

Mentors' Reflections of a Pilot Mentoring Programme in a South African University

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ABSTRACT Issues of student throughput and graduation rates are issues of concern in many South African universities. Numerous intervention programmes are put in place to assist students to progress well with their studies and curb failure and subsequent drop out from degree programmes. Student mentoring is one such intervention. The purpose of this study was to establish trained mentors' reflections of their contact with mentees in a pilot student mentoring programme in a South African University. The study adopted a wholly qualitative approach in which a purposefully selected sample of 42 mentors participated in the study. Data were collected through document analysis of mentors' weekly reports and postings to a Facebook page were read and analysed. Data were analysed through content analysis of emerging themes. The study found that although the mentors were positive about the establishment of a student support programme, they were concerned about schedules, communication between themselves and the Teaching and Learning Unit and between mentors and mentees. The level of commitment by mentees and the impact that the programme had on assessment were found questionable. In conclusion mentors agree that this programme is important in this context but more still needs to be attended to, to improve the system. The paper provides a list of recommendations that the university needs to take into account to provide a more effective student support programme.

INTRODUCTION

Issues of Student Throughput and Dropout Rates in South African Universities

The ushering in of democracy in South Africa in 1994 signalled the beginning of the transformation of the higher education system. Access to higher education was opened for all citizens who qualified. As a result universities experienced burgeoning enrolments and a more diverse student body amid limited resources. It was soon apparent that opening access was not necessarily leading to success. According to Scott (2009: 17) while, "The traditional image of the first year at university is one of exciting intellectual and personal discoveries, independence in growth in confidence, this is close to reality for some students, but for many others - in fact, perhaps the majority in South Africa - the experience is marred by failure, loss of confidence, and perhaps disillusionment."

Scott (2009) cites cohort studies and other data sources (for example, Letseka and Maile 2008) to show that about 30% of the undergraduate intake drop out or are excluded at the end of their first year in South Africa. In the same vein, according to a Department of Education preliminary data analysis of the 2005 cohort of the university sector, "...dropout rates of first-entering students in a three year qualification are on average 26% in the first year, with a further 9% in the second year and 6% in the third year..." (Department of Higher Education and Training Foundation Provision Ministerially Approved Programmes New Guidelines 2012: 1). Looking at graduation data, a 2000 cohort study commissioned by the Department of Education and conducted by Scott et al. (2007) presents a scaring overall picture of the graduation rates. "By the end of 2004 (that is, five years after entering), only 30% of the total first-time entering student intake into the sector had graduated. 56% of the intake had left their original institutions without graduating, and 14% were still in the system, (Scott et al. 2007: 12).

At the University under study, queries from the Department of Education in 2004 on the University's low success rate at undergraduate level led to the establishment of a Task Team that conducted a study on the University's throughput and graduation rates for the period 2001-2003

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(Council Approved Educational Development Centre Policy Document 2009). According to the findings of that study, lecturers identified inadequate academic support as one of the reasons for low academic success. This claim is supported by Kramer and Spencer (1989) who argue that academic support plays an important role in integrating students into the social and intellectual fabric of an institution. According to the Council Approved Educational Development Centre Policy Document 2009, although poor academic performance is a combination of complex underlying factors, the following variables have been found to be key factors in exacerbating poor performance and attrition of students:

- ♦ Academic under-preparedness of staff and students;
- ♦ Transition or adjustment problems;
- ♦ Career choice uncertainties and
- ♦ Inadequate financial support.

In the light of the Department of Education (DoE) study by Scott et al. (2007), the University has also conducted an internal cohort analysis of the year 2000 first year intake and the results seem to resonate with the DoE study. According to the study, by 2007,

- ♦ 27% of the cohort had completed in 3 or 4 years
- ♦ 15% completed in 5 or more years
- ♦ 57% dropped out
- ♦ The remaining 1% were still registered for a Bachelor's degree in 2007

In addition to the above, one of the authors of the paper analysed first entering students examination results and found that more than half of the students would be repeating one or more modules the following year (Ndebele and Masehela). Both national data and the institutional data above paint a grim picture on the efficiency of the system. Armed with this evidence, the authors were convinced that introducing a programme that would help students pass their modules at the next examination attempt was beyond any questionability. The need to put in place mechanisms to improve the graduation rate could not in the authors' views be disputed and when the university was approached for funding for the programme, funds were made available.

