zsimpson@uj.ac.za

to #FeesMustFall, however, requires an understanding of the complexities surrounding student funding, one of which is the challenge of student bursary provision. Although some work in this regard has been undertaken internationally, relatively little has been done within the context of (South) Africa, specifically (Kerkvliet & Nowell, 2014; Harrison et al., 2015; Panigrahi, 2015).

As such, this study seeks to explore student bursary funding from the perspective of the implementation challenges that pertain to it. This includes exploring who the stakeholders involved are, and the extent to which student funding supports the project of transformation in the country. The study is exploratory and qualitative, and examines the undergraduate student funding model deployed within one higher education institution in South Africa. It is an intra-institutional case study as it draws on interviews conducted with senior university staff involved in a range of student support and financing activities. These senior staff included those working in Finance, Student Services, Information Technology and Recruitment. Importantly, the case study speaks to the first-year student experience in that it interrogates, from an institutional perspective, how students gain access to funding with a view to examining how access to funding can be enhanced in the future.

Student Funding: Challenges and Debates

Access to higher education is a crucial component in solving the myriad of social and economic problems that South Africa faces. But access is inhibited in two crucial ways. First, there are insufficient university places in the current suite of South African higher education institutions to accommodate all the applicants. Second, the aspirations of young people hailing from impoverished areas to attend tertiary education institutions are stymied if they do not have access to the funding necessary to engage in university study (Walker & Mkwananzi, 2015). But the sheer numbers who require funding and the limited funds available mean that there is not enough money to fund all students. This has created an urgent need to investigate alternative and innovative models of student funding within higher education.

One such student funding model is a government-created student loan scheme, known as the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS). Although NSFAS costs the South African government upwards of R1.1 billion per year, it remains insufficient compared to the demand for funding (Pillay, 2010; DHET, 2013). In addition, it is not a pure bursary scheme, with only a maximum of 40% converted to a bursary (on the condition of good academic performance) and so, even with NSFAS aid, students exit university deeply indebted (Kwiek et al., 2012). For those who do not qualify for NSFAS, or do qualify but are not able to get funding due to funding shortfalls, it is either the students themselves or the higher education institutions that have to make up this shortfall. In practice, students manage their financial obligations via a balance of some or all of the following channels: student funding (grants, bursaries, NSFAS loans), bank loans, part-time work, savings and parental contributions.

The result of this can be seen in recent history: in South Africa, by the early 2000s, national student debt had risen to R5.5 billion. To reduce this, South African institutions of higher education vigorously pursued upfront payments and other cost recovery strategies, including debt collection. In some cases, this included withholding academic results until students had settled their debt (Koen et al., 2006). Despite this, entire student debt owed to universities alone stood – by the end of 2016 – at almost R1 billion, and the number of private student loans (from banks for example) stood at 120 000, with at least one third in arrears (Govender, 2017; Eighty20, 2016). Indeed, another result was the student revolt of 2015, known as #FeesMustFall, where students took their grievances over the costs of higher education to the streets and to the seat of government, the Union Buildings in Pretoria.

Of course, debates about student funding must be situated in broader concerns about the extent to which higher education is inclusive in terms of the environment it provides for its participants. Student funding is a significant concern, but it is important to avoid 'mis-framing' the nuanced problems that exist regarding social justice and higher education (Bozalek & Boughey, 2012). Access to higher education is crucial for inclusive growth and social mobility, and there are various forms of transformation required across the higher education sector, particularly with regard to language, race, gender, internationalisation and class (Panigrahi, 2015). It may well be of little consequence to increase student funding while ignoring the "interconnecting structures, systems, practices, discourses and cultures of higher education that are complicit in the social, economic and cultural reproduction of inequalities and exclusions in and through higher education" (Burke et al., 2017, p. 1). Thus, the broad aim should be to provide equitable access to higher education study for all groups within society (Asplund et al., 2008).

But Burke et al. (2017) show that representation alone is insufficient: what is also necessary is the redistribution of resources, recognition of diverse resources and transformation of pedagogical spaces. Within such a context, funding needs to be modelled in such a way that it contributes to this project of transformation. Of course, therefore, there cannot be a one-size-fits-all approach; instead, institutions, and government, need to devise funding strategies that are student-centred. While this presents a significant challenge, it may be essential to facilitate effective transformation of higher education.

Nonetheless, while research shows that state aid has a positive relationship with student performance, other studies claim that the total amount of money spent does not reliably improve results (Forster, 2008; Richardson et al., 2009). Thus, one area where student funding could be improved is in the use of multiple criteria, both academic and non-academic to determine who qualifies for a bursary. In this regard, student funding decision-makers may do better to incorporate non-traditional criteria, such as differences between the environment of the institution and the environment from which a student comes. Furthermore, student funding must make provision for institutional life: residence activities provide an engaging environment in which students can become immersed in the academic environment (Burke et al., 2017). This allows for better social integration, which could have a positive impact on students' performance in higher education.

Furthermore, the provision of student funding cannot be divorced from the provision of student support services. Students who require funding often hail from marginalised groups. Although one cannot homogenise such groups, they face many obstacles: family stresses, financial strain, stigmatisation, social integration, and lack of access to the culture of the academy (Thompson et al., 2013). That said, such challenges are not only felt by so-called "disadvantaged" students. All students require support, particularly in the first year, in order to fulfil their potential, whether this is support with things such as academic writing, or emotional and psychological support. The provision of such support is extremely costly, and is often marginalised within institutions because it does not provide direct forms of income to mitigate its expense. However, in this paper, we propose that student funding must be seen as part and parcel of broader initiatives aimed at (first-year) student support. A significant challenge, however, is to ensure that such support recognises diversity in a positive manner, as opposed to engaging in assimilationist coercion (Burke et al., 2017).

Finally, a key part of student funding is stakeholder engagement. Dewey (2009) proposes that institutions need to make a fundamental change to the way they engage with stakeholders. This involves much closer relationships with students, government and industry in order to ensure a sustainable, effective, accountable and flexible approach to student funding. Indeed, this is critical to student funding with its myriad of challenges and constraints: institutions need to work closely with stakeholders in order to allow for innovative thinking and mutual gains. Student funding (seen within the broad thrust of student support and transformation of higher education) is an increasingly important function of higher education institutions. However, it is not a simple proposition. As Begičević et al. (2010) argue, there are multiple aspects on which higher education institutions are expected to deliver, each of which presents its own benefits and costs. The needs for research, industry engagement and the like present conflicting and dynamic priorities depending on which part of the institution one is positioned within (Asif & Searcy, 2014). Again, this calls for clarity of focus, effective decision-making and open stakeholder engagement.

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to explore the undergraduate student funding model used at one contact institution of higher education in South Africa, from the perspective of senior university management. The aim was to determine if, and how, the student funding model could be improved. Participants were selected based on how familiar they were with the inner workings and decision making of the institution. Most were in middle management with portfolios that were either strategic or operational. The seven who agreed to participate were from the departments of student services, student finance, information technology and recruitment. These departments all work on various aspects of student funding (independently, and in conjunction with one another) and, in combination, the selection of these participants allowed for a broad exploration of the challenges, (dis)advantages and considerations related to student funding.

It is important to note that the interviews were conducted in 2015, prior to the emergence of the #FeesMustFall protests. Participation was voluntary and participants were given the option to withdraw at any time. Moreover, participation was confidential and ethics clearance from the institution was obtained. A limitation of the present study is that participants were limited to 'internal' role players only and stakeholders, such as students, parents and lecturers were not included. Due to the focus being funding, no direct investigation into student support was undertaken.

Table 1: List of interviewees

Title	Years of experience (in student funding)	Years of experience (in Higher Education)
Senior Manager: Student Finance	15	30
Business Analyst: Student Finance	6	18
Division Head: Student Finance	35	35
Manager: Bursaries & Loans	19	19
Manager: Financial Aspects	10	10
Senior Manager: Recruitment & Retention	14	14
Deputy Director: Recruitment & International Students	18	18

A semi-structured interview schedule was designed (see Appendix). The areas of focus within the interview schedule were: (a) the mechanisms used to facilitate student funding; (b) the criteria used for student funding; and (c) the challenges facing student funding. The interviews were recorded and the transcribed data amounted to 79 pages or 35 300 words. Content analysis was used to analyse the transcriptions and the themes that emerged from the data are presented here. Where necessary, data collection and analysis was supplemented by referring to internal documentation such as memos and policies.

Results

Current student funding model: Criteria and stakeholders

The interview data suggested that the institution divides student funding into three different fund groups: (1) Own Funds, (2) Controlled Funds, and (3) Administered Funds (see Table 2) with 1 698 individual funds managed by the university. Each individual fund has its own set of criteria based on the strategy and/or needs of that particular fund. As Participant 1 pointed out, all "have different criteria, different reasons why each is awarded, and the processes, marketing and communication for each is different" making it "complicated" due to the "different stakeholders … finance, client service, faculties, external donors, education innovation".

Table 2: Fund groups and examples

University's own funds	Funds controlled by the University	Funds administered by the University
• Merit bursaries • Sport bursaries • Loans • Special projects • S-Funds bursaries • Family discounts • Staff rebate • Edu-loan	• NSFAS • NRF • Studentships • Donors with M.o.U.	• City Council • Provinces • Government • Other

Table 3 lists the types of criteria that individual student funds use, although some fund groups use a combination of these criteria. Participant 7 indicated that the range of criteria was useful as it allowed the institution to "tailor offerings to suit an individual or the market … you are trying to capture". Thus, as Participant 1 added, the wide range of criteria gave the institution "options".

Table 3: Criteria used in student funding

Academic	Non-academic
• Grade 12 results (individual subjects, admissions point score, etc.) • Grade point average	• Financial neediness • Sports achievement • Extra-curricular activities especially leadership (Head boy/girl, etc.) • Employment status (institutional staff) • Disability status • Application for funding • Faculty and/or study choice • Population group/race • School • Loyalty (development or school programmes)

Although there are non-academic criteria, the institution places a great deal of emphasis on academic criteria. Participant 1 noted that this was because the institution wanted to attract "top students". Participant 7 added that "we were specifically [worried about] losing market share, especially in the top [Grade 12 results] category … so it was reviewed and a new model [Vice-Chancellor's award] has been put in place for 2016". But, Participant 6 noted that "rewarding performance based on study choice was perceived as being unfair by parents and students". As such, the overemphasis on academic criteria (although this rewarded student for academic performance) was viewed as problematic. Instead, Participant 1 wanted leadership to be emphasised in addition to academic results, whereas for Participants 3, 4 and 5, "need" was identified as taking precedence. Participant 7 felt that excellence, rather than need alone, should be adopted as a criterion for NSFAS: "I would like government to reward academic excellence … couple neediness to academic excellence.” Participant 6 was concerned that the awarding of sports bursaries was not transparent and that the criteria were not clear. Most wanted the university to adopt aptitude and ability tests and use the results to improve student funding decisions. Participant 2 wanted the settlement of previous, outstanding debt and/or the efforts made in terms of securing their own funding via loans to be a criterion. This participant also felt that “students … [who] put in a lot of effort into getting money to settle their outstanding balances but … then we help students [who] have not paid at all … [so] students who try to settle their debts are ignored in favour of those who made no effort”.

The participants identified a combined total of 18 stakeholders (see Table 4). The key stakeholders were identified as the University finance department, external funders (including NSFAS) and students. In most cases, participants also mentioned parents. It was felt that there was significant consultation with stakeholders. For example, Participant 1 argued that “they have a lot of input” while Participant 5 stated that “we sit around a table often, everyone is notified” and Participant 7 confirmed “we have developed a bit of a policy, so I think there is lots of opportunity to give input”. It was found that key stakeholders “sit around a table” to raise their concerns, but non-key stakeholders were managed by the relevant staff members who relay concerns to those in authority. Although participants were unanimous in their belief that stakeholders were satisfied, they qualified this by arguing that there was need for some improvement. For example, Participant 4 stated “yes, but potential funders are unhappy due to the process followed to become a funder”.

Challenges of the current student funding model

It was found that the student funding model is continuously under review and revised annually, with ad-hoc changes made even during a cycle when necessary. Overall, the participants felt that the current student funding model faced four significant challenges: finance, communication, funding design and student support. Each of these challenges is elucidated below.

Finance

The most important challenge was that requests for funding far outstripped the money available. Participant 1 stated that “the budget is under constraint” while Participant 7 adds, “the institution can’t make up the shortfall, we don’t have the money”. All of the participants acknowledged this lack of funding. The university was under financial pressure [Participants 2 and 6]. Participant 7 was particularly concerned that universities were spending their reserve funds (“money is not kept in reserve”) which was seen to be detrimental to the long-term survival of the university (“you are cutting off your own sustainability if you offer too many of these [bursaries]”). Despite this, there was also an attempt by the institution to take inflation and real costs into account [Participants 1 and 6]: “Bursary values were enhanced and made more competitive [compared] to other universities”.

Table 4: Internal and external stakeholders

Internal stakeholders	External stakeholders
• Administration Department • Career counsellors • Client services • Education innovation • Executive management • Faculties • Finance Department • Institutional advancement • Institutional planning • Research and innovation support • Residences • Student affairs • University relations	• External funders • Government Departments • Parents • Schools • Students

Crucially, Participant 7 noted that the bulk of the money was allocated in the first year of study: "We frontload the offerings" which was seen to be "inherently unfair". This participant wanted funds to be disbursed "through the years" as staggering the award over the duration of the study period provides consistency for the student. That is, for students to "know that [I] got that left for 2nd year" and "[what] I got left for 3rd year". Some wanted a system in place whereby student fee accounts had to be settled first rather than giving money that students can "take out and go do something else with". Another issue was that upon graduation, the NFSAS bursary is converted to a loan, which means such students do not return for postgraduate studies due to this "loan hanging over their head" [Participant 6].

Communication

Participants felt that communication with students and other stakeholders could be improved. In some cases, students did not know about bursary funding and so "if the student didn't apply for funding, then they are not going to be on the list" [Participant 2]. Participant 4 concurred and felt that a potential solution was to wrap funding applications with the standard application to study. That is, "funding applications should be automatic". Participant 7 felt that students need to understand the "strings" attached to loans and noted that only recently could students even "view the terms and conditions on the bursary website", as "the rules and regulations [are currently not] clear". Another challenge was communication with potential funders, with Participant 4 remarking that "potential funders are sent from one person to the next" rather than there being one central interface whereby the university can engage with potential funders. However, the participants did indicate that the university was constantly improving its practices. Participant 5 noted that "we try to see if we can do it better, faster, communication" and Participant 1 added "there's a lot more communication than before".

Funding design

All the participants felt that the bursary fund rules and criteria were overly complex. Participant 1 noted that "there are different criteria … why the award is given … they have different processes, the marketing, and the communication … it's quite complicated … it's a lot of admin". Added to this, was the need to manage the limited funds well ahead of time: "We try to forecast a year or two in advance." This causes problems as there are multiple factors that can impact on these forecasts, such as inflation, strikes and budget cuts. Most acknowledged the huge support offered by NSFAS, but wished that they could do more. Participant 3 contends that "the offer to the student is not enough to cover all their fees and for instance the hostels". Participant 5 confirms that "[NSFAS] have a capped amount of R67 000 … and so can't fund the additional R20 000 or what's needed".

Student support

Many participants felt that student support was critical to student funding success. Participant 2 was explicit in this regard: "there is a huge lack of support for the students". Participant 3 indicated that such support is vital to student life ("it must be compulsory for students to receive counselling so that they fit in") as did Participant 4, who felt that students needed support in an environment in which they do not feel comfortable: "students feel that this [the institution] is not my first choice … I was not accepted elsewhere". Lastly, Participant 7 felt that those that receive funding need to be monitored closely with full support given based on the student's need: "I would introduce … a type of monitoring system … for students [who have] gotten funding from us … [as we do not know who] might be at risk or might not be at risk." This way they can "get whatever kind of help is necessary".

Student funding and transformation

Most participants were of the view that funding did take transformation into account. Participant 1 said: "Yes, there are equity awards." Participant 7 gave voice to the strategic nature of transformation: "Yes … if you take the broad sense of transformation from equity to demographics … we have a wide range of bursaries." In terms of improving transformation, two participants (Participants 6 and 7) suggested that more emphasis should be placed on non-academic criteria and Participant 1 argued for emphasis to be shifted to particular degree programmes.

The question of transformation played out in the interviews in various ways, and significant, related points emerged from the data. These included: student support (again), capacity planning, language policy, and organisation development. Each of these are discussed in turn below.

Student support

Student support was also seen to be important for transformation. Participant 2 wanted an early warning system: "Support for students … this [support must be] in the beginning of their studies, otherwise they get discouraged and they just drop out." Participant 3 indicated that there is a need to find the root cause of the problem and address that "support services, to see really where the problem is and pinpoint that". Participant 4 wanted cultural integration programmes: "[Creating] a culture at university … [where students are more comfortable]." Participant 6 argued for "a quota system" outlining that "we have a quota system in residence, which I think is good" [Participant 6]. Participant 3 argued that "it must be compulsory for students to receive counselling".

Capacity planning

Participant 4 took the view that by increasing capacity, there would be a natural progression in terms of transformation as the institution's demographic starts to resemble that of the nation. This involves re-designing the university to cope with the greater number of students. Capacity planning refers to achieving a balance between massification and staff-to-student ratio. That is, simply increasing enrolments will not, in the long run, reduce inequality because when the staff-to-student ratio becomes too large, excellence in tuition is sacrificed.

Language policy

Some participants indicated that transformation may require changing the University's language policy [Participant 6 and 7]. Language policy, in the context of the institution under study, refers to teaching in a language that students are comfortable with so as to level the playing field for all students.

Organisational development

Organisational development refers to transformation of the organisation in order to match the objectives of government and ensure that staff buys in to the requirements of transformation. Thus, transformation is complex and nuanced and the debate needs to be widened beyond that of funding. Participant 7 sums this point up particularly cogently: "Your environment should be changed that it's welcoming to all people … and it's something that needs to be addressed by looking at accommodation, language policies, HR policies … if you don't address it at an institutional level and cascade that down to departmental levels … they won't become embedded in what you do."

Discussion

Participant concerns over money mirrored those of the #FeesMustFall campaign (although these interviews were conducted before this campaign entered the public discourse). It appeared that while the institution was attempting to assist students, it was overwhelmed by the size and scale of the problem. However, the short-term solution of using equity and 'discretionary funds' to help students was seen as going against the principle of long-term financial sustainability. These findings are in alignment with the literature (Koen et al., 2006; Aydin, 2014; Styan, 2014; Mulaudzi, 2015).

There are numerous challenges associated with current funding mechanisms. The total bursary money available from the government is insufficient to fund all the students who need it (DHET, 2013). Thus, even academically strong students will not necessarily receive funding. Another challenge is the effective allocation of bursaries, an issue found worldwide (Callender & Wilkinson, 2013). The institution under study here does attempt to allocate bursaries in a transparent, predictable and timeous manner. But, the range of funds from which bursaries must be allocated means that this ideal is not always achieved in practice. In addition, funding information is poorly communicated to students; as such, those who really need it often do not apply. In other cases, students hear too late that funding for which they have applied has been granted or declined, leaving them either unable to take up the bursary or unable to find alternative funding. As such, better communication with all stakeholders, but especially students, is required.

Sometimes, complex rules and criteria bear unintended consequences. For example, some students are awarded multiple bursaries, while other, similarly deserving students – or even more needy students – are left out altogether. Thus, there should be limitations on the amount of money any one student can be allocated. This is borne out in the literature, which argues that more money does not automatically produce better academic performance (Kinnucan et al., 2006). In addition, the administrative decision to write off outstanding student fee balances is a disincentive to settle debts; in fact, it creates an incentive to not pay at all. Although there is a heavy reliance on NSFAS, the cost of attending the institution was not fully covered by the fund. Thus, NSFAS needs to be re-examined and an increase in the availability of loans can be achieved through adopting innovative measures such as income contingent loans (Greenaway & Haynes, 2003). Subsequent to this research being conducted, the Heher Commission of Inquiry into higher education funding, instituted by former President Zuma in response to the #FeesMustFall protests, has also identified income contingent loans as a means of addressing funding shortfalls (The Presidency, 2017). Furthermore, although institutions should be able to use their own funds to attract students, this should be capped to ensure long-term financial sustainability.

Although the institution does its best to capture an extremely varied group of students in order to achieve transformation targets, the main driver of bursary allocations remains academic criteria (that is, Grade 12 Results and Grade Point Averages), which means that transformation continues to be stymied by the inequalities present in the primary and secondary education sectors. While a focus on academic quality above all else is consistent with what happens elsewhere in the world, some participants nonetheless wanted greater emphasis to be placed on non-academic criteria, especially leadership and aptitude (subject-related skills tests or access tests) as well as ability (non-subject-specific tests or interviews) (Zaaiman, 1998; McCaig, 2016).

Although this study has focused on student funding, all the participants made it clear that funding is but one issue facing the transformation of higher education. Students also require emotional and social support, as well as language support, integration support, career support and psychological support. This is consistent with other studies (Webber & Ehrenberg, 2010; Volberding et al., 2015) where it has been found that offering emotional support and other similar support services positively influences success rates.

Conclusion

Student funding is complex: it cannot be viewed simplistically as just a process of giving funds to students. From an institutional perspective, funding faces two main challenges: the available money is too little, and careful management of multiple stakeholders, rules, regulations and criteria is required. As such, the institution struggles to address these two factors. This may in part explain why first-year students struggle to obtain the funding they need. In order to ensure that what limited funding there is goes to those students most in need, it is recommended that the current funding model be improved by the inclusion of both academic and non-academic criteria. Importantly, the study showed that not all students, especially first-years, know where or how to apply for funding. This means there needs to be better communication about funding. Importantly, all the participants in the study emphasised that funding is but one issue facing first-year students. First-year students are highly vulnerable and need emotional and social support, as well as language support, integration support, career support and psychological support. Without this improved student support, no amount of funding may help the student. In terms of future research, a number of suggestions can be made: (1) to explore students' perceptions of student funding; (2) undertake investigation into how to ensure the sustainability of (a) institutional, (b) government and (c) corporate student funding in the South African context; and (3) the development of a model that allows for efficient and effective student funding communication, both internally and externally.

References

Asif, M. & Searcy, C. (2014). Determining the key capabilities required for performance excellence in higher education. *Total Quality Management & Business Excellence*, 25(1/2), 22–35. https://doi.org/10.1080/14783363.2013.807676

Asplund, R., Adbelkarim, O.B. & Skalli, A. (2008). An equity perspective on access to, enrolment in and finance of tertiary education. *Education Economics*, 16(3), 261–274. https://doi.org/10.1080/09645290802338102

Aydin, O.T. (2014). Current developments and trends in higher education. *Journal of Business, Economics & Finance*, 3(4), 471–489.

Begičević, N., Divjak, B. & Hunjak, T. (2010). Decision-making on prioritization of projects in higher education institutions using the analytic network process approach. *Central European Journal of Operations Research*, 18(3), 341–364. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10100-009-0113-3

Bozalek, V. & Boughey, C. (2012). (Mis)framing higher education in South Africa. *Social Policy & Administration*, 46(6), 688–703. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9515.2012.00863.x

Burke, P.J., Crozier, G. & Misiaszek, L.I. (2017). *Changing Pedagogical Spaces in Higher Education: Diversity, Inequalities and Misrecognition*. Routledge: Abingdon.

Callender, C. & Wilkinson, D. (2013). Student perceptions of the impact of bursaries and institutional aid on their higher education choices and the implications for the National Scholarship Programme in England. *Journal of Social Policy*, 42(02), 281–308. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047279412000992

Dewey, B.I. (2009). Through any means available: Connecting people with scholarship. *Journal of Library Administration*, 49(5), 533–544. https://doi.org/10.1080/01930820903090912

DHET (Department of Higher Education and Training). (2013). Statistics on Post-School Education and Training in South Africa: 2013. Retrieved from http://www.dhet.gov.za/SitePages/Doc_Publications.aspx

Eighty20. (2016). Student debt in South Africa. Retrieved from http://www.eighty20.co.za/student-debt-south-africa

Forster, G. (2008). Free marketeers should support student-centred funding. *Economic Affairs*, 28(2), 74–75. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0270.2008.826_b.x

Govender, P. (2017). Universities have plans to register indebted students – but not all of them. *Mail & Guardian*. Retrieved from https://mg.co.za/article/2017-01-26-00-universities-have-plans-to-register-indebted-students-but-not-all-of-them

Greenaway, D. & Haynes, M. (2003). Funding higher education in the UK: The role of fees and loans. *Economic Journal*, 113(485), F150–F166. https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0297.00102

Harrison, N., Agnew, S. & Serido, J. (2015). Attitudes to debt among indebted undergraduates: A cross-national exploratory factor analysis. *Journal of Economic Psychology*, 46, 62–73. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.joep.2014.11.005

Kerkvliet, J. & Nowell, C. (2014). Public subsidies, tuition, and public universities' choices of undergraduate acceptance and retention rates in the USA. *Education Economics*, 22(6), 652–666. https://doi.org/10.1080/09645292.2012.659010

Kinnucan, H.W., Zheng, Y. & Brehmer, G. (2006). State aid and student performance: A supply–demand analysis. *Education Economics*, 14(4), 487–509. https://doi.org/10.1080/09645290600854177

Koen, C., Cele, M. & Libhaber, A. (2006). Student activism and student exclusions in South Africa. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 26(4), 404–414. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2005.09.009

Kwiek, M., Lebeau, Y. & Brown, R. (2012). Who shall pay for the public good? Comparative trends in the funding crisis of public higher education. *British Association for International and Comparative Education*. Retrieved from https://repozytorium.amu.edu.pl/jspui/handle/10593/9864

McCaig, C. (2016). The retreat from widening participation? The National Scholarship Programme and new access agreements in English higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 41(2), 215–230. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2014.916672

Mulaudzi, S. (2015). University students battle to get funding. *Finweek*, 19 February, 37–39.

Panigrahi, J. (2015). Growing private providers and constraints in the choice of higher education institutions: Impact on access to higher education. *Economic Affairs: A Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 60(1), 41–47. https://doi.org/10.5958/0976-4666.2015.00004.2

Pillay, P.N. (2010). *Higher Education Financing in East and Southern Africa*. Retrieved from http://www.africanminds.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/13407160372101493429.pdf

Richardson, M., Evans, C. & Gbadamosi, G. (2009). Funding full-time study through part-time work. *Journal of Education & Work*, 22(4), 319–334. https://doi.org/10.1080/13639080903277394

Styan, J.-B. (2014). The state of SA's tertiary education. *Finweek*, 19 June, 10–15.

The Presidency. (2017). Release of the report of Commission of Inquiry into the feasibility of making high education and training fee-free in South Africa. Retrieved from http://www.thepresidency.gov.za/press-statements/release-report-commission-inquiry-feasibility-making-high-education-and-training

Thompson, M.N., Nitzarim, R.S., Her, P. & Dahling, J.J. (2013). A grounded theory exploration of undergraduate experiences of vicarious unemployment. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 60(3), 421–431. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0033075

Volberding, J.L., Baghurst, T. & Brown, T.C. (2015). Emotional intelligence levels of undergraduate kinesiology students: Brief report. *North American Journal of Psychology*, 17(1), 37–44.

Walker, M. & Mkwananzi, F. (2015). Challenges in accessing higher education: A case study of marginalised young people in one South African informal settlement. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 40, 40–49. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2014.11.010

Webber, D.A. & Ehrenberg, R.G. (2010). Do expenditures other than instructional expenditures affect graduation and persistence rates in American higher education? *Economics of Education Review*, 29(6), 947–958. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econedurev.2010.04.006

Zaaiman, H. (1998). *Selecting Students for Mathematics and Science: The Challenge Facing Higher Education in South Africa*. Human Sciences Research Council. Retrieved from http://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED439908

Appendix: Structured Interview Questions

1. What criteria are used to make undergraduate student funding (bursary allocation) decisions?
2. In your opinion, what are the advantages and disadvantages of the current criteria?
3. What aspects of the current student funding (bursary allocation) system would you change if you could?
4. What inhibits the implementation of changes to the student funding (bursary allocation) system, in your opinion?
5. When last was the undergraduate student funding (bursary allocation) system reviewed? What was the outcome?
6. In your opinion, does the current student funding (bursary allocation) system address transformational issues? Could the addition of other criteria assist with regards to transformation? What would these criteria be?
7. Should the student funding (bursary allocation) system be used to address transformational issues? What other tools are available to address transformational issues?
8. Who are the internal and external stakeholders of the student funding (bursary allocation) system? Are they satisfied with the current student funding (bursary allocation) system? How much input do they have with regards to the student funding (bursary allocation) system?

How to cite:

McKay, T.J.M., Naidoo, A. & Simpson, Z. (2018). Exploring the Challenges of First-Year Student Funding: An Intra-Institutional Case Study. *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa*, 6(1), 19–32. DOI: 10.24085/jsaa.v6i1.3063

Research article

Student Academic Monitoring and Support in Higher Education: A Systems Thinking Perspective

Vino Paideya* & Rubby Dhunpath**

Abstract

This article interrogates an Academic Monitoring and Support system (AMS), which was designed to enhance first-year student progression at a South African University. Institutional research evidence produced through engagement with AMS practitioners and university leadership, analysed through the lens of Systems Thinking, reveals a well-intentioned system, whose efficacy is compromised by systemic incoherence. The data suggests that loosely defined roles and responsibilities of AMS practitioners, their level of preparedness to provide academic support, their conditions of employment and job profiles, all act in concert to compromise the intended outcomes of the programme. The authors contend that opportunities do exist to re-engineer the Academic Development system to provide coherent, effective and sustainable support for students 'at risk'.

Keywords

academic monitoring, systems thinking, sustainable academic support, higher education.

Introduction

The widening articulation gap between schooling and higher education (CHE, 2013) necessitates alternative forms and models of student support in promoting student success. In response, universities have instituted academic monitoring and support programmes (Adams, 2006; Mngomezulu & Ramrathan, 2015) which find expression in a wide range of student-focused support systems and learning environments to reduce attrition. One such system is the Academic Monitoring and Support system (AMS) offered by the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), located on the east coast of KwaZulu-Natal. A key principle underlying the AMS at UKZN is an acknowledgement that higher education no longer enjoys the luxury of ascribing its performance (or lack thereof), to the underperformance of the schooling sector and the alleged under-preparedness of students (Monnapula-Mapesela, 2015). Based on evidence derived from research at the selected university and other South African institutions (see Dhunpath & Vithal, 2012), the authors contend that universities must accept that they are, at least in part, the source of under-preparedness:

* Dr Vino Paideya is a Lecturer and First-Year Coordinator in the School of Chemistry and Physics at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Westville Campus, South Africa. Email: paideya@ukzn.ac.za

** Dr Rubby Dhunbath is Director of Teaching and Learning at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Email: dhunbath@ukzn.ac.za

ideologically, structurally, and pedagogically, particularly, since organisational cultures often alienate students by failing to enable epistemological access (Morrow, 2009).

