Student Evaluations of Available Academic Support and Development Programmes in the Faculty of Education at a University of Technology in South Africa

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Introduction
Academic support is central to student success and retention at university and some scholars have argued that university access without support is no opportunity (Tinto, 1986). Wilson-Strydom (2010) maintained that widening access does not automatically translate to 'epistemological access' and student success at first year level, and that this requires the transition from high school to university to be carefully managed and monitored to ensure student success. In order to enhance student learning and counter the high drop-out and attrition rates at South African universities, the Department of Higher Education in South Africa ring-fences a substantial amount of funding for academic support and development. Some of the support and development interventions provided by universities have been successful in improving student learning, while others have not been that successful (CHE, 2015).

Academic development practitioners argue for the seamless integration of students' academic and social lives for the holistic development of students (Moja and France: 2014, Wilson-Strydom (2010), Petersen, Louw, Dumont (2009). In the same vein, Ashwin, Boud, Coate, Hallett, Keane, Krause, Leibowitz, MacLaren, McArthur, McCune and Tooher (2015:280) also maintain that teachers, trainers, lecturers, researchers and *all* who support the learning of others should provide intellectual, social and emotional support which helps learners to develop expertise in their learning for it to be effective and secure." Given this understanding of the need for a holistic approach to student support and development, the study evaluated 'academic and non-academic support and development programmes' (CHE: 2015) that are in place in the Faculty of Education at a University of Technology to establish student views on the effectiveness of the academic support programme how they have influenced their learning.

The CHE's Institutional Audits Directorate (2015) provides a useful distinction between academic and non-academic support and development programmes/interventions:

Academic support and development: helping students successfully execute the tasks required to succeed in their academic programme. This includes providing training in study skills, activities to develop academic literacies and additional support related to specific courses such as tutoring.

Non-academic support and development: involves helping students successfully navigate the challenges associated with being a university student and with life in general. This includes providing training in life skills such as time and stress management, peer mentoring, lifestyle and psychological counseling and special services needed by students with disabilities.

The CHE's QEP report (2015: 113-130) identified the following student development support structures that were perceived as successful in the 23 higher education institutions: organizational structures for promoting teaching –learning, central student services division, faculty structures that offer a variety of student support programmes, faculty-based academic staff development units, support offered at departmental level and centralized committees that focus on student access and support, support programmes for first-year students (First Year Experience and orientation), academic support and development (development of academic literacies, writing support and the use of on-line programmes) subject-specific academic support and development (Supplemental Instruction, extra tutorials, tutor-training focusing on at-risk subjects), and non-academic support and development (mentoring and peer support, life skills development and counseling, support for students with disabilities and those living in university residences, career guidance and counseling, work-place –related skills and links with alumni, employers, professions and curricula).

However, the report also stipulates that some of the support and development programmes/interventions were not always successful for a variety of reasons, viz. technology challenges; time-tabling and the fact that academic

support by its very nature is voluntary; communication about and the use of available services and structural, financial and staffing constraints (QEP Report 2015:131-138).

This research project gives the student perspective on the perceived effectiveness of available support and development programmes in the Faculty of Education at a University of Technology. The purpose of the study was to explore student evaluations of the available academic support programmes in the Faculty of Education. The study targeted second year B.Ed. (FET & GET) students and included at- risk students enrolled in high-impact subjects from this cohort.

Study Context

The Faculty of Education is the largest provider of pre-service teacher education in the Western Cape. Following the re-structuring of the higher education landscape in South African universities during the late 1990's there has been widening participation of all racial groups from different educational backgrounds in higher education. In a context such as one described above, academic and non-academic support programmes play a pivotal role in promoting 'epistemological accesses, success and retention.

Rationale

Whilst many a study has been published about success factors in Higher Education, the peer review of teaching and student evaluation of courses, not much has been written on the perceived value and effectiveness of available academic support programmes in diverse South African higher education contexts. The rationale for the present study was to explore how students experienced and evaluated the support and development programmes.

Research Problem
Although a few studies have been published on factors that influence first year students' experiences and academic performance (*Pather: 2015*), there have not been any studies conducted in the Faculty of Education at this institution to explore the effectiveness of existing academic and non-academic support programmes and their contribution to student learning, retention and success. It is my argument in this paper that academic and non-academic support programmes in higher education must be sustained throughout the undergraduate studies and should be monitored and evaluated regularly *by the recipients* of the programmes/interventions and the providers of these services in order to enhance student learning and for quality assurance purposes.

Research Questions
The current study sought to address the following questions:
1. Which academic and non-academic support programmes are in place in the Education Faculty to address student learning needs and promote retention and success? How effective have these programmes/interventions been in enhancing student learning?

