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From fixing to possibility: Changing a learning model for undergraduate students

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Abstract

This article engages with the work of an equity initiative, the Academic Development (AD) programme in the Education Development Unit (Commerce) at the University of Cape Town. The programme focuses on providing access, improving graduation rates and creating a 'value-added' experience, rather than a deficit model approach..

The article concentrates on understanding how and why the model has evolved over time with an increasing awareness that the notion of 'disadvantage' needs a more critical engagement and stereotype threat is real issue in any separate programme. The challenge is to draw on students as a resource in the teaching and learning process and develop a way of working collectively and reflectively to help shift both teaching practices and students' level of engagement and reflection. This necessitates shifting away from the notion of a 'one size fits all' approach and moving away from 'preparing' the students to a joint undertaking of transforming both the teaching and learning environment, addressing the great diversity of strengths and challenges that the students bring to higher education.

The article is a qualitative exploration of the key issues that guide this work, as well as outlining what this focus means in practice.

Keywords: Learning community; a variety of cultural capitals; multifaceted approach; reflective practice; teaching structures and pedagogy.

INTRODUCTION

This article has been inspired by a journey of working mostly with first generation black₁ students in higher education in South Africa over the past 12 years. These students have been part of a successful Academic Development Programme (ADP) which is based in the Education Development Unit (EDU) of the Commerce Faculty at the University of Cape Town (UCT). This unit has managed, in recent years, to achieve a fairly dramatic increase in graduation throughput by moving from a focus on 'fixing' the students to a more flexible approach that engages with shifting both the institutional culture and current teaching and learning practices, as well as understanding what students bring to the university and their needs. Many of

these students are multilingual and have English as an additional language. There is a great disjuncture between student and university experiences and expectations; students have a range of vulnerabilities; and the overall class composition is both complimented by and fraught with a great array of diversity.

Throughout the world, an increasing number of first generation students (i.e. no family member has previously attended a higher education institution) are being accepted into higher education institutions (HEIs) thereby posing a range of challenges for both the students and the institutions (Crosling, Heagrey and Thomas 2009). Recent research into student experience as pertaining to the international context (see, e.g. Christie et al. 2008; Herrington and Curtis 2000; Mann 2008; Reay 2001; Reid, Archer and Leathwood 2003) 'has shown that experiences of alienation are fairly common for all students, but particularly so for many first generation students as they enter into the middle-class environment of higher education' (Pym and Kapp 2011, 278). However, the challenges posed by the 'dislocation of conventional family structures; the breakdown of the culture of learning and teaching in schools; and the violence and conflict in society has meant that black working-class and rural learners in South Africa are particularly placed in situations of extreme risk and vulnerability' (see Bloch 2009; Bray et al. 2010; and Ramphele 2002) (Pym and Kapp 2011, 278). For many of these students higher education is seen as a route out of often very impoverished home circumstances. It also places onerous burdens on them to shift their family's socio-economic circumstances. Entering into this new environment of higher education means that many students experience little that is familiar and often feel loneliness, loss of voice, self-esteem and purpose. Coupled with this, the academic challenges become a self-perpetuating cycle with students increasingly feeling disempowered, ill-prepared and experiencing declining academic grades. Ignoring the psychological and social aspects of the transition to higher education results in a failure to engage with the great identity challenges faced by young black students who have come from often dysfunctional environments into relatively elite universities (see also Marshall and Case 2010). It is clear from the ADP staff's experiences that academic and psychological issues are intertwined (Pym and Kapp 2011).

Students who are viewed as 'at risk' due to their circumstances are often placed in 'special programmes' so that their academic and linguistic difficulties are addressed by putting in place structured courses to compensate for the deficit of schooling. It is probable that the history of academic development (AD) in South Africa has exacerbated students' experience of being marginalised in the university as the construction of 'less able' and ill-prepared identities have emerged. These stereotypes have been compounded by race and class (Pym and Kapp 2011). By their very nature, such programmes often have the unintended effect of producing what Steele (1999, 44) calls 'stereotype threat', that is, an overarching anxiety that becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. The consequence is to encourage passivity and dependence, thus stripping students of the agency which enabled them to attain access to tertiary studies despite their home and school circumstances (ibid.).

