

Academic Behavioural Confidence of First-entering Humanities University Access Program Students

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ABSTRACT The current study seeks to gain insight into the Academic Behavioural Confidence (ABC) of first-entering university access program students intending to enroll for the Humanities (HUM) degree. The study adopts a quantitative-descriptive (survey) design. The respondents, 141 HUM university access program students, completed the questionnaires on their own at the same time and the author was present to respond to concerns raised. This measure ensured that respondents did not collude and give responses that were not authentic. Thus, a hundred percent return on the questionnaires was secured. A generally moderate level of academic confidence was discovered. This clearly indicates that these students need a greater and comprehensive support in order to succeed.

INTRODUCTION

When things get tough for students in higher education, they need the self-belief that they can succeed and persevere, otherwise they are most likely to give up. Pulford and Sohal (2006) maintain that while self-perceptions of academic competence have been investigated in children, little is known about how higher education students perceive their academic strengths. The Oxford English Dictionary (1989) defines confidence as having a strong belief, firm trust, or sure expectation; feeling certain, fully assured, self-reliant; having no fear of failure. Sander and Sanders (2005) maintain that confidence differs among people in the same situation and that people have differing levels of confidence in different situations. Thus, someone who is highly confident in a familiar setting for example, may lose confidence in an unfamiliar and challenging environment. Access program students are likely to consider the university environment as unfamiliar and challenging on at least two levels. Firstly, the fact that university operates differently from high school in many respects and secondly, the feeling that access program students did not meet criteria for admission and may not gain access to university after all, aggravates the lack of confidence. The problem in question is pondered amid shocking results of a recent study which indicated that most first-year students could not adequately read, write or comprehend and that universities which conduct regular competency tests have reported a decline in standards (MacGregor 2009).

In concurrence with MacGregor's position, Boughey (2009) reports that tests are administered to school leavers' and their performance as a measure to determine their levels of university preparedness, indicated a drop in standards and a lack of reading skills. This point is clearly articulated by Boughey: "it is not simply that reading at university level is more difficult than other sorts of reading but rather involves the reader taking up a different position in relationship to what he/she reads-a problem which is ultimately derived from values and attitudes to what is knowledge and how knowledge can be known (p.4). Furthermore, Brussow (2007) alludes to factors such as a lack of reading and writing skills; language barriers; employing a surface learning approach; lack of effective study skills and intrinsic motivation; inability to understand complex material and a lack of self-efficacy and regulation aspects as having a major contribution to academic failure. These factors contribute to the academic unpreparedness of students in higher education institutions.

Conceptual Framework

Academic behavioural confidence (ABC) is a construct that refers to the students' beliefs that they can perform competently in a particular learning situation. Students become motivated when they believe that they can be successful in learning new material and performing new tasks. Confidence relates to self-efficacy and contributes to achievement. Confident students have been

found to be better able to attain goals than students who do not have confidence in their own abilities (Bandura 1977; Jones 1977).

In accordance with Bandura's (1986) *Social cognitive theory* "what people think, believe, and feel affects how they behave. Their natural and extrinsic effects of their actions, in turn, partly determine their thought patterns and affective reactions" (p. 25). Albert Bandura (cited in Pajares 2000: 2) further argues that: "educational practices should be gauged not only by the skills and knowledge they impart for present use but also by what they do to students' beliefs about their capabilities, which affects how they approach the future". According to Pajares (2000) students who develop a strong sense of self-efficacy are well equipped to educate themselves when they have to rely on their own initiative. Bandura's argument provides food for thought about what assistance to give to students in order to influence their future actions.

The current study is located in the first of Chickering and Reisser's (1993) seven vectors, that is developing competence. The 'developing competence' vector covers both the acquisition of particular intellectual, physical and interpersonal skills (the three tines in Chickering and Reisser's pitchfork analogy), as well as the confidence one feels in those skills (the handle of the pitchfork which is crucial to the development of a strong sense of competence). In fact, the current study investigates the academic behavioural confidence (the handle of the pitchfork) of first-entering university Humanities access program students. The study aims to investigate what can be done for access program students by analysing their ABC on arrival at university. No other measures are used at this institution to determine the students' ABC. ABC can be described as confidence in one's academic and intellectual abilities in general, as well as confidence in particular aspects of that ability (for example, mathematical ability or problem-solving skill). In the current study, ABC is closely related to aspects of an adapted Sander and Sanders' Academic Confidence Scale (ACS).

