

An evaluation of a brief psycho-educational intervention for exam stress with
Extended Degree Programme students.

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This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

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ABSTRACT

University is a time of stress for many students, especially first year students. Overseas research has shown that minority students are at special risk for stress. South Africa's race-based history of educational discrimination means that South African black students are multiply disadvantaged on the formerly white university campuses. Many interventions around disadvantaged students have been reframed in terms of retention difficulties. Internationally, increased student support has been shown to help with retention. Psycho-educational interventions with students have also shown to be successful. In South Africa, many universities have extended their degree programmes to help support disadvantaged students. In 2009, a psycho-educational support group was run with first year humanities Extended Degree Programme students. The following study was a qualitative evaluation of the psycho-educational group. We found that the group was successful in giving students social support. In addition, students felt that it had been useful academically. Difficulties encountered included the group starting late in the semester, attendance difficulties and administrative problems. Issues that should be addressed in the next session include clear avenues for referral and improving student/facilitator interaction. The stress that the students were under and the academic demotivation that they experience suggest that the whole support programme should be evaluated and improved.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Student life is popularly understood as a carefree time for young adults. For many students university life is also a source of stress and first year is an especially stressful period. Sources of stress include academic functioning, social functioning and the stress of adjustment (Ross, Niebling & Heckert, 1999). International literature suggests that minority students are at heightened risk for stress at university. This is because of factors that they bring with them to university (Rodriguez, 2000) and factors within the institutional setting. Many minority students are discriminated against in the institutional setting (Sedlacek 1999).

South Africa has a complex history of race-based educational discrimination. In 1994 universities undertook the task of transforming to meet the political and developmental demands of the new democratically elected government (Wolpe, 1995). Part of transformation of universities was the application of Affirmative Action programmes (Lindsay, 1997) but in spite of these there is still a huge racial imbalance at South African universities (Barbarin & Richter, 2001) and, race and class can still be seen as important factors influencing emotional wellbeing at university (Flisher, De Beer & Bokhorst, 2002). Part of the reason for this is that many black¹ students are still unprepared for university by the time that they reach tertiary studies (Scott, Yeld & Hendry, 2007). Poor academic preparation can be seen in students' difficulties with English (Agar, 1990) or their difficulties with writing a university essay (Van Schalkwyk, 2007). Some of the difficulties that underprivileged students experience at South African universities are attributable to poor academic preparedness and many are due to hostile institutional culture (Hay, 2008). Many black students and academics still feel alienated at South African universities (Soudien, 2008).

In the past, the reasons for students' struggling at university were attributed to personal qualities, but in the 1970's academics began to recognise that institutions played an important role in student drop-out and the study of student retention has grown into an important area of research (Tinto, 2006). Among the findings are that

¹ The term black refers to all the students who would have been classified as African under the Group Areas Act

relationships that students develop with academic staff are important to retention (Thomas, 2001) and the method of assessment is also important in supporting students (Yorke, 2001). Many universities have used psycho-educational programmes successfully in interventions with students (Gonzalez, Tinsley & Kreuder, 2002).

Many South African universities use extended degree programmes to help bridge the gap between poor secondary education and university education. Many students feel alienated by the programmes (Soudien et al, 2008) and the academic effectiveness of the programmes has been questioned (Agar, 1990). At the University of Cape Town (UCT) Extended programmes are run by the individual faculties. In 2009, the Student Wellness Centre at the university ran a pilot psycho-educational programme with the Quantitative Stream of the Extended Development Programme (EDP) of the Faculty of the Humanities facilitated by students in the MA clinical psychology programme at UCT.

This study was a qualitative evaluation of the programme, which is useful when trying to improve programmes (Babbie & Mouton, 2005). Chapter two reviews the literature around student stressors, disadvantaged students, student retention and useful interventions. Chapter three describes the methodology used in the qualitative study, specifically the types of data and the methods of data analysis used. In chapter four, the results of the analysis are presented. In chapter five, the results of the analysis discussed and options for future studies are presented

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

This Chapter contains a review of the relevant literature. The first section discusses the challenges faced by some first year students. Stressors experienced by the general student population are then discussed. Internationally it is recognised that students of colour are often at more risk from stress at university than other students. In South Africa, our history of race based educational discrimination means that black students at South African universities are at a particular disadvantage. International interventions to support disadvantaged students have focussed on retention of students and psycho-educational programmes are a useful part of such interventions. Interventions in South Africa for disadvantaged students concentrate on extending the normal degree programme to give students support. Despite these interventions in South Africa, many writers still argue that there is discrimination on South African Campuses.

Entering University for the first time

In the popular understanding of student life, it is seen as a carefree time for young people to explore, experiment and have fun. Academic discovery is seen as part of assuming a new identity as an adult. For some this ideal of student life is partially true for at least most of the time. For many students it is also true that university is a time of personal, social and academic stress for at least part of the time. For some students, university is most often a source of stress instead of a time of carefree exploration. Student entering their first year are supposed to be a group which has the most fun and carefree existence at university, but they are also a group at risk of experiencing high levels of stress. When entering first year, there are many adjustments that students have to make in academic, social and personal terms (Ross, Niebling & Heckert, 1999).

Adjusting to the academic expectations of university is a large area of stress for students. First Years are more exposed to failure than senior students. Some students enter university with a set idea of what they are going to study, and are disappointed to discover that their course of study is not what they expected or what they enjoy or have an aptitude for (Cokeley, 2000). The academic transition from high school to

university almost always puts pressure on students. A survey of students (Ross, Niebling & Heckett, 1999) found that the increased workload was the most difficult part of this adjustment. Continuous evaluation means that a large part of the work completed counts towards final course results, which can contribute to academic stress in first year. One of the difficulties about student stressors is that they are often not understood as stressful to those outside the university context (Ross, Niebling & Heckett, 1999).

Students are at university primarily to study, and academic concerns are a source of stress for many students (Lucas & Berkal, 2005). As well as experiencing academic stressors, first year students are more at risk than other students for personal and interpersonal stress. This stress can be caused by small daily events that do not appear to be especially stressful but can be of concern to students. Moving away from home entails the assumption of new responsibilities in terms of self-care and these responsibilities are an area of concern to students (Ross, Niebling & Heckert, 1999). Some of the stressors that first year university students bring to student counselling centres include difficulties with relationships, academic concerns and worries about part-time work (Lucas & Berkel, 2005). Because first year can be a time of stress in different areas of performance, stress management courses should be offered to students. Such courses can help students to reframe events and the way in which they experience them, because the way potentially stressful events are perceived will influence their actual degree of stress (Ross, Niebling & Heckett, 1999). Student stress should be a matter of concern because stress has been shown to affect the academic performance and the health of students (Ross, Niebling & Heckert, 1999).

Students of colour: international perspective

While all students are at some risk of stress, international literature suggests that minority students or students of colour are more at risk of stress than their counterparts. Minority students are likely to bring factors with them to university that place them at risk of unhappiness when at university (Rodriguez, 2000). This unhappiness can be quantified by the higher attrition rates and lower grade point averages that minority students have when compared to their white counterparts (Smedley, Myers & Harrell, 1993). Minority students are still more likely to be economically disadvantaged than white students. For example, 40% of Hispanic

children in the USA (under the age of 18) are considered to be living in a state of poverty (Rodriguez, 2000). Poverty is a considerable factor determining the resources (such as libraries) and schooling to which children have access. Children going to school in poor areas usually only have access to the poorly resourced schools in those areas. Many schools in the USA are still segregated, since poor areas in the USA are predominantly home to minorities. Receiving poor quality high school education means that poor minority students are at a significant disadvantage when compared to their better educated white peers (Rodriguez, 2000). Theories of cultural deficit were popular in the 1950s and disseminated the idea that some cultures were not good at adjusting to higher education (Tinto, 2006). Although these theories have fallen out of fashion, their effect has been to damage students' self-confidence when engaging with universities. The theory of cultural deficit is just one of the cultural stereotypes that are damaging to minority students entering a university (Rodriguez, 2000).