These assumptions have meant a particular focus on filling the gaps left by schooling and teaching students ways of thinking and being that challenge the formula-driven, rote-learning modes that characterise many black working-class and rural schools (ibid.). There has also been a strong emphasis on assimilating students into higher education with a 'cultural literacy' model (Knoblauch and Brannon 1984) that is strongly dominated by middle-class norms and values that often marginalise the experiences of non-traditional, working-class students.

This article aims specifically to outline the rationale for the learning model in the EDU, focusing on the underpinning philosophy and teaching and learning approaches adopted to enable a different way of working with black students entering HEIs in South Africa; aiming to develop a culture of learning that promotes academic success, social connectedness, identity and agency.

THE CONTEXT

There are approximately 950 students in the ADP in total and an average of 250 first year students are accepted into the programme each year. The ADP makes up approximately 31 per cent of the Commerce Faculty's equity students.

The Commerce Faculty is viewed as prestigious in terms of its academic results and its international professional credibility. It has one of the highest entry grade requirements in the university. While the student composition has shifted so that the Commerce Faculty has 47 per cent black students (2009 UCT enrolment data), the academic staff composition of the faculty is 59 per cent white (Institutional Planning Department 2009).

The ADP students are all black and, while the profile of economic and social circumstances continues to change and contribute to greater diversity in the cohort, the majority of the students are still from working class, rural and/or township backgrounds and do not have English as their home language. Many are the first generation in their families to attend an HEI and either do not know their fathers or have very limited contact with them (Pym and Kapp 2011). The following example is typical:

I was raised by my strong and powerful mother. I have experienced a lot of violence in my youth leaving me to grow up quickly and see the world with sceptical eyes or view. I have gone through life not having a father figure this causing me to resent men or families with fathers and I also became cold and resilient – focused on my books and passing better than most people.

Students often experience a crisis that relates both to academic and linguistic difficulties and to affective issues, as well as being inadequately prepared for the demands of independent study or for analytical engagement at cognitively demanding levels (ibid.). On the whole, large classes in the faculty are usually lecture centred and the anonymity created often militates against promoting students' involvement and intellectual development (MacGregor et al. 2000).

A CRUCIAL CHANGE OF DIRECTION

There has been a range of studies exploring what impacts on students' academic success or failure at tertiary level in South Africa. This includes rote learning at school level, poor career guidance, language of instruction, financial and economic issues (Chen and Lin 2008; Peterson, Louw and Dumont 2009; Springer, Stanne and Donovan 1999; Walton and Cohen 2007). Eighteen years into the 'new' South Africa, the structural barriers for black students are still considerable, despite the existence of ADPs. While there are a range of initiatives that focus on systemic approaches to enhance the student experience and improve student success (see Ogude, Kilfoil and Du Plessis 2012), there have been few longitudinal studies over a long time period which explored what it might mean to work in a holistic way with a range of curricula, teaching pedagogies and socio-cultural and psychological factors that could impact on academic performance.

Twelve years ago the ADP worked with students who did not meet the faculty matric score requirements; focused on the first year and academic issues only; and had an extended curriculum design whereby students completed four semester courses over a full year period. This 'one size fits all' notion meant that some students were deeply frustrated doing a semester course over a year when they were particularly talented in that discipline. In addition, many students failed in their second year as they were not accustomed to the pace or quantity of work in comparison to their first year. The teaching followed a similar pedagogy to mainstream classes, focusing mostly on a transmission model, but with smaller classes. Students did not want to be in the programme and certainly did not want to acknowledge that they were in the programme for fear of being stigmatised.

Over this time period, the ADP has undergone fairly major shifts as it continually reflects on the changing student population and shifting needs. Students may now apply to enter the programme which means that the student body no longer comprises students who did not meet faculty entrance requirements. Those students who have met mainstream points commence their degree in the regular time frame (but often change with time) and those who have not met the requirements register for an extended degree. There is a high degree of flexibility and articulation during the degree course. Both augmented and extended courses are provided. The augmented courses are over the same time period as mainstream classes, but with different teaching pedagogies and support structures. The same examination is written by all students. The programme now works throughout the degree (as well as with postgraduate students) focusing on academic and affective factors, a range of graduate competencies, as well as actively developing a learning community.

