

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Supporting At-Risk Learners at a Comprehensive University in South Africa

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Abstract

This paper reports on a study done within the Learning Development Unit (LDU) at a South African university. It addresses the issue that many students who arrive at university lack the requisite academic skills needed for success in higher education which increases the time taken to graduate. One of the multiple reasons for this is the 'articulation gap' between school and higher education in South Africa and in other countries. This articulation gap is exacerbated by the assumption about prior learning on which South Africa's traditional higher education programmes are based. The purpose of this study is to explore whether learning development interventions can change student attitudes and confidence levels, and develop some of the skills necessary to succeed. The study allows the academic counsellors who provide support a sense of whether their interventions are working. The study was undertaken by analysing student responses to learning development interventions. The data is gleaned from evaluation forms, assessment results and interviews conducted with students over three sets of consultations with each student. There were three hundred students who attended workshops and one hundred who sought individual consultations. Initial analyses suggest that significant gains were made in increasing student coping mechanisms and learning/study skills. This indicates that support offered by the Learning Development Unit develops the capabilities and competencies of academically at-risk learners. It is important to note that the LD unit does not pursue graduate outputs and notions of success rates but focuses on enabling at-risk students, allowing them to engage in more purposeful learning.

Keywords

academic competence, academic development, at-risk students, learning development, learning development interventions, student success, under-prepared students

Introduction

In South Africa, as in many other countries, a high number of students arrive at university without the requisite study skills and strategies required for succeeding in higher education (Department of Education (DoE), 2006; Council of Higher Education (CHE), 2013; UNESCO, 2002). Such students are more likely to leave university before graduating (Scott, 2009; Kinzie, 2011). The lack of preparedness that students face when they enrol

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for studies in higher education is referred to as the ‘articulation gap’ i.e. the gap between success at school and success at university. This gap needs to be bridged particularly through the work of the academic support and learning development units in higher education in order to support students to succeed in higher education. According to the CHE, “the Articulation Gap is not confined to subject knowledge but encompasses a range of facets of learning such as academic literacies, conceptual development and socialisation” (CHE, 2013). Furthermore, there is a widening gap between what students expect and what is actually delivered at university (Tinto, 2012; Shrawder, 2015).

The changing role of university and the growing diversity of students being admitted into university in South Africa make learning development even more relevant. As institutions attempt to uphold and pursue global trends and benchmarks on performativity and competition for rankings and throughput rates, the need for student academic support increases. Results in both the PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study) and the NBT (National Benchmark Tests) suggested that student preparedness had been dropping over the last five years (Nkosi, 2013). However, this race to produce more human capital can lead to students feeling more disengaged, disillusioned and marginalised (Grant, 2015). It is precisely these learners that need to be reached out to, accommodated and engaged by academic development and learning development facilitators. Winberg *et al.* (2013) raise the concern that the neo-liberal agenda of preparing work-ready graduates is seen as the primary role of the higher education sector. They however point out that if curricula are understood as workplace preparation then graduate attributes such as critical thinking and learning to learn will suffer.

In the South African higher education landscape, academic development is still closely linked to the national transformation agenda (i.e. the transformation to democracy after apartheid) and perceived as a means to close the gap between racially and socio-economically disadvantaged learners and learners from advantaged backgrounds (CHE, 2013). Academic development and support programmes need to exceed their reach in higher education, especially to students in first year and those in transition. Academic (or educational) development programmes across South Africa’s tertiary institutions have a limited impact as they reach only 10% of the student body (Scott, 2007). In South Africa 60% of student enrolment is now made up of black African students. The completion rate for black students at university is still less than half of the rate of white students (Scott, 2009). This statistic makes a compelling argument firstly, for the need of academic/ learning development and secondly, for bridging the articulation gap between school and higher education.

Research is required that provides an account of the difficulties students face in accessing the knowledge and related literacy practices of the university. As the study described in this article shows, academic development as a programme or as an intervention to assist students can make the transition to learning at university achievable for learners aspiring to get a university qualification regardless of race, schooling background or socio-economic status. These learning support interventions are necessary as many of the mainstream diplomas and degrees offered at university do not offer learning, academic

literacies and study skills and strategies. The learning and academic development of students is thus an area of concern which cannot be neglected (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh & Whitt, 2005). More especially, research shows that first-year success requires support strategies and mentoring from committed staff to alleviate the problem of attrition and high dropout rates (Reason, Terenzini & Domingo, 2006).