It is clear that some minority students arrive at university with a set of personal factors that mean that they will have more difficulty than other students. The factors that students bring with them are not the only hurdles that minority students face at university. Once students arrive at university they have difficulties that are created in part by the institution (Harper & Nichols, 2008). Because minority students are more likely than other students to be poor, they are more likely to have financial concerns that are stressors. The burden of student debt and the cost of living are usual financial concerns. To try and solve some of these problems, students sometimes take on part time jobs that bring the additional stress of time management with them. According to Rodriguez (2006), parents who have not gone to university themselves do not appreciate what university entails; thus their expectations may become difficult for minority college students to manage (Rodriguez, 2000). As well as real economic concerns, minority students can be marginalised by the white, middle class cultures of the universities that they attend. Language can be part of this alienation: for instance Latino students may feel marginalised and different when they speak Spanish in class or in social settings (Rodriguez, 2000). Also alienating is the way in which administrators see minority students, tending to see them as a mass with broad and general needs. This means that different groups and their special needs are aggregated together (Harper & Nichols, 2008).

Knowledge of the institution is an important factor in ensuring the success of minority students by helping them to adapt to the institution. While getting to know campuses, they concentrate on the part of campus that they need to know (such as the library and the computer lab) rather than becoming overwhelmed by the large whole. Many are adept in developing mentoring relationships with older students, which help to protect them against the anonymity of the institution. Supportive relationships with peers act as a buffer against the harsh environment of a big institution when they develop mentor relationships and form supportive relationships with friends (Rodriguez, 2000).

The difficulties that minority students experience are very clear, but what helps students become successful can be opaque. Sedlacek (1999) has developed a model that predicts success of black students, with seven factors identified as being important. The possession of self-confidence while retaining the ability to monitor the self realistically are two factors that help minority students at university. Unfortunately, racism is a reality at many institutions (Rodriguez, 2000). While institutions should do everything within their power to combat racism, there is a high chance that minority students will be affected by it. When that happens, an understanding of racism and knowledge of how to deal with it help to make the university experience easier for these students. Campus is a place full of distractions and so minority students who are able to defer gratification generally do better than those who cannot. The sixth factor that Sedlacek (1999) identified is the availability of a mentor in a time of crisis. The seventh factor that helps minority students is previous leadership experience (Sedlacek, 1999).

These factors are interrelated: for example, it is easier for white students to get realistic feedback about progress from faculty. This is for a whole host of reasons, including racism on the one end of the spectrum and misguided political correctness on the other. According to Sedlacek(1999), the lack of connection in the faculty-student relationship helps to make realistic self-appraisal difficult for minority students. These factors and the way that they are interconnected should be considered when designing support programmes for minority students. Educators involved in these programmes should evaluate them regularly and share the results of the

evaluations with other educators to make support programmes more effective (Sedlacek, 1999).

South African perspective on students of colour

The international literature makes it clear that students of colour are disadvantaged in the university setting and this also applies to these students in South Africa. The South African picture of racial disadvantage is complicated by our history of Apartheid, a system of legislated racial discrimination which affected all areas of black people's lives, including their ability to participate freely in the economy and seek educational advancement. In 1994 Apartheid was replaced by a democratically elected government, but more than a decade later, black students still experience difficulties at university (Scott, Yeld, & Hendry, 2007). During Apartheid, South African universities were organs of the state but some also offered resistance to state control, maintained ideals of academic freedom and opposed segregation. A complicated network of higher education was established in order to maintain the idea of separate development and train the people needed to run the separate Bantustan, coloured and Indian administrative systems (Wolpe, 1995). Separate universities were established for different ethnic groups. In the 1990's, South African universities faced the task of transforming themselves to the purpose of the new state and social conditions. . Historically black universities (HBI) had to redefine themselves (Wolpe, 1995) and historically white universities (HWI) were put under a great deal of pressure to put policies of affirmative action in place (Lindsay, 1997).

The new government entered whole-heartedly into transforming the system of Higher Education to serve the needs of the new constitutional democracy to redress the imbalances of the Apartheid past. Although affirmative action policies were instituted in universities (Lindsay, 1997), there is still a racial imbalance. While a large proportion of the South African population are classified as black, only a small fraction of the black population enters higher education (Barbarin & Richter, 2001). A further challenge in South African Universities is the high drop-out rate. A cohort study of students entering higher education in 2000 found that 15,000 of them dropped out without completing their courses of study (Scott, Yeld & Hendry, 2007). Analysis of completion rates by race and class shows that poor black students are

more likely than other students to drop out (Scott, Yeld & Hendry, 2007). Black students at a traditionally white institution have a higher drop out rate than white students at the same institutions (Agar, 1990). A study of students seeking help at the counselling centre at the University of Cape Town found black students were more likely than white students to see counselling. Class was also a factor, with students on financial aid being more likely than other students to seek counselling. If help-seeking can be seen as a sign of unhappiness, race and class can be seen as factors affecting the emotional well-being of students at a historically white university (Flisher, De Beer & Bokhorst, 2002).

Many black students come to university with disadvantage. Some of the reasons for the unequal experience of black students at university are beyond the control of Universities. A marked difficulty in South Africa is that primary and secondary schooling is unequal. Poor black students still receive a poorer quality of education than middle class white students (Fiske & Ladd, 2006). Sixty -six percent of the students who entered Grade 1 in 1995 dropped out before writing their matric exams, the majority of them poor and black. An endorsement in matric means that students are eligible for university entrance but only 5% of the 1995 cohort of students obtained endorsement. In this environment, completing matric and obtaining an endorsement is a real achievement, and students have to overcome obstacles to do so. Even though an endorsement with a matric pass signifies an achievement, it does not guarantee adequate preparation for university (Scott, Yeld & Hendry, 2007).

The unequal preparation for university can be represented by various factors (Scott, Yeld & Hendry, 2007). Schools that were for black students are staffed by teachers who are under-qualified when compared to the staff at formerly white, model C schools. The Apartheid government spent little when developing schools for black children, the new government has not made up the deficit, and so students often do not enjoy access to amenities such as media centres, libraries and laboratories which make a difference to the quality of the learning experience. For instance reading about an experiment and actually performing one are very different. Outcomes Based Education (OBE) replaced the Apartheid era curriculum (Fiske & Ladd, 2006). It was envisaged as a move away from rote learning to experientially based learning, but while it was well-intentioned, OBE deepened the divide in South African schools and

the experience of different groups of students. Teachers in well resourced schools have smaller classes, are better trained and supported and so better equipped to work within the method of OBE than teachers in under-resourced schools. The experiential learning aspect of OBE included experiments and research which required access to laboratories, libraries and computers (Fiske & Ladd, 2006). It follows that many students from poorly resourced schools are not well prepared to enter higher education. The way in which schools approached the syllabus meant students from poorly resourced schools are in general are less academically literate than students from better resourced schools (Scott, Yeld & Hendry, 2007).

Poor secondary school education translates into academic unpreparedness once students reach university. Although academic unpreparedness is not the only reason that students struggle at university, it does play a role in explaining their struggles. The gap between the academic experience at a secondary school level and the academic demands and expectations of university were perceived as problematic by disadvantaged black students at university (Agar, 1990). Arriving at university with high expectations, students in the Extended Degree Programme at the University of Stellenbosch also found that there was a difference between the academic demands of secondary school and of university (Van Schalkwyk, 2007).

