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The Changing Landscape: Exploring the dichotomy between academia and first-year students' transition from school to university

Abstract

This paper examines the role of the demands made by academia on forty first-year students and how that impacted on their transition from high school to the university environment in South Africa. It argues that the process of analysing and reflecting on the transition challenges of new students is vital because it will aid understanding of how the institutional practices affected the lives of students on both a personal and academic level. A case study design was used and three data sets were collected. Five academic challenges were identified by the students and analysed. The significance of the findings lies in the fact that the institutional practices impacted negatively on the students' self-efficacy, and as a consequence, on their academic performance and integration into the university environment.

Keywords

Academia, academic transition challenges, first-year students, impact, self-efficacy

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Geänderte Landschaft: Überlegungen zum Einfluss akademischer Anforderungen auf den Übergang von der Schule zur Universität bei Studienanfängern

Zusammenfassung

In diesem Paper wird anhand von Erfahrungen vierzig Studierender im ersten Studienjahr untersucht, welche Rolle akademische Anforderungen spielen und wie sie den Übergang zwischen High School und Universität in Südafrika beeinflussen. Es wird betont, wie wichtig der Prozess der Analyse und der Reflektion über die Erfahrungen der neuen Studierenden ist, um Erkenntnisse darüber zu gewinnen, wie sich institutionelle Praktiken sowohl auf das persönliche als auch auf das akademische Leben der Studierenden auswirken. Es wurde ein Case-Study-Design benutzt, bei dem drei Datensätze erhoben wurden. Die Studierenden haben fünf akademische Herausforderungen identifiziert und analysiert. Das wichtigste Ergebnis der Studie ist die Erkenntnis, dass sich institutionelle Praktiken negativ auf das Selbstbewusstsein der Studierenden auswirkten und dadurch sowohl ihre akademische Performance als auch ihre Integration in das universitäre Umfeld negativ beeinflussten.

Schlüsselwörter

Universität, Erfahrungen, Studienanfänger, Einfluss, Übergangsherausforderungen

1 Introduction

The realities of the educational experiences in *apartheid* South Africa have impacted negatively on the vast majority of Black South African students (BUNTING, 2004; LESEKA & MAILE, 2008; MCGHIE, 2012). Attempts by the democratic government to redress this historical imbalance have been made to create access for students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds, but various studies indicate that challenges in this regard still persist (COUNCIL ON HIGHER EDUCATION, 2010, 2013; SCOTT, 2009; STRYDOM & MENTZ, 2010). The sad reality is that

many of these students enter university with extreme social, cultural and financial challenges which are further compounded by the epistemological challenges they encounter at university. These students literally become 'strangers in paradise' as their social and cultural experiences are foreign to that of the university (DIAMOND, VORLEY, ROBERTS & JONES, 2012; STARK & SCHOLDER, 2011). In addition, the South African schooling system reflects that the education system 'cripples' the critical and creative abilities of learners to such an extent that many first-year students are 'totally overwhelmed' by the realities of what it means to be at university (LETSEKA, COSSER, BREIER, & VISSER, 2010).

It is against this backdrop that this paper sets out to explore this 'changing landscape', by critically examining the academic progress of new first-year students in the Extended Curriculum Program (ECP) in a business faculty at a historically Black university in South Africa. The central focus of the paper is on the role of the institutional practices in terms of teaching and learning, and how that ultimately impacted on the students' transition and performance in their first semester at university. Thus, the aim of the paper is twofold: Firstly, it seeks to identify the key challenges that were encountered by a group of students in terms of their transition from high school to university; and secondly, it critically examines how these challenges might have affected the students' self-efficacy and as a consequence, their academic performance during this period. The objective is to arrive at guidelines and enabling factors that will support a successful transition of new incoming students to the ECP. It is argued that understanding this terrain of transition and comprehending the extent of the challenges as experienced by students, will allow for critical reflection and a rethinking of the institutional practices at higher education institutions in South Africa.

2   Theoretical orientation

The theoretical orientation draws on MORROW's (1989, 2007) epistemological views on access provided to students, KELLER's (1987) Motivation Theory and TINTO's (1975, 2006) student integration model which promotes a holistic ap-

proach to the induction of students into the university environment. The above theories were deemed the most suitable to use as theoretical orientation after the data were analysed and the themes and sub-themes were identified because the study was about a bridging program that was supposed to provide the students with epistemological access to higher education studies.

MORROW (1989, 2007), in his paper on epistemological access, postulates that providing access to university for disadvantaged students did not automatically grant epistemological access to knowledge to these students; that access to university was not a guarantee for success at university; and that historical imbalances in the South African system of education, required a radical shift in how one approached teaching and learning in the higher education environment in the new South Africa. He argues that a new approach was vital in the domain of higher education, an approach that must give credence to the actual life experiences of students ensuring that 'bridges are constructed' to enable access to knowledge and successful learning (MORROW 1989, 2007).