The ADP has the challenge of addressing the 'unequal playing fields' and attempting to shift the marginalisation of students' experiences, as well as creating a space to attract mainstream attention to consider different ways of contextualising and developing the higher education experience of Commerce Faculty students. Theorists such as Gee (2001), Haggis (2004) and Roth and Tobin (2007, as cited in Marshall and Case 2010, 492) motivate for a sociocultural perspective on student

learning which moves beyond the perception of learning as a cognitive process and takes cognisance of broader aspects related to the student learning experience with a 'recognition that studying in higher education involves taking on a new identity in the world, a challenging experience requiring personal development'. The ADP draws on its own experience of working in this context over the past 12 years, as well as a growing body of educational theory which shows that social networks are an essential resource in the formation of identity (Soudien 2008) and central to learning. There is an intention to develop both a supportive community and a culture of learning by focusing on the provision of academic skills and creative workshops that attempt specifically to promote social connectedness and agency throughout the student's degree.

The need to engage with the poor graduation throughput rate, the real psychological and economic damage to individual students due to high failure rates, as well as to counter the experiences associated with special programmes for black students at historically white institutions has also necessitated a different way of working and the need to develop a model that engages with the increasing number of students who have a different cultural capital than what is required by the university.

This realisation has been crucial and created a fundamental shift in understanding the ADP staff's work. There has been a shift away from only addressing factors impacting upon the individual student to addressing structural issues and practices that need to be transformed. Given the challenges that have hampered working class students' meaningful participation in the university, there has been an emphasis on nurturing a sense of belonging as an important precursor to effective learning (Mann 2008; Reay 2001).

The ADP has changed to working with a 'value-added' model that engages with students throughout their degree, focusing on academic and affective factors, as well as developing graduate competencies. Importantly, it has meant challenging the assumptions of assimilating students into the university and moving toward shifting the programme's practices to address and utilise more adequately the resources with which the students present themselves. Transforming this work from a deficit model to one that engages actively with the varying linguistic and social capitals that students have in order to develop a range of competencies, including meta-reflective capacities and graduate skills, has caused a fundamental shift in the number of the students in the programme (74 in 2001 to 950 in 2012); the number of students who want to be in the programme (74 students placed in the programme in 2001 and over 760 direct applications for the programme in 2012); the graduation throughput rate (approximately 42% in 2001 and +76% in 2011); the number of students accepted into postgraduate degrees (2 students in the Post Graduate Diploma in Accounting in 2006 to 63 in 2011). While acknowledging the range of initiatives and work in AD in South Africa, the pass rates in this programme far exceed the national pass rate of 31 per cent in the Business/Management sector for all first-time entering students (2005 cohort) (Scott, Yeld and Hendry 2007). This means that this programme has an important contribution to make regarding approaches for other ADPs.

A MODEL

The model that has evolved (and continues to do so) has arisen from a long history of working with these students in multiple ways and finding increasingly that students are discovering their voice and that graduation rates have increased remarkably. This work is now, in the broader university context, finding currency and generating great interest.

Academic development is now focused on a multifaceted, multipronged approach over the entire degree period. The approach adopted is motivated strongly by a holistic model, acknowledging the multiple factors that contribute toward student success, as well as the development of a range of graduate competencies. The AD approach takes theories regarding various elements of stereotype threat into account in order to nurture a strong sense of individual self-efficacy and worth, as well as the development of a supportive learning community. Apart from focused teaching and learning structures and pedagogies at first year level, a major challenge for AD is collaborating with the mainstream regarding the teaching and learning environment.

To meet the needs of such a broad educationally diverse student intake requires engaging with a range of academic skills and personal interventions, as well as providing the linguistic, creative and cultural space for expression throughout the degree (e.g. the annual awards ceremony). This approach involves particularly sophisticated teaching capacity and fairly multifaceted understandings of the relationship between the students and their learning environment. Building this type of institutional culture and the educational skills and training to engage with a wide range of learning needs is the EDU's ongoing challenge.