Difference between secondary school and university academic expectations is problematic when the difference is in the style of learning required and many students from disadvantaged backgrounds find that there is such a difference (Van Schalkwyk, 2007). Academic literacy involves the ability to understand and comply with the unspoken expectations of the university and also involves the core skills needed for university. For instance, students need to be able to write and read to a high standard in order to prosper at university, to be able to think critically about their subjects and present their thoughts in a coherent manner (Scott, Yeld & Hendry, 2007). Many schools in South Africa emphasise rote learning without understanding of the subject matter, which is not useful at a university level (Agar, 1990). The university essay is different from a school essay and unprepared students have difficulty understanding and meeting the requirements of the university essay (Van Schalkwyk, 2007). English is the medium of instruction at most historically white universities. Proficiency at English is positively correlated to success at university (Stephan, Welman & Jordaan,

2004), and many disadvantaged students are anxious about their competence in English, which is often a second or third language. This anxiety does prevent some students from speaking in lectures or tutorials, which means that they do not ask questions about work they do not understand or engage in classroom discussion (Agar, 1990).

Although academic preparedness is an important factor to consider when looking at the reasons for the alienation of black students on campus, there are other non-academic factors that play a role. Social factors influence the performance of students (Downs, 2005). In a study of black female students at a historically white university, it was found that psychosocial and background factors have an effect on the performance. In this study the effect of social factors on performance was greater than the effect of cognitive factors such as learning style (Malefo, 2000). Although the academic preparedness of students is to a large extent out of the control of the university, it has some measure of control over the social experience of students at university. University systems and institutional culture can include or alienate students. They affect student performance and are within the control of the administration (Scott, Yeld & Hendry, 2007).

Universities have particular institutional cultures that disadvantaged students may struggle with. Difficulties in acclimatizing to the institutional culture of universities are made worse by finding that lecturers are ignorant of students' cultural backgrounds. Assumptions about prior knowledge, especially knowledge of unspoken conventions can be alienating to students who do not share that understanding (Hay, 2008). Students feel as if there is an expectation that they need to do a great deal of work to learn about conventions. They feel as though the university does not meet this by putting effort into explaining conventions and helping them to acclimatize (Soudien, 2008). Thus it may be useful exercise for university staff to do work to understand who their students are. Ruth (2000) found that exploring the backgrounds of the members of a first year class was a useful exercise and helped to enrich academic instruction.

Part of the alienation experience of university is that disadvantaged students face coming from working class backgrounds in a middle class setting. It is a reality in

South Africa that many students are poor, and universities do not have control over the socio-economic backgrounds of their students (Scott, Yeld & Hendry, 2007). Anxiety about money is a social factor may also affect a student's academic performance (Agar, 1990).

After the end of Apartheid, historically white institutions (HWI) were put under a great deal of pressure to enrol more black students. The social integration of black students into institutions of higher education is a useful marker of transformation of institutional culture at institutions. The Soudien (2009) report states that the institutional culture of formerly white institutions is alienating to black students and staff. Soudien et al (2008) draw a link between this alienation and low completion rates for black students (when compared to their white peers). While affirmative action has meant that more black students enrolled at universities, the perception that students are at university for affirmative action reasons rather than on their own merit can be damaging. Affirmative action policies often consist of lowering entrance requirements for black students (Senegue, 1992). Such affirmative action policies leave black students with anxieties around their competence, when compared to their white peers (Christian, Mokutu & Rankoe, 2002). Often affirmative action policies concentrate on increasing the number of black students entering the university system and this has led to an increase of enrolment of black students in tertiary institutions. Concentrating on increased enrolment means that the support of students already in the university system is ignored (Favish, 2005), so while the numbers of black students at historically white universities has increased, studies have found that informal segregation still exists on university campuses in South Africa, for instance dining halls are often still informally segregated (Finchilescu, Tredoux, Mynhardt, Pillay & Muianga, 2007).

International perspectives: interventions

All over the world, students of colour have difficulties at universities. While these difficulties are widely noted, interventions to help students are less prevalent. What can be useful is to reframe the question of student retention to involve supporting students likely to drop out of university. Retention of students is an important problem that universities need to deal with and much attention has been paid to it in the

literature (e.g. Yorke & Thomas, 2003, Seneque, 1992, Tinto, 2006). Before the 1970s, the predominant idea around university drop outs was that students dropped out of university for personal reasons. Thus student drop out was seen as the fault of the students and not the responsibility of the university. During the 1970s, different ideas around student drop outs emerged. The importance of the university context to student retention was emphasised and first years recognised as a very important year for student retention, as it is the year when students are most likely to drop out. According to Tinto (2006), the way in which the university engages students was recognised as important and the quality of student engagement can be seen in the classroom environment. The way in which academics view and treat students is important to engagement. Conversely very few academics see student retention as part of their core interest (Tinto. 2006).

Institutional culture is an important factor to consider when discussing student retention (Tinto, 2006). Class plays a role in how at home students feel at an institution. Middle-class students share an understanding of conventions with their lecturers and the prevailing institutional culture but students from working class backgrounds may not share the prevailing middle-class culture. Financial pressure affects a student's university experience and anxiety about money is detrimental to academic functioning. According to Thomas (2001), students come to university with a set of expectations and the way the university met or addressed those expectations was shown to be important to retention. Whether the student was committed to the institution or not helped to determine whether they would drop out. To keep students at university, it is important that they feel as if they fit and this is related to academic fit, but also to social fit. The relationships that exist between academic staff and students help students to learn while the friendships students make at university help to make them feel integrated into the institutional life (Thomas, 2001).

Academic and social integration is important to the quality of student experience, which is an important factor in retention. A good retention programme is based on a quality tutorial programme. It cannot compensate for deficiencies in the tutorial programme (Yorke, 2001). The academic experience that students have at university is integral to retaining students, and efforts to retain students should scrutinize the undergraduate academic experience (Thomas, 2001). Assessment forms an important

part of the academic experience, and can produce much anxiety so quality assessment is useful in retaining students. Such assessment provides useful feedback that gives students guidelines for improvement. Quality feedback acknowledges advances that students have made and should improve the learning experience. End of module summative feedback is problematic because the feedback is given at the end of the course. This does not improve the learning experience because students do not receive feedback that helps them to improve their performance during the course (Yorke, 2001).

Creating and maintaining a relationship with students and providing quality, formative feedback are things that academics can use to help with retention. Social integration is important to retention, and quality feedback can help with this. This is because of the contact and support that lecturers give students. Working closely with students requires a great deal of time and effort from the academic staff which means that university management should consider the resources, including lecturers' time, to be spent on retention (Thomas & Yorke, 2003). In the United Kingdom, the size of lecture and tutorial groups is growing. This is mainly for budgetary reasons but large classes decrease the amount of time an individual lecturer can spend on individual students. Providing quality assessment requires universities to balance the priorities of research and teaching functions carefully (Yorke, 2001).

These ideas around retention and positive student experience can be put into practice. Yorke and Thomas (2003) did a useful study of successful retention practice at institutions which had a good record of retaining students from low socio-economic backgrounds at university. A common theme that emerged from the study was that all the institutions committed themselves to ensuring that their students had a positive university experience. According to Yorke and Thomas (2003), the enriched positive experience was promoted through making sure that students were known as individuals. Teaching students was promoted as an important aspect of the academic job and staff contact with individual students was encouraged (Yorke & Thomas, 2003). Individual attention to students is considered an important aspect of retention (Thomas, 2001). This group of universities considered proper orientation programmes very important to success with retention. Students should leave inductions with a clear understanding of what studying at university entails. One of the universities took great

care to unpack unspoken academic conventions for their first year students. To give students time to settle in, these universities made sure that important assessment did not take place at the beginning of each course. The universities worked hard on providing comprehensive financial aid packages. The importance of part time jobs for students was also recognised (Yorke & Thomas, 2003).