2. How have students in the Faculty of Education experienced these programmes?

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study were to:

1. Establish effectiveness of academic and non-academic support programmes that are available for students in the Education Faculty;
2. Explore how the students have experienced these programmes

Aim of the Study

The overall aim of the study was to evaluate the effectiveness of available academic and non-academic support and development programmes/strategies in the faculty so that an effective student and development support service that addresses students' needs in a more direct and focused way is in made available to students.

Limitations of the Study

The small-scale case study findings cannot be generalized to other contexts. However, in keeping with the nature of pragmatic research, valuable lessons can be drawn from the study and utilised to strengthen academic support programmes in other faculties at CPUT and in similar contexts.

Conceptual Framework

The study used the *CHE framework* for understanding student success which comprises the following elements: teaching, curriculum, assessment, learning resources, student enrolment management, academic and non-academic support and development. The model was chosen because of its currency and relevance in the S.A context. The study also utilised the University of Western Sydney's four-part quality framework which emphasizes the importance of adopting a *whole-of institution systems approach* to quality improvement Ashwin, Boud, Coate, Hallett, Keane, Krause, Leibowitz, MacLaren, McArthur, Mc Cune and Tooher (2015:280-281). The systemic framework is made up of the following components which form the Institutional Quality Management system: curriculum design standards, support standards, impact and outcome indicators, Sahney, Banwet & Karunes (2004:145) argue that TQM concepts should be increasingly applied to higher education as there is currently a definite move from physical access to quality management. In keeping with this view, the focus of this research was on the evaluation of the quality of support offered in the Faculty of Education by students, based on their experience of these programmes/interventions.

Methodology
The case study used mixed - methods research (mixed research) to address the two questions above. According to Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004:14), the strength of a mixed research design is its "methodological pluralism or eclecticism which frequently results in superior research (compared to mono-method research)". The study is situated within a pragmatic research paradigm and uses both qualitative and quantitative research methods.

Data Collection
A student questionnaire was administered to investigate how the students had experienced the academic support interventions they had participated in, and whether they viewed them as having made it easier for them to understand the subject content. This was followed by focus group discussions.

Discussion of Findings

Questionnaires

Interventions /Strategies that were perceived as effective and promoting student learning

Strategies or interventions that were viewed as having helped students understand the subject matter better could be grouped into two categories: those that were *initiated by the student* (self-studying; using You-tube videos and Blackboard to enhance learning, making effective notes, attending lecturers and participating actively in the class discussions working independently in the library, practicing mathematical problems more often, using lecturer notes to consolidate one's learning, revising and researching, completing homework exercises and participating actively in group work, using Powerpoint slides and lecture notes, using the internet to search for information) and *those that involved support from others* (belonging to a study group, participating in tutorials, engaging in cooperative learning and collaborating with others, the support of family and friends, being part of a study group, consultation with lecturers and asking the lecturer and those who had to explain difficult-to understand content The following strategies /interventions were viewed as the *most effective strategies* in helping students pass their modules: the lecturer's teaching style (integration of technology into teaching, a participatory teaching style) subject –specific tutorials, peer- support (getting a student who had grasped what the lecturer had said during lectures to explain), collaboration with fellow students and studying in a group, mentoring, active listening and taking down notes, Teaching Practice workshops, collaboration/group study, researching, using the library and translating key disciplinary concepts into the learner's own language (isiXhosa in this case). Using a Likert scale, the students rated the efficacy of the support interventions as follows: using technology for learning (86,3%), completing tutorial tasks (87,3%), participating actively in class and during tutorials (87,8%), consulting lecturers and tutors on difficult sections

of the work (87,4%), collaborating with fellow students/joining a study group (81,4%), lecturer's use of technology when teaching (85,3%), subject –specific tutorial support (69,1%),mentoring and peer support (51,8%) and the lecturer's participatory teaching style (87,5%).

Support strategies that were perceived as least effective

The *unavailability* of some of the support interventions when needed led to some students rating them as least effective, for example, the Writing Centre Support. Writing support in the faculty is offered by a Consultant from the Teaching –Learning Centre who visits the faculty at least twice a week. The Writing Consultant was unable to attend to the students' needs because of his busy work schedule (105, 150, &131). Consequently, some of the students were not even aware that writing support was available in the faculty and therefore could not make any effective use of this resource. Although some who had made use of this service rated it highly in the focus group discussions, there was ambivalence about the writing support (agree & disagree = 33,5%; neither agree nor disagree = 33%, disagree & strongly disagree = 33,5%).

Mentoring/peer support was not available consistently, "There wasn't really any readily-available support from peers" (39), Although Blackboard and the use of technology had been identified as helpful by most students, the lecturers' lack of know-how when it comes to integrating technology into teaching was seen as a hindrance by students, "Often lecturers did not know how to use technology and wasted time trying to connect" (172). The LMS was reported as very unstable, "Most of the time Bb does not work (165), and student cards give problems (142). Sometimes they did not get access to the internet because most of the computers were not working, or were being used by fellow students, sometimes for stuff that was not related to their studies (229).