Intervention Strategies to Curb Low Pass Rate

Attempts have been made in South Africa to design interventions to curb the low graduation

rates. A growing academic development movement has emerged in the University sector which has focused on academic staff development and student academic support. Prominent among the staff development initiatives are new staff induction programmes, interim workshops on teaching and learning in higher education, credit bearing short courses and formal qualifications in higher education studies. Scott et al. (2007: 62) show that since the progress of the sector ultimately rests with the staff, creating a successful professional development system is a key investment for higher education and argue that, "there should be an expectation that all academic teaching staff should in time gain a basic level of educational knowledge, sufficient for effectively implementing appropriate educational approaches. Some level of professionalisation of teaching is increasingly being required of academic staff in developed countries (whose educational challenges are not as demanding as South Africa's)".

With regard to student academic support, various interventions have also been designed. At National level the major student academic support initiative has been the introduction of the extended degree foundation programme which provides government funding that allows students to complete their studies over a longer period with additional instructional support. According to the Department of Higher Education and Training Foundation Provision Ministerially Approved Programmes New Guidelines (2012: 1), the role of foundation provision is to "support educationally disadvantaged students who are un/underprepared despite meeting minimum admission criteria by enabling them to be placed on an extended curriculum that will give them the academic foundations for successfully completing their studies."

At the various institutions other micro level interventions such as tutorials and supplemental instruction programmes are increasingly being added into the curriculum in universities to help underprepared students. In addition, generic academic literacy and language courses have been introduced in the universities with the hope that they would help those students for whom the medium of instruction is a second or even third language. One intervention which is subject of this study is the provision of academic support through student peer mentoring.

The Concept 'Mentoring'

According to Landolt (2012: 1), "mentoring entails informal communication, usually face-to-face and during a sustained period of time, between a person who is perceived to have greater relevant knowledge, wisdom, or experience (the mentor) and a person who is perceived to be less knowledgeable (mentee)". It is further stated that true mentoring should be more than just answering occasional questions or providing informal help. It is about an on-going relationship of learning, dialogue and facing challenges.

Enhancement of Learning Through a Constructivist Approach

According to McCown et al. (1996), the constructivist view of learning stems from the assumption that knowledge is constructed by learners as they attempt to make sense of their environments. The following aspects about the constructivist approach have been extracted from McCown et al. (1996).

Active Learning

The more active students are in processing information, the more successful they will be in encoding and retrieving it. However, active learning from a constructivist perspective requires qualitatively different interactions between students and content than is achieved through more practice or more feedback (Semb and Ellis, in McCown et al. 1996). Rather, active learning calls for students to engage in meaningful tasks in which they have ownership of content (Honebein et al. in McCown et al. 1996). Cognitive research points to the conclusion that teachers who foster active learning enhance the outcomes of learning for their students. How then do teachers establish instructional situations that foster active learning on the part of their students? From the constructivist perspective, the answer comes in two parts: the nature of the task and the nature of the interaction among learners.

Authentic Activity and Situated Learning

An important issue in active learning is the type of activity in which learners engage. Constructivist researchers argue that for students to learn the skills and knowledge of a given disci-

pline, they should engage in activities that are authentic". Leinhardt (in McCown et al. 1996: 237) points out that "a task can be authentic because it is part of the world outside of school or because it is part of the culture of a particular discipline. In situated learning, students are engaged in solving realistic or simulated problems that require the use of disciplinary knowledge and skills.

Communities of Learning

When students assume particular roles within a group, they are often able to collaborate more fully, with each member contributing something essential to the success of the entire group. In the constructivist view, learning is inherently a social process, because knowledge is distributed across individuals. For understanding to occur, students must accept or refute ideas proposed by their peers, offer interpretations and explanations of their own, and eventually build on or reconstruct concepts and principles that make up their knowledge.

