

Editorial

Against high attrition rates and low graduation rates, universities in South Africa have institutionalised academic development. This has entailed the establishment of teaching and learning centres in universities whose function, amongst others, is to promote and nurture academic development of staff members and students. Such academic development practices take different forms and have various natures, but the ultimate purpose is to ensure that students and staff are supported, with the view to improve retention, reduce attrition and promote student success.

It is, however, important to ensure that academic development practices in universities result in sustainable development. Sustainable development is measured against the ability for such practices to become integral aspects of university life with the noticeable desired results of improved graduation rates. Low graduation rates and high attrition rates are wastages and have huge cost and human resource implications.

It is the purpose of this special edition to gather, from academics and staff development practitioners from different South African Universities, their experiences of various issues pertaining to institutionalised academic development practices. This special issue draws papers from researchers at different South African universities, namely, the University of Fort Hare, University of Venda, University of Limpopo, North West University, Central University of Technology, Durban University of Technology Cape Peninsula University of Technology and the University of South Africa. There is also a contribution from the University of Swaziland.

In the first article, *Applying The Elements Of Cooperative Learning: Reported Influence On Self-Directed Learning And View Of Cooperative Learning*, Betty Breed of the North West University addresses the issue of enhancing student learning at university through the use of interactive methodologies such as cooperative learning. Using both quantitative and qualitative methodologies, this study explored the influence of incorporation of the five elements of effective cooperative learning on students' views of cooperative learning and their level of self-directed learning. The results showed that structuring of cooperative learning activities to

include the elements of cooperative learning changed students' views of group work, and at the same time enhanced their level of self-directed learning in terms of using appropriate learning strategies, evaluation of their own learning and improving interpersonal skills.

In the second article entitled *First year students' perceptions of the Supplemental Instruction programme* Vuyelwa Dondolo and Vuyisile Nkonki of the University of Fort Hare sought to establish the perceptions of first year students on the Supplemental Instruction (SI) programme. Located in the interpretive paradigm, the qualitative study found that students had different perceptions of Supplemental Instruction sessions and such perceptions were shaped by their expectations and preferences the purpose of the programmes and the facilitation methods employed. The researchers also found that students could not distinguish between the purposes and modes of operation of SI and tutorial sessions because some of the lecturers would assign the SI leaders tutorial tasks and lecturer responsibilities. Recommendations are made with respect to the strategies of addressing the confounding of the Supplemental Instructional programme with the tutorial system and lectures. Also, ways of bargaining for, framing and focusing of students' expectations, and the streamlining of the SILs facilitation methods with the SI principles, as well as the induction of first year students into SI.

The pedagogical issue of problem-based learning is explored by Aubrey Golightly in the third article entitled *Geography Student Tutors' Perceptions And Experiences In Problem-Based Learning Tutorial Sessions*. In this article Aubrey utilises a qualitative case study design situated within social constructivism to explore Geography education student tutors' perceptions and experiences in the Problem-based learning (PBL) tutorial sessions within a South African context. The study established that most of the Geography student tutors experienced the PBL tutorial sessions as a very positive approach to teaching and learning. The study further advocated the employment of student tutors to ensure effectiveness in facilitating and guiding small group learning.

In the fourth article *Moving away from Rote Learning in the University Classroom: The use of Cooperative Learning to Maximise Students' Critical Thinking in a Rural University of South Africa*, Khashane Malatji investigated the practice of cooperative learning as a departure from rote learning in the English classroom. The aim of the study was to explore different approaches of cooperative learning and recommending the best approach suitable for rural Universities with the aim of maximizing students' critical thinking in the English classroom. The result of this study revealed that cooperative learning encourages student's critical thinking and it also encourages them to research more about their discipline. The study recommended that lecturers be trained about the use of cooperative learning and how to manage such learning. Furthermore, the study recommended a relevant model of cooperative learning for rural university.

In the fifth article entitled *Are we helping them to pass or setting them up for failure? Assessment related experiences of partially sighted students at a university of technology in South Africa*, Lawrence Meda of the Cape Peninsula University of Technology brings to the fore the issue of inclusivity by showing how universities should be prepared to cater for partially sighted students. Located in the interpretive research paradigm and utilising a qualitative case study approach, the study investigated assessment-related experiences of partially sighted students at a university of technology in South Africa. The study found that partially sighted students' needs were neglected. Pre-requisites such as providing large font size and extra-time were taken for granted, yet they were consequential to every partially sighted student. Guided by a theoretical framework of the Social Model, the study concluded that an individualistic approach to supporting partially sighted students did not only make them feel included, but also enabled them to realise their full potential.

