

Exploring Student Views on Factors Affecting Academic Performance in a South African University

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ABSTRACT The improvement of throughput, graduation and retention rates in South African higher education is a national priority. Student academic performance data in one School at a historically disadvantaged South African university have shown that the pass rates have been declining over the past few years. This decline in pass rates have necessitated the undertaking of this study with the intention of investigating the underlying factors impacting on student academic performance in the School. The study adopted a qualitative case study design which solicited data from a purposive sample of second, third and fourth year students. Data were collected through focus group interviews; the interviews were audio-taped and transcribed and data were analysed through content analysis. The study identified some negative factors that are affecting students' academic performance. The study concluded that steps should be taken to remedy the situation and recommendations were made as to possible intervention strategies.

BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The improvement of throughput, graduation and retention rates in South African higher education is a national priority and there have been various research studies into factors affecting the academic performance of students in both residential and distance education tertiary institutions. A Department of Education study on graduation rates at South African higher education institutions indicated that only 30 per cent of first entering students had graduated after five years of study (Nel, Troskie-de Bruin and Bitzer 2009). According to Badat (2009:11), “throughput rates for 2000-2004 were between 13% and 14%, and the cohort graduation rate was 45% in 2004 with an overall drop-out rate of 45%”. Breier and Mabizela (2007:281) also observed that only 15% of students who enrol in South African universities are able to complete their degree programmes in designated time, whereas “30% drop out after the first year and a further 20% drop out after their second or third year”. Such an observation is a cause for concern, as government invests much in higher education and expects better throughput and graduation rates. In order to reduce these high attrition and dropout rates and improve the graduation rate, it is incumbent upon the higher education sector to understand the nature and extent of students’ academic challenges in universities. The literature review revealed the following as some of the factors affecting learning in higher education.

Lecturing style and lecturer attributes

Students in contact institutions consciously interact closely with their lecturers. In the day-to-day interaction between students and lecturers, lecturer attributes can affect students’ academic performance. Adeyele and Yusufu (2012) are of the opinion that the availability of resources and satisfying the minimum standards set by a national quality agency are no guarantee for good performance but what matters most is the ability of the academic staff themselves. Mlambo (2011) argues that students’ learning preference and lecturer’s teaching style have been proven to impact positively in the performance of students in higher education. Shah (2009), in her PhD study, found that students’ performance improves when lecturers show respect to their students. Students need to feel comfortable in the presence of their teacher. Clay and Breslow (2006) found that students are motivated to attend classes even if the topic under discussion is uninteresting but the lecturer brings about active learning approaches in the teaching of the content.

Matsumura, Garnier, Pascal and Valdes (in Schwerdt and Wuppermann 2008) looked at the effect the quality of assignments has on student achievement. Using hierarchical linear modelling they found that a small part of student test score variance can be predicted by

assignment quality. The relationship between assignments and student achievement was also analysed by Newmann, Bryk and Nagaoka (in Schwerdt and Wuppermann 2008). These authors found that more intellectually challenging assignments are related to higher gains in test scores. Wenglinsky (in Schwerdt and Wuppermann 2008) used multilevel structural equation modelling to analyse the impact of different teaching practices on student test scores in Maths and Science. He found that the use of hands-on learning activities like solving real world problems and working with objects, an emphasis on thinking skills and frequent testing of students, but also more individualized assessment through projects and portfolios are positively related to students test scores. Wentzel and Wigfield (1998:166) assert that “tasks which are diverse, interesting, and challenging foster students’ task-involved goals, as do tasks students think they have a reasonable chance to complete.”

According to Wentzel and Wigfield (1998), evaluation practices are also likely to influence students competence-related beliefs, subjective values, and goals. For instance, performance will affect the degree to which ability-related information is accessible and comparable (Rosenholtz and Rosenholtz, in Wentzel and Wigfield 1998). These authors state further that teachers who frequently contrast students’ performances, grant privileges to ‘smart’ students, or award prizes for ‘best’ performance may increase the importance of ability but heighten the negative affect associated with failure. In contrast, in more co-operative or mastery-oriented classrooms, everyone who performs adequately can experience success. As a result, students in mastery-oriented classrooms are more likely to focus on self-improvement than comparisons, to perceive themselves as able, and to have high expectation for success (Nicholls, in Wentzel and Wigfield 1998). In general, these findings can be interpreted as showing that mastery evaluation practices are better at fostering and maintaining motivation than competitive evaluation practices. Recognition of student effort instead of only recognizing their ability, and giving all students (rather than just the ‘best’ students) a chance to achieve recognition fosters task-involved goals. Furthermore, such recognition practices make comparative ability assessment less relevant, students instead focus more on their own efforts and on improving their skills (Wentzel and Wigfield 1998).

