

Academic Intervention Experiences of ‘At Risk’ Students in a South African University

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Abstract

High levels of student drop-out and low throughput levels experienced in undergraduate programmes in South African public higher education institutions have become a serious concern in terms of the efficiency of the higher education system and a threat to the transformation agenda and widening of access to previously disadvantaged population groups. Several interventions have been institutionalised to address this concern. This paper focuses on one of the major interventions that most universities have institutionalised to promote efficiency and throughput, that of academic support to ‘at risk’ students. ‘At risk’ students are those students that have been identified as being ‘at risk’ of failing in their academic programme. This paper presents a descriptive account of ‘at risk’ students’ experiences of academic support from the point of identification to the receiving of academic support. This paper suggests that through enforced compliance in a structured and monitored process ‘at risk’ students see the value of academic support.

Keywords: access, academic support, intervention, ecological systems theory

Introduction

In South African higher education, the trend has been for higher institutions to intensify the integration, development or implementation of programmes

of support for students with a view to targeting successful completion of their degrees and diplomas. In part, this move is seen and approached as an integral component of the transformation agenda of higher education institutions. Transformation has led to a number of steps being taken to enhance higher education access to previously disadvantaged segments of the population (Akoojee & Nkomo 2007). These steps include access initiatives that emphasis programmes for the development of access routes (for example, incorporating foundational learning into mainstream degree programmes), increased awareness projects and the marketing of higher education in previously educationally-marginalised communities (UNESCO 1998; Pandor 2005). Policy and institutional reforms that target pedagogical access have been institutionalized through national and institutional policy frameworks. Curriculum initiatives to enhance access include curriculum reviews and academic support programmes. As a result of these interventions the student demographics of higher education have changed substantially. For example, the number of African students has increased from 213 000 in 1993 to 640 400 in 2011 (Council for Higher Education 2013b).

The changing demography in the student population strongly suggests a significant enhancement in the level of physical access to higher education for African and other previously marginalised population groups (Teferra & Altbachl 2004), but there is growing concern that the throughput and retention rates experienced systemically within the South African public higher education system will compromise the transformational agenda (Ramrathan 2013; Letseka & Maile 2008; Christenson, Sinclair, Lehr & Godber 2001). Although different explanations are advanced for this phenomenon, findings indicate that the poor throughput rate, even if not fine-grained in all nuances of quintile analysis, is largely accounted for by students from the previously marginalised population, for whom access has been enhanced (Moll 2004). Interventional strategies to address this growing concern includes identification and monitoring processes to identify students who are deemed to be at risk of failing, followed by academic support for these identified students. Academic support has several forms. These include language support, peer support and study skills support. These interventions have been instituted for over a decade, yet the throughput and dropout rates have not improved significantly (Council for Higher Education 2013a; Ramrathan 2013). Theoretically, the interventions instituted by public higher education institutions should have impacted on the academic performance of

students in their undergraduate studies, but this has not been evident through the vital statistics as recorded by the Council for Higher Education (2013b). Similar trends have been noted in other countries where, for example, decades of research leading to interventions to address the problem of student retention and throughput in the United States of America have been conducted with very little success being noted (Tinto 2012).

This article, therefore, starts with a contextual synopsis of the academic monitoring and support programme at a particular School of Education as a case study of academic support to students who were deemed at risk by the university. The article further engages recent debates and research in the area of academic monitoring and support and draws its focal lens from Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory to make meanings of students' understanding of their needs. In this article we argue that process factors rather than content factors are largely to blame for underperformance in higher education and that the ecology of the learning environments are the root causes of poor academic performance. We advocate that factors related to student underperformance in undergraduate studies now needs to be explored in greater depth to understand the dynamics of poor academic performance. The experiences of students within the STAR programme (a moniker created to protect the privacy of 'at risk' students), offered at the University of KwaZulu-Natal attest to this advocacy as this STAR programme is underpinned by process issues rather than academic content.

