

## Reflections on a Study Skills Training Program at a University in Limpopo Province, South Africa

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**ABSTRACT** The purpose of the present study was to explore students' views on study skills and other factors that might have influenced their learning at a university in Limpopo Province of South Africa. The study made use of a qualitative approach in which a case study design was employed. Purposive sampling was used to select two samples from a group of 45 students who completed the Foundation Program in the university. Each sample consisted of 6 participants and data were collected through individual and focus group interviews. Data were analyzed through content analysis. The study found that there were numerous factors that impacted negatively on students' learning efforts. The study concluded that the type of study skills offered in the Foundation Program were not appropriate for learning in higher education. The study makes recommendations to enhance student learning in the university.

### INTRODUCTION

One of the most pressing challenges of higher education institutions in South Africa is to assist first-year students with relevant academic skills to enable them to perform better in their academic tasks. Awang and Sinnadurai (2011) pointed out that new students enrolling in tertiary institutions will feel disorientated as they face learning difficulties due to a transition period and changes in their study orientation. These authors, further, state that these students have to orientate themselves from being dependent learners into independent learners. Visser and Van Zyl (2013) allude to the under-preparedness of first-entering students for academic work and the lack of success by higher education institutions in graduating these students.

Mendezabal (2123) indicated that a number of researchers have examined the role of study skills, motivation, study behavior, study habits and attitudes on students' academic achievement. According to this author, some researchers argued that these factors have strong relationship with academic performance of students while others concluded that it was the combina-

tion of the different factors that could influence students' academic performance. Mutsotso and Abenga (2010) asserted that many students are unsuccessful in higher education because they lack effective study skills. In a research on study skills, Entwistle (in Mutsotso and Abenga 2010) reported that students who voluntarily took a study skills course were more successful academically than similar students who did not take the course.

Butcofsky (in Mutsotso and Abenga 2010) reported that students who have difficulty in college frequently have inadequate study habits that affect their academic achievement. According to this author, the main problem was that many of these students had not learned how to take effective notes and manage time for studying. Demir et al. (2012) are of the opinion that many students cannot succeed even though they spend a lot of time studying. The motive behind this was suggested as lack of efficient study skills. These authors, further, state that even students who are considered as successful may not possess adequate level of efficient study skills. Benjamin (in Demir et al. 2012) investigated study strategies of successful students to detect whether they are different from failed students in terms of quality in processing information. Findings indicated that successful students are more active, purposeful and flexible in using their strategies and more satisfied with their academic performances. Gall (in Demir et al. 2012) believed that 'teaching learning' and, therefore, 'developing study skills' is as important as teaching any course.

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Gettinger and Seibert (2002) differentiated between procedural or organization-based study skills, cognitive-based study skills, and meta-cognitive-based study skills. Procedural study skills include the behaviors or habits that allow students to maximize the use of their study time. For example, time management, material organization, and development of schedules or study routines. The goal of cognitive-based study skills is to guide students to engage in appropriate thinking about information they are required to learn. Meta-cognitive skills refer to students' ability to assess the need for studying, and to plan, implement, monitor, and evaluate their study approaches (Gettinger and Seibert 2002). Fazal et al. (2012) differentiated between meaningful learning and rote learning by pointing out that the former is the linking of present knowledge with prior knowledge, which is essential for successful learning. Thus, studying is enhanced when new material is meaningful to students and integrated with their existing knowledge (Gettinger and Seibert 2002). Demir et al. (2012) regard study skills as planned studying, organizing study environment, efficient reading, note-taking and efficient writing. Brazeau (in Fazal et al. 2012) stressed that the active part of learning is to involve students in the process of note-taking as it helps to pinpoint critical points, correlate concepts, and organize the content in an understandable manner.