In the sixth article entitled *Assuring the quality of mentoring in Malawi's 1+1 model of initial primary teacher education programme: implications for teacher development*, Mwanza, Moyo and Maphosa offer a Malawian perspective on mentor training in initial teacher education. This study assessed the structures and processes of quality monitoring of mentoring in the 1+1 Initial Primary Teacher Education mode in Malawi. Utilising a sequential mixed methods

design comprising a survey followed by a case study and employing document analysis and face to face interviews, the study found that mentoring schools had no structures, policies, practice codes and standards for monitoring mentoring practices and depended on bureaucratic-management or bureaucratic-technicist approach with more emphasis on accountability to the teacher training college than self-improvement. Schools also had inadequate scope of what was monitored; lacked uniformity in the frequency of monitoring activities; and lacked collegial approach to monitoring quality of mentoring. The results show a shortfall in the monitoring of the quality of mentoring in primary schools.

In a study entitled *Quality assuring teaching and learning processes in higher education: A critical appraisal*, Netshifhefhe, Nobongoza and Maphosa argue that quality assurance of teaching and learning processes and procedures is important in order to ensure that relevant and useful graduates are produced from universities. In the concept paper the three authors explore the concepts quality and quality assurance and a link is drawn between quality assurance and teaching and learning processes in higher education. The authors explore theories underpinning quality assurance in higher education, examine the importance of quality assurance and also discuss the different dimensions quality assurance could take in teaching and learning.

In the eighth article entitled *Enablers and impediments to students' sustained use of Blackboard in a Historically Disadvantaged Institution* Vuyisile Nkonki, Siyanda Ntlabathi and Luvuyo Mkonko of the University of Fort Hare investigated enablers and constraints to students' use of Blackboard. Using Archer's social realist perspective, the study sought to understand structural, cultural, and agential influences that bear on students' use of Blackboard, a Learning Management System. The study found that culturally, the practice of making courses available online was not practiced by all lecturers across the levels of the qualifications even though students are appealing the use of Blackboard for all courses. Structural issues uncovered related to network failures, compatibility with other devices, and the maintenance of computer hardware. It also emerged that some of the students exercised their agency in making Blackboard usable in their own gadgets, overcoming personal fears, in terms of acquiring proficiency in the use of Blackboard.

In the ninth article entitled *Lecturers' perspective on the effectiveness of portfolio assessment for a professional development course* Vuyisile Nkonki of the University of Fort Hare looked at portfolio assessment. Located in the interpretive research paradigm and utilising a qualitative case study approach, the purpose of the study was to establish the effectiveness of the portfolio as an assessment tool for a professional development course at an institution of higher learning. The study found that the portfolio as an assessment tool was effective around aspects such as fostering a process approach to learning; improving and further developing assessment practices; enabling effective assessment practices, among others.

Anniekie Ravhudzulo of the University of South Africa the tenth article entitled *Towards bridging the teaching and learning gap in qualification design and development for sustainable development in open distance learning (ODL) and African Universities*. The article attempts to portray a connection between students and academic practices in qualification design and development in ODL. The mixed method approach – a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods – was used in order to bridge teaching and learning gap in ODL. The findings indicated that there were deficiencies in the PQM, the manner in which curricula were developed by academics. The problem areas impacted immensely on the articulation and progression of ODL students in particular and in South African universities. In conclusion, it is recommended that the processes and procedures for PQM to be improved in bridging the teaching and learning gap in conformity with sustainability education development ideology and internationalization of curricula.

In the eleventh article entitled *Accessing Success through the Writing Centres at a University of Technology*, Nonhlanhla Zuma Tosin Popoola and Livingstone Makondo of the Durban University of Technology, tackle the issue of sustainable development of students' academic writing abilities through the use of well-structured writing centres in a university of technology. The qualitative study found that students in a university of technology had varied writing needs and that such needs could only be met if Writing Centres identified the needs and provided services which were responsive to student needs.