> This realisation is beginning to inscribe a consciousness amongst members of the Higher Education community: that it can no longer defend the perpetuation of a university system that is structurally designed to fail the majority of students.
>
> (Dhunpath, Mtshali & Reddy, 2013)

This is evident in the unsustainably low graduation rates which indicate that more than 24% of students 'drop out' of university after their first year, 14% graduate in three years, and approximately 52% graduate with their first degrees after an average of seven years, while 48% of the group never graduate (DHET, 2015). The latter 48% that never graduate is a matter of concern for the higher education sector, which warrants introspection.

The emergent consciousness around institutional under-preparedness is reflected in the variety of student support programmes developed over the past few decades in response to the exponential growth and diversity of the student body, changing learning needs, and highlighting the need for non-traditional approaches that transcend the tendency to pathologise students as carriers of academic deficit. Yet, in spite of the abundant attention lavished and support provided in the selected university, it has not witnessed a concomitant impact on the stubbornly high attrition rates. The question that plagues the academic community is: why do students continue to fail in spite of the interventions that are meant to help them succeed? In attempting to answer this question, the literature is brimming with allusions to gaps in students' linguistic and numeric proficiency (Jaffer & Garraway, 2016); inadequate resources (Jaffer, Ng'ambi & Czerniewicz, 2007); inappropriate environmental conditions (Al-Zoubi & Younes, 2015) and outmoded learning spaces (Temple, 2007; Brooks, 2011). More recently, attention is being directed to the persistence of colonial pedagogies which fail to enhance student learning (De Lissovoy, 2010) while increasing and sometimes ambiguous calls for transformation have typified the higher education discourse.

The South African university selected for the site of this study, referred to hereinafter as UKZN, has a Senate-approved Academic Monitoring and Exclusions Policy, which requires the university to provide appropriate support systems that are able, in the first instance, to alert students to their academic progression status or their potential risk status. Thereafter, the early-warning indicators are expected to invoke appropriate interventions to prevent students from being relegated to 'at risk' status, from which rehabilitation is often difficult. According to the university's Teaching and Learning Unit's report on Academic Monitoring and Support (2013, p. 4), "Academic Monitoring and Support (AMS) is a key strategy in enhancing the quality of teaching and learning as a mechanism to improve student performance in undergraduate programmes".

The support programmes cited above, developed organically over several years in response to contextual needs of each of the four Colleges (College of Science; College of Humanities; College of Health Sciences; College of Management Sciences), are expected to reduce exclusion and dropout rates and improve throughput and completion rates. To achieve this aspiration, students have the reciprocal responsibility of committing themselves to their studies by monitoring their performance and accessing the available support, which typically takes the form of academic counselling and academic literacies support, as well as career and personal counselling. A more ambitious outcome of AMS is that students would be supported to successfully complete their studies in the minimum time specified for the particular qualification.

UKZN's response to the access for success discourse is articulated in the Academic Monitoring and Support (AMS) programme for 'at risk' students (2009), the key features of which are articulated below:

> … academic monitoring and support [AMS] is important to retain students through a wide range of student-focused support systems and learning environments that enable them to complete their studies successfully. Students will only be excluded on account of poor academic performance as a last resort after all other avenues have failed to restore their academic performance to the required level. The policy commits the university to **identifying under-performing students [at risk]** timeously and providing the necessary academic support to **assist students to graduate in the minimum time** possible or redirect them and obligates students to attend and participate in the range of support that is made available. (UKZN, Academic Monitoring and Exclusions Policy and Procedures, 2009, p. 1)

The mandatory Senate-approved AMS system, intended to be a holistic support programme, comprises several allied components including the availability of the early-warning system to identify 'at risk' students.

Noting the underlying principles of the AMS programme and its espoused design features, this paper interrogates the programme through a systems analysis (Senge, 1990; Banathy, 1991; Kim & Senge, 1994). We place under the spotlight the structure, design and delivery of the AMS programme, interrogating the efficacy of its systems through the lived experiences of AMS practitioners. To this end, we reflect briefly on the historical development of academic monitoring and support as a construct that emerged out of a systems perspective on student support, which sought to mitigate the tendency to provide episodic and often incoherent interventions, which had minimal impact on student outcomes. We then subject AMS in the four Colleges and the university as a whole, to a systems analysis, to appraise the extent to which the AMS programme approximates the core tenets of systems thinking (Kim & Senge, 1994) which theoretically grounds the article. We do this because we believe it has the potential to transcend reductionist thinking on how component parts of a system work to deliver system-wide outcomes. Finally, we demonstrate through an analysis of data, that although the AMS programme is conceived on an awareness that nothing less than a coherent systemic response is required to shape institutional behaviour, at least as it relates to students at risk, the theoretical principles do not find adequate expression in practice. The paper argues that given the resources invested in the AMS initiative, its leaders have an obligation to advance scholarship in AMS, through an evidence-based approach, which is more holistic, and resonates with the key principles of systems thinking.

This paper directs its attention to three concerns: What accounts for the shape and form of AMS in relation to its historical trajectory? How do academic monitoring and support practitioners enact their roles and responsibilities in the different schools and Colleges? And, what is the effect/impact of their *modus operandi* on student success, particularly for students classified as 'at risk'?

Academic Monitoring and Support: The Historical Context

Shortly after the AMS programme was implemented in 2008, internal and external evaluations were conducted in the four Colleges: College of Science; College of Humanities; College of Health Sciences; College of Management Sciences. The evaluation reports indicate that the University has developed innovative intervention strategies for success, funded primarily through the Teaching Development Grant (TDG) sourced from Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET). The 2010 Academic Monitoring and Support (AMS) Report reveals that in most Colleges, the interventions were compulsory for all students. Most Colleges made extensive use of Academic Development Officers (ADOs) in their monitoring and support activities, including academic literacies development and psychosocial support (Paideya, 2014). As early as 2010, concern was raised about the relative 'instability' of the support system, primarily because the programme was funded through the DHET grant, and consequently, it was staffed largely by ADOs on short-term contracts. Systems data from the UKZN's 2014 data repository reveals that despite the substantial investment in academic monitoring and support, the graduation rate continued to decline from 20% in 2006 to 16% in 2014, with some Colleges experiencing higher dropout and exclusion rates than graduations in some programmes.

In 2011, the Quality Assurance Unit at the University, together with external evaluators conducted an audit of the AMS programmes. The report highlighted a number of functional attributes and practices available in the four Colleges. These included the positive attitude to AMS, dedication and commitment of staff involved in the AMS programmes, the availability of some form of mentorship system and the involvement of senior academic staff in the AMS programme at both School and College level. However, substantial variations were reported relating to the conceptualisation of the roles and responsibilities of AMS personnel and their practices. The Teaching & Learning Portfolio cautioned in 2010 that unless the provision for academic monitoring and support was integrated into their mainstream budgets (as core business), the policy aspiration of a stable institutionalised and sustainable system rather than one subject to the vagaries of external funding, would be an elusive dream (AMS, 2013).

Academic Monitoring and Support: Through the Lens of Systems Thinking

There is a growing recognition that our ability to address the academic needs of students requires that we do more than "simply tinker at the margins of our educational practices" (Tinto, 1999, p. 13). Consonant with Tinto's notion of tinkering at the margins, the authors contend that for a systemic institutional strategy to develop traction, it requires systematic organisational support, which is adequately resourced and regularly monitored. It further requires a collaborative effort or a "partnership approach" which "contributes to a cultural shift by bringing students, teachers and academic developers together" to support student learning (Barrineau et al., 2016, p. 79).

Ever since Aristotle's claim that knowledge is derived from the understanding of the whole and not that of the single parts (Aristotle's Holism), researchers have been struggling with systems, their component parts and their relative dynamics (Mele, Pels & Polese, 2010). Systems thinking is an interdisciplinary heuristic, which allows us to examine phenomena through a macro lens (Capra, 1997). It incorporates a wide field of research with diverse conceptualisations and areas of focus (Boulding, 1956; Maturana & Varela, 1975; Senge, 1990; Jackson, 2003). For the purpose of this paper, we have chosen Senge's (1990) conceptualisation of systems thinking to understand the functionality of the academic support system at the university. We believe that systems thinking has the potential to explain the constituent components of AMS and the extent to which these coalesce to provide coherence, continuity and sustainability in a large learning organisation.

Systems thinking, as advocated by Senge (1990), is premised on five basic components for a learning organisation:

1. **Systems thinking**, which views the organisation as a living entity that enables or inhibits organisational success;
2. **Personal mastery**, where individuals are inspired to create conditions which generate successful outcomes;
3. **Mental models**, which require practitioners and managers to disrupt rituals of practice to envision new possibilities for success;
4. **Shared vision**, where individuals embrace the vison of the collective, rather than aspire to pursue individual interests; and
5. **Team learning**, which requires consistent interrogation of practices, critical dialogues aimed at enhancing successful practices.

Senge (1990) articulated basic principles of the learning organisation that may be restated as the need for organisational members to:

(i) suspend traditional modes of thinking (mental models);
(ii) engage in an open and transparent dialogic manner (personal mastery);
(iii) have a clear grasp of how an organisation works (systems thinking);
(iv) devise a plan that enjoys relative consensus (shared vision); and
(v) apply the plan in a concerted and systematic way to pursue the vision (team learning).

A key impediment to achieving the ideal articulated above is that what is written and done in the name of effective management is that simplistic frameworks are applied to what are complex systems. Here, the focus is on the parts rather than the whole, and this accounts for the failure to see the organisation as a dynamic process. Ivanov (2011, p. 94) argues that "organizations often fail because of catastrophic malfunctions in structure" and that "these malfunctions are difficult to notice because of time delay in organizational cause and effect". Ivanov goes further to add that "time flows differently in organizations than in the physical world" (2011, p. 94). Kim and Senge (1994, p. 278), suggest that "organizations are in great need of new learning capabilities if they are to thrive in an increasingly complex, interdependent, and changing world". They assert that managers' attention is naturally focused on addressing their most important practical problems. Even though these problems might be resolved successfully, there is little to guarantee that new capabilities have been developed to address similar problems more effectively when they emerge in the future.

To mitigate the effects of mission drift amongst leaders, Kim and Senge (1994) advocate decentralising the role of leadership to harness the capacity of organisational members committed to common goals. Hence, while all individuals have the capacity to learn, the structures in which they function are often not conducive to reflection and engagement. Furthermore, practitioners may lack the tools and guiding ideas to make sense of the situations they face. In a learning organisation, leaders are designers, stewards and teachers (Senge, 1990). They are employed, ostensibly, for their capacity in building organisations, where members continually expand their capabilities to understand complexity, clarify vision, and improve shared mental models. Banathy (1991), applying systems thinking to examine the design of educational systems, suggests systems analysis through three lenses: a "still picture lens", used to understand the **components** comprising the system and their relationship; a "motion picture lens", used to understand the **processes** and dynamics of the system and a "bird's-eye view lens", used to understand the **relationships** between the system and its peer and supra systems.

Banathy (1991) identifies five reasons why our efforts to effect transitions in educational systems have been met with so little success. First, improvement efforts can be viewed as "piecemeal" or through "an incremental approach". These can be considered as improvement efforts lacking quality and coherence with little to guarantee that new competencies have been developed to address similar problems more effectively in the future. Second, there is "failure to integrate solution ideas" (ibid., pp. 38–41) into action plans. Here, various recommendations and reports are proposed as improvement ideas, but these fail to be organised into a comprehensive system of reform. The failure to connect again harks back to a lack of systemic reform. Third, a "discipline-by-discipline study" is adopted rather than a systemic view, where we fail to recognise the complexity of current concerns surrounding higher education and have not grappled with the nature of education as a societal system, a system interacting with other societal systems embedded in a rapidly and dynamically changing macro society. Fourth, a "reductionist orientation" is adopted where complex situations are reduced to manageable pieces and solutions to each are sought. This promotes insular thinking typified by "staying within the boundaries of the existing system" (not thinking 'out of the box'), where improvements and reform initiatives have focused on the system as it exists and have stayed within its boundaries, with only occasional attention to broader societal issues. All five are examples of paradigm paralysis, or "mumpsimus" – defined as "persistence in a mistaken belief" (Betts, 1992, p. 38), an attempt to interpret current experience using old models and metaphors that are no longer appropriate or useful.

We have chosen to deploy systems thinking as a lens to interrogate AMS practices in an attempt to provide useful indicators of potential slippages and fractures impeding the optimal functionality of AMS as a systemic institutional strategy, particularly the stubborn adherence to fragments rather than the adoption of a holistic, systems thinking approach to institutional development. The question that remains unanswered is: how do we re-engineer the AMS system to be proactive rather than reactive, when dealing with student progression? Does systems thinking, as a conceptual lens, provide the academy with a global view of student progression? Does it allow for proactive solutions and mechanisms for early-warning tracking which inform appropriate action? In the section that follows, we interrogate the efficacy and actual outcomes of the AMS programme by examining the profiles, roles and responsibilities of the AMS practitioners in each of the four faculties at UKZN.

Producing the Evidence

Design

This paper sought to understand the existing academic monitoring and support structures within the university. A mixed methodology approach was adopted and data was collected via a questionnaire (n = 50) and semi-structured focus group interviews (n = 2) between 2013 and 2014. To gain access to the AMS practitioners in each of the four faculties, the Academic Leaders of Teaching and Learning in each of the Schools were contacted to identify the respective AMS practitioners. Different categories of AMS practitioners were targeted for the study, namely, Academic Development Officers (ADOs), Academic Development Coordinators (ADCs), Academic Leaders (AL) and Supplemental Instruction Leaders (SI). The data generated from questionnaires were analysed statistically, to produce emerging trends and patterns while data obtained from interviews were thematically analysed. The two sets of data were triangulated to ensure validity and reliability. Requisite gatekeeper and participant ethical clearance and consent were obtained.

Data collection

Fifty out of a total of sixty-seven AMS practitioners from across faculties responded to the questionnaire, which included biographical data and a detailed account of their job profile. Responses were analysed and clustered thematically. The emergent data was complemented by two focus group interviews with between six and eight ADOs and/or ADCs from each of the faculties in each focus group. The College ADCs/ADOs were interviewed to obtain a clearer understanding of the nature of academic support and monitoring work which informed their different roles and responsibilities as AMS practitioners. In addition, the focus group interviews were undertaken to ensure trustworthiness of the questionnaire data and veracity of the conclusions reached. Further, the focus group interviews were utilised to clarify certain aspects of the questionnaires data and determine how AMS practitioners interpret their roles and responsibilities in relation to the official university policy.

Findings and Discussion

Three main themes emerge from the two data sets, namely, lack of coherence, lack of consistency and considerable variance of AMS practices, profiles and functions of AMS personnel. These are analysed below under the categories: Nature of Employment; Remuneration Ranking; Gender Distribution; and Job Profiles.

1. Nature of Employment

The data suggests that there are significant variations in nomenclature of AMS personnel in each of the faculties who perform the roles of ADO (Academic Development Officer), ADC (Academic Development Coordinator), AL (Academic Leader), AMS (Academic Monitoring and Support staff) and SI Leaders (Supplemental Instruction Leaders). This variation in the existence of multiple nomenclatures or descriptors in the field of Academic Development is acknowledged by Ouellett (2010) and Kensington-Miller, Renc-Roe and Moron-Garcia (2015). Kensington-Miller et al. (2015) claim that the categorisation of the role of academic developers can impact on their ability to do their job, resulting in the undermining of their credibility. Hence, understanding the effect of the variations in the categorisation of their roles and their tenure is significant in this study. The theme – nature of employment – evolved from the data that presented variations in the classification as well as the duration of AMS practitioners' employment contracts.

Table 1: Nature of employment

Nature of employment						
Contract period	**ADC**	**ADO**	**AL**	**AMS**	**Counsellors**	**SI Leaders**
Permanent	1		1			
2–3 years	1	3		1		
1 year	3	9				
10 months		8			2	
>10 months		5				16

Table 1 (above) indicates that the majority (86%) of the AMS practitioners had a one-year or shorter contract position and that there were only two permanent positions out of the 50 analysed questionnaires. The two permanent positions were that of the Academic Leader of Teaching and Learning in Health Sciences and an ADC in the College of Management Sciences. This enables one to understand the type/nature of academic monitoring and support programmes offered by each of the faculties. According to Tinto (2005, p. 5), "institutional policy must provide for incentives and rewards for Faculty, as well as staff, to work together to construct educational settings" that promote effective learning for all students. The fact, however, that 86% of the practitioners were on one-year contracts or less makes one question how ADOs develop adequate competencies in these positions to enable them to support at-risk students. Banathy (1991) refers to these efforts to improve and change as part-orientated and a fragmented approach arising out of a reductionist scientific view. With this in mind, one has to ask: what impact do short-term contracts have on the AMS programme as a whole?

The data reveals that employing AMS personnel for short periods does not allow for proper support and training of these personnel so as to enable them to fully integrate into the AMS programme in support of students' academic success. Senge (1990) argues that we tend to think that cause and effect will be relatively near to one another. Typically, we look to actions that produce improvements in a relatively short time, such as short-term contracts and externally funded just-in-time programmes. However, when viewed through the lens of systems thinking, short-term improvements often involve very significant long-term costs, such as the failure to yield significant improvements in student outcomes as evidenced in the declining UKZN graduation rates from 20% in 2006 to 16% in 2014.

2. Remuneration Ranking

The data (see Table 2, below) shows a variation in the four faculties with respect to the different ranking of AMS practitioners in terms of their status and remuneration structure at the university.

Table 2: Staff rank

Staff rank	ADC	ADO	AL	AMS	Counsellors	SI Leaders
Professor	1					
Senior Lecturer			1			
Lecturer	3	3		1		
Tutor	1	18			2	16
Unknown	1	3				

Table 2 suggests that more than half of the AMS staff are ranked at Tutor level (74%) followed by 7 practitioners (14%) at Lecturer level with respect to remuneration ranking. Consequently, the majority of staff are ranked at Tutor level, despite their qualifications, which ordinarily would see them appointed at higher levels in the academic career trajectory. Here, academic rank is determined by the funding source which in turn determines monetary reward, which is linked to status and value of academic development labour. Kensington-Miller et al. (2015) claim that the role of the academic development practitioner has a liminality 'more to do with paradoxical and often disempowering institutional positions and cultures' to which they need to adapt and which may cause their existence and roles to be delimited.

Kim and Senge (1994) suggest that when adopting a systems view, the essential quality of the parts resides in its relationship to the whole. In other words, if the majority of the AMS personnel are ranked at Tutor level, there should be adequate support for the progression of these individuals so that the entire system benefits. It is questionable whether university leadership has recognised the complexity of the human activity systems in which human beings are the most valued; and the ones to be served by the system in order for the system to develop (Banathy, 1991).

3. Gender Distribution

Another significant finding in this research was evidenced, as shown in Figure 1 (below), in the dominance of females in the AMS programme in all four faculties, suggesting that AMS is gender-biased.

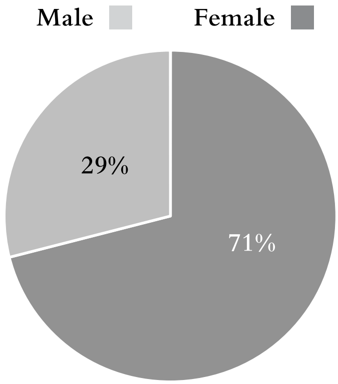


Figure 1: Gender distribution

Figure 1 reveals that of the 50 AMS practitioners surveyed, 71% were female while 29% were male. These results prompt the question of whether AMS is gendered by design and considered a 'nurturing' programme and hence dominated by females. A more cynical analysis would signal a marginalisation of women academics to the periphery of mainstream academic activities, which might actually have unintended consequences, particularly as it relates to the help-seeking behaviour of men, which makes for a useful study outside the scope of this paper. Understanding embedded cultures could assist in improving the success of AMS programmes as it would reveal the AMS organisational culture and the mechanisms and processes it produces that are not necessarily readily observable, but often reside within the gaps between policies and practice.

4. Job Profiles

The data suggests that the AMS practitioners perform several roles within the AMS programmes which is evident in Figure 2.

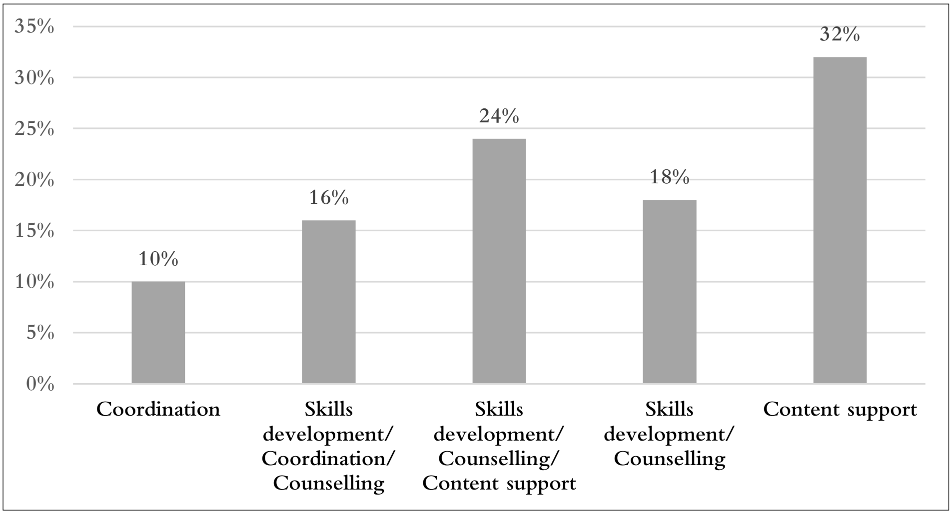


Figure 2: Role of AMS practitioners (n = 50)

When asked what AMS personnel's key role function was, 32% of respondents indicated that they provided academic content support and therefore are probably disciplinary experts in their related fields. The main role of AMS personnel would seem to be a combination of academic skills development, academic counselling and content support, which is represented by 24% of the responses. This explains why only 32% of the AMS personnel are involved with content support. It is apparent that 10% of the AMS personnel have only a coordination role of AMS programmes within the different Colleges. The focus group interviews reveal that AMS coordinators are expected to oversee the scheduling of the different AMS activities, provide support to the tutors involved with academic support and monitor AMS programmes in faculties. A further layer of complexity is the different Colleges' interpretation of the AMS policy, resulting in varied roles and responsibilities of the AMS practitioners.

This variation in the roles and responsibilities of AMS practitioners in each of the four Colleges may be explained by Banathy's (1991) assertion that a "discipline-by-discipline" study of education involves staying within the boundaries of existing systems. Such improvements produce changes at the margins but fail to recognise the complexity of current arrangements surrounding higher education systemically, signalling the need for a developmental approach, which takes into consideration recommendations and reports proposed for improvement of practices.

Considered collectively, the four broad themes, namely, Nature of Employment, Remuneration Ranking, Gender Distribution and Job Profiles highlight how academic monitoring and support practitioners enact their roles and responsibilities in the different Schools/Colleges, which might be at odds with the original conception of the AMS programme as a holistic, coherent, systemic intervention.

Fractures between Policy and Practice

Analysis of focus group interview data with AMS practitioners suggests noteworthy findings: several AMS personnel bemoaned the marginal status of their work in relation to the core business of teaching, learning and research. Despite the espoused policy, which deems the AMS programmes to be institutionalised, the actual position as experienced by practitioners suggests that the programme has not been sufficiently incorporated into the School or College structures, leaving AMS practitioners to function in isolation relative to the College's *de facto* core business. Tinto (2005, p. 2) emphasises that "institutional commitment is more than just words, more than just mission statements" but is "willingness to invest the resources and provide the incentives and rewards needed to enhance student success". Relegating the programme to the periphery of the academy limits the systemic impact of the initiative or as Banathy (1991) suggests: the lack of commitment to participation results in "failure to integrate solution ideas". This proposition is evident in the AMS practitioners' claim that "numerous reports and recommendations are suggested through different avenues (meetings, workshops, colloquiums etc.), however, these are not sufficiently embraced and acted on to produce a coherent and comprehensive system".

To accentuate the relegation of AMS programmes as 'unofficial' business, academic support practitioners claim that they are typically "not regarded as scholars with the obligation to research and advance the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SOTL)" in their academic domains. This relegation results in programmes being perceived as an alternative space "where students go to get band aid" rather than an institutionalised, evidence-led programme that is an integral part of the curriculum (Phillips, 1993). The fact that AMS programmes in the majority of Colleges are externally funded in their entirety and the majority of personnel are contract staff leads to the assumption that such programmes are not seen as core business and could abruptly be terminated.

Academic Development Coordinators (ADCs) reported that they felt they were not being as effective as they could to be because of time constraints accruing from having to support and mentor tutors and students from two or more campuses. This argument again coheres with Banathy's proposition (1991, p. 149), that "piecemeal" interventions or "an incremental approach" to change precipitates failure, since resources are being spread so thinly that their effectiveness is being compromised, resulting in a dilution of quality and coherence with little to guarantee of future reward in student progression and quality of outcomes.

This absence of substantive support is exacerbated by the organisational structure of the university, which accords responsibility for academic development to Academic Leaders (AL). Academic Leaders, located at the level of the School within the College, are expected to provide pedagogic leadership for AMS within their particular disciplinary cluster. While structurally this location of leadership is potentially effective in identifying and signalling at-risk students for coordinated support, this is undermined by the rapid turnover of Academic Leaders (AL). The turnover is ascribed to the blurring of boundaries between academic, administrative and reporting responsibilities. Consequently, many ALs find the sheer volume of the workload and the absence of concomitant reward a disincentive to continue in leadership positions, as noted by practitioners:

> Constant change in Academic leaders of teaching and learning who came with different leading styles and different understanding of the AMS programmes has been very challenging.

The ADCs/ADOs again bemoaned the lack of support or ineffective support they receive, impeding their progress and success within AMS programmes. Kim and Senge (1994) and Banathy (1991) concur that most often, improvement efforts lack quality and coherence where individuals lack the tools and managerial skills to understand the complexities of situations they face. The efficacy of the initiative is compromised as the structures in which they have to function are not conducive to engagement and reflection. This leads to the inability and paralysis in attending to the learning of individuals or groups in the organisation.

A key finding from the analysis of AMS practitioner roles and responsibilities is that there appear to be considerable variations across four faculties with regard to nomenclature of AMS personnel, variations in AMS personnel's qualifications, variations in duration of contracts and variations in job profiles. This is typified in the varied key role functions that AMS practitioners occupy, with some offering content support and others concentrating on soft skills. Yet others assume a pastoral/academic counselling role. The inclusion of the pastoral/academic counselling role in AMS satisfies the monitoring aspect in the AMS policy, providing students with counselling support and guidelines on how to conduct themselves in academia (Barrow, 1999), but adds a further layer of responsibility, which should ordinarily be devolved to specialist counsellors.

A further area of concern emerging from the data, which accounts for the relative instability of the system, is the ad-hoc staffing arrangements, with only 2 out of 50 respondent AMS practitioners employed in permanent positions – where the majority of the AMS practitioners (40 out of 50 responses) are post-graduate students. Typically, they take up AMS roles to 'support' themselves while completing their studies. Thus, inadvertently, support is redirected from students to practitioners. A closer look at the interview excerpts reveals that the AMS practitioners were preoccupied with personal concerns such as job security and job satisfaction. It could also be argued that by employing staff on short-term contracts, the institution is adopting what Banathy (1991) regards as a reductionist orientation: of providing ad-hoc solutions to an enduring systemic problem. While the institution has recognised the problem of unsustainable student progression, there is little correlation between the problem and the attendant solutions, particularly the absence of a systems orientation in conceiving of effective solutions. Aptly articulated by one Dean of Teaching and Learning: "We have now reached a stage where, given the resources we invest in the programme, we must recognise the need for institution-wide approaches to enhancing AMS" (personal communication, 2016).

Concluding Comments

The institutional research into the Academic Monitoring and Support programme at UKZN was prompted by the persistently high dropout rate and the low success rates, especially in 3-year degree programmes, despite the declared institutionalisation of the

AMS programme which was designed to ameliorate the problem of student progression. In summary, AMS practitioners' roles and responsibilities are mediated by the fact that despite the official Senate policy, which provides for the institutionalisation of AMS, it has not been sufficiently embraced, integrated and systematised at UKZN. Notably, as asserted by Banathy, (1991, p. 5) a "reductionist orientation" is applied to a complex academic environment, evident in the leadership's partial understanding of the role of student support as core to the university's mandate in promoting student success. The dissonance between leaderships' partial interest in AMS seems to have resulted in AMS practitioners feeling undervalued and marginal to the university's mainstream activities. This is intensified by their predominantly short-term contract positions, which mitigate against substantive development of their skills and their capacity to deploy these skills productively. The data further indicates that quality and coherence within the AMS system is compromised by unstable leadership and requisite resources being spread thinly, diluting the quality and efficacy of support.

Given the extent of the problem of student attrition, and the considerable human and material resources invested in the AMS initiative, a key question that we raise is whether AMS practitioners and those who provide leadership have the obligation to advance scholarship in AMS, through an evidence-based approach, based on the principles of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SOTL). If the university seeks to gain traction in SOTL, then the university has a pristine opportunity to design a coordinated research agenda, where making *praxis* public is valued as the *raison d'être* of practitioners who are constantly reflecting and innovating to enhance the quality of teaching and learning and student outcomes. This, the authors contend, is less reductionist, less interventionist and more scholarly an approach that will extricate AMS from its crisis of credibility.

References

Adams, J.D. (2006). *Prevailing and Preferred Learning Practices in University Student Support Programmes.* Unpublished Doctoral thesis. KwaDlan-gezwa: University of Zululand.

Al-Zoubi, S.M. & Younes, M.A.B. (2015). Low Academic Achievement: Causes and Results. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 5(11), 2262–2268. https://doi.org/10.17507/tpls

Banathy, B.H. (1991a). *Systems Design of Education: A Journey to Create the Future*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Educational Technology Publications.

Banathy, B. (1991b). New Horizons through Systems Design. *Educational Horizons*, 69(2), 83–89.

Barrineau, S., Schnaas, U., Engstrom, A. & Harlin, F. (2016). Breaking ground and building bridges: a critical reflection on student-faculty partnerships in academic development. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 21(1), 79–83. https://doi.org/10.1080/1360144X.2015.1120735

Barrow, M. (1999). *Higher education: subjection or emancipation.* HERDSA Annual International Conference, Melbourne, Australia, 12–15 July.