According to Eluemuno and Azuk-Obieke (2013), metacognition involved students' awareness and understanding of their learning skills, performance, preferences, barriers and goals. In essence, a meta-cognitive learner must understand his or her strengths and weaknesses in learning, and how he or she will approach a problem. These authors further state that meta-cognitive skills include taking control of learning and selecting strategies, monitoring the progress of learning, correcting errors, monitoring the effectiveness of learning strategies when necessary. Ofodu and Adedipe (2011) indicated that students who demonstrate a wide range of meta-cognitive skills perform better on examinations and complete work more efficiently; and that Such students are self-regulated learners who can identify blocks to learning as early as possible and change strategies to ensure goal attainment.

The throughput and graduation rates of students who enrolled in the Foundation Program at a university in Limpopo Province, South Afri-

ca, in the past five years were below the required pass rate of 80 per cent. It was also realized that many of these students struggled to proceed to the second and third years of their degree programs. A study skills training program was introduced in the Foundation Program. The training was offered for the whole year, and it covered various topics such as time management, study methods, self-concept enhancement and concentration, among others. Students were assessed throughout the year in the form of tests, assignments, and examination. The aim of the training was to enhance students' study habits, attitudes, study methods and motivation.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study was to explore students' views on learning skills that they acquired from the study skills training in the Foundation Program. In addition, the study attempted to determine other factors affecting students' learning efforts in the university.

### **Research Questions**

- The following questions guided the study:
- ♦ What learning skills have students acquired after completing the Foundation Program?
  - ♦ What other factors might be affecting students' learning efforts in the university?

### **Theoretical Framework**

According to Vygotsky's developmental theory of learning, students come to university with a potential which needs to be developed (Jarvis et al. 1998). In order to develop this potential to the full, students need to be able to cope with the demands of higher education (Jarvis et al. 1998). Vygotsky emphasized the issue of collaboration and teamwork in developing one's potential. Students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds, for instance, need to find a way of relating to one another for the purpose of forming study groups for facilitation of learning. The cognitive theory of learning, on the other hand, premises that cognitive learning involves various brain functions and capabilities generally associated with the thinking, reasoning, and perceiving aspects of learning new information (McCombs and Miller 2007). Various studies have indicated that cognitive strategy

training should focus on the individual's abilities and insights, so that the strategies that are appropriate to the learning task at hand can be used (Hattie et al. 1996). According to O'Donnell et al. (2007), one of the main applications of Piaget's theory in learning is promoting logical thinking, abstract reasoning and the ability to conceptualize, which have a direct impact on how well a student can perform at university.

### RESEARCH METHOD

The study used a qualitative approach to explore and describe the experiences of students who completed the Foundation Programme at a university in Limpopo Province of South Africa. Henn et al. (2006) explained that a qualitative approach allows participants to talk about the subject in terms of their own frame of reference. In addition, participants can express their views unrestricted (Cresswell 2005). The study also utilized a case study design. The researchers used this design to conduct an in-depth exploration and understanding of the views of the participants (Cresswell 2005).

#### Samples

Purposive sampling was used to select two samples from a group of Foundation Programme students. According to Neuman (1997: 206), "a researcher uses purposive sampling to select unique cases that are especially informative". One sample was selected for focus group interviews and the other for individual interviews. Both samples were composed of students who obtained the highest scores and those who obtained the lowest scores in the final examination of their first year of degree study. The researchers believed that these samples might provide useful information about the phenomenon being studied (Cresswell 2005). Each sample had 6 participants.

#### Data Collection

Individual and focus group interviews were used to capture the participants' views about the learning strategies they use when studying, as well as other experiences in the university. The interviews were semi-structured and open-ended to allow the participants to answer in detail and clarify their responses (Neuman 1997).

Both interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed for analysis. The researcher decided to use both interviews because individual interviews allow the participant to express thoughts, feelings and opinions without competing with others, or feeling intimidated by the group (Upcraft and Schuh 1996). It is also easier for the interviewer to establish rapport with one participant than with an entire group. On the other hand, one important advantage of a focus group is that participants can support or disagree with one another, creating more enthusiasm and, thus, more data (Upcraft and Schuh 1996).