Retention intervention programmes are important. When looking at the retention issue, it is important to note that black students often face hurdles different from their white counterparts. In a study of African American student self-efficacy, it was found that student self-efficacy is positively correlated to grades achieved at university. This study found that positive student-staff interactions help students to feel better about their ability to engage in their studies (Cokely, 2000). Self-efficacy is an important variable to promote in minority students, since a high sense of self-efficacy has been found in black and white women who are high achievers in their careers (Ritchie, et al, 1997). In a survey of a college counselling centre (Lucas & Berkel, 2005), it was found that African American students were often adversely affected by the barriers they saw in reaching their academic goals and were more likely than other students to be worried about the barriers they faced outside the formal educational setting. University staff should be made aware of the type of stressors that students face and be sensitive towards them (Lucas & Berkel, 2005).

Psycho-educational interventions with students

Many interventions with students have a psycho-educational component. Counselling services are extremely important to the academic success of students (Kitzrow, 2003). One of the ways in which many university counselling centres have tried to deal with student stressors is through psycho-educational programmes that provide social support and help students to work constructively with difficulties in their lives. A review of a psycho-educational programme with African American women (Napholz, 1999) found that life satisfaction increased after taking part in a psycho-educational programme and the women felt better equipped in the various roles that they had to play in their lives.

Psycho-educational interventions with varied populations of college students have shown some success (Gonzalez, Tinsley & Kreuder, 2002), with different studies identifying factors that influenced outcomes. For example, a study of a sexual assault prevention programme with college women (Anderson & Whiston, 2005), it was found that programmes longer than an hour were more successful than programmes that were shorter than an hour. This difference was significant and was measured through attitude change. The difference between the two forms of interventions is hypothesized to be the in-depth discussions that the longer programmes allow (Anderson & Whiston, 2005). Stress management is an important skill to learn and a stress management intervention with students should have a time management component, since time management problems were the source of much reported stress (Ross, Niebling & Heckert, 1999). In South Africa, psycho-educational programmes have been run with disadvantaged university students. In one instance, psycho-educational groups were included alongside academic support and enrichment (Seneque, 1992).

South African interventions: Bridging programmes.

One of the ways in which universities try to combat academic unpreparedness and retain disadvantaged students is through extension programmes. Bridging programmes played an important part in affirmative action programmes put in place by the university (Lindsay, 1997). Even though they were started with good intentions, academic extension programmes that many universities put in place often serve to alienate black students further (Soudien et al, 2008). Students in academic extension programmes have reported feeling inferior and separated from students in mainstream programmes and some lecturers make no attempt to understand their backgrounds (Soudien et al, 2008). A study of an academic extension programme (Agar, 1990) shows that it did bring about change, but participants in the programme still faced significant problems. At the University of the Witwatersrand a programme to support traditionally disadvantaged students did not increase graduation rate significantly. Thus the presence of an extension programme cannot be regarded as a solution to all the university's transformation and student retention difficulties (Agar, 1990). Foundation courses are well-intentioned but the content and assessment should be thought about critically and evaluated regularly (Downs, 2005).

A case study (Case, 2007) of students on an extension programme was revealing of the kinds of difficulties that such students face. Students described how hard they worked at university. This hard work for little reward leads to them disengaging from their studies by only doing the bare minimum. Students who had suffered from this type of academic burnout knew that disengaging from their studies was not a wise study strategy but did so anyway. According to Case (2007), Students had unrealistic expectations of the amount of time they should spend on their studies. When their expectations of how much they should study proved unreachable, they expressed the view that time management would be a solution to this problem. Time spent away from academic work was regarded as wasted time. At the same time, students did not report enjoying their academic work (Case, 2007).

It was when students had unrealistic expectations of the amount of work they had to do without enjoying their work that they disengaged from their studies. Adding to the stress of university, students felt self-denial in relation to campus social activities. Some students experienced home as a refuge from university life while others felt out of place at home because university had changed them. Students who worked part-time felt disconnected from most of their classmates and most students kept to a small, racially homogeneous group. This was the group with whom they went to lectures and tutorials. When they had a chance to interact with new students, they spoke positively about the experience. The theory of student disengagement at university is a good theory to help explain the failure of students at university (Case, 2007).

What complicates the application of intervention programmes in South Africa is that many commonly understood truths about ways to reduce the drop out rate may not be accurate. For instance, boosting student confidence is commonly understood as a way of reducing the drop out rate. However a study of UNISA students (Ochse, 2003) found that students who were extremely confident did less well than students who were not as confident. Encouraging over-optimism may be harmful for students who fail their own over-optimistic standards (Ochse, 2003). In further research, it was found that the black students in this study over-estimated how successful they were going to be. This was correlated with lower achievement. This may reflect ignorance of what is actually expected of them in assessment contexts and they may base their

criteria for success and what is expected in their disadvantaged schools (Ochse, 2005). It has also been noted that some students do not comply with measures designed to help them, such as tests during orientation period to assess their levels of competence. Thought is needed about why students evade such measures (Huysamen, 2001).

Although the problems around disadvantaged students at university should not be over-simplified, there are some ideas about ways in which to help the situation. For instance it has been found that academic and social integration into a university leads to persistence in students (Favish, 2005). At the moment integration happens informally and so formal integration programmes may be useful. Non-academic activities such as sporting or volunteer activities may be a way in which to do this and the importance of such activities should not be underestimated (Favish, 2005). There is also a late bloomer theory that suggests that disadvantaged students take longer to adjust to university (Huysamen, 2000). Studying what characterizes successful disadvantaged students showed that initiative, motivation and a sense of their own agency characterized black South African students who had overcome adversity and achieved academically. Also important was a supportive family and role models. These protective factors did not entirely relieve the stress of poverty (Dass-Brailsford, 2005).

One of the ways in which interventions with South African students can be improved is by examining successful interventions with disadvantaged students. In response to the high failure rate in a first year economic programme, the University of Stellenbosch introduced a special summer school for first years. This summer school was different from traditional lectures as academic staff had more contact with students and tutors, students had to submit compulsory homework assignments and attendance at lectures was made compulsory. Students who attended the summer school had an 89% pass rate, which was significantly better than the pass rate of students who repeated the course in normal lectures (Horn & Jansen, 2008).

Interventions would be improved if they were recognised as interventions within the university community. Although some interventions that focused on academic skills are in place to help disadvantaged students, and have been shown to contribute to better results (Horn & Jansen, 2008), the power relations that exist within the

universities need to be thought over carefully before proceeding with interventions. Some of the unintended consequences of such interventions, such as the shame of needing help should not be underestimated and need to be thought about (Gibson 2002). This can occur even with the most politically correct and progressive interventions. This means that practitioners should be flexible and open to changing the programmes (Sterling, 2002). If these needs were taken into account, programmes that offer social support to disadvantaged students can be of great help to them. Such programmes can also help students to access resources (Nettles, 1991).

Even with the interventions that are in place to help disadvantaged students, there is a widespread view that universities discriminate against black students and poor students. In 2008 the minister of Education commissioned a report on racism and transformation in institutions of Higher Education in South Africa (Education white paper 3: A programme for transformation of higher education). The final report, The report on progress towards transformation and social cohesion and elimination of discrimination in Public Higher Education Institutions, is known colloquially as the Soudien et al (2008) report. The report is not an academic report and there are methodological flaws that mean that some of the conclusions of the report may be built on incorrect premises. For instance, all the data collected was not analysed. Historically black and historically white universities produced different submissions, and so a comparison between their submissions becomes difficult (Soudien et al, 2008).

Even though there are methodological flaws in the report, it does raise important issues, one of which is that discrimination is widespread at South African universities; racism is reported as inherent in the classroom and social experience of students at institutions of higher education. The Extended Degree programmes at institutions were seen as discriminatory and students who were part of the programmes felt that they were labelled within the university community. In addition, the living experience of students at university was shown to be difficult. Residence culture was criticised as being discriminatory and the prevalence of sexual harassment was noted. Students who were not first language English speakers struggled at English medium universities (Soudien et al, 2008).