Monitoring and Support for Students Considered 'At Risk' – The UKZN (STAR) Programme

Being 'at risk' for the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) means not being able to meet the required minimum progression pass in the normal credit load for a semester. The students are categorised at various levels of risk using colour codes (green, orange and red) that signal the different progression commands (adapted from the traffic light system). This three-colour academic standing system is implemented university-wide and accessible on a central Student Management System (SMS). The SMS system alerts students (and support staff) to, firstly, their academic standing status, and secondly, the stipulated action/s to be taken.

The colour code *Green* represents good academic standing. What this implies is that the student has passed $\geq 70\%$ of the normal credit load for the semester; and also has passed $\geq 75\%$ of the credits expected, at that point, for regular progression in the chosen degree (for completion in the minimum time). At this point, a student is considered not to be 'at risk' and no specific action is required. However, optional counselling and support are available at the students' request in order to support the goal of passing all modules in the following semester.

The colour code *Orange* indicates that the student is 'at risk'. What this means is that either s/he has passed less than 70% of the normal credit load for that semester; or s/he has passed less than 75% of the credits expected, at that point, for normal progression in the chosen degree. The action required at this point is for the student to follow compulsory academic counselling and developmental programmes in order to make sure that s/he meets the goal of returning to green code status by the end of the following semester. However, it is the student's responsibility to participate in the required counselling and developmental programme and meet the set targets.

The colour code *Red* signifies serious under-performance, and that the student is 'at risk'. What this means is that the student's pass in the normal credit load for the semester is below required minimum progression requirement in the chosen degree. The action required of the student is to follow the stipulated and compulsory academic and personal/career counselling programmes of support. There is also a set condition that should the student wish to continue with the chosen degree, s/he may do so for one semester on strict probation. Specific and realistic conditions to be met at the end of the semester (which is normally a minimum load of 3 modules in the School of Education) are set by the university while provision for continued academic support is made for the student. It is the student's responsibility to make sure s/he participates in the personal/career counselling programmes of support (UKZN 2009).

Institutional Intervention in Supporting Students Deemed 'At Risk'

In this paper the Student 'At Risk' (STAR) programme is described in detail as a case study to illuminate the issues related to this institutional intervention

for academic support. The STAR programme was initiated as a response to a policy process that identified, monitored and tracked students that were regarded as ‘at risk’ based on the identification and monitoring system described above. Students who were identified as orange and red codes were required to consult the School’s academic co-ordinator for programmed intervention for academic support. The STAR programme had several elements, outlined below.

Workshops

The workshops are an intervention facility that provides support for students in the form of coaching and mentoring in skills such as time management, life skills, study skills, academic literacy, report writing, exam preparation and resiliency skills.

The Drop-in-Centre

The Drop-in-Centre is an intervention that provides the space for peer-to-peer student mentoring. This intervention is meant to provide students with immediate support from student mentors who take turns to be on duty all day during week days.

Academic Counselling

The academic counselling intervention is meant to provide one-on-one counselling on academic support needs of the students by the academic monitoring coordinator, the lecturers and the academic qualifications coordinator. This intervention session provides students with academic guidance or advice.

Peer Mentoring

The peer-to-peer mentoring intervention is meant to offer tailored support via smaller peer-led breakout sessions. Sessions are held weekly and include individual support meetings.

Referral System

The referral system is meant to provide students with referral support by signposting and referring them to other university support structures according to their specific needs. This intervention is meant to facilitate appropriate targeting of the varying needs and challenges that impact students' academic performance, including personal and financial support.

Contextualising Academic Monitoring and Support: Concepts and Challenges

Globally, increasing rates of student access has brought into focus the question of readiness for the academic progress and success for students both for higher institutions and for students themselves. However, the level of readiness differs in each country (Archer 2005). The increasing rate of student access to higher education has resulted in increased concerns within higher institution institutions on how to manage their access, progress and throughput support (Letseka & Maile 2008). In order to address the concern, higher education institutions have designed programmes and interventions designed to enhance success in their studies (Adams 2006). However, increased global access to higher education has not matched by the same level of growth in resources and infrastructure in the affected institutions (Hubball & Burt 2004).