The University Access Program as an Alternative Program to University Admission

According to the Ministry of Education (2005b), the widened access to Higher Education (HE) in South Africa has resulted in an increased

enrolment of black learners, which accounts for over 72 % of the total enrolment. Naidoo (2005) further states that an estimate of 50 % of students at HEIs in South Africa are unsuccessful in completing their initial studies as measured over a five-year period, with under-preparedness being the main catalyst of this situation.

Academic under-preparedness is progressively being experienced at South African institutions of higher education (Cilliers and Kilpin 1998; Van den Bergh and Burke 1998). Hartshorne states that "it is well documented that students coming from the Department of Education and Training are dependent on rote learning and experience teacher-and- textbook dominant learning environments" (Agar and Knopfmacher 1995: 119). Many South African universities developed access programs as an alternative route to university admission. According to Kapp (2004), access programs were conceived to increase access for black students who were disadvantaged by apartheid and to empower these students for the rigors of higher level study. The current study probes the empowerment of these students in respect of learning skills acquired. Pavlich et al. (1995) assessed the effectiveness of access programs and suggested that they depend substantially, on:

- The use of appropriate learning technologies (for example tutorials; computer-assisted learning; etc.).
- Intra- and inter program management structures.
- The development of sensitive alternative selection procedures, that is identifying the more capable students regardless of their grade twelve results.
- Ensuring that disadvantaged students are catered for in non-academic ways (in terms of financial aid; counseling services, etc).
- The extent to which faculties, administration and the student body perceive the program as 'legitimate'.

Even though access programs are intended to ameliorate deficiencies, they are not immune to criticism. Mabokela (1997, in Akoojee and Nkomo 2007) contends that these programs are underpinned by the assumption that black students are inherently deficient. Mabokela (2000) further argues that the "deficiency model of labelling black students has the potential not only to stigmatise black students as inferior but also to impede the ability of these universities to

critically interrogate the relevance of their academic programs". Troskie and de Bruin (1999) found that access program students are critical of this 'backward looking' approach. Notwithstanding such drawbacks, the access program has potential and is designed as an intervention strategy that can promote access to higher education through academic preparation (Edward et al. 2004).

A study by Edwin and Alexander (2004) found that students who successfully completed the program had better opportunities for further study and tended to achieve higher academic levels than those who did not complete it. This vindicates Akoojee and Nkomo's (2007), Malaza's (2007) and Higher Education South Africa (HESA)'s (2005) assertion that access should not be limited to participation in higher education but embrace success (access with success). For the purpose of this study, respondents were supposed to have been denied access to higher education as a result of not meeting the requisite academic admission criteria.

Despite the fact that higher education participation rates are still comparatively low and remain racially skewed (Pandor 2006), South Africa's democratic government has seen growing student numbers and improved access to higher education, especially for disadvantaged black students as a key to overcoming past inequities, creating a stable democratic society, as well as producing the high-level skills essential to drive economic growth and development (Pityana 2006). As noted earlier, access programs strive to develop skills for lifelong learning. We therefore argue that the imperative of access programs, as conceptualized in the Humanities Faculty at the University of the Free State should lead to the empowerment, emancipation and development of independent learners.

The above discussion indicates that universities generally become involved when the students reach their doorstep. To bridge the gap, the Upward Bound Program (UBP), as an approach to redress access of previously disadvantaged students to higher education in South Africa, was conceived. According to Ramrathan et al. (2007) UBP was conceptualised on the assumption that by exposing school learners to university life and giving them additional academic tuition, their chances of university education would be enhanced.

Appraisals of access programs revealed some

successes. In fact, an appraisal by Hay and Marais (2004), after ten years of the existence of the program, concluded that if it is done in an innovative way, it has a justifiable place in higher education. An access program implemented at the Vaal University of Technology (VUT) resulted in not only widened access, but had a positive impact on the learners' cognitive and academic language skills (Du Plessis et al. 2005). Wood and Lithauer (2005) reveal that the access program has far-reaching effects on all aspects of the students' lives and not solely on their academic performance. Results from their longitudinal study showed that students who completed the program tend to perform better in later degree studies than those who were directly admitted to degree studies.

Despite recorded successes attributable to the access program, Downs (2005) cautions that due to the consequences of a myriad of academic and non-academic factors, it cannot necessarily be guaranteed that students who perform well in the program will continue to perform better in subsequent degree courses. Alfonso (1995) opines that despite achieving a new level of independence, first-year students are typically challenged by the vectors of competence, emotions and autonomy.