This approach is potentially controversial in that it moves beyond the perspective that anything beyond the academic endeavour is outside the ambit of AD work. However, over a 12-year period, there has been a groundswell of critical reflection, change to and enhancement of the programme via a range of interventions. There has been a concomitant increase in the graduation rate and there is anecdotal evidence from organisations and companies regarding the increasing stature and competencies of ADP graduates.

The ADP's engagement with day-to-day realities and issues can be used as an impetus to challenge and change broader structural and pedagogical areas in the Faculty. The programme offers students the opportunity to be a prototype to engage with a range of structural and educational issues that will enhance their transformation, rather than simply preparing them to be assimilated into a faculty. Ultimately these learnings essentially need to be incorporated at a structural level, including the whole faculty, so that the ADP no longer engages only with a section of the student population, but embraces a different ethos regarding all the students, and the teaching and learning environment, and critically addresses the institutional culture.

Underpinning all the areas of work have been four fundamental threads that undergird and impact on this work, namely: having a clear vision; building a learning community; working with what the students bring; and creating a reflective practice.

Having a clear vision

The ADP staff's vision has been to create an environment for students throughout their degree that will enhance and develop their learning experience, their academic success and their broad graduate attributes and qualities that are sensitive to the needs and realities of present day South Africa. Overall, it means developing a spirit of optimism and assertiveness; helping students to think more realistically and flexibly about the problems they encounter; nurturing their capacity for meta-reflectivity to act as a 'pivotal dimension of agency' (Bandura 2001, 10) and so developing their capacity to be active agents in generating or escaping from advantage and disadvantage (Bray et al. 2010).

Building a learning community

The ADP staff's focus on building a learning community is inspired by Vygotsky's (1978) focus on social practice. The lines of inclusion and exclusion can contribute significantly to students' identities and likelihood of achieving their goals.

Underpinning this focus is the belief that collaborative work is richer, more critical and engaging than individual work. This focus is evident in the programme's teaching pedagogy, teaching structures, as well as in the range of interventions provided outside the classroom.

Working with what the students bring

The university is not a neutral space. On the whole students are moving from poor economic environments to a middle class environment, imbued with a particular culture and values, which recognises quite a different cultural capital to those that the students have. This movement can serve to reinforce negative perceptions and comparisons relating to their status and identity (Bray et al. 2010). A considerable amount of the students' time and effort can be involved in learning the 'new' rules, discourse and ways of being at university.

The ADP staff need to find multiple ways of creating a 'platform' for students' lives, experiences, culture, language and ways of being to help 'straddle' the different worlds of home and university. Crucially, these spaces need to shift the staff's understandings, practices and ways of doing things. Creating a space of 'value-added' experiences enhances students' own sense of well-being and community and begins a formal process of thinking about developing students who have a range of competencies and qualities. In moving away from deficit notions of the students as 'disadvantaged' or 'underprepared', the staff are working hard at valuing what the students bring to higher education. There is an understanding that the university is enriched by the diverse cultural and language backgrounds of both students and staff. In the process of valuing this diversity, the staff have attempted to develop a deeper understanding of who the students are and what they know, as well as gain knowledge of their diverse cultural backgrounds. Conducting surveys; developing structures that ensure that students have a 'voice'; and using a variety of teaching

pedagogies and formative feedback mechanisms have helped develop formal and informal ways to acknowledge and benefit from this diversity.

Creating a reflective practice

Teaching structures and methods, interventions and 'ways-of-being' need to be varied and continually responsive to a range of life experiences, styles of learning and needs as, clearly, 'one size does not fit all'. The ADP staff need to be in tune continually with who they are serving, what the students' needs and issues are and how these change. This means a great deal of reflection on, flexibility in and change to what the staff do, as well as how and when they do things. Academic development work is about 'process' with a continually changing terrain and creation of significant moments for students. It involves developing forums for students and staff to develop reflective capacities, and utilising the power of stories to motivate and help develop this meta-awareness. This means consciously creating spaces to reflect continually on staff practice, enabling them to be proactive rather than reactive in responding to student needs. This has been crucial to understanding 'who the student is' in a rapidly changing institutional, national and global context. Reflective practice has meant that flexibility is crucial in continually assessing the impact of the ADP's work to determine what is working and what needs either to be changed or reviewed.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR THE TEACHING?

