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Engaging Students: Do First Year Students Hold High Unrealistic Expectations of What University Has To Offer?

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ABSTRACT This study focused on unearthing and delineating the forces that lie beneath the surface of the higher education landscape that impact on success rate of first year students (FYS). The study investigated the expectations FYS have with regards to what the university has to offer them and the implications thereof on their prospects of succeeding during their first year. Data was collected through interviews during focus groups discussions with 21 FYS. This study revealed that, more especially first generation students, experience challenges during their early days of university study. The reasons for the challenges include: lack of proper guidance from families, non-alignment of curriculum between high schools and universities, and lack of skills

to cope with academic demands at universities. Arranging extended orientation that would run for two months; putting up support structures in place that would enable FYS to participate in engaging activities coined ‘my life at the university’, and realigning universities with high school curriculum would promote smoother students transition in the university life.

i. INTRODUCTION

Many students, more especially those from previously disadvantaged background, arrive at the institutions of higher learning with high expectations of acquiring knowledge and achieving their dreams (Tinto 2005). The majority of them have made it through high school against all odds and they believe they have what it take to make it through university studies. Their high expectations also draw from them having made it through the university selection criteria, hence the expectation that they have what it takes. The Gen Y (people born between 1980 and early 2000) generally display sense of entitlement as they expect things to happen for them with little effort because it’s their right as they would have paid their fees (Garces-Ozanne and Sullivan 2014). On the other hand, the academic staffs mourn the quality of students that walks through their lecturer rooms. The majority of the students are perceived by the lecturers to be underprepared to cope with University programmes. Killen (1994) in Fraser and Killen (2006) argue that matriculation examination do not measure non-intelligence factors that influence student’s potential to succeed once enrolled at university. They suggested that it could be more useful to focus on the post-enrolment factors (Frazer and Killen 2006). In short, being perceived as underprepared should not necessarily be equated to lacking the potential to succeed.

A substantial body of international literature on FYS experience make reference to minorities that are immigrant students struggling to adjust to new environment, language barriers and financial challenges. In North America, minority race includes African Americans, Hispanics, Caucasians, and American Indians (Giroux 2003). Whereas in South African context, the majority of at risk students come not from the minorities, but from the majorities that happens to be Black African from previously disadvantaged background. Leaving home, from rural and South African townships, for the first time and being in an unfamiliar environment may lead to many students feeling anxious, confused, threatened and clueless on how to seek help (Bojuwoye 2002). This means the newly registered FYS are at the most vulnerable stage of their

academic career. It is therefore important for universities to take into consideration the background nature of their students, environmental demands of the institution and the kind of programmes they offer in order to tailor make their induction programmes to meet these students' needs. Failure to address these problems, according to Bojuwoye (2002) may affect the students' integration and ultimate success in the university.

According to Krause and Coates (2008) the Australian studies on first-year experience started in the mid-1990s to collect data to assist in the monitoring of the quality of university education. Data collected through these studies were commissioned in 1994, 1999 and 2004. This data have the potential to inform understanding on many aspects of university life for FYS. The aspects according to McKenzie and Schweitzer (2001) and Krause and Coates (2008) may include student affairs, pedagogical quality, recruitment and selection, attrition and retention, equity, and student learning processes. These variables could be used to develop a model to identify students at risk of academic problems.

There is a general recognition across the world of the importance of education to facilitate the reduction of poverty and ignorance. In South Africa, like anywhere else, there is a close connection between unemployment and poverty. Unemployment is closely linked with lack of skill and education. In addition, there is a strong perception that provision of education to the masses would assist in alleviation of poverty. Since the dawn of democracy in South Africa in 1994, massification (accelerated and expansion of higher education and increased access to it) (van der Meer, et al. 2010) has been used by government to accommodate students from previously disadvantaged communities into higher education sector. This fulfils one of the objective of the Freedom Charter that "higher education and technical training shall be opened to all by means of state allowance and scholarships awarded on the basis of merit and that adult illiteracy shall be ended by a mass state education plan (Ntshoe 2004; Kean 2009).

Retention of students at universities has long been a concern for academic staff members and authorities. Although it is the responsibility of the institutions to create an enabling environment for students to engage in learning and succeed, the onus still rest on the individual students to learn and complete their studies (Krause and Coates 2008). Central to the intentions by the institutions to increase students' retention, should be the commitment to improve the educational setting in which students are expected to learn (Tinto 2005). In North America, many

colleges and universities have focused their attention on students at risk and have embarked on strategies like:

- Offering 'early alert' initiatives meant to identify students performing poorly in their first few weeks assessment. The identified students would be offered tutoring or counselling services;
- Appointing a campus 'retention director' to respond to retention issues;
- Organising a term-length first year course called a first year seminar (Barefoot 2004).