The role of assessment feedback

According to Jordan (in McCann and Saunders 2010), both assessment and assessment feedback play a fundamental role in underpinning student learning in higher education and as such should be an integral part of any teaching and learning strategies. This means that the

assessments the lecturers choose to offer students and the ways in which they (the lecturers) give feedback can have a significant impact on the academic performance of students. Brown (in McCann and Saunders 2010:2) defines assessment feedback as “information which can be given in various forms, in response to an assessment or an individual’s or a group’s performance of a task with the purpose of motivating the student(s) by informing them how well they have done and how to improve”. Thus, feedback should essentially be part of the teaching and learning process because, as Ramsden (1992) shows, assessment has two functions: to tell us whether or not the learning has been successful and in conveying to students what we want them to learn. Several studies point to the importance of feedback in student learning. According to Lockett and Sutherland (2000), assessment is used to provide feedback to students about their progress in order to motivate them and help them improve their learning. Taras (2002) shows that feedback cannot be effective unless the student has understood what the purpose of the assessment was, how it was assessed, and how he or she can improve the shortfalls in the future. Race (2002) states that in order for feedback to be effective, it should ideally be received within a day or two. McCann and Saunders (2010) assert that for assessment feedback to be most effective, it needs to be timely, relevant, meaningful and offer suggestions for improvement that students can understand.

Module content

The way module content is structured and how it is presented to students can also affect student learning. Richards (2007:51) states that “a sound educational program should be based on the analysis of learner needs”. Similarly, Schmitt (2002:136) observes that any course or module based on students’ needs is bound to be “sensitive to learners’ needs.” The content that students learn in modules should also be related to real life situations. Theall (2004) indicates that the application of theoretical knowledge in real life situations enables students to easily understand the learnt material as they can easily identify with it. This is in contrast to theorised and abstract material that may be difficult for students to understand as it is divorced from their everyday life. Gene and Dean (1998) argue that a curriculum linked to real life situations encourages students to learn more and be more involved in the learning process. Murray, Olivier and Human (1998) believe in what they term ‘learning through problem solving’. This suggests that content in courses and modules should be planned in such a way that it poses problems that students should try to solve. If content is presented in such a way that it compels students to memorise facts, it may not assist students to be problem-solvers or critical thinkers (Murray, Olivier and Human 1998). These authors further

postulate that a problem-centred learning approach is based on the realisation that students are able to construct their own knowledge as individuals and in groups and share the constructed knowledge.

Learning strategies and other aspects related to studying

According to Cukras (2006), university students face the challenge of understanding assigned tasks, selecting appropriate study strategies for interpreting and reviewing the assigned tasks and self-monitoring their understanding. Cukras (2006) states further that students must develop a number of study strategies that can be selectively utilized to meet particular demands of the learning material, and maximize their understanding of the material. Most students find it difficult to use their time effectively. Students have a lot of work to accomplish each semester at university, it is therefore important that they learn how to use their available time wisely. Poor management of time is often caused by lack of planning for one's study. In most cases students cannot balance their time between study and leisure. Mushishi (1997) suggests that a time schedule sheet should be used to ensure good and effective management of one's study time. The above view of a study time schedule is supported by Du Plessis, Du Toit and Roos (1995) who emphasise that the time schedule can be advantageous if a student is able to stick to it.

Language competence

Although English has been a medium of instruction in South African schools for many years, students from disadvantaged backgrounds have not fully acquired the skills of speaking, reading and writing, which are important areas of language competence (Jama, Mapasela and Beyveld 2008). Language competence may, therefore, be regarded as another factor affecting the learning ability of students and their academic performance.