The fact that the students pass a matriculation examination does not necessarily make them academically competent for success at university. University requires a whole new set of learning skills. The government's transformation policy for education after apartheid allowed for increased access to higher education for previously disadvantaged students, in order to alleviate the racially skewed patterns of enrolment and graduation. One of the ways this was done was to increase funding of academic/learning development programmes (Boughey, 2010). In response to this concern, learning development initiatives and interventions are offered at this university to provide these skills. The purpose of this study is to explore the effectiveness of Learning Development as an intervention in enhancing learning support and improved results for students who are academically at risk. This was investigated by analysing student responses in evaluations and interviews to LD interventions. Student assessments were analysed to evaluate whether there had been improvements. Initial results indicate that students who are exposed to the interventions experience an improvement in their results and have a more positive outlook on their university experience.

Theoretical Framework

I first highlight the thinking behind Academic Development, and cite some successful interventions first focusing on the international arena and then on the national. I argue that learning development interventions can offer students foundational support to close the articulation gap and ease the transition to higher education.

Learning development at UJ has as its primary goal the aim of increasing access to learning, of encouraging and supporting students to learn independently and subsequently enhance learning and performance at university, such that students move from being at risk to being competent learners who are prepared. In fulfilling these objectives, learning development has to train and prepare students to take charge of their own learning goals and in so doing become accountable for their own progress. They should also manage their time in a more structured way so as to enhance organisational skills. In addition, students have to adapt successfully to the new environment in order to thrive in the university setting (Tinto, 2012; Kuh, 2003; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Schreiner, 2010).

A comprehensive study conducted by Reason, Terenzini and Domingo (2006) based on 6,687 first-year American students across 30 campuses highlights the student's sense of support, levels of academic and cognitive engagements, and a coherent first year. Their study focused on the individual, organisational, environmental, programmatic and policy factors that shaped student development of academic competence in first year. Their evidence suggests that students' learning and cognitive development is shaped by what happens in the class, but more so by the range of learning opportunities their institutions

provide outside the classroom. Students who reported more encounters with diverse individuals and ideas, also reported advantages in academic competence.

Another such successful intervention which focused on mentoring and monitoring students is documented by Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh and Whitt (2005). They documented the practices in 20 successful DEEP (documenting effective educational practice) institutions in the USA. Student-oriented support services and academic interventions feature high on the list in all institutions. In one of them 15,000 first years are each given support and opportunities to succeed by being allocated to support and advisory staff who mentor and monitor students to identify and tag struggling students in an early-warning system (Kuh *et al.*, 2005). Kuh suggests that for students' success to be enhanced, it becomes necessary to identify with the least engaged, those who are at risk, and to target interventions towards these students. Being at risk is defined by Schoon (2006) as being confronted with an unwanted event and lacking the adaptive ability to deal with the adverse conditions. Kinzie raises these pertinent issues to direct thinking on the issue of what puts students at risk of attrition:

Who are the culprits of depressed success rates? Is it underprepared or unmotivated students? Or is it underperforming institutions and ineffective pedagogies? Or are we ignoring emotional and psychological phenomena among a diverse student population?
(Kinzie, 2012)

These questions are as pertinent to the South African students who are the population in this study as they point to the underlying factors that may be overlooked in the dilemma to find the 'culprits' that retard student success. I argue that it is a combination of under-prepared students, a diverse student population and under-performing institutions which fail to provide the requisite academic support. Kinzie's question about emotional and psychological phenomena is addressed by Rheinheimer, Laskey and Hetzel (2011) who surmise that academic readiness is not only related to skills and behaviour, but that a lack of either motivation, soft skills or personality traits can also place a student at academic risk. Learning Development as a mediator of positive learning and academic outcomes has a role to play in modifying and improving these attributes and behavioural habits through interventions and academic support.