KELLER's (1987) Motivation Theory focuses on four steps in the learning process, namely: *attention*, *relevance*, *confidence* and *satisfaction*. He explains that the *attention* of students could be kept through perpetual arousal which uses surprise or uncertainty to gain interest; or through inquiry by stimulating curiosity through posing challenging questions or problems to be solved. *Relevance*, he argues could be established through the use of perceptible language and relevant examples in order to increase students' level of motivation. He further suggests that students should have *confidence* in themselves and this could be achieved through motivating and encouraging them by setting feasible objectives, performance requirements and evaluation criteria, allowing them to grow and develop at their own pace. Lastly, he explains that students' *satisfaction* could be achieved through regular feedback, reinforcements and incentives. These in turn, could strengthen the students' intrinsic and extrinsic motivational levels (KELLER, 1987). Thus, Keller's Motivation Theory is about strengthening the students' perceived self-efficacy in order to become self-regulating students. BANDURA (1997, p. 3) defines perceived self-efficacy as "beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of

action required to produce given attainments"; while ZIMMERMAN (2002, p. 65) states that "self-regulation is the self-directive process by which learners transform their mental abilities into academic skills". Implied in these definitions is the fact that students should have confidence in their own abilities and believe that they can learn and be successful in their studies (BRIGGS, CLARK & HALL, 2012; EINFALT & TURLEY, 2013).

Finally, TINTO (1975, 2006) formulated a 'student integration model' where he presents the argument that, to persist, students need integration into formal (academic performance) and informal (faculty staff interactions) academic systems and formal (extracurricular activities) and informal (peer-group interactions) social systems. TINTO (1975, 2006) argues that both the academic and social integration of students increases their institutional commitment and that in turn, will ultimately reduce student dropout rates.

Based on the aim and objectives of this study, and the theoretical orientation, three questions guide the data analysis and discussion, namely:

1. What were the transition challenges that students in the Extended Curriculum Program encountered, with specific focus on the demands made by academia?
2. How did the identified challenges impact on the students' learning process, with reference to their self-efficacy and their academic performance in the first semester?
3. What can the institution do to minimise or prevent the challenges so that new students could integrate successfully to the university environment?

3   Methodology

A case study research design was utilised in this study. A case study design forms part of qualitative research as it allows researchers to conduct an extensive examination of a particular phenomenon (SCHRANK, 2009; YIN, 2009). STAKE (1995, p. 23) clarifies that a case does not have to be an individual... "it can be whatever

'bounded system' is of interest – an institution, a programme, a population can be a case". Also, both STAKE (1995) and BABBIE and MOUTON (2001) explain that case studies help to unveil that which is not known in a unique way, which was why a case study design was deemed appropriate.

The case consisted of a group of 40 first-year students who were registered for the B Com General Extended Curriculum Program in the business faculty during the first semester of the 2014 academic year. The National Education Department introduced the Extended Curriculum Program (ECP) to higher education institutions in South Africa as a way to widen access to previously disadvantaged Black learners. These students enter university with the minimum admission requirements and are thus at a higher risk of failing and dropping out than the students who come from private or better resourced schools. The main purpose of the program is therefore to provide (bridging) academic support to these students in the first year of their degree program before they start with the actual first-year subjects. They register for prescribed foundation year subjects and must pass these before they can continue with the normal first-year subjects.

The 40 students were part of a cohort of 245 new students in 2014. At the end of the first semester, 132 students passed all their subjects; 73 students failed one or two subjects; and the remaining 40 students failed all their subjects and had to repeat them in the second semester. Thus, we used a convenient sampling method because we included all 40 students as research participants, we obtained their consent for conducting the study and they formed the Case (YIN, 2009). Following STAKE (1995) and BABBIE and MOUTON (2001), our goal was to identify and understand the reasons for their failure in order to find solutions and assist them better in the second semester.

Three data collection instruments were used: a one page *written reflective piece* in which the students were asked to identify what their transition challenges were and how that impacted on their academic performance in the first semester. This was done in the last week of July which was the second week of the second semester. The second instrument was four *small group sharing sessions* (with ten students

per group) in which the students were required to discuss the challenges identified in the reflective piece and how that impacted on them both personally and academically. The sessions were held during August 2014 and the discussions were recorded and transcribed. Lastly, the students were asked to write a three page *reflective essay* requiring them to do an introspection and clarification of the identified challenges. The essay was submitted at the end of September 2014.

Content analysis was used to analyse the data (CRESWELL, 2013; HENNING, 2004). Content analysis consists of a three stage open coding process. In Stage 1, all the responses of the students were read by two of the three researchers and typed in a Word document. In Stage 2, the responses were grouped and categorized into themes, again by the two researchers in a separate Word document. Three themes emerged from the data, namely: personal, social and academic factors, but only the academic factors are discussed in this paper. The identification of the themes were deductive because they were based on previous studies conducted (LETSEKA et al., 2010; MCGHIE 2012). Finally, in Stage 3, all three researchers worked together and categorised the responses further into sub-themes in a separate Word document and cross-checked that all the responses were correctly categorized. The students' responses were similar in that what they reported in the reflective written piece was explained with examples in the small group discussion sessions and the essay. Thus, the repetition allowed for triangulation and validity of their responses. Five sub-themes were identified under the academic factor theme, namely: lecturing styles compared to teaching styles at school (35 students); a heavy workload (40 students); a language barrier (33 students); literacy challenges (40 students); and the use of technology (30 students).

4   Results

The first question posed at the end of Section 2 was about identifying the transition challenges that the students encountered as a result of the demands made by academia. Thus, under the first sub-theme, the students explained in their essays how they experienced the *lecturing styles of their lecturers compared to how their*

teachers taught at high school, and identified it as a reason why they had failed their first semester courses. One student wrote:

> Part of adapting to university life will also mean adapting to lecturing styles because it is so different from teaching styles...the teachers teach whereas at university the lecturers lecture.

What is particularly striking in this student's response was the apparent contrast in