#### Validity and Reliability

Maree (2010:80) found that, validity and reliability in qualitative research refer to "research that is credible and trustworthy". To ensure reliability and validity of the outcomes of this study, the researcher saw to it that there were no biases and influences during the whole interviewing process and adhered to the procedures which ought to be followed when coding, categorizing and analyzing data. Further, the research included primary data in the results to allow the reader to see exactly the basis upon which the researchers' conclusions were made (Wolcott in Eisner and Peshkin 1990). For instance, detailed descriptions of participants' views were given with quotes as evidence.

#### Data Analysis

The data was analyzed through qualitative content analysis as described by Henning et al. (2004) and Creswell's qualitative process of data analysis (Cresswell 2005). Raw data from the interview transcriptions was coded and categorized. The categories were analyzed for patterns that emerged as themes.

#### Ethical Measures

The researchers, adhered to the Research Ethics Protocol set out by the university. Permission to conduct the research was granted by the Department of Research and Development at the university. Selected students were given consent forms, which they read and signed as confirmation of consent to participate in the research. Participation was voluntary, and participants could terminate their involvement at any

time should they wish to do so. The participants were provided with adequate information regarding the goal of the research.

## RESULTS

In these results, both individual interviews and focus group interviews were discussed concurrently in order to avoid repetition. Below are the themes that emerged from two categories: "attitude towards the institution and degree" and "learning strategies". Some of the views of the participants were quoted *verbatim*.

### 1. Attitude Towards the Institution and Degree

Participants gave a great deal of information regarding the causes of negative attitudes towards the institution and their degrees. Negative attitudes may have a demotivating effect on students' endeavours to perform better in their academic activities. The following themes emerged from the participants' views:

Inadequate administrative ability, language discrimination, lack of resources, unapproachable lecturers, and non-accredited degrees

#### a) *Inadequate Administrative Ability*

Most participants voiced their dissatisfaction with the administration of the university. The following statements from both individual and focus group interviews support this view. Participant 2 in the individual interviews said: "*The administrative system of the university is very poor*". Participant 2 in the focus group interviews said: "*This University is much disorganized. Look at what happens during registration of students. The process is very slow*". Participant 4 in focus group interviews said: "*My negative attitude towards this university is mainly due to the administrative system*". Participant 6 in the individual interviews said: "*I have a negative attitude because the administration process is very poor. The management style of the university is sometimes very disturbing*." It is clear from the above statements that there appears to be a general discontent among the students about the administrative system of the university. One could observe the seriousness of the matter on the faces of the participants as they expressed their dissatisfaction.

#### b) *Language Discrimination*

Some participants expressed their disgust as a result of the apparent language discrimination which is reported to be practiced by some staff members. The staff members may not be aware that what they were doing was regarded as some form of discrimination, but the affected students regard it as such. The participants' feelings were expressed in the following quotes from individual and focus group interviews. Participant 6 in the individual interviews said: "*There is some sort of discrimination at this university, especially with regard to language. For example, administrators and some lecturers constantly speak to students in their mother language, even when they know that some of us are from different ethnic groups*." Participant 5 in the focus group interviews said: "*There is some division along ethnic lines when it comes to the use of the language at the university. Sometimes I don't understand the lecturers because they are using their mother language*." It is important to note that students at this university are from various ethnic groups in the RSA. There are, for example, Zulus, Swatis, Tsongas, Sothos and so on. The use of English is, therefore, very important as it is the language that every student understands and is able to share his/her views.