Rationale for the present study

The Extended Degree Programme is an attempt to bolster the success of underprivileged students at the University of Cape Town. Different faculties of the university have different programmes and the Faculty of Humanities has two streams for Extended Degree Programmes: the qualitative stream and the quantitative stream. The student wellness centre ran a successful psycho-educational programme with Extended Degree Programme students in the science faculty and the commerce faculty. In 2009 a pilot psycho-educational programme was run with the quantitative stream of the humanities faculty Extended Degree Programme. This programme consisted of three psycho-educational groups run with students. The groups were open and students could miss sessions without having to drop out of the programme. The groups focused on helping students deal with exam stress and managing their study habits. The programme was structured to provide room for group participation and discussion. The student wellness centre supervised masters students from the Child Guidance Clinic at UCT to facilitate the programme. The present study uses material from the psycho-educational programme and its purpose as to evaluate qualitatively the process of the psycho-educational programme. An evaluation of the process is useful to improve the way the programme is run.

In this chapter, the experience of students at university is discussed. Students, especially first year students often experience academic and social stressors at university. International literature has shown that minority students are at a disadvantage in the university setting. In South Africa, black students are also disadvantaged on university campuses. International interventions have focussed on retention, and psycho-educational interventions have shown to be useful for students. In South Africa, Bridging programmes and extended degrees have been used to support disadvantaged students, although widespread discrimination is still reported at South African universities. This study is an evaluation of a psycho-educational intervention done with EDP students in the Faculty of the Humanities.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

In this Chapter, the methodology used in the study is presented. The context of the research is discussed in the rationale for research. The aims for the evaluation are then presented. Qualitative evaluation methods are discussed under the methodology section. D

RATIONALE FOR RESEARCH

This thesis is a study of the experience of students in the quantitative Extended Degree Programme in the Faculty of Humanities at University of Cape Town. This programme is an academic support programme for South African coloured, black or Indian students whose matric scores do not qualify them for entrance to mainstream programmes but whose entrance test results show promise. Students are given mentoring support and extra workshops and tutorials and do their degree over four years rather than three. Students do not apply to this programme, but are considered for it if they apply and do not meet the criteria for a general degree. The programme in the humanities is divided into the quantitative and qualitative streams The Quantitative stream is for the Psychology and Economics Majors and students in this stream get extra support with Mathematics. The non-quantitative stream is for other Bachelor of Arts subjects (www.uct.ac.za, 2009).

The material for the study was drawn from a brief psycho-educational programme run with these students. For a number of years, the Student Wellness centre at the University of Cape Town has run psycho-educational support groups with Extended Development Programme (EDP) students in the Science and Commerce faculties as support programmes for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Programmes such as these arose out of the realization that admitting black students into universities did not automatically guarantee a good throughput rate (Griesel, 1999).

In 2009, a brief intervention around exam stress was run with students in the quantitative EDP programme of the Humanities faculty. This programme took the form of three psycho-educational workshops around exam stress and anxiety and was run by four students in the MA (Clinical Psychology) course. The UCT Student Wellness Centre provided the materials, training and supervision for this programme.

The aim of the programme was to give students skills (such as time and stress management) to help them cope with university exams. The second aim of the programme was to provide students with psycho-social support.

AIMS

The aim of the research project was to evaluate the support group run with Humanities EDP students. This was done to improve any future interventions within the EDP programme for students in the Faculty of Humanities.

DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Qualitative evaluation methods.

Evaluation studies are an important part of social research in which the reasons for conducting an evaluation define the project. The current study was an improvement-orientated evaluation, to identify parts of a project that worked well and parts that should be changed. The implementation of the programme is scrutinized and an improvement-orientated evaluation will suggest ways of making it more efficient (Babbie & Mouton, 2005). This was the first time that the programme in question had been run in the Faculty of Humanities and the first time it had been run in a shortened form focused on exam stress. Thus a formative, improvement-focused evaluation (Babbie & Mouton, 2005) that would provide feedback as to how to improve the programme seemed appropriate.

The approach used in the study was qualitative in nature. Qualitative evaluations are useful for process evaluations and also when detailed, rich data is needed. Qualitative methods can uncover how participants experience a programme (Babbie & Mouton, 2005). In order to make the findings more robust, triangulation of sources, involving three informant/participant groups was employed. This form of triangulation, data triangulation, helps to provide the assurance that data may be generalised (Tellis, 1997). The first source of data was a focus group which was run after the psycho-educational groups had finished. The second source of data was the evaluation form given to participants at the last group session. The third source of data was the notes from the facilitators' meetings.

Participants

The participants were undergraduate students in the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Cape Town. These students were registered in the EDP programme and had attended the psycho-educational groups run by Masters Students in clinical psychology during the month of May 2009. 43 students signed up to join the programme, only 23 attended (counting the students who attended just once). 9 students completed the evaluation forms and attended the focus group (all the students who attended the groups were provided with evaluation forms and invited to join the focus group). The facilitator notes were drawn from the supervision sessions with the student wellness centre, attended by the four facilitators and two supervisors. A problem in recruiting participants was their exam timetable, so careful liaison between the Student Wellness Centre and the Psychology Department was necessary. Because of South Africa's racially segregated past, most of the students in the programme were black. There were 20 students in total who participated in the EDP groups and 8 students took part in the focus group. The students had not obtained good enough matric marks to be allowed into the general degree programme, but their entrance test results had shown that they had potential; therefore they were admitted to the EDP.

Data collection procedures

Focus group discussion

As a form of evaluation of the groups, a focus group discussion was held. This gave students an opportunity to raise a wide spectrum of concerns that they may have had. Focus groups are a useful method of research for participants who do not want to be interviewed by themselves. Instead of responding to the question put by an interviewer, participants interact with one another. The jokes and less "official" responses tell about aspects of their experiences that participants do not communicate directly in response to an interview schedule, and they tap into group norms (Kitzinger, 1995). However these norms may mean that people will not offer points of views that clash with the view of the group or institutional norms. When bringing together participants for a focus group, it is important to be aware of how relationships outside the groups influence relationships within them (Kitzinger, 1995).

Focus groups are helpful to tap into shared rather than individual experiences (Sim, 1998). As it is important to note how participants interact, facilitating the conversation is important (Babbie & Mouton, 2005).

All the students who had participated in the programme were invited to take part in the focus group and complete questionnaires. Students were invited by email and were also informed about the study in the last session of their psycho-educational groups. A note about the focus group was made on the student administration site.

Nine students attended the group. The purpose of the group was explained to the students and they were asked how the year was going. They were then asked how they had experienced the psycho-educational groups and then what had worked and what had not worked about the groups. Since the students seemed to want to say things about the EDP, we also spent time discussing how they experienced the EDP. The facilitator of the focus group took notes of the discussion.

Written Material

Two sets of documents were used as part of the evaluation process. Documents are useful because they are a stable form of data and are easy to analyse objectively. While they have their advantages, they often do not produce the same quality of detail because they may have been recorded for different purposes than the research they are being used for (Tellis, 1997).

The first set of written material consisted of evaluation forms used by the National Association of Children Living with Alcoholics (<http://www.nacoa.org/>) which were adapted to evaluate social support groups. The form was chosen because it was clear (simply written and presented) and easy to use. It covered the areas of participant experience that were relevant to the study. The form included questions on: how welcome participants felt in the group, their experience of facilitators and how useful they found the programme. The form also included space for the participants to add their own issues of interest. The EDP student participants were required to fill in evaluation forms in their last group sessions. These were given to students in the last session of the psycho-educational group. The second set of documents was the process notes from the sessions with the students and workshops with the trainers

from the Student Wellness clinic. The process notes are useful because of the detail they provide but they cannot be regarded as an unbiased source (Tellis, 1997).

