

## Exploring Psycho-social Challenges of Underperforming Students in the Faculty of Education at the University of Kwa Zulu Natal in South Africa

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**KEYWORDS** Psycho-social. At-Risk Students. Academic Intervention Programs. Diverse Learner Needs

**ABSTRACT** The present research explored psycho-social challenges faced by students AT-RISK of academic failure in the Bachelor of Education from the second year to the fourth year students. Resiliency theory underpins this research. The study used a qualitative approach with an interpretive design. It was done through interviews, field notes and observations of a sample of students who were part of the intervention support programme for students at risk known as 'STAR PROGRAM'. In this study, 107 students colour coded as 'At-risk' of academic failure and are part of the 'STAR' program were interviewed so that the students could be given a chance to give personal reasons hindering their performances. The researchers took a week to interview every student in the 'STAR program'. This research sought to draw attention to the psycho-social challenges that students are faced with that ultimately impact on their academic performance. The data was analysed through the lenses of resiliency theory. The findings indicated that with practical intervention strategies, the students may improve their academic performance despite the psycho-social challenges. This program is providing a platform to discuss personal challenging issues and offers appropriate academic interventions to address specific needs of individual students. This program has been successful in offering a platform in which students have been able to open-up and speak on the real attributes for their failure. The research concluded that a well organized and accessible academic intervention programs are the key to student success at University of KwaZulu Natal at Edgewood Campus.

### INTRODUCTION

National Plan for Higher Education in South Africa document states that "On average, about 20 percent of all undergraduates and postgraduates drop-out of the higher education system each year. The average for first-time entering students is 25 percent. The latter potentially resulted in an annual loss to the system of at least 120 000 students who do not complete their studies" (Department of Education 2001:18; Cilliers et al. 2010). The International Education Association of South Africa (IEASA) agreed by stating that higher education has a disturbing 45 percent drop-out rate among students, which undermined greatly the access gains of universities. The statement further alerted that financial difficulties among the country's large pool of poor black students are largely to blame (IEASA n.d:16). A survey by the Human Science Research Council

showed that 70 percent of higher education drop-outs were in the low income category (Letseka and Maile 2008). The majority of these students come from disadvantaged backgrounds and they become students At-risk not only because they were under-prepared for higher institutions but also because of language barriers, financial difficulties and lack of family support (Frymier 1992). Literature pertaining to student support within higher education focuses mainly on institutional support, in the form of programs, management, structures and processes, and the outcomes of such interventions, largely using case studies (Donald et al. 2010). There are few studies, especially within a transformational context, on the actual experiences of students who are identified as 'At-risk' (Strydom 2002). The study, therefore, attempted to contribute towards the theoretical discourse on students' real experiences, hidden psycho-social issues that hinders their academic progress. It also addressed the importance of higher institutions responses to individual student needs, since higher education institutions have improved access for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. During this process, other issues have emerged which tend to cancel out the gains achieved by increased access for disadvantaged students. These issues are related to student dropout and throughput

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rates, which are a major concern in higher education. Speculations abound regarding the causes of throughput and dropout problems, and different responses by institutions of higher learning have been noted.

### **Psychosocial Challenges of University Students Associated with Drop-out Rates in Tertiary Education**

The mental health of the university-age population has received heightened attention (Hunt and Eisenberg 2010) with increased perception that the number of students with severe psychological problems has gone up in recent years. Tertiary educational students face multiple protective and risk factors to developing psychopathology like, many students lead “hyper-enriched lives”, with their cell phones, computers, classes, jobs, sports, travel, volunteer work, and more (Kneser 2004); being young adults, and in some parts of the world have serious financial problems, development of personal relationships, and for some, parenthood, pursuit of greater educational opportunities and employment prospects cross-cultural issues, family dysfunction, poor frustration tolerance, experimentation with drugs and alcohol, and weak interpersonal attachments; academic overload, constant pressure to succeed, competition with peers and concerns about the future (Tosevski et al. 2010).

Psycho-social experiences, pressure and stress directly impact on students’ ability to function effectively in classrooms, family settings, and social activities, and often they result in unprecedented study burn out among students with consequent various forms of psychopathology among this population than in other populations which may persist later in life (Harper and Peterson 2005). A growing body of research suggested that psychological distress conditions were numerous and increasing among students in institutions of higher education. Nsereko et al. (2014) viewed that the research in the United Kingdom indicated that mental health illness or psychological problems within student populations were as high as 40 percent, with most students suffering from depression or anxiety, or both. Gallanger (2005) cited out that 86 percent of university students reported severe psychological problems including depression, anxiety and serious substance abuse at counseling centers. Further still, recent systematic reviews of

universities worldwide concur with earlier findings which indicated an apparent trend of worsening mental health in recent years among the university population with significant numbers of students with serious mental illness rising up (Hunt and Eisenberg 2010).