Mentoring in the University under Study

In view of the problem regarding the non-completion of degree or diploma programmes by students and also of failure to complete degree or diploma programmes in record time, the University under study adopted a widely practised approach to providing student support to struggling students known as 'mentoring'. Prior to the mentoring programme, lecturers and students did not have a university approved policy to guide their student support activities. Nonetheless, some departments had put in place other forms of academic support such as tutorial services to provide support to their struggling students and large classes. The pilot mentoring programme was guided by the draft 'Mentoring Guidelines'. The mentoring programme was identified as one that would curb failure rate. Therefore only students who were repeating a module or more qualified to participate in the programme as mentees. These students were referred to as 'at risk' students. The School administrators assisted the University's Teaching and Learning Unit in identifying students. Academic departments identified 'suitable' senior students (third or fourth or postgraduate students) to be appointed as mentors for 'at risk' students in their

departments. Thereafter, the Teaching and Learning Unit trained the mentors with emphasis in active learning strategies. The trained mentors were then formally appointed by the University's human resources department. Lecturers were responsible for monitoring the mentoring sessions and attending to any form of concerns that either the mentor or mentees might raise.

In the pilot programme, each mentor was responsible for assisting not more than five mentees throughout the duration of the mentoring period which was approximately a semester. However, since there were no strict mechanisms in place to monitor how the mentoring process unfolded, some mentees did not commit themselves to the exercise and failed to attend some sessions. Therefore some mentors worked with less than five mentees. In ensuring that mentors did not get overwhelmed with their mentoring duties, the draft policy encouraged mentors to meet with their mentees for not more than two hours a week in overall.

At the end of each meeting, both the mentor and the mentees were compelled to complete a form called Mentor-Mentee Record Form. It was in these forms that mentors and their mentees had to note down issues of concern or appreciation about the session. Staff at the Teaching and Learning Unit recommended that these issues be recorded in each participant's hand writing. This was for two reasons: first, it served as evidence that a meeting took place for payment purpose and as record for the unit.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a qualitative research paradigm. Denzin and Lincoln (1994: 107) states that:

A paradigm may be viewed as a set of basic beliefs (or metaphysics) that deals with ultimate or first principles. It represents a worldview that defines, for its holder, the nature of the "world," the individual's place in it, and the range of possible relationships to that world and its parts, as, for example, cosmologies and theologies do.

In the context of this study the researchers held the view that qualitative research stimulates participants in bringing out their subjective truth as it is argued by Langemeyer and Nissen (2005: 190). Leedy and Ormrod (2001) further attest that there are no absolute truths in

research but truth is better understood from the view points of the participants. There is, therefore a need to establish the views of the mentors on the benefits of the mentoring exercise hence the adoption of the qualitative paradigm. According to Creswell (1994: 1-2),

A qualitative study is defined as an inquiry process of understanding a social or human problem, based on building a complex, holistic picture, formed with words, reporting detailed views of informants, and conducted in a natural setting.

This present study sought full understanding of the mentors from their day to day participation in the mentoring activities. This was done by seeking understanding and reporting the detailed views of the participants. Lindlof (1995: 9) states that in comparison to quantitative studies that seek to perform tests of prediction and control, "qualitative inquirers strive to understand their objects of interest." It was the primary purpose of this study to seek meaning from the participants of the mentoring programme. Marshall (1996: 522) further observes that 'Qualitative studies aim to provide illumination and understanding of complex psychosocial issues and are most useful for answering humanistic 'why?' and 'how?' questions.' It is against such notions that this study followed the qualitative paradigm.

This study utilised a case study design. Neale et al. (2006: 3) cite Yin (2003) who observes that;

A case study is a story about something unique, special, or interesting—stories can be about individuals, organizations, processes, programs, neighbourhoods, institutions, and even events.

In this study the researchers undertook to 'tell the story' of a mentoring programme in one rural-based university from the participants' points of view. This is in line with Bromley's (1990: 302) view of a case study as a "systematic inquiry into an event or a set of related events which aims to describe and explain the phenomenon of interest". Yin (1994) further contends that case studies are most ideal to use when dealing with research that seeks to answer 'how' and 'why' questions. The case study design was chosen from the need to have an in-depth understanding of mentoring relationships and resultant benefits to mentees. This approach is also taken in accordance with Zaidah's (2007: 1) observation that a case study 'can be considered a

robust research method particularly when a holistic, in-depth investigation is required.'