Teaching Practice workshops did not address the students' needs fully. "We learnt more in schools during Teaching Practice". (177). Some mentioned their lack of computer literacy skills as a challenge that put them at a disadvantage (125). Others claimed that they had not received any peer-mentoring/tutorial support in their second year of study (214) and the Reading Literacy and AL subject content overlapped immensely (156). Consequently, they found themselves repeating content that had been taught in the other course.

Focus Group Discussions

The following themes were generated from the Focus Group Discussions:

1. *Although the Faculty of Education offers a variety of useful, important and value-adding support and development programmes, some of the students were <u>not aware</u> of these as they were not properly advertised and marketed to students.*

Readers are Leaders '*improved my English language skills because Afrikaans is my home language… so it improved a bit (S4GET).* The writing support programme was useful (S4 GET). However, some students were not aware of where they needed to go to in order to get this kind of support (S6 & S8 FET). Some of the students had unrealistic expectations about the Writing Centre support and expected the Writing Consultant to identify and correct all the errors in the entire assignment (S2 FET).The writing component within the Reading Literacy programme was rated positively, '*So, they give us an opportunity to do an assignment and submit to them, so that they can go through the assignment, you see. And then they give feedback, you see –like 'no you must correct this thing, you see.'(S5GET).*

 Some viewed the Reading Literacy course as 'too complex and least helpful' and ultimately dropped out of the programme because they could not understand the work (S3 FET). It was also perceived as disorganised and not properly coordinated and was no longer offered after September in 2015 (S6 FET).

The 2015 pre- Teaching Practice workshops were viewed as *'horrible' and 'disorganised' (S6GET),* '*some students dropped out of the programme'* (S7, S4 GET). *'But the stuff that we learnt was not beneficial to us… we could have spent that time doing something a lot more beneficial' (S2GET).* There was a marked *improvement in 2016 though, and some lecturers provided 'focused support'* (S2GET) and raised the student teachers' level of confidence. Although micro-teaching was found to be useful (S3GET) it could not prepare them adequately for the large classes they were confronted with during Teaching Practice (S8GET).

Besides the uneven provisioning of academic support in the GET and FET, there were divergent views on the implementation of tutorial support. Sometimes, much needed academic support was not available to students who were repeating courses, or had registered for high-impact modules. Although viewed as beneficial to student learning, the students perceived it as the weakest link because the tutors were not always available for their protégées since they also had to attend lecturers and complete assignments. The non-availability of student – tutors when needed is what prompted some students to rate them as <u>least effective</u> (S11GET). S9 FET strongly felt that with proper coordination, marketing and more focus on 'difficult' courses, struggling students would benefit immensely from peer-to-peer support (SI FET).
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> *Support should not be offered in every subject. It should focus on the majors instead. On like, I think literally sitting down and looking at how people pass ... so that means that they are struggling with this, so let's try and arrange a tutor for this subject. I don't believe we need a tutor for each subject."(S9 FET).*

Others (possibly the weaker students) felt that support should be offered in every subject (S6FET) – from first to fourth year. Instead of focusing on the class averages – which are sometimes misleading, lecturers could track students in a course manually and provide support where necessary (S7 FET).

2. Students are acutely aware of their learning needs and the support they require to address these needs

The B.Ed undergraduate curriculum structure was perceived as complex, content-heavy and demanding by the participants (S1, S9), and this in their view called for the need to re-structure and provide more focused support– especially for L2 students who were struggling with the medium of instruction (S1 & S9) and Computer Literacy and Afrikaans Kommunikasie (S6 & S7 FET) because of their previous limiting education experiences.

3. *The sustainability and quality assurance of support programmes is dependent on sustainable quality induction and training of all the 'service providers' on their roles and responsibilities.*

Part-time lecturer-tutors were always available, *'they've got time and they put us in a schedule for that time' (S8GET).* Some recommended that *'the faculty must outsource some of the support services' (S10GET).* S11GET maintained that one of the tutors: '*….was so helpful... He would ask, 'Did you do this? How did you find this, was it easy or hard? I think...was the reason why I managed to pass last year. He was so helpful.' (S1GET).* However, in the FET, the availability of part-time staff for tutoring and lecturing was seen as a huge challenge (S7 FET) as student often had no access to them.

Continuity in the mentoring programme was seen as a key challenge as mentors were not always available to support fellow students and follow-up on students that had approached them for support. The tutors also had classes and assignments to complete and the 4th years (mentors are drawn from this group) are usually available during the first semester only and spend the second semester in the schools doing Teaching Practice (S9 FET).