Betts, F. (1992). How Systems Thinking Applies to Education. *Improving School Quality. Educational Leadership*, 50(3), 38–41.

Boulding, K. (1956). General Systems Theory – The Skeleton of Science. *Management Science*, 2(3), 197–208, reprinted in *General Systems*, Yearbook of the Society for General Systems Research, 1. https://doi.org/10.1287/mnsc.2.3.197

Brooks, D. (2011), Space matters: The impact of formal learning environments on student learning, *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 42(5), 719–726. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8535.2010.01098.x

Capra, F. (1997). *The web of life*. New York: Doubleday-Anchor.

CHE (Council on Higher Education). (2013). A proposal for undergraduate curriculum reform in South Africa: The case for a flexible curriculum structure. South Africa.

CHE (Council on Higher Education). (2014). Framework for Institutional Quality Enhancement in the Second Period of Quality Assurance. Quality Enhancement Project. South Africa. Retrieved May 2016 from http://www.che.ac.za/sites/default/files/publications/QEP%20Framework%20Feb%202014.pdf

De Lissovoy, N. (2010). Decolonial pedagogy and the ethics of the global. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 31(3), 279–293. https://doi.org/10.1080/01596301003786886

Department of Higher Education and Training, Annual Report (2014/15). Retrieved from http://www.dhet.gov.za/Commissions%20Reports/DHET%20Annual%20Report%202014-2015.pdf

Dhunpath, R & Vithal, R. (2012). *Alternative Access to Higher Education: Underprepared students or underprepared institutions?* South Africa: Pearson.

Dhunpath, R, Mtshali, N. & Reddy, S. (2013). *Academic Monitoring & Support in a Transforming University*. Academic Monitoring & Support Research Colloquium 2013. South Africa.

Ivanov, S. (2011). Why organizations fail: A conversation about American competitiveness. *The International Journal of Organizational Innovation*, 4(1), 94–110.

Jackson, M. (2003). *Systems Thinking: Creative Holism for Managers*. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons.

Jaffer, F. & Garraway, J. (2016). Understanding gaps between student and staff perceptions of university study in South Africa: A case study. *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa*, 4(1), 65–76. https://doi.org/10.14426/jsaa.v4i1.145

Jaffer, S., Ng'ambi, D. & Czerniewicz, L. (2007). The role of ICTs in higher education in South Africa: one strategy for addressing teaching and learning challenges. *International Journal of Education and Development using ICT*, 3(4). Retrieved from http://ijedict.dec.uwi.edu/viewarticle.php?id=421

Kensington-Miller, B., Renc-Roe, J. & Moron-Garcia, S. (2015). The chameleon on a tartan rug: adaptations of three academic developers' professional identities. *International Journal of Academic Development*, 20(3), 279–290. https://doi.org/10.1080/1360144X.2015.1047373

Kim, D.H & Senge, P.M. (1994). Putting systems thinking into practice. *System Dynamic Review*, 10(2–3), 277–290. https://doi.org/10.1002/sdr.4260100213

Maturana, H.R. & Varela, F.J. (1975). *Autopoietic systems*. BLC Report 9. University of Illinois.

Mele, C., Pels, J. & Polese, F. (2010). A Brief Review of Systems Theories and their Managerial Applications. *Service Science*, 2(1-2), 126–135. http://dx.doi.org/10.1287/serv.2.1.2.126

Mngomezulu, S. & Ramrathan, L. (2015). Academic Intervention Experiences of 'At Risk' Students in a South African University. *Alternations* Special Edition, 17, 116–141.

Monnapula-Mapesela, M. (2015). Students' Perception of Own Preparedness for Higher Education: Case Study. *International Journal of Educational Science*, 9(2), 255–264. https://doi.org/10.1080/09751122.2015.11890315

Morrow, W. (2009). *Bounds of Democracy: Epistemological Access in South Africa*, Cape Town: HSRC Press.

National Commission on Higher Education. 1996. A Framework for Transformation. Pretoria.

Ouellett, M. (2010). Overview of faculty development: History and choices. In: K.J. Gillespie & D.L. Robertson (Eds.), *A guide to faculty development* (2nd ed.) (pp. 3–20). San Francisco, C.A.: Jossey-Bass.

Paideya, V. (2014). Institutional Project Report – Identifying the Roles and Responsibilities of Academic Monitoring and Support Practitioners. University of KwaZulu-Natal. Unpublished paper.

Phillips, M. (1993). Too Many Institutions Still Taking Band-Aid Approach to Minority Student Retention, Experts Say. *Black Issues in Higher Education*, 9(24), 24–26.

Quality Promotions and Assurance Office, (2011). Report of the external review of Academic Monitoring and Support. University of KwaZulu-Natal.

Senge, P.M. (1990). *The Fifth Discipline, The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*. New York: Doubleday.

Temple, P. (2007). *Learning Spaces for the 21st Century: A review of the literature*, Higher Education Academy, London. Retrieved from http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/research/Learning_spaces_v3.pdf

Tinto, V. (1999). *Adapting learning communities to the needs of development education students*. Paper presented at the National Center for Postsecondary Improvement, Stanford University.

Tinto, V. (2005). Taking Student Success Seriously: Rethinking the First Year of College. Syracuse University. Retrieved from http://fdc.fullerton.edu/events/archives/2005/05

UKZN (University of KwaZulu-Natal). (2009). Academic Monitoring and Exclusions Policy. Ref: CO/06/0412/09.

University Teaching and Learning Office. (2012). Report on Academic Monitoring and Support. University of KwaZulu-Natal.

University Teaching and Learning Office, (2013). External Evaluation Report on Academic Monitoring and Support. University of KwaZulu-Natal.

How to cite:

Paideya, V. & Dhunpath, R. (2018). Student Academic Monitoring and Support in Higher Education: A Systems Thinking Perspective. *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa*, 6(1), 33–48. DOI: 10.24085/jsaa.v6i1.3064

Research article

The Mismatch between First-Year Students' Expectations and Experience alongside University Access and Success: A South African University Case Study

Subethra Pather* & Nirmala Dorasamy**

Abstract

The widening of access into higher education institutions in South Africa has rapidly transformed the student population to become more diverse. Students vary in age, race, culture, backgrounds, educational experiences, academic potential and university expectations. Widening university access with the commensurate need for success requires intervention mechanisms to ensure university management addresses student challenges, especially at first-year undergraduate level. Access and success cannot be achieved without understanding students' university expectations and experiences, as these are critical factors that are integrated with retention and success. This paper examines the gap between students' expectation and experience and argues that the intensity of such a gap can negatively impact the goal of achieving access and success amongst students from diverse backgrounds. The study utilised a pre- and post-survey to collect quantitative data from 95 first-year teacher education students at a university of technology in South Africa. The results indicate that there is a significant gap between students' expectations and their actual university experience with regard to the following indicators: social engagement, academic engagement and seeking academic support. It is posited that such a mismatch between students' university expectations and experience can result in students feeling disconnected to the institution, which could lead to academic failure and high drop-out rates. This study recommends that an intentionally planned first-year experience programme is required to entrench a more inclusive and sustainable first-year experience for 'all students' which could close the gap between students' expectation and experience and access and success.

Keywords

first-year experience; first-year expectation; gap analysis; higher education

Introduction

The South African Constitution of 1996 and the Education White Paper 3 (EWP 1997), entitled "A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education", allude to important transformation principles to eradicate all forms of unfair discrimination and advance

* Dr Subethra Pather is currently Teaching & Learning Specialist in the Office of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor Academic at the University of Western Cape, Cape Town, South Africa. Email: supather@uwc.ac.za

** Dr Nirmala Dorasamy is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Public Management and Economics, Faculty of Management Science at the Durban University of Technology, Durban, South Africa. Email: nirmala@dut.ac.za

the redress of past inequalities (Department of Education [DoE], 1997). One of the key imperatives of transformation is that student enrolment be expanded and access broadened to reach a wider distribution of social groups and classes (DoE, 1997). The post-school system that is envisaged in the post-apartheid South Africa is one that is more expanded and diverse, thereby ensuring that the quality, quantity and diversity of post-school education and training in South Africa are significantly enhanced. Issues of access and success are fundamental to meaningful transformation within the higher education milieu in South Africa. Public Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have increased enrolment figures from 892 936 in 2010 to 985 212 in 2015 (Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET], 2016). The new enrolment trends show a different racial imbalance with more students from historically underrepresented groups entering higher education. For example, the African student complement increased from 64% of all enrolments in 2008 to 70% in 2013 (Council for Higher Education [CHE], 2013), a student population that is more representative of the country's national population. This drastic shift in diversity in enrolment demographics in South Africa's higher education has resulted in students entering universities from positions of extreme inequality in terms of schooling, race, class, and financial and other resources (Chetty & Pather, 2015). This has been underpinned by student expectations varying across the continuum from being realistic to unrealistic. Without students understanding this continuum, unfulfilled expectations can have a detrimental effect on successful performance. In essence, university management needs to make concerted efforts to ensure a match between expectations and experiences as this is an imperative for student success.

Although, the South African higher education system has made notable progress in terms of widening access, cohort studies have highlighted that approximately 30% of students drop out of university in the first year and about 55% of all students never graduate (CHE, 2013). While there has been growth in differentiation and diversity, many of the students entering higher education face a number of challenges. Such challenges include student preparedness (Bettinger & Long, 2009), low retention and success rates (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), and lack of provision of relevant first-year support (Tinto, 2007). Evidence points to HEIs in South Africa not being adequately equipped to accommodate the new student population entering university (CHE, 2013). South African universities need to be more assertive in gaining a full understanding of their incoming students' university expectations and experiences, specifically focusing on indicators relating to social engagement, academic engagement and seeking academic support. Gaining such knowledge could increase student success and retention, particularly in the first year of study. Additionally, such knowledge can inform effective and appropriate first-year support initiatives. A number of studies have revealed that an awareness of student expectations can reduce students' psychological stress (James, 2002); improve academic performance (Smith & Wertlieb, 2005); encourage social relations and integration (Bean & Eaton, 2001); and improve students' sense of belonging or sense of community (Thomas, 2012; Tinto, 1995). In this regard, it becomes imperative that universities re-evaluate intervention mechanisms to ensure that students' experiences are aligned to their expectations, thereby fostering success through access.

From the literature reviewed, first-year student retention and success studies focused mainly on factors within the institution such as the quality of students' first-year university experience, student engagement and academic performance, without taking into account students' prior university expectations. The match or mismatch between student expectation and actual experience can provide insight into all of the aforementioned factors within the institution. This study takes into account students' prior university expectations and their actual experience in social engagement, academic engagement and seeking academic support at university. Student engagement can be defined as "the quality of effort students themselves devote to educationally purposeful activities that contribute directly to desired outcomes" (Hu & Kuh, 2001, p. 3). They add that this engagement includes activities inside and outside of the formal classroom. The Australian Council of Educational Research (ACER) defines student engagement as "students' involvement with activities and conditions likely to generate high quality learning" (ACER, 2008, p. vi). There are various perspectives on student engagement, which according to Zepke and Leach (2010), allow a multifaceted lens to be placed on student engagement. This study takes into account the above two definitions of student engagement.

This study addresses the dearth in the literature on student expectation and experience by examining the intensity of the gap between incoming students' expectations of social engagement, academic engagement and seeking academic support, with their actual university experience. It can be argued that a gap analysis study between students' expectations and experience is critical to ensuring that the goals of access and success are achieved. Measuring the intensity and direction of the expectation–experience gap would provide a better understanding of the extent of the mismatch or alignment of students' expectation with university experience, which could inform appropriate actions taken to close this gap. This outcome could have a positive impact on student university transition, retention and success.

Literature Review

Widening university access has drawn first-year students from varying schooling contexts. This action has opened access to a significantly large number of students, particularly from township and rural schools, which, according to the South African Human Rights Commission (2006), can be characterised as dysfunctional, vulnerable, alienated and lacking social cohesion. Students entering universities with such disparities in schooling could influence their university expectations. Nelson, Kift and Clarke (2012) acknowledge that the diversity in students' lives impacts on their university expectations, which they suggest reflects on a range of first-year experiences and students' engagement with the university. Slonimsky and Shalem (2006) identify these students as mainly first-generation university students with limited access to the social networks harbouring vast expanses of university experiences. Such under-preparedness for the complex nature of university study could impact on teaching and learning and student success (Moll, 2004). Therefore, the argument by Reason, Terenzini and Domingo (2006) that the first year is the most critical year for laying the foundation for subsequent academic success does require urgent consideration by higher education institutions when planning support initiatives for first-year students.

Universities need a multi-dimensional approach in understanding students' expectations and actual university experience. This approach will provide a more in-depth exploration of students' first-year expectation and experience, which can assist in improving student transition, retention and success. Awang and Ismail (2010) offer one such approach. They suggest that universities need to conduct regular first-year surveys concerning students' expectations and perception as part of their quality improvement exercise. They assert that the information collected can ensure that the services offered by the institution to their first-year students could be of the highest quality. Strydom (2015) suggests that universities need to create the following awareness amongst incoming students: how universities function; complexities of university readiness; opportunities to learn the required academic behaviours and expectations; social interactions; and diverse environmental factors, as all of these aspects can influence more realistic expectations, thereby reinforcing opportunities for success.

A substantive number of studies on student expectations reveal that students have unrealistic expectations of university experience with regard to awareness of courses to enrol in (McInnes et al., 2000); generic skills required for university study (Bamforth, 2010); and managing workloads and self-study (Van der Meer, Jansen & Torenbeek, 2010). Personal and circumstantial variables were also found to influence students' expectations, which ultimately interfere with student success. Kim, Newton, Downey and Benton's (2010) research showed that student expectations were strong predictors of academic performance and success. They assert that students' personal, social and academic related factors influence students' expectations of academic performance and success. A study by Creighton (2007) highlighted that students who felt accepted within the social environment of the university were more likely to return, while those who had unrealistic expectations were more likely to be unsuccessful. Additionally, Creighton found that isolation and a lack of support services did not facilitate learning, nor contribute in positive ways to student success. Tinto, Goodsell-Love and Russo (1993) assert that the congruency between students' expectation and university experience is a determining factor for students' access and success. They further explain that the aligning of students' expectation with their actual experience is necessary for understanding students' sense of belonging or fit. These authors argue that it is this sense of belonging that is linked to the students' sense of congruence and without this sense of congruence between the student and their educational pursuits, it can be assumed that these students are less likely to navigate successfully through the first year of university.

The authors of this paper, however, contend that higher education institutions have a moral obligation to ensure that the students who gain access into their universities are understood and accommodated for inclusively. Students' expectations should be explicit to all first-year curriculum planners, academics and support units to ensure successful transition into university. The Rural Education Access Programme (REAP), which undertook a study on the factors influencing the success of previously disadvantaged students, concluded that rurality negatively affects students' success and found that insufficient finances was also a key reason for student dropout. In addition, REAP recognised that the "unpreparedness of students" was commonly known "but the unpreparedness of higher education institutions for these types of students is less taken into account" (REAP, 2008, p. 6). This knowledge could also encourage a more constructive dialogue between all stakeholders to ensure a positive alignment of students' expectations and university realities, thereby allowing for enhancement of student success.

The real challenges affecting student success require institutional support. Literature on the first-year student transition reveals that for students to successfully make the transition to university life, they need to develop a sense of belonging and connectedness with their new peer groups and the wider academic community. Thomas (2012, p. 12) defines students' sense of belonging as "students' subjective feelings of relatedness or connectedness". Perry and Allard (2003) claim that students need to make connections between the experiences they bring with them to the new university environment and their new knowledge obtained at university. They stress that the ability to do this cannot be pursued in silo. University support in facilitating alignment of student expectations and experiences is integral for student success. In addition, the institutional support needs to be underpinned by appropriate timing in the provision for it to be effective.

Drawing from literature on university students' expectation and experience, it is evident that there is a mismatch between students' pre-university expectations and actual experience (Smith & Wertlieb, 2005). However, this study examines the extent of the gaps between students' pre-university expectation and their actual university experience. The uniqueness of the study is that it explores the degree to which students' expectations of their actual university realities are matched or mismatched. This study makes use of gap analysis to identify the intensity or size of gap between students' expectations and actual experience. If first-year students enter university with a set of expectations shaped by their prior educational knowledge, background and histories, and are confronted with experiences that do not match these expectations, then there is a greater likelihood that these students will experience dissatisfaction and either drop out of university or struggle to fit in.

This study draws on Parsuraman, Zeithaml and Berry's (1985) service gap idea that postulates that the quality of service perceived by a customer depends on the size and direction of the gap. They define service quality as the gap between consumers' expectations and perceptions. The assumption underlying the service gap concept is that disappointment and withdrawal of support or use of service will result if expectations are not met. Gap analysis is not a new concept in the higher educational context and can be applied to higher education in a similar way to quality of services perceived by customers. For example, in LaBay and Comm's (2003) study, they used gap analysis to evaluate student expectations and perceptions concerning their tutor's services. In Legčević's (2009) study, she determines the quality gap by measuring university students' perceptions and expectations of educational services offered in the Law faculty in Osijek. In the present study, the gap between students' university expectations with their actual university experience is examined alongside widening university access and success.

Methodology

This exploratory study analysed first-year teacher education students' pre-entry expectations with their actual university experience of social, academic and seeking support integration. The aim was to gain a better understanding of the size of the gap between student expectation and experience in relation to its impact on access and success. This study employed a case study strategy conducted in the Faculty of Education at Cape Peninsula University of Technology, in Cape Town, South Africa. A self-designed questionnaire was used to collect quantitative data at two stages in the study. The first survey was a self-administered Pre-Entry Expectation survey, which was mailed to all first-year students accepted into the Bachelor of Education (BEd) programme prior to commencement of their academic study. An acceptable response rate of 65% was achieved. The second survey was conducted in the last term of the first year of study. All first-year teacher education students were invited to complete the First-Year Experience survey. The second survey had a response rate of 66%, but from a smaller pool of first-year students. Only students who completed the first Pre-Entry Expectation survey and the second First-Year Experience survey were considered as participants for this study. In this regard, a total of 95 first-year students who completed both surveys became the participants of this study.

Instrument

The Pre-Entry Expectation survey information was collected in two parts. The first part collected biographical and background characteristics information. The second part contained 35 expectation statements covering items relating to academic preparedness, social and academic integration, perceptions of lecturer expectations, and seeking institutional support. Students were asked to rate all items on a 4-point Likert scale with respect to their expectations and perceptions of university experience. To give participants a range of responses to the statements, a Likert scale consisting of four categories ranging from 4 being 'strongly agree' to 1 being 'strongly disagree', was provided. The reason for using a 4-point scale is that participants are required to make a decision on the statement. As noted by Cohen et al. (2008), there is often a tendency for participants to opt for the mid-point. In the First-Year Experience survey, the same 35 statements from the expectation survey were used. All the expectation statements were changed to experience statements and presented in the same order with the same 4-point rating scale.

Data analysis procedure

Quantitative statistical analysis was conducted by using a computer software package (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences: SPSS version 22.0). Comparison of the two sets of scores was done using the paired sample *t*-test, as normality conditions were satisfied. Of the 35 pairs of indicators computed, 25 statements, around 71%, were found to be statistically significant at the 5% significance level, with the majority of the statements yielding p-values less than 0.001.

The gap scores for each statement were measured by examining the average mean expectation score with the average mean experience score. According to Juillerat (1995) student satisfaction can be defined by the positive and negative gaps in the expectation level and actual experience. In this study the gap score was obtained by calculating the difference between the average mean score for each expectation statement paired with the corresponding experience statement. A positive difference between the mean expectation score and the mean experience score indicated that the students' actual experience exceeded their expectations. A negative gap score indicated that the students' expectation was not met by their actual university experience. A p-value of less than 0.05 indicated the level of significance of the gap. Descriptive and statistical inferences were used to interpret and present the findings of this study.

Validity and reliability

The self-designed survey used in this study was piloted, tested and revised to ensure reliability and validity. To determine the reliability of the survey instruments, the authors made use of Cronbach's alpha (α) to determine the internal consistency and average correlation of the 35 items in the survey instrument. The Cronbach's alpha for the 35 items ranged from 0.564 to 0.776. The overall coefficient score of 0.668 obtained for this study can be regarded as an acceptable score, bearing in mind that this was a newly developed instrument.

Two layers of informed consent were sought. First, approval was sought from the institution's Faculty Ethics Committee. A formal proposal was submitted to the committee, providing full disclosure of the aim, objectives and procedures of the research project and the participants who would be selected for the project. A research ethical clearance compliance form was completed. The second consent was obtained from the participants. Written consent was attached to the Pre-Entry Expectation and First-Year Experience survey. As an introduction to the survey a brief summary of the research project was highlighted, also stating that filling in of the questionnaire was optional; no costs would be incurred since a self-addressed envelope was provided for the expectation survey; and finally, confidentially would be preserved with regard to participants' information and identity as completed.

Findings and Discussion

The aim of the study was to determine the size of the gap between students' expectation and actual university experience in relation to students' engagement in academic, social and seeking support. The findings from this study indicate significant gaps between first-year students' expectation and their actual university experience. In the current study, a negative gap indicates that students' expectations were not met. This implies that students' mean expectation scores were greater than their mean experience scores. A positive gap implies that students' expectations were met and in some occurrences, it actually exceeded their expectations. In this regard, the mean experience score was greater than the mean expectation scores. From the tables below, it is evident that an overall negative average gap score was found in all three categories: social engagement (-0.53), academic engagement (-0.65), and academic support (-0.56). These results imply that there was a mismatch between students' expectation and actual experience. In this study, students' expectations of their actual first-year university experience were not met. In order to better understand the findings of this study the authors needed to gain a comprehensive overview of their participants, their profiles and background characteristics. The next section describes the participants' backgrounds.

First-year students' profiles

From the total sample of 95 participants, 77% were female and 23% male. The majority of the participants (53%) were under 20 years of age, attending university directly from school. A substantive portion of 40% of the participants were in the 21–29 year age group. Most of the participants (53%) indicated English as their home language, while 23% indicated IsiXhosa and 21.5% indicated Afrikaans. A large majority of the participants (83%) indicated they were first-generation students, implying that they were the first members in their immediate family to attend university. Finally, only 6% of the participants were able to fund their own studies, while 53% sought outside funding in the form of bursaries and loans. A total of 41% of the participants indicated that their parents funded their university studies. The profile of the sample participants was representative of the first-year BEd student cohort in the faculty. The participants' background characteristics provided context to the data collected in the pre- and post-surveys. The findings from these surveys are discussed in the following sections under three main headings: (i) social engagement, (ii) academic engagement, and (iii) seeking academic support.

(i) Social engagement: Gap analysis

Table 1 below shows the gap analysis for five social engagement indicators which included 'joining social clubs', 'attending social functions', 'making new friends', 'making friends from different racial groups', and 'social events on campus will be a distraction'. The highest positive gap is observed for 'making friends' (0.15) indicating that the participants' actual experience at university of making friends was higher than their prior expectation. However, this result was not found to be significant with a p-value of 0.063. The highest negative gap is observed for 'joining social clubs' (-1.24), indicating that students' expectations of joining clubs at university were higher than their actual experience and therefore not met. This result was found to be significant with a p-value of <0.001. Significant p-values were also noted for 'attending social functions' ($p = <0.001$) and 'social events will be a distraction' ($p = 0.003$). Both these statements indicate a negative gap, -1.07 and -0.34 respectively, implying that students' expectations were not met. The indicator 'making friends from different racial groups' also produced a negative gap, -0.14. However, this score was not significant ($p = 0.054$).

Table 1: Gap scores of social engagement indicators

Social engagement indicators	Expectation	Experience	Gap	p-value
Joining social clubs	3.12	1.88	-1.24	<0.001
Attending social functions	3.20	2.13	-1.07	<0.001
Making new friends	3.34	3.49	0.15	0.063
Making friends from different racial groups	3.47	3.33	-0.14	0.054
Social events on campus will be a distraction	2.15	1.81	-0.34	<0.001
Average	**3.06**	**2.53**	**-0.53**	**-**

Students' mean expectation score of 'social events being a distraction' was close to the level of disagreement (2.15) while their actual experience on this indicator shows a score close to strongly disagree (1.81). This result actually corroborates the negative gap in statements 1 and 2 in Table 1 above. All statements had a lower level of agreement than their expectations. This result could be due to a number of variables either within or external to the university environment, such as the university not having many social events or clubs, poor advertising of social clubs and events, students' heavy workloads and full timetables, lack of transport, financial constraints, students not feeling as if they belong, and/or personal obligations. Spengen (2013) argues that students with a deficit in social capital can fall behind socially and academically, and are more likely to have higher levels of non-academic engagements due to problems associated with integrating into university life. However, regardless of the reason for non-social engagement, the exclusion of first-year students from the university's social activities can cause great insecurity and hesitation within the university environment whereby these students will view themselves as cultural outsiders (Spengen, 2013).

According to Thomas (2012, p. 12), feeling a sense of belonging can be defined as "students' subjective feelings of relatedness or connectedness" to the university. In Pather's (2015) study, it was found that students' lack of connectedness to the wider university community was mainly due to their financial constraints and family obligations. For students to successfully make the transition to university life, they need to develop a sense of belonging and connectedness with their new peer groups and the wider university community. For Bourdieu (1984) integration and a sense of belonging are informed by one's habitus and past experiences. As Spengen (2013) asserts that first-generation students generally come from a background where there is an absence of advantaged knowledge, resources and information acquired from social networks, this results in these students not being able to adequately understand higher education as a conduit to overall success. This lack of social capital can create unrealistic expectations of the students' social engagement within the higher education milieu. This section's findings highlight the urgent need for universities to make a conscious effort to enhance students' social engagement so that students can feel more socially connected to the institution.

(ii) Academic engagement: Gap analysis

This section outlines the gap analysis of first-year students' expectations and actual university experience within the following academic engagement indicators listed in Table 2 below: time spent preparing for lecturers; time spent at the library; social media contact with the lecturer; conversations with the lecturer outside of class time; and regular feedback from the lecturers.

Table 2: Gap scores of academic engagement indicators

Academic engagement indicators	Expectation	Experience	Gap	p-value
A lot of time spent on preparing for lectures	3.31	2.73	-0.58	<0.001
A lot of time spent at the library	3.09	1.70	-1.39	<0.001
Social media contact with lecturers	2.62	2.17	-0.45	0.002
Conversations with lecturers out of class	2.76	2.52	-0.24	0.004
Regular feedback from lecturers on assignments and tests	3.34	2.75	-0.59	<0.001
Average	**3.024**	**2.374**	**-0.65**	**-**

All these academic engagement indicators show a negative gap, which implies that students' expectations, were higher than their actual experience and therefore not met. All the statements in Table 2 show a mean expectation score that has a higher level of agreement than the mean experience scores. The gap analysis for all the statements are regarded as significant with p-values being <0.05. Students' expectations exceeded their actual experience with the biggest mean gap of -1.39 being scored for 'a lot of time spent at the library'. Students' expectation of spending time at the library scored a high level of agreement, 3.09 as opposed to their actual experience score which indicated a strongly disagree score of 1.70 with a significant p-value of 0.001. A significant p-value of 0.001 was also indicated for the mean gap of 'a lot of time spent preparing for lectures' -0.58 and 'regular feedback from lecturers' -0.59. The mean gap of the 'social media contact with lecturers' (-0.45) and 'conversation with lecturers outside of class time' (-0.24), indicated a significant p-value of 0.002 and 0.004 respectively.

The findings in this section indicate that students had high expectations with regard to academic engagement. Smith and Wertlieb (2005) contend that unrealistically high expectations make it difficult to adjust to university life, thereby inculcating higher levels of non-adaptation. However, the participants in this study demonstrated high expectations of academic preparedness by anticipating spending much time preparing for lectures and also spending a vast amount of time at the library. Contrary to this expectation, the students' actual experience indicate that this expectation was not met. Jansen and Van der Meer (2011) highlight that students' preparedness for academic education is one of the most important factors for success at university, and it can be expected that students who feel better prepared for university will have less trouble with university transition.

The results also found that the participants' high expectation of getting feedback, having social media contact and conversations with lecturers outside of class time was not met. Brinkworth, McCann, Matthews and Nordström (2009) support this finding. They indicate that first-year students seem to hold expectations that academic staff will provide quick feedback to students about their work and that academic staff will be readily accessible to students. According to Spengen (2013), students who enter university with social capital benefits, display higher levels of class participation and higher interaction with academic staff. However, students lacking such social capital benefits do not possess the resources and knowledge to fulfil their roles as students thereby hindering their development and success. It is therefore critical that universities acknowledge these tensions and seek intentional strategies to close these gaps, which could impact on the risks associated with student access and success.

(iii) Seeking academic support: Gap analysis

Table 3 shows the gap analysis of students' expectation with their actual university experience under the following four seeking academic support indicators: seeking assistance from lecturers; seeking assistance from librarians; seeking assistance from peers and friends; and seeking assistance from senior students and tutors. All results indicate a negative gap between the mean expectation and experience scores. This implies that students' expectations of seeking assistance exceeded their actual experience of getting academic support at university.

Table 3: Gap scores of academic support indicators

Academic engagement indicators	Expectation	Experience	Gap	p-value
Seek assistance and advice from lecturers out of class time	2.07	1.58	–0.49	<0.001
Seek assistance from librarians with finding information	2.47	1.82	–0.65	<0.001
Seek assistance from peers and friends with academic work	2.30	2.23	–0.07	0.330
Seek assistance from senior students and tutors with academic work	2.30	1.27	–1.03	<0.001
Average	**2.29**	**1.73**	**-0.56**	**-**

The largest negative gap is observed for 'seeking assistance from senior students and tutors' (-1.03) with a significant p-value of 0.000. Two other significant p-value of 0.001 were indicated for 'seeking assistance from librarians' and 'seeking assistance from lecturers' with a mean gap of -0.65 and -0.49 respectively. The smallest negative gap of -0.07 is observed for seeking assistance from peers and friends. This result indicates that there was a close correlation between students' expectation and their actual experience with regard to peers and friends assisting with academic work. However, this gap was not significant (p = 0.330). From the results, it is evident that participants' preference, from highest to lowest, with seeking academic assistance at university were from their peers (3.23), librarians (2.82), academic staff (2.58) and senior students and tutors (2.27). This finding indicates that peers and friends become an important source of information and support to the first-year students. This study's finding collaborates Pather, Norodien-Fataar, Cupido and Mkonto's (2017) research findings that found students sought academic assistance from peers that they identified as more knowledgeable and/or like-minded, also acknowledging that their peers were more easily accessible.