The study made use of a purposive sample of 42 trained mentors. Given (2008) contends that purposive sampling groups participants according to pre-selected criteria relevant to a particular research question. In the context of the present study, the participants were mentors in one mentoring programme in a university set-up. Purposive sampling is, therefore, the selection of participants who have knowledge or experience of the area being investigated (Given 2008). All the mentors involved in the mentoring programme were selected to participate in this study. They had been trained and had a semester-long mentoring relationship with mentees hence they had the knowledge and experience of the area being investigated.

Data Collection Tools

Data were collected from mentors through document analysis. Bowen (2009) states that documents are written records that could be used for analysis to gather data in a research project. According to Bryman (2001) document analysis is a social research method and is an important research tool in its own right. Document analysis involves interrogating written material. Mentors' weekly mentoring reports as well as postings of their mentoring experiences on a Mentors' Facebook page created for the mentoring programme mentioned above.

Data Analysis

Content analysis was employed to analyse qualitative data gathered through document analysis. Elo and Kynga (2008: 107) cite Cole (1988) who states that content analysis is a method of analysing written, verbal or visual communication messages. Elo and Kynga (2008: 108) further observe that "through content analysis, it is possible to distil words into fewer content-related categories." Through content analysis of the mentors' documents, common themes were identified and these guided the analysis and presentation of results.

Content was analysed following the inductive content analysis method. This method of analysis requires the researcher to open codes, categorise items and abstraction. Abstraction means formulating a general description of the

research topic through generating categories (Robson 1993; Burnard 1996; Polit and Beck 2004 cited in Elo and Kynga 2008: 111). The process is illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1: Data categories

<i>Sub category</i>	<i>Generic categories</i>	<i>Main categories</i>
Mentoring times and venues	Mentors' views of the mentoring schedule	Mentors' reflection
Time allocation for mentoring	Mentors' views of the communication strategy	
Communication between Teaching and Learning Unit staff and mentors		
Communication between mentors and mentees		
Communication between mentors and lecturers		
Mentees' attendance patterns	Attitudes of mentees towards the programme	
Mentees' levels of participation		
Impact of mentoring programme on assessment		

Trustworthiness of the Study

One of the most common criticisms labelled against qualitative studies is that of failure to adequately ensure trustworthiness of data and results. Shenton (2004) posits that in ensuring trustworthiness, researchers will be demonstrating that a true picture of the phenomenon under scrutiny is being presented. Trustworthiness encompasses credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Guba 1981). There were numerous measures that were taken by the researchers to ensure credibility and trustworthiness of the study and these included verifying contents of the reports by talking to the writers of the reports, asking mentors to report their activities as honestly as possible, allowing mentees to check and confirm contents of the reports and assigning different members of the research team different reports to analyse and re-analyse to avoid researcher bias.

Ethical Issues

Informed consent was sought from and granted by the participants. It was clarified to them that data in their reports would be used for research purposes with the view to improving the mentoring programme. Confidentiality was guaranteed by concealing the participants' identities in data drawn from reports and postings.

Data Collection

Data were generated from three different sources namely completed Mentor-Mentee Record Forms, postings to a Facebook page and evaluation forms. The Mentor-Mentee Record Form turned out to be the most reliable official source of recording mentors' experiences about the programme and a record of the encounter. More data were expected to be generated from the Facebook page, however this did not yield much information as only eight members from the mentoring team used this approach. Development practitioners could not figure out what hindered mentors from using the Facebook because reasons given for not registering on the Facebook page were as simple as 'I will do it soon'. It was only during the follow up meeting that one brave student confessed that they did not have access to the internet and also that most of them did not own smart phones. We failed to figure out why it was difficult for these mentors to say openly so from the initial meeting that our suggestion to open a Facebook page was above expectation. Due to this the Facebook page could not provide much information. During the follow up meeting the Academic Development practitioners in the Teaching and Learning Unit established that mentors had more to say than in the Mentor-Mentee Record Forms. The practitioners then agreed during that meeting mentors would put on paper everything they were saying. Then blank pieces of paper were distributed to the mentors and they were given time to put down their thoughts without writing their names on these papers. Thereafter Academic development practitioners collected the notes and this led to an unplanned focused-group discussion which contributed richly to the data for this study.

