First-year Students' Perceptions of Extended National

Diploma Programmes: the Case of a Comprehensive

South African University (2012)

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Abstract

This study compared how the cohort of extended diploma students enrolled at a comprehensive South African university in 2012 perceived the programmes for which they were enrolled at the beginning of their first year and towards the end of the year. Data were gathered using questionnaires and semi-structured interviews involving students enrolled for extended national diplomas in Human Resource Management, Management, Entrepreneurship, Logistics, Management Services, Transportation Management and Public Relations. The study established that while the students had negative perceptions of several aspects of the extended national diploma programmes, they had become positive about most of these towards the end of the year. The paper recommends strengthening of teaching and learning support to the extended programmes at the comprehensive university in order to positively influence students' perceptions of the programmes for achievement of the ultimate goal of improving students' retention and success rates.

Keywords: Extended national diploma, Programmes, Students, Lecturers, Diploma, Perceptions

1. Introduction

In addition to normal degree and post-graduate programmes, the South African university at which this study was carried out also offers extended national diploma programmes in faculties such as Finance and Economic Sciences, Engineering and the Built Environment and Management. This is in a bid to comply with the Department of Higher Education's intention to increase access to tertiary education for students from sections of the South African population to whom such opportunities were not readily available during apartheid. This study focused on extended national diploma programmes offered in two faculties, namely Management and Humanities. While the Faculty of Humanities offers an extended national diploma in Public Relations, the Faculty of Management offers extended national diploma programmes in Logistics, Transportation Management, Human Resources Management, Entrepreneurial Studies and Management. In practice, the extended national diploma programme is four years long as in the first year the students receive foundational provisioning in such subjects as Basic Business Calculations, Workplace Preparation and Fundamental Research Practice. Other forms of support and quality assurance arrangements offered to these programmes include the submission of performance reports by the Academic Development Centre (ADC), at the end of every term to the Heads of Departments of the respective subjects which the students do. The students also receive end- of-term progress reports. This helps with monitoring of the students' progress by parents as well. All these forms of support are in keeping with the view that, "…access without support is not opportunity" (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008, p.44).

2. Statement of the problem

Since their inception at the university, the extended national diploma programmes have been characterized by a number of challenges. The first of these is the high drop-out rates by students which are captured in the Head of Access programmes' annual reports. For example, in 2009 there was a 60% drop out rate from the Extended National Diploma Public Relations class. In 2011 there was a 45% drop out rate from the Extended National Diploma Entrepreneurial Studies class while in the Logistics and Transportation Management classes the drop-out rates were

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25% and 21% respectively in the same year (Shandler, 2009; 2011). The question therefore arises as to the possible reasons for such high drop-out rate

The second problem associated with extended national diploma programmes stems from the fact that the need to provide access to tertiary education to as many South African school leavers as possible in a bid to correct historical injustices has proved to be a double-edged sword. This has been in the sense that the universities have had to provide access to students many of whom are deemed not prepared for university education. At this comprehensive university, the low success rates in the extended national diploma year has been attributed in part to this factor. The first two problems seem to have created a third, that of negative perceptions of the programmes, which various stakeholders both within and without the university have developed, especially in comparison to students enrolled for mainstream programmes. In light of the high drop-out and failure rates, this raises the question as to how the students enrolled for extended programmes themselves perceive the programmes. The study therefore sought to establish the university's 2012 extended national diploma (Management and Humanities) students' perceptions of the programmes for which they were enrolled. This would be done by comparing data gathered at two stages, entry point in February 2012 and towards the end of the year.

3. Literature review

3.1 Introduction

Extended national diploma programmes are known by different names in different South African universities. While in some universities, they are known as foundational programmes, in others they are known as access programmes. In most universities, the programmes are housed in Academic Development Centres or Academic Development Support Units which run the programmes in different forms of collaboration with faculties. At the university where this study was carried out they are run by the Access wing of the Academic Development Centre (ADC) which itself is one of the four centres of the Academic Development and Support Division.