Further, a maiden study about the experiences of depressed mood among students at a South African university, found students to have higher rates of depression and suicidal ideation than the general population. Over 14.9 percent of the students were diagnosed with a major depressive disorder which is significant considering the lifetime prevalence of major depressive disorder being between 5 percent and 25 percent (Van Niekerk et al. 2008).

Salzer (2012) noted that the associated psychopathology among students manifested mainly as depression and anxiety which was often referred to as “stress”. It was singled out to lead to difficulties in concentration, lack of motivation and interest, poor attendance, and somatic physical complaints such as headaches, poor sleep and fatigability. The author further reported that college students with emotional distress reported less engagement on campus activities and exhibited poorer relationships, which factors were associated with lower graduation rates and increased likelihood of drop-outs.

### **Issues of Graduation and Dropout Rates in South African Universities**

A drop-out is an individual who fails to complete a learning program or who takes a path that does not lead him or her to graduate successfully with the associated qualification (Daniel et al. 2006). Student- drop out is very disquieting because it is perceived to reflect inadequacies’ in the education system in terms of both quality and quantity. Further, there is also the perception that it reflects an inefficient use of resources.

In the context of South Africa relative to the history of apartheid education policies and legislation, university student drop - out has powerful socio-economic and political overtones. It is regarded as the perpetuation of past exclusions and inequalities and an unjust subversion of the historic promise of freedom and democracy (Pandor 2007).

Previous studies have revealed the stark realities of racial inequalities in higher education.

In addition, higher education institutions produce an insufficient number of graduates, particularly black graduates. Some studies argued that universities are not producing enough graduates with relevant qualifications for the labor market. Others point out that the labor market has discrimination problems of its own, most conspicuous in a deliberate refusal to employ graduates from historically black universities. Additionally, unaffordable university fees contribute to the continued under-representation of black students, which threatens to replicate racial inequality in higher education well into the future bringing about fewer black graduates. In 2005, 30 percent of all university students were white, compared with 37 percent in 1995. White students made up a third of the student body at the University of the Witwatersrand, half of the students' population at the University of Cape Town and three-quarters of students at Stellenbosch University. Government tried to help by setting up the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS).

The promise of equality has yet to materialize. Black Africans and coloureds, sections of society that bore the brunt of exclusion by apartheid education policies and legislation, continue to lag behind in education success rates. Badad (2004) noted that in 1998 South African universities and technikons produced about 75000 graduates and diplomats. He stated that environments need to be built in which especially historically disadvantaged learners can, through academic support, excellent teaching, mentoring and other initiatives, have every chance of succeeding and graduating with the relevant knowledge, competencies, skills and attributes that are required for any occupation and profession and for productive citizenship.

South Africa's graduation rate of 15 percent is one of the lowest in the world, according to the National Plan for Higher Education (NPHE) compiled by the Department of Education in 2001. This is of particular concern given the shifts that have taken place in employment distribution and the critical shortage of high-level skills in the labor market. In combination, these factors are likely to act as a major impediment to achieving the government's economic development goals.

The Department of Education also noted wide disparities in the graduation rates, with the average graduation rate for white students more than double that of black students. To bring about

equity, the department identified a need to increase both the participation and graduation rates of black students in general and African students in particular, with concomitant increase in the representation of blacks and women in academic and administrative positions, especially, at senior levels. While the new higher education policy will improve the quality of education programs offered in the institutions created as a result of mergers, and will also reduce perceptions of inadequacy in higher education held in the labour market, the challenge of resources requires urgent attention, particularly in the historically black universities.

The University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) has a tracking mechanism shows 'At-risk' students in colour coding. They implemented three-colour *academic standing system*, to be visible on the central Student Management System. This system alerts students (and support staff) to take action (UKZN 2009).

The green color indicated good academic standing: the student has passed  $\geq 70$  percent of the normal credit load for the semester; and has passed  $\geq 75$  percent of the credits expected, at that point, for regular progression in the selected degree (for completion in the minimum time). No action is required; however, optional counseling and support are available if requested, to support the goal of passing *all modules* in the following semester (UKZN 2009).