Coping with social and emotional demands

The unfamiliarity of a tertiary environment, especially to first entering students, may be a source of anxiety, feelings of insecurity and stress (Snyders, Vawala, Taljaard, Brophy and Plaatjies 2005). It is imperative that students acquire knowledge of the nature and causes of stress in order to cope with stressful situations that may impact negatively on their learning efforts. Entering a new environment also entails forming new relationships. According to Snyders et al (2005), it is only through rewarding relationships that students can fulfil their potential and achieve success. McCombs and Miller (2007) are of the opinion that learning is

influenced by social interactions, interpersonal relations, and communication. McCombs and Miller (2007) emphasize that if students have good relationships with teachers they experience their academic work as meaningful and this promotes their understanding. On the contrary, when students experience poor relationships with their teachers, they see their academic work as coercive, irrelevant and not helping them to achieve their academic goals (McCombs and Miller 2007).

The purpose of this study was to explore students' views on factors affecting their academic performance, specifically lecturing style and lecture attributes, assessment feedback, module content as well as academic and psycho-social challenges in a particular School at a university.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Based on the background and the literature, and to address the purpose of the study, the following research questions were formulated:

- In which ways do lecturing style and lecturer attributes affect students' academic performance?
- How does assessment feedback affect students' academic performance?
- How does module content affect student learning?
- What are students' academic and psycho-social challenges at university?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative case study design. Qualitative studies are known for their ability to understand phenomena from the participants' point of view (Bogdan and Biklen 1998). The study sought to establish factors affecting students' academic performance from the point of view of the students themselves. The study was carried out in one School in the selected university. The School was selected as it has experienced a decline in pass rates and graduation rates hence it was considered an information-rich site.

Population and sampling

Students from second year up to fourth year in the participating School formed the population of the study. A purposive sample of 25 male and 15 female students participated in the study.

These students were drawn from second to final year and were deemed experienced enough with teaching and learning practices in the university to provide useful insights on factors affecting students' academic performance.

Data collection

Focus group interviews were used as a mode of collecting data from the participants. Participants were interviewed in groups of eight and six. Six groups of students were interviewed and these were audio-recorded and later transcribed.

Reliability and validity

According to Maree (2010:80), validity and reliability in qualitative research refer to "research that is credible and trustworthy". In order to ensure reliability and validity of the outcomes of the study, the researchers saw to it that there were no biases and undue influences during the whole interviewing process. This process adhered to the recognised procedures which ought to be followed when coding, categorising and analysing data. Furthermore, the research included primary data in the results to allow the reader to see the basis upon which the researchers' conclusions were made (Wolcott, in Eisner and Peshkin 1990). For example, some of the participants' views were given with actual quotations as evidence.

Data analysis

The data was analysed through content analysis. Interview transcriptions were coded and categorized, and thereafter analysed for patterns that emerged as themes.

Ethical issues

The participants were informed about the purpose of the research. They participated voluntarily and they could terminate their participation at any time if they so wished. Permission to conduct the research was granted by the Research Ethics Committee at the university.

RESULTS

The following are categories on which analysis of raw data was based, and themes that subsequently emerged from the analysis.

Category 1: Module content

Interesting modules, less interesting modules, and availability of reference books are themes that emerged in this category. Some brief comments on each of the themes follow:

- **Interesting modules**

The participants expressed their feelings about modules which they regard as interesting. Participants said these modules are challenging and stimulate their thinking. The practical component is said to be sufficiently provided than just theory and one is encouraged to think more about applying knowledge in real life situations.

- **Less interesting modules**

Participants also indicated that there are modules they regard as less interesting. Participants pointed out that in some of these modules they are just repeating the subject matter they did in high school. Assessments are said to be less challenging in some of these modules and students are expected to do more theoretical work than practicals. In addition, the demands of assignments are not articulated. Some participants' direct quotations: *"Some assignments are not clear. You do not know what you are expected to do"*.

- **Availability of reference books**

Participants indicated that it is difficult to get proper reference books in the library. The few books which are available are reported to be very old.

Category 2: Assessment

Provision of feedback was the only theme that emerged in this category.

- **Provision of feedback**

Participants commented as follows about feedback regarding assignments and tests: *"Some assignments are never brought back to students, but semester marks appear"*. *"In some instances a test is written even when the first one is not yet brought back to students"* *"When feedback is given, students are not informed how they should answer the questions"* *"Sometimes feedback is given a week before semester marks are released"*. *"With some*

assignments all students get the same mark. Some assignments come back with no comments, only the marks”.