4. Lecturer involvement and participation in student support is central to student success

For some of the participants, effective student support begins with the subject lecturer.

'*So, whenever we struggled with Maths, Mr... would actually get us off the morning before we attended the Maths class the following day and ask us to identify areas in which we needed support.' He would then explain and give us some activities to work on. This really helped us.'* This kind of support was no longer available as the lecturer had joined another institution and a replacement for him had not been found yet. One student observed *"So I think if you need help, you should be able to talk to your lecturer. Say I need help."(S7 FET)* When a follow-up question was asked on why they did not approach their lecturers when experiencing difficulties in their studies, S7 (FET) responded that some of their lecturers are part-time staff and were only available on certain days of the week, thus making it difficult for them to schedule appointments with their lecturers. S8GET was of the view that the curriculum structure needed to be re-visited as they were studying too many courses.

5. The successful implementation of the support programmes depends on effective communication

Student <u>awareness</u> of available support programmes – institutionally and at faculty level is central to student support and can lead to students tapping into the available programmes to enhance their learning. Some of the students claimed that they were not aware of any support programmes on their campus as these – in particular FET support programmes were not advertised and students had to find the mentors themselves (S9 & S8 FET). The multi-campus nature of the institution itself posed communication problems. The Faculty of Education which more or less operates as a single entity because of its distance from the other campuses, is not immune to these challenges (S8FET).

Others were aware of the writing support that is made available to the students in the Faculty by the Teaching-Learning Centre (S5 & S6, FET), tutorial support (S8FET), mentoring support (S9FET), and Reading Literacy support (S3FET). However, S1 FET lamented that many of the available support programmes in the faculty "*focus on first year IFP and Foundation Phase - and - even though we are no longer first year students, we still need the academic support. These programmes are advertised all over campus*". The student also observed that these programmes were "*not advertised correctly.*" This could mean the adverts were not placed in strategic positions where everybody could see them. (S8 FET) concurred that there were no visible support initiatives for FET students, "*there might be tutors who will tutor FET students, but they are not putting anything up to show that there are tutors and this is where we can find them. And on campus, nobody wants to take responsibility as far as admin is concerned. We don't know where to go, who to go to, who to ask.*" When asked why they did not consult their lecturers about available tutorial support, S8 FET responded as follows," "*You actually have to find someone – on a personal note, instead of a lecturer referring you for support because they don't have any tutor staff- except in the case of Maths Literacy where they have tutorial support from second to fourth year.*" In short, tutorial support which is available only in select courses was viewed as ad hoc and poorly-organised.

6. Resource constraints impact on the viability and sustainability of programmes

Some of the programmes though useful and highly valued by students, are not always fully operational or available because of resource constraints. Resource provisioning e.g. computer labs, number of mentors and tutors; equity of provisioning: swimming pool, shuttle service, gymn facilities in a multiple delivery site institution*,* feeding scheme was seen as crucially important. The on-line Can Academy Mathematics programme which the faculty had since discontinued was found to be extremely helpful, in particular by students who had not studied pure Mathematics in Matric (S9, S6 GET). The instability of the LMS (S1GET), the social conditions of the students as many had no computers at home (S3& S1GET), students hogging the few functioning computers in the labs and using them for non-educational purposes (S1GET) affected the sustainability of the programmes and the quality of support provided.

Lessons Learnt
- Effective academic support begins with the lecturer. Discipline-specific support should be scaffolded into content to enable students to experience its immediate relevance. The lecturer is best placed to track and monitor at- risk students and can provide the necessary targeted support.

- Technology-aided teaching and support is highly valued by students since it appeals to their varied learning styles.
- Support interventions should be offered consistently and on time. Although writing support is highly valued in this context, its value is lost if it is offered erratically, or students are not even aware of where to go to get this kind of support.

- The induction and training of tutors and mentors, monitoring and evaluation is an important cog in the academic support wheel and a means of improving the quality of the support offered. Student satisfaction surveys should be conducted for quality assurance purposes, especially when the support is mainly in the form of stand-alone modules as is the case in most universities.

- Students will only tap into available academic support programmes when these are communicated and marketed efficiently and effectively to them. Marketing becomes crucially important in academic support because of the voluntary nature of these programmes.

- Resource constraints impact on the viability and sustainability of academic support programmes.

- An integrated support strategy that puts the lecturer at the centre of the support project should be offered throughout the under-graduate programme and scaffolded into content.

Conclusion

The study presented a student perspective on the effectiveness of available academic support and development programmes in a Faculty of Education. The findings indicate the importance of applying systems thinking to academic and non-academic support and development programmes in order to promote efficiency and enhance the quality and overall academic experience of the student. Objective evaluations by the recipients of the programmes create an opportunity for the 'service providers' to reflect on the impact of the academic support programmes on offer and provide corrective and focused improvement strategies.

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