The orange color indicated that the student is 'At-risk': either because s/he has passed less than 70 percent of the normal credit load for that semester; or because s/he has passed less than 75 percent of the credits expected, at that point, for normal progression in the selected degree. The student is *required to take immediate action*, with the goal of returning to green status by the end of the following semester. Compulsory academic counseling prior to the start of the semester initiated a compulsory developmental program. Available components (depending on the student's needs, the degree concerned and the available resources) may include a modified curriculum (or a one-semester suspension, should no valid curriculum be feasible) with a set target; academic support of various types; and referral to Student Counseling for personal or career counseling. Financial Aid and residence status remained unchanged. The onus is on the student to participate in this developmental program, and to achieve the set target (UKZN 2009).

The red color indicated serious under-performance that progress is below faculty minimum progression requirements. After compulsory academic, personal and career counseling, should the student wish to persevere with the degree, s/he may continue in the Faculty for one further semester on strict probation, with specific and realistic conditions to be met at the end of the semester. Continued academic support is available, and it is recommended that financial aid and residence status remain unchanged. The onus is on the student to participate in the developmental program. Red status can only be assigned once incoming first-year students have completed two full semesters at the university, to allow adequate time for transition from high school to university (UKZN 2009).

On this account of UKZN's process of identification and monitoring of students 'At-risk', shows that institutions of higher learning are taking this issue seriously and endeavor to contextualize the students challenges and take every individual student case as unique, requiring specific tailor made intervention strategies under specific contexts.

### **At-Risk Student**

The definition of the term 'At-risk' varies depending on who uses it and the context in which it is used. Ferguson (2000) and Perez (1998) defined the 'At-risk' student as someone who is learning-disabled and under-prepared or someone who lacked skills in meeting the academic demands of post-secondary institutions. Further, Manning and Baruth (1995) defined 'At-risk' learners as those in danger of failing to meet their potential.

A broader view of students 'At-risk' is taken by Montgomery and Rossi (1993) which noted that neo-natal conditions, health, family characteristics, peer influences, community climate and resources, and social status affect a student's readiness to learn. Frymier (1992) defined children 'At-risk' as those who are likely to fail at school or in life. Johnson (1994) conceptualized educational risk within an ecological framework, in contrast to an epidemiological model, which assumed that the causes of children's school failure resided within the child's 'inadequacies, limitations, incompetence and deficiencies'. He then projected a new paradigm: children were 'At-risk' when they were placed in environments

for which they were not prepared. Johnson's (1994) paradigm organized the child's environment interactions in four nested ecosystems that mirrored four levels of educational risk: micro-risk (classroom interaction); (b) meso-risk (domestic interaction); (c) exo-risk (community interaction); and (d) macro-risk (socio-cultural interaction). Thus, according to Johnson, educational risk is a consequence of 'discordant child environmental interactions'.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The present study is premised on the resiliency work of Werner and Smith (2001) which builds on interactionist perspective of human behaviour (Blumer 1966). According to Denzin (2009) behaviour is self-directed and observable at distinct levels, the symbolic and interactional (or behavioral). By 'self-directed', Denzin (2009) adds that humans can act toward themselves as they would toward any other object. Blumer (1966) stated that a human may perceive himself, have conceptions of him, communicate with him, and act towards him. This behaviour, which Blumer (1966) called self-interaction permits humans to plan and to align their actions with others. Resiliency theory works with the understanding that each individual has the 'inborn capacity' to achieve within their capabilities (Werner and Smith 2001). This notion has two critical conditions namely: Significant exposure to threat or severe adversity and the positive outcomes in achievement due to adaptation despite major assaults on the developmental process of the individual.

### **Resiliency Theory**

Authorities in resilience theories referred to resilience as dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity (Werner and Smith 2001). Werner and Smith (2001) suggested that each individual has the 'inborn capacity for self-knowledge' and like other researchers who studied resiliency theory agreed that resilience is not a 'genetic trait' that only a few possess. All children are born with an intrinsic capacity for resilience and its presence can be recognized and enriched externally. The ability for resilience is to 'develop social competence, problem-solving skills, a critical consciousness, autonomy, and a sense of purpose' (Bernard 1995).

It is valuable to consider each of these characteristics of a resilient human being separately so that non-resilience can be identified. Social competence include a responsiveness and 'ability to elicit positive responses from others', flexibility even from inter-culturally, empathy, communication skills and a sense of humor, problem solving skills incorporate the ability to plan, be resourceful, help seeking behaviour and the capacity for critical, creative and reflective thinking. A resilient student has a sense of purpose and a belief in their future which makes them goal-directed, motivated to achieve and have educational aspirations, persistent, hopeful, optimistic, and spiritually connected (Waxman et al. 2004).