There have been three phases of academic development in South Africa (Shandler, 2009). The first of these was founded in the 1980's in the historically English-medium white liberal institutions as a result of the easing of apartheid policy. These programmes, modeled along the American minority programmes, were tailor-made to support the small number of academically disadvantaged black students who had gained access to these institutions. The major focus of these programmes was English, mathematical/numerical and personal skills. These interventions were offered before or concurrently with the mainstream studies. The second phase was introduced in the 1990's. At this stage 'academic development,' which had positive and progressive connotations became the preferred concept instead of 'academic support' which was associated with remediation and inferiority (Scott, 2009, p.1). During this stage the focus had moved away from historical disadvantage based on race to the need for institutions of higher education to change their curricula and practices to meet the needs of non-traditional students who were gaining access to higher education institutions as a result of the move from elitism to the universalization of higher education (Shandler, 2009). The concept of academic support which had been prevalent before this stage also lost its appeal because of the work of academics such as Merlin Mehl and Herbert Vilakazi who argued that, "… it was not students who were 'underprepared' for higher education but rather the other way round: universities were underprepared for the task of embracing the diversity that would characterize student populations following a shift to democracy" (Boughey & Niven, 2012, p.40). Sadly, however, some of the models used during this phase "… in which 'gaps are filled', 'bridges are built' and missing 'skills' are somehow 'added on' to students who are deemed poorly equipped for university study…" still persist (Boughey & Niven, 2012, p.40). This has perpetuated the perception that some students who enroll into South African universities, especially under the extended programmes are not ready for university as some of them, reportedly, cannot even read, write or count.

The third phase of academic development emerged in the late 1990's. This phase, as a result of the new political dispensation, was characterized by focus on increasing the number of graduates and improving throughput rates of all students (de Kadt, 2008). It was also characterized by the demand for the massification of higher education arising from demographic growth, a wider provision of secondary schooling and higher retention and matriculation pass rates (Kallaway, Kruss, Fataar, & Donn, 1997). The massification of South African higher education was a proposal of the National Commission on Higher Education which was aimed at resolving, "… the equity-development tension since increased participation was supposed to provide greater opportunity for access (equity), while also producing more high-level skills that were necessary for economic growth" (Cloete, Massen & Fehnel, 2005, p.96). Education policy during this phase thus had to balance three key features which were in tension with each other, namely, commitment to access and to quality, and the constraints of affordability. The phase therefore saw the promulgation by President Nelson Mandela of the National Commission on Higher Education in

order to, "…preserve what is valuable and to address what is defective and requires transformation" (Cloete *et al*., 2002, p.94).

A question which inevitably arose during the third phase was that related to the preparedness of university students for the demands of academic work at tertiary level. Academic Development has therefore been forced to focus on students' academic preparation not only for their programmes of study but also for the world of work.

In the last phase, the work of academic practitioners has gained recognition resulting in academic development modules which have been accredited and incorporated in ministerially recognized degrees and national diplomas in the form of extended degrees and diplomas (Shandler, 2009). It is, however, important to note that despite all the developments which higher education in South Africa has gone through, the question of access continues to arise as there are still many students who cannot access post-school education for a variety of reasons chief among which are lack of funding and limited places at institutions of higher learning. This perhaps explains why even today, the South African government is still calling for improvement in students' access to higher education. For example, in the view of the former Deputy Minister of Higher Education, Professor Hlengiwe Mkhize, "We need to increase our investment into higher education and devise strategies and mechanisms to ensure that education, and higher education in particular, becomes accessible to all our people, especially the poor" (Macupe, 2012, p.8). This is a worthy call especially in light of the fact that some of the students who end up enrolling for extended national diploma programmes actually have as good results, if not better, than some of the mainstream students as emerged in interviews with students enrolled for extended programmes. These students said they end up enrolling for extended programmes because of having applied late for mainstream programmes or lack of funding. A greater investment in higher education institutions as suggested by Mkhize would, in the case of South Africa, also help to increase the higher education participation rate which is currently only 16%, far below the national 20% set in the government's 2001 national plan for higher education which has barely changed since 1996 (Breier & Le Roux, 2012).