In the discussion paper on higher education which was published by the Australian Government Department of Employment, Education and Training (1987:1) cited by Gow and Kember (1990), it was asserted that:

The major function of education is ... to increase individuals' capacity to learn, to provide them with a framework with which to analyze problems and to increase their capacity to deal with new information.

It emerges that researching, sharing and imparting knowledge and information is the core business of universities. However universities are also faced with the task of researching models on how best to retain their FYS.

However, the 70% increase in enrolment resulted in unfavourable consequences were universities have to device means of retaining students. For an example, Cherry (2010) points out that research statistics read that 35% of students drop out of degree studies, 52% out of certificate or diploma studies and 70% out of distance higher education, whereas, only about 29% of those who enrol at colleges eventually pass. In both categories, only a minority complete their qualifications in the prescribed period.

This study comes at the backdrop of the release of the 2010 South African Survey of Student Engagement (SASSE) report. The SASSE study was conducted in collaboration with the council on higher education (CHE). This was part of an investigation into the development of a 4-year undergraduate curriculum, as well as undergraduate education in general. The pilot phase of the study was conducted in 2009 and the project has continued in 2010. Within the context of this investigation, research on student engagement has the potential to help identify the conditions and drivers of success at a university. This would lead to the identification of high impact activities that contribute to the improvement of throughput and success rates in the South African higher education (SASSE 2010). Sampled universities include amongst others

universities of technology namely the Durban University of Technology (DUT) and the Central University of Technology. The survey discovered that, among others, FYS were less engaged in curriculum activities as compared to senior students.

The main intention of this study is to examine the expectations of FYS against the reality they are confronted with during their first few months. I hypothesise that students with more realistic expectations and those that are more prepared for university life, have more realistic chances of succeeding in their first year at university.

ii. METHODOLOGY

This qualitative research was conducted at the beginning of the second semester of 2014. The aim was of capturing students' reflection on their FYS' expectations of what universities offers. This design allow the researchers to elicit data and to understand experiences from the student point of view in a non-controlling and open way (Patton 2002). The research questions centred on their FYS expectation and experiences during their first days on campus, the process of selection of courses and lastly their expectations and experiences of academic engagement.

Respondents for this research were predominantly self-selected first year DUT students. They responded to an advert requesting students to be part of research on FYS' expectation of university. 17 students responded and an additional 4 were approached in order to reflect racial demographics of the university students' population. Students formed focus groups, in a format of 3 mixed-gender and racial. Focus group interviews provided the researchers with opportunity to observe the interaction among participants as they question, share and negotiate, socially constructing perspectives within a group context (Kenny 2005, Wilkinson 2011). Purposeful sampling was used for this research. Purposeful sampling calls for the researcher to identify particular types of cases for in-depth investigation (Neuman 2000; Rossman and Rallis 2012). The students from diverse racial and language backgrounds were encouraged to reflect on their expectations before entering the university and on their FYS challenges. Relevant literature were collected and reviewed. Focus group discussions lasted for an hour each and were recorded verbatim by means of an audio recorder to ensure accuracy and trustworthiness of data. Data was later transcribed and results were processed.

iii. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Due to the nature of this research, in this section we first present the results and follow them with a discussion of the emerging trends. Attention is focused on what emerged in regard to FYS in relation to first days, choice of subjects and academic expectations.

First days

The research discovered that during the first days of arrival, most students were overwhelmed by the situation on campus. They felt lost without their friends and familiar faces around them. Enquiring on how some of them managed to overcome this first huddle, some students responded in this manner:

I was fortunate to have met with one of my former classmates on the second day of registrations and we spent time together. But the next day he had to leave due to financial constraints and I was left alone once again. Time moves very slow when one is among strangers. But I was strong enough to join one small group that looked lost like myself, and we have been friends since then (student J).

For some, taking a decision to choose the same university with their former school mates made life a lot easier as they reconnected and formed a new social group. The first expectation that the university environment will provide ample opportunities of social interaction was squashed in a moment. Reality was that it was up to an individual to apply his/her social skills to create new friendship. Unfortunately, these unpleasant experiences have proven to have impacted negatively on some students' prospects of acclimatising and coping with their studies.