RESULTS

Results were analysed based on the open codes, categories and abstraction method used

above. As indicated above, the main category was called 'Mentor's reflection' which is followed by three generic categories these were 1) mentors' views of the mentoring schedule, 2) mentors' views of the communication strategy and 3) attitudes of mentees towards the programme. Each generic category was coupled with three sub-categories.

Mentor's Views of the Mentoring Schedule

It was evident from the mentors' reports that scheduling times for the mentoring periods was a challenge. In most instances, mentees in a group found it difficult to schedule a common meeting time that suited the whole team. This impacted negatively on the mentor's personal schedule because he or she had to make time for those who missed the previous session and in so doing they spent more time in mentoring. Mentors felt the two hours per week allocated for mentoring was insufficient and they suggested at three to four hours per week, but the University Management was concerned that would negatively impact on mentors' own academic responsibilities.

Venues for Mentoring

The University did not have facilities for student support. For that reason it was a challenge for students to locate comfortable venues for mentoring purposes. However, there was plenty of ground on campus which was receiving a face lift. Academic development practitioners in the Teaching and Learning Unit encouraged mentors to use any available space within the University for mentoring sessions. .

Mentor's Views of the Communication Strategy

As mentioned above that the academic development practitioners who coordinated the mentoring programme set up a Facebook page but mentors were found not to be so active in social networks such as Facebook an alternative communication strategy had to be adopted. It was only during the follow up meeting, just before examinations started that mentors suggested the use of Short Message Services (SMS) and also suggested that the Teaching and Learning Unit paste notices around in the most con-

spacious places of the University such as the cafeteria, library and the main paths. This was a creation of another challenge to the academic development practitioners because it meant sending SMSs to more than forty students on a weekly if not daily basis at their personal expense because the University did not have the bulk SMSs facility for communication with students at that time. Each time there was a need for communicating with mentors, academic development practitioners would make phone calls to a randomly selected group of mentors taking into account the different groups we had from different Schools. We urged those that we called to spread the message around. The approach worked quite well but not perfectly. Other than scheduling meeting times, communication tools to be used between mentors and the Educational Development Centre was also a matter of concern throughout the duration of the programme. The registered eight members on Facebook page were not as active as expected. Even though one tried to generate a discussion, it would not develop. Although the Mentor-Mentee Record Form was the best source of data it also had its flaws. In the beginning of the mentoring sessions, mentors would bring in forms with little information explaining that they did not know what to write in the forms. However, this matter was addressed quite early in the programme.

An even more problematic matter was that of communication between mentors and mentees. Although students owned cell phones but access to airtime that would enable them to communicate among themselves was a challenge. It was often problematic for the mentors to use social networks to communicate mentoring related issues as in addition the University was not in a position to subsidise mentors on cell phone expenses. The other communication problem that we experienced was between lecturers and mentors. Lecturers were supposed to be in control of how the mentoring sessions unfolded in their modules but it was not so because of the mentoring venues as discussed above.

Attitudes of Mentees Towards the Mentoring Programme

Mentors were not happy with the attendance patterns of mentees. They felt some mentees did

not take the sessions seriously. It was common practice of mentees to be absent for sessions without notifying the mentor or any other fellow mentee. Nevertheless, mentors observed that committed mentees were found to be very active in their participation during mentoring sessions. This gave both parties hope for the future development of the concept.

DISCUSSION

The study found that the issue of appropriate venues for mentoring sessions was a challenge that negatively affected the mentoring activities. Such a finding is consistent with observations by DuBois et al. (2002) who state that effectiveness of mentoring programmes is guaranteed when basic conditions for the mentoring programme are set. On such a condition is the provision of adequate and free space for mentoring. It becomes a real problem for both mentors and mentees if they struggle to find convenient spaces to meet and work. In stating the importance of venues Small (2008: 2) observes that;

Mentoring relationships benefit when schools provide program resources such as a place to meet, liaison staff and access to evaluation.

It becomes imperative that for any mentoring programme to succeed, the fundamental resources should be made available.

The study also established that time was also a contributing factor affecting the mentoring programme. Hanson (2007) contends that one-to-one mentoring thrives on when quality time is spent between the mentor and the mentee as the mentor attempts to nurture the mentee. Small (2008) further states that frequent contacts between mentors and mentees are important. It is, therefore, important that time is made available for mentors and mentees to meet despite their equally demanding academic programmes. Once time is not made available the whole mentoring relationship is still-born.