Data Analysis

The focus group material was analyzed using qualitative methods. The type of analysis chosen was thematic qualitative analysis. This form of analysis tries to obtain themes from the data. It is useful when deeper discourses are not the object of study. Themes are ideas that are repeated in the data. The data was prepared by transcribing all of it into a computer processing programme. Inductive thematic analysis is analysis that uses themes from the data as opposed to looking for themes from a theory in the data. The second stage of the analysis is examining the script in its entirety, making notes as you go. In the third stage the researcher groups pieces of the script with possible themes. Each group under the theme is checked against the script to see whether more things emerge to flesh out the theme. After this has taken place, the researcher writes about the theme, backing it up with salient quotes (Hayes, 2000).

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The anonymity of students taking part in the study was protected. No identifying details (such as home town and residence) were mentioned in the research report. All participants of the focus group signed informed confidentiality agreements which informed participants of the purpose of the research and their rights with regards to the research (for example, their right to withdraw from the research at any time). There is a confidentiality risk involved in focus groups and so I asked students to talk to me afterwards if they had anything sensitive to say. Students had my contact details, those experiencing adverse emotional reactions were encouraged to contact me so that I could refer them to the student wellness centre. All of the facilitators were aware of the research and had given their consent to it.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

In this chapter, the results of the evaluation study are discussed. To obtain these results, the process of thematic analysis was used to analyse themes that emerged from the raw data. The difficulties confronting EDP students are described and the reported strengths, as well as the challenges faced by the intervention are discussed. This leads to the discussion of the possible shape of future interventions.

Introduction

On the evaluation forms, all but one of the students who filled in the forms reported a positive experience in the group, using smiley faces. In the process notes, it can be seen that some of the students believed that they did have specific deficits in their study skills. They believed that they needed help with time management and study skills. This is an indication that students perceived a need for the psycho-educational groups. In the focus group, a student also reported a positive experience of the group.

“The support groups were very helpful.”

Issues confronting EDP students

Throughout the process of running the psycho-educational groups, it became clear that more support was needed for these students. When asked how the year had been in the focus group one student said, to much laughter,

“The year’s been hectic, hectic, hectic. I’m finished.”

Students in the focus group agreed that the year had been one where they had worked very hard, but at the same time had not made much progress. They compared themselves to their peers in the mainstream programme and found that they were behind.

“We work so much but we are still young to work”.

“We work tooth and claw”.

During the process of facilitation, it became apparent that students had difficulty with specific academic skills. The problem with writing and referencing appeared repeatedly in the notes. Students had been penalized for incorrect referencing. They also felt as if their writing skills were lacking. They were not confident about basic grammar or their ability to research and make a coherent argument. The writing skills course that they do was not regarded as helpful.

In the focus group, English writing and reading was highlighted as a problem. The writing centre is an available resource that students find of limited use.

“It helps us with grammar but not with constructing an argument and putting together content.”

A particular problem identified in the group was the issue of referencing, with some not being sure of how exactly referencing is done and others of its importance: All the students in the focus group said that correct referencing was a difficulty for them. Part of the difficulty with referencing was that the students said that the importance of referencing was not emphasized.

“They need to tell us how important it is, you can miss 10-15% from referencing.” (focus group)

There was confusion about the mechanics of referencing, specifically in-text and end-of-text referencing. Students said that what they had learnt about referencing at school did not transfer to university, and so there was confusion around the transition.

“They need to understand that what we learnt about referencing in school is different from what we learn here.” (focus group)

Another difficulty with referencing was the confusion between the Harvard and APA styles of referencing (the two major referencing styles used in the Faculty of Humanities at UCT).

Student experiences of current EDP support

The Extended Degree Programme is the structure put in place by the Faculty of Humanities to provide the extra support needed by disadvantaged students. The psycho-educational groups were run as a part of the EDP, thus the success of the groups is linked to the perceptions the students had of the EDP. In the focus group, the students appeared to be ambivalent about the programme. Some students expressed an appreciation for the programme and the support that they received.

“Libby (programme coordinator) is great.”

Another student in the focus group said:

“I like EDP, I feel we are supported like we are special students.”

Some of the students in the focus group expressed the idea that the extra work was of academic benefit. This was especially true of the support that they received in mathematics. One of the students said that what was also appreciated was the flexibility that membership of the programme gave them in terms of academic deadlines. One student encouraged the others to join the mentorship component of the Extended Degree programme in order to make the programme better.

“Please guys, sign up for the mentorship.”

While some students in the focus group did express appreciation for the programme, others did not find it helpful. They felt that their workload was too great and that it was the same amount of work as the normal students had to do. Another student said:

“Sometimes I feel like a guinea pig (other students make sounds of agreement). I have to do all these things. Feels like someone watching us.”

The EDP is an experiment of sorts, and the students are monitored more closely than their peers in the standard academic programme. The above quote shows that the students are aware of this.

The ambivalence that students expressed towards the groups is mirrored by the ambivalence that they expressed towards their mentors in the mentorship programme. Some of the students were extremely dissatisfied with their mentors. They said that the mentors were not of use to them at all:

“We are big girls now. We don’t need to be told how to go to the library and the writing centre”.

One student described the process of mentoring in terms that made it seem like a process that alienates students further from the university:

“My mentor doesn’t even know who I am. I pass her in the hall and she doesn’t see me. She looks for me all the time when we meet and doesn’t know what I look like.”

Another student chimed in with:

“That’s why you must become mentors.”

However, students also reported positive, important relationships with mentors. One student described a relationship of help and support:

“My mentor was really helpful. She is the reason why I passed politics. Sometimes I do feel like that but she’s here to help me. she gave me tips on studying for politics. She helped me see the subjects as more than school.”

In the facilitation sessions, students complained that the extra courses in the EDP programme do not prepare them adequately for university. One of the notes read:

“The critical thinking course does not teach them to research properly and they are not taught how to write.”

The dissatisfaction expressed by some of the EDP participants mirrored what was reflected in facilitators’ notes about feedback received at the end of each session. These documents noted that students’ disappointment with being in the EDP

programme was reported at various times in the sessions. Some students reported enjoying the EDP programme, and felt that it had really supported and helped them academically.

In the process notes the difference between school and university expectations becomes apparent. This is especially true of students' perceived performance in university, which had dropped compared to their performance in school. They were also exposed to unfamiliar things, such as computer based testing. In the facilitation notes students were aware that they were the first Outcomes Based Education class to come through the university system and this made them especially wary of university exams, since they believed that they had not written such exams before. The facilitators noted that students did not know what to expect from university exams.

REPORTED STRENGTHS OF THE GROUP INTERVENTION

Social support

A strength of the group process was the social support aspect of the groups. During the process of facilitation, all the facilitators noted that the social engagement was positive. In every session facilitators noted that students were enthusiastic participants and there seemed to be a positive energy about the sessions. Students were supportive of each other, empathizing with one another and offering practical advice. On the evaluation form, all the students chose "agree" or "strongly agree" when asked whether they had felt welcome in the groups. They also all chose "agree" or "strongly agree" when asked whether they had felt safe in the group. When asked what they liked best about the programme on the evaluation form, a theme that emerges is the appreciation of the social support aspect of the programme. It seemed as though students appreciated knowing that other students were going through the same difficulties that they were.

"The fact that there are people who are going through the same things as I am. We can talk about it."

"Hearing other people talking about their experiences."

Part of the social support that was appreciated seemed to be the sense of togetherness. In the evaluation forms, participants wrote:

“Togetherness, talking about our problems.”

“The interactions we have.”

Part of the reason that the social support aspect of the programme was successful was that participants felt safe sharing their feelings. One of the participants wrote in her evaluation form:

“Thank you. I felt that I could say whatever I want to.”

The social support provided by the groups was important because, during facilitation, it appeared that students were not very socially engaged on campus. Students in the focus group reported joining clubs and societies in Orientation-week but not going to the meetings. Some students participated actively in Christian activities; others found that the Christian organizations were places where they were judged. Many of the students reported in the focus group that they were definitely not living the typical student lifestyle. They reported that as first years, they are expected to party all the time but that they found themselves working most of the time.