Category 3: Lecturer attributes

Unapproachable lecturers and lecturer favouritism were themes that emerged in this category.

- **Unapproachable lecturers**

Participants indicated that they find it difficult to consult some lecturers when they have problems with subject content. *“Some lecturers make us afraid to interact with them. They would just crush the student’s spirit. It is like they have a personal grudge against students”* Some lecturers are said to mention phrases like *“You are dull”* or *“you are stupid”* referring to students. Some lecturers discourage students by always saying *“you will all fail this module”*

- **Lecturer favouritism**

Participants indicated that some lecturers appear to favour certain groups of students’ in class. For example, when asking questions some lecturers will always point to those students who get high marks in assignments and tests. With regard to gender favouritism, participants said that some male lecturers appear to favour female students: *“they always point at females in the class”*.

Category 4: Students’ academic challenges

Language problem, time management and academic writing are themes that emerged in this category.

- **Language problem**

Language competence is regarded as another serious academic challenge for students. Participants indicated that some lecturers are contributing to students’ inability to acquire English language skills, especially speaking. Participants said: *“Some lecturers give examples in their mother tongue when teaching in class”*. *“Some lecturers penalise students for language mistakes in tests and assignments without showing them how they should correct those mistakes”*.

- **Time management**

According to participants, students lack of time management skills lead to postponement of tasks and subsequently poor academic performance.

- **Academic writing**

Participants said that students in the School have not yet grasped academic writing skills. Participants felt that there should be some form of academic support to deal with the issue of academic writing. Participants said: *“The problem in the School is the lack of tutors, otherwise they would help with academic writing”*.

DISCUSSION

The participants' comments on category 1 have shown that module content is one area that needs special attention regarding how it is structured and presented to students. Peacock (2001) asserts that lecturers should ensure that module content and resultant teaching approaches are in line with students' needs. It is also important that the content that students learn in modules should, as far as possible, be related to real life situations. In the case of the School in question, it means that more practicals should be done in various fields of specialisation. Module content should not just be theoretical and divorced from students' real life experiences. One of the reasons why some modules are regarded as less interesting is that students do more theoretical work than practicals. Participants indicated that some modules are less challenging and they do not stimulate their thinking, especially with regard to assessments thereof. Murray, Olivier and Human (1998) suggest that content in courses and modules should be planned in such a way that it poses problems to students. If content is presented in a way that compels students to memorise facts it may not assist students to become problem solvers or critical thinkers (Murray, Olivier and Human 1998). Participants have indicated that lack of reference books is another impediment in the process of mastering module content. According to social exclusion theory (Brandsm 2000), students are denied access to information due to a lack of appropriate resources such as reference books, especially in historically disadvantaged institutions. This lack of resources becomes a hindrance to students when executing their academic tasks because they cannot get appropriate information.

Participants' comments on assessment (category 2) focused on the way feedback was being provided in the School. Students appear to be dissatisfied with the way in which some lecturers handle feedback. The importance of feedback in learning has been pointed out in several studies. According to Luckett and Sutherland (2000), if feedback is properly provided to students, it can motivate them and improve their learning. Participants indicated that in some instances they do not get feedback on written assignments and, if feedback is provided, it may be very late. Race (2002) points out that feedback should ideally be received

within a day or two in order to be significantly effective. Race (2002) states further that feedback should not dampen students' learning spirit, and as such words like 'weak' or 'poor' should be avoided as far as possible. Chong (1999) is of the opinion that regular, frequent and immediate feedback is usually more effective than irregular, infrequent and delayed feedback. Rosenshine and Stevens (in Chong 1999) suggested that frequent feedback enhances students' learning processes. Kulik and Kulik (in Chong, 1999) argue that immediate feedback works far better than delayed feedback because it shows students the mistakes in their work and prevents them from repeating the same errors. Brophy and Brophy (in Chong 1999:8) emphasized the importance of "specific and explicit feedback". These authors argued that students should be told exactly which aspects of their responses are correct and which are incorrect.