The issue of communication was also found to be quite a challenge as there were no reliable means and ways of communication between the coordinating Teaching and Learning Unit and mentors, mentors and mentees and mentors and lecturers. Communication is key to the effectiveness of the implementation of mentoring programmes. Small (2008: 4) states that;

Poorly implemented (mentoring) programs may not only be ineffective, but can lead to adverse effects on the mentees.

The importance of ensuring that means and ways of communication are put in place to ensure successful implementation of a mentoring programme cannot be overemphasised.

The study also established from the mentors' point of view that mentees did not fully participate in the planned mentoring programme as evidenced by irregular attendance and lack of commitment. This kind of behaviour by mentees negates a claim made by Ntakana (2011: 15) that "support programmes that target students-at-risk; assist students to unleash their potential and empower student leaders with life skills." One can argue that Ntakana's observation turns out true if the concerned students fully participate in them. As implementers of the programme there is need to establish why some mentees were not committed to the programme before adverse problems arise as Small (2008) attests. Mentees were not so keen because the program was not well thought through, this is a matter worth investigating.

On the contrary, the study also established that mentees who attended mentoring sessions were very active in the sessions. This finding is consistent with principles of active learning which state that meaningful learning is only guaranteed if learners are actively involved in the learning process. Bonwell and Eison (1991) state that active learning entails involving students in doing things and thinking about the things they are doing. This makes learning exciting on the part of learners and enhances retention and application of learnt concepts. The positive participation of committed mentees in the mentoring programme encourages educational development practitioners in the rural university that establishing a mentoring programme is a move in the right direction as studies conducted globally indicate that mentoring has proven to be an effective strategy for improving success rate in higher education (Packard 2011; Odirile 2012; Holba 2012; Nursing department Mentor/Mentee Toolkit 2012), therefore faculty members, students and support staff should be encouraged to explore mentoring even further, especially in a rural university that is dominated by students who come from rural backgrounds as well.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that there were positive and negative views held by mentors on the pilot mentoring programme as an intervention to support underperforming students. Mentors were concerned about challenges of venues and time, which they felt negatively affected the implementation of the mentoring programme. Mentors were also concerned about means and ways of communication which also made it difficult for them to properly dispense their duties of nurturing their mentees. However, mentors indicated their satisfaction with the nature and extent of active participation exhibited by those who attended mentoring sessions. A follow up research with the mentees is necessary to investigate the mentees' views of the mentoring programme that could contribute to its positive development. Not only insights from the mentees' perspective, but lecturers whose modules participated in the programme could also contribute in providing a comprehensive picture of the programme. Furthermore, a study investigating the design principles that make mentoring practices more effective and scalable would be more valuable in trying to make a mentoring programme effective.

It is also concluded that mentees for whom the mentoring programme was designed seemed not to appreciate the programme as evidenced by irregular attendance and lack of commitment. It is clear then that for a programme to be effective the beneficiaries of the programme should appreciate it and participate fully.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To ensure the useful implementation of a mentoring programme, the following measures should be taken into account;

- ♦ Attendance of mentoring sessions should be made compulsory to all students identified as those who require academic support. This will ensure that support measures are made available to needy students.
- ♦ The University timetable should accommodate mentoring sessions to ensure that the mentoring programme is part of the University teaching programme. This will also ensure proper supervision of the mentoring activities.
- ♦ Constant meeting should be held between the coordinating Teaching and Learning

- Unit, lectures, mentors and mentees. This will ensure constant communication of all parties involved.
- ♦ The Information Technology department of the University should consider providing access for current forms of technology to ease communication between academics and students.
 - ♦ Workshops for non-academic departments to sharpen their understanding of their role as indirect student supporters should be treated as an urgent matter.
 - ♦ Opportunities for academics in academic departments to benchmark student support interventions in other institutions should be a matter of priority.
 - ♦ Students' mentors should work as close as possible with module lecturers to provide quality support to their mentees.
 - ♦ To prevent stigma, the University should consider establishing an integrated student support programme that can cater for all kinds of students.

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