Thus, it has been argued that in order to balance the intake with the throughput rate, extensive intervention support programmes should be established (Agar & Knopfmacher 1995). How this act of balancing is achieved within the South African higher education space is important to study and understand, particularly so given the current drive for transformation. Improve understanding can lead to further development of contextualised systems of support intervention in order to enhance students' success. However, as much as access into higher education has improved, epistemological access is still a concern (Boughy 2003). The not-so-smooth transition from secondary school level to university undergraduate study level remains a challenge in the South African context.

South Africans are still divided along the lines of advantaged and disadvantaged, at least in terms of access to higher education institutions. The diverse nature of the student population since the opening up of access to

higher education (Chikte & Brand 1996; Goduka 1996) attests to the diversity that defines the higher education space, particularly in terms of race, gender, social status, cultural lineage and levels of academic achievements. A possible implication is the continued re-enactments of the legacy of higher educational access equating to privilege. Yet, students who enter the higher institutions come from different cultural backgrounds with different life practices, educational opportunities and a great variety of prospects, learning needs and academic potentials (Fraser & Killen 2005).

Globally, there is in practice systems of identification, intervention, monitoring and tracking that have been tried and implemented for students that are targeted as 'at risk' of academic failure (Aguilar, Lonn & Teasley 2014). The UKZN academic monitoring and support programme, the 'traffic light system' is a contextual example of these programmes. The execution of the process of identifying, tracking and monitoring of students targeted as 'at risk' tends to differ in terms of first years and returning students. Thompson & Geren (2002) highlight the difficulty inherent in identifying students who are 'at risk' of academic failure particularly at the point of entry. However, Campbell & Mislevy (2012) contend that early identification may assist in targeting and retaining students. Other studies maintain that identification often includes real examples of behaviours, such as absences or tardiness, missed assignments, mid-term grade performance, or even lack of academic goals (Kuh *et al.* 2005; Cuseo 2006). However, it is observed that these behaviours may not show at the beginning of the academic year but only later in the students' studies. Hence, the suggestion that intervention such as tracking systems, follow-ups to monitor and support students who the university identifies as 'at risk' are considered necessary in order to improve 'at-risk' student retention (Kuh *et al.* 2005; Cuseo 2006). This implies that for higher institutions to increase the throughput rate, early and continuous identification, tracking, monitoring, support and continuous follow-ups is a possible way forward.

A study of four institutions focusing on what criteria institutions use to identify, track and monitor 'at risk' students, indicates differences and similarities in this task (Kirk-Kuwaye & Nishida 2001). Furthermore, Kirk-Kuwaye & Nishida (2001) report that even though strategies used to identify, track and monitor 'at risk' students differ, institutions use the same main criteria which is academic performance that is below the expected standard. Kuh *et al.* (2005) also found that below par academic performance is a

common strategy used to identify 'at risk' students. What these studies have shown is that though higher institutions are reported in literature to be implementing a system of identification, monitoring and support targeted at students who are considered as being 'at risk' of academic failure, what seem to be lacking in the discourse is the students' voice on their experience of academic support. Students' voices, as opposed to institutional-oriented factors, seem to be missing in the determination of what constitutes their support needs, and the implications of their status as being 'at risk' of academic failure. This paper focuses on their voices through their personal experiences of being identified, then monitored and tracked through the intervention programmes.

Theoretical Framework

Research studies have drawn from the ecosystems theory in explaining the interrelation and inter-dependency of systems and role players (Bronfenbrenner 1995). Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory explains the interdependency of systems in the relationships between organisms and their physical environment at varying levels. Students considered to be at risk of academic failure are faced with varying levels of challenges (Ntakana 2011). There are challenges that may occur in the classroom (micro-level risk), in the home or school (meso-level risk), in the community (exo-level risk) and/or in the larger society (macro-level risk). At each of these eco-systemic levels of risk, there are differently but related risk factors that potentially compromise in part or as a combination with other levels of risk, their ability to perform, in this case their academic performance within their undergraduate programmes in a higher education environment.

