



Examining the Efficacy of Student Academic Support Systems for 'At Risk' First Entering Students at a Historically Disadvantaged South African University

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Abstract

The study sought to establish what academic support programmes, policies and systems were in place to support first entering students who were at risk of not succeeding with their studies at a historically disadvantaged rural based South African University. The study examined institutional frameworks for supporting at-risk students and systems used to monitor academic support systems, existing relationships and practices that prevailed, and lecturers' attitudes towards support systems for students who were academically 'at-risk' at the university. The study is premised on the qualitative research paradigm and the chosen research design was the case study design. An open-ended questionnaire was used to collect data from a sample of 100 'at-risk' students, 20 lecturers, and 1 Information Management System Officer who was directly dealing with first entering students in the University. The findings showed that the university support systems were inadequate as both the students and lecturers indicated that support was either not forthcoming, or they did not know where to get it. The study recommends vigorous marketing of academic support programmes to both staff and students, appropriate training for mentors and monitoring and evaluation of effectiveness of existing programmes.

Keywords First entering students · At-risk · Support systems · Historically disadvantaged

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Introduction

Researchers across the world argue that student information is important to the first year of study when transition from school to university may have an influence on academic performance (Budgen et al. 2014; Krase and Nyatepe-Coo 2012; Nelson et al. 2009). This is important to avoid students becoming at risk of failure at university (Grayson 2003; Mandel and Evans 2003; McKenzie and Schweitzer 2001). The issue of under-performing students has been reported in literature the world over. Martin (2017) reports that in the United States of America, up to one-third of first-year college students do not return for their sophomore year, while DeLaRosby (2017) indicates that an estimated 75% of college students who leave higher education institutions without obtaining a degree do so within their first 2 years of college. It is also reported that of all students who started college full time in *autumn* 2015 in any public or private institution in America, only 61% returned to the same institution in *autumn* 2016. (Lane 2018; National Student Clearing House [NSCH] 2017). In the same vein, Lane (2018) avers that the 6-year graduation rate for first-time, full-time undergraduate students who began seeking a Bachelor's degree at a 4-year degree-granting institution in *autumn* 2009 was 59%. In Australia, data show that nearly one in five Australian students leave their studies by the end of their first year (Cornelius et al. 2016). As a result, many institutions of higher education are implementing high-impact practices on their campuses to promote positive student outcomes (Provencher and Kassel 2017).

In South Africa, there is a worrying trend among South African universities that, despite government financial support to universities, students do not complete their academic programmes in time (Masehela et al. 2014; Mayet 2016; Scott 2009; Scott et al. 2007; Sikhwari et al. 2015). Cohort studies have shown that graduation rates at higher education institutions in South Africa indicated that only thirty percent of first entering students had graduated after 5 years of study (Scott et al. 2007). Meanwhile, according to Badat (2009), “throughput rates for 2000–2004 were between thirteen and fourteen percent while the cohort graduation rate was forty-five percent in 2004, with an overall dropout rate of forty-five percent...” (p. 11) Literature reveals that a number of factors such as under-preparedness for university learning, socio-economic background, gender, culture and the models of teaching are major factors that contribute to poor performance by students at risk (Banerjee and Lamb 2016; Jensen 2011; Ngalo-Morrison 2017). Several studies show that students are usually faced with a dilemma in identifying their academic support systems to avoid risk of failure at university with academic (or educational) development programmes across South Africa's tertiary institutions reaching only 10% of the student body (Mayet 2016; Scott et al. 2007). Other factors that affect academic performance include: module content, teaching and learning approaches, lecturers' attributes, assessment techniques, students' academic and non-academic performance, degree choices, career aspirations, discipline and interest in the subject (Forrester-Jones 2003; Lucas and Meyer 2004).

The Department of Education (2001) concluded that an average of 20% of all undergraduates and postgraduates drop out of the higher education system every

year in South Africa, and the drop out average for first-time entering students is 25%. The Department of Higher Education experiences financial challenges in funding university studies, and this causes student dropouts (Department of Education 2001). The International Education Association of South Africa (2012) states that higher education has a disturbing 45% drop-out rate among students. This undermines greatly the access gains of universities. A survey by the Human Science Research Council showed that 70% of higher education dropouts come from disadvantaged backgrounds. They become at-risk not only because they are underprepared for higher education but because they come from poor backgrounds. Language barriers, financial difficulties and lack of family support may also cause student drop-out (Doll et al. 2013; Letseka and Maile 2008). The issue of student dropouts and throughput is a major concern in higher education and needs to be addressed.