Hence, despite the challenges students may face, the expectation is that university students have self-knowledge of their abilities to perform their academic tasks to achieve at least to the required minimum of their chosen specialization, without giving up on their studies. Much as the realities of our education system is such that we have mass enrolments with the majority of students coming from poor background and poorly prepared for University, their inner-capabilities should enable them to rise above the challenges. Resilience theory in this study will help with the explanation and understanding of the phenomenon of psycho-social challenges faced by students.

### Research Questions

The study sought to address the following research question;

1. What are the challenges that affect academic performance do students' experience?
2. Why do the students have these challenges?
3. How does the university endeavor to address these issues to enhance academic success?

### Constructivist Paradigm

A paradigm is the fundamental model or frame of reference used to organize our observations and reasoning (Creswell 2012). The basic assumptions guiding the constructivist paradigm are that knowledge is socially constructed by people active in the research process, and that researchers should attempt to understand the

complex world of the lived experience from the point of view of those who live it (Creswell 2012; Cohen et al. 2011). The constructivist paradigm emphasized that research is a product of the values of researchers and cannot be independent of them. The answers to the paradigm defining questions for constructivist approach are: 1. the balanced representation of views that raise participants' awareness and community rapport. 2. The multiple and socially constructed realities. 3. Interactive link between researcher and participants; the values are made explicit and finally findings are created (Creswell 2012; Cohen et al. 2011). Creswell (2012) elaborated this further as he submits that a constructivist paradigm is qualitative in nature in which dialectical and contextual factors are described. This paradigm was found necessary for this study due to the fact that the researcher needed to have adequate dialogue, interaction and consider contextual factors in order to collaboratively construct a meaningful reality of under-graduate students who are AT-RISK of academic failure.

### Case Study Research Design

A case study is an in-depth study of a particular research problem which narrows down a very broad field of research into one or a few easily researchable examples (Yin 2003). In this study, the broad field of research on the University of KwaZulu natal undergraduate students in all fields of qualifications was focused only on the Bachelor of Education students who were in the STAR program. The case study research design is equally useful when testing whether a specific theory and model actually applies to phenomena in the real world. This design can provide detailed descriptions of specific and rare cases. Since the participants had personal challenges, they narrated during the interview from their specific contexts, this research design was found to be most appropriate for this specific phenomenon (Yin 2003).

### Population and Sampling

A 'population' consists of subjects one wants to study, in the present study it was all Under-graduate students of all specialisation at the University of KwaZulu Natal. A 'sample' is the process of selecting a group of subjects for a study in such a way that the individuals repre-

sent the larger group from which they were selected (Creswell 2012). In the study, the sample was Under-graduate student in Bachelor of Education degree at Edgewood Campus.

The students that were coded At-risk of academic failure for 2010 in semester two were 107. 46 were male students and 61 female students. One of them had a 2005 registration number (has been on campus for 6 years), 2 students from 2006 in-take (5 years of Bachelor of Education study), 5 students from 2007, 18 students from 2008, 29 students from 2009, 52 students from 2010. 49 of these students came from the formally disadvantaged schools. To ensure success of all students, the process requires a phasing in of strategies that are directed at departmental, institutional, instructional and curricula transformation. In such a situation, particular attention is paid to achieving objectives through a realistic and effective implementation process that moves towards the development of a system that accommodates and respects diversity.

### **Instrumentation**

In this study students all 107 students colour coded as 'At-risk' of academic failure and are part of the 'STAR' program were interviewed so that the students could be given a chance to give personal stories hindering their performances within full 7 days. They also completed a qualitative questionnaire which required them to give reasons for their academic failure, and give strategies they perceived to be important for resolving their failure. These students were also observed and field notes were taken. The students updated the researchers of their challenges both formally and informally. Sometimes, they just came because they needed somebody to talk to and ended up saying more than they had said in the formal interview, this information was documented for research purposes too. Qualitative open ended questions were used as the instrument for this study (Creswell 2012; Cohen et al. 2011).

### **Data Analysis**

Data in the study was collected through individual interviews, semi-structured interview scheduled and qualitative questionnaires with At-Risk student in the STAR program. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed

through highlighting the emerging themes. The questionnaires were equally analysed the same way. Pseudonyms were used to hide the identity of the students (Creswell 2003; Shank 2006). The researchers examined the patterns of speech and themes emerging from students' accounts of their experiences. The comprehensive view helped identify emerging patterns (Shank 2006).

### **Reliability and Validity**

Reliability means that the selection methods, tests and ensuring results are consistent and do not vary with time, place or different subjects. Historically, validity was defined as the extent to which an instrument measured what it claimed to measure. The focus of the current views of validity is not in the instrument itself but on the interpretation and meaning of scores derived from the instrument. Reliability and validity are the two key characteristics that interviews have to have to be a suitable method for selection in any context. They measure if the chosen methods provide consistent results and if they adequately measure the characteristics they are looking at (Creswell 2012; Cohen et al. 2011). In the present study, the participants were given qualitative questionnaires as well oral interviews to clarify what they had written in the questionnaire.