These risk factors we can recognise and categorise as push and pull factors (Doll, Eslami & Walters 2013). An understanding of these factors perhaps permits a clearer grasp of how Bronfenbrenner's (1995) ecosystemic theory enables a holistic insight on what the 'at risk' factors are, and where they are embedded for students considered as 'at risk.'

Push factors are those factors from without the student, at exo-level and macro-level which, in practical terms, are related to institutional influence or impact.

Pull factors can be recognised as from within the student or student-induced. These are factors embedded in the micro and meso-levels.

Jordan, Lara & McPartland (1994) describe the push and pull factors in students' dropout as adverse experiences of the school environment that consequently lead to student dropout and within students' factors that compel and divert them from successful completion of schooling, respectively. Beyond these, a third factor is recognisable in what Watt and Roessingh (1994) explain as the 'fall factor'. This factor is described as induced by 'insufficient personal and educational support' provision for the student (Watt & Roessingh 1994:239). The fall factor can be recognised as bestriding all layers and levels of the Bronfenbrenner's ecosystemic theory and as such is pervasively embedded. In applying understanding of the push, pull and fall factors to varying levels of challenges (Ntakana 2011), students considered to be 'at risk' of academic failure face, it becomes possible to see through the lens of the multi-layered ecosystemic theory (Bronfenbrenner's 1995), the where and how complexities of 'at risk' student's challenges and their intersections.

Research Methodology

The attempt to understand students' experiences of particular intervention programmes at a particular institution informs the choice of qualitative case study design. A case study approach enabled a process through which data was collected by methods including individual interviews and focus group discussions. The justification of the choice of these methods is the need for collecting thick narratives that situate the students' experiences in their real contexts. According to Cohen, Manion & Morrison (2000), case study as an approach explores real people in real situations rather than merely demonstrating with abstract theories or principles.

Using a combination of focus group discussion and individual interview methods, the data for this study was collected from a purposively selected sample population that comprised twelve students from the School of Education at UKZN. These students were in their second to fourth year of study. Their experiences of academic support and intervention, their understandings of the 'at risk' status, how they navigate and associate their academic performance as 'at risk' students with other aspects of their lives

and environment were explored. Participants' consent was sought and obtained, and they were informed that the information they provided would be treated as strictly confidential and that their identities would not be revealed. In order to protect participants' identities, pseudonyms were used. Also, because of the sensitive nature of the discussions, participants were advised to avail themselves of psychological counselling which was provided by a university counsellor.

Findings and Discussion

From the focus group interviews, the reasons that emerged as possible causes for participants' poor academic performances were similar to those previously identified in studies. These included environmental issues such as language of instruction and poor preparation for higher education; institutional issues such as wrong programme choices and boring and unsupportive lectures; and personal issues such as finance and family concerns (Letseka & Maile 2008; Council for Higher Education 2013a). However, what emerged through in depth exploration was the value of environmental process issues. For example, on the issue of language barriers, the students reported that at their schools they were supported by their teachers who translated key concepts into their mother tongue language but that this translation support was completely lacking at university.

Some of the students who experienced language as a barrier to learning indicated the following:

'In high school, we were taught in isiZulu as a language. Other subjects were translated and the problem we faced at the university is that we have to write essays in English when we don't understand what to say or how to answer questions. At the university it is very difficult to translate what lecturers are saying, especially English-speaking lecturers who teach in a very difficult language; you have to listen very carefully.' Zodumo.

'What is a problem here at the university for me is the language; I am not used to be taught in English, my teachers were teaching in IsiZulu. They will try and translate and explain in IsiZulu. To

prepare for exams we used and practised previous question papers.' Khethiwe.