Students at risk of dropping out of school tend to have poor relationships with teachers (Hamre and Pianta 2001). A strong interpersonal relationship between teachers and students increases students' sense of school belonging and achievement, thus helping them to take on more challenging academic endeavours (Aragon 2002; Gentry et al. 2012). Opdenakker et al. (2012) and Tosevski et al. (2010) state that family problems, frustrations, tolerance, experimentation with drugs and alcohol, weak interpersonal attachments, academic overload, constant pressure to succeed, competition with peers and concerns about the future may hinder student academic performance. At-risk students are underprepared for learning or lack skills in meeting academic demands of post-secondary institutions (DeRoma et al. 2005; Ferguson 2000; Perez 1998).

Research Setting

The South African university system is differentiated into three institutional types. The first type are Traditional universities. These offer basic formative degrees such as Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor of Social Science and professional undergraduate degrees such as Bachelor of Science in Engineering and honours degrees. They also offer a range of Masters and Doctoral degrees at postgraduate level. The second type are Universities of technology; these offer mainly vocational or career-focused undergraduate degrees and diplomas and a limited number of Masters and doctoral programmes. The third type are Comprehensive universities; these offer programmes typical of a traditional university as well as programmes typical of a university of technology. Furthermore, the South African higher education system is hierarchical. Research-intensive traditional universities occupy the highest level; comprehensive universities (under which the university under study is classified) focus on mass higher education through provision of a hybrid of programmes focusing on both traditional university type and university of technology qualification. Lastly, Universities of Technology facilitate the acquisition of technology-based qualifications. This stratification, which was delineated in the National Plan for Higher Education (NPHE) (Department of Education 2001), stems from the apartheid era when there were separate higher education institutions for blacks and whites. Historically, black

or historically disadvantaged institutions (HDIs), as opposed to historically white or historically advantaged institutions (HAIs), lacked (and still lack) resources, were controlled by the apartheid state and set up mainly in the former homelands. Their differential access to, for example, library resources, land and buildings continues to impact on these institutions in post-apartheid times (Bozalek and Boughey 2012; CHE 2013; Leibowitz et al. 2017).

The University under study is one of the two institutions of higher education in the Limpopo Province situated at the Northern-most tip of South Africa. It is a rural historically disadvantaged institution (HDI) classified as a comprehensive university. It has only one campus and draws most of the students from previously disadvantaged rural schools across South Africa and the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) region. The university describes itself to external audiences as positioned to respond to needs of its context, that is, needs of the rural communities of the province in which it is located (University of Venda Strategic Plan 2012–2016). Like other historically disadvantaged universities in the country, the university under study is burdened with large numbers of students who require more significant support and time devoted to teaching than is the case with the more elite historically advantaged universities (Leibowitz et al. 2017). As Leibowitz et al. (2017) show, teaching in a poorly resourced context with a large staff-student ratio of largely under-prepared undergraduate students creates different demands on an academic staff member than teaching in a research-intensive, well-resourced institution, hence the need for academic development support programmes at this university.

This study examined support systems for first year entering students who are academically at risk at the university. In light of the socio-economic background of the university, which is resource constrained and located in the periphery of the country, it was imperative to examine what this institution was doing to address challenges of students who were academically at-risk. In light of this purpose, the study sought to address the following research questions: Are there any institutional supporting systems in place for first year entering academically at-risk students and if so, to what extent are they effective? Are there any monitoring mechanisms in place to see to it that supporting systems are being implemented at the university? What measures can be instituted in the university in order to strengthen monitoring and evaluation of the academic support systems for students who are at-risk?

Literature Review

Concept of Students At Risk

The definition of the term “At-risk” varies, depending on who uses it and the context in which it is used. An “At-risk” student is someone who is learning-disabled and under-prepared or someone who lacks skills in meeting the academic demands of post-secondary institutions (Ferguson 2000; Perez 1998; Schoon 2006) or does not adjust easily and quickly to the rigour of studying in higher education (Lane 2018; Mayet 2016). Popp et al. (2016), meanwhile describe at-risk students as, “those students who, because of various environmental factors beyond their control have

an increased likelihood of experiencing challenges in attending, succeeding and remaining in school” (p. 276).