Darlaston-Jones et al.'s (2003) study acknowledges the lack of engagement between academic staff and students. They reveal that students tend to feel ignored by their lecturers and inhibited about contacting them even when seeking assistance with academic issues. Tinto et al. (1993) identifies this lack of integration between students and academic staff, outside of the classroom environment, as one of the contributing factors to student dropout. Ball and Vincent's (1998) concept of 'grapevine knowledge' is supported in this study's findings. The grapevine knowledge indicates that students seek assistance and information from peers and friends known to them. Ball and Vincent refer to this information received from friends and peers as hot knowledge and acknowledge that students perceive this information as valuable and more honest and trustworthy. These authors add that information received from the institution, particularly academic and support staff members, is regarded as cold knowledge. Baker, Ramsay, Irwin and Miles (2017) proclaim that non-traditional students find seeking information from the institution uncomfortable to access. The results in this section show that students' preferred source for seeking academic support was from friends and peers, and not from university staff, senior students and tutors, as they had perceived prior to entering university. In this regard, university academic and support staff need to improve on providing a more inviting connection with first-year students. Additionally, institutions need to provide mentoring skills to first-year students early in the academic year so that these students can be equipped to support one another. The danger of incoming students relying on peers and friends for academic support and institutional information could result in limited or incorrect support, advice and information offered to fellow students, which could have an impact on the students' academic success.

Conclusion

The study has provided a detailed view of first-year students' expectation and university experience relating to social engagement, academic engagement, and seeking academic support. In analysing the gap between students' expectations and actual university experiences alongside students' university access and success, it is argued that student success is a product of an environment that supports students' expectations of university realities. Access and success at university is indicative of students fulfilling their expectations relating not only to academic learning, but also to broader career, social and personal goals. Institutionally, student success is pivotal to universities preparing and supporting students for life beyond the university milieu. Therefore, universities need to be responsive to student expectations and experiences by developing strategies that prepare and support students in achieving success. Investments in scrutinising students' expectations and experiences requires careful analysis of factors relating to expectations and experience that allow students to connect with the social, academic and support structures of the institution as this would have a direct impact on success.

In this study, the realities of the first-year students' social engagement, academic engagement and seeking support were not commensurate with their expectations. Success can be impeded if the reality of students' expectations is not met. An alignment of expectations with experiences can significantly help students to feel more connected with the university, thereby contributing to positive learning outcomes. Universities need to address incoming students' realistic and unrealistic expectations with their actual university experience so as to foster students' sense of connectedness to their new learning environment. In this regard, university initiatives need to be intentional and inclusive. Creating an awareness of the demands of higher education and addressing any university misconceptions of the first year of study is critical for academic and social adjustment into the university environment. This will also assist in closing the gap between student expectation and university experience. Addressing the misfit and helping students to connect with the opportunities of university life not only helps in the transition to university but also helps students to understand the culture and expectations of university life. By doing so, students tend not to become demotivated when their university experiences do not match their expectations. However, institutions also need to be sensitive to students' expectations and make a conscious effort to align the institutional structures to satisfy the type of students who are entering higher education in the twenty-first century. Most often, academic success is related to students' expectations being fulfilled and therefore it is imperative that universities understand the student expectation–experience alignment to ensure academic access, retention and success.

References

ACER (Australian Council for Educational Research). (2008). Attracting, engaging and retaining: New conversations about learning. *Australian Student Engagement Report*, Camberwell, Victoria.

Awang, H. & Ismail, N.A. (2010). Undergraduate education: A gap analysis of students' expectations and satisfaction. *Problems of Education in the 21st Century*, 21(1), 21–28.

Baker, S., Ramsay, G., Irwin, E. & Miles, L. (2017). 'Hot', 'Cold' and 'Warm' supports: towards theorising where refugee students go for assistance at university. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 1–16.

Ball, S.J. & Vincent, C. (1998). 'I heard it on the grapevine': 'hot' knowledge and school choice. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 19(3), 377–400. https://doi.org/10.1080/0142569980190307

Bamforth, C.J. (2010). Improving undergraduates' performance via an embedded generic skills program. In: M. Devlin, J. Nagy & A. Lichtenberg (Eds.), *Research and Development in Higher Education: Reshaping Higher Education* (pp. 33, 49–59). Melbourne, 6–9 July.

Bean, J.P. & Eaton, S.B. (2001). A psychological model of college student retention. In: J.M. Braxton (Ed.), *Reworking the student departure puzzle: new theory and research on college student retention* (pp. 48–61). Nashville, T.N.: Vanderbilt University Press. https://doi.org/10.2190/6R55-4B30-28XG-L8U0

Bettinger, E. & Long, B.T. (2009). Addressing the needs of underprepared students in higher education: Does college remediation work? *Journal of Human Resources*, 44(3), 736–771. https://doi.org/10.3368/jhr.44.3.736

Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: a social critique of the judgement of taste*. Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard University Press.

Brinkworth, R., McCann, B., Matthews, C. & Nordstrom, K. (2009). First year perspectives and experiences: Student and teacher perspectives. *Higher Education*, 58, 157–173. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-008-9188-3

CHE (Council for Higher Education). (2013). A proposal for undergraduate curriculum reform in South Africa: The case for a flexible curriculum structure. Pretoria.

Chetty, R. & Pather, S. (2015). Challenges in Higher Education in South Africa. In: J. Condy (Ed.), *Telling Stories Differently: Engaging 21st century students through digital storytelling*. Stellenbosch: African Sun Media.

Cohen, L., Manion, L. & Morrison, K. (2008). *Research methods in education* (6th ed.). London: Routledge.

Creighton, L.M. (2007). Factors Affecting the Graduation Rates of University Students from Underrepresented Populations. *International Electronic Journal for Leadership in Learning*, 11(7).

Darlaston-Jones, D., Pike, L., Cohen, L., Young, A. & Haunold, S. (2003). Are they being served? Student expectations of higher education. *Issues in Educational Research*, 13(1), 31–52.

DHET (Department of Higher Education and Training). (2016). Statistics on Post-School Education and Training in South Africa. Pretoria, South Africa.

DoE (Department of Education). (1997). Education White Paper 3: A programme for the transformation of higher education. *Government Gazette 386* (18207). 15 August (notice 1196 of 1997). Pretoria: Government Printers.

Hu, S. & Kuh, G.D. (2001). *Being (dis)engaged in educationally purposeful activities: The influences of student and institutional characteristics*. Paper presented at the American Educational Research Association Annual Conference.

James, R. (2002). Students' changing expectations of higher education and the consequences of mismatches with the reality. In: O.P. Coaldrake & L. Stedman (Eds.), *Responding to student expectations* (pp. 71–73). Paris: OECD.

Jansen, E.P.W.A. & Van der Meer, J. (2011). Ready for university? A cross national study on students' perceived preparedness for university. *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 39(1), 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-011-0044-6

Johnson, D., Soldner, M., Brown Leonard, J., Alvarez, P., Kutotsuchi Inkelas, K. & Rowan-Kenyon, H. (2007). Examining sense of belonging among first year undergraduates from different racial/ethnic groups. *Journal of College Student Development*, 48(5), 525–542. https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2007.0054

Juillerat, S. (1995). Investigating a two-dimensional approach to the assessment of student satisfaction: Validation of the SSI. Unpublished dissertation, Temple University.

Kim, E., Newton, F.B., Downey, R. & Benton, S. (2010). Personal factors impacting college student success: Constructing College Learning Effectiveness Inventory (CLEI). *College Student Journal*, 44(1), 112–125.

LaBay, D.G. & Comm, C.L. (2003). A case study using gap analysis to assess distance learning versus traditional course delivery. *The International Journal of Education Management*, 7, 312–317. https://doi.org/10.1108/09513540310501003

Legčević, J. (2009). Quality gap of educational services in viewpoints of students. *Ekonoska Misao Praksa DBK. GOD*, 18(2), 279–298.

Lehmann, W. (2009). Becoming Middle Class: How Working-Class University Students Draw and Transgress Moral Class Boundaries. *Sociology*, 43(4), 631–647. https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038509105412

McInnis, C., Hartley, R., Polesol, J. & Teese, R. (2000). *Non-completion in vocational education and training and higher education: a literature review*. Commissioned by the Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs. Canberra: AusInfo.

Moll, I. (2004). Curriculum responsiveness: the anatomy of a concept. In: H. Griesel (Ed.), *Curriculum responsiveness: case studies in higher education* (pp. 1–19). Pretoria: South African Universities Vice-Chancellors Association.

Nelson, K.J., Kift, S.M. & Clarke, J.A. (2012). A transition pedagogy for student engagement and first-year learning, success and retention. In: I. Solomonides, A. Reid & P. Petocz (Eds.), *Engaging with learning in higher education* (pp. 117–144). Oxfordshire, U.K.: Libri Publishing.

Parasuraman, A., Zeithaml, V.A. & Berry, L.L. (1985). A conceptual model of service quality and its implications for future research. *Journal of Marketing*, 49(4), 41–50. https://doi.org/10.2307/1251430

Pascarella, E.T. & Terenzini, P.T. (2005). *How college affects students: a third decade of research*. San Francisco, C.A.: Jossey-Bass.

Pather, S. (2015). Factors influencing teacher education students' first-year experience and academic performance. Unpublished DEd thesis, Cape Peninsula University of Technology, Cape Town.

Pather, S., Norodien-Fataar, N., Cupido, X. & Mkonto, N. (2017). First Year Students' Experience of Access and Engagement at a University of Technology. *Journal of Education*, Issue 69.

Perry, C. & Allard, A. (2003). Making the connections: transition experiences for first-year education students. *Journal of Educational Enquiry*, 4(2), 74–89.

REAP (Rural Education Access Programme). (2008). Factors that Facilitate Success for Disadvantaged Higher Education Students. Retrieved from http://www.reap.org.za/REPORTS/RESEARCH/Factors%20that%20facilitate%20success_Final%20report%202008.pdf

Reason, R.D., Terenzini, P.T. & Domingo, R.J. (2006). First things first: developing academic competence in the first year of college. *Research in Higher Education*, 47(2), 149–175. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-005-8884-4

Slack, K., Mangan, J., Hughes, A. & Davies, P. (2012). "Hot", "cold" and "warm" information and higher education decision-making. *British Journal of Sociology in Education*, 1–20.

Slonimsky, L. & Shalem, Y. (2006). Pedagogic responsiveness for academic depth. *Journal of Education*, 40(3), 35–58.

Smith, J.S. & Wertlieb, E.C. (2005). Do First-Year College Students' Expectations Align with their First-Year Experiences? *NASPA Journal*, 42(2). https://doi.org/10.2202/0027-6014.1470

South African Human Rights Commission. (2006). Report of the Public Hearing on the Right to Basic Education. https://www.sahrc.org.za/home/21/files/Reports/Right%20to%20basic%20education%202006.pdf

Spengen, A.E. (2013). The Experiences of First-Generation University Students. *Sociology Publications*, 32–41.

Thomas, L. (2012). Building student engagement and belonging in Higher Education at a time of change: final report from the What Works? *Student Retention & Success programme*. London: Paul Hamlyn Foundation, 100.

Tinto, V. (1995). *Educational communities and student success in the first year of university*. Paper presented at the Monash University Conference on the Transition from Secondary School to University, Melbourne, 29 November–1 December.

Tinto, V. (2007). Research and practice of student retention: what's next? *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, 8(1), 1–19. https://doi.org/10.2190/4YNU-4TMB-22DJ-AN4W

Tinto, V., Goodsell-Love, A. & Russo, P. (1993). Building community. *Liberal Education*, 79(4), 16–21.

Van der Meer, J., Jansen, E. & Torenbeek, M. (2010). 'It's almost a mindset that teachers need to change': First-year students' need to be inducted into time management. *Studies in Higher Education*, 35(7), 777–791. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075070903383211

Wilson-Strydom, M. (2015). *University Access and Success: Capabilities, diversity and social justice.* Abingdon: Routledge.

Zepke, N. & Leach, L. (2010). Beyond hard outcomes: 'Soft' outcomes and engagement as student success. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 15, 661–673. https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2010.522084

How to cite:

Pather, S. & Dorasamy, N. (2018). The Mismatch between First-Year Students' Expectations and Experience alongside University Access and Success: A South African University Case Study. *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa*, 6(1), 49–64. DOI: 10.24085/jsaa.v6i1.3065

Research article

Monitoring Student (Dis)engagement: Retention Officers' Experiences at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology

Nosisana Mkonto*

Abstract

Most first-year university students experience serious academic and adjustment challenges, which remain undetected until it is too late to provide meaningful intervention. Universities are therefore developing academic support systems that can assist in identifying students who experience learning challenges early on, and provide quality first-year experiences that ensure that first-year students adapt, engage and succeed at the university. Such student academic support systems should provide resources that detect risk factors as early as possible. This study explores the support provided by the Retention Officers (ROs) in assisting first-year students to overcome disengagement issues at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology in Cape Town, South Africa. Modelled on Tronto's (2010) Theory of Ethics of Care, the design of the First-Year Experience project is underpinned by the value of inclusion and care for first-year students in higher education. This practitioner-based paper draws on the experiences of ROs in monitoring first-year students' disengagement in a science faculty at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology. Data extracted through interviews and written reports by ROs formed the basis for a qualitative interpretation of ROs' experiences dealing with first-year students' disengagement. This paper therefore highlights the importance of mediating between discipline-based support and generic psycho-social support through the involvement of ROs to enhance student engagement.

Keywords

first-year experience; student engagement; first-year student support; ethics of care; Retention Officers

Introduction

Universities globally are devising strategies to support first-year students to successfully navigate the university effortlessly (Tinto, 2006). First-year students often experience challenges in transitioning from high school to university. While some first-year students cope better with transition and hence perform better academically, others struggle and consequently fail and drop out (McMillan, 2014). Anecdotal accounts suggest that first-year students are often overwhelmed by the large quantity of information they receive in the

* Dr Nosisana Mkonto is Head of the Department of the Student Learning Unit at Fundani Centre for Higher Education Development at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology, Cape Town, South Africa. Email: mkonton@cput.ac.za

first weeks of entering the university. This leads to a sense of confusion and information overload. Some students do not get accepted into their programme of choice and are forced to accept an offer into another programme and this also results in confusion and lack of commitment. Issues around student integration and responding to students' unpreparedness for university studies have been researched extensively with various models of coping with first-year student attrition proposed (Astin, 1993; Bean, 1980; McInnis, 2001; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1983; Tierney, 1992; Tinto, 1993). Access for success and access for participation speak more to the South African higher education social justice agenda. In South Africa there is a high failure and dropout rate amongst first-year students, more especially African students, with a large number of first-generation students from disadvantaged socio-economic and educational backgrounds (Sader & Gabela, 2017). Consequently, there is a constant need to re-evaluate the efficacy of learning and social support being provided to first-year students. This paper explores the concept of Retention Officers (ROs) as one of the interventions being provided in order to enhance first-year students' engagement in the university. Specifically, the paper argues that the narratives of a small group of ROs accounting for how they experience first-year students' engagements with studies highlight how the ethics of care framework could be instrumental in extending the way first-year student learning support is being provided, especially for disadvantaged students.

The First-Year Experience (FYE)

This study emerges from the First-Year Experience (FYE) project in a university of technology in South Africa. The ROs' initiative is located within the FYE project in that university. FYE aims not only to increase student success and reduce attrition, but to maximise student achievement. FYE focuses on encouraging students to become fully inducted into their academic disciplines and programmes, providing them with psycho-social and academic support that will inspire them to achieve academic excellence. The university prioritises student support for first-year students with the aim of curbing attrition and increasing retention.

In order to curb attrition the university set up two FYE structures, one Institutional and the other Faculty-based. The Institutional FYE structure comprises of representatives from the Faculties and Support Units which include the Library, Student Counselling Unit, Disability Unit, and the Centre for Innovative Education Development and Student Welfare. The Institutional FYE Committee discusses issues pertaining to first-year students in all six faculties of the university. The FYE faculty structure comprises of the Teaching and Learning Coordinator, First-Year Coordinators, Retention Officers, Mentors, Tutors and Class Representatives. In the Faculty FYE structure discussions include: challenges, opportunities, sharing of best practices and general issues affecting first-year students. The creation of these structures encouraged the integration of the FYE in all the university structures.

Retention Officers (ROs) Initiative

Until recently, at the university there was no clear platform directed towards coordinating the socio-academic needs of first-year students within faculties and departments. FYE provided the platform and the Retention Officers' (ROs') initiative fell under its auspices. There are different names for ROs. They are called First Year Advisors (Box, Callan, Geddes, Kemp & Wojcieszek, 2012), Academic Advisors (Coll & Draves, 2009), Coaches (Bettinger & Baker, 2014). By whatever name they are called, they are responsible for academic preparation, information gathering, information sharing and social integration of first-year students into the university. They assist in preparing students academically for their chosen field of study, counsel students, provide advice and care, identify challenges students face and refer them to the relevant student support services. Retention Officers, Students Advisors and Coaches enhance the interaction between the students and the faculty and contribute to the development of positive attitudes, relationships and university experience in general (Coll & Draves, 2009).

The Retention Officers (ROs) initiative was established to track first-year students' performance and identify students' disengagement as well as who could be at risk as early as the first month of registration, and to provide care and support and/or refer them to the relevant support units. There is support for first-year students at the university such as the Writing Centre, Student Counselling, Disability Unit, Library, HIV/AIDS Unit and Student Welfare but they are located outside the faculties and first-generation students often do not know how to access such assistance. The ROs are senior students (Masters and PhD) employed in a faculty to provide support to first-year students. They work closely with the First-Year Coordinator in identifying risk factors faced by first-year students as early as possible and are paid a monthly stipend. The ROs undergo training in basic counselling skills, understanding students with disabilities, accessing Blackboard, basic understanding of HIV/AIDS, and mentoring and understanding social issues that impact academic performance. Training of ROs is done in collaboration with other support units at the university and focuses on the student in totality which is key to first-year transition (Tinto, 2006). This is confirmed by Cleyle and Philpott (2012) whose study proposes that institutional structures at the university could be instrumental in student engagement and success. Universities should therefore invest in support services in preparing students for higher education.

The ROs' role is to ensure that first-year students understand how things work at the university, which includes how they are being supported and whether they know where and how to access academic and other support services. Bettinger and Baker (2014, p. 5) assert that first-generation students are often not aware that they require assistance, do not take steps towards seeking help and do not know what questions to ask. In addition, the ROs are responsible for monitoring class attendance, non-submission of assignments, failing of tests and academic literacy issues. This involves contacting students who have missed classes, failed a test, and could not submit an assignment, to find out what their problem was, and assisting them in getting the necessary help and/or referring them to the relevant support units available. Such support follows a compassionate and holistic approach that acknowledges the reality of first-year experience (Box et al., 2012, p. 93; Kift, 2015).

Student Transition and Student Engagement: A Brief Overview

The RO initiative is aimed at student success at universities and in so doing it follows Morrow's (1993) concept of epistemological access. Epistemological access does not only denote registering students at the university and permitting them to study but signifies knowledge of the course they are studying (Morrow, 1993). In order for the students to be engaged in their studies, they need to be provided with support. The role of an RO is to provide such support. Scott, Yeld and Hendry (2007) and the Council on Higher Education (CHE, 2013) attest to high attrition rate at first-year level in South African higher education institutions. CHE (2013) further confirmed a 33% dropout rate of students accessing universities. Several causes have been alluded to for the high attrition rates that include but are not limited to transitional challenges, inability to cope with the complex curricula, lack of support at the university, financial problems and incorrect choice of course of study. Lack of support is the reason why the University of Technology in this study instituted the Retention Officers' initiative within the First-Year Experience project.

Tinto (1975) proposes that when students are provided with support they are more likely to be satisfied, to persist and not drop out of the university. Disengaged students are less likely to be committed to the university, will not be satisfied with the institution and hence drop out (Nelson et al., 2012). Tinto (1975) and Bean (1980) acknowledge that the more students are integrated into the university the more they are committed to the university. Tinto (1987, p. 176) further asserts that:

Students are more likely to become committed to the institution and, therefore stay, when they come to understand that the institution is committed to them. Programs cannot replace the absence of high quality caring and concerned faculty and staff.

First-year students expect such care to come from staff at the institution. Research has affirmed the positive influence that staff can have in promoting student transition (Tinto, 1987). Student–staff relations also promote student learning and development, thereby enhancing student experience at the university.

Tronto (2010, p. 162) asserts that care relationships should have clear, defined and acceptable purposes. In the case of the ROs, the overall purpose is retention and they have a clear mandate of supporting the first-year students so that they can adapt, engage and succeed at the university. Tronto (2010, p. 160) further identified four phases of care: caring about, caring for, giving care and receiving care. Caring about refers to being attentive to the needs of the person being cared about and also picking up unspoken needs; caring for is making a conscious decision to meet the needs recognised and putting together resources to meet these needs; giving care refers to the actual act meeting the caring needs; and receiving care involves the reaction of the person receiving care. In the context of South African higher education, the high attrition rate of students entering university (CHE, 2013) makes the first-year student vulnerable and therefore requiring care. The ROs' interaction with their relationship with the students exposes them to be able to provide care. Kuh (2009) stresses the importance of student experience during their studies at the university.

Student Engagement

Zepke (2013) looks at student engagement in the university in terms of engagement with lecturers, peers and support provided by the university. Studies indicate that student–staff interaction play an important role in student engagement and success (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1993). Trowler (2010) and Strydom, Basson and Mentz (2010) recognise the incorporation of academic and non-academic aspects of the student experience in order to improve engagement. Kuh (2009) and Cleyle and Philpott (2012) recommend that in order for student engagement to succeed it should include appropriate support structures that cater for students' needs. Such support structures could be beneficial in student engagement and success. The RO initiative is one such structure that serves the students' needs to ensure that they engage with their studies. Thomas (2002) acknowledges the connection between student engagement and success.

Research Design

This research focuses on ROs' experiences of first-year students' learning engagements. As such, much of the data needed leans towards ROs' perceptions and accounts of first-year students' learning engagements. In order to ensure that this is not a superficial description of the students' experiences, the study was designed within the qualitative design. Qualitative data was collected from eight ROs from different departments in a science faculty at a university of technology in South Africa from February to September. The participants were purposely selected so as to create a good rapport between research focus and the participants (Brynman, 2008). Purposive selection accentuates rich information from the participants (Patton, 2002) and allows for deeper understanding of student engagement and their challenges. Semi-structured one-on-one interviews were held with the eight participants who were part of the ROs initiative. This was supplemented by observations extracted from ROs' reports. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The data provided insight into the care provided by the ROs and the challenges faced by first-year students. The following research questions guided the data extraction process:

- What are the challenges faced by first-year students in your department?
- What kind of support does the first-year student require in order to engage?
- What kind of support does the RO provide?

Findings

Based on the information extracted from interviews and ROs' reports, the following key aspects stand out regarding how first-year students engage with learning in particular and university life in general.

Late coming and class attendance

Some students arrive late or do not attend classes (especially the early morning classes) because of the unreliability of the transport system in the city.

> *"I miss classes because in a week, the trains are delayed 3 or 4 times and we only get the information about the delay after waiting for an hour for the train."*

Unreliable commuter trains are a key problem that students from economically disadvantaged suburbs face. This greatly hampers their ability to arrive on campus on time or at all as they often cannot afford alternative modes of transport such as buses and taxis. One student reported staying about 50km away from the university. There is only one train that leaves from that area at 5.00 am and, if he misses that train, the next one will only arrive five hours later.

> *"If I miss the 5am train I go back home."*

Another student reported being just lazy and finding it difficult to wake up in time:

> *"I am not a morning person. I wish classes can start at 11h00."*

Clubbing was fingered as another cause for late coming or non-attendance of classes:

> *"When I go to Long Street on a week day it is difficult to come to school the next day."*

In order to support the student who lives 50km away from campus, the concerned RO organised a space in the hostel for the student. Another RO had a discussion with the lazy student and the one who goes clubbing on week days, and showed them the importance of attending classes and arriving on time for classes as this will not only help them at the university but also in the workplace as the university is preparing them for the world of work. The RO went as far as finding students staying in the same area so that they could travel together to avoid being robbed on the way to the bus or train station. A WhatsApp group that included all the students was formed so that those who had challenges with public transport could inform the group of their late coming or non-attendance. The RO would inform the lecturer, request the work to be done and then send it to the students. Workshops on time management and goal setting were arranged for the students so that they could understand the importance of planning their school work, setting time aside daily for studying and setting themselves SMART goals. The RO also reported that in some classes, taking the attendance register was problematic, especially in large classes.

Non-submission of assignments and poor test results

Some students reported that they had not yet grasped the teaching style of the lecturer and therefore failed to follow in class.

> *"At school our teachers used to explain other stuff in isiXhosa but here the lecturers speak English all the time and I get lost most of the time."*

Others struggled with academic writing conventions when completing their assignments even though these students were referred to the Writing Centre to acquire the necessary writing skills.

> *"I submitted an assignment that did not have references because I did not know that I needed to write references."*

The RO referred the student to the Writing Centre for Harvard Referencing workshops in this case. The Writing Centre also supported the student with workshops on topics such as note-taking and academic writing skills. The RO used the WhatsApp group to remind students about upcoming assignments and tests so that they could prepare on time and submit assignments to the Writing Centre for writing support.

Lack of resources

Some indicated that they lacked resources such computers and learning space at home.

> *"I do not own a laptop and there is no computer at home so I struggle when I have to write an assignment and the computer labs are always full."*

> *"At home we are nine and we share one room and I do not even have a space to study. I must wait for everyone to sleep and study in the kitchen."*

Though there is a 24-hour computer laboratory at the university, students who are not staying in hostels cannot stay at the university until very late when working on their assignments because they have to catch public transport to get home.

> *"I have a bus ticket and have to catch a 17h00 bus. I cannot stay in the computer lab until late."*

Others do not have a space to study at home as the whole family stay in a one-roomed shack. In response to the above-mentioned issue the RO requested the students to form study groups to meet over weekends or students to come individually to study at the university or a nearby library.

Personal issues

Some of the issues that the students mentioned to the ROs can be considered to be personal and sensitive. For example, two students shared the following information with the ROs:

> *"I am pregnant and I am scared to tell my parents and I don't know what to do. I am stressed out."*

> *"I am not sure whether to drop out with my studies or not, I have been diagnosed with a dreaded disease. What is a point of studying if I am going to die in any case?"*

The RO arranged counselling for these students for professional advice.

Financial issues

South Africa is a very unequal country with huge disparities between the rich and the poor. Therefore, finance will always influence poor students' levels of engagement at the university. Some students lack basic needs such as daily provision of food. This is what one student reported to the RO:

> *"My mother who is a bread winner has been retrenched and now we are experiencing difficulties at home, most days we do not have food and just drink water and sleep."*

The RO brought these issues for the attention of the head of department who in turn asked for donations in terms of foodstuffs from lecturers. Some students have to fend for their families while they are studying. Another student also reported that:

> *"I work at a restaurant 4 nights a week so that my family and I can survive."*

The student was offered a job as a student assistant, even though it does not pay much, but the student could at least attend classes and was no longer tired. Both these issues will affect the engagement of these students.

Other issues

Some issues are explained during orientation and are written in the subject guide but first-year students could not grasp them very well and ended up seeking answers from the ROs.

> *"I was sick when a test was written, I have a sick certificate, and to whom do I submit the sick certificate?"*

> *"Where is room 314 in this building?"*

> *"How do I get my lecturer if I want to ask something?"*

These questions might seem trivial and something that students can find out for themselves, but they are significant in gauging student engagement. The ROs encouraged students to approach them whenever they have questions and even if they think the questions are stupid.

The majority of students received the care provided by the ROs very well. They did not wait for the RO to approach them, but approached the RO on their own when they experienced challenges.

> *"I was approached by a group of five who were struggling with calculations, looking for a tutor."*

Not all students were happy with the care given by the ROs. One student complained that the RO is always in their face and "must give him a break!".

Challenges faced by ROs

ROs also face challenges as mentioned by these ROs:

> *"The previous year we were more successful in referring students with problems to support units, the short term this year made such intervention impossible."*

Monitoring attendance register is sometimes problematic because of large classes.

Discussion

Universities globally have become more diverse due to increased numbers of student registrations. Diversity is evident in terms of gender, age, ethnicity, race and socioeconomic status. Universities are therefore compelled to review their retention strategies in order to accommodate and retain the diverse students coming into the university (Coll & Draves, 2009). Universities made use of academic advising as a way of increasing retention (Tinto, 2006). The RO initiative in the context of the university under study provides an early warning system and feedback that is critical to student engagement. The ROs provide a caring space for first-year students to talk openly about their issues without fear of being judged. The students felt that someone cared for them and about them. They, in turn, received the care and engaged with their studies. Knowing that somebody cares for them encouraged students to persevere. This is confirmed by the following statement: "Young people need emotional, spiritual and communal support before they start learning (Jansen, 2015).

Monitoring of first-year student engagement and intervening with students who are at risk of failing can help curb the high attrition and dropout rates at higher education institutions (Box et al., 2012). The majority of first-year students entering higher education are first-generation students who lack cultural capital that can assist them in navigating higher education (Pather & Chetty, 2015; Norodien-Fataar & Daniels, 2016).

The onus is on students to seek and utilise the support that is being provided by the ROs. Receiving support and making use of the available resources at their disposal at first-year level lays a foundation for successful learning in their future years of study. Students need to make a conscious decision to engage with their books on a regular basis. In order for the students to be able to do this, they need somebody caring for and about them. While students commit to their learning, staff at university should show care and enhance the commitment the students show.

Some of the students have limited resources that are detrimental to their engagement. Not possessing a personal computer and not having access to the internet disadvantages the 21st century student. Technology plays a very important role in terms of accessing information and the actual writing of assignments. However, some lecturers are oblivious of students' circumstances and demand a lot from the students while Paulsen and St. John (2002) caution that it is important to take these circumstances into consideration. The ROs, by engaging with the students, bring these issues into the open so that they can be discussed and solutions found.

The majority of first-generation students come from impoverished socio-economic backgrounds where there is a lack of basic needs for survival such as food and study space. Hunger and poverty are prevalent in South Africa. ROs can create awareness about these issues and bring them out for discussion so that the university can devise ways of resolving them.

Conclusion

Retention Officers play an important role in providing material and interpersonal resources to first-year students, such as access to information and services. This study adds to the already considerable volume of research on supporting first-year student learning engagement in South Africa. However, the paper extends the argument on how first-year student learning initiatives are conceptualised and implemented from an ethics of care perspective. This is a practitioner based paper reflecting on ROs' accounts and experiences of first-year student engagement. In this regard, the paper argues that a caring RO, just like any other student learning support personnel, can make significant changes in how first-year students engage with their academic work. Therefore, even though the RO initiative adds to the already considerable number of student support initiatives in the higher education landscape, the most important contribution of the RO initiative is how the ROs use their past experiences as students, and a caring approach in listening to students' challenges, thereby enabling these students to re-engage with their studies. When students felt overwhelmed and alienated by the university they had a person in the form of the ROs to talk to and offload their baggage. The ROs were a convenience for first-year students to ask small questions, some of which they felt embarrassed to ask, and these questions were vital to students' adaptation, engagement and success – especially for first-generation students. ROs, through their continuous contact with students, collected data on student engagement that can be utilised to enhance institutional efficiency and inspire recurring quality improvement. Sometimes the ROs could not do their work well because of large classes and the limited time they have, especially during student protests. Some lecturers are reluctant to allow the ROs to access first-year students' information though the ROs are sworn to maintaining of confidentiality in the contracts they sign.