Aud's (2010) assertion that fewer than half of college students who begin a bachelor's degree ever complete one in their lifetime (quoted in Schreiner, Louis & Nelson, 2012) further highlights the need for academic and learning support to be undertaken at first- and second-year level. In a study looking at first-year expectations and experiences conducted among Science and Humanities students, Brinkworth, McCann, Matthews and Nordstrom (2009) concluded that a successful transition was not only about academic competence, but also about "adjustments to a learning environment that requires greater autonomy and individual responsibility than students expect upon commencement". This implies that students who do not adjust easily and quickly to the rigours of studying in higher education or those that are unable to self-regulate are also at risk. The issues of general concern for

student success are those of commitment to the course, expectations of teaching, support for learning, academic confidence, time management and social engagement (Willcoxson, Cotter & Joy, 2011).

However, many international studies address Kinzie's question about ineffective pedagogies and regard these as the reason for students dropping out. For instance, several insights were provided by Long, Ferrier and Heagney (2006) with regard to teaching and being at risk. At-risk students in first year identified academic reasons for discontinuation in tertiary education and largely blamed poor quality of teaching and/or inadequate or poor interaction with teaching staff. It would seem then that lecturers take for granted that students are "university ready" and do not address these needs adequately if at all. Additionally, Palmer, O'Kane and Owens (2009) identified "liminality" and "slippage" as factors that contributed to students being at risk. Liminality relates to the student's feelings of being suspended in the "transient space" between home and university and belonging to neither; while slippage describes the transitional phase/state within the student who feels unrelated to the space or place.

In the South African higher education context, the latest report from the Council for Higher Education (CHE, 2013) reveals that:

Some 55% of all entering students, including about 45% of contact students, never graduate. The figures show that, in the main degree and diploma programmes only 27% of all students, including 20% of African students and 24% of coloured students, graduate in regulation time.

Boughey (2007) supports the notion that access and admission to university in South Africa remains a contested arena since universities are places where knowledge is constructed in ways that sustain the values and attitudes of the university. Recent student protest action and campaigns like the #fees must fall and decolonisation of knowledge movements are a result of the values and attitudes that students blame for their unpreparedness and under-preparedness for higher education studies. Students contend that these values place them at risk of either failing, increasing the time taken to graduate, or worse, dropping out of the system as access is denied to them by virtue of their so called disadvantaged educational and socio-economic background. National throughput and statistics show the seriousness of lack of preparedness for higher education in South Africa; the apartheid legacy, ongoing economic inequalities and major problems in the schooling sector enhance the way student unpreparedness is experienced in this country. The CHE report argues that "time constructively spent on foundational learning [...] will foster quality and success" (CHE report, 2013). The SA Department of Education, too, reiterates that:

Foundational provision is commonly intended primarily to facilitate the academic development of students whose prior learning has been adversely affected by educational or social inequalities. Foundational provision is thus aimed at facilitating equity of access and outcome. (DoE, 2006)

The foundational programmes generally focus “on the discontinuity or articulation gap between students’ educational backgrounds as shaped by their familial and socio-economic circumstances” (CHE report, 2013).

South African Academic Development initiatives have learnt a lot from the ‘foundation programmes’ which have been offered by many SA universities for the past decade. Shandler *et al.* (2011) have reported on student success in the Extended/Access diplomas at the University of Johannesburg where “foundational provision” and more supported learning takes place. Their results indicate that in many cases, foundational-phase learners have overtaken mainstream students in completing their diplomas. Academic development programmes enable South Africa’s higher education institutions to offer greater access to higher education and the academic competencies to deal with the skills and strategies required to succeed in a higher education environment (Scott, 2007, 2009).

Detailed Context of the Study

This study is located in the Learning Development Unit (LDU) at a university in Johannesburg. LDU is a unit within Academic Development and Support which offers support to students who do not have the necessary competencies to cope with university study. Currently the Faculty of Health Sciences offers four learning development workshops to their first-year students in all seven departments during the first semester. Individual students may be referred by PSYCAD, the psychological services wing of academic support, or sent by a lecturer or head of department who has identified the student as being at risk of failing. Or the student may be going through a review process after failing their major subjects and receiving an F7 rating which in effect means that they are no longer eligible to register for further studies. The student has an opportunity to lodge an appeal. Often their appeals are accepted on the basis that they agree to attend academic support/learning development.