Risk can be defined as a mismatch of demands of a course and knowledge, attitudes and capabilities we inaccurately assume they possess. In this sense, risk is reduced when courses are designed, based on an explicit understanding of students’ capabilities or when interventions are put in place to mitigate the risks (Popp et al. 2016; Tinto 2017). At-risk students are described as students who are “at-risk” of failing academically, for one or more of any several factors and reasons. School factors include unqualified teachers, rigorous curriculum, unsupportive school climate, lack of safety in school (Barton 2003; Kober 2001), lack of academic goals and inability to academically integrate into college life (Lane 2018) while home and societal factors include student mobility, living in poverty, hunger and poor nutrition (Popp et al. 2016).

A student may be deemed “at-risk” when academic performance is below the minimum progression requirements, and the student has not passed 75% of the maximum expected credits to date or if less than 70% of the normal credit load has been passed in the current semester (University of Venda General Calendar 2013). At-risk students, on average, obtain lower scores, pass fewer subjects in the first semester and are less intelligent than achievers in most intelligence measures. According to the University of Venda, General Calendar (2013: Rule G10), at-risk students are those who fail a module more than once. Failure by the university to have enough student support systems increases students’ underperformance.

Support System for Students At-Risk

Early detection of at-risk students allows timely intervention in their studies. Use of proximal or just-in-time risk markers to identify under-engaged or underperforming students may be of help. It is imperative that there be demographic or early life cycle risk markers to identify particular groups of students and provide targeted support or development opportunities (Guthrie and Fruiht 2018; Tinto 2017; Yomtov et al. 2017). Tinto (2017) argues that students’ early struggles, if left unaddressed, will tend to erode their self-efficacy and further undermine performance.

Information on students’ early academic engagement and performance may function as a useful early-alert or early-warning ‘risk marker’. Students who do not attend classes may have an increased level of risk of subsequent academic failure and need appropriate intervention to help them with their studies. The interventions can be conceived as a ‘safety net’ for students who may be experiencing difficulties that require timely response to improve their academic success (Adelman and Taylor 2008). Appropriate intervention strategies and academic support systems are expected to reduce dropout rates and exclusions and improve throughputs and completion rates at the university (Eiselen and Geyser 2003). A student who is at risk should be required to participate in a compulsory developmental programme that includes academic counselling, a possible modified curriculum as well as student counselling for personal, life skills and/or career counselling (Eiselen and Geyser 2003). Skills in students’ transition from high school to university, workshops on

academic life skills: for example, avoiding plagiarism, academic writing, reading and study skills need to be held with students.

In the South African context, due to massification of higher education following the apartheid legacy in South Africa, a vast number of black students in higher education institutions are predominantly from marginalised and poorly resourced education environments and socio-economic backgrounds and are most likely to face learning challenges, which impedes their academic success (McGhie 2012). According to a cohort analysis of throughput rates by race for 3 year degrees with the first year of enrolment in 2012 by the Council on Higher Education (CHE 2019), for example, only 23% of African students had graduated within the 3-year regulation time, compared to 45% of white students. The need for additional academic support to improve throughput rates is widely reported in the South African literature (see for example, Council on Higher Education 2010; Council on Higher Education 2019; De Klerk et al. 2017; Nelson et al. 2009; Nyamupangedengu 2017; Scott et al. 2007; Selesho 2012; Swartz et al. 2017; Wilson-Strydom 2010).

Lewin and Mawoyo (2014) indicate that many universities now provide a full range of student support services to assist with social integration into university life and psychosocial aspects of engagement with academic life to enhance student success. However, despite all the support services provided to students, Lewin and Mawoyo (2014) note that the overall South African university system remains somewhat inefficient and inequitable. Swartz et al. (2017) advocate for investment in high schools where students need to be properly orientated to university course requirements as well as career opportunities.

Student Support Programmes at the University Under Study

While students are encouraged to be responsible for their own learning, in light of the challenges discussed in the preceding paragraph, the university under study has (to some extent) put systems in place. These provide academic support acknowledging that early warning systems that identify students at-risk and areas of teaching and learning that need attention for academic improvement early are important. Coordination of academic support systems for first year entering students who are academically at-risk at the university is done by the Centre for Higher Education Teaching and Learning (CHETL) officials. They are assisted by the Information Management System Officer (IMS). Early detection of students in this category allows timely early intervention in their studies. The IMS and CHETL officials are mandated to put in place ways and means of managing students' data so that they pick up first entering students who are at-risk of failure on time and give them necessary assistance immediately.