### **Ethical Issues**

All the participants' were kept as confidential and were not mentioned when the data was collected, the researchers used pseudo names. Since there were psychological issues involved, all students were advised to see the student counsellor. Informed consent forms were signed and students new that they were not obliged to participate and they could pull out of the research participation at any stage they wished. The university ethics committee equally granted permission for the study (Cohen et al. 2011).

### **Trustworthiness**

Most of the students were interviewed three times which made the information correlate with the previous one. Students with medical challenges had medical report to support the claim. Those with financial challenges had submitted financial reports from the university and from

the lawyers for debt collection. Those for drugs addiction were required to submit documents from rehabilitation centres. Others had to bring supporting documents or reports from the hospitals, psychiatrists or the university counselors (Cohen et al. 2011).

## RESULTS

The code list was created based on what students said and some of the students had multiple factors that lead to unsatisfactory performance. The themes and sub-themes were identified as follows:

### 1. Family Issues

Family issues are some of the challenges highlighted by the students. Some of the students are under pressure exerted on them by their families instead of receiving support from them. This results in academic failure.

Thobo stated that:

*The problem I have had in the two previous years, I have been supporting my family at home financially, and there is no one working, both my parents do not have jobs and I have five siblings who are school going and they all depend on me for support, the Financial Aid I get is the only source of income they depend on for survival that is a lot of stress to deal with, they are always calling me asking for money.*

Samba stated that:

*I gave most of my allowances to my family because there is no one who is working, I feel as if I have to give them all of it to keep them for each month. Sometimes I don't have money for transport because of that.*

The university conducted workshops for budgeting but very few students endeavor to register for these workshops, in most cases the students that are very good with budgeting want to get better with it and those who need to attend do not see the need. The other aspect is that of giving away all the money to the family and then the student remains wondering, how they are going to survive through the month. One might think that a student at the university should be able to know that if they give everything they will have nothing, they have to divide the money in such a way that the family members survive and they must survive at the university campus too. However, Financial Aid is

not meant for family support, it is for the student, to help him/her through their academic endeavors.

The problems in the family impact negatively on most of the student academic performance. A student who comes from a family that requires him/her to fend for them brings risk to academic success because of the pressure the family exerts on him/her. The institutions do not have control over such issues. The students are required to take responsibility of their own situations and find a way of using the same challenges in their environment as the reason to work hard for academic success. In such cases, failure is not an option; they are required to be resilient.

Some students had family responsibilities that require them to be absent from the university. Lack of support structure causes academic failure, because it causes students to take too much responsibility.

Thabang stated that:

*Both my parents were very sick at home, so I have to take some days off, and not attend lectures to look after them and my siblings.*

Looking at the above statement, one would rather be with dying family members than be at school. The students will rather be present when their parents die than be absent and leave with guilt of abandoning them at the point of death. However, they are required to catch-up with the work they have missed, by consulting the relevant lecturers. The university understands but there is work to be done. Despite all life goes on!

### 2. Poverty in the Family

Much as a student can be motivated to work as hard as possible if there are no supporting resources for academic success, students fail.

Moleboheng stated that:

*I did not have money to come and write supplementary examinations.*

Kuhle stated that:

*I am failing because I have to work to support myself at the university, I do not have Financial Aid.*

The challenges like these must not be taken lightly. Universities have rules for examinations but when these cases warrant consideration they must be a quote in the rules that speaks to executive decisions being made on merit of the case. The consequence of stiff rules are having a very low throughput and causing the same poor stu-

dents to pay for the same modules when they do not have money. They ultimately drop-out of the university.

Most of the students come to the university with the hope that the university will give them funding, it becomes a rude shock to them, when they find out that the institutions have no money to dish out to students, but want money from them to pay for their studies.

Mule stated that:

*I did not have any financial support last year and I am supported by my grandmother who is a pensioner; it was very hard for me, when I came I thought the university was going to give me money for studying, she gets a monthly pension of less than R800, it is no even enough for basic food. I have been waiting for the university to give me tuition money, but they said that they do not give money, so how am I going to pay for my studies?*

Just about every student coming from formerly disadvantaged backgrounds require funding, without it, chances of successful completion becomes very slim, because they are always worried about funds. Besides that, the results are withheld from them and they are not allowed to register until all fees are paid-up. If they do not pay, the university submits their names to the lawyers/debtors and they are taken to court, this situation worries all self-funded students from poorly disadvantaged backgrounds.