Most HEIs are fairly reliant on the lecture model as the primary structure to promote learning. While increasing class sizes have contributed to this, there is an assumption with this learning format that all students are orientated toward auditory learning, do not need to have dialogue about the material, learn at the same pace, have good note-taking skills and possess the prerequisite knowledge to benefit from the lecture. Too often this model is not very effective as there is very little time spent on task.

The ADP advocates that teachers' thinking and what they do in the classroom can shape the kind of learning that takes place (Hargreaves and Fullan 1992). There is a focus on the level of student engagement, rather than the method of instruction (Cross 1987). An excellent lecture may elicit great involvement, while a poorly run workshop may mean minimal student involvement. Analysis of the research literature (Chickering and Gamson 1987) suggests that students need to do more than just listen: they need to read, write, discuss, or be engaged in solving problems. Importantly, in order to be actively involved, students need to engage in higher-order thinking tasks such as analysis, synthesis and evaluation (Bonwell and Eison 1991). Within this context, it means developing strategies that promote involving students in doing things and thinking about what they are doing. Deeper engagement and more lasting learning arise from the active use of the concepts introduced in a class. Students will learn what they practice which means that students need to be actively involved in legitimate tasks that will lead to the desired outcomes (ibid.). 'If we want students to become more effective in meaningful learning and thinking,

they need to spend more time in active, meaningful learning and thinking, not just sitting passively receiving information' (McKeachie, Pintrich, Yi-Guong and Smith 1986, 7). This means giving students the opportunity to construct their own knowledge and meaning, creating varied learning structures, as well as different spaces in those structures to provide students with opportunities to be challenged; that there are regular reviews of prior learning and a range of opportunities are given for guided practice (moving to unguided practice). For example, students are given a question or problem to consider or work through, they discuss this with a neighbour and sometimes report back to the class as a whole. Students can check their understanding, prepare for the forthcoming lecture or refocus on the material just presented. Students can get immediate and explicit feedback on the strength or weakness of their understanding. Prompt and descriptive feedback is an important predictor of powerful teaching and learning (Chickering and Gamson 1987; Walberg 1984) and an important indicator regarding student performance. Students can be given immediate and effective feedback while on task in the classroom. A lecturer walking around and listening to student conversations can redirect students' thinking either by asking a further question or by marking students' work and commenting on their output immediately.

As spoken of previously, the notion of 'disadvantage' often homogenises the 'poor' and fails to develop the nuanced range of diversity that characterises the South African higher education classroom. The increasing diversity of students and learning styles is a strong motivator to explore a range of different teaching structures and pedagogies. A range of teaching techniques could be used, ranging from students convincing others of their answers; paraphrasing an idea; correcting an error; supporting a statement; selecting a response; writing a minute paper on an idea; answering a question in the last few minutes of a class; constructing their own sample test problems; discussing why a particular answer is unacceptable or incomplete; predicting something; each student taking responsibility for learning a portion of the material and teaching it to the rest of the group; problem-based learning to structured academic controversy.

The teaching model needs to develop a reflective capacity in students and aim for them to be careful observers of their own learning. This means creating multiple moments for students to think about what they have learnt, how they have learnt it and what their most urgent and compelling questions are. Bandura (2001) speaks about developing 'meta-cognition' as a core feature of human agency. This reflective framework helps students to begin to understand the assumptions, practices, rules and ways of being in an academic environment.