At-risk students are identified from the university's student tracking system as soon as assessment marks are recorded. These are then tracked, and their lecturers are alerted and conversations are held between the Centre for Higher Education Teaching and Learning and identified students and lecturers responsible for those modules. (University of Venda General Calendar 2013). The student counsellors,

educational development practitioners and lecturers then work out intervention strategies based on identified needs.

There are teaching and learning policies that have been developed to support student academic performance. These are: the teaching and learning policy, assessment policy, the monitoring and evaluation of teaching and learning policy and peer mentoring policy. According to the University of Venda Teaching and Learning policy (2014), students have the responsibility of committing themselves fully to their studies, monitoring their performance and utilizing all the available resources such as academic career counselling, academic support, as well as career and personal counselling, to successfully complete their studies, preferably in the stipulated time.

The policy calls for the need for academics to be exposed to contemporary effective methodologies of teaching in order to enhance student success. Provision is made for individualised and constructive feedback by lecturers in the University of Venda Assessment Policy (2014). The policy designates the module coordinator to ensure that the student receives a marked assessment task in time to use feedback for completion of the next task. The policy further argues that feedback on an assessment task should be provided in a rigorous manner to students, irrespective of the size of the class; evidence of such effort should be documented in one way or the other.

Another policy, the University of Venda Monitoring and Evaluation of Teaching and Learning policy (2014), preambles with the rationale that the academic profession upholds values and practices of constructive feedback, from peers and students. This applies to all aspects of academic work, including curriculum design and delivery. The policy gives a voice to students on curriculum issues and provides for student feedback on courses/modules. The student evaluation questionnaire instrument is designed to obtain student feedback in relation to key aspects of course design and delivery. The policy further states that the University will use student evaluation questionnaire results for quality assurance purposes and inform decisions on course/module development and the overall process of monitoring effectiveness of teaching and learning.

The Peer Mentoring Policy (2014) requires a student who is at-risk to participate in a compulsory developmental programme, including academic counselling, possible modified curriculum as well as student counselling for personal life skills and/or career counselling. The at-risk students need student mentors and student assistants to coach them as they need greater personal attention, feel humiliated in class and are stressed. According to the policy, senior and postgraduate students whose academic performance is excellent should be appointed to mentor students who are academically at-risk. Mentors should be trained, and their roles and responsibilities in the mentoring programme should be clearly articulated (University of Venda Mentoring Policy 2014).

It, however, remains to be seen if stakeholders are aware of these policies. If they are, have these policies had been actualized at implementation level? Hence, the need for this study that sought to establish what academic support programmes, policies and systems were in place to support first entering students who were at-risk of not succeeding academically. The study undertook to establish the extent to which these were

being actualized at implementation level to enhance student success and the extent to which the support had yielded results.

Methodology

This study was premised on the qualitative research paradigm, which is a form of social enquiry that focuses on the way people interpret and make sense of their experiences and the world in which they live (Cohen et al. 2007). The chosen research design was the case study design, which focused on only one rural-based South African University. Creswell and Creswell (2018) describe a case study as a qualitative design where a researcher explores in-depth a program, event, activity, process or one or more individuals. The phenomenon explored in-depth in this study was the academic development support programme for at-risk first entering students.

For selection of participants, the purposive sampling technique, a type of non-probability sampling where participants are chosen deliberately, was used (Du Plooy-Cilliers et al. 2014). One hundred at-risk students, 20 lecturers teaching modules identified as at-risk modules and 1 Information Management System (IMS) Officer responsible for tracking the progress of first entering students, were selected. The Information Management System (IMS) Officer purposefully extracted the names of students and lecturers from the university management information management system using assessment data from the first three assessment tasks written by the students. The rationale behind selection of the aforementioned sample was based on the understanding that since students were direct beneficiaries of the academic support programme, and the twenty lecturers interacted with these students on a daily basis during the learning and teaching process, they were best placed to provide the necessary information pertaining to the efficacy of academic support for 'at risk' students. Polkinghorne (2005) highlights the need to sample or select information-rich cases that researchers are convinced, will provide insight on issues central to the purpose of the research.