3.2 Perception and learning

Various theories have been put forward by scholars mainly in the field of psychology to explain the factors that affect our perceptions and the values that we then go on to place on each of these phenomena. This section will examine some of these theories and how they can be used to account for the attitudes that learners, including university students, adopt towards university programmes for which they enroll.

Perception can be defined as, "the process by which organisms interpret and organise sensation to produce a meaningful experience of the world" (Lindsey & Norman, 1977, p.112). It can also be defined as "…the process through which the living organism maintains contact with the environment. Perception always involves immediate experience, which can be explained as immediate exposure to any particular source of information in the environment" (Travers, 1982, p. 29). A question that often arises is how human beings form perceptions. "You form a perception of something or someone when you physically observe that thing or person, and then interpret what you have observed" (Louw & Du Plooy-Celliers 2003, p.35). The way we perceive various phenomena in the world around us is therefore dependent on a number of factors. The implication from these definitions and characterisations is that perception is largely dependent on what has already been learnt. An implication which we can derive from Travers (1982)'s assertion is that the way students perceive programmes for which they are enrolled is a function of what they have learned formally or informally about those programmes.

3.3 Perceptions and attitudes

Studies conducted within the field of higher education on the international scene convey the idea that in addition to students' high school experiences, their perceptions of what they will be studying and their opinions of the study environment have an influence on their approaches to learning, strategies for studying and motivation to study (Entwistle & Smith, 2002; Jungert & Rosander, 2009). This, in turn, has an influence on their perceptions of their programmes of study, their performance in various subjects in the programmes and ultimately their decisions on whether to quit or continue with the programmes till graduation.

Perception influences another important element of human personality, attitudes (Travers, 1982). An individual's attitude is therefore the result of his or her perception and this explains why two people with different perceptions see the same thing or concept differently, resulting in their having different attitudes towards that particular thing or concept.

According to the Social Learning theory, attitudes go a long way in influencing learners' views of their programmes of study and the material to be learnt therein. Attitudes can be defined as "…the relatively enduring orientations that individuals develop towards the various objects and issues they encounter during their lives, and which they express

verbally as opinions" (Fontana, 1995, p.227). An attitude can be described, "…in terms of the favourableness or unfavourableness of feelings towards an object or issue." (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993, p.15). Attitudes contain elements of value, belief, as well as varying degrees of factual knowledge (or what the holder believes to be factual knowledge, and possess both cognitive and behavioral as well as affective aspects (Fontana, 1995). Attitudes may be conscious or unconscious and it is the balance in this conflict that often determines the final position that we take on a particular issue. In addition, they have four functions (Fontana, 1995). Firstly, they can be instrumental, (prompted by an individual's desire to see things arranged in a particular way to suit his or he needs). Secondly, they can be knowledge-based, (governed by one's needs to make sense of the world and his or her life). Thirdly, they can be value-expressive (associated with one's moral beliefs and self-concept). Lastly, they can be socially adjustive (generated by one's desire to feel part of a larger social or political community). It is clear from these functions that attitudes influence the way learners perceive educational programmes. For example, the instrumental function shapes the use-value that learners see in an educational programme. The value-expressive function determines the extent to which learners develop certain beliefs and values on the basis of the knowledge acquired from an educational programme while the socially adustive function influences the extent to which learners see an educational programme as helping them to integrate into the community to which they belong.

Travers (1982) also identified four functions of attitudes. However, what Fontana (1995) calls the instrumental function, Travers (1982) refers to as the adaptive function as a result of which, for example, a child learns to avoid fire after being burnt once. This attitude is instinctive and helps to protect individuals from being harmed by environmental factors. At a higher level, as a result of the adaptive function of attitudes, a young businessman may, for example, choose to tow the political line to protect his business interests. With regard to a university programmes such as the extended national diplomas, a learner may thus force himself or herself to like the particular programme for which he or she is enrolled just to pass it as a result of the realization that failure to pass it can be an impediment to getting a job. The second of Travers' (1982) functions is the cognitive function as a result of which human beings are able to classify the endlessly complex phenomena of the world into simplified categories that permit easy handling of interactions with those phenomena. The third function of attitudes is the need gratification function as a result of which attitudes must satisfy the individual who possesses them (Travers, 1982). The functions included here are those that involve the very direct gratification of needs. As a result of such functions, for example, a learner may have a positive attitude towards a subject because he or she needs to pass it in order to gratify his or her internal desire to complete his or her programme of study. The fourth of Travers' (1982) functions of attitudes is the ego-defense function. This consists of attitudes that are held in order to bolster the individual's own evaluation of himself. With respect to an educational programme, this function can manifest itself in the effort that a learner puts into the programme in order to look positively at himself as being capable of doing well in that programme.