#### c) *Lack of Resources*

Participants mentioned lack of resources as another cause of dissatisfaction in the university. Participants made mention of resources such as student residences, computer laboratories, classes and other facilities in general. This is substantiated in the following statements from the individual as well as focus group interviews. Participant 3 in an individual interview said: "*There is a lack of resources such as computers*." Participant 6 in an individual interview said: "*Shortage of residences is a big problem for students because it is difficult to focus on studies when you are staying outside the campus*." Participant 2, a disabled student in a wheel chair in an individual interview said: "*The University is not accessible for people with disabilities*". Participant 1 in a focus group interview said: "*Our library does not have sufficient sources of information and is not sufficiently equipped. The library is not good for studying because it is small and too hot and there is lack of space*

in the library.” Participant 5 in the focus group interview said: “*The lecture halls are small for us and I have to arrive one hour before the lecture commences in order to get a seat.*”

#### **d) Unapproachable Lecturers**

When students complain about the negative attitude of a lecturer at a tertiary institution, they usually develop a negative attitude toward the course offered by the lecturer concerned. The following quotes from both individual and focus group interviews indicate the participants' dissatisfaction with some lecturers' actions and attitudes. Participant 6 in a focus group interview said: “*Lecturers sometimes make me feel negative about the degree.*” Participant 4 in the focus group interview said: “*Some lecturers demotivate students. They do not have time for students and they do not give enough reading materials.*” Participant 3 in the individual interview said: “*The actions of some lecturers indicate that they are not qualified educators. Sometimes the lecturers are not so welcoming, you become afraid of them.*” Some signs of resentment were observable when participants expressed their views.

#### **e) Non-accredited Degrees**

It is important that students should feel that their selected fields of study (degrees) will lead to the achievement of their career goals. To pursue a career in certain professions, it is imperative that an undergraduate degree should be accredited at a relevant professional organization (association). Some participants indicated that their degree is not accredited, thus barring them from pursuing a professional study at post-graduate level: “*I am worried because our BCom at this university is not accredited at SAICA. This is worrying me as I will not be able to follow a career as a chartered accountant.*” It became clear from the participants' remarks that students' inadequate academic performance may also be attributed to affective factors such as attitude and motivation, and these may lead to problems of concentration.

## **2. Learning Strategies**

Participants indicated various techniques they use when studying academic texts. Five

themes emerged from the participants' views: skimming through the text, writing down main points, self-testing, memorizing facts, and group discussion.

#### **a) Skimming Through the Text**

Reading through the text in a superficial way was cited by most participants as the first step in the study process. Participant 1, in a focus group interview said: “*I first read through the pages to get an idea of what I am reading about. I then try to answer some previous exam questions.*” Participant 2 in an individual interview said “*I go through the whole chapter like a newspaper. Thereafter I read again, making sure I understand what I am studying. I do revision before I go to the next chapter.*” Participant 6, in an individual interview said: “*I read through and then talk to myself what I was reading about.*” Participant 3 said: “*I read the headings and sub-headings first, and then read the content two or three times.*” Participant 4 said “*I read the whole text like I am reading a newspaper.*”

#### **b) Writing Down Main Points**

Participants indicated that writing down the main points from the text is another important step in the study process. Participant 1, in an individual interview said: “*I read while writing down important points.*” “*on a separate piece of paper.*” Participant 3, in individual interview said: “*When I study I write what I have studied.*” “*When I study I recite while writing down the important points.*” Participant 2 said: “*I read the content twice or thrice and then write down main points in another piece of paper.*” Some participants indicated that they make use of the main points to summarize. Participant 6 in an individual interview said: “*When I study I underline the main points and thereafter summarize by writing down these points.*” Participant 5, in a focus group interview said: “*I make a summary by writing the main points in my notebook.*”

#### **c) Self-testing**

Participants said that they test themselves by setting questions based on the content and then answer the questions. Previous question papers are also used. Participant 4, in an individual interview said: “*I try to answer some*

questions from previous question papers.” Participant 3 said “*I write down some questions and then answer the questions. Thereafter I revise everything. I make sure I understand what I am studying.*” Participant 6 in individual interview said: “*I look at previous question papers to find the logic of the questions themselves.*” Participant 1 in an individual interview said: “*After studying I draw up a test for myself and try to see if I know the information I studied.*” “*I try to answer previous question papers.*”