Because identifying and challenging assumptions and exploring alternatives can involve elements of threat and risk taking, creating a supportive environment that encourages students to take risks (Lowman 1984) and providing peer support do this provides a powerful psychological boost to critical thinking efforts. This means developing communities of learners who discuss, debate and summarise (Bruffee 1993; Kurfisss 1988; Pascarella and Terenzini 1991; Vygotsky 1978). Providing a

sense of belonging is one of the most important conditions that can be created in a classroom (Astin 1993; Palmer 1998; Seymour and Hewitt 1997; Tinto 1993). Being a part of a group not only promotes students' AD but also enhances their personal development and increases their sense of well-being. Many students learn best from other students who can explain new information using language that is more accessible. Therefore, the ADP staff promote frequent student-student and student-faculty interactions as they feel these are the best predictors of positive student outcomes. Astin (1993, 398) reflects that although the nature and frequency of student-faculty relationships are important, 'the student's peer group is the single most potent source of influence on growth and development during the undergraduate years'. 'Frequency of student-student interactions ... correlates with improvement in GPA, graduating with honors, analytical and problem-solving skills, leadership ability, public speaking skills, interpersonal skills, preparation for graduate and professional school, and general knowledge, and correlates negatively with feeling depressed' (ibid., 385).

In the AD classroom, lecturers know the students by name and much of the learning takes place using small group and collaborative work. A variety of learning structures in addition to the traditional lectures and tutorials are used. Examples are workshops; web-based scenarios, for example, chatting on-line to the lecturer, a 'Learning Channel' using a TV format of questions; clickers in the classroom where students respond to various tasks, questions, problems; and so on. Prior learning and varied experiences are used as a resource, rather than framing students' schooling in deficit terms. Students are constructed as active participants and the various disciplines use case studies, annotated texts which mediate conceptual understanding, problem-solving scenarios, problem-based learning, simulations and experiential situations to facilitate learning. Home languages are used as a resource in the learning environment whereby students sometimes explain a particular concept in their home language. There is sufficient linguistic skill in the classroom for translation and understanding and these brief moments contribute toward affirming students' strengths and contexts. A cross-disciplinary collaboration among lecturers has helped the development of an explicit meta-language which plays a role in developing students' capacity for reflective learning and facilitates transfer of knowledge and skills across disciplines. Overall, the teaching and learning environment for first year students could be described as being outstanding. This is evidenced by three of the lecturers having received the university's prestigious 'Distinguished Teacher Award', mostly higher pass rates than mainstream students in all first year courses and very positive feedback from students regarding their engagement in their learning.

Learning is a cognitive process that is held within the broader context of students' experiences. This sociocultural perspective (Haggis 2003; Malcolm and Zukas 2001; Webb 1997) means that teaching focuses on both cognitive processes as well as developing 'a way of being'; recognising that studying in higher education requires a range of challenges regarding students' personal identity.

Outside the formal classroom, a suite of opportunities are provided that attempt to promote social connectedness. Specific interactive interventions exist in subject knowledge, academic and language literacies and broad life, presentation and leadership skills. The induction programme at the beginning of the year for all new ADP students aims to forge a close family network which provides a sense of belonging and identity. A well-developed web site, communication network, birthday/examination/graduation wishes and newsletter enhance contact, news and information. Monthly class meetings are held for all cohorts in order to ensure continuity, receive feedback, identify appropriate interventions and use role models to inspire and motivate. The annual awards ceremony acknowledges students' academic excellence and progress, and also provides a platform for students' dance, music and poetry creations.

In all these interventions, there is a deliberate attempt to create a sense of belonging to a community which offers a safe space in which students can express their fears and anxieties, and which also provides coping mechanisms. This is in keeping with a number of theorists who have argued that if students are to be invested in their learning, they need to feel a sense of belonging and social connectedness (Lee and Robbins 2000; Martin and Dowson 2009).

The interventions throughout the degree are focused on creating a developmental and incremental impact, rather than providing support only. Students' progress is constantly monitored with a strong emphasis on working proactively in terms of both academic and psycho-social support. This means that student results are examined regularly so that it is possible to assess and negotiate difficulties before academic consequences. Where appropriate, students are referred to the university's counselling service which works reactively and proactively by offering a first year course which focuses explicitly on the transition to higher education, emphasising a range of meta-cognitive skills (critical thinking, collaborative learning, language and communication skills, career planning and time/stress management). Senior students are also trained to take up positions of mentoring and tutoring and facilitating the induction programme for new students.