Chickering (1969) defines developing competence as the student's ability to acquire the intellectual skills necessary for the higher education environment. Managing emotions has to do with students' self-control and appropriate behavior in relation to challenging situations. Developing autonomy is the students' experimentation with achieving independence and handling things on their own.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Approach: The current study is primarily exploratory in nature. An exploratory study is conducted to gain insight into a situation, phenomenon, community or individuals (Bless and Higson-Smith 1995). The need for such a study could arise out of a lack of understanding in a new area of interest or in order to be acquainted with a situation (Fouché 2005). This study seeks to gain insight into the ABC of first-entering Humanities university access program students. As noted earlier, access programs comprise developmental courses the purpose of which is to empower the students to cope with

demands (academic, in particular) in higher education. The study further draws on descriptive attributes of professional research and presents a picture of the specific details of a situation, social setting or relationship (Neuman 2000). As stated earlier, the study probes and subsequently reports on Humanities university access program students' ABC on arrival at university. The population for the study was constituted by the students intending to enroll in the Humanities access program at a historically disadvantaged campus that was incorporated into a historically white university (HWU).

Design: Mouton (2001) defines a research design as a plan or blueprint of how one intends conducting the research. Huysamen (1994) views it as the plan according to which data are collected to investigate the research hypothesis or question, in the most economical manner. The study adopts a quantitative-descriptive (survey) design. The respondents (141 students) completed the questionnaires on their own while the author was present to respond to concerns raised. This measure ensured that respondents did not collude and give responses that were not authentic. A hundred percent return on the questionnaires was secured. The collection of data was done during the orientation week, before the students attended their first lectures. At the time of orientation, the repeaters and senior students are not present at university.

Research Questions: The main goal of the current study is to gain insight into the academic behavioral confidence of first-entering Humanities university access program students. In order to address the main goal, the following questions were posed:

- Is there any difference in ABC between male and female first-entering university access program students?
- Is there any difference in ABC between first-entering university access program students of different ages?
- Is there any difference in ABC between first-entering university access program students of different ethnic groups?

Hypotheses: The research problems stated above were investigated by testing the following null hypotheses:

Ho1: There is no significant difference in ABC between male and female first-entering Humanities university access program students.

Ho2: There is no significant difference in ABC

between first-entering Humanities university access program students of different ages.

Ho3: There is no significant difference in ABC between first-entering Humanities university access program students of different ethnic groups.

RESULTS

Distribution According to Age

A one-way analysis of confidence by gender was used, with no missing values. Post hoc= Tukey of 0.05 was found. A frequency of 6.613 was indicated; crucially the significance level of 0.011 which is low is also evident (see Table 1). This statistical analysis is an embracer of *Ho2*, which indicates that there is no significant difference in ABC between first-entering Humanities university students of different gender groups. The null hypothesis cannot be rejected.

Distribution According to Gender

A one-way analysis of confidence level by age groups was also calculated. There is a level of differences in mean square between groups 0.033 and within groups 0.247. The frequency level of 0.133 and the significance level of behavioral confidence of 0.716 are indicated in Table 2. This is an indicator that between the age groups-thus, there is a difference in ABC. The null hypothesis (*Ho2*) cannot be rejected. Results of an independent *t*-test in a study by Choi (2005) also indicated no significant gender differences. Usher and Pajares (2006) further contend that social persuasions tend to be more relevant to girls than boys when girls form their ABC.

Distribution According to Home Language

A one-way analysis of ABC level by language was indicated. A mean of 0.219 between groups and 0.245 within groups, with the frequency level of 0.893 are also indicated. On evaluating the mean squares one can notice there is no vast difference (see Table 3). This is an embracer of *Ho3*, which states that there is no significant difference in ABC between first-entering Humanities university access program students of different ethnic groups. This is reflected through the language of the participants in this study. The null hypothesis cannot be rejected.