Attitudes can also be looked at in terms of the cognitive dissonance theory as a result of which individuals can behave contrary to what they themselves hold to be true (Travers, 1982). This perhaps can be used to explain why a learner may have a negative attitude towards a programme of study despite his or her full knowledge that the programme is important. He or she then rationalizes to justify his or her position and to try and re-establish a sense of psychological equilibrium resulting from the inconsistencies between holding one view and behaving in the opposite manner.

Another important aspect of attitudes is that, for most people, on most issues, they are not cast in concrete (Fontana, 1995). In other words, they change on the basis of changes in the environment in which individuals find themselves. This has implications for teaching and learning in that positive rewards for, and support of, what students are doing well in usually engenders positive attitudes even where previously negative attitudes prevailed. There are four basic ways in which such positive changes in attitudes on the part of learners can be achieved (Fontana, 1995). These are firstly, the modeling of activities by a figure they look up to, implying that lecturers must be role models in their subject areas. Secondly, and closely related to modeling, is the need for lecturers to set examples for learners, especially in terms of social conduct. This may, for example, imply the need for fair-mindedness and being considerate on the part of the educator. Thirdly, positive changes in attitudes need to be reinforced by the educator. Last, is the need to recognize that students respond readily to enthusiasm in others. As long as this enthusiasm is not forced on them, learners are likely to be fired by it and want to participate in activities associated with it. Lecturers teaching extended national diploma students therefore have a big role to play in terms of both their own attitudes and conduct with respect to the programmes for which their students are enrolled.

4. Methodology

A research design incorporating both quantitative and qualitative methods employing a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews was used in this study. This is in keeping with the view that although the two approaches have traditionally been looked at as being mutually exclusive, in real research they are not and can be used in combination (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). A survey approach using the questionnaire and semi-structured interviews was used to gather data. One hundred and four questionnaires were administered to students enrolled for extended national diploma programmes in Management Services, Public Relations, Transportation Management, Logistics, Human Resources Management, Management and Entrepreneurial Studies, both at the beginning and towards the end of the year. This concurs with the suggestion that one way of determining whether students develop, in what respects, and the directions in which they do so is by assessing their perceptions of their own development by collecting pre-entry data and comparing it to follow-up data for the same cohort of students (Bitzer, 2005). While the Management, Human Resources and Entrepreneurial Studies groups were based at the campus of the University which was formerly for blacks only, the Logistics, Transportation Management, Public Relations, and Management Services were based at a campus of the University which was formerly a Technikon. Administering the questionnaire was easy because one of the researchers coordinates those programmes run at the former while the other coordinates the programmes based at the latter campus.

The questionnaire was chosen as a tool of data collection because of the ease with which the researcher can use it to collect data from many participants (Lamb *et al,* 2008). The first section of both questionnaires asked for information such as the gender of the student, their age and the programme for which they were enrolled. The second part of the first questionnaire asked questions such as whether the programme that they were enrolled for was their first choice; whether they would still want to pursue their first choice if given a chance; what their own perceptions of the extended programmes they were enrolled for were; what perceptions of the various stakeholders of the university had of the extended programmes and whether they would recommend their friends or relatives to enroll for the extended national diploma programmes.