References

Astin, A.W. (1993). *What matters in college: Four critical years revisited.* (Vol. 1). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Bean, J.P. (1980). Dropouts and turnover: The synthesis and test of a causal model of student attrition. *Research in Higher Education*, 12(2), 155–187. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00976194

Bettinger, E.P. & Baker, R.B. (2014). The effects of student coaching: An evaluation of a randomized experiment in student advising. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 36(1), 3–19. https://doi.org/10.3102/0162373713500523

Box, G., Callan, N., Geddes, T., Kemp, H.M. & Wojcieszek, J. (2012). University First Year Advisors: A network approach for first year student transition and retention. A Practice Report. *The International Journal of the First Year in Higher Education*, 3(1), 91–100. https://doi.org/10.5204/intjfyhe.v3i1.107

Bryman, A. (2008). *Social Research Methods* (3rd ed.). Oxford University Press.

CHE (Council on Higher Education). (2013). Proposal for undergraduate curriculum reform in South Africa: The case for a flexible curriculum structure. Report of the Task Team on Undergraduate Curriculum Structure. Pretoria.

Cleyle, S. & Philpott, D. (2012). *Developing an effective first year experience for students with academic challenges: A proposal for a pilot program.* Research Report. Office of the Vice-President Academic. St. John's, N.L.: MUN.

Coll, J.E. & Draves, P. (2009). Traditional age students: Worldviews and satisfaction with advising; a homogeneous study of student and advisors. *College Student Affairs Journal*, 27(2), 215–223.

Jansen, J. (2015). The Big Read: It's not the money it's the care. *Times Live*, 9 October. http//timeslive.co.za

Kapp, R. & Bangeni, B. (2011). A longitudinal study of students' negotiation of language, literacy and identity. *Southern African Linguistics and Applied Language Studies*, 29(2), 197–208. https://doi.org/10.2989/16073614.2011.633366

Kift, S. (2015). A decade of transition pedagogy. A quantum leap in conceptualizing the first year experience. *HERDSA Review of Higher Education*, 2, 51–86.

Krause, K.L. & Coates, H. (2008). Students' engagement in first year university. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 33(5), 493–505. https://doi.org/10.1080/02602930701698892

Kuh, G.D. (2009). What student affairs professionals need to know about student engagement. *Journal of College Student Development*, 50(6), 683–706. https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.0.0099

McInnis, C. (2001). Researching the first year experience: where to from here? *Higher Education Research & Development*, 20(2), 105–114. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360125188

McMillan, W. (2014). 'They have different information about what is going on': emotion in the transition to university. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 33(6), 1123–1135. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2014.911250

Morrow, W. (1993). Epistemological access in the university. *AD Issues*, 1(1), 3–4.

Morrow, W. (2009). *Bounds of democracy: Epistemological access in higher education*. Cape Town: HSRC Press.

Nelson, K.J., Kift, S.M. & Clarke, J.A. (2012). A transition pedagogy for student engagement and first-year learning, success and retention. In: I. Solomonides (Ed.), *Engaging with learning in higher education*. Faringdon, U.K.: Libri Publishing.

Norodien-Fataar, N. (2016). The pre-university pathways of disadvantaged students for gaining entry to university study. *Education as Change*, 20(1), 85–103. https://doi.org/10.17159/1947-9417/2016/568

Norodien-Fataar, N. & Daniels, D. (2016). Exploring the Educational Engagement Practices of Disadvantaged Students at a South African University. *Alternation*, 23(1), 90–112.

Pather, S. & Chetty, R. (2015). The habitus and social capital of first-year students: A case study. *Alternation Special Edition*, 17, 54–76.

Patton, M.Q. (2002). Designing qualitative studies. *Qualitative research and evaluation methods*, 3, 230–246.

Paulsen, B.M. & St. John, P.E. (2002). Social class and College Costs: Examining the Financial Nexus between College Choices and Persistence. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 73(2), 189–236. https://doi.org/10.1353/jhe.2002.0023

Sader, S.B. & Gabela, N.P. (2017). Spatialities of widening participation: narratives of first year students receiving financial aid. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 31(1), 227–242. https://doi.org/10.20853/31-1-1056

Scott, I. (2009). First-year experience as terrain of failure or platform for development? Critical choices for higher education. In: B. Leibowitz, A. van der Merwe & S. van Schalkwyk (Eds.), *Focus on First-Year Success: Perspectives Emerging from South Africa and Beyond* (pp. 17–35). Stellenbosch: African Sun Media.

Scott, I., Yeld, N. & Hendry, J. (2007). *Higher Education Monitor: A case for improving teaching and learning in South African Higher Education*. Pretoria: Council on Higher Education.

Seepe, S. (2000). Higher Education and Africanisation. *Perspectives in Education*, 18(3), 52–71.

Strydom, J.F. & Mentz, M. (2010). *Focusing the student experience on success through student engagement*. Pretoria: Council on Higher Education.

Terenzini, P.T. & Pascarella, E.T. (1991). Twenty years of research on college students: Lessons for future research. *Research in Higher Education*, 32(1), 83–92. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00992835

Thomas, L. (2002). Student retention in higher education. The role of institutional habitus. *Journal of Education Policy*, 17(4), 423–442. https://doi.org/10.1080/02680930210140257

Tierney, W.G. (1992). An Anthropological Analysis of Student Participation in College. *Journal of Higher Education*, 63(6), 603–618. https://doi.org/10.2307/1982046

Tierney, W.G. (1999). Models of minority college-going and retention: Cultural integrity versus cultural suicide. *Journal of Negro Education*, 68(1), 80–91. https://doi.org/10.2307/2668211

Tinto, V. (1975). Dropout from higher education: A theoretical synthesis of recent research. *Review of Educational Research*, 45(1), 89–125. https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543045001089

Tinto, V. (1987). *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Tinto, V. (1993). *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition* (2nd ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Tinto, V. (2006). Research and practice of student retention: What next? *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, 8(1), 1–19. https://doi.org/10.2190/4YNU-4TMB-22DJ-AN4W

Tronto, J.C. (2010). Creating caring institutions: Politics, plurality, and purpose. *Ethics and Social Welfare*, 4(2), 158–171. https://doi.org/10.1080/17496535.2010.484259

Trowler, V. (2010). Student engagement literature review. *The Higher Education Academy*, 11, 1–15.

Zepke, N. (2013). Student Engagement: A complex business supporting the first year experience in tertiary education. *International Journal of the First Year in Higher Education*, 4(2), 1–14. https://doi.org/10.5204/intjfyhe.v4i2.183

How to cite:

Mkonto, N. (2018). Monitoring Student (Dis)engagement: Retention Officers' Experiences at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology. *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa*, 6(1), 65–76. DOI: 10.24085/jsaa.v6i1.3066

Research article

Maximising the First-Year Experience through the Incorporation of Generic Skills in a Medical Curriculum at the University of the Free State

Mpho Priscilla Jama*

Abstract

The highest attrition rates occur among first-year students. Universities have designed different curricular programmes, such as the development of generic skills, to address this challenge. In the medical school at the University of the Free State in South Africa, these skills were incorporated in the MBChB curriculum as an eight credit-bearing module in 2000 and later increased to 12 credits in 2009. To date, the effectiveness of this first-year module in equipping students with generic skills was last determined in 2002. The aim of this research was to determine the perceptions of first-year students regarding the effectiveness of this module in equipping them with generic skills. A questionnaire survey was distributed to 596 first-year medical students each year from 2013 to 2016. A focus group discussion (FGD) was held with 13 students who failed the first year of study in 2016 and had to repeat in 2017. According to the results, most students had a positive perception about the structure and organisation as well as the benefits of the module. However, from the questionnaire results, the overall rating of the effectiveness of the module was not very positive, with 35% of students rating it effective, 45% rating it relatively effective and 20% rating it not effective. However, during the FGD, seven (54%) of the 13 students rated it effective. In the qualitative statements of the questionnaire, a common comment related to the poor rating was about the unnecessary long hours in some sessions. Other comments from the questionnaire were medically related, with some students suggesting more practical and clinical demonstrations. During the FGD, students could not understand why their peers needed practical demonstrations in the first year. The incorporation of generic skills should be context- and discipline-specific and students should be "re-equipped" with certain skills during different stages of the curriculum.

Keywords

First-year experience; students' attrition; generic skills module and development; high-impact practices; medical curriculum; students' perceptions; higher education; South Africa; University of the Free State

Introduction

The high attrition and drop-out rates of first-year students in universities have been a challenging phenomenon and explored by many researchers (Arco-Tirado, Fernándes-Martín & Fernándes-Balboa, 2011; Badat, 2010; Council on Higher Education [CHE], 2013;

* Dr Mpho Priscilla Jama is Head: Division Student Learning and Development, Office of the Dean, Faculty of Health Sciences, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa. Email: jamamp@ufs.ac.za

Tinto, 1987; Tinto, 2014; Van Zyl, 2016; Veenstra, 2009). Many reasons, for example under-preparedness for university, lack of or poor skills such as time management, study strategies, academic literacy and inability to adjust to university environment, have been provided for these high drop-out rates (Boughey, 2013; Davids, 2014; Jaffer & Garraway, 2016; Mouton, Louw & Strydom, 2013; Underhill & McDonald, 2010; Wilson-Strydom, 2015).

In response to this trend, different countries have designed different structures. For example, the National Resource Centre (NRC) for the First-Year Experience (FYE) and Students in Transition, established at the University of South Carolina in the United States of America (U.S.A.), is known for its expertise and scholarship in this area (Latino & Ashcraft, 2012; Skipper, 2017; Young & Hopp, 2014). South Africa has followed suit by establishing the South African National Resource Centre (SANRC) for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition (SANRC, 2017), which also provides expertise and scholarship.

One of the interventions that universities have designed and used for now over twenty years to ease the transition from school to university is the development of generic, also called general, skills of students (Christie, 1997; Beylefeld & Jama, 2002; Robley, Whittle & Murdoch-Eaton, 2005; Shakir, 2009; Oliver, 2013; Murdoch-Eaton, Louw & Bezuidenhout, 2016). Although most studies have focused on the effectiveness of such an intervention in equipping students with these skills at the beginning of the first year only, not much has been reported to further determine the perceptions of students who had to be "re-equipped" because they had to repeat the first year of study. Hence, the significance of this study lies in its aim to determine not only the perceptions of students at the very beginning of their first year at university, but to continue to determine their perceptions after "re-equipping" them because of a failed first year of study.

Generic Skills

Studies in the field of generic skills development have been done in countries such as the U.S.A. (Benjamin et al., 2012), China (Leung, Leung & Zuo, 2014), Malaysia and Indonesia (Hadi & Ibrahim, 2013) and Singapore (Jacobs et al., 2014). Most of the studies, however, were done in the United Kingdom (U.K.) and Australia. In the U.K., the 1997 Dearing Report identified the key skills required by graduates to function in the workplace. This report was preceded by the U.K. General Medical Council's (GMC) review of the undergraduate medical curriculum, which recommended the introduction of student-selected components. These are components that allow students to study areas that are of particular interest to them in depth, while developing generic skills that are essential for professional medicine in the 21st century (Robley, Whittle & Murdoch-Eaton, 2005). Also termed "generic graduate attributes" or "transferable skills" that are applicable across most disciplines, these skills include oral and written communication, information technology, numeracy, teamwork, managing and organising learning and information retrieval, and critical analysis (Kember, 2009; Kember, Lueng & Ma, 2007; Murdoch-Eaton & Whittle, 2012; Shakir, 2009; Whittle & Murdoch-Eaton, 2005; Robley, Whittle & Murdoch-Eaton, 2005).

In Australia, generic skills are regarded as the qualities, skills and attributes a university believes its students should develop during their studies, to prepare them for employment (Barrie, 2007; Cumming, 2010; McNeil et al., 2012; Oliver, 2013). The Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) funded a National Graduate Attributes Project to identify strategies for embedding and assessing graduate attributes (Barrie, Hughes & Smith, 2009). According to Jones (2009), the Australian Technology Network of Universities further identified capabilities in a number of disciplines at different universities, and outlined steps towards its implementation in the programmes. As alluded to by Star and Hammer (2008), the changes in Australia's system of higher education led to a skills-based pedagogy, which became a useful way of addressing issues such as students' transition, development of appropriate discipline-specific standards and development of life-long learning.

In their study of British and South African medical schools, Murdock-Eaton et al. (2012) reported on the importance of generic skills integration in medical curricula and ensuring that these skills are tailored to the needs of students. In South Africa, Burch et al. (2013, p. 676) investigated the generic learning skills of academically-at-risk students at the University of Cape Town (UCT) and reported that "detailed knowledge of skills deficiencies provides an opportunity to offer tailored support promoting effective learning, thereby enabling students to achieve their true academic potential while also addressing the widening of access agenda". Notably, the Undergraduate Education and Training Subcommittee of the Medical and Dental Professions Board of the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) has in collaboration with the training institutions and the South African Committee of Medical and Dental Deans, adopted seven "AfriMed" core competencies for undergraduate students in SA (HPCSA, 2014).

The renewal of the medical curriculum has been common in many universities across the world. For instance, Whittle and Murdoch-Eaton (2005) reported on the changes of Curriculum 2000 in the U.K. and how this affected students' key skills. In South Africa, Hartman et al. (2012) reported on the transformation of the UCT's curriculum with the aim to equip their graduates with the required competencies. Recently, Murdoch-Eaton, Louw and Bezuidenhout (2016) reported on the implementation of a revised curriculum at Stellenbosch University, stating that other than scientific knowledge, the generic learning skills of students should be developed and facilitated.

Similar to the renewal of the U.K. Curriculum 2000 and the medical curricula at UCT and Stellenbosch, the University of the Free State (UFS) revised their curriculum, also called Curriculum 2000. With these revisions, the importance of developing the general skills in the first year of study had been emphasised. In South Africa, this is particularly important because of the high attrition of especially black students who come from previously underrepresented groups and backgrounds, and eventually drop out in the first year of study. The Council on Higher Education (CHE, 2013) revealed that nearly a quarter of all students drop out after the first year at university.

Different forms of incorporation of the generic skills in first-year curricula have been suggested. For example, Latino and Ashcraft (2012) referred to First-Year Seminars (FYS) and reported on how these seminars should be designed, implemented and assessed.

Skipper (2017) and Kuh (2008) referred to the FYS as High Impact Practices (HIP) that engage students in educationally purposeful tasks. Young and Hopp (2014) stated that the main objectives of a FYS are to develop a connection with the institution, develop knowledge of campus resources, and develop academic skills. Some of the FYS are in the form of credit-bearing modules (Lewin & Mawoyo, 2014), which is the case at UFS.

Context

The context of this paper is a first-year module on general skills (MGEN1513) of the MBChB undergraduate medical curriculum in the School of Medicine at the UFS. When the School restructured the programme from a six-year to a five-year curriculum in 2000, one of the directives was to prepare medical students for the demands of the curriculum by helping them become proficient in general skills, such as time management, study techniques, group work, and research. In this curriculum, students who fail a module at the end of the first semester, cannot progress to the second semester. Another restructuring element in the curriculum was the design of a Learning Development Programme (LDP) presented in the second semester to accommodate first-year students who failed the first semester. Included in the LDP is a Life-long Learning Skills module (LLLS1524) that aims to "re-equip" these students with generic skills, thus preparing them to "re-enter" the first academic year in the following year (UFS, 2017).

In South Africa, the incorporation of generic skills in all curricula is a requirement of the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA, 2000). In the medical curriculum at the UFS, a template for incorporating general skills in the curriculum was developed and mainly based on that of the University of Leicester in the U.K., which also revised its medical curriculum (Beylefeld & Jama, 2002). Therefore, the skills that were incorporated in the module are based on the SAQA requirements and the University of Leicester template.

At the outset, it was anticipated that some of those students who failed would be seriously lacking in the required competencies, while others would be typically negative towards reinforcement of skills they had acquired as a result of privileged schooling backgrounds. According to the results of the study undertaken to determine the students' experience of the module in 2000 and 2001, most students felt positive about the module. Those who were negative were from privileged schools, claiming that they had already acquired the skills (Beylefeld & Jama, 2002).

With further restructuring of the curriculum in 2009, the credits of this module were increased from 8 to 12, thus requiring an organisational restructuring of the module. As consistent with conventions of most curricula, the module has been evaluated by the students by means of a questionnaire survey.

Methodology

A questionnaire was administered to all first-year undergraduate medical students at the end of the first semesters in 2013–2016, as part of the formal module evaluation of the MBChB curriculum. Although students' evaluations are subjective in nature, as asserted by Newton, Menna and Tank (2009), they provide invaluable information than can lead to module improvement. This paper reports on the findings of questionnaires completed by 471 of 596 (79%) students between 2013 and 2016. Probably, some of the students who did not respond are senior students who had already done this module and those who were absent from class. The aim of the survey was to elicit information regarding the students' perceptions of the extent to which the module equipped them with the required generic skills to be competent in their studies, and focused on (i) structure and organisation; (ii) perceived benefits; (iii) overall rating; and (iv) suggestions for improvements. The aim of collecting the 2013–2016 data was to determine the trends in the students' perceptions, ultimately the review of the module.

In order to corroborate data from the questionnaire, a focus group discussion (FGD) was held with 13 (68%) of the 19 students who had failed at the end of the first semester of their first year in 2016, were admitted in the LDP in the second semester of the same year, and re-admitted in the first semester of their first year in 2017. Notably, these students were equipped with the generic skills in the MGEN1512 module in the first semester of 2016, "re-equipped" with the same skills in the second semester of 2016 in the LLLS1524 module when they were in the LDP, and again in the MGEN1512 module in the first semester of 2017 when they repeated the first year. The same broad themes about the structure and organisation of the module, perceived benefits, overall rating and suggestions for improvements, were used to guide the interview. However, the focus was on the aspects that most students either did not agree or agreed with, those that were either perceived very positively and negatively and those that were rated either high or low. Similar to the open-ended items in the questionnaire, students were given an opportunity during the FGD to comment and give suggestions.

Results

The following results portray data for over four years of study and provide the trends in the students' perceptions over these years.

Structure and organisation: questionnaire

Table 1 summarises students' responses with regard to the structure and organisation of the module. According to these results, the percentage of students who agreed with the statements ranged between 52% and 65% on most of the aspects regarding the structure and organisation of the module. There were three aspects that most students agreed with: first, 69% of the students agreed that there was sufficient time to achieve the outcomes of the module; second, 80% of the students agreed that the facilitators knew the content of the module; and third, 75% of the students agreed that facilitators were prepared for contact sessions. However, only 49% agreed that the teaching and learning activities helped them to achieve the stated outcomes, and only 48% agreed that the E-portfolio was an effective method to demonstrate competence. The most common response in the comments regarding the teaching and learning activities was that they would have preferred more clinical and practical demonstrations.

Structure and organisation: Focus group discussion

During the FGD, all 13 (100%) students agreed that there was sufficient time to achieve the outcomes of the module, the facilitators knew the content and were prepared for the contact sessions. Remarkably, they added that although there was sufficient time to achieve the outcomes, they did not use the time effectively, with all of them stating that they "waited until the last minutes". One of the students said "we have to be honest and take the blame here".

With regard to the E-portfolio, these students felt that it was very time-consuming to upload the items in the portfolio, especially those that had to be uploaded twice, and to keep up with the deadlines. One of the students said "it did not make sense to do some of the skills twice and double upload". Another comment was that the E-portfolio manager kept on "bugging" them with due dates and threatening to close the online platform at midnight.

When the students were asked to comment about the request to have more clinical and practical demonstrations, most of them seemed surprised. One of them mentioned that this was "very biased", because there were practical and clinical demonstrations in the other modules. Another student said, "I really don't understand what more they wanted, because they had practical sessions in Anatomy and the lecturers in MGEN did include practical sessions such as looking at references and doing them practically when we did references and plagiarism."

Perceived benefits: Questionnaire

In Table 2, the questionnaire results with regard to the perceived benefits of the module are summarised. Between 53% and 64% of the students' perception was that they benefited from the skills taught in the module. There were five skills that students particularly thought they benefited from the most. These skills were dealt with in the sessions on plagiarism (75%), referencing technique (83%), medical terminology (91%), ethics and professional behaviour (76%), and research (72%). However, students felt they did not benefit from problem solving (49%), Introduction to Information Communication Technology (ICT) (49%), photo story (41%) and poster communication (41%).

The suggestions and comments were mostly on the time allocated for sessions, introduction to Sesotho/Afrikaans/English terms, medical terminology and photo story. In the case of time allocated for sessions, most students stated that some sessions for which two hours were allocated could be reduced to one hour, with the first hour dedicated to a lecture and the next hour for self-directed learning or getting notes for self-study. Concerning the session on Introduction to Sesotho/Afrikaans/English terms, 24% of the students requested more sessions for this, even suggesting a formal course, as is the case at other universities. With regard to medical terminology, approximately 19% of the students requested more practical medical terminology sessions.

Table 1: Students' responses regarding the structure and organisation of the module

Questionnaire item	Disagree					Neutral					Agree				
	2013 N=97	2014 N=122	2015 N=115	2016 N=137	Total N=471	2013 N=97	2014 N=122	2015 N=115	2016 N=137	Total N=471	2013 N=97	2014 N=122	2015 N=115	2016 N=137	Total N=471
	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	N (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)
1. The content of the module was well planned.	8 (8)	39 (32)	12 (10)	17 (12)	76 (16)	38 (39)	46 (38)	31 (27)	37 (27)	152 (32)	51 (53)	37 (30)	72 (63)	83 (61)	243 (52)
2. The content of the module provided opportunities to develop skills.	16 (16)	18 (15)	16 (14)	7 (5)	57 (12)	26 (27)	42 (34)	29 (25)	35 (26)	132 (28)	55 (57)	61 (50)	70 (61)	95 (69)	281 (60)
3. The teaching and learning activities helped me to achieve the stated outcomes.	14 (14)	22 (18)	17 (15)	18 (13)	71 (15)	37 (38)	49 (40)	35 (30)	48 (35)	169 (36)	46 (48)	51 (42)	63 (55)	71 (52)	231 (49)
4. The time to achieve the learning outcomes was sufficient.	3 (3)	6 (5)	9 (8)	11 (8)	29 (6)	25 (26)	40 (33)	26 (23)	29 (21)	120 (25)	69 (71)	76 (62)	80 (69)	97 (71)	322 (69)
5. The workbook and guide to online learning was a valuable aid to learning.	14 (14)	19 (16)	20 (17)	30 (22)	83 (18)	37 (38)	49 (40)	28 (24)	32 (23)	146 (31)	46 (48)	54 (44)	67 (59)	75 (55)	242 (51)
6. Tasks and assignments were clear.	16 (16)	25 (20)	17 (15)	15 (11)	73 (15)	21 (22)	32 (27)	18 (15)	31 (23)	102 (22)	60 (62)	65 (53)	80 (70)	91 (66)	296 (63)
7. Tasks and assignments were linked to the expected outcomes that were stated.	5 (5)	9 (7)	5 (4)	11 (8)	30 (6)	33 (34)	41 (34)	24 (21)	41 (30)	139 (30)	59 (61)	72 (59)	86 (75)	85 (62)	302 (64)
8. The E-portfolio is an effective way of demonstrating competence.	32 (33)	44 (36)	22 (19)	19 (14)	117 (25)	28 (29)	43 (35)	23 (20)	35 (26)	129 (27)	37 (38)	35 (29)	70 (61)	83 (60)	225 (48)
9. Overall the facilitators knew the content of the module well.	1 (1)	7 (6)	9 (8)	7 (5)	24 (5)	21 (22)	23 (19)	8 (7)	19 (14)	71 (15)	75 (77)	92 (75)	98 (85)	111 (81)	376 (80)
10. Overall the facilitators were well prepared for contact sessions.	2 (2)	6 (5)	8 (7)	10 (7)	26 (6)	13 (13)	21 (17)	28 (24)	28 (20)	90 (19)	82 (85)	95 (78)	79 (69)	99 (73)	355 (75)

Table 2: Students' perceived benefits of the skills taught in the module

Theme	Beneficial					Slightly beneficial					Not beneficial				
	2013 N=97	2014 N=122	2015 N=115	2016 N=137	Total N=471	2013 N=97	2014 N=122	2015 N=115	2016 N=137	Total N=471	2013 N=97	2014 N=122	2015 N=115	2016 N=137	Total N=471
	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)
1. Learning styles	50 (52)	69 (56)	78 (68)	94 (69)	291 (62)	35 (36)	35 (29)	29 (25)	33 (24)	132 (28)	12 (12)	18 (15)	8 (7)	10 (7)	48 (10)
2. Problem solving	31 (33)	58 (47)	62 (54)	80 (58)	231 (49)	28 (29)	41 (34)	38 (33)	43 (31)	150 (32)	38 (39)	23 (19)	15 (13)	14 (11)	90 (19)
3. Icebreaker & grouping	63 (65)	77 (63)	70 (61)	82 (60)	292 (62)	19 (20)	29 (24)	21 (18)	41 (30)	110 (23)	15 (15)	16 (13)	24 (21)	14 (10)	69 (15)
4. Group work	67 (69)	79 (65)	68 (58)	91 (66)	305 (65)	17 (18)	31 (25)	30 (26)	29 (21)	107 (23)	13 (33)	12 (10)	17 (15)	17 (13)	59 (12)
5. Introduction to ICT	43 (44)	57 (47)	59 (51)	70 (51)	229 (49)	28 (29)	36 (29)	37 (32)	51 (37)	152 (32)	26 (27)	29 (24)	19 (17)	16 (12)	90 (19)
6. Plagiarism	72 (74)	82 (67)	86 (75)	112 (82)	352 (75)	16 (16)	28 (23)	19 (16)	23 (17)	86 (18)	9 (9)	12 (10)	10 (9)	2 (1)	33 (7)
7. Reference technique	83 (86)	102 (84)	99 (86)	105 (76)	389 (83)	8 (8)	16 (13)	10 (9)	27 (20)	61 (13)	6 (6)	4 (3)	6 (15)	5 (4)	21 (4)
8. Stress management	49 (51)	59 (48)	76 (66)	88 (64)	272 (58)	33 (34)	44 (36)	30 (26)	43 (31)	150 (32)	15 (15)	19 (16)	9 (8)	6 (4)	49 (10)
9. Information skills	49 (51)	64 (52)	64 (56)	78 (57)	255 (54)	35 (36)	44 (36)	37 (32)	45 (33)	161 (34)	13 (13)	14 (12)	14 (12)	14 (10)	55 (12)
10. Medical terminology	92 (95)	107 (88)	106 (92)	121 (88)	426 (91)	4 (4)	12 (10)	5 (4)	13 (9)	34 (7)	1 (1)	3 (2)	4 (4)	3 (2)	11 (2)
11. Professional & ethical behaviour	73 (75)	84 (69)	94 (82)	109 (80)	360 (76)	18 (19)	31 (25)	17 (15)	22 (16)	88 (19)	6 (6)	7 (6)	4 (3)	6 (4)	23 (5)
12. Research skills	74 (76)	84 (69)	88 (77)	95 (69)	341 (72)	15 (15)	30 (25)	22 (19)	27 (20)	94 (20)	8 (8)	8 (6)	5 (4)	15 (11)	36 (8)
13. Introduction to Sesotho/ Afrikaans/English	66 (68)	80 (66)	72 (63)	81 (59)	299 (63)	16 (17)	22 (18)	23 (20)	41 (30)	102 (22)	15 (15)	20 (16)	20 (17)	15 (11)	70 (15)
14. Study methods	48 (49)	59 (48)	71 (62)	81 (59)	259 (55)	28 (29)	39 (32)	34 (29)	42 (31)	143 (30)	21 (22)	24 (20)	10 (9)	14 (10)	69 (15)
15. Time management	46 (47)	60 (49)	66 (57)	83 (61)	255 (54)	30 (31)	41 (34)	37 (33)	35 (25)	143 (30)	21 (22)	21 (17)	12 (10)	19 (14)	73 (16)
16. Test & exam techniques	48 (49)	62 (51)	68 (59)	80 (58)	258 (55)	33 (34)	38 (31)	39 (34)	41 (30)	151 (32)	16 (17)	22 (18)	8 (7)	16 (12)	62 (13)
17. Integrated learning	57 (59)	72 (59)	77 (67)	85 (62)	291 (62)	31 (32)	33 (27)	32 (28)	33 (24)	129 (27)	9 (9)	17 (14)	6 (5)	19 (14)	51 (11)
18. Clinic reflection	46 (48)	56 (46)	94 (80)	107 (78)	303 (64)	37 (37)	44 (36)	18 (15)	22 (16)	121 (26)	14 (14)	22 (18)	3 (3)	8 (6)	47 (10)
19. Photo story	41 (42)	40 (33)	60 (52)	53 (39)	194 (41)	33 (34)	40 (33)	32 (28)	49 (36)	154 (33)	23 (24)	42 (34)	23 (20)	35 (25)	123 (26)
20. Poster communication	32 (33)	37 (30)	52 (45)	72 (53)	193 (41)	36 (37)	46 (38)	46 (40)	47 (34)	175 (37)	29 (30)	39 (32)	17 (15)	18 (13)	103 (22)
21. Oral presentations	57 (59)	73 (60)	77 (67)	96 (70)	303 (64)	25 (26)	32 (26)	20 (17)	31 (23)	108 (23)	15 (15)	17 (14)	18 (16)	10 (7)	60 (13)

Perceived benefits: Focus group discussion

During the FGD most of the students agreed with the results of the questionnaire, especially concerning the sessions that they thought were beneficial. Although they stated that they did not see the need to upload twice on the E-portfolio, it was very fulfilling to receive good marks from their peers for plagiarism activities. They stated, however, that the peer assessment should only happen once. Similar to the data from the questionnaire, there was a unanimous plea to increase the time for Sesotho/Afrikaans/English sessions or offer it as a course. Although 58% students indicated on the questionnaire that they benefited from the stress-management session, the students who participated in the FGD thought that this session was presented too early in the year. One of them said, "medical students experience stress later on, this should either be addressed later or repeated."