In the twelfth article entitled *Questioning 'questioning': examining the use of questioning as an interactive teaching tool in higher education*, Maphosa and Wadesango interrogate the utilization of questioning as an interactive teaching tool in higher education. Informed by the social constructivist learning theory which asserts that learning is a social practice and that learning is construction of meaning by learners through interaction, the authors engage in exploring the purpose and function of questioning and how different types of questions could be utilized to ensure promotion of student-centred and activity based learning, which develops higher order cognitive and problem solving skills. Implications for staff academic development are also assessed.

In the thirteenth article entitled *Exploring student-specific factors affecting PhD theses completion*, Maphosa and Wadesango contribute to the perennial debate on what really contributes to successful PhD theses completion within regulation time. A lot of studies on post-graduate research normally focus on modes of research supervision and student funding as the most important factors in PhD research work but in this discussion paper the authors examine student-specific factors. Students may have the best research supervisors and be exposed to the best supervisory practices as well as have adequate research funding but still fail to complete their theses. The authors contend that self-motivation, commitment, diligence, autonomy, organizational and communication skills, research experience as well as ability to negotiate and foster working relationships with supervisors, among others, are the critical factors that promote research progress and ultimate completion of a PhD thesis.

In the fourteenth paper entitled *The influence of peer tutoring on students' performance in a South African university* Baleni, Malatji and Wadesango report on a quantitative study undertaken to explain the influence of peer tutoring on students' performance. A systematic random sample was used to select students studying one module in one faculty in the university under study. Data collected were through document analysis presented statistically. The study revealed that 45 percent of students who attended more than 4 tutorial sessions are the ones who scored higher marks. However, results showed that 55 percent of the sampled students

did not attend tutorial sessions and this affected their results. The study concluded that attendance of tutorial sessions seemed to have an effect on improving academic performance. The study recommended that tutorial sessions be compulsory to all students; and the allocation of marks for attendance of sessions be used to motivate students to attend and that will result in improved performance. Furthermore, the study has recommended Tinto's model of student retention to be used in this rural university. According to this model institutions and programs should continually assess students' actions with an eye toward improvement.

In a paper entitled *Recognition of Prior Learning practices in South African institution of higher learning: Implications for Academic Development* Malatji and Maphosa investigated practices of recognition of prior learning (RPL) in a South African institution of higher learning. The researchers used a qualitative research approach with case study as a research design. The study followed interpretivist paradigm because it consisted of faculties' subjective experience on RPL practices. Purposive sampling of a case from each of the three faculties was utilised. Data were collected using narrative reports of three cases from three different faculties that were sent to the advisory centre that served as consultant on RPL issues. Data was presented from each of the cases and analysed thematically. The study revealed that there was a lack of knowledge from university RPL committees in three faculties under studied. It was concluded that faculties lack knowledge on RPL practices. It was therefore, recommended that all RPL committees in the university be trained about RPL policies and issues.

In a paper entitled *The Connection between a Mentor and a Mentee in Higher Education: A Case of a Primary Teachers' Training College in Zimbabwe*, Sithulisiwe Bhebhe of the University of Swaziland undertook a study to

establish the nature of mentoring relationships that existed between a mentor and a mentee during teacher training in one primary school teacher training college in Zimbabwe. A qualitative case study design, in which one-on-one interviews, focus group discussions were used to collect data, was utilised. A purposive sample of 17 student teachers and 10 mentor teachers from the schools that the teachers' college collaborated with in training student teachers was selected. Data were analysed for content. The study found that various kinds of relationships existed between mentor teachers and student teachers these were either positive or negative. The study concluded that good mentoring relationships benefited both the mentor and the mentee. A conclusion was made that mentor teachers should be equipped with skills of establishing mentoring relationships for positive results. Recommendations were made for the improvement of mentor-mentee relationships.

Magda Kloppers and Marieta Jansen van Vuuren of the North West University provide an article entitled *Enhancing critical thinking dispositions in the mathematics classroom through a flipped learning approach*. This study was triggered by low throughput rates and low averages in Mathematics for education students in higher education. It aimed at investigating the use of flipped classroom learning where traditional teaching methods are "flipped" to deliver instruction outside of the class and move homework into class sessions. This teaching pedagogy and model would prepare students for their future careers. The study concluded that flipped learning for the Mathematics class seemed to be a viable instructional methodology.

The authors invite feedback from readers and the guest editors would like to thank the editors of the Journal of Communication for this special issue opportunity.

Professor Cosmas Maphosa
(University of Fort Hare, South Africa)
and

Professor Newman Wadesango
(University of Limpopo, South Africa)
Guest Editors