The first part of the second questionnaire also asked questions on the students' gender and programmes they were enrolled for. In the second section the students were asked questions related to changes in perception of the programmes they were enrolled for on their own part and on the part of other stakeholders within the university such as lecturers and support staff. There were also questions that asked students to give possible reasons for changes, if any, in perceptions on their part or on the part of the other stakeholders. The students were also asked whether they would still want to pursue the programme which was their first choice if given a chance. They were also asked if they would recommend the extended national diploma which they were enrolled for to a friend or relative. Frequencies and percentages were calculated for responses to each of the questions in the questionnaire.

Semi-structured interviews were used to follow up on issues that arose from participants' responses to some of the questions in both questionnaires. Ten participants were selected for the interviews. Purposive sampling was used to select interview participants to ensure that each of the extended national diploma groups was represented. The interview questions were used to probe participants in order to get further insights into their perceptions of the programmes they were enrolled for both at the point of entry and ten months later. After the second questionnaire had been administered, participants were also asked probing questions on the change in their perceptions or lack thereof. The results from interview questions were recorded in a pocket notebook. A qualitative- deductive approach to content analysis was used to analyze the results of the interviews. In qualitative research, deductive content analysis works with prior formulated theoretical derived aspects of analysis, bringing them in connection with the text (Mayring, 2000). This implies that the researcher condenses the raw data into categories or themes based on valid inference and interpretation. In the case of this research, the results of the interviews were categorized into such themes as students' perceptions of extended national diploma programmes at entry into university; other stakeholders' perceptions of the extended national diploma programmes; students' perceptions of extended programmes after ten months of study; and reasons for students' changes in perceptions of extended national diploma programmes. On average the semi-structured interviews lasted thirty minutes each.

4.1 Response rate to the questionnaire

For both questionnaire 1 and questionnaire 2, there was a 100% response rate. This was made possible by the fact that the researchers enlisted the assistance of class representatives to administer the questionnaires in each case. The class representatives ensured that the participating students completed the questionnaires and collected them soon after completion by the students.

5. Results and discussion

As pointed out earlier, the results of the study were analyzed on the basis of the students' responses to both the first and second questionnaires as well as the responses of those students who took part in the follow-up interviews both at the beginning and towards the end of the year.

5.1 Perceptions of programme: students and other stakeholders

To establish students' perceptions of the programmes they were enrolled for, a number of questions in both the first and second questionnaires asked for students' responses to certain aspects of the programmes. For example, in the first questionnaire, students were asked whether the programmes they were enrolled for were in fact their first choices. In the second questionnaire, students were asked whether they would still want to pursue their first choice or they were now comfortable with the extended national diploma programmes they were enrolled for. Responses to the first questionnaire showed that, for 85% of the students, the programmes they were enrolled for were not the ones they would have liked to pursue as first choices. The students' perceptions of the extended diploma programmes seemed to be in keeping with the view that the perceptions that we hold of a particular phenomenon can be a result of the instrumental value that we place on that phenomenon (Travers, 1982). In this case, most of the students' negative perceptions of the extended programmes could have been a result of a belief on their part that the extended programmes are not as useful as the mainstream programmes. Only 15% of the students said the extended diploma programmes they were enrolled for were their first choices.

Responses to the second questionnaire showed that only 41% of the students said given a choice, they would still want to pursue their first choice. This indicated a significant change in the students' perceptions of the extended national diploma programmes after the students had gone through the programmes for ten months. This issue was followed up on during interviews in a bid to establish the reasons behind the change in perceptions. It was established that at entry, most students did not have a good understanding of what being enrolled for the extended national diploma programmes entailed hence the largely negative perceptions at that stage. The change in perceptions here is also in keeping with the view that students' perceptions of their programmes of study are a function of the utility value which they attach to those subjects (Travers, 1982). As one student who took part in the interviews said:

> When I got a place to do an extended programme in February I thought it was going to be just a repeat of matric. I kept hoping I would get a chance to do my first choice. Now I realize that even though an extended programme is one year longer, I still get to achieve a university qualification at the end of the day. I've also heard of stories of extended national diploma students completing their programmes ahead of their mainstream counterparts.