Contrary to the questionnaire findings, most students did not agree that the number of medical terminology sessions should be increased. One of the students said "that's not necessary, medical terminology in MGEN is what it is meant to be. It is an introduction, we do this in Anatomy anyway and a lot is repeated in other semesters and I guess during the coming years." The students were probed about the photo story and the poster communication, which both received a negative response from approximately 41% of students on the questionnaire. Their non-verbal response regarding the photo story strongly indicated that they fully agree with the poor response obtained with the questionnaire. Interestingly, one student stated "please press exit delete for that one. I don't know why it's there in any case." With regard to the poster communication, they also unanimously agreed with the questionnaire response. Actually, one of them said "oh another waste of our time, just keep it one hour lecture please, don't expect us to spend another hour making those drafts of the poster, we can do the rest for ourselves".

An alarming issue that came forward during the FGD, was their opinion concerning the professional and ethical behaviour session. One of the students stated that although 76% of the students in the questionnaire survey thought this session was beneficial, it did not help at all because most of their peers are "cheating a lot". With further probing, one student said, "our class is not ethical at all". They further referred to incidences of "cheating", "signing for each other on the attendance register", "sending each other messages during a test", "making gestures such as sighing and whispering as a clue to an answer" and "swapping clickers to share answers". It was quite disturbing when one of the students mentioned that "they were actually talking during the open book test". When asked about the role of invigilators, one of the students said, "they never get caught because of the large class. That is the real problem that this faculty must start to think of otherwise the cheating will never stop."

Overall rating: Questionnaire

The questionnaire results on the overall rating of the module (Table 3) showed that only 35% of the students thought the module was effective in equipping them with the required generic skills. Approximately 45% rated it reasonably effective. According to the statements in the comments and suggestions section, once again students stated that some of the sessions are unnecessarily too long. Other common comments were "we already know these skills", "we already did this in high school" and "some of us are seniors, we did this".

Table 3: Students' rating of the overall effectiveness of the module

Rating	2013 N=97	2014 N=122	2015 N=115	2016 N=137	Total N=471
	n (%)	**n (%)**	**n (%)**	**n (%)**	**n (%)**
Effective	27 (28)	46 (38)	42 (36)	52 (38)	167 (35)
Reasonably effective	43 (44)	44 (36)	54 (47)	70 (51)	211 (45)
Not effective	27 (28)	32 (26)	19 (17)	15 (11)	93 (20)

Overall rating: Focus group discussion

During the FGD, eight (62%) of the 13 students indicated that they perceived the module as beneficial. However, none of them thought it was not beneficial. Notably, one student was of the opinion that the reason why only 35% of the students thought the module was beneficial was that most students "think" they know. This student further said: "You know medical students, when they arrive here with all those 9 to 10 distinctions, they think they know it all. Nobody wants to appear stupid." Interestingly, one of the students said: "Let them just fail before they realise the benefits of some … not all of the sessions." Similar to the questionnaire response, another student was of the opinion that it was most probably senior students who thought the module was not beneficial.

When asked to comment about being exposed to the MGEN module twice and the LLLS module once, they recommended that skills such as conflict management and public speaking covered in the LLLS module should be included in the MGEN. Another suggestion was that the MGEN workbook should have more notes that they can "take home", which is the case in LLLS.

Discussion

In general, the results from the questionnaire and FGD indicate that students had a positive perception about the structure and organisation of the module, especially regarding the content and facilitators' engagement. Despite the positive perception about sufficient time to achieve the outcomes, it is clear that designers of the module must review the amount of time allocated for certain teaching and learning activities, as suggested by Latino and Ashcraft (2012). This became evident in the comments of the students who suggested practical demonstrations and decreasing the time from two hours to one hour. Another matter to consider is that these students are digital natives and can function on their own; hence, the sessions on photo story and poster communication were perceived negatively. However, there should be caution in assuming that students can manage their time and are self-directed learners, because the comment "we waited until the last minute" from one of the FGD participants indicated that they could not manage their time effectively.

Despite the contradiction regarding the inclusion of clinical demonstrations, this suggestion was consistent with the view of Walker, cited by Entwistle (2010), who stated that teaching and learning activities must consider the interests of students. The results also demonstrate that South African medical schools must design the generic skills module according to their context. Hence, the request to increase or design the Sesotho/Afrikaans/English content as a course is relevant for doctors who have to communicate with patients in these languages.

It is common knowledge that most medical students experience high levels of stress. The comments about incorporating the stress-management session later indicate that module developers must consider the timing of some sessions. It was pleasing to note that students thought they benefited from the research, referencing and plagiarism sessions, because the HPCSA (2014) expects medical students to be trained as scholars. Generally, the assessment of generic skills is challenging (Murdoch-Eaton & Whittle, 2012), which was evident from the comments on the E-portfolio assessment in this study. Therefore, module developers must design credible assessment methods that can be managed effectively by both facilitators and students.

Regarding the overall rating of the module, it became clear that students might not realise the relevance of generic skills development at the beginning of their first year. As one of them stated, "they think they know". Therefore, the importance of "re-equipping" them with these skills during different stages of the curriculum has to be emphasised. Although universities can consider a way of recognising prior learning for those who claim "they have already acquired the skills", it should be done with caution, as students might not realise the context in which these skills are taught and how they apply in their respective disciplines. Despite the 35% overall rating of the module, according to assessment records, the average academic performance (marks) of the students in the module was excellent (78%).

The surprising revelation about the unethical behaviour of first-year medical students, who are trained to be professionals, was disturbing. According to the HPCSA (2014), professional and ethical behaviour is one of the cornerstones of being a doctor. It highlights the importance of "re-equipping" students with skills during the different stages of their studies. The comment about the management of a large class is worth considering.

Conclusion

The primary focus of this study was to determine the perceptions of first-year medical students regarding the effectiveness of the generic skills module in facilitating transition from school to university. Similar to the situation in 2002 (Beylefeld & Jama, 2002), students still had a positive perception about the module. However, it is clear that module developers must continually revise the structure and organisation of the module, the teaching and learning activities and assessment practices. In addition, South African universities must develop first-year programmes and strategies directed at the transition from school to university, based on the specific programmes, disciplines and context. In this way, these programmes and strategies can be intentional and focus on activities that provide for High Impact Practices. From this study, it became clear that there must be congruence between the time allocated for sessions and the teaching and learning activities. The findings further suggest revision of assessment methods that can be managed effectively by both students and lecturers.

Given the different perceptions of the students who did the LLLS module, it may be necessary to "re-equip" students with generic skills during different stages of the curriculum, thus providing for life-long learning. Overall, the findings of this study may be relevant for other higher education institutions that plan to incorporate generic skills into their disciplines.

A limitation of this study was that only one group of students who did the LLLS module in the LDP, were included in the study. Further studies are recommended to evaluate the perception of the students during the different stages of transition during their studies, which in medical education will be between the pre-clinical and clinical years. Other studies can be done to track the academic performance of these students throughout their studies.

Acknowledgements

This research is a registered project with the Health Sciences Research Committee at the UFS. The author would like to thank the students who participated in this study, and Dr Daleen Struwig, Faculty of Health Sciences, University of the Free State, for technical and editorial preparation of the manuscript.

Declaration of Interest

The author has no conflict of interest to report.

References

Arco-Tirado, J.L., Fernández-Martín, F.D. & Fernández-Balboa, J. (2011). The impact of a peer-tutoring program on quality standards in higher education. *Higher Education*, 62(6), 773–788. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-011-9419-x

Badat, S. (2010). *The challenges of transformation in higher education and training institutions in South Africa.* Retrieved 28 September 2017 from www.dbsa.org/EN/About-US/Publication/Document

Barrie, S.C. (2007). A conceptual framework for the teaching and learning of generic graduate attributes. *Studies in Higher Education*, 32(4), 439–458. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075070701476100

Barrie, S.C., Hughes, C. & Smith, C. (2009). *The National Graduate Attributes Project: integration and assessment of graduate attributes in curriculum.* Sydney: Australian Learning and Teaching Council. Retrieved 29 September 2017 from www.voced.edu.au/content/ngv%3A64684

Benjamin, R., Klein, S., Steedle, J., Zahner, D., Elliot, S. & Patterson, J. (2012). *The case for generic skills and performance assessment in the United States and international settings.* Retrieved 28 September 2017 from cae.org/images/.../The_Case_for_Generic_Skills_and_Performance_Assessment.pdf

Beylefeld, A.A. & Jama, M.P. (2002). Incorporating transferable skills in an undergraduate medical curriculum: learning from experience. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 16(1), 113–121. https://doi.org/10.4314/sajhe.v16i1.25282

Boughey, C. (2013). What are we thinking of? A critical overview of approaches to developing academic literacy in South African higher education. *Journal for Language Teaching*, 47(2), 25–42. https://doi.org/10.4314/jlt.v47i2.2

Burch, V.C., Sikakana, C.N.T., Gunston, G.D., Shamley, D.R. & Murdoch-Eaton, D. (2013). Generic learning skills in academically-at-risk medical students: a development programme bridges the gap. *Medical Teacher*, 35(8), 671–677. https://doi.org/10.3109/0142159X.2013.801551

CHE (Council on Higher Education). (2013). A proposal for undergraduate curriculum reform in South Africa: the case for a flexible curriculum structure. CHE: Pretoria. Retrieved 29 September 2017 from www.che.ac.za/sites/deafault/files/publications/Full_Report.pdf

Christie, P. 1997. Globalisation and the curriculum: proposal for the integration of education and training. In: P. Kallaway et al. (Eds.), *Education after apartheid: South African education in transition*. Cape Town: University of Cape Town.

Cumming, J. (2010). Contextualised performance: reframing the skills debate in research education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 35(4), 405–419. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075070903082342

Davids, M.N. (2014). Traditional tutorial system – fit for purpose or past its sell-by date? University students' pedagogical experiences. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 28(2), 338–354.

Entwistle, N. (2010). Taking stock: an overview of key research findings. In: J. Christensen & J. Mighty (Eds.), *Taking stock: research on teaching and learning in higher education* (pp. 45–81). Montreal: McGill Queen University Press, .

Hadi, Y. & Ibrahim, M.S.B. (2013). Students' generic skills at the National University of Malaysia and the National University of Indonesia. *Procedia – Social and Behavioural Sciences*, 83, 71–82. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2013.06.015

Hartman, N., Kathard, H., Perez, G., Reid, S., Irlam, J., Gunston, G., Janse van Rensburg, V., Burch, V., Duncan, M., Hellenberg, D., Van Rooyen, I., Smouse, M., Sikakana, C., Badenhosrt, E. & Ige, B. (2012). Health Sciences undergraduate education at the University of Cape Town: a story of transformation. *South African Medical Journal*, 102(6), 477–480. https://doi.org/10.7196/SAMJ.5680

Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA). (2014). Core competencies for undergraduate students in clinical associate, dentistry and medical teaching and learning programmes in South Africa. Pretoria: HPCSA.

Jacobs, J.L., Samarasekera, D.D., Shen, L., Rajendran, K. & Hooi, S.C. (2014). Encouraging an environment to nurture lifelong learning: an Asian experience. *Medical Teacher*, 36(2), 164–168. https://doi.org/10.3109/0142159X.2013.852168

Jaffer, F. & Garraway, J. (2016). Understanding gaps between students and staff perception of university study in South Africa. *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa*, 4(1), 65–76. https://doi.org/10.14426/jsaa.v4i1.145

Jones, A. (2009). Generic attributes as espoused theory: the importance of context. *Higher Education*, 58(2), 175–191. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-008-9189-2

Kember, D. (2009). Nurturing generic capabilities through a teaching and learning environment which provides practise in their use. *Higher Education*, 57(1), 37–55. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-008-9131-7

Kember, D., Leung, D.Y.P. & Ma, S.F.R. (2007). Characterizing learning environments capable of nurturing generic capabilities in higher education. *Research in Higher Education*, 48(5), 609–632. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-006-9037-0

Kuh, G.D. (2008). *High impact practices: What they know, who has access to them, and why they matter.* Washington, D.C.: Association of American Colleges & Universities (AACU). Retrieved 28 September 2017 from https://keycenter.unca.edu/sites/default/files/aacu_high_impact_2008_final.pdf

Latino, J.A. & Ashcraft, M.L. (2012). *The first-year seminar: designing, implementing, and assessing courses to support student learning and success. Volume 4. Using peers in the classroom*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina, National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition. Retrieved 28 September 2017 from https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED558828

Leung, K-C., Leung, F.K.S. & Zuo, H. (2014). A study of the alignment of learning targets and assessment to generic skills in the new senior secondary mathematics curriculum in Hong Kong. *Studies in Educational Evaluation*, 43, 115–132. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.stueduc.2014.09.002

Lewin, T. & Mawoyo, M. (2014). *Student access and success: issues and interventions in South African Universities.* Retrieved 28 September 2017 from www.inyathelo.org.za/images/publications/summary_student_access_success.pdf

McKay, T.J.M. (2013). Embedding academic support within an academic discipline: a teaching model. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 27(3), 682–695.

McNeil, H. P., Scicluna, H.A., Boyle, P., Grimm, M.C., Gibson, K.A. & Jones, P.D. (2012). Successful development of generic capabilities in an undergraduate medical education program. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 31(4), 525–539. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2011.559194

Mouton, N., Louw, G.P. & Strydom, G.L. (2013). Restructuring and mergers of the South African post-apartheid tertiary system (1994–2011): a critical analysis. *Journal of International Education Research*, 9(2), 127–144. https://doi.org/10.19030/jier.v9i2.7718

Murdoch-Eaton, D., Louw, A.J.N. & Bezuidenhout, J. (2016). Effect of curriculum changes to enhance generic skills proficiency of 1st-year medical students. *African Journal of Health Professions Education*, 8(1), 15–19. https://doi.org/10.7196/AJHPE.2016.v8i1.414

Murdoch-Eaton, D., Manning, D., Kwizera, E; Burch, V., Pell, G. & Whittle, S. (2012). Profiling undergraduates' generic skills learning skills on entry to medical school: an international study. *Medical Teacher*, 34(12), 1033–1046. https://doi.org/10.3109/0142159X.2012.706338

Murdoch-Eaton, D. & Whittle, S. (2012). Generic skills in medical education: developing the skills for successful learning. *Medical Education*, 46(1), 120–128. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2923.2011.04065.x

Newton, B.W., Menna, J.H. & Tank, P.W. (2009). *How to become an effective course director*. New York: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-0-387-84905-8

Oliver, B. (2013). Graduate attributes as a focus for institution-wide curriculum renewal: innovations and challenges. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 32(3), 450–463. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2012.682052

Robley, W., Whittle, S. & Murdoch-Eaton, D. (2005). Mapping generic skills curricula: A recommended methodology. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 29(3), 221–231. https://doi.org/10.1080/03098770500166801

Shakir, R. (2009). Soft skills at the Malaysian institutes of higher learning. *Asia Pacific Education Review*, 10, 309–315. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12564-009-9038-8

Skipper, T.L. (2017). *What makes first-year seminar high impact? An exploration of effective educational practices. (Research reports on college transitions No. 7)*. Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina, National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition. Retrieved 28 September 2017 from files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED573737.pdf

South African National Resource Centre (SANRC). (2017). South African National Resource Centre for First-Year Experience and Students in Transition. Retrieved 28 September 2017 from www.sanrc.co.za

South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA). (2000). National qualification framework and curriculum development. Pretoria: SAQA.

Star, C. & Hammer, S. (2008). Teaching generic skills: eroding the higher purpose of universities, or an opportunity for renewal? *Oxford Review of Education*, 34(2), 237–251. https://doi.org/10.1080/03054980701672232

Tinto, V. (1987). *Leaving college: rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Tinto, V. (2014). Tinto's South African lecturers. *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa*, 2(2), 5–26. https://doi.org/10.14426/jsaa.v2i2.66

Underhill, J. & McDonald, J. (2010). Collaborative tutor development: enabling a transformative paradigm in a South African University. *Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnership in Learning*, 18(2), 91–106. https://doi.org/10.1080/13611261003678853

University of the Free State (UFS). (2017). Faculty of Health Sciences Rule Book. Bloemfontein, UFS. Retrieved 28 September 2017 from apps.ufs.ac.za/dl/yearbooks/274_yearbook_eng.pdf

Van Zyl, A. (2016). The contours of equality: the links between socio-economic status of students and other variables at the University of Johannesburg. *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa*, 4(1), 1–16. https://doi.org/10.14426/jsaa.v4i1.141

Veenstra, C.P. (2009). A strategy for improving freshman college retention. *The Journal for Quality and Participation*, January, 19–23. Retrieved 28 September 2017 from https://static.squarespace.com/static/51fafa0ee4b0d906af53ce83/.../JQP%20article.pdf

Whittle, S.R. & Murdoch-Eaton, D. (2005). Curriculum 2000: have changes in the sixth form curricula affected students' key skills? *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 29(1), 61–71. https://doi.org/10.1080/03098770500037762

Wilson-Strydom, M. 2015. *University access and success: capabilities, diversity and social justice*. London: Routledge.

Young, D.G. (2016). The case for an integrated approach to transition programmes at South Africa's higher education institutions. *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa*, 4(1), 17–32. https://doi.org/10.14426/jsaa.v4i1.142

Young, D.G. & Hopp. J.M. (2014). *2012–2013 National survey of first-year seminars: exploring high-impact practice in the first college year. Research reports on college transition No. 4*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina, National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition. Retrieved 28 September 2017 from https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED546831

How to cite:

Jama, M.P. (2018). Maximising the First-year Experience through the Incorporation of Generic Skills in a Medical Curriculum at the University of the Free State. *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa,* 6(1), 77–91. DOI: 10.24085/jsaa.v6i1.3067

Interviews and dialogue

Understanding the Role of FYE Resource Centres

Annsilla Nyar* & Lebo Mosebua**

Dr Tracy Skipper is Assistant Director for publications at the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition. She holds degrees in psychology, higher education, American literature, and rhetoric and composition. In addition to her writing and editorial work, she has served as a student affairs administrator and taught writing at college level. Her most recent work is the edited collection, *What Makes the First-Year Seminar High Impact? Exploring Effective Educational Practices*.

Introduction

Lebo Mosebua from the South African National Resource Centre for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition (SANRC) conducted an interview with Dr Tracy Skipper from the SANRC's U.S.-based partner organisation, the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition (NRC). Dr Skipper is the assistant director for publications at the NRC. Given the leading role of the NRC in holding and disseminating resources and information about the First-Year Experience (FYE), the SANRC sought ideas about how the NRC's resource centre was built and how it is maintained. This interview focuses on the importance of resource centres, and provides information on how resource centres operate as well as on how to successfully establish one.

Mosebua: Please give us some background information about the NRC and how it was set up, with particular reference to the 'resource' aspect of the centre and how these were gathered.

Skipper: The NRC is housed within the University of South Carolina (USC). It was established as an independent unit in 1986 with a small grant from the state department of higher education. The Center was established under the auspices of an academic programme, the University 101 course at the USC. This academic programme was

* Dr Annsilla Nyar is Director: South African National Resource Centre for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition (SANRC), University of Johannesburg, South Africa. Email: anyar@uj.ac.za

** Lebo Mosebua is Administrator at the South African National Resource Centre for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition (SANRC), University of Johannesburg, South Africa. Email: lebom@uj.ac.za

designed to help students entering the university learn how to be successful students and to feel connected to the university. This spurred a series of conferences focusing on the first college year or the initial transition to college.

At the time of the Center's founding, one of the initial goals was to create a literature base on the first year of college. Our initial efforts focused on the founding of an empirical journal, now the *Journal of The First-Year Experience & Students in Transition*, and a newsletter focusing on practice. Monographs or books exploring curricular and co-curricular initiatives to support student learning, development and success came later. Those longer publications also looked at groups of students who might be more at risk in the college environment, for example, students with disabilities, non-White students, students who come from economically deprived backgrounds, students with prior military service and LBGTQ students.

In the early 1990s, the NRC began looking at the transition out of college, what is called the senior year, and the second college year because we recognised that students were facing some unique challenges during those transition points; the Center has also looked at students who transfer from one institution to another – a phenomenon that has become increasingly common in U.S. higher education. The Center also began to connect with educators in other parts of the world to see how they might come together from sometimes very different educational contexts to address common problems experienced with helping students make a successful transition to higher education.

Additionally, one of the other aspects of our efforts that began early in the Center's history was that we launched a national survey to look at the first-year seminar course – essentially an inventory that described the goals, structure and administration of these courses at institutions across the U.S. That agenda has expanded to include landscape studies of initiatives for sophomore and senior college students and a student-level survey exploring peer support roles. International partnerships are also evident in the International Survey of Peer Leaders (Canada, U.K., Australia/New Zealand and South Africa).

So, I mention these three strands of our work – publications, meetings or professional development events, and research – because I think they are central to how we have defined ourselves as a resource centre. We certainly provide resources through our publications and research. We also see the creation and nurturing of networks of professionals who connect via our conferences and other professional development events or through our electronic email lists as an important resource.

Mosebua: Is there a difference between a resource centre and a library? Do they both serve the same purpose?

Skipper: Yes, in the sense that both might serve as a repository for information, libraries and resources might serve similar purposes. In my mind what distinguishes one from the other is that the resource centre – at least as we have conceived it – is more than just an archive or collection of content on a given topic. We are actively engaged in the creation of that content.

The definition gets fuzzy, especially in U.S. institutions, as we see libraries taking a more active role in curating content – which certainly has a creative function. We are also seeing some university presses being moved under the direction of libraries, which blurs those lines a bit and, as I mentioned earlier, I see the professional networks that we enable as being an essential part of the "resource" that we provide.

Mosebua: Since the dawning of the digital age, the library has been transformed in its utility and role due to rapid technological advancements. How has technology influenced the way in which the NRC, traditional libraries and resource centres operate?

Skipper: One of the things that we are seeing in libraries in the U.S. – whether we are talking about local, public libraries or college/university libraries – is that as resources are converted from print to digital, the physical space of the library is being transformed. No longer a space for quiet, independent research and study, university libraries are being transformed into true academic meeting places, a centre for reflection and inquiry, and a marketplace for the exchange of ideas. Public libraries are also taking spaces once occupied by books to allow for community gatherings, maker spaces, and social support functions. Libraries are becoming really vibrant centers for individuals, community growth and development.

I think the National Resource Center is really no different. For years, we maintained a physical resource library, and an occasional visiting scholar would make use of that library. But for the most part, it was inaccessible and as more resources became available electronically, it really didn't serve much purpose for folks in our network. So now, we are much less about being a repository of static materials and more a space (both intellectually and physically) for the exchange, interpretation, and advancement of those ideas into practice writ large, into other settings, to affect change, to impact policy, and to advance the larger research agenda. Technology has also broadened our community, making it much easier to exchange information and ideas and share the process of inquiry across countries and the globe. It also is a means to invite the numerous people who fall under the umbrella of FYE work into the movement.

Mosebua: Please briefly highlight some of the major challenges facing libraries and resource centres globally. For example, what are some of the challenges facing the NRC in its work?

Skipper: The information explosion of recent years – so much, so easily available that people may not see the value of the library; they no longer need the library to access information. I think resource centres are challenged by this as well – there are just so many players in the marketplace, and it becomes increasingly difficult to have your message heard. However, libraries and resource centres have an increasingly valuable role in curating that information and helping people evaluate what's out there. At the same time, the sheer volume of information can make effective curation challenging – it requires robust, dynamic technological infrastructure – we're trying to figure out what's the best use of our resources with respect to this moving forward.

As a resource centre, we're not a membership organisation – we're constantly having to re-establish and solidify members of our constituency. Technology obviously helps with this, but getting the information to people who can affect change at all levels (researchers, practitioners, academic leaders, and policy-makers) is a perennial challenge. One of the ways we've managed this has been through forging partnerships with other entities that 'own' smaller pieces of the larger first-year experience, student transitions, and student success landscape – National Orientation Directors Association, National Academic Advising Association, National Institute for the Study of Transfer Students, American College Personnel Association, and John Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education among others. We've also created partnerships with regional and international groups focusing on these issues. The goal – and often the challenge – is to create partnerships that are collaborative rather than competitive.

Mosebua: A resource centre actively seeks to share the information that it contains. What steps have been taken by the NRC to ensure that its resource collection is accessible and widely used by all?

Skipper: While we have some infrastructure support from the University of South Carolina, we are largely self-funded, which means we have to charge for many of our publications. But we are sensitive to those costs and do make an effort to offer resources where we can at no cost to researchers and practitioners who are invested in this work.

For many years, we printed and mailed a practitioner-focused newsletter. To control costs, we moved to an electronic format but it was not highly subscribed or read. We ultimately made the decision that it was more important to provide this forum for sharing information about practice than it was to receive a steadily declining income from the publication. A couple of years ago, we moved this to a hosting platform that makes it easier for readers to share individual articles from that publication.

We have been offering our journal in print and online for seven or eight years now and recently started offering online only subscriptions, which makes it more attractive for many libraries – especially those in international markets. We've also entered into some limited licensing agreements to make the journal more accessible via inter-library loan and as part of some international consortia deals.

With respect to our books, we are way behind the curve in offering e-books. Part of that has been the difficulty of negotiating contracts as a unit within a larger educational institution. We released the first one last year and added five more recently. This will make them more available and at a lower price point for our readers. With regards to the research produced by the Center, we provide access to executive summaries on our website. As a team, we are engaged in making presentations, disseminating that research to a number of different audiences. We make those presentations available on our website. In addition, we solicit and make available presentation materials from sessions presented at the conferences we host.

So we really have a good bit of information available, but as I mentioned earlier, curating that information, putting it into a dynamic, searchable framework, is challenging. That is one of the things we are currently working on – creating a framework that will make that information more readily searchable and therefore accessible to people.

Mosebua: What advice can you give to the SANRC as it continues to develop its own resource collection?

Skipper: We often have to make sure that we are offering options for the dissemination of resources that fit with the promotion and reward structures of our constituents. Journal articles and conference research presentations are what is meaningful to professors and researchers. The ability to share (either through presentations or newsletter blasts) "star programs" and build reputational capital for institutional successes is important to campus leaders and administrators. The chance to gather practical advice and suggestions for developing and implementing programmes is important to practitioners and directors. Make sure that things are called what they need to be called to be professional 'feathers in the cap' or CV entries for the range of professionals in your constituency. That often requires supporting a range of resources at different levels of rigor and for different purposes.

Regardless, we have created systems for peer review for all our publications, even for pieces that are not expressly research publications. Our conference proposals are also peer reviewed. Peer-reviewed publications are more highly regarded than editorial-reviewed publications. Again, I think this also takes some of the onus off the resource centre to be the expert on everything, especially when those reviewers have been carefully vetted.

Mosebua: Who would you say are the likely partners and collaborators for a centre such as the SANRC?

Skipper: We have an apparatus in place for editing, designing, publishing, and distributing publications. Many of our collaborators don't have that; instead, they offer access to content expertise that we believe is valuable to our network. Find the collaborators who can help you fill in the gap. If you are not ready to take the lead in producing a publication, who can you partner with to make that happen?

Mosebua: The majority of books found on local bookstore shelves are imported from the U.K. or the U.S. and as such, are highly taxed and hence prohibitively expensive. What would you say are some cost-effective measures which can be undertaken to ensure that books are easily obtained and made accessible to users?

Skipper: Certainly e-books and digital journal repositories are important tools in the dissemination of books and journals. Putting these materials in libraries also ensures a more democratic and widely accessible means of sharing information.

Mosebua: How can the SANRC/NRC encourage scholars and practitioners to use the information available in the resource centres? Furthermore, how can they be stimulated to get involved in research initiatives that contribute towards the advancement of FYE resources?

Skipper: Scholars and practitioners have to be aware that the centre is there – the SANRC can exploit social media platforms to push out information on new resources and also have a mechanism for readers to receive content alerts. The SANRC can adopt a similar approach to the NRC. Our editors regularly host sessions at conferences where discussions are held on the various publishing options available through the Center, as well as what makes a good submission for the various venues. The submission and review process is also discussed.

We send out direct invitations to people – I just returned from a conference on Tuesday. My editor and I will go through the conference programme and send personalised invitations to select presenters asking them to submit to our publications. Sometimes, they will be directed to our journal. Sometimes, they will be directed to a newsletter. It's time-consuming, but it serves the dual purpose of both making them aware of our resources while also potentially generating new contributions. We engage members of our network as reviewers for our journal, electronic newsletter, and for book proposals and books. We've been hosting a research grant for a number of years – we offer direct support for the kind of research we would like to see. Going back to my earlier response, it's important to host a variety of venues or opportunities for dissemination to engage the broadest possible network of collaborators in this work.

Mosebua: How can libraries and resource centres solicit feedback in order to improve on content and accessibility to information?

Skipper: The NRC periodically conducts readership surveys, especially for practitioner-focused newsletters; a range of questions are asked to help in determining whether the Center is hitting the mark. Additionally, the NRC has made use of data analytics collected online to learn more about how are publications are being read. We also use our advisory board as a sounding board, especially when seeking new directions.

Dr Skipper provided important points of information for a developing centre such as the SANRC, which aims to make FYE materials and resources widely available to all in the FYE community, and indeed all higher education professionals. While resource centres are different from libraries, they have an interrelated function of ensuring that resources are available and accessible. Dr Skipper highlighted the importance of technology, and the need to utilise available tools such as social media and other innovative ways to ensure that stakeholders are reached. She emphasised the need to have a holistic view of the functioning of a resource centre and to take this into account when implementing a repository that will be of practical use to the FYE community. It can be concluded that resource centres play an essential role in growing the FYE community and ensuring the growth of FYE as a well-developed field of study.

How to cite:

Nyar, A. & Mosebua, L. (2018). Interview with Tracy Skipper: Understanding the Role of FYE Resource Centres [09 November 2017]. *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa*, 6(1), 93–98. DOI: 10.24085/jsaa.v6i1.3068

Interviews and dialogue

Understanding the UJ Institutional Student Success Initiative (ISSI)

Annsilla Nyar* & Celine Meyers**

Dr André van Zyl has a Master's Degree in Strategic Management and a PhD in Higher Education. His main research focus is in the area of student success with specific focus on first-year students. He has spoken at various national and international conferences. Dr Van Zyl was responsible for initiating the First-Year Experience initiative at UJ and he has spearheaded the setting up a National Resource Centre for the FYE in South Africa. The SANRC is now fully functional and housed on the APB campuses of UJ. He has been working at UJ since 2004 and has worked as a Learning Development facilitator, FYE coordinator and since late 2012 as the Director of the Academic Development Centre at UJ.