In addition, the focus group discussion brought to light that there was a sizeable number of students that remained isolated for a long time. This impacted negatively on lonely students as they sometimes missed on information shared amongst students like venues for orientation sessions and directions to lecture rooms. In this regard the observations by student A are pertinent:

It is not uncommon to see students arriving for the first time at lecture rooms a week or two after commencement of lectures because they were afraid to ask for directions or did not know where to ask for help. These confused students were now faced with catching up with lost work - they had no friends for support and guidance. Some of them remained confused until they wrote their first assessment and prospects of recovering became

slimmer by the day. One can imagine how many students drop out of university or start engaging in illegal activities like drug abuse, just because they did not have coping skills or someone to help them along! It is a lot tougher to some people than one can imagine. Those high expectations of good life at universities can turn into nightmares.

The remarks above help to highlight the significance of having students form friendships on time upon arrival at the university. Together with proper institutional support, these students could manage not to miss on vital information that would help them get settled as early as possible.

Furthermore, in this research it emerged that students staying in residences provided by the university are usually faced with language challenges. In a South Africa with eleven official languages, the mostly spoken languages are English and Afrikaans. In this regard, one student said:

As I was staying in one of the residence and was not speaking the local language, I felt as if I was in a foreign country. I used to see other first year students mixing freely with others as if they have been here forever. I used to ask myself why they are treating me differently. I thought at university we all speak English and my language being different should not be a handicap. I understood later that they also felt threatened by unfamiliar environment and were using coping mechanism that was simpler to them. It was up to me to try to be one of them. However, I still believe those in authority should anticipate such situations and device means to assist those who might be experiencing language barriers (student C).

One of the participant echoed similar sentiments:

As an Indian South African, I would have loved to stay at the university residence as my parents live 200 kilometres from the university. However, by the look of things, the residence seemed to cater for certain type of people and I was afraid of being singled out and ill-treated. Right now I stay with family friends and it's not always convenient (student P).

Participants indicated that some of their colleagues left for home early in the year as they could not find their footing due to language being a barrier. This highlights the need for university management to intervene on time by encouraging the use of a language that meets the needs of the majority of the student body. The role of student leadership, housing and residence management in breaking the barriers by fostering collegial environments cannot be ignored.

This research discovered that the first students' expectation that it would be easy to fit into the university social and academic life is not necessarily a reality for many students, more especially those students without support structures in place. According to this research's findings, all Indian and white students were not staying at residence and had strong family support in terms of adjusting to campus life. Twenty-two black students were not familiar with language spoken locally. Female students indicated that they struggled more to cope than male students.

The focus group discussions brought to the fore that many students were quick to realise that university life was no different from any other new environment. A student is expected to be equipped with survival skills that would enable him/her to adjust by among others, forging new friendships. Being alone makes the new environment to appear more threatening and hostile. Residence students faced more daunting task as compared to those going back home after lectures. Going back home in the evening gives a FYS a chance to reconnect with familiar environment and support structure at home. Some of those residence students that do not speak local language experienced extra barriers as they felt more marginalised. Such challenges impact directly on how new and isolated students navigate their way through the campuses and access support mostly needed at this crucial stage of their studies. Some students, according this finding, resorts to using drugs as a way of coping with the situation.

Choice of courses

During group discussions it emerged that some students did not have enough background information regarding their choice of course. Their expectations could have been that they would be given ample time to choose or be orientated on what is on offer from various faculties/department. The reality is, whilst at high school grade 12 students were expected to receive guidance from their Life Orientation educators on the field of study based on their subject choices. Many universities still experience what is called 'walk-ins' - student that did not apply a year before but simply present themselves in January to apply. This, in many instances results in, for an example, students forced to choose a course although they did not understand what it entails.

Friends seemed to play a key role in influencing choices of courses. Participants indicated that some of the students had to change their first choice courses due to number of reasons. Firstly, some students did not meet minimum requirements. Secondly, some programs had

reached required number of intakes. Students that faced such predicament had to opt for any program that was available. Participants responded to the enquiry on how this situation impacted on students' commitment to their studies by saying:

I came here to do Engineering studies but discovered that I did not meet minimum requirements due to my low mathematics marks. I was forced to enrol in Accounting of which I am not happy with although I am doing relatively well. I think I will try my luck again in engineering next year (student T).

One student responded passionately on this subject by pointing out that:

I know of four students who came late in February to do my course. They were clearly upset with what they were forced by circumstances to enrol for. Two of them were struggling to obtain good marks because they never felt comfortable with what they were doing. I did not see them again after the June examination. The other two are still with us because their parents told them that they cannot afford to spend a year doing nothing. Imagine what kind of life one is going to live when you were forced to a career you never imagined before? (student B).

However, the research found that the situation was not always negative, depending on the students' school and family background. According to student V:

Two of my siblings are university graduates. So they managed to prepare me with regards to career choice and general life at university. My secondary school educators were also well informed and enlightened us pertaining to choice of courses, institutions and fees. I basically cannot complain much as I knew what to expect.