Those students who said they would still want to pursue their first choices if given a choice said this was not because they saw anything fundamentally wrong with the extended programmes. It was just out of a desire to pursue what they had a passion for. This can be explained in terms of the view that perceptions influence attitudes and that attitudes in turn determine the orientations that an individual develops towards an object, issue or phenomenon (Fontana, 1995; Travers, 1982).

As alluded to earlier, perceptions are, to an extent, socially determined. From the interviews conducted it was apparent that the perceptions which extended diploma students had of their programmes of study were a function of the perceptions of other stakeholders' perceptions of the programmes. Such stakeholders included fellow students as well as academic and support staff at the University. At entry point, 20% of the extended national diploma students said that they felt that other students at the University had negative perceptions of both the extended programmes and the students enrolled for them. The reason given for this was that the mainstream students saw the extended programmes as being meant for up-grading students who had failed matric and were only being given a second chance to gain entry into university. Mainstream students with such perceptions of the extended programmes reportedly saw the extended diploma students as being less academically gifted and, in some cases, made fun of them. This, as was revealed during the follow-up interviews, contributed to the negative perceptions which some of the extended students developed of the programmes which they were enrolled for. Another reason for the negative perceptions which some mainstream students had of the extended programmes was that the extended year made the programme that students were enrolled for one year longer than the conventional programmes. Practically, according to the mainstream students, this meant that the extended students graduate a year after them. This is, however, despite evidence from the University which has shown that a good number of extended students graduate before some mainstream students. There was also reportedly a belief amongst some mainstream students that there were fewer opportunities after graduation for extended national diploma students. This could also have had a negative

influence on the perceptions that some of the extended students developed of the programmes which they were enrolled for. This can be explained in terms of the use-value of attitudes (Fontana, 1995).

While at entry point, only 15% of the students said other students had positive perceptions of the extended diploma programmes, ten months later the percentage had increased to 20%. Asked what influence the positive perceptions which other students, though small in number, had of the programmes had on their own perceptions of the extended programmes, most of the students who took part in the interviews said the affirmation of the programmes by other students encouraged them to become even more positive about their programmes. This change, small though it is, can be explained in terms of the assertion that perceptions and the attitudes based on them are, for most people, not cast in concrete (Fontana, 1995). For example, one of the students who participated in the interviews said:

> Those mainstream students who have taken the trouble to find out what the extended programmes are about, now really appreciate how well the programmes prepare us for the mainstream year. If other students give the programmes the thumbs-up, why would we, who are enrolled in the programmes look at them negatively?

Both the first and second questionnaires asked students questions pertaining to their lecturers' perceptions of both the students themselves and the programmes they were enrolled for. At entry point, 90% of the students felt that lecturers had positive perceptions of the extended programmes and the students enrolled for them. The reasons given for these positive perceptions included the belief that most lecturers take their job as a calling, love it, and are therefore prepared to work with any group of students, their route of entry into university notwithstanding. The lecturers, according to the students, saw potential in the students and were also driven by the desire to lay a solid foundation for the extended students. They thus would do a lot to motivate them to succeed in their studies. Responses to the second questionnaire showed that 99% of the students felt that their lecturers had positive perceptions of both the extended programmes and the students enrolled in them. The reasons given for the lecturers' perceptions and attitudes were, in the main, similar to those given in response to the question on lecturers' perception at entry point. Further probing during interviews showed that students felt that positivity on the part of lecturers regarding the extended programmes had a positive influence on their own perceptions of the programmes. In the words of one of the interview participants:

> Initially I was negative about this whole thing but my lecturers' positive attitudes helped me a lot. Now I see that there isn't much of a difference between us and the mainstream students. We have the potential to do equally well and, at the end of the day, we will leave the university with the same qualifications, in some cases, even earlier.

This response affirms the view that variables such as teaching style and the enthusiasm of lecturers have an influence on students' approaches to learning and their perceptions thereof. It also affirms the view that, "…it is not always those who are 'fit' for higher education who succeed" (Bitzer, 2005, p.172).