'Even when I was attending Saturday classes in Grade 12, the classes were taught by Indian teachers and I struggled to understand what they were saying. When you try and practise talking English at school they will laugh at you, saying all those things that you think you are better than them.' Nokuthula

From this data set, it seems that two important factors contributed to students' low performance in relation to language barriers within higher education. The first relates to the context of support that these students were accustomed to during their schooling. While school education was through the medium of English, despite their mother tongue being other than English, their teachers provided the language translation support to enable them to learn, understand and be assessed through the language of English. At university, this translation support was absent and these students then had an additional burden of becoming acclimatised to a new learning environment that privileged English. The second factor relates to how the environment is supportive of individual responses to the language barrier. While students had the opportunity of developing their communicative skills in English whilst at school, their ability to take up this opportunity was compromised by others within their school environment. Some learners made them feel uncomfortable when they attempted to develop and use their English language communicative skills, hence these students would rather not practice English language communication so as not to be embarrassed by their peers. These students then come into a university that privileges English as the medium of instruction; their English language communication is not sufficiently competent to support the independent study required of higher education in a language of instruction different from their mother tongue. A further factor in the language barrier category is the school environment which, through translation, that has compromised the students' preparation for higher education. By assisting the students with conceptual thinking through translation, students were being disadvantaged in that they did not actively take ownership for self-learning, a key element of higher education studies. The ecological system (Bronfenbrenner 1979) of the school did not resonate with the ecological system of higher education with respect to

language competence development and self-study, resulting in students experiencing difficulties in their academic programme. The participants blamed (or attributed their underperformance to) their school environment for not providing them the scope to prepare for higher education within the English medium of instruction.

Teacher paternalism was another process factor at the site of the school that compromised students' ability to cope within the higher education environment. The participants referred to their dependency on teachers and their lack of preparedness regarding academic issues prior to university. During their school study programme, their teachers were constantly reminding them about their responsibilities, and some sort of punishment was used to force them to study. At university, students are often independent and participants find it difficult to suddenly become responsible. They have no one to rely on and have no one who keeps motivating them to study. They are expected to be mature and independent students. The issue of teacher paternalism is highlighted by Warburton, Bugarin, and Nunez (2001), who state that the quality of academic experience and student-teacher dependency affects almost every aspect of success in postsecondary education. According to these researchers, school curriculum and teaching as well as learning style have a direct impact on a student's readiness for higher education.

One of the students who experienced teacher paternalism and self-regulated learning indicated that:

School was very different because you were given a task to do and if you did not do it you will be punished; this was forcing us to study, and then when I came to university no one was asking me to study.'
Nozizwe

'University is different because no one is behind you and pushes you which mean that you need to grow up very quickly. If you don't hand in your assignment it's your own story.' Sabrina

'Things are different at university, I enjoyed my secondary school compared to university, and I was supported by my family and teachers unlike here where no one is behind you.'

'At school teachers were supportive and they explained things clearly compared to university; I think my teachers assisted me more.' Mbali

'The school did not prepare me for university at all because I struggled to write an assignment when I came to university. Lecturers don't spoon feed you like teachers do at school.' Busisiwe

Analysis of this set of data indicates that two important factors have contributed to students' low performance within higher education. The first factor relates to the context of spoon-feeding that these students were accustomed to during their school study programme. This is an age-old problem; learners are not taught to work independently and engage with self-regulated learning (Biggs 2001). It surfaces in higher learning institutions where students are expected to work independently. Teachers at school level cushion and support students by helping them in class, giving them reminders, and helping them with homework and revision for exams. Some students appreciated the fact that teachers from secondary school gave them support; however this support also contributed to their lack of maturity. Students explained that they were spoon-fed by teachers and this created the culture of teacher dependency. From students' responses it shows that the transition from dependent pupil to independent student delayed adaptation to the higher education institution. Some students became 'at-risk' because no one provided extrinsic motivation to submit assignments on time and they were not 'pushed' to study; they had to grow up very quickly and develop intrinsic motivation to pass their studies (see Sabrina's statement above). The second factor relates to punishment as a tool used to encourage them to study. For some, performance depended on harsh consequences such as punishment which is very different to an institution of higher learning where students are taken as adults who are responsible and mature. When students enter a higher learning institution the motivation to succeed has to shift from extrinsic to intrinsic motivation. Students were not able to make this transition. The peer support activity of the STAR programme has been designed to allow students to transcend this motivational continuum. This is another example of how the school ecology (Bronfenbrenner 1979) is different from that of the university environment.