IMPACT

The ADP teaching and learning environment has contributed toward a significant change in academic results, and first-year students' results have mostly outperformed those in 'mainstream' classes for the past five years. While there is still much work to be done to improve performance in the senior years, as stated earlier, the graduation rate is increasing. The ADP staff are beginning to work more proactively in the senior years by identifying key courses that need support and organising additional workshops and mentoring in these disciplines. There is an ongoing debate regarding the efficacy of students, who already have a heavy workload, expending additional time in support workshops. It would seem that development work in relationship to the teaching and learning environment is crucial. While this is a significant part of the work of the EDU, it is beyond the ambit of the article to elaborate further.

Students' comments about their experience in the ADP reflect their own meta-awareness that both the quality of the teaching and learning environment and the provision of psycho-social support have made a difference to their academic success, their confidence and the variety and depth of their graduate attributes. One student spoke of the 'care for both academic life and other aspects of our lives' and asserted, 'I wouldn't want to be anywhere else'; and another stated that '[it has] helped me be my own person and more independent' Many students have spoken of the personal recognition and motivation that they received from the programme, for example: 'There is a pool of dedicated men and women who care about me and my future and who would go to great lengths to see me successful' and '... they emphasize the fact that there is always hope for a very bad situation'; 'Being in the Academic Development programme has been the turning point in my life ... I feel like a part of a family here'; 'Some days would be really tough but the words of encouragement they would give us during our class meetings meant a lot. At times I felt like giving up but the support I received from Academic Development I felt I had to so keep fighting and was encouraged to work harder'. The qualitative data suggests that the experiences implicit in the ADP have impacted strongly on the students' sense of worth and motivation and has helped energise them to cope within the university environment: 'Varsity has made us realise the importance of having support from the Academic Development family to remind us of our dreams and goals because the journey can sometimes throw you off track'; 'Being a part of the Academic Development family has given me a great sense of belonging because all my life I have felt out of place' (Student written feedback 2011).

Drawing on Bandura's (2001) notion that the capacity for meta-cognition is a core feature of human agency and therefore ultimately students' ability to successfully negotiate their learning at higher education, the development and tracking of students' meta-cognitive capacity is an area that still needs far greater research and exploration. When asked to comment on their growth during their time at university, there is some level of meta-reflection for final year students who made comments such as, 'This year, as I finally have/know how to approach university; have a good balance and have mastered the art of studying smart and not hard' (2009 Graduate) and 'I feel I am more responsible now. I can adjust easily to any changes and I know the right ways to go about addressing challenges I face' (2008 AD Graduate). This provides some contrast with reflections in earlier years in which students could articulate what they were feeling, but not necessarily with realistic self-consciousness regarding their self-efficacy, 'My performance is falling dramatically I would like support' and 'I am trying my level best and I think it's coming well' (2005 cohort).

A proactive approach has meant a gradual shift to students taking far greater individual and collective ownership for their learning and their experiences in higher education. In 2009 the students formed and registered their own organisation (EDU Student Organisation) with the university. The organisation has been very active, organising forums, speakers and recreational activities.

Although the issue of a separate programme and students' experiences of marginalisation in the broader faculty has not disappeared, there is growing reported feedback that students greatly value being in the ADP and would not choose to be in the mainstream. In recent years, increasing numbers of mainstream students have requested to be moved to the programme.

Perhaps the most important marker of success is that the Commerce Faculty has established the EDU which houses the ADP and has an explicit mandate to draw on the strategies within the Academic Development Unit in order to improve teaching and learning in the 'mainstream' (Pym and Kapp 2011).

CONCLUSION

This model has evolved over time with an increasing awareness that the notion of 'underpreparedness' and 'disadvantage' needs a more critical engagement. The challenge is particularly to draw on students as a resource in the teaching and learning process and develop a way of working collectively to help shift both teaching practices and students' level of engagement and reflection. This necessitates shifting away from the notion of a 'one size fits all' approach and engaging in multiple ways with the great diversity of the student population. Importantly, it involves a consciousness of moving away from 'preparing' the students to a joint undertaking of transforming both the teaching and learning environment, addressing the great diversity of strengths and challenges that the students bring to higher education, as well as re-orientating HEIs' vision and goals regarding the type of student they are hoping to develop in the present South African context.

NOTES

- 1 This is a generic term to be used for all previously disenfranchised people in South Africa.

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