At entry point, only 10% of the students felt that the lecturers had negative perceptions of the extended programmes and the students enrolled for them. The reasons given for the negative perceptions reportedly included some of the lecturers' view that extended students were not as academically gifted as the mainstream students. Some of these lecturers therefore showed less enthusiasm for teaching the extended students than the mainstream classes. There was also a claim by some of the students that some of the lecturers do not take the extended students and programmes seriously. According to one of the students:

> I have a friend doing a mainstream programme similar to the one I am doing. From what she tells me about one of our lecturers, I cannot believe he is the same man who teaches us.

Inevitably, negative perceptions on the part of lecturers have a knock-on effect on the perceptions students have of both their programmes and themselves. This was confirmed by one of the students who asked how easy it would be for students to be positive about a subject when the individual teaching it implicitly or explicitly demonstrates negative attitudes towards the subject or the students doing the subject.

The perceptions which students develop of learning and the programmes which they are enrolled for are not only influenced by their lecturers and fellow students. They are also to an extent a function of the perceptions which support staff has of the students themselves and the programmes which they are enrolled for. Categories of such staff include the Centre for Psychological and Career Development (PSYCAD) consultants, tutors, administrative assistants, library staff, as well as registration and examination assistants. All these categories of staff interact with students on a regular basis. Inevitably therefore, their perceptions of the extended programmes and students can have an influence, positive or negative on the perceptions which the students have of themselves and the programmes

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which they are enrolled for. At the point of entry, 99% of the students said that support staff had positive perceptions of the extended programmes, and the students enrolled for them. From the second questionnaire, the percentage of students whose view it was that support staff had positive perceptions of the extended programmes, and the students enrolled for them had increased to 100%. Evidence given for the reported positive perceptions on the part of support staff included the support staff's readiness to help the extended students, the advice they give to the students as well as the motivational support they provide to the students. The students also reported that in most cases support staff did not discriminate between mainstream and extended students. "They treat us all the same," said one of the students. Further evidence given was that related to the support which the students receive from their tutors, PSYCAD, the academic advisors, the public lectures and the field visits which the Academic Development Centre organizes for them. For most of the students, all these initiatives, structures and programmes demonstrate the positive perceptions which abound within the university of the extended diploma programmes and the students enrolled in them. In the words of one of the students:

> There wouldn't be so much investment in efforts meant to ensure that we adjust to university life and cope with the demands of university learning if there were negative perceptions of us and the programmes which we are enrolled for.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

The main conclusion to be drawn from the study is that the majority of students had negative perceptions of several aspects of the extended programmes at entry point. The aspects which they had negative perceptions of at this point included the curriculum content of the programmes, the demands which the curriculum content would place on them and the utility value of the programmes. With respect to the curriculum content there was a widespread perception among the students that the extended programmes were a repetition of what they had learnt in matric and therefore would not be challenging. Such perceptions, in the majority of cases were a result of what students heard from other students, especially those enrolled for the mainstream programmes. At entry point, a considerable number of the students also thought that their chances in life after graduation would be minimal as a result of their having gained entry into university through the extended diploma route. This seemed to be based on the assumption that employers have a negative view of students who will have gone through the extended programme. A large number of students therefore felt that given a choice, they would rather pursue those programmes which they had had as their first choices.

Despite the negative perceptions the students might have had of their programmes at entry point, there was an extent to which they were positively influenced by the positive perceptions of these programmes on the part of stakeholders such as lecturers and support staff. Thus ten months after enrolling for the programme, students' perceptions of various aspects of the extended programme had significantly changed from being negative to positive.

The students also expressed the view that most people who looked down on the extended programmes in the belief that the extended programme was a repetition of matric did so out of ignorance. In fact, by October 2012, the perceptions of some of these people towards the extended programmes had changed from being negative to positive. There was also a significant change in the students' view of the utility value of their programmes. This, in the main, seemed to be based on the realization on the part of the students that they could in fact complete their programmes ahead of some of their counterparts who entered university through the mainstream route. At entry point, the students had positive perceptions of the support they received from their lecturers and other stakeholders at the university. After ten months, such perceptions had become even more positive, thus positively strengthening their perceptions of their programmes even further. Though there were still some students who, after ten months said that given a choice, they would still want to pursue their first choices that did not seem to take away from the positive perceptions which such students had developed of the extended programmes.