The first session with a learning development facilitator is a “getting to know you” session. The students fill in a form giving biographical and contact details and are then interviewed to gauge lifestyle issues, family and educational background, financial situation, living arrangements, accessibility to food and university funding. A food cupboard is maintained on a donation and sponsorship basis for indigent students or those who are hungry or lack immediate access to food. Students are assisted to apply for a food bursary operated by an NGO in collaboration with UJ, so that they receive at least two meals a day on weekdays through the Gift of the Givers food programme.

The next part of the conversation between the student and the academic counsellor relates to the course or diploma that the student is registered in, and the study method that the student currently employs. The student is interrogated about the number of hours and times when study is undertaken, the methods and techniques used to study, the note-taking and -making skills, the memorisation and retrieval skills used, how resources are organised, use of learner guides and Blackboard (the IT learning management system of the university) and any other related issues that may arise.

The second session with the student is used for equipping the student with time-management skills and setting up a time-managed programme for the student based on

their lifestyle and commitments. A week later, the student reports back on the time-management programme and it is further revised and fine-tuned to meet personal needs and learning styles.

In the third session, the student is inducted into the study cycle and shown how to implement each of the components for constructive cognitive engagement, namely, pre-reading, attending class, consolidation, the weekly review and revision. The student is shown how to link their individual work with the learning outcomes and assessment criteria as set down in the learner guide for each course. In subsequent sessions the student is shown how to take notes in class, make notes during consolidation and organise their learning resources and material. They are also guided to use memorisation and retrieval skills, text maps, mind maps and referred to Academic Literacy and the Writing Centre for further support if required. When test or assessment dates are announced, a specific study programme for the test is set up, taking into account the amount of work that will be tested and the time that is available. Students are urged to contact the counsellor by email or to make further appointments with the academic counsellor if additional support and help is required.

Methodology

The current study is based, firstly, on an analysis of 300 evaluation forms from the training and workshops presented by the Learning Development Unit to the Health Sciences departments. Of the 300 students that attended the workshops arranged by their departments, 100 came back for individual help and consultations. Other students are referred by their departments if they have failed more than one test. The students are generally undergraduate students from all faculties studying across a range of qualifications. Research by the Director of Academic Development, Dr Andre van Zyl, reveals that at least 40% of our students are first-generation university students.

The students each attended a minimum of three sessions of individual academic counselling in the Learning Development Unit. These students were interviewed before the sessions with the counsellor, then completed a further evaluation form, and at the end of the set of sessions a conversation was held with students about their overall impressions and to gauge if they had actually implemented suggested changes and made improvements and progress. In addition, test results from before the intervention were compared with test results from after the intervention.

The evaluation forms for both the workshops and the individual consultations are constructed similarly. They are made up of four key questions relating to the actual intervention sessions, as follows:

1. I learnt new study techniques and approaches in my academic counselling session.
2. I think I will be able to apply some of the techniques I learnt in my studies.
3. I think the academic counselling session will make a positive contribution to my success as a student.
4. I will recommend attending academic counselling to other students.

The response options of the key questions are linked to a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'. These four questions are followed by two further open-ended questions:

1. What I found most useful about academic counselling was _____.
2. List some of the techniques/skills you will be willing to try or be able to implement _____.

For the close-ended questions, the frequencies on each option of the Likert scale were calculated. Qualitative content analysis was used for the open-ended questions and interview data. Specific themes were identified that would support or contradict responses to previous questions. The students who attended individual consultations were also tracked in terms of performance before and after the set of sessions, to check improvements and persistence. In this way a deeper understanding was gained of their experience with learning development and the contribution made by LD towards the improvement in their results and their university experience.

Finally, the 2015 undergraduate student report was also mined for statistics relating to the tutoring programme and the Academic Development Centre. This is an online survey undertaken annually. During 2014/2015 a cohort of 14,000 of a potential 30,000 students responded to the survey which is overseen by the Division for Institutional Planning, Evaluation and Monitoring (DIPEM).

Findings and Discussion

Results show that both sets of students, those who attended the workshops as a class and those that attended the individual consultations, were enabled by learning development interventions.