Data analysis was done through an idiographic process that started with an iterative and detailed examination of responses per question. Open-coding, axial-coding and selective-coding techniques to identify similarities and differences as well as contradictions was done. Through inductive analysis, recurring patterns and common themes were identified. The identified themes were then rephrased into sub-topics to be used as sub-headings to guide the presentation and discussion of findings.

The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the institution granted through ethical clearance certificate number THA241SLAV0. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. The purpose of the study was explained and participants informed that their participation was voluntary. With regard to confidentiality, respondents were assured that the information they provided would be anonymous and used only for study purposes.

Results and Discussion

Content analysis was used to identify emerging themes from the data. Aggregated data from the questions were summarized and paraphrased while emerging patterns were identified. This was followed by identification of emerging themes. The identified themes were then rephrased into sub-topics used as subheadings to guide the presentation and discussion of findings. The results are presented and discussed according to sub-headings drawn from emerging themes. Respondents were asked to mention institutional support systems and mechanisms available to support at-risk first entering students. Their responses led to the subheading: Academics' knowledge of academic support available for students.

The respondents were asked if there were any monitoring systems and tools in place for first entering at-risk student support programmes at the university, and this is reported under sub-heading: Monitoring tools for the student support programme. Academics were also asked to share what they had done individually to assist at-risk first year students, regardless of whether or not any institutional systems for support existed. This was put under the sub-heading: Academics' own initiatives to support students at-risk. On a question on lecturers' views on students' attitudes, perceptions and responses to academic support programmes, a sub-heading: Lecturers' views on student attitudes to academic support was crafted. Respondents were also asked to suggest measures that could be put in place to strengthen and monitor academic support programmes. This led to subheading: Lecturers' views on strengthening academic support programmes. In addition, questions asked are integrated within the actual results and discussion.

Academics' Knowledge of Academic Support Available for Students

Respondents were asked to mention institutional support systems and mechanisms available to support at-risk first entering students. Responses indicated that academics were aware of available mechanisms as several interventions were cited. Mentoring and tutoring programmes were mentioned by the majority, 50%, with 20% identifying student counselling as the common institutional mechanism to support first year academically at-risk students at the university as shown below:

- (a) Tutor programme;
- (b) Professional Development;
- (c) E-learning programme; and
- (d) E-Tutoring programme.

Other institutional support systems cited as available to support first year entering at-risk students included: individual consultations with students and peer education services offered by the Student Affairs directorate. The use of peers for student support has been found beneficial in the literature. Findings by Kiyama and Lucia (2014), for example, suggest that employing peer mentors can be mutually

beneficial to retention efforts, since peer mentors are trained to demonstrate aspects of advocacy, role modeling and acting as human bridges for programme participants while benefiting from those very forms of institutional support embedded in the programme structure. Career guidance and counselling, the Teaching Assistants programme, availability of Academic Development practitioners, the Foundation Programme, Supplemental instruction and offering extra classes to students identified as 'at-risk' were also mentioned.

With regard to supplemental instruction, a study by Carr and London (2017) found that students who participated in Supplemental Instruction and tutoring earned higher course grades compared to other students. Career guidance and counselling, another support mechanism identified in this study, has also been found beneficial elsewhere. Goodwin et al. (2016) reason that institutional or college and course counseling activities aimed at providing students with pertinent information about college experience, guidance on course-taking, assisting with college search, application and selection processes are valuable initiatives for at-risk students.

With regard to students' awareness of policies that support at-risk students, 64% were indeed aware, 31% were not aware and 5% were unsure. However, although some at-risk first entering students at the university were fully aware of academic support systems or mechanisms surrounding academic support, they did not know where to go to access support. The fact that 36% of the students were either unaware or unsure of existence of support mechanisms is cause for concern, indicating the need for aggressive marketing of student support initiatives amongst the student body. In this regard, Mayet (2016) advocates for the need for universities to make provision for and actively market academic support to ensure that students remain engaged. Mayet (2016) further argues that first year students and even those in their second or even final year need the support and scaffolding to traverse and move efficiently through the content and context of higher education to ease the transition into and have a preferred experience of learning in university.