Table 1: Distribution according to age (n=141)

<i>Confidence</i>	<i>Sum of squares</i>	<i>Df</i>	<i>Mean square</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
Between groups	1.558	2	1.558	6.613	.011
Within groups	32.754	139	.236		
Total	34.312	141			

Table 2: Distribution according to gender (n=141)

<i>Confidence</i>	<i>Sum of squares</i>	<i>Df</i>	<i>Mean square</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
Between groups	.033	2	.033	.133	.716
Within groups	34.279	139	.247		
Total	34.312	141			

Table 3: Distribution according to home language (n=141)

<i>Confidence</i>	<i>Sum of squares</i>	<i>Df</i>	<i>Mean square</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
Between groups	.438	2	.219	.893	.412
Within groups	33.874	139	.245		
Total	34.312	141			

Table 4 presents the results of first-entering university access program students intending to enroll for the NAS degree program. Results indicate higher ABC levels means (2 on a 4- point Likert scale) in all but four aspects/items, i.e., ask help if you don't understand; be on time for lectures; make the most of the opportunity of studying for a degree at university; and attend

most lectures, tutorials as well as practicals. In comparison with the other two fields of study (i.e., EMS and Humanities), access program students intending to enroll for the NAS degree evinced the highest ABC level. The students' ABC in all except 4 aspects/items are above 2. Items with means lower than 2 are: ask for help if you don't understand; be on time for lecturers; make

Table 4: Distribution according to various aspects of ABC (n=141)

<i>Statements</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
Ask lecturers questions about the material they are teaching, during a lecture	141	2.62	1.62
Respond to questions asked by a lecturer in front of a full lecture theatre	141	2.52	1.59
Ask lecturers questions about material they are teaching, in a one-to-one setting	141	2.38	1.54
Engage in profitable academic debates with your peers	141	2.28	1.51
Follow the themes and debates during lectures	141	2.24	1.5
Understand the material outlined and discussed with your lecturers	141	2.15	1.47
Prepare thoroughly for lectures as well as tutorials	141	2.10	1.41
Manage your workload to meet coursework deadlines	141	2.06	1.44
Give a presentation to a small group of fellow students	141	2.06	1.43
Plan appropriate revision schedules	141	1.98	1.41
Attain good scores/marks in your modules/courses	141	1.91	1.38
Read the recommended background material	141	1.85	1.45
Produce coursework at the required standard	141	1.83	1.36
Produce your best work under examination conditions	141	1.82	1.35
Pass assessments at first attempt	141	1.82	1.35
Remain adequately motivated throughout the year	141	1.79	1.34
Seek appropriate support when the need to do so arises	141	1.77	1.33
Produce your best work in assignments	141	1.71	1.31
Attend tutorials	141	1.70	1.3
Study effectively on your own.	141	1.65	1.28
Write in an appropriate academic style	141	1.64	1.35
Make the most of the opportunity of studying for a degree at university	141	1.64	1.22
Attend most lectures, tutorials as well as practicals	141	1.50	1.22
Be on time for lectures	141	1.50	1.18
Ask for help if you don't understand	141	1.40	1.28

the most of the opportunity of studying for a degree at university; and attend all lecturers, tutorials, as well as practicals.

DISCUSSION

When people feel uncertain they turn to the confidence with which an answer is expressed as a basis for reaching a 'best' answer. Specifically, the higher the level of confidence used by a speaker, the greater that speaker's influence is on the choices made by the listener. We contend that ABC is a crucial facet in combating the underpreparedness of first-entering Humanities university access program students. Furthermore, contributing factors such as a lack of reading, mathematical ability and effective study skills exacerbate the poor academic performance of students. Hardman and Ng'ambi (2003) are of the opinion that the ABC of prospective university students could be enhanced if challenges with regard to teaching and learning at school level are supported by focused intervention strategies, aimed at developing learners' abilities.

CONCLUSION

In this study the authors investigated the ABC of first-entering university Humanities access program students. The study revealed that university Humanities access program students intending to enroll for the HUM degree program have moderate ABC. There are several aspects of students' ABC that need to be addressed in order to boost students' belief in their capabilities. These aspects include production of best work in assignments, tutorial attendance, studying effectively on one's own, writing in an appropriate academic style, being punctual for lectures, as well as asking for help if one does not understand. Consistent with the *attribution theory*, lecturers and academic development staff can help students to increase their confidence by encouraging them to see learning as a result of their own efforts and strategies (McCown et al. 1996).

In producing quality in all intended programs and courses, HEIs, like the University of the Free State need to fulfill a more constructive role in supporting first entering Humanities students. Furthermore, the promulgation of the White Paper on Higher Education (1997), necessitated Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), such as the

University of the Free State, to avail their expertise in their human resources and physical infrastructure for school improvement initiatives, in the interests of demonstrating social responsibility and a commitment to the development of South Africa at large (CHE 2006: 11). This then may also translate to our academic endeavours in higher education, not be focused on knowledge production per se, but also to extend on their current strategies as to reinforce students beliefs about the capabilities which ultimately affects the manner in which they approach their future.

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