Lecturing to hungry students does not work, it does not matter how well prepared you are as a lecturing in terms of lesson plan, the student might not concentrate, because of an empty stomach, thus, for taught work to bear fruit, the stomach must have some food in it.

Laba stated that:

*I am very hungry in the lectures, so I fail to concentrate.*

Hunger amongst students from formerly disadvantaged backgrounds is a very big problem and most of them are so proud to an extent that they will not go around begging, so they suffer through until they drop-out or fail and get excluded. However, the university has no 'pot of gold' for poor students, funding is from the Department of Education.

### 3. Computer Illiteracy

The assumption in the offer of all modules at the university level is that by the time the stu-

dents finish secondary education they will be competent enough to participate in computer literacy class and type all assignments and do internet search for the assignments. Little do they know that most of the students coming from deep rural areas see the computer for the first time at the university. When everybody in the lecture is busy working on a task, they do not even know where the switch button is, they sit pretending that they are busy working too until they have no assignment to submit for marking for the given task and all tasks are suppose to be typed.

Solly stated that:

*The problem was that I was confused and stressed, I had a lot in my mind. I haven't used the computer before, I sat there no knowing what to do, and I was too embarrassed to ask anybody, because everybody seemed to know what was going on.*

The universities must have support systems where the students should go for help. The university must have support systems that ensure accommodation of all diversity without discrimination and every effort must be geared towards the success for enrolled students.

### 4. Personal Problems

Most of the students had personal problems as indicated below.

Fifi stated that:

*I dropped out during second semester of 2010. I was going through problems, my husband divorced me and I did not feel emotional-ly stable to continue with my studies'.*

This case brings variation to the nature of support that should be rendered for the students who are At-Risk of academic failure at university level. The students admitted are all deemed to have potential therefore that should be the start point in terms considering the students, reasons for failure. If our societies are ill and fail to hold together its systems, the university attitude must be such that it plays its part in terms of guaranteeing success on all students.

Most of the female students at Edgewood Campus fall pregnant without a plan, during their academic years on Campus, the emotional trauma most of them go through, impacts negatively on their academic achievements. Some give birth and give-up their babies for adoption without the knowledge of their family members. Some abort and some leave the babies with family mem-



bers, who put them under pressure for maintenance. The fortunate ones are those with mothers or grand-mothers who are willing to take care of their babies at no cost.

Lola stated that:

*After being raped I discovered a month later that I was pregnant and I was not sure whether to keep the baby or to think about adoption or abortion. I failed all my modules. My family does not know about my pregnancy because the person responsible for it is a family member, they all consider him to be a golden boy ( a loved boy by the family, that makes no mistakes), when I told them about the rape, no one believed me, how should I tell them about the pregnancy, they will still not believe me, this is causing me to fail, I do not what to do.*

Lulu stated that:

*The depression that I experienced after the death of my first son caused me to fail my tests and assignments this also affected my personal life.*

Lea stated that:

*Since I aborted, I haven't been well. I cry all the time. I killed my baby and my stomach is very painful all the time. I do not go for classes, I have no good reason to, I cannot go because if I can kill my own child, I should not be alive myself and train to teach other people's children, what sort of a mother am I? One who kills her own child? I saw body parts of my baby being taken out of my body; nobody can tell me know that it was an egg! I cannot tell anyone these things; I am telling somebody today for the first time, I will never tell my parents that I killed their grand child. I killed my baby, by now he/she will be 6 months old. How do I explain this to my mother; I have let everybody down, although, they do not know that I aborted.*

Much as cases like these will require counseling, they will equally require academic support. How this academic support is administered within the university systems will determine the difference between success and failure. Most of the students think that after aborting, the problem of pregnancy will be over; little do they know that for most of them it is the beginning of a miserable life of guilt of murdering their own child, and not to mention the medical complication that may come thereafter.

Kopa stated that:

*I have been in and out of hospital, I am not sure if I should continue this semester because I*

*feel as if there is something that was left inside me during abortion at the clinic.*

Trauma after abortion in most students we have worked with is a reality. They do not cope well after abortion because of guilt and unforgiveness towards themselves. The university toilets all have condoms, but it seems as though no one is prepared to use them, or very few use them, the rate of pregnancy is very high.

## 5. Laziness

It is sad to hear from the students confessing of laziness as a reason for failure, because there is no place for people who do not want to do anything but expect to be successful. No one succeeds by doing nothing.