Introduction

Celine Meyers from the South African National Resource Centre for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition (SANRC) recently spent time with Dr André van Zyl, Director of the Academic Development Centre at the University of Johannesburg (UJ), in order to learn more about UJ's recently-implemented Student Success Initiative. Dr Van Zyl has been involved in this important new initiative since its inception. The interview with Dr Van Zyl highlights important components of the UJ Institutional Student Success Initiative (ISSI) and outlines some of the thinking behind the institution's key efforts to successfully transition students all the way to the graduation stage and beyond.

Meyers: Please give us some background about the UJ ISSI and how it fits into the broader strategic objectives of the institution.

Van Zyl: The University of Johannesburg has taken the matter of student success seriously for a long time. Taking it seriously means looking at student success more broadly and holistically. We started the First-Year Experience (FYE), the Senior Student Experience (SSE) and even the South African National Resource Centre for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition (SANRC) with the help from the department and colleagues overseas. UJ has over time developed an atmosphere where student success

* Dr Annsilla Nyar is Director: South African National Resource Centre for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition (SANRC), University of Johannesburg, South Africa. Email: anyar@uj.ac.za

** Celine Meyers is a student research assistant at the SANRC, University of Johannesburg, South Africa. Email: celinem@uj.ac.za

and the professionalisation of teaching and learning have both become central to what we do as an academic endeavour. UJ is target-driven in this regard. We have looked at the undergraduate success rate and the minimum time plus one completion rate. It is not the minimum time per se, because students often need a little bit more time to complete their studies. Ideally speaking, we want to plan for an extra year ahead. This is my personal point of view of course! We focus on a minimum time plus one, because there's an element of realism in what we do. Minimum time plus one is more attainable.

Little pockets of activity related to this initiative have existed for a long time, but it's only been 'pockets'. Things were done in a way that wasn't fully institutionalised. Therefore UJ moved towards institutional action by creating the First-Year Experience Committee for a much more focused institutional student success. This initiative was the next logical step.

In late 2017, UJ looked to the ADC for leadership. I worked with a few of my colleagues, along with Prof. Rory Ryan, Executive Director: Academic Development and Support at UJ, on this. We came up with a plan which served at the top management of the institution. They were happy with the proposal. That plan has been refined and structures have been put in place. Now we are in the first phase of implementation.

These initiatives feed into a number of the institutional strategic objectives, for example: (1) academic success and excellence and (2) the living and learning experience of the institution. UJ has for the past few years spoken of 'affordable excellence'. This initiative feeds directly into this objective. On a personal level, it is very much institution-facing so that it can influence student success and experiences. It is focused firstly on the institution.

Meyers: When will the UJ ISSI be formally introduced? What is the structure like? Will there be someone who leads the initiative? Please explain your own involvement with the UJ ISSI.

Van Zyl: Immediately after October 2017 we set up the plan and had it approved. Part of the plan was to put institutional structures in place that haven't always existed before. For example, we created a new institutional committee called the Student Success Committee. This committee is chaired by Prof. Ryan. The Vice Deans for Teaching and Learning of all eight faculties sit on this committee. The committee focuses exclusively on student success. It met for the first time in November 2017. Between the beginning of October and the end of November 2017, we identified all the priority modules, communicated these and the plans were already set up in November 2017. It was an incredibly fast start.

The actual implementation started in February 2018 when classes began. We met with lecturers and looked into the relevant interventions. FYI, a priority module is a module where we are losing the greatest number of 'funded credits' (this is a technical term). It basically means 'where are most students getting stuck in terms of numbers?' If you have a large module that has 3 000 students, regardless of high success rates, you could still be on the high priority index. This index lists the top 20% of modules institutionally where students are failing. We then select the top 5 by faculty. The exception was the College of Business and Economics, because it is a quarter of the institution. Given this, we selected modules in consultation with the Vice Dean of Teaching and Learning. We set up certain teams, internal structures, and a Student Success Committee. From January 2018, we set up appointments with the lecturers as well as workshops for students in priority modules.

The official university structure is as follows: We have a Senate Teaching and Learning Committee (STLC) which reports to Senate, the highest organisational structure at UJ. The Student Success Committee falls under the Teaching and Learning Committee. It is led by Prof. Ryan and the DVC for Teaching and Learning, but they are not directly involved in it. There are many people working on this initiative, but the main implementation is done by myself and my team.

Meyers: What is UJ hoping to achieve with the UJ ISSI?

Van Zyl: Firstly, we are trying to push up the minimum time completion plus one and secondly, we want to address the issue of module completion rates. While we do not expect immediate results, we are hoping to see slight improvements in the module success rate. This initiative feeds into the professionalisation of teaching and learning at UJ. It immediately starts treating academics like professional teachers. This initiative has also helped to re-invigorate the ADC. We have become real agents of change within the institution. This has helped to strengthen the existing positive atmosphere for teaching and learning at UJ.

Meyers: Student success is a multi-faceted concept. How does UJ define student success?

Van Zyl: At UJ, we believe that student success has to be defined at least as the minimum time plus one completion. If you complete in the end, it is still some sort of success, but the ideal success and what we would hope to see happen, is at least minimum time plus one. That is what we define as student success.

Meyers: Is there a theoretical underpinning behind the UJ ISSI?

Van Zyl: Yes there are many. It depends on what interventions and theories we use. The ideas of theorists like Vincent Tinto play a grounding role in giving us language to work with. It is very fashionable to criticise Tinto these days, but nobody is currently putting a better framework on the table. It is still by far the best broad sociological framework we have by which to understand matters of student success. At UJ we also believe in William Purkey and Betty Siegel's theory of 'invitational education', i.e. we have to be intentionally inviting of success for our students. We are now asking ourselves "How do we become more intentionally inviting to student success?"

Meyers: How will this initiative differ from UJ's current suite of diverse student success initiatives?

Van Zyl: This initiative will often replicate the content of other things and in some instances it will develop new content. It will differ in the sense that we are slightly more intrusive. Let us rather use the term "intentionally collaborative". We are saying to our fellow UJ colleagues "student success is part of your responsibility. Let us work together on purpose and in a data-informed focused way, let us test what we do and if it does not work, let's do something else next year". These are all aspects that are new to UJ. We have always wanted to work along these lines, but we have previously never had this kind of institutional momentum and top-management support to do so. Also, stronger institutional structures, which are less dependent on particular individuals, are now being put in place.

Meyers: What kind of data will be used to support the initiative?

Van Zyl: The data we are using comes from UJ's institutional database. Our colleagues from the Division of Institutional Planning for Evaluation and Monitoring are responsible for overseeing this database.

Meyers: How will monitoring take place?

Van Zyl: Two things can be monitored, i.e. activity and impact. Regarding activity, we have documented all our activities on Dropbox. It has also become part of the job description and performance management agreements of relevant ADC staff who are working on this initiative. Measuring impact is much more difficult as the module success rate is a highly complex issue. How can we, for example, say that the impact is truly related to this initiative? While we do not expect improvement in all modules, we are hoping to see an average improvement in the 41 priority modules. We have to be careful in how we claim impact.

Meyers: The Blackboard Predict (BBP) Students Analytic System is used by UJ to identify students who are at risk. Would you say that BBP is used evenly and consistently across the institution? Is there sufficient knowledge by staff of how to use BBP data and the best approach therein toward students?

Van Zyl: The answer to both of your questions is unfortunately no. This is in part because it is a very complex system and we have only rolled it out to one faculty. We are planning to roll out a part of it to another faculty only in second semester. It will take us at least three years to get this up and running across the institution. Blackboard Predict is not central to the ISSI. It is running parallel to it and thus far, the response to it from both students and staff has been immensely positive. They are finding it very useful, because it tracks you over time and gives individual feedback. It warns you about your students. We are careful about the term 'at-risk'. We do not call our students at-risk, even when they are failing, given that it labels students in a negative way. Of course, it is not an incorrect term technically, but the highest part about the Blackboard Predict is communication. For example, we do not tell lecturers they teach poorly and the same goes for our students. Blackboard Predict is there to identify 'at-risk', but most importantly, it is there to activate success. Finally, I would like to emphasise that this is not the same as ISSI and a number of workshops have been rolled out to the Faculty of Law to ensure sufficient knowledge of how to use the BBP and this has been implemented. However, it will probably take us a decade to get BBP properly embedded across the institution.

Meyers: Is there anything else you would like to add about the initiative?

Van Zyl: Implementation of such an initiative requires institutional buy-in as well as patience. Without patience, prior work and proper institutional structures, this cannot be accomplished.

It is clear that UJ's student success initiative is characterised by strong leadership and vision as well as an underlying ethos of 'invitational education'. The initiative is still in the early phases of implementation and South Africa's higher education sector will be watching developments at UJ with a view to learning more and understanding how different universities can adopt similar approaches.

How to cite:

Nyar, A. & Meyers, C. (2018). Interview with André van Zyl: Understanding the UJ Institutional Student Success Initiative (ISSI) [24 April 2018]. *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa*, 6(1), 99–103. DOI: 10.24085/jsaa.v6i1.3069

Campus report

SANRC FYE Conference 2018: An Important Space for South Africa's FYE Community is Now Taking Shape

Annsilla Nyar*

The SANRC's annual First-Year Experience Conference is rapidly becoming established as a focal point on South Africa's higher education calendar. The 2018 conference was held at the Garden Court Marine Parade in Durban on 23–25 May 2018. The conference was attended by a wide spectrum of delegates from South Africa's universities. From the large number of 130+ delegates who were present, it was possible to see that this young conference has grown impressively since the inception of the new Centre only a short time ago in 2015.

The conference theme, "Toward the pursuit of excellence in national support to South Africa's first-year students: critically examining all aspects of the FYE", embraced a number of different themes:

(a) Teaching for first-year success;
(b) Measurement and accountability in first-year support services;
(c) Innovative first-year support initiatives;
(d) Engaging the student voice; and
(e) Orientation programmes as a key element of student support.

The programme reflected the diverse body of work of FYE scholars and practitioners along the lines of the various themes. Seventy-three papers were presented in total, in addition to the workshop sessions.

The keynote addresses delivered at the conference were intended to provide important 'framing' reference points for the national conversations to be taking place over the three-day conference period. The opening keynote address was given by Prof. Sandile Songca, who is Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Teaching and Learning at University of Zululand (UniZulu). Prof. Songca reflected critically on the historical background of the FYE concept and how it is expressed and practised in different contexts, including that of his institution of UniZulu.

The second keynote address of the conference on 24 May 2018 was delivered by Prof. Emmanuel Mgqwashu, Dean of Education at Rhodes University. Prof. Mgqwashu spoke about the research project, "The influence of rurality on students transitions to higher education", on which he is currently working with two other partner universities, i.e. the

* Dr Annsilla Nyar is Director: South African National Resource Centre for First-Year Experience and Students in Transition (SANRC), University of Johannesburg, South Africa. Email: anyar@uj.ac.za

Universities of Johannesburg and Fort Hare. The project also has international links with the Universities of Bristol and Brighton in the United Kingdom. This keynote address was particularly well received by many conference delegates, who found that the project's framing themes of social justice and decolonisation in higher education resonated deeply with them and their work.

Dr Laura Dison, senior lecturer in the Wits School of Education, delivered the final keynote address on the last day of the conference, 25 May 2018. Dr Dison is the co-coordinator of the Postgraduate Diploma in Higher Education at University of the Witwatersrand (Wits). She brought her specialist knowledge of managing the Wits Postgraduate Diploma to her critical reflections on the benefits of professional development for all higher education staff (not only academics). She also spoke to the issue of how reflective practice in teaching and learning may ultimately provide the enabling conditions for student success.

The conference is intentionally designed to offer professional development opportunities to FYE scholars and practitioners in ways that would continually upskill them and build their capacity for the FYE work they are undertaking. The professional development workshops were very well attended. Three workshops were held concurrently on the first day of the conference:

(a) a HELTASA Tutoring and Mentoring SIG workshop led by Dr Subethra Pather from University of the Western Cape (UWC) with HELTASA colleagues Dr Xena Cupido from Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT), Dr Nelia Frade from University of Johannesburg and Ms Thaiurie Govender from Durban University of Technology (DUT);
(b) a workshop on good orientation practices as part of an SANRC national campaign on orientation, led by Dr Danny Fontaine from University of Cape Town; and
(c) a workshop addressing how academic libraries contribute to student success led by Dr Shirlene Neerputh from University of Western Cape (UWC) and Ms Ingrid Thomson from University of Cape Town (UCT).

The conference has quickly gained a strong national constituency, linking to one of the key goals of the SANRC, i.e. the facilitation of national networking and collaboration among South Africa's universities. The annual conference serves as testimony to the national links being forged through the unique platform that this particular space offers universities to learn more about what each institution is doing and how collaborative work can be done. It is toward this end that the conference strives to provide relevant spaces for such national conversations to take place, not only in the conference rooms but also after hours where national and international networking can take place.

For those who wish to enquire about the next annual SANRC FYE Conference, details about SANRC FYE Conference 2019 can be found in due course on the SANRC website: http://www.sanrc.co.za.

How to cite:

Nyar, A. (2018). SANRC FYE Conference 2018: An Important Space for South Africa's FYE Community is Now Taking Shape. *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa*, 6(1), 105–106. DOI: 10.24085/jsaa.v6i1.3070

Book review

Case, J.M., Marshall, D., McKenna, S. & Mogashana, D. (2017). *Going to University: The Influence of Higher Education on the Lives of Young South Africans.* Cape Town: African Minds.

Reviewed by Liezel Frick*

Higher education in South Africa is in a state of turmoil. Student protests, increased state intervention, uncertainty and surprises around government funding of the sector amidst increased massification of universities, pressure on institutions to insource staff, calls to diversify both student and staff bodies, demands for decolonisation of university curricula (or Africanisation, as Msila and Gumbo [2016] choose to position these debates), and substantive changes in national policy directives have created a sector in constant flux.

It is thus no surprise that a variety of authoritative authors within the South African higher education context have taken a rather dim view of the current situation. While Adam Habib (2016) focuses on re-imagining the future of the South African university, he acknowledges the stark current reality that the South African university system is not on par with its counterparts in other developing countries and that it shows limited transformation after more than two decades of democracy in South Africa. Cloete (2016a) similarly points to inefficiencies within the system (particularly at the undergraduate level) that are amplified by under-funding of the system as a whole. However, he argues against the notion of free higher education, as it may lead to even greater inefficiency and inequality (Cloete, 2016b) – a notion also questioned in terms of feasibility by the Heher Report (South Africa, 2017). Yet this is exactly what came to be towards the end of 2017.

Jonathan Jansen's recent book, *As by fire: The end of the South African university* (2017), considers the experiences of vice-chancellors amidst the #FeesMustFall protests, and takes a decidedly negative stance on the future of universities in South Africa. In *As by fire*, it almost seems like the culmination of Jansen's (2005, pp. 3–4, 12) earlier question, "When does a university cease to exist?", where he remarks:

> … a university ceases to exist when the intellectual project no longer defines its identity, infuses its curriculum, energizes its scholars, and inspires its students. It ceases to exist when state control and interference closes down the space within which academic discourse can flourish without constraint. The university ceases to exist when it imposes on itself narrowing views of the future based on ethnic or linguistic chauvinism, and denies the multiplicity of voices and visions that grant institutions their distinctive character. And the

* Dr Liezel Frick is Associate Professor at the Centre for Higher and Adult Education, Department of Curriculum Studies, Stellenbosch University, South Africa. Email: blf@sun.ac.za

> university ceases to exist when it represents nothing other than an empty shell of racial representivity at the cost of academic substance and intellectual imagination. … The greatest challenge facing the post-apartheid university is that second-generation South Africans fail to find a compelling moral purpose in higher education beyond crass materialism and individual self-enrichment. It will require credible leadership to sustain the idea of the university through a restored idealism among students and teachers, an idealism that places our common humanity at the centre of institutional endeavour in a very dangerous world.

These contributions seem to paint a picture of a system in constant crisis, with little hope of redeeming itself to be(come) both nationally responsive and internationally competitive. A narrow reading of such texts could easily make the South African higher education landscape seem barren, caught in a hopeless situation.

However, in a critique on particularly Jonathan Jansen's (2017) *As by Fire*, Suellen Shay (2017) argues:

> What South Africa's universities need from their leaders now is not prophecies of doom, but deeper reflection on the transformative potential of this difficult historical moment.

It is within this space that the recent publication of *Going to University: The influence of Higher Education on the lives of young South Africans* (Case, Marshall, McKenna & Mogashana, 2017) provides a much-needed reason for hope and respite amidst the turmoil.

The book reports on narrative interviews with 73 young people who first entered university studies in South Africa some six years beforehand. The interviewees hailed from three different research-intensive South African universities, studied in either Arts or Sciences, and included both completers (n = 60) and non-completers (n = 13). Despite documenting the obvious (and sometimes not so obvious) battles and challenges students face in a nuanced way, this is essentially a book of hope as it firstly provides a much-needed constructive student voice to understanding what university is about, and why it matters. Secondly, as Sue Clegg's foreword to the book highlights, it contributes to broader debates about the significance and importance of higher education across disciplinary and institutional boundaries. As such, the book may have a wide appeal not only to scholars of higher education as a field of study (as the reports of such projects often do), but also academics beyond this field of interest, professional and support staff at universities, university leaders, thought leaders in industry, and policy makers. Though the book is a truly (and proudly) South African contribution, its reach will in all probability extend beyond national boundaries. And although the storied contribution is by its very nature nationally and institutionally embedded, it speaks to much broader issues of race, class and gender in higher education, as well as how student agency manifests in a turbulent and resource-constrained context.

An evident strength of the contribution of *Going to University* lies in the solid theoretical foundation (most evident in the first chapter) and methodological rigour (as explained in the addenda) on which the work is built. Yet, the authors made a pragmatic decision to foreground the voices and stories of the participants, which makes the book much more accessible and digestible to a wider audience, although the authors' subsequent shorter published essays in media such as The Conversation (and hopefully some future podcasts or YouTube clips) may be more widely read than the actual book itself. Scholars in higher education studies will find these aspects of much interest though, and there is enough theoretical and methodological depth to get a grip on the scholarship that forms the backdrop to the stories. One would also hope to see additional future scholarly publications that thrash out these aspects in greater detail for the readership particularly interested in the research behind the stories.

The story of the stories unfold in an interesting way in the book, starting off with a contextualisation of higher education (Chapter 1), before it moves on to how students navigate the undergraduate curriculum (Chapter 2), while the third chapter explores how students deliberate and make decisions on study plans. The fourth chapter considers the broader student experience. The second half of the book gives voice to the student experience beyond the university, firstly looking at non-completion of the first degree choice in the fifth chapter (an invaluable contribution that moves the reader beyond a deficit view of high dropout and low completion rates within the sector). Another valuable contribution in the sixth chapter focuses on doing postgraduate studies. Chapter 7 explores students' experiences of entering the workplace. The book ends off with a careful consideration of the purposes of higher education in Chapter 8.

The build-up to the final chapter moves from the contextualisation in the first chapter through a storied scenery of what it means to go to a (research) university in South Africa today. The complexity of both in-class and out-of-class experiences are told in an interwoven manner, where the weave of the first-person student narratives is securely held by the weft of the authors' interpretations. These chapters show how higher education in South Africa is linked to societal and economic contexts in inseparable and complex ways, as is evident in recent policy developments. The recent draft National Plan for Post-School Education and Training (NPPSET) (DHET, 2017) highlights how national policy has shifted from a focus on social justice and redress (as espoused in the White Paper 3 on the Transformation of Higher Education, 1997) to a more outcomes-driven imperative (as is also evident in the White Paper on Post-school Education and Training, 2013) with a focus on skills development for (immediate) employment (with a resultant emphasis on student success and throughput) and knowledge production, application and transfer (with greater involvement of industry and the workplace). The NPPSET (DHET, 2017, p. 10) states that the plan,

> … moves away from the current focus on scarce and critical skills and proposes that the focus should be on qualifications and programmes for occupations in high demand, using three dimensions: programmes that are specifically needed for economic growth; programmes that will provide opportunities for employment for large numbers of people; and programmes that support social development priorities.

Student access, success and employment are, of course, important given the current national higher education student success indicators, youth (un)employment figures, and the slow economic growth evident in South Africa. But the unintended consequences of such a policy shift may be that universities are seen as just other knowledge-based institutions focused on the exchange of knowledge and knowledge workers with other organisations. Youtie and Shapira (2008) warn that universities could end up being seen as mere knowledge factories when only the impact that has a direct economic and regional benefit is measured and valued. *Going to University*, to some extent, challenges this policy discourse, when the authors point out:

> But university is more than just a self-improvement camp. Participants were able to articulate the specific knowledge and ways of thinking that they had developed while at university, and how these skills put them in a strong position in trying to enter what is now termed the 'knowledge economy'. Importantly, these are not just instrumentalist technical 'skills' but ways of thinking – which means that the impact goes beyond the individual. Many students spoke in some detail about the kind of creative and analytical thinking that they had learnt at university: not taking things at face value, being able to interrogate different ways of conceptualising a phenomenon, how to build up or test a logical argument. (p. 134)

Such a more holistic notion of student development is in line with the so-called skills identified by the World Economic Forum (2017) as essential to succeeding in the Fourth Industrial Revolution, including complex problem solving, critical thinking, creativity, people management, coordinating with others, emotional intelligence, judgment and decision making, service orientation, negotiation, and cognitive flexibility. As such, the contribution of *Going to University* forces the reader to (re-)consider the current university sector's potential to nurture the creative potential of students, which requires time, resources and space for more flexible programme structures, improved student support structures, an investment in developing creative higher education pedagogies, as well as research that may not have an immediate and applied impact. This is in line with the work of Florida, Knudsen and Stolarick (2010, p. 68), who empirically explored the role of universities in the economy. Their findings suggest that the role of universities "goes far beyond the 'engine of innovation' perspective". They indicate that whilst technology generation is important, the role of universities in this aspect of the economy has been overemphasised while the role of universities in generating, attracting and mobilising talent, and establishing a tolerant and diverse social climate is often overlooked and neglected by policy makers and leaders. The idea of being a creative university (as defined by Reichert, 2006) does not exclude being efficient or economically viable, but it takes a longer term view on the benefit it might add to society and the economy, and allows more space for dialogue, experimentation and innovation.

It is within this frame of reference that the final chapter of *Going to University* gives the reader some reason for hope when the authors conclude:

> … what kind of young people have we formed in our university graduates? They are independently minded and socially progressive. They are getting traction in their careers and they are acting with thoughtfulness and responsibility. They are thinkers and they mostly engage critically with the world and their place in society. Many are aware of inequalities in society and of their own experiences of privilege. … They are resilient young people and future leaders; crucially it is their experiences of grappling with knowledge during university studies that has formed them (p. 143).

These findings speak to the higher order and complex skills as envisioned by the World Economic Forum predictions cited above, and should not be disregarded or diluted to a more simplistic notion of skills development.

Going to University is available for free downloading through the publisher's website under Creative Commons licensing.

References

Case, J., Marshall, D., McKenna, S. & Mogashana, D. (2017). *Going to University: The Influence of Higher Education on the Lives of Young South Africans*. Cape Town: African Minds.

Cloete, N. (2016a). For sustainable funding and fees, the undergraduate system in South Africa must be restructured. *South African Journal of Science*, 112(3-4), 1–5. https://doi.org/10.17159/sajs.2016/a0146

Cloete, N. (2016b). *Free higher education. Another self-destructive South African Policy.* Cape Town: Centre for Higher Education Transformation (CHET).

Department of Education (1997). White Paper 3: A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education. Pretoria: Government Printers.

DHET (Department of Higher Education and Training). (2013). White Paper for Post-School Education and Training. Pretoria: Government Printers.

DHET (Department of Higher Education and Training). (2017). National Plan for Higher Education and Training. Retrieved from http://utlo.ukzn.ac.za/Libraries/Documents/NPPSET_consultation_draft_16_November_2017.sflb.ashx

Florida, R., Knudsen, B. & Stolarick, K. (2010). The university and the creative economy. In: D. Araya & M.A. Peters (Eds.), *Education in the creative economy*. New York: Peter Lang.

Habib, A. (2016). Transcending the Past and Reimagining the Future of the South African University. *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 42(1), 35–48. https://doi.org/10.1080/03057070.2016.1121716

Jansen, J. (2005). *When does a university cease to exist?* Johannesburg, South Africa: South African Institute of Race Relations.

Jansen, J. (2017). *As by fire: the end of the South African university*. Cape Town: Tafelberg.

Msila, V. & Gumbo, M. (2016). *Africanising the curriculum: Indigenous perspectives and theories*. Stellenbosch: African SunMedia. https://doi.org/10.18820/9780992236083

Reichert, S. (2006). *The rise of knowledge regions: Emerging opportunities and challenges for universities*. Brussels: European University Association.

Shay, S. (2017). The end of South African universities? *The Conversation Africa*, 16 August. Retrieved from https://theconversation.com/the-end-of-south-african-universities-82180

South Africa (2017). Report of the Commission of Inquiry into Higher Education and Training. Retrieved from http://www.thepresidency.gov.za/sites/default/files/Commission%20of%20Inquiry%20into%20Higher%20Education%20Report.pdf

World Economic Forum. (2017). *The 10 skills you need to thrive in the Fourth Industrial Revolution*. Retrieved from https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/01/the-10-skills-you-need-to-thrive-in-the-fourth-industrial-revolution

Youtie, J. & Shapira, P. (2008). Building an Innovation Hub: A Case Study of the Transformation of University Roles in Regional Technological and Economic Development. *Research Policy*, 37, 188–204. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.respol.2008.04.012

How to cite:

Frick, L. (2018). Review on Case, J.M., Marshall, D., McKenna, S. & Mogashana, D. *Going to University: The Influence of Higher Education on the Lives of Young South Africans.* Cape Town: African Minds. (2017). *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa*, 6(1), 107–112. DOI: 10.24085/jsaa.v6i1.3071

Book review

Macfarlane, B. (2017). *Freedom to Learn: The Threat to Student Academic Freedom and Why it Needs to be Reclaimed.* London: Routledge Taylor and Francis.

Reviewed by Rejoice Nsibande*

In this book, Macfarlane engages with the notion of students' freedom to learn which he defines as personal freedom to live the way they want to live their lives, political freedom in that students contribute to decision-making processes without domesticating their voice, and the right to learn as they decide what to learn, when to learn and how. He argues, as adult learners, students should have autonomy over choices and decisions such as these. He views this autonomy as crucial to providing students an opportunity to better understand their world and control what they want to do with their lives. Macfarlane argues, "if students are to be able to develop their own capabilities as independent learners and thinkers, they need to be provided with the choices, opportunities, encouragement and conducive environment in which to do so" (p. 26). He bemoans that university practices aimed at supporting student engagement, though well intentioned, ultimately fail to support an environment where students are trusted as adults responsible for making decisions on what they want to do. In his view, university policies and practices fail to acknowledge students' individual differences and preferences, consequently alienating them in the process.

Strategically combining theory and practice (vignettes of students' experiences of policy and practices), the author develops and sustains his argument that university policies are impacting negatively on students' private lives. He draws his examples from higher education institutions across the U.K., U.S.A., Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa to show first, that policies demonstrate a lack of trust and respect for students as adults; and second, the extent to which the adoption of managerialism and performative culture has led to universities putting themselves at the centre, rather than the students. He says students are involved in academic activities as 'clients' rather than scholars capable of making decisions about what they want to do, decisions on university governance processes and the ability to direct their own learning.

In essence, Macfarlane argues, to expect students to conform to standards, suppresses individual preferences and autonomy. In Chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7, Macfarlane provides detailed examples of what he terms "performative demands" on students to demonstrate his point. He categorises "performative demands" as follows: "participative performativity" that forces students to participate in activities that are supposed to engage them in the learning

* Dr Rejoice Nsibande is Head of Evaluation Services – Centre for Learning, Teaching and Development, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa. Email: rejoice.nsibande@wits.ac.za

process and prepare them for the workplace, while excessively auditing learning through assessment; "emotional performativity" through forced reflections seen as a form of self-surveillance and invasion of privacy; and "bodily performativity" through forced class attendance. Macfarlane is not arguing against student engagement as a critical element for student development. However, he is challenging universities to think about the importance of enriching educational experiences. He contends that such experiences can only occur when students participate in activities voluntarily in an environment that is inviting and where they are trusted to make appropriate decisions. Students as legitimate citizens in universities should have a voice and they should contribute to decisions on which activities are worthwhile. This should be done as part of genuine recognition of students as adults with freedom and the right to learn. Student engagement (in- and outside of class activities) is gaining focus in most universities globally, with the more recent literature indicating how engagement supports retention, learning and personal development (Tinto, 2012). Macfarlane, however, shows how practices associated with student engagement are infringing on students' freedom and rights, and how the practices support institutions to achieve set goals and account for daily operations to funders in line with the culture of "performativity".

The book challenges institutions to think about how student engagement activities encourage deep participation and opportunities for capacity building. Deep thinking is required to rethink how these activities are constructed, with students as co-constructors, since students' involvement in determining and shaping their activities is crucial to their enjoyment of freedom and rights to learn. Macfarlane concludes by calling for efforts to reclaim the Rogerian principles of student centredness to restore students' rights to learn. He is advocating for processes and practices that foreground a participatory model in a climate of trust and transparency, and unconditional respect for students as autonomous adults. In his view, reclaiming student centredness is critical and possible, focusing on *the right to non-indoctrination*, *the right to reticence*, *the right to choose how to learn* and *the right to be trusted as adults*.

Although the book is well written, the author assumes that, since students voluntarily choose to participate in higher education, they are equally capable and should be given the opportunity to make choices and manage their learning. Literature (Mann, 2001) indicates that the majority of students participating in higher education do so as part of a process, rather than as a result of calculated decisions. Hence, the assumed students' agency and capacity to make choices, and the ability to control their learning, may not hold at all times and for everyone.

The book presents an opportunity for institutions to reflect on current practices and the extent to which they align with opportunities for students to exercise their freedom and right to learn. Macfarlane's views seem to be in line with students' call globally, through protests, to be heard and recognised not as clients but as legitimate citizens with the capability to contribute as scholars. The book is valuable for leaders of institutions, academics, student affairs and staff tasked with student development. Practitioners are to reflect on the nature of student engagement practices to ensure that students' freedom and their right to learn are protected through opportunities for their involvement in decisions on which activities are worthwhile for their learning.

References

Mann, S. (2001). Alternative perspective on the student experience: Alienation and engagement. *Studies in Higher Education*, 26(1), 7–19. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075070020030689

Tinto, V. (2012). *Completing college. Rethinking Institutional Action*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226804545.001.0001

How to cite:

Nsibande, R. (2018). Review on Macfarlane, B. *Freedom to Learn: The Threat to Student Academic Freedom and Why it Needs to be Reclaimed*. London: Routledge Taylor and Francis. (2017). *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa*, 6(1), 113–115. DOI: 10.24085/jsaa.v6i1.3072

Book review

Bangeni, B. & Kapp, R. (Eds.). (2017). *Negotiating Learning and Identity in Higher Education: Access, Persistence and Retention.* London: Bloomsbury.