Students' Experiences of the STAR Academic Support Programme

With a nuanced focus on process issues in relation to academic support of 'at risk' students, this section of the paper argues that forced recognition and forced compliance are necessary for students to recognize their need for and value of academic support. This argument is developed from the evidence provided by the 'at risk' students.

The university's system of notification of students' academic standing includes notification through the student central system (students log on to the university student management computer system to view their academic profile), notification through their results sheet posted to them and notification at the point of registration for the next academic year. Students therefore have several points of official notification. In addition, students have an idea of how they may have performed in their examinations through their experience of writing their examinations as well as in their knowledge of their performance within the semester of their study through the continuous assessment process of the modules that they take each semester.

'I saw my student colour changed from green to orange from student central system then I knew that my performance was unsatisfactory'. Sabrina

'I saw it from student central that my status has changed and on my academic record it was written that I must consult the Dean.' Musa

'During registration I was told to see the academic support office and they explained to me about my performance'. Nevan

These quotes suggest that the students knew of the notification processes as well as the meanings of this notification. What seems important through these statements is that these students waited for formal communication from the university to inform them of their academic status. This could mean that students were either oblivious about what is going on and what constitutes as good performance for a student or they are in denial until the system informs them. The realisation of being labelled as 'at risk'

was delayed until the official notification of their academic standing, suggesting that these students were very reluctant to be introspective or believe that they were not performing well academically, as was expected of the programme. This formal notification through the colour code change forced students to recognize that they would now have to do something to retain their place within their higher education programme or risk being academically excluded.

This forced recognition of underperformance led to forced compliance with receiving academic support.

'When I was told I was part of the programme I didn't like it because I thought I was working hard enough to be able to pass my modules without the help of the program'. Musa

'Initially I felt ostracised by the whole thing when I was told I need to attend the programme, now they know that I am not performing well, but it turned out to be a good thing because after talking to the support programme coordinator I was then sent to a university counsellor because of my issues and depression. I was then referred to the hospital and they discovered that I have bipolar disease.'
Nevan

What seems important through these statements is that these students felt that they were offered support that they did not need, suggesting forced compliance (receiving academic support). However as much as they had performed poorly in their studies, they still believed that they were capable of succeeding without intervention support. Initially, they reacted negatively towards the idea of attending the support program. This could have been brought about by the fear of knowing that the university was monitoring their progress. The change of attitude towards the programme was brought about by the positive assistance they received, particularly as they were given the space to talk about issues that compromised their academic performance (see Nevan's statement above). This shows that students are reluctant to receive intervention support until they see the benefit from it.

Students' Reflection after Intervention

The study reveals participants' views on how effective they perceived the academic support they received to be. It emerged from the study that the academic and support programme experienced by participants in this study provided a revelation discourse of broader support available such as that of the disability unit, financial support, health support and language support. Academic support also provided comfort and hope; it provided a space for a collegial and collaborative learning discourse and it contributed to a sense of community.

Comfort and Hope

Data from this study showed that some participants felt that the intervention programme provided them with emotional and psychological support. Some claimed that sharing challenges with other students in the programme and peer mentors made them feel that they were not on their own and that experience brought resilience, comfort and hope. Ntakana (2011) confirms this view in that a student's emotional instability may result in thoughts of students quitting their studies.

It feels comfortable to know that you are not on your own; there are other students who have problems like you.' Rita.