Positive impact on academic work

On the evaluation forms, students said that the programme had helped them with their academic work, specifically with exam preparation and this was echoed in the focus group, where the students expressed a positive feeling about the exams:

“It was very good and it will help me to prepare for the exams.”

Specific skills gained from the programme that were mentioned on the evaluation forms included stress management and time management.

“It helped find me ways to better manage my time.”

“The programme helped me strongly with time management and stress. It gave me techniques of motivating myself such as giving yourself rewards after accomplishing something.”

On the evaluation form, participants said that the workshops had made a difference in their academic work and approach to exams. Participants mentioned the ability to make a realistic study plan and to follow it as an outcome of the programme:

“I have designed my timetable and am following it.”

One student wrote on the evaluation form that she had learnt the ability to prioritize in the course. Psychological benefits mentioned on the evaluation forms included confidence and stress management.

When asked whether the programme had changed the way in which they approached their academic work, all the students chose “agree” or “strongly agree” on the evaluation form. However, when asked to rate whether they had learned skills they could use every day, the responses were mixed, with 3 of the students choosing “not sure”. The rest of the students chose “agree” or “strongly agree” in response to the question. More than half of the students chose “disagree” or “not sure” in response to a question about whether they had learned better study habits as a result of the programme.

The group as a referral channel

One of the aims of the course was to be a referral channel for students. However, 4 students chose “not sure” or “disagree” on the evaluation forms when asked whether the course had made them more aware of campus services. During facilitation the facilitators did note providing referrals. For example students did not know where the Student Wellness Centre was (this is the place where medical and psychological support is offered to students). Facilitators provided directions to the service. When a student was bereaved, we found that she did not know how to apply for leave of absence or deferred exams. Facilitators helped the student to use the available channels.

Evidence for students' emotional upset can be found in the disturbed eating and sleeping patterns that were reported continuously in sessions. Students either ate too much or too little. Students either struggled to fall asleep, slept very late at night or slept too much. Fatigue was reported as well as illness, and students needed to be encouraged to consult a doctor. Some students reported a lack of proper exercise. All these personal difficulties we encountered indicate that there needs to be a strong link between these groups and the referral system at the Student Wellness Centre.

CHALLENGES

Attendance difficulties

Very few of the participants attended every session, and this inconsistent attendance was a problem faced by the programme. The fluctuation of student numbers is noted in the facilitation notes. At every session new students arrived and old students did not arrive. We had originally seen the groups as closed groups but accepted the fluctuation, partly because there was little we could do to stop it. One student did not arrive at her first two groups, but emailed apologizing and promising to attend the next group. She did not ever arrive at a group.

On the evaluation forms, participants said that the programme had been relevant, despite their not having attended each session.

“I only went to two classes and it helped me a lot and kept me calm.”

“Good, it really helped even if I came a few times.”

One of the participants said on her evaluation form that the programme did not help her that much because she had not attended enough classes. This comment should also be considered in the context of the fact that the programme was brief (4 sessions) as compared to the 10 or so sessions run in other faculties.

The students' belief that the programme would be beneficial to their peers shows us that they believed the programme had merit. A common explanation for participants' absence is that they do not believe the programme to be beneficial. In this case, the

participants did believe that the programme was beneficial. Why, then was the attendance so poor? This question can be answered in two ways. The first looks at the administrative difficulties that the programme faced. The second answer lies in the turbulence that the students experienced in their day to day lives and this will be discussed more fully later in this section.

One of the participants wrote in her evaluation form that the thing she liked the least about the programme was that it started late. Another participant wrote on her form that the groups would have been better if they had been started earlier. Starting earlier in the year was a major room for improvement noted in the forms.

In the focus group, participants agreed that the groups would have been better if they had been started earlier.

“The support groups were very helpful. But if started earlier they would have been more helpful.”

Administrative difficulties

The programme was a collaborative effort between three agencies on the university campus. The Psychology Department is located on upper campus. A staff member from the Psychology Department coordinates the quantitative stream of the EDP. Most of the students in the groups were Psychology students. The Child Guidance Clinic is the home of the MA course in Clinical psychology. This unit is part of the Psychology Department but has separate staff and is on a different campus to the main department. Students at the Clinic facilitated the psycho-educational group. The Student Wellness Centre provided the manuals for the psycho-educational groups and facilitated the facilitators' workshops.

Having three agencies involved in the programme led to serious administrative difficulties. There were three different times to accommodate, which led to a lot of negotiation. There were the training needs of the main Psychology Department and the Child Guidance clinic that needed to be met. There was debate around the question of whose responsibility it was to recruit and then manage participants.

Because there were three different sites involved in the programme, convening meetings to sort out the administrative difficulties became problematic.

Administrative difficulties did have an impact on student attendance. Because all the agencies needed to agree on a plan before starting the programme, the programme started later than we would have liked. The timeslots chosen for running the programmes were not ideal for the EDP students because the needs of the Guidance clinic and the Student Wellness centre needed to be taken into account. Uncertainty about whose responsibility recruitment was led to recruitment being slightly haphazard.

ISSUES THAT SHOULD BE ADDRESSED IN THE INTERVENTION

Unrealistic expectations

During the process of facilitation, it became apparent that students had unrealistic expectations of themselves and of the amount of work that they needed to do. For instance, students believed that they should study between 8 and 12 hours a day before the exams. A question that illuminated the experience of trying to keep up with such expectations was the question about brain death in one of the sessions. A student wanted to know whether brain death existed and what it felt like when your brain was dead. The same student described the feeling of sitting in a lecture and listening to the lecturer:

“Words come out of the mouth but I don’t understand.”

In the psycho-educational groups, we tried very hard to give students a realistic view of how much work was expected of them and what “doing well” at university means. It is unclear that we managed to do this, though. This is certainly an area of concern that should be brought up in future groups.

Demotivation

During the process of facilitation, it became apparent that students were struggling to remain motivated. Problems with concentration were widely reported; students spoke of getting demotivated after working hard and obtaining low marks. They did not want to put in more effort when they had been rewarded with low marks. Once

students became demotivated, some of them reported not coming to class, or not preparing properly for class. One student spoke in the focus group of missing so many classes, she did not even know where her class was. It was extremely difficult for students to sit in a class and not understand the work and be surrounded by students who were understanding and engaging with their academic work. As one student in the focus group said:

“Other students are on chapter 8 and we’re still on chapter 4. How did they get there?”

It was hard for them to feel as if they were the only ones who did not understand. Students reported struggling with specific classes that they did not enjoy.

Facilitator/student interaction

When asked to rate the facilitators out of 10, 6 of the participants gave the facilitators scores of 9 or 10 and one of the participants gave the facilitators a score of 8, with comments such as:

“They were very nice, open, friendly.”

“They are brilliant. They listen and want us to pass.”

However, there were also dissatisfaction, as indicated by the student who wrote on her evaluation form that the thing she liked least about the programme was the facilitation style, and two of the participants only gave the facilitators scores of 5 out of 10. One of them made the comment:

“I hate the way they looked and listened to us as if we are samples for a research.”

This feeling was also reported in the focus group, with some students complaining about the facilitation style. One student in particular expressed the feeling that the

groups were part of a package of things that were forced onto the EDP students. The facilitation style reinforced this belief for her:

“Facilitators feel like they’re watching us for other things. Like experimenters with their subjects.”

The other one commented that more interactions and responses to interactions would have been useful. Both these participants were in the afternoon group. When asked what to improve in the programme in the evaluation forms, both of these students mentioned improving the facilitation style.

The sentiments about “experimentation” resonate with what was recorded in the process notes, where it is clear that the groups were used as a teaching tool for the Masters students. This meant that there is much discussion of our roles of facilitators of psycho-educational groups in the notes. For instance there was discussion of what contact details to give students and how best to refer students. Since there were two clinical psychologists conducting the teaching sessions we also spent time discussing the symptoms that the students experienced. For instance we discussed when behaviour became pathological. We also discussed the role of sleep and eating in making a diagnosis. We discussed psychological labels such as Depression and Generalized Anxiety Disorder. Psychological language was used.