Research has found that students' performance improves when lecturers show respect towards them. In other words, the interaction between students and lecturers should be characterised by respect and trust. If students' interaction with the lecturers is cordial, it might increase their level of commitment to academic tasks. Participants indicated that they find it difficult to interact with some lecturers because of the latter's negative conduct and attitude. It is a common occurrence that students complain about a negative attitude of a lecturer at a tertiary institution. In such a situation, students will develop a negative attitude towards a course (module) offered by the lecturer concerned. According to Yaworski, Weber and Ibrahim (2000), students who develop positive relationships with their lecturers feel more comfortable in approaching them when they need assistance. The same authors further indicate that the professors who were interviewed in their study generally agreed that it was the high achieving students who perceived them as experts and sought their advice. In contrast, the low achieving students did not perceive their professors as experts and often did not trust their professors' judgements concerning their work. Aiken (2002:162) argues as follows: "Of all the factors that influence student learning, one of the most important is the classroom teacher. The abilities, attitudes and personality of the teacher can have a profound effect on the extent to which students benefit from school experiences".

Student academic challenges range from language problems to difficulties in academic writing. According to Ayliff, in Jama, Mapesela and Beyleveld (2008), students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds have not fully acquired and grasped the skills of speaking and writing, even though English has been a medium of instruction in South African schools for many years. Participants expressed their disgust as a result of staff members who use their mother tongue instead of English when teaching, and they indicated that these staff

members are contributing to students' inability to acquire English language skills. Another challenge facing students is time management. Most students find it difficult to use their time effectively. Poor management of time is said to be caused by lack of time management skills. Participants indicated that many students in the School still lack academic writing skills. Snyders, Vawda, Taljaard, Brophy and Plaatjies (2005) point out that students arrive at university with different writing skills. Many students are still far less experienced in organising their thoughts into a logical and coherent argument and would benefit greatly from academic writing programmes (Snyders et al. 2005). These authors stated further that academic writing is one of the most important skills in higher education.

CONCLUSIONS

It can be concluded that the way in which module content is presented to students might influence their attitude and motivation toward a module, and ultimately their academic performance. This conclusion is substantiated by participants' views concerning 'interesting' and 'less interesting' modules in the School. It is important that lecturers should take the interests of students into consideration when structuring presentations of module content. It was noted that students' mastery of content can be enhanced if reference books are readily available. This is difficult in historically disadvantaged institutions which are still struggling to have adequate resources.

With regard to assessment in the School, it was indicated that feedback was not properly handled in some modules. In the preceding discussion, various authors have indicated the importance of feedback in improving the academic performance of students. This research has revealed that feedback was not properly done in the School, and as such it may not serve the purpose it is intended for. It is hoped that the issues raised by participants concerning feedback will be considered and some steps taken to remedy the situation.

The research has also highlighted some issues concerning lecturers' conduct and attitude toward students. It is evident that students are not free to consult some of the lecturers in the School, and this may have a negative impact on the academic performance of students. Any interaction between students and lecturers should be characterised by respect and trust.

Students have some academic challenges that need further investigation. These include language problems, time management and academic writing. The University in question has long been faced with the problem of a large intake of academically disadvantaged students from a poor educational background. The secondary schools from which these students come

have little or no resources necessary for adequate academic preparedness. It would therefore be appropriate to implement, for example, academic writing skills programmes for first year students.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the study as well as the literature, the following recommendations are made:

- The School should put in place staff development programmes in liaison with the Centre for Higher Education Teaching and Learning in the university. Such programmes will assist lecturers with basic teaching and assessment skills.
- Lecturers should explain what assessment feedback is for and how to use it by integrating it more clearly into the teaching and learning process. This could help students to respond effectively to feedback.
- The School should also liaise with the Centre for Higher Education Teaching and Learning in the university for offering of a series of academic writing and study skills workshops to all first-years in the first semester of every year.
- Systematic monitoring of students' academic performance should be put in place to identify 'at risk' students on time and put in place appropriate intervention measures such as mentoring and supplemental instruction.
- There should be a balance between theory and practice, especially with regard to professional and/or career orientated degree programmes.
- Students should have some opportunities of applying their knowledge in work places relevant to their fields of study and rendering services in the community.
- Academic staff should help students see themselves as capable of learning rather than making them feel hopeless and incapable. In addition, the interaction between students and lecturers should be characterised by mutual respect and positive regard, and this may increase the likelihood of co-operation and student success.

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