'The Academic and Support programme makes me feel whole again; it gives me hope that I can still make it.' Zodwa

'As much as I didn't want to go to the programme, when I got there I realised that it is good to have someone to talk to.' Zodwa

'During my first year I was pretending to be fine but now I am seeing the counsellor because my mentor referred me to her.' Nozizwe

As one may notice from the above quotes, when students experienced failure they tended to lose hope. The quotes show that the support programme and counselling makes students feel that they are not on their own and that the experience brings resilience, comfort and hope.

Collegial and Collaborative Learning Discourse

Data from this study shows that some participants felt that the intervention programme enhanced their academic performance. The workshops provided them with academic skills. In line with this view, Ntakana (2011) observes that student support programmes assist students to cope with a number of academic challenges such as writing and study skills, simplifying key concepts and providing a safe space for addressing their learning difficulties. Some of the students who indicated that the program provided enhanced their academic performance said:

My performance was not good, during workshops they advised us how to study, how to organise myself, time management The following semester I passed all my modules. I tried to follow all methods they were teaching us, it came at the right time for me.'

Focus group

'Workshops made me change my attitude completely; you need this programme when you arrive at the university, when you need a direction and how to do things.' Nevan

In this case it shows that some students were empowered with academic skills and life skills that contributed to their success. Some students suggested that this support was needed from first year level and some thought it came at the right time, when they were struggling academically.

Physical Support

Institutional intervention and a support system like monitoring is experienced positively by some of the participants but some students feel they should have had this support from first year level. One of the students from the focus group claimed that the programme provided a platform whereby students shared their challenges and their ways of coping. This is shown in the selection of statements that follow:

'I felt supported, I wish I had this support in my first year level, having monitoring chart made me feel like I have something concrete

that makes me go and speak to my lecturers. I feel comfortable talking to support programme staff about my challenges.' Sabrina

Some participants revealed that through the intervention programme their challenges were resolved. This is shown in the following statements:

'My mentor structured my work out for me to do on certain days.'

Luke

'I feel comfortable to be able to talk to other students in the programme because they understand the programme better than other students. When they share their experiences you feel that you are not on your own.' Sindi

Most participants confided that the monitoring chart provided tangible support and it motivated them to consult with lecturers regarding their academic progress. Some participants expressed the view that attending the programme makes them feel part of the group and they were encouraged by sharing their experiences with other members of the programme. In support of this view, Kuh (2001) observes that structured interventions can contribute to the development of a positive culture.

Contributed to a Sense of Community

The data from interviews and the focus group revealed that the name of the support programme makes students comfortable about being part of the group because it did not make them feel inferior to other students. Participants felt that the programme contributed to a sense of community. This is shown in the following statements:

'The Academic and Support programme makes me feel a whole again, it gives me hope that I can still make it. I just feel as if some people still believe in me and when my friends ask me about this Academic and Support meeting they don't know what this is about.'

Zodwa

'The name STAR doesn't make us feel that we are anything, any less than other students; it's a very confidential.' Focus group

The positive name given to the support programme promotes the programme and creates a positive attitude towards attendance and encourages a commitment to the support programme. The programme is seen by some as support and they feel protected from being stigmatised. Some students described the positive value of feeling normal and having a sense of being cared for.

Evaluatory Discourse

Some participants confided that the programme had assisted them mainly by providing a space to talk, in identifying problems and in referring them to relevant sectors for further assistance in order to alleviate personal issues. One participant stated:

'My mentor organized for me to meet my lecturer and discuss my progress and get advice. I thought I am not going to pass this module because I had to attend my usual hospital appointment and miss lectures.' Luke

'During first year I was pretending to be fine but now I am seeing the counsellor because my mentor referred me.' Nozizwe

The participants claimed that the one-on-one sessions offered an opportunity to talk freely to their peer-mentors about any psycho-social, academic and personal issues. Some students needed an extra hand to take responsibility or to seek appropriate help. In line with this view, Dobizl (2002) observes that providing a formal programme using mentors or group counselling sessions, and an environment where help is always available, leads students toward a more fruitful and healthy lifestyle.