Most of the students expressed no problem with the facilitation style used. However the issue of facilitation style and the way that the groups are used should not be ignored. The process that EDP students go through in the university may make them more sensitive to observation than other students. Thus the careful supervision and support of the student facilitators by the Child Guidance Clinic is needed in order to provide the participants with a useful experience.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Further intervention

In the focus group, students expressed the feelings that, while the psycho-educational groups were helpful, they needed other support. Many students felt that they had

started the year unprepared. One student said that she wished that she knew what she knew now at the start of the year, especially about the workload at university compared to school. Students also said that they had started university not knowing basic things like which textbooks they needed.

“Wish they’d told us what textbooks they needed before we started.”

Students in the focus group said that they would have appreciated help with basic skills for university.

“Varsity is nothing like school. Practical study skills are needed. Not this fancy stuff but how to study practically.”

One student suggested that workshops at the beginning of the year would have been useful

“Workshops, at the beginning of the semester would be useful.”

Students in the focus group thought that courses on study skills would have helped them. The support course they were provided with was called “this fancy stuff” and students felt that the courses didn’t give them the basic skills that they needed. Students also complained about misunderstandings with tutors who did not mark their tutorials or who were strict.

When asked for ideas for improving the programme, two students mentioned that they thought that more students should attend the workshops.

“By making it compulsory, people need this programme.”

“Motivate more people to come because many people don't know about this.”

In the focus groups, students also agreed strongly that more students should have attended the workshops. The students thought that the workshops would be highly beneficial to their peers.

“The programme should have been advertised more. There are other people who need it. It was advertised in the beginning but should have been advertised during the programme.”

The overall perception of the groups was positive. Students were ambivalent towards the EDP and mentorship programme, especially about the level of practical support they receive. A positive aspect of the psycho-educational group was the level of social support students received. Students also reported that the groups had a positive impact on their academic work. The groups served as referral channel for the students. A challenge that we experienced was the low attendance at the group. The administration difficulties that we experienced hindered the effectiveness of the groups. When the programme is run again, the unrealistic expectations and demotivation of the students should be considered. The facilitator-student interaction needs to be improved. A recommendation from this study is that the students are given more workshops in practical skills.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

In this chapter, the results of the evaluation are discussed and the process of the evaluation and ideas for further research are presented. Research shows that for minority students, university can be especially stressful and. South Africa's specific history of racial discrimination means that many black students on formerly white campuses face multiple disadvantages (Fiske, & Ladd, 2006 Sedlacek, 1999). South African universities use Extended Degree Programmes in an attempt to integrate previously disadvantaged students into the university. For the first time, in 2009, a psycho-educational programme around exam stress and study methods was included in the EDP for the quantitative stream of the humanities. The current study is a qualitative evaluation of that programme which was intended to improve the psycho-educational component of the EDP.

Participants reported an overall positive experience from the programme. They came to the programme with requests for the type of skills that the programme was trying to teach and so there was a good connection between the self-perceived needs of the participants and what the programme was offering.

Although there was a reportedly positive experience with the programme, there were also weaknesses. The first noticeable weakness was fluctuation in participant attendance. There was a huge fluctuation, with many participants missing sessions. Half the participants who signed up to the programme did not attend the project. This is something that needs to be addressed in future programmes. The first route to addressing participant fluctuation would be to improve the quality of administration of the programme. The programme was administered by three units on the university campus and difficulties arose around clarity of roles and responsibility, and difficulties in communication channels. These difficulties could be resolved by having a meeting between all units before the beginning of the university semester (which did not happen before the project in 2009). The fluctuation in student attendance can be seen as a symptom of the difficulties in their lives.

Administration difficulties caused the programme to start late. Many of the participants felt that the programme started too late and should have been run earlier. Having a programme that started late in the semester could have accounted for the fluctuation in participant numbers. The end of the semester is when many assignments are due and tests happen. Thus the participants may not have had much time to focus on the psycho-educational programme.

Many aspects of the programme were successful. The programme appeared to be (from facilitator and participant report) successful in providing a measure of psycho-social support to the participants. Students said that they liked the aspect of shared experience in the programme. They reported feeling safe in the group. Facilitators commented that students were very lively in the groups.

The primary aim of the group was to help the students manage exam stress through skills such as time management. In the evaluation forms and in the focus group, students reported feeling positive about the exams. They reported that they had gained skills in areas such as time management. They reported being able to construct and follow a study timetable.

Many of the students appeared to have unrealistic expectations of themselves and they appeared to be demotivated. Future courses should try and anticipate how to deal with these difficulties. While most students were happy with the facilitators, some students were unhappy with the facilitation style. This indicates that the Child Guidance Clinic should offer careful supervision and support of the Masters students who facilitate the programme.

This study was a qualitative evaluation of a psycho-educational programme. The attendance difficulties plaguing the intervention affected the evaluation. A future evaluation should try to recruit more students. This could be done by running an evaluation session within the groups. If the attendance difficulties in the larger programme are resolved, perhaps that would affect the attendance difficulties at the evaluation session. Another difficulty with the evaluation is that I was both an evaluator and a facilitator. This could mean that the students held back in their criticism of the programme. Future evaluations of this programme should bear this in

mind. It may be useful to do a follow-up study to see what impact the psycho-educational programme had on students' study habits in the long term

The psycho-education programme was part of a larger support programme and as facilitators of the support groups, we believe that it would be useful to evaluate how students of the EDP are supported. While we were running the groups it became apparent that the students were under a great deal of stress and that they did not believe that they were adequately supported. Questions around stress levels of the students, the type of support they need and the outcomes of the programmes need to be formulated and answered. A quantitative evaluation would be useful in order to gain an understanding of the severity of the problem. Qualitative interviews would be useful to gain a sense of the lived-experience of students in the EDP. The mentorship programme should be evaluated. It would also be useful to do a follow-up study of students in the EDP, in order to judge how effective it is in the long-term.

The facilitators of the larger Humanities EDP should consider the international retention literature. The way that the student is engaged by the university, as well as the amount of contact students have with academics has been shown to be influential in retention (Tinto, 2006). Institutional culture is an important factor in the university experience (Thomas, 2001). Assessment that provides useful feedback to students helps students to improve (Yorke, 2001). A good orientation programme helps students to understand academic culture (Yorke & Thomas, 2003). All these things should be considered when evaluating the Humanities EDP and when designing changes to the programme.

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APPENDIX A

National Association of Children Living with Alcoholics programme evaluation form.

Modified for the psychoeducational programme evaluation.

Exam preparation support group

Support Group Evaluation Form

1. Which face best captures how you feel about this program overall?
(please mark an 'x' over your choice)



What do you like best?

What do you like least?

2. For each of the following statement please circle the response that best reflects your feeling about that statement.

This program has made an important difference in my approach to exam preparation

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

I feel welcome when I attend support group meetings

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

I have learned skills in this program that I use each day

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

I felt safe when I raised my experience in meetings

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

I practice better study habits as a result of this program

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

I am more aware of campus services that can help me as a result of participating in this program

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

3. How relevant was the program to your experience with Exam preparation

4. How would you rate the way the way facilitators interacted with participants?

(place an 'x' on the line below)

Very Poorly

Very well

Comments:

5. Describe an experience that you have had since participating in the program that you dealt with differently because of what you learned through this program?

6. How do you think we could we improve the program?

Thanks for helping us to assess and improve the program!!

APPENDIX B: Questions asked during the Focus Group

- 1) How has your year been so far?
- 2) How did you experience the focus groups?
- 3) What was worked about the groups?
- 4) What didn't work about the groups?