Choosing suitable subjects seems to be a challenge for many students. Universities expect students to come well prepared and knowledgeable regarding career choice. Armed with grade 12 results that are released by the Department of Education late in December of the previous year, students walk into the university expecting to be enrolled in any course of their choice. Those that did not make applications well in advance find that space is limited to those who did so beforehand. Many of those that do not meet minimum requirements for their first choice programmes are forced to look for next available programmes. This, based on the students' discussions, has a direct impact on students' attitude towards their studies and prospect of

succeeding at the end of the year. Guidance and support from former schools and family has potential to form realistic expectations on the side of FYS.

Academic expectations

The study discovered that students expected academic life to be laid back – unlike at school where everyone was expected to be at school from 7h30 to 15h00, at university one may come and go as one wishes – no rules and no restrictions. If freedom was what students were looking forward to, how did they expect to cope with fulfilling their academic responsibility? Some responded in this manner:

As kids in secondary schools we viewed grade 12 as a gateway to freedom. Friends talked about being away from strict parents and educators. We looked forward to not wearing school uniform and bunking class at will without repercussions. Yes, we later discovered that rules are not that strict, but the catch was the kind of work one had to do warranted one to be self-disciplined. The first semester was tough as one had to acclimatise to the volume of reading and research. Unfortunately many of us stumbled along the way as we wanted to realise those unrealistic dreams of being free. That is why many students failed their first tests and even the first semester (student M).

This suggests that not all students realised soon enough that their expectations of freedom at university were not necessarily what reality presented. But that may have come with unpleasant result of not doing well in assessments. This prompted a response from student V who said:

Like it was said before, it was easier when you had people who came before you and painted a more realistic picture on what to expect during your first year at university. The truth is we all want to enjoy freedom that come with exiting secondary school. Being at university is one exciting experience. One need to enjoy while it last, and time moves extremely fast. Within a short space of time, one had to submit first project then it is tests time. I have seen many students cry because they could not submit their first projects on time because some were absent from lectures or were not aware of due dates- you snooze you lose.

Whilst we are still on the subject of falling behind with academic work during the first semester, this research discovered that there were other learning barriers that could have contributed towards students struggling to cope. For an example, the speed or pace at which lecturers presented their lectures. According to students S:

One had to learn to listen and take notes at the same time. Remember, no one will remind you to take notes and you may not be asked if you understood or not. Some students just chill and let it slip ... then when test day come, it is then when one realises that you were not taking your lessons seriously.

The same sentiments were echoed by the following comments:

The challenge is that some of us take time to rid ourselves of the high school culture of always being reminded of doing our homework or pay attention in lecturer room. The volume of work exceed by far what we did at school.

On the other hand, below is what the other student said:

During the first four months I felt pity for some of my fellow students that were not accustomed to using computers. All first year students were expected to attend End-user courses as an introduction to the use of computers. Realistically speaking, it is near impossible to master the use of a computer within three or four weeks. Within no time, one is expected to start preparing to submit typed projects in all other courses. For us who came from school that offered computer practice, it was like a walk in the park. Imagine using this gadget for this first time, having to complete project that needed analyses and evaluations ... all this at the same time? What does that do to one's confidence? Chances of submitting one's projects beyond due dates are high, or submitting with lots of errors. But many, because of positive attitudes and eager to learn, have made it through those huddles. With proper guidance, many have made it (student P).

The group discussions revealed that one major expectation that students were looking forward to was freedom. The perception most FYS had was that they would still do well and cope with their university work whilst enjoying freedom of bunking classes at will. These students were looking forward to joining vibrant social life accompanied by status of being a university student (Wyatt 1992). However, they did not anticipate the volume of work covered during each lecture and the onus would be on each individual to catch up on missed lectures. Some students were not accustomed to taking notes and being engaged by lecturers. This impacted on their comprehension of the subject matter presented by lecturers. Some students were expecting that reliance on prescribed learning materials would be the easier way of

understanding and mastering of the subject matter. Inputs from participants highlighted the importance of skills learnt at high school to assist in coping with demands of the university. Students that were exposed to subjects like computer literacy done at well-resourced secondary schools came better prepared. Whereas those coming from previously disadvantaged schools, faced an uphill battle to learn computer skill in short space of time. For many students from previously disadvantaged background, the first few months at university is more of a nightmare than freedom they initially anticipated. According to the findings, six of the black students did not have prior computer skills. They were faced with mammoth task of learning how to use computer during the first months of their first year at university. However, students staying in residences tends to recover faster because residences provides additional support in a form of tutorials.