Toho stated that:

*I always promise myself that I will study but when if it is time to study I just get tired or sometimes I'm lazy, it's just that I like to sleep.*

Mola said that:

*The workload was too much; I was not able to finish on time and also not able to manage time during exam time.*

Exclusions for lazy students are inevitable. Their lamentation to beg for mercy to continue studying fall on deaf ears, because they are given enough chances and their academic record indicated how badly the students performed by the code used. The poverty card does not work when the academic record is poor. The color codes and the referrals to the dean for counseling is the time for them to realize that their time at the institution is numbered; the university resources and time must be used wisely not wasted on lazy students. The university has a minimum and a maximum workload allowed for students. They have the right to deregister from the modules if they are not coping with the load. One wondered why then any student will come up with the above statement if it is not just laziness, besides that the students decided for themselves what to register for, for in each semester. However, this is not a problem for self funded students.

The major concern is on those who use money from Financial Aid for drugs. There is no excuse for such abuse when there is so much poverty and many students desperately needing financial help.

Faz stated that:

*I was having problems because I am addicted to alcohol and drugs but I now attend treat-*

ment centre, the reason for this is that I am seeing this amount of money for the first time, even my own parents do not have an account at any bank and I have so much, I cannot help it, that is why I am in drugs and alcohol.

The students like this must not be funded, because funds cause them to be self-destructive. The university will be helping them by excluding them from the funding processes and asking them to pay back the money they have abused.

### 6. Accommodating Diversity in Teaching Methods

There is a need for a bridging gap between matric and first year of the university studies for many learners who are At-Risk of academic failure. During this year at the faculty of education, the students will learn how university studies are administered and the expectations of the lecturers.

Sakhi stated that:

*My problem was adapting to university style of teaching and learning. I find it difficult to engage to this type of learning.*

The Faculty of Education must invest into investigating in a bridging program. This study has revealed that the majority of the students in the 'STAR PROGRAMME' are first year students. This calls for urgent intervention in terms, of the above mentioned bridging year, to equip the students with the skills to cope in the university environment, where all students are treated as adults and expected to work without anybody 'policing' them, to check whether the assignments are done, and preparation for the exams are done.

Zimi lamented:

*Why is it that no one came to remind me that the exams will start soon?*

Tas stated that:

*I failed my modules in my first year so when I had to repeat them the following year, it came as a challenge because I handed my assignments late and missed classes. It was my fault because I lacked motivation and felt as if I couldn't do it.*

Temba stated that:

*The challenge why I failed my modules it's because I was very scared as it was my first time at university, I was even scared to ask questions during lectures.*

Russ indicated that:

*I found certain modules and writing assignment difficult.*

Jack in the same breath stated that:

*I failed because I did not understand the module well.*

Students seem to expect the university lecturers to be as vigilant as the high school teachers and principals, in terms of pushing them to work hard, and forcing them to study after school and offer motivation for success. Unfortunately, the university admits students with merit/endorsement result in matric because that caliber of students is expected to understand what is required of them or else they fail.

### 7. Language Barrier

Language barrier is a problem for those who come from formerly disadvantaged backgrounds and foreign students. They normally do not clearly understand what is going on during lectures; those who manage to collect a few resources come to the lectures with dictionaries which is quiet a challenge.

Vuyo stated that:

*I failed because I do not understand English very well; I come from a deep rural area school.*

This cannot be taken lightly if the result is academic failure. If the university admits students who are not conversant with the language of teaching and learning of the institution, it is their responsibility to ensure that all students are accommodated in terms of providing academic support to ensure academic success. Normally, for foreign students, universities require English language competence before admitting the student. With local students it becomes a problem if the matric results states that the student passed English and you discover that they can not say or put one correct sentence in English together.

### 8. Lack of Responsibility

It was evident through data collection that some students are just irresponsible. The students who need to grow and take their work seriously and be groomed to become responsible citizens.

Wello stated that:

*'Where I live it is very noise, they drink and party all the time, and they are all my friends, so we party and drink together'.*

Xau stated that:

*'The problem I seemed to face is the environment, we don't have enough space and sometimes it is hard to study because it is noisy'.*

The ideal situation for every university is to have accommodation on campus, for the students to have access to all resources, however, very few students (1/3) can be accommodated on campus, which leaves many to find their own accommodation, which normally leads to transport issues, and assignments being submitted late etc. The university must expand accommodation facilities to cater for all students. It does not mean that they will be perfect to stop students from making noise on campus residence. They have the choice to stay in the company of noisy people or find themselves a quiet place to study. They are expected to be old enough to make that choice.

## 9. Disabilities

When the students come to the university, they do not want to disclose their invisible disabilities, in fear of victimization and hope for a new disability free life; thus they suffer through it and fail before they disclose their disabilities to the disability office.