Given the levels of under-preparedness for university learning on the part of most students who enroll for extended national diploma programmes which in turn has a bearing on their performance and therefore perceptions of these programmes, there is a need for greater institutional responsiveness to their academic needs. While it is acknowledged that the South African school system is failing, this cannot be an excuse for students failing to cope with university work (Boughey & Niven, 2012), and therefore, by implication, developing negative perceptions of the programmes for which they are enrolled. We therefore agree with the recommendation that there is a need for university academics to appreciate that they have a role to play in teaching their students to read, write and know in ways that are acceptable to the universities and that this goes beyond offering students the so-called support classes and subjects as is common in extended programmes (Boughey & Niven, 2012).

We also recommend an improvement in the governance of higher education for enhanced efficiency and effectiveness. For example, most extended diploma students fail to access the National Students Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) loans due to bureaucratic bungling within the scheme resulting in their focus being taken away from their studies to worrying about fees. This is a contributory factor to the high failure and drop-out rates among the extended diploma students, which in turn perpetuates negative perceptions of the programmes on the part of both the students enrolled for the programmes and other stakeholders.

There is also a need to promote a culture of academic excellence at national level, starting from primary and high school in a bid to arrest the vicious cycle of academic failure as a result of which the South African basic education system has been labeled 'a national disaster' (Bloch, 2009). This is because the level of students' academic performance and commitment to their studies is a critical dimension of the culture of any institution of higher learning. Though there are views to the contrary, for us, a starting point could be to take a re-look at the current 30% pass marks which condemns South African children to a future of non-performance and, by implication, negative perceptions of their programmes of study (Jansen, 2012). As Salim Vally, the Director at the University of Johannesburg's Centre for Educational Rights and Transformation says "…. a very low bar has been set and we should, as a country, not be condemned to mediocrity" (Govender, 2012, p.5).

Students' perceptions of the academic programmes they are engaged in are to a large extent a function of lecturers' competencies and attitude towards teaching and learning. There is therefore a need for the University to increase the number of suitably qualified academics who work in academic development on a full-time basis. Of necessity, measures should be put in place to retain such academics by appointing them on the same conditions of service as staff who teach on the mainstream programmes. This will help to avoid a situation characterized by a high staff turn-over in the extended programmes. This has what has often resulted in the some subjects in the programmes being staffed with part-time staff from the mainstream programmes some of whom do not have their hearts in the part-time work, thus negatively affecting the students' perceptions of the programmes. There is also a need to stop using the extended programmes as a dumping ground for under-qualified staff who do not qualify to teach in the mainstream programmes.

The extended national diploma programmes at the comprehensive university have in recent years seen sharp increases in student enrolments. According to most of the lecturers who teach on these programmes this has contributed to the high failure rates in the programmes as a result of most of the at-risk students not getting enough individual attention from lecturers. There is therefore a need for rational admission policy with respect to these programmes. This is because the programmes, by their very nature, are an acknowledgement that the students enrolled in them are generally weak academically. Increased class sizes seriously compromise success rates and this perpetuates negative perceptions of the programmes on the part of both students and other stakeholders.

Once students have been accepted on to the extended programmes, in addition to responsiveness on the part of lecturers to the needs of these students, there is also a need to institute programmes which will contribute not only to the enhancement of their performance but also to the cultivation in them of positive attitudes towards the programmes for which they will be enrolled. Much is happening at the university in this regard. One can only recommend further strengthening of initiatives such as the tutorial programme through recruitment of only tutors who are at least studying towards post-graduate degrees as well as strengthening of the tutor training and monitoring programmes. In addition, closer cooperation between the ADC and the faculties and departments in terms of teaching and learning initiatives would also go a long way in improving students' success and retention rates, thereby possibly contributing significantly to an improvement in students' perceptions of the extended programmes. Continued exposure of students to the opportunities that await them in the real world of work would, in our view, greatly enhances the students' perceptions of the utility value of the programmes for which they are enrolled.

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