As students are individuals with unique needs, support for FYS should be tailored to meet such specific needs. The first six months for a FYS is seen as one of the defining period because it has significant consequences on student attrition and failure rate. This research collaborated previous studies that discovered this transition period between high school and university put students under tremendous emotional psychological pressure (van der Meer et al. 2010). Students struggling to adjust experience extreme loneliness – missing home and old school friends, at the same time feels ‘not belonging’(Solomon 2007; Palmer et al. 2009) to the new university community. Students are individuals, each with their own learning needs, however support should be made available to all and should not be stigmatized as remedial (Ituma 2001) or for those struggling to ‘fit in’ the university system. The students need to be inspired, motivated and provided with support systems that involve various sectors within the university. The support services might be provided by the housing department (for accommodation logistics), centre for excellence in learning and teaching (CELT) (for academic issues), student counselling unit (psychological matters) and student financial support unit (for financial issues). It would be of benefit to all students for university to organize an extended orientation period that would run for a reasonable time so that key stakeholders are afforded chance to talk and orient the students to what they offer. During this period the university will put structures in place that would enable FYS to participate in engaging activities coined ‘my life at the university’. FYS would be organized in manageable groups and assigned mentors (Fenzel 2001) that would guide discussions on topics around academic and social lives on campus. This initiative will also

provide adjustment experience to those students struggling to initiate friendships, create and maintain strong support networks that would eventually make them feel as part of the family and sense of belonging (Palmer et al. 2009; Popadiuk 2010).

In addition, these organized groupings would provide students with opportunities to table issues affecting young adults in transitional periods like transmitted diseases, drug abuse and relationship matters. As rapport is created among members of the group, it would also take a form of support group that would enable individuals to open up to their friends. This structure could double up as referral unit – in a non-threatening manner. This could see individuals in need being advised and referred to professional structures like CELT, student counselling unit, financial support unit or health clinic if need arise. Group discussions presented evidence that First-generation students often describe experiencing even greater anxieties and problems than other students in making the transition to university life, due to a lack of social and cultural capital (Pascarella et al. 2004, The Pell Institute, 2011). Students from parents or family members with university experience tend to have an edge over first generations in terms having more realistic and better understanding of what universities have to offer.

iv. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Among multiple challenges FYS face when they enrol at university, is selection of courses of study. Students leave high school without being properly prepared for courses they are supposed to choose from. Lack of alignment between high school and university makes the situation more complex (Bettinger et al. 2013). Educators at high school level seems not well equipped to give adequate guidance to learners on which university to choose and courses that are suitable to subjects they do at secondary schools. In order to forge alignment between universities and high schools, it is recommended that universities should organise open days for Life Orientation educators. During such occasions university personnel would get opportunity to engage with educators and highlight pertinent challenges students may face when they enroll at schools of higher learning. At present, universities organises open days for all grade 12 students. Students attend enmass to this open sessions, and there is no tangible proof that information shared with students is profitable utilised.

Absenteeism is one of the variables that contribute to poor performance on the side of FYS. Some of the FYS misses lectures due to factors like being overwhelmed by the situation and getting disoriented. Evidence from discussions showed that some students only manage to locate their lecture rooms after days of searching around. It is recommended that one stop shop customer services kiosks be erected around the campuses to provide services for FYS like for an example, walking a student to lecture venues they may not be able to locate. Electronic system to track lecture attendance to be introduced. Those students that misses 3 lectures to receive sms (short message system) on their cell phones alerting them to report to specific departmental offices where they will be expected to provide reasons for their absenteeism. Students should also be made aware of the policy that permit them to withdraw or drop a subject if they anticipate that they may not cope or have made incorrect choices. Continuing with a subject whilst not attending class with no intention of writing final assessments has adverse financial implications.

One of the factors contributing to students struggling to cope is the lack of computer skill. It would be of benefit if lecturers identify such students. The first project would be assigned to a group (Palmer et al. 2009) involving those who are computer literate, however tasked would be assigned equally so that others would not feel used.

At the beginning, we hypothesised that students with more realistic expectations stood a better chance of succeeding during their first years of study at universities. The reality is, all students, no matter how realistic their expectations are, new environment always presents new challenges. The findings of this research indicate that although many of first years felt disappointed that some of their expectations were not realised, some students do readjust their expectations (Garces-Ozanne and Sullivan 2014) early in the year and rise to the occasion to face task at hand. With collaborative support from various units within the university, most of the students stand benefit from such initiative that would also include secondary educators who tasked in preparing learners for university life. .

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