Enhanced Skills and Students' Accountability

The data generated from interviews for this research indicated that partici-

pants valued the assistance that they received from the workshops. This is shown in the following statements:

'My performance was not good, but during workshops they advised us on how to study, how to organise myself and how to implement time management. I followed the recommendation and the following semester I had passed all my modules. I still try to follow all the methods that they were teaching us. It came at the right time for me.'
Nokuthula

'When I was told I was part of the programme I didn't like it at all but when I got there I was astonished about the assistance I got from the programme; it actually assisted me with the way I was doing things.' Musa

'Workshops made me change my attitude completely; you need this programme when you arrive at the university, when you need a direction and how to do things.' Focus group

'When I got to the meeting I was assigned a mentor; am lucky that she is a female. She reminds me of my deadlines.' Focus group

From participants' responses it was noted that the students benefitted from the support programme in terms of time management skills and adhering to deadlines. Another participant indicated that as much as he did not want to attend the programme it made him reflect on how he was doing things. One participant confided that being assisted by a mentor who was a female made her comfortable. In support of this view, Zajacova & Espenshade (2005) point out that a gap in study skills and practices, self-management capability or academic ability may be open to early intervention and improvement.

Discussion

It emerged from the study that notification of a change in students' academic progress to 'at risk' status causes a flurry of emotional and psychological

reactions in students. These emotional and psychological reactions ranged from shock, disbelief, demotivation and anger. Weiner (1986) explains reaction towards labelling as a common response. However, in the students' support intervention, 'labelling', which is what students, understood being identified as 'at risk' to be, produces reaction that manifests in alarm, concealment, forced compliance and acceptance. The findings show that students, being identified as 'at risk' and in need of the academic support intervention were perceived to be stigmatising.

What the findings also highlight is the value of the intervention programme, based on students' responses. Their responses indicate the following benefits: (i) breaking the isolation barrier – meaning that students had come to realise that they need not work in isolation – that there were benefits and tangible support that they could get by attending support programmes and did not just have to rely on their own strengths; (ii) forced exposure to support services offered at the institutional level – without this forced exposure through the academic support programme students would assume that there was no or little assistance to students outside of their lectures to assist them to cope with the demands of academic life; (iii) regulated compliance – a means to get students on track by consciously making them access the support services available to all students; (iv) monitoring progress – meaning that students were under positive surveillance to encourage them to continue receiving support and ultimately leading to student improvement – something that they may not realise if they were not monitored.

Conclusion

Several steps have been taken over the last decade in targeting previously disadvantaged communities as part of the initiatives for achieving the transformational agenda of higher education in South Africa. These initiatives include the enhancement of access to mainstream degree programmes. While this transformation goal seems to have been met, studies have also found that the dropout rates are extremely high in the first year of study and are of equal concern in other years of study (Van Schalkwyk 2007). Furthermore, the low number of students completing their degree in the minimum time is reported as alarming (Christenson, Sinclair, Lehr & Godber 2001). In view of these,

higher education institutions are beginning to develop and implement programmes of support for students with a view to targeting the successful completion of their degrees and diplomas. These intervention programmes are usually designed to respond to both their personal and academic needs.

However, it can be said that students considered as 'at risk' of academic failure are not being fully understood in terms of what exactly constitutes their needs outside of the prescription-imposed generic needs designed for them from an institutional perspective. This implies support programmes accessible from higher institutions need to offer general support to students that are targeted as 'at risk'. It is perhaps compelling to state that the one-size-fits all approach to academic intervention has not provided an adequate answer to the recurring deficit in 'at risk' students' successful completion of their studies. These students considered as 'at risk' are typified as individuals with specific needs and special issues (Ferguson 2000). Such needs and issues have to be holistically understood, specifically met, and timeously addressed.

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'At Risk' Students in a South African University

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