

“Identifying Barriers to Success Amongst a Cohort of First-year Students At a University of Technology”

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Summary

Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT) is a university which is career-focused and which offers predominantly undergraduate diplomas. The University is located within the Township of Umlazi in Durban. MUT, not unlike most other universities in South Africa experience major challenges related to the ‘under-preparedness’ and ‘unpreparedness’ of students for higher learning. This challenge amongst others, focuses obsessively on the students and the questionable schooling system, an indispensable connexion in the education, training and development supply chain. MUT identifies teaching and learning as one of its core business projects and therefore seeks to excel in academic learning and achievement. While there have been laudable amounts of energy, time and resources expended on widening post-school study opportunities at MUT, through the provision of extended curriculum programmes, student success – as measured by retention, drop-out and graduation rates – remains a serious concern.

Increasing the understanding of the barriers to student success at first-year level, through the lenses of both student and teaching staff, is the focus of this study. The study will attempt to explore the impact of extraneous factors on the learning experiences amongst a cohort of first-year students in the Faculty of Management Sciences during the course of 2015. The aim is to obtain insight as to the dominant barriers they encounter which contributes to some of them being less successful in the learning process while others were successful.

Significance

It is widely regarded that throughput rates only provide a snapshot of the performance of the higher education system and of the institutions within them. They do not reveal the multifaceted dynamics influencing student success and retention rates or provide insight into the quality of the educational experiences of first-year university students. For that reason it is anticipated that the findings of this cohort study will intuitively contribute to the widespread

dialogue on substandard student retention, improving success rates at first-year level in South African Universities and the national First Year Experience (FYE) project.

At institutional level, identifying the barriers to student success will allow all MUT stakeholders to engage with evidence-based inferences in relation to the challenges students have to confront in their pursuit for academic success. Consequently, endeavours to improving student success will be free of conjecture and less partisan to the singular views and opinions of academics. The study provides MUT students and teaching staff with opportunities to find expression with their viewpoints and contribute to improving the engagement between both parties which extends beyond the typical teacher-student relationship. It is contemplated that the improvement will make a positive difference to student retention and success at first-year level.

In addition, it will provide teaching staff with the impetus for critical reflectivity on curriculum design and delivery, and improve support for the needs of students. It will contribute to the conversations around enhancing the first-year experience (FYE) and be able to provide feedback to students and teaching staff in order to eliminate factors which impede student success.

From an academic perspective the study contributes to the existing body of knowledge on student retention (lower attrition) at first-year level and from a professional perspective the study forms the basis for making recommendations to the MUT community that will ameliorate the way in which academic staff engage with their charges resulting in improved student outcomes.

Literature review

Paul Ashwin (2015) enquires as to how lecturers know that their teaching has been effective in promoting student learning; how does one generate evidence about our practices that we can reflect on and use to improve the quality of our teaching; and how do we change our practices based on this reflection. Ashwin's contention is that there are two principles, mentioned below, on enhancing the quality of teaching and learning in Higher Education:

- Effective teaching and learning depends on the research and learning of all those educators who teach and research to support the learning of others.
- Effective teaching and learning requires learning to be systematically developed.

Fullan & Scott (2009) argue that there is a general shift across many higher education

systems to a focus on outcomes rather than on inputs as key measures of quality.

There is a particular interest in determining how a university can show it has benefitted student capabilities and has done so at a university standard. However, the

sophistication, reliability, and validity of the measures used appear to be variable.

The search will be to challenge perceived notions of acceptable standards of teaching and learning in an institution that to a large extent is a centre for undergraduate teaching. Badat (2012) notes that for the vast majority of students, the undergraduate degree or diploma is the terminal degree and only a small percentage of these students proceed to post-graduate studies and that teaching and learning based on common sense notions unwittingly compromises important goals and serves to alienate significant portions of the student body.

The problem or issue that concerns me

Post 2004, improving student success and throughput rates has been the incessant empirical conversation that has been confronting the South Africa higher education landscape. Student success rates in South African higher education institutions are unacceptable. Higher Education South Africa (HESA) reports that 35% of first-years drop out after their first year (Sapa 2008). Breier and Mabizela (2007: 281) found that only 15% of students who enrol, complete their degree in the designated time; 30% drop out after the first year and a further 20% drop-out after their second or third year. Notwithstanding the multiplicity of scholarly research enquiries which have been undertaken within the South African higher education sector to interrogate the barriers to student success and unearth mitigating interventions, educational leaders and academia have had limited success in reducing attrition rates and increasing throughput rates. MUT is not exempt from the dilemma. Can a case for using student-staff interaction indicators improve retention rates, enhance student learning and other desired outcomes?

What you would I like to do about it?

In order to achieve the research aim, a mixed-method approach was adopted. In the first instance, a quantitative approach, using a questionnaire to obtain feedback from 120 first-year students enrolled in the Financial Accounting (Extended Curriculum Programme) in the

Faculty of Management Sciences was adopted whilst in the case of the teaching staff a qualitative, interpretive approach was used.

In the case of the students, a questionnaire consisting of two Sections was developed. Section A was a set of eleven (11) option-type questions designed to gain biographical insights broadly focusing on personal information, family background, financial support and living facilities. Section B comprised 13 closed questions (five Likert type scale with choices ranging from 5 for strongly agree to 1 for strongly disagree) and two open-ended questions. The focus of the closed questions was on the student's preparedness to pursue a university education, communication competence, and availability of financial support, suitability of accommodation facilities, family support and engagement with teaching staff. The two open-ended questions included: "Comment on any "barriers" which may have hindered your success" and "Provide any further comment(s)".

The qualitative, interpretive inquiry involving seven (6) teaching staff include multiple data collection methods. Qualitative data concerning the perceptions of the participants was generated via an individual biographical information questionnaire and individual interviews to provide a triangulation of rich, in-depth data of teacher-student engagement.

The use of descriptive statistical methods, namely measures of dispersion, frequency distributions and use of graphs to describe distributions will enable the analysis of data extracted from the student questionnaires to be summarised and organised in an effective and meaningful way.

Progress on the project

To date, the survey with students were conducted under my supervision. A limiting consideration was that the survey was conducted at the time of the year-end examination and 99 respondents participated. The EVASYS data analysis system located in the office of MUT's Quality Management Department was used to analyse the survey questionnaires. The six (6) teaching staff had been interviewed for their responses. The use of descriptive statistical methods, namely measure of dispersion, frequency distributions and use of graphs to describe distributions has enabled the analysis of data extracted from the student survey questionnaires, and in the case teaching staff, reflective pieces and individual interviews were used.

Assistance had been sought from Mr Edgar Samkange (Peer-assisted Co-ordinator: TLDC) to conduct a pilot study to revise the student survey questionnaire. He provided valid amendment feedback which was used to redesign the questionnaire.

The project has stalled due to unavoidable personal reasons. Despite this delay it is envisaged that the final report with the project findings will be completed in the next two months.

Finances: do you require financial support?

Yes. I request financial support to attend the 9th Annual International SATN Conference to be held in Cape Town from 12 – 14 October 2016; the following costs are entailed:

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| Registration, Accommodation and Special events (Invoice) | R8 190 |
| Airfares – approximate costs (Return from Durban to Cape Town) | <u>4 000</u> |
| Total | <u>12 190</u> |

Funds required: R10 000 (TAU Fellowship Subsidy)

R 2 190 (for Personal Account)