The variety of mechanisms the respondents mentioned is an indication of the institution's commitment to alleviating under-preparedness and understanding of the whole notion of academic support. The different activities illustrate diverse ways institutions can assist in improving at-risk students' academic performance. Such pro-active initiatives to support at-risk students have, indeed, been found to aid student retention. Contact with a university's professional staff, including academic advisors, has been associated with increased student desires to remain in college, retention and student success (Bean 2005; Bigger 2014; Kot 2014; Lillis and Rai 2011; Martin 2017). Without support to improve performance, many students lose their motivation to persist and subsequently dropout (Tinto 2017).

Monitoring Tools for the Student Support Programme

The respondents were asked if there were any monitoring systems and tools in place for first entering at-risk student support programmes at the University, and 70% of the lecturers replied in the affirmative while 30% refuted the existence of such tools. The Students Representative Council was mentioned as one structure

that monitored the programme. The Centre for Higher Education Teaching and Learning and the Quality Assurance Directorate were also mentioned as key organs in the university that monitored the programme. The Centre for Higher Education Teaching and Learning was involved through training of tutors and mentors and ensuring that attendance registers were kept for all mentoring sessions. The Quality Assurance Directorate was said to conduct evaluation through issuing mentees with evaluation questionnaires on their perceived benefits and challenges of the support programmes. On a similar question to students on whether monitoring mechanisms existed and how they felt the existence of monitoring mechanisms would enhance their performance, 57% of the students felt monitoring mechanisms were in place and plausible reasons were given for the importance of such mechanisms.

As in the case of existence of policies and mechanisms, a significant number of students (43%) were either unsure or felt such mechanisms did not exist. In their study, Abrams and Jernigan (1984) argue and propose that given that participation of at-risk students in the at-risk programme improves their chances of success, admission to institutions of high learning should be on the condition that they participate fully on all such support programs. Abrams and Jernigan (1984) further suggest that institutions should start focusing on pre-matriculation identification of students willing to seek help and likely to benefit from participation in support service programmes.

A follow-up question was asked to ascertain whether or not the respondents were in favour of these academic support programmes. The majority 75%, of lecturers were in support of student academic support interventions while 15% did not support such policies, and 10% were not sure. It is not clear why some academic staff were not supportive of these policies in view of the high drop-out rates in the university. Literature indicates that academic advising is one of the more powerful predictors of student retention (DeLaRosby 2017; Kuh and Schneider 2008). One would, therefore, expect all academics to support interventions meant to enhance student retention and success. Specifically focusing on the role of teachers, Snyder (2005) as cited in Guthrie and Fruht (2018) identified ways teachers can build hope in students such as spending time with and caring about students, setting clear goals for students and for the class, having a clear plan to achieve course goals (pathways), demonstrating enthusiasm about the course material to promote motivation (agency), and praising student effort in the learning process along with the learning of course content. If students understand how to learn (pathways) and are motivated to learn (agency), this increases hope and helps increase academic success beyond that particular course (Guthrie and Fruht 2018).

A question to students on their views on the value of the academic support programmes showed that 60% appreciated the support, as shown in these responses:

- They motivate students;
- They help students to adjust to the new academic environment;
- They encourage us to study hard;
- Students feel free to talk to their peers than lecturers; and
- Increase pass rate and Increase graduation rate.

These views by students corroborate findings by Mayet (2016) indicating that with guidance and interventions designed to support and empower them, students are enabled to make the transition from school to university and succeed. Further, this category of students felt there was value in monitoring the student support programme, as articulated in these responses:

- The monitoring mechanisms will improve mentors and lectures' performance;
- It will ensure that the mentors are doing their job; and
- It will enable the monitors to identify the problems being encountered by students

In a related study, Goodwin et al. (2016) found that programmes meant for at-risk students have positive effects on college students, especially on their academic progress. Similarly, Guthrie and Fruiht (2018) found that having support from teachers, advisors and other staff members predicted higher levels of academic hope and concluded that overall, students who had support from multiple caring adults on campus, and most importantly teachers, reported more positive academic self-perception.

A probing question to academics supporting university policies and interventions on how they supported the policies yielded responses that 47% indicated that they did so by implementing policies but did not provide evidence of this. On the other hand, 28% indicated that they encouraged postgraduate students to enlist as mentors on programmes while 10% indicated involvement in the monitoring and evaluation of the mentoring programme through liaison with mentors. Mentorship programmes, if properly planned, can enhance student success for both mentees and mentors.