#### **d) Memorizing Facts**

Participants regard the memorization of the learning material as an important part of the study process. Participant 1 in a focus group interview said: “*I memorize what I have written down by reciting to myself.*” Participant 2 from the same group said: “*I memorize important concepts by using acronyms.*” Participant 3 said: “*I memorize the learning material by imagining what I am reading and trying to understand.*” Participant 2, in an individual interview said: “*I read through and then narrate to myself what I have read about.*” Participant 1 said: “*I make sure I understand what I am studying.*” “*I draw sketches or diagrams in order to remember what I am studying.*”

#### **e) Group Discussion**

Participants regard group discussion as an important process which assists in mastering the learning material. Participant 3, in an individual interview said: “*I discuss what I have studied with others in a group. This enables me to recall the matter easily.*” Participant 4, in focus group said: “*After reading and understanding the subject matter, I discuss with my classmates. I talk to classmates about what I have read.*”

### **DISCUSSION**

The primary aim of the Foundation Program was to prepare students who were considered to be at risk adequately for successful studies in their degree programs, hence the provision of the study skills training. However, the participants’ views showed that they relied mostly on general study skills such as skimming through texts and memorizing facts. Students did not show any knowledge of cognitive skills such as information-processing or meta-cognitive skills

such as the ability to monitor their own studying and selecting study strategies according to varying task demands. The views of the participants showed that students were lacking cognitive and meta-cognitive skills that are essential for successful learning in higher education. Bezuidenhout and Alt (2011) emphasize that memorizing and reproducing meaningless facts, and never applying cognitive skills such as critical thinking and decision-making, will not prepare students to be independent thinkers. Hassanbeigi et al. (2011) postulated that cognitive skills are important in comprehending a text and inferring the information from the text. Kloppers and Grosser (2010) explained that it is imperative that skills such as analysis, synthesis, reflection and problem-solving need to be nurtured among students. In addition to this, students need to be made aware of the fact that lack of cognitive skills can contribute to poor academic performance (Kloppers and Grosser 2010). These authors further indicated that lack of cognitive skills can result in inability to distinguish between relevant and irrelevant facts in text, and lack of self-regulation during learning.

In relation to the other research question concerning other factors that might be affecting student learning in the university, the participants’ views showed that students have negative attitudes towards the university. Participants mentioned several aspects that might have demotivated them in their learning efforts. For instance, the issue of “unapproachable lecturers” was cited as one of their experiences in their learning situation. Mendezabal (2013) pointed out that, positive attitudes which are a driving force behind study habits should be adopted by students in order to succeed. In his research study, Sarwar (in Mendezabal 2013) found a significant relationship between student attitudes and academic performance. Sarwar further states that the attitudes of students towards the teachers’ classroom management and behavior, and students’ acceptance of education are significantly related to their academic performance. This was supported by Yu (in Mendezabal 2013) who found that students’ perception of teacher effectiveness influenced student academic performance. Students in the Foundation Program might have developed negative attitudes toward the institution and lecturers because of what they have experienced, and these might have impacted negatively on their academic endeavours.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of the study, it could be concluded that students who completed the Foundation Program were not exposed to cognitive skills as well as meta-cognitive skills. Students could, therefore, not apply these skills when executing their academic tasks. Several researches have indicated that there is a positive relationship between metacognitive skills and academic achievement. It is, therefore, important that students should know how to apply these skills. In addition to lack of adequate learning skills, students were generally not happy with the way certain activities were carried out in the institution.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

To enhance student academic success, curriculum for study skills training should incorporate guidelines for application of cognitive and metacognitive study skills. The Academic Development Unit in the university should organize regular training workshops to guide students in using different metacognitive skills. It is imperative that students should develop positive attitudes toward the institution and learning. It is, therefore, recommended that students should be engaged in educationally enriching activities that will result in learning and personal development. This could be done through the provision of psycho-educational programs that will help students develop positive attitudes toward learning.

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