The analysis of the evaluation forms of the class groups showed that:

- 90% of students were positively disposed towards the workshops.
- The workshops and training sessions on time management and the study cycle were marked as the most useful.
- Approaches to study skills and note taking were next in terms of usefulness.

Students definitely felt that they had received skills that had enabled them. Students reflected on arriving at university with only their experience of learning at school. They said that in many cases lecturers do not allow them to 'slide gently' into the workload and new learning context. A fortnight of orientation is clearly not sufficient to allow first-time university students access to the learning culture of such an institution, with the result that students feel overloaded, stressed and easily start to fall behind with their studies once lectures and assessments commence. Students only realise that they are falling behind with work and/or are not coping after the first sets of results are released in the first term. It is at this point that more and more individual consultations are requested.

The analysis of the evaluations of the students who attended individual learning development consultations, revealed that:

- 92% of students agreed that they had learnt new techniques of managing their studies and time after attending academic counselling and that they would be able to apply the new techniques to improve their studies.
- 78% of students strongly agreed that academic counselling would make a positive contribution to their studies.
- 75% strongly agreed that they would recommend attending academic counselling to other students.

The students stated that they felt “less stressed” and were able to dedicate themselves to their studies with confidence once they had a time-management plan and study skills in place. Follow-up visits were scheduled to check on results of tests and assessments administered. Mark increases and improved results in assessments were noted in nearly all cases. Students who, on the first visit, were emotional, insecure and felt that they were failures who would let their parents down, showed more confidence and were more positive. Typical comments students made in their evaluations and interviews are quoted:

It made me to excel in my studies.

[...] all academic issues are addressed promptly and with solutions.

[...] the workload seems less and study skills have improved after my sessions with the counsellor.”

She shows how to get the bigger picture of what you about to do.

[...] even today I am still applying what study skills I learnt.

Saying my problems out loud and having someone put solutions down on paper that I can use continuously really helped me.

These student comments concur with other research that shows that the more students experience success and see positive results, the more likely they are to stay on at the institution (Tinto, 2012).

The 2015 University of Johannesburg Undergraduate Student Experience Report, a survey undertaken by DIPEM (Division of Institutional Planning, Evaluation and Monitoring) revealed the following in respect of Tutoring and Academic Development and Support:

- 71% of the students who responded regarded the academic environment to be ‘good’ whilst 19% rated it as ‘very good’.
- Overall, 90% of the students felt that the University of Johannesburg offers a supportive academic environment.
- 67% of the undergraduates said that the study method courses were helpful. They rated the Academic Development staff as ‘knowledgeable, helpful and professional’. The Tutoring unit was credited with 68% of respondents saying that they sought help at least once a week from tutors. (DIPEM 2015)

The impact of the learning development interventions on the University is that the Faculty of Health Sciences and the Building and Construction Management Department have institutionalised the learning development offerings to their first-year students based on the student and lecturer evaluations of the interventions. In addition, the Faculties of Engineering and the Built Environment, Humanities and Science are booking more workshops for their students and referring students for academic counselling. As students move into their senior years, they return for help with time management, writing skills and academic literacies. The role for direct student support cannot be ignored, as learning development interventions have an important role to play in mediating study skills and learning as a psycho-educational tool that leads to performance-enhancing behaviour.

Conclusion

Students in their first year of study and sometimes beyond, 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 the preferred experience of learning in university. The initial findings in this study support this claim. Both the findings and the literature indicate that, with guidance and interventions designed to support and empower them, students are definitely enabled to make the transition from school to university and succeed. These results are relevant for those educators and policy planners who are interested in increasing retention and diminishing drop-out rates, as well as those who hope to ‘ease the articulation gap’. Both King (1999) and Kuh (2005) liken college for the first-year student to a jigsaw puzzle made up of many puzzling pieces that do not seem to fit. Academic/Learning Development can help students to find a way to fit the puzzle pieces together and find direction in a transitional phase of their lives.

Through supported learning of skills and strategies to negotiate the puzzle that constitutes the first year of study, learning development can provide help for the academically at-risk student to attain a greater measure of academic competence. The university has to make provision for and actively market academic support so that students remain engaged. Persistence and retention instead of drop-out and attrition will then become the experience of more students in higher education.

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