Findings by Kiyama and Lucia (2014) suggest that employing peer mentors can be mutually beneficial to retention efforts since peer mentors were trained to demonstrate aspects of advocacy, role modeling and acting as human bridges for the programme participants while also benefiting from those very forms of institutional support embedded in the programme structure. Other support mentioned included referring students with identified psychosocial problems to student counsellors and open door policies for individual consultations.

Academics' Initiatives to Support Students At Risk

Academics were asked to share what they have done individually to assist at-risk first year students, regardless of whether or not any institutional systems for support existed. Most academics (45%) responded that they refer students to tutors and mentors (45%), while 30% said they offered at-risk students extra classes as a way of supporting them. Academics who confessed to doing nothing to support at-risk students constituted 15% of the sample.

- Encourage students to consult with their lecturers;
- Provide instant and ongoing feedback;

- Develop Positive Relationships with Underperforming Students; and
- Encourage them to attend class.

Meeting with absent and underperforming students at the earliest possible opportunity provides an effective way of promoting dialogue between staff and students who are experiencing difficulties, and this may improve students' academic performance. Students' belief in their ability to succeed is positively influenced by attitudes and values of others in the classroom, especially those of the faculty (Tinto 2017; Trolan et al. 2016). DeLaRosby (2017) argues that the ability for students to succeed in college and be retained is, in part, influenced by the relationship students have with their professors. The author recommends that lecturers should be made aware of these results, so they know how formal and informal interactions with students can increase levels of students' satisfaction.

Lecturer Views on Student Attitudes to Academic Support

On a question on lecturer views on students' attitudes, perceptions and responses to the academic support programmes, 70% of respondents reported that students were positive, showed commitment and showed improved pass rates as shown in the following sample responses:

- Students appear to value academic support programmes as they enhance their learning;
- Students' perceptions of the teaching and assessment was positive; and
- Learning is inhibited if students do not get academic support from the learning institution.

On the other hand, 20% indicated that students' response was poor arguing that students attended the programmes as a last resort since they undermined these academic support programmes and did not want to be seen as struggling. Ten percent were not sure how students responded to these academic support initiatives. The following were some of the *verbatim* responses:

- Their participation is poor, some rarely attend, they use them as last resort They undermine it negative perception, they do not see the need;
- Students do not want to be seen as struggling; and
- Without positive attitudes and perceptions, students have little chance of learning proficiently.

These negative staff perceptions have an effect on how these lecturers treat the students. Negative perceptions from lecturers have also been reported in literature. Zhang et al. (2017) pointed out that many students arrive to the advising session ill-prepared and ready to be told exactly what to do, with lecturers also saying that they were burdened by other responsibilities that left little time to prepare for advising. As Zerquera et al. (2018) argue, lecturers serve as a primary point of contact

for students in college, playing vital roles in students' retention and attainment. "The perceptions and beliefs held by these institutional actors are important for understanding the context that shapes students' experiences while they are in college and potentially, long after they leave" (Zerquera et al. 2018, p. 29). A study by Schademan and Thompson (2016) revealed that academics who held negative attitudes towards students were continually frustrated with student abilities and seemed unwilling to make changes in their practice.

The fact that attendance of the student support initiatives was poor is an alarm bell as the intention of these initiatives is to assist the students in their studies. Tinto (2017) avers that students have to want to persist and expend the effort to do so even when faced with the challenges they sometimes encounter and that without motivation and the effort it engenders, persistence is unlikely.

Lecturer Views on Strengthening the Academic Support Programmes

Lecturers were asked to suggest measures that could be put in place to strengthen and monitor the academic support programmes, and several suggestions were advanced, for example:

- Mentors should be given more hours to work with the underperforming students; and
- Proper planning and monitoring, for example, there should be a committee in each school that regularly reviews the programmes.

Peer mentoring does assist students to navigate challenges in their studies and the call for more mentorship time is therefore justified. Salinitri (2005) found that peer-mentoring programmes have been successful in improving academic achievement of low achieving, first-year students. Guthrie and Fruht (2018) contend that encouraging formal and informal mentoring relationships with students and building an ethnically diverse body of faculty and staff may each help contribute to closing the support gap on college campuses. Further, research (Collings et al. 2015; Cornelius et al. 2016; Lane 2018) suggests that peer mentoring can assist with the successful social and academic integration into college and buffer potential negative effects, such as stress during the transition, which can have positive impacts on retention and persistence rates.