Baboo stated that:

*I have learning disabilities since I started school but I wanted to work very hard and prove that I can do it, I can beat dyslexia and autism, but my lecturers do not understand what I write'. All my life people have discriminated against me because of my disability, and I hoped that I will beat the disability because it seems to be following me wherever I go, that is why I did not disclose.*

Clio stated that:

*I struggled in lectures to read from transparencies because I am partially sighted, I depend on my friends' notes. Most of the time I miss important work, because I cannot see properly.*

Zoli stated that:

*The hearing problem is one of my challenges, I cannot hear properly.*

Queen said:

*Epilepsy has been my problem since high school, my family took me to traditional healers but it's not getting any better. Sometimes I miss lectures because of this illness and people don't understand what to do when I am attacked*

*by epilepsy, I get embarrassed after the attack, so I do not go for classes for some time.*

Universities have support systems for students with disabilities if they disclose. However, they also have the right not to accept disabilities that might jeopardize the rights of other people at professional level; the student might never be competent enough to do certain duties. For instance, medical schools are not known to admit blind students or students without arms, because they need those parts of the body to function as medical doctors. If they accepted them they will be setting them up for failure, they might be supported to pass the academic part probably but will never pass the practical/professional part of the modules. Like wise in education, a student who has disability pertaining to not being able to read and write must never be enrolled in education. In terms of social justice and inclusivity for him/herself and students he/she will be teaching in schools.

## Intervention Strategies

### *Intervention Strategies for Family Issues*

The students are given a platform to discuss the problems and discuss the issues with parents as well as try and resolve the issue where possible and stress the pressure they exert on the student and the effects the pressure has on the student. Budgeting workshops are also conducted for the students.

### *Intervention Strategies for Poverty in the Family*

Mentorship by successful students who have been through the same challenges is the strategy normally used and workshops for empowerment and resilience.

### *Intervention Strategies for Computer Illiterates*

Intervention strategies for computer illiterates include mentorship by successful students who have been through the same challenges, workshops for empowerment and resilience, the study skills and examination preparation workshops, one to one consultations from relevant academics and academic support coordinator and computer literacy extra classes.

### ***Intervention Strategies for Personal Problems***

Counseling is a useful tool for psychological challenges. Mentorship by successful students who have been through the same challenges is the strategy normally used as well as workshops for empowerment and resilience.

### ***Intervention Strategies for Laziness***

This includes mentorship by successful students, workshops for empowerment, resilience and life skills workshop

### ***Intervention Strategies for Accommodating Diversity in Teaching Methods***

Orientation program is utilised to familiarise the student with new environment and the curriculum. Career guidance and counseling is utilised and curriculum consultation workshops for empowerment and resilience are done with students including motivation speeches, study skills, examination preparation and time management workshop.

### ***Intervention Strategies for Language Barriers***

Workshops for empowerment and resilience are very important for students who come from deep rural areas. Study skills and examination preparation workshops, one to one consultations from relevant academics as well as academic support coordinator and language tutorials are also very important.

### ***Intervention Strategies for Lack Responsibility***

This includes mentorship by successful students who have been through the same challenges, workshops for empowerment, resilience and life skills workshop

### ***Intervention Strategies for Disability***

This includes orientation programs, career guidance and counseling, the academic consultation with the academic monitoring coordinator and with the academics in terms of understanding the requirements for the given tasks.

## **DISCUSSION**

The present research found that the most common problems experienced by students "at

risk" were family issues, poverty in family, computer literacy, personal problems, laziness, teaching methods, language barriers, lack of responsibility and disability. The Intervention Strategies used at UKZN, Edgewood campus such as mentorship program, career academic counseling and variety of workshops such as study skills, empowerment, resilience, motivation, academic literacy, time management and so forth are designed to suit and meet student's needs. However, all the students should have knowledge above themselves in terms of academic performance that will help them intrinsically on how hard they should work, and provide them with the insight of what they should avoid to be successful at tertiary institutions. Much as we can talk of academic support, excellent teaching, mentoring and other initiatives including counseling infrastructure, students are expected to be resilient despite the challenge they go through and that resilience in this context is only seen in academic success by acquiring skills and competencies that enable them to become professionals and productive citizens.

## **CONCLUSION**

From the findings of this study, it is clear that the students who are AT-RISK of failing often experience a number of psycho-social problems that negatively affect their academic performance. Thus, the institutions need to be aware of that, and provide the necessary support and infrastructure. The students have the responsibility to access the knowledge and skills that are provided and apply them to avoid academic failure.

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