Reviewed by Taryn Bernard*

Negotiating Learning and Identity in Higher Education: Access, Persistence and Retention is the first in a Bloomsbury series, entitled "Understanding Student Experiences in Higher Education". It consists of nine chapters, all of which report on research that was conducted using qualitative, longitudinal data at the University of Cape Town (UCT) – an elite, English-medium, and historically white South African University. The participants in the research are all part of a generation of young black people who have grown up in the new South Africa and are mostly first generation, working class and from single-parent families. In addition to this, they are all bilingual or multilingual and English is generally used as a second or third language.

By collecting and analysing data over a period of eight years the book offers a rich understanding of the identities and experiences of this important group of university students. The approach adopted by the editors and authors when representing participants in the study is also of significance: in the Introduction, Kapp and Bangeni (2017, p. 2) draw the reader's attention to the fact that many public textual representations in South Africa construct black working-class youth as failures or victims, as disadvantaged and as marginalised. In this book, the researchers can be commended for the necessary step of moving away from such deficit constructions to rather focus on the *agency* of the participants, and conducting research that highlights the *agentic* and *enabled* subject positions of the participants. This is done by avoiding a static notion of identity from the outset, and by adopting a poststructuralist approach to identity that acknowledges that identity changes over time and in accordance with the context in which the individual is situated.

Overall there were twenty participants included in this study from the period 2002 to 2005, and another hundred participants from the period 2009 to 2012. The participants were registered in a range of faculties and for a range of degrees. The researchers draw on a number of data-collection methods and texts such as questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, written reflections and assignments that had been selected by the students themselves. In this way, the voices of the participants have been traced throughout their journey through the higher education system. This longitudinal perspective offers insight

* Dr Taryn Bernard is Lecturer and Course-Coordinator, Extended Degree Programme, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Stellenbosch University, South Africa. Email: tbernard@sun.ac.za

into how and why students persist and engage with their studies and UCT as an institution, or why they deregister or disengage. More specifically, the book sets out to answer three extremely pertinent questions in higher education contexts today:

1. How does a particular group of students can gain meaningful access to institutional and disciplinary discourses?
2. How can the knowledge, languages, resources and discourses that the students bring with them be recognised and valued; and
3. How can important role players address the practices and resources that marginalise particular groups of students?

In addressing these questions the researchers work towards facilitating more meaningful approaches to access in an effort to transform discourses that exclude, silence and marginalise.

The chapters in the book are arranged in order to focus on the experiences of one small, typical sample of participants at a time and the approach to analysis differs from chapter to chapter, depending on the aims of the author(s). Throughout the nine chapters, the contributors are able to cover a variety of contexts and subject positions, including the working-class township schooling context (Kapp, Badenhorst, Bangeni, Craig, Janse van Rensburg, Le Roux, Prince, Pym & Van Pletzen, Chapter 1), the Engineering Extended Curriculum Programme context (Craig, Chapter 7), subject positions regarding mathematics (Le Roux, Chapter 2), the experiences of a young working-class Muslim woman registered for a social science degree (Sacks & Kapp, Chapter 3), Humanities, students' understanding of language, literacy and identity (Kapp & Bangeni, Chapter 4), the role of religion in framing students' experiences of higher education (Bangeni & Pym, Chapter 5), the factors shaping the degree paths of black students (Bangeni, Chapter 6), and finally, the impact of previous experiences and social connectedness when transitioning to higher education (Pym & Sacks, Chapter 8).

There are a number of prominent issues that are raised in this book, and which stand out for me as being worthy of further exploration – ideally in terms of comparable research emanating from other universities in South Africa. I refer specifically here to topics and symbols that reoccur across text types and during diverse processes of analyses. Of particular significance is the participants' notion of 'the university', of 'home', of English and of religion and religious practices. For example, the authors are able to reveal the extent to which UCT is conceptualised as a site of privilege and excellence, wherein English is conceptualised as both a portal for access and a gatekeeping mechanism, and perceptions of learning academic English are constructed around contrasting binaries of loss/gain, whiteness/alienation and upward mobility/exclusion. These findings should have a significant impact on how academic literacy development is conceptualised and implemented at tertiary level.

Adding to this, the longitudinal data were able to highlight connotations around the notions of 'home', where home remained a significant aspect of the participants' identity even while away from home and at University. The chapters all make a valuable contribution to understanding the paradigms and discourses with which the students enter University, including religious paradigms, which are often challenged in disciplinary discourses (particularly those of Philosophy and Science). Many students maintain their religious beliefs as a framework that enables them to stay positive and maintain a good working ethic in the context of challenging home and academic environments. The manner in which this issue is dealt with within the book is so convincing and authentic that it works as a cautionary tale to academics who may disregard religious beliefs as such beliefs may contribute to persistence and retention, particularly amongst a vulnerable group of students.

Overall, the book makes an extremely important contribution to the global conversation around widening access and participation by offering an in-depth understanding of student experiences at UCT. Over and above this, each aspect of the research project is able to critique the dominant, yet deficit, assumption that students will be passively assimilated into disciplinary discourses after they have been rehabilitated in adjunct, first-year practices without any changes to mainstream teaching practices and institutional culture. This then offers an important commentary on approaches to teaching and learning, and academic development which are commonplace at many South African universities.

How to cite:

Bernard, T. (2018). Review on Bangeni, B. & Kapp, R. (Eds.). *Negotiating Learning and Identity in Higher Education: Access, Persistence and Retention.* London: Bloomsbury. (2017). *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa*, 6(1), 117–119. DOI: 10.24085/jsaa.v6i1.3074

Author biographies

Dr Taryn Bernard is a Lecturer and Coordinator of the Extended Degree Programme in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Stellenbosch University, South Africa.

Dr Rubby Dhunpath is the Director of Teaching and Learning at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), South Africa. His previous appointments include that of Teacher Educator at UKZN, Senior Research Specialist at the Human Sciences Research Council and Rockefeller Research Fellow at the University of Illinois. A Fulbright and Spencer Alumni, he now provides leadership for the promotion of scholarship in teaching and learning, and institutional research. He is also an Advisor/Mentor in the Teaching Advancement at Universities (TAU) Fellowship. Rubby has researched and published in education and language policy, organisational ethnographies and higher education curriculum.

Prof. Nirmala Dorasamy is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Public Management and Economics, Faculty of Management Science. Being a rated researcher, she has widely published in accredited journals both locally and internationally. Her research focus areas include ethics, leadership and governance with particular focus on the public sector. Her expertise has been widely recognised by international journals, earning her nomination to several editorial boards. Being a member of the discipline specific organisations has enabled her to chair track sessions at several conferences. She has successfully supervised and examined master's and doctoral students.

Prof. Liezel Frick is an Associate Professor in the Department of Curriculum Studies and the Director of the Centre for Higher and Adult Education at the Faculty of Education at Stellenbosch University, South Africa. Her research interests are within the broader field of doctoral education, with a particular focus on aspects of doctoral creativity and originality, learning during the doctorate, and doctoral supervision. Her master's and doctoral students work more broadly within the fields of higher and adult education, where most tend to focus on staff development, student experiences of learning environments, and workplace learning. Liezel is a member of the International Doctoral Education Research Network (IDERN), as well as of the Special Interest Group of the European Association for Research on Learning and Instruction (EARLI) on Researcher Education and Careers. She has received the Best African Accomplished Educational Researcher Award for 2013-2014 by the African Development Institute (ADI) and the Association for the Development of Education in South Africa (ADEA), and currently holds a South African National Research Foundation Y2 rating.

Dr Mpho Priscilla Jama ventured into higher education in 2000 as a Lecturer in the Division Student Learning and Development (DSLD) in the Faculty of Health Sciences (FHS) at the University of the Free State in Bloemfontein, South Africa. Presently, she is the head of DSLD and is primarily responsible for the academic development and support of undergraduate students in the FHS. Part of that responsibility includes teaching in the MBChB and B Medical Science undergraduate programmes. She also teaches and supervises postgraduate students in the Health Professions Education programme. Dr Jama is also an internal and external examiner for postgraduate studies. Dr Jama's research expertise is intertwined with her work in the DSLD. This follows from doctoral work (completed in 2009) on the design of an academic support and development programme to combat attrition among medical undergraduates. Her current research explores the academic environment, with specific focus on the manner in which humane values are modelled in curricular and co-curricular teaching and learning practices and activities. She places a particular emphasis on practices that often subject students to inordinate stress resulting from hostile teaching and learning environments. Her research and expertise has earned her international and national recognition and awards, such as Golden Key International Honour, a Fulbright scholarship in 2013 through which she was subsequently hosted as a visiting research scholar for almost a year at the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) in the USA. Nationally, she has served on the executive of the Higher Education Learning and Teaching Association of South Africa (HELTASA). She serves as a reviewer for conference abstracts and research articles nationally and internationally. Furthermore, she is a co-founder of the First-Year Experience (FYE) Special Interest Group (SIG) which was awarded a Teaching and Learning Grant by the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) to establish a South African National Resource Centre (SANRC) for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition. She serves as a member of the conference scientific committee/editorial board for the International Institute for Academic Development. Presently, her focus is on writing a book, which was drafted during her Fulbright scholarship at UCLA. The tentative title of her book is "Towards a humanistic pedagogy: teaching students in complex and demanding academic environments".

Prof. Thierry M. Luescher is a Research Director in the Education and Skills Development Research Programme of the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), Cape Town, and an affiliated Associate Professor in Higher Education Studies at the University of the Free State (UFS), Mangaung, South Africa. Before that, he was Assistant Director for Institutional Research at the UFS, a Senior Lecturer in Higher Education Studies and extraordinary Senior Lecturer in Political Studies at the University of the Western Cape, and a Senior Researcher in the Centre for Higher Education Transformation (CHET), Cape Town. He has a PG Diploma in Higher Education from the UFS and obtained his PhD in Political Studies from the University of Cape Town. Thierry researches, teaches and consults on matters of international and comparative higher education, with particular interest in the nexus of higher education with politics in Africa, higher education policy and governance, student politics, the student experience, student affairs, and higher education development in Africa. He has published in local and international scholarly journals, along with several chapters in internationally edited books. He is a founder and editor of the *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa*, and member of the editorial boards of the *Journal of College Student*

Development, *Makerere Journal of Higher Education* and *African Higher Education Dynamics*. Thierry recently edited the book *Student Politics in Africa: Representation and Activism* (with M. Klemenčič and J.O. Jowi, 2016). His publication list and links to open access downloads can be viewed at www.thierryluescher.net.

Prof. Tracey McKay has over 20 years' experience in teaching in Higher Education. She has a number of teaching qualifications, teaching awards, community engagement awards and a Research Award. She has supervised 20 master's students to completion and has 44 accredited publications to date. She is currently an Associate Professor at the University of South Africa (UNISA). Her PhD was on adventure tourism under the supervision of Prof. Chris Rogerson. Her research interests include adventure tourism, environmental management, school commuting, private schooling, and teaching and learning in higher education. She is currently the President-Elect of the Society of South African Geographers (SSAG).

Ms Celine Meyers is a Research Assistant at the South African National Resource Centre for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition (SANRC). She holds a BA in Psychology, BA Hons in Sociology (cum laude) and is currently in the final stages of completing her MA in Sociology. Celine received an award for the best research project in 2016 (Sociology) at the University of Johannesburg (UJ), South Africa, and currently sits on the Dean's list in the Humanities Faculty. In addition, she has received scholarship awards from the National Research Foundation (NRF), UJ merit awards and the Global Excellence and Stature (GES). Her research interests include studies in online communication, higher education, and international and national migration.

Dr Nosisana Mkonto is the Head of Department of the Student Learning Unit and the Coordinator for the First-Year Experience at Fundani Centre for Higher Education Development (CHED) at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT), South Africa. Her responsibilities include leading and coordinating FYE initiatives in the institution. She holds a Secondary Teachers' Diploma (STD) from the Lennox Sebe College of Education, a BA from UNISA, a BEd and MEd (Education Support) from the University of Cape Town, and a BTech (Business Administration) and PhD from the University of the Western Cape. She also holds the following positions: Deputy Chairperson: IsiXhosa National Lexicography Unit (XNLU); Chairperson: Fundani Ethics Committee; Chairperson: CPUT Institutional First-Year Experience Committee, and member of CPUT Disability Advisory Forum. Previous positions include; Coordinator Technical Committee (XNLU); Lecturer (Faculty of Education and Business Faculty, CPUT), Academic Development Lecturer (Fundani CHED, CPUT) and Teacher (Western Cape Education Department). Her research interests include student support and development, learning and teaching styles, peer support, mentoring and first-year experience. Nosisana has held an Erasmus Mundus scholarship as visiting scholar at the University of Hull, UK. She has presented papers at both national and international conferences, and has published articles in journals.

Prof. Teboho Moja is Clinical Professor of Higher Education at New York University. Her teaching experience includes high school and university levels. Teboho has held key positions at several South African universities, including being appointed Chair of the Council of the University of South Africa. She has held positions as Professor Extraordinaire at the University of Pretoria, the University of Johannesburg and the University of the Western Cape, and has been Visiting Professor at the University of Oslo (Norway) and the University of Tampere (Finland). She was instrumental in setting up the Centre for Higher Education Trust (CHET) in South Africa and is currently serving as Chair of its board. In addition, she has served on the boards of international bodies such as the UNESCO Institute for International Education Planning and the World Education Market. She has also served as Executive Director and Commissioner to the National Commission on Higher Education (1995–1996) appointed by President Mandela. Before joining New York University, Teboho served as a special advisor to two ministers of education in post-1994 South Africa. She has authored several articles on higher education reform issues in areas such as the governance of higher education, policy processes, and impact of globalisation on higher education, and co-authored a book on educational change in South Africa. She is a founding member and Editor-in-chief of the *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa*.

Ms Lebo Mosebua is an Administrative Support Specialist at the South African National Resource Centre for the First Year Experience and Students in Transition (SANRC). She has over seven years of work experience within the Higher Education sector. Prior to joining SANRC, she worked at the School of Leadership (SoL), where she was responsible for coordinating SLP programmes (related to Industrial Policy, Strategic Diplomacy and Transitional Justice), focusing on the complex emergencies associated with insurgency and counter-insurgency campaigns on the Horn of Africa. In addition to coordinating the programmes, she acted as a communication liaison for SoL with policy makers from Zambia, Swaziland, Botswana and Zimbabwe. She is a certified Public Relations and Communications Practitioner and holds an additional qualification in Management Services through the Faculty of Engineering, conferred by the University of Johannesburg, South Africa. She is currently in the process of completing her Master's in Business Administration as well as accumulating credits in order to become a Chartered Communications Practitioner. She is an honorary member and co-founder of the Students Public Relations Association (SPRA), an academic support structure and student chapter under the Public Relations Institute of Southern Africa (PRISA).

Mr Anban Naidoo is the Director of Student Academic Services at the University of the Free State, South Africa. He holds a BCom Accounting qualification from the University of Cape Town, an Information Systems qualification from the Cape Peninsula University of Technology, and a Master's in Business Administration (MBA) from the University of Pretoria. His interests include a broad range of fields centred around innovation and systems thinking in the Higher Education sector, such as student recruitment, applications, admissions, assessments, curriculum management, student record management, graduation, student finance and financial aid. Anban has also had the privilege of working for the University of Cape Town and the University of Pretoria, two of South Africa's top universities.

Dr Rejoice Nsibande is the Head of Evaluation Services in the Centre for Learning, Teaching and Development at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), South Africa. Her responsibilities are to support academic staff in their engagement with evaluations of their teaching and courses. This involves individual consultations, facilitating workshops and formal sessions. Her research interest is on evaluations of teaching as a social practice, focusing on the interplay between evaluation practices and institutional culture in the context of academic staff development and quality teaching. She has written and presented papers in this area of interest. Currently, she is also actively involved in two projects of the Higher Education Learning and Teaching Association of Southern Africa (HELTASA), as Chair of the Teaching Excellence Awards Committee and as an Advisor in the Teaching Advancement at University Fellowship (TAU).

Dr Annsilla Nyar is Director of the South African National Resource Centre for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition (SANRC). The SANRC is an independent national centre based at the University of Johannesburg (UJ), South Africa. Prior to this, she held several senior management positions, including that of Senior Researcher at the Gauteng City-Region Observatory (GCRO), a partnership between the Gauteng Provincial Government, UJ and the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits); Research Manager at Higher Education South Africa (HESA), now Universities South Africa (USAF). Annsilla has over 20 years of experience in the world of academia. She holds a Master's degree in Political Science from the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) and a PhD through the Department of Political Studies at Wits.

Dr Vino Paideya is a Lecturer and First Year Coordinator in the School of Chemistry & Physics at the University of KwaZulu Natal (UKZN), Westville campus, South Africa. She has a Bachelor's degree in Science with Chemistry majors and a PhD in Chemistry education. Dr Paideya has received certification as a Supplemental Instruction (SI) Supervisor from the University of Missouri, Kansas City. Her research interests are first year student experiences, chemistry education and student academic support programmes (SI). She has also worked with the UKZN Teaching and Learning Office on several institutional research projects. She has published journal articles and conference proceedings in her fields of interest. Dr Paideya has also presented papers both nationally and internationally at conferences and seminars.

Dr Subethra Pather is currently the Teaching & Learning Specialist in the office of the Deputy Vice Chancellor Academic at the University of the Western Cape (UWC). Included in her portfolio is the coordination of the Institution-Wide Tutor Programme and First-Year Experience at UWC. She is currently the Convenor for the HELTASA

Special Interest Group: Tutoring & Mentoring. Dr Pather, who holds a Doctorate of Education, was awarded a Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) scholarship from the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Centre for Critical Research on Race & Identity (UKZN – CCRRI's nationwide project titled Education and Emancipation: A critical, intervention-orientated investigation of obstacles and opportunities within higher education and training in South Africa). Dr Pather's research interests lie in the higher education field with particular focus on student learning support, first-year experience, and student access and success. Her academic publications and presentations are centred in this field. She is also involved in several national and international networks in first-year experience to advance her research agenda.

Dr Birgit Schreiber is Senior Director of Student Affairs at Stellenbosch University, South Africa. Prior to that, she was the Director of the Centre for Student Support Services at the University of the Western Cape (UWC) in Cape Town. She holds a PhD from UWC. Birgit has published in national and international academic journals on student support and development, has presented research papers and keynotes in national and international conferences, and has given lectures at the UC Berkley, the University of Leuven (Netherlands), and the University of Oslo (Norway). She was a visiting scholar at the UC Berkeley, where she was involved in their student affairs department. She has also been involved in various quality assurance panels reviewing student affairs at South African universities, and has taken part in the national review of the South African Student Engagement tool (SASSE). She has been a member of the national executive of various national professional organisations, including the South African Association of Senior Student Affairs Professionals (SAASSAP), and currently serves on the Executive of the Southern African Federation of Student Affairs and Services (SAFSAS). She is also the Africa Regional Coordinator of the International Association of Student Affairs and Services (IASAS). She is a founding member of the Editorial Executive of the *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa*.

Prof. Ian Scott is Professor Emeritus in the Centre for Higher Education Development at the University of Cape Town, having been Director of Academic Development for many years. He has served on task teams and has undertaken research for various policy bodies, including the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), the Council on Higher Education (CHE) and the World Bank, and led the research and report-writing for the CHE's investigation into undergraduate curriculum reform, published in 2013. He has also served on the DHET's Foundation Provision Reference Group, which advises the Minister on policy and funding for Extended Curriculum Programmes, since its inception. His main research interests are in higher education policy related to teaching and learning, comparative models for widening successful participation in higher education, and curriculum development.

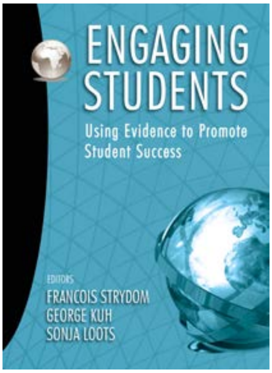
Dr Zack Simpson is an educational development Lecturer in the Faculty of Engineering and the Built Environment at the University of Johannesburg, South Africa. He holds a PhD in Education from the University of Cape Town. His research interests include engineering education, higher education studies, academic literacies, and social semiotics. He has produced more than 25 publications, including journal articles, book chapters and conference papers, in these areas. Zach is also on the editorial boards of journals, such as *SOTL in the South* and *Visual Communication*.

Thank you to our reviewers

The *JSAA* Editorial Executive wishes to thank the peer reviewers of Volume 5 of the *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* for their time and expertise in evaluating and helping to select and improve the submissions received:

Lucy Alexander
Mumthaz Banoobhai
Lisa Bardill Moscaritolo
Kasturi Behari-Leak
Jaco Brink
Kat Callahan
Graham Dampier
Arona Diso
Alten du Plessis
Ronel du Preez
Adnan Farah
James Garraway
Natheem Hendricks
Mpho Jama
Moyra Keane
Brenda Leibowitz
Hennie Lotter
Arno Louw
Henry Mason
Kibbie Naidoo
Najwa Noordien-Fataar
Femi Otulaja
Vino Paideya
Sue Pather
Moragh Paxton
Adriana Perez Encinas
Roshini Pillay
Vianna Renaud
Birgit Schreiber
Rob Shea
Liesl Smith
Jenni Underhill
André van Zyl
Chris Winberg

Publications by AFRICAN SUN MeDIA

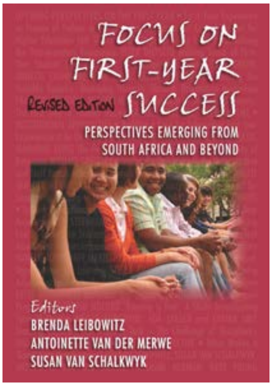


Engaging Students: Using Evidence to Promote Student Success by Francois Strydom, George Kuh & Sonja Loots (Eds.) (2017)

"[It] is the first comprehensive manuscript on research into student engagement in South African higher education. Each of the chapters has a clear, distinguishable focus and makes an original contribution in and of itself, while retaining the central focus on student engagement. The book provides a rich, informative picture of the current state of student engagement evaluation, while also highlighting challenges and opportunities for future advances. A particular strength of this publication is its emphasis on the importance of taking evidence-based decisions, and showing how the South African Survey of Student Engagement (SASSE) can provide the evidence for well-informed changes in policy and practice in order to enhance student success."

– Professor Magda Fourie-Malherbe,
Stellenbosch University, South Africa

ISBN 978-1-928424-08-6 R335 260 pages
ISBN 978-1-928424-09-3 R265 (e-book) DOI: 10.18820/9781928424093



Focus on First-Year Success: Perspectives emerging from South Africa and beyond by Brenda Leibowitz, Antoinette van der Merwe & Susan van Schalkwyk (Eds.) [revised ed.] (2012)

"The importance of the first-year experience is now well recognised. This collection of papers makes a fascinating and important contribution to our understanding of students' transition to higher education. This is a scholarly, engaging and illuminating text that is relevant not only in the context of South Africa but for anyone interested in student learning in the first year of university education."

– Professor David Gosling,
Plymouth University, U.S.A.

ISBN 978-1-920338-12-1 R365 285 pages
ISBN 978-1-920338-22-0 Free (e-book) DOI: 10.18820/9781920338220

AFRICAN SUN MeDIA is an integrated content manager and specialist supplier of publishing and printing services for the higher education market and the private sector. We publish under the imprints SUN PRESS, SUN MeDIA, Rapid Access Publishers (RAP) and Conference-RAP. Most of our publications are available in electronic and print format at:

orders@africansunmedia.co.za
www.sun-e-shop.co.za
africansunmedia.snapplify.com (e-books)
www.africansunmedia.co.za

Submissions

Please register as an author and read the Author Guidelines at http://www.jsaa.ac.za. Submissions must be made by email to the Journal Manager at jsaa_editor@outlook.com. Submissions in response to special calls for papers must also be made directly to the guest editors concerned (see Call for Papers).

The *JSAA* typically has themed issues. However, submissions that fall within the general scope and focus of the Journal can be made at any time and may be published irrespective of the overall theme of the Journal. Particularly encouraged are open-theme manuscripts that address the following:

- Case studies of innovative practices in student affairs in the context of African higher education (e.g. student lifecycle, orientation, residence management, student governance, student counselling).
- High-level reflective practitioner accounts.
- Explorations of the nexus of student affairs theory, policy and practice in the African context and beyond.
- Conceptual discussions of student development, and key enablers and inhibitors of student development in Africa.
- Explorations of authoritative literature, theory and professional trends related to student affairs in Africa.

Please note that there are different requirements for different types of manuscripts:

- **Research articles:** Contributors are encouraged to submit research-based manuscripts. Research articles must include an extensive consideration of recent literature and relevant theory. Research-based articles must be original and research-based and must make a significant conceptual (or empirical or normative) contribution relevant to the scope and focus of the *JSAA*. The length must be approximately 5 000 words, including all references, notes, tables and figures. Manuscripts should be accompanied by an abstract of approximately 150–300 words.
- **Reflective practitioner accounts:** High-quality reports on professional campus practice are screened and reviewed according to the same criteria as for research articles, albeit with a different emphasis. Unlike a research article, they do not need to include an extensive consideration of recent literature and theory, but they must nonetheless comply with standard academic convention and scholarly practice. Reflective practitioner articles must be original, must make a significant empirical contribution, and must significantly enhance our understanding of student affairs practice within their respective scope and focus. Typical length should be 2 500–5 000 words. Manuscripts should be accompanied by an abstract of approximately 150–300 words.
- **Book reviews** should be between 800 and 1 000 words in length. Competent reviews of key student affairs books are published at the discretion of the Editorial Executive.
- **Comments and critique**, of no more than 2 500 words, are also welcome.
- **Proposal for the Journal's Dialogue/Interview section and Calls and Notices** should be emailed directly to the Journal Manager. The publication of calls and notices (for conferences, vacancies, etc.) may incur a nominal fee.

Authors are required to check their submission's compliance with all of the following items, and submissions that do not adhere to these guidelines may be returned to authors.

1. The ethical requirements of social research have been considered and fully complied with.
2. The submission has not been previously published, nor is it before another journal for consideration (or an explanation has been provided in Comments to the Editor).
3. The submission file is in MS Word, OpenOffice, or RTF document file format.
4. The text is double-spaced; uses a 12-point font; employs italics rather than underlining (except with URL addresses); and all illustrations, figures and tables are placed within the text at the appropriate points, rather than at the end.
5. The text adheres to the stylistic and bibliographic requirements outlined on the Journal's website.
6. The Journal uses the APA author–date referencing system.
7. If submitting to a peer-reviewed section of the Journal, i.e. as a research article or reflective practioner account, the instructions in Ensuring a Blind Peer Review must have been followed.
8. If submitting a proposal for the Dialogue section, a Call/Notice, or a Comment/Critique, this should be emailed directly to the Journal Manager.

9. The final text of the article has been professionally edited and proofread prior to submission.
10. The front page of the manuscript indicates the Section under which it is proposed that the article be published, i.e. Research Article (peer-reviewed); Reflective Practice (peer-reviewed); or Book Reviews/Dialogues/other contributions.
11. Permission to reproduce any copyrighted material has been obtained and can be produced should this be requested by the Editorial Excecutive.

Section review policy and process

The *JSAA* publishes research articles (peer-reviewed); high-quality reflective practitioner accounts (peer-reviewed); dialogues/interviews (non-reviewed); and book reviews (non-reviewed). The Journal is committed to assisting emerging scholars and professionals in developing promising manuscripts to the point of publication.

Editorial commentary
☐ Open submissions ☑ Indexed ☐ Peer reviewed

Research articles and professional practitioner accounts
☑ Open submissions ☑ Indexed ☑ Peer reviewed

Campus dialogue/interview section
☑ Open submissions ☑ Indexed ☐ Peer reviewed

Book reviews
☑ Open submissions ☑ Indexed ☐ Peer reviewed

The editorial and peer-review policy adheres to the *ASSAf National Code of Best Practice in Editorial Discretion and Peer Review for South African Scholarly Journals* (ASSAf Council, 2008). All submitted manuscripts undergo an initial careful examination by the Editorial Executive to ensure that authors' submissions fall within the mission, scope and focus of the *JSAA* and conform to scholarly best practice. Qualifying scholarly research-based articles and high-quality, relevant reflective practitioner accounts are blind-reviewed by at least two peer reviewers, who would typically be members of the International Editorial Advisory Board of the *JSAA*. Peer reviewers have proven scholarly and/or professional expertise in the subject matter of a manuscript. Reviewer reports are assessed by a member of the Editorial Executive and form the basis of any decision by the Editorial Executive on how to proceed with a manuscript. The suitability of a manuscript is evaluated in terms of originality, significance, scholarship and adherence to the requirements of ethical social research, scope and interest, and accessibility.

Publishing and dissemination policies

Cost of publishing
There are no processing fees or page fees. No costs accrue to authors of articles accepted for publication.

Licensing notice
Authors who publish with this Journal agree to the following terms:

Authors retain copyright and grant the Journal right of first publication with the work simultaneously licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution License that allows others to share the work with an acknowledgement of the work's authorship and initial publication in this Journal.

Authors are able to enter into separate, additional contractual arrangements for the non-exclusive distribution of the Journal's published version of the work (e.g. post it to an institutional repository or publish it in a book), with an acknowledgement of its initial publication in this Journal.

Authors are permitted and encouraged to post their work online (e.g. in online research repositories or on their website), as it can lead to productive exchanges, as well as earlier and greater citation of published work.

Open access policy
This Journal provides open access to its e-journal content. Free copies can be downloaded from the Journal website at http://www.jsaa.ac.za, and from co-hosting sites e.g. http://ajol.info. Authors are encouraged to place copies of their final articles in their institution's research repository.

Print copies/subscription

- Online subscriptions to the e-journal are free of charge. Please register at http://www.jsaa.ac.za.
- Printed copies of past issues of the Journal (Vol. 1 to Vol. 4(1)) can be ordered from the following online bookstores: African Books Collective http://www.africanbookscollective.com/; Amazon Books http://www.amazon.com or directly from African Minds http://www.africanminds.co.za.
- Printed copies from Vol. 4(2) and following can be ordered directly from African Sun Media at orders@africansunmedia.co.za.

Journal of Student Affairs in Africa

The *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* (*JSAA*) is an independent, peer-reviewed, multi-disciplinary, open-access academic journal that publishes scholarly research and reflective discussions about the theory and practice of student affairs in Africa.

AFRICAN SUN MEDIA
UNIVERSITEIT STELLENBOSCH UNIVERSITY
OPEN ACCESS

ISSN 2311-1771 (print)
ISSN 2307-6267 (electronic)