Student views were also solicited on what they felt could be done to strengthen support to improve academic performance and these corroborated those offered by lecturers and the following were some of the responses.

- More mentors and tutors should be hired to help in all modules;
- Students should be encouraged to attend tutorial sessions;
- Improve Library services like for example, they should extend the closing time; enough textbooks, creating enough studying space, internet access enough computers and past exam papers;
- Lecturers should engage with struggling students;

- Introduce face-to-face tutoring; and
- Introduce on-line tutoring.

The need for an increase in the number of mentors and tutors is supported in the literature. Recommendations by Yomtov et al. (2017) after their study on the impact of mentorship were that future iterations of the programme should increase the number of mentors as a way to increase the frequency of contact with students. Carr and London (2017) suggest that tutoring may be one of the most effective means of increasing undergraduate retention, but also that tutoring attendees may be a highly motivated university subpopulation that is deserving of additional study. On the call by students for lecturers to engage with students, Popp et al. (2016) indicate that effective teachers of at-risk students take into account student needs and experiences, as well as the curriculum in planning for instruction.

While a good number of students called for an increase in the number of tutors as shown above, some students had reservations on mentors, tutors and lecturers, arguing for abolishment of tutorial and mentoring sessions. Students felt mentors and tutors were under qualified; they urged that enough and properly qualified lecturers should be hired as shown hereunder:

- Mentoring and tutorial sessions should be cancelled, only qualified lecturers should teach students;
- Undergraduate students should not be mentors;
- The university should employ qualified lecturers; and
- Establish exchange programmes with other universities.

To cushion against the student concerns raised above, Tinto (2017) urges institutions to invest in lecturer development to better ensure that lecturers not only possess the skills they need to better help all students learn and succeed in the classroom but also are aware of how their behaviors, intentional or otherwise, also influence student success. According to a research study by Chester et al. (2013), it appears that good training and high quality ongoing support for mentors can support even those who are not academically strong to make a useful contribution to the transition of first year students.

Conclusion

The study reviewed the academic support systems for the first entering students who were academically at-risk at the university. While efforts had been made to put in place such academic support systems, some stakeholders felt these were inadequate and where they existed, they were inadequately marketed to both staff and students. If academic staff are not aware of the academic support initiatives, this means that they are not directing the first entering at-risk students to seek assistance and this is a major concern at the university. In order to get support for interventions, buy-in and support for the efforts must be sought from all stakeholders by making them an integral part of its development, planning, implementation, and evaluation (Rabinowitz

2013). In this regard, Mayet (2016) advocates for the need for universities to make provision for and actively market academic support in order to ensure that students remain engaged.

The issue of inadequacy of the student support initiatives is also a key finding as it demonstrates awareness of the need and significance of such interventions. The fact that the university under study is a rural historically disadvantaged institution plagued by shortage of resources foregrounds the need for concerted efforts at national level to deliberately target such institutions if they are to graduate from this poverty cycle. Teaching in a poorly resourced context with a large staff-student ratio of largely underprepared undergraduate students makes different demands on an academic staff member than teaching in a well-resourced institution (Leibowitz et al. 2017), hence the need for sufficient funding for academic development support programmes at this historically disadvantaged university.

Significant in the results is the finding that some students felt mentors were inadequately trained to provide the mentorship. It is our considered view that the quality of mentors with regards to knowledge, skills and competence to provide mentorship plays a key role on how the mentorship programme is perceived by the students. The perceptions and beliefs held by both institutional actors and recipients of the support are important for understanding the context that shapes students' (Zerquera et al. 2018). Systems and interventions need to be put in place to dispel such negative feelings and perceptions for such interventions to succeed. Investment in tutor and mentor development will ensure that mentors and tutors not only possess skills they need to help all students to learn and succeed; they also need to be aware of how their behavior, intentional or otherwise, influences student success. Good training and high quality ongoing support for mentors can support even those who are not academically strong to make a useful contribution to the transition of first year students (Chester et al. 2013).

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest N. Phelley Lavhelani received a research grant from her university while Clever Ndebele and Fhatuwani Ravhuhali did not receive any funding for the research. N. Phelley Lavhelani declares that she has no conflict of interest. Clever Ndebele declares that he has no conflict of interest. Fhatuwani Ravhuhali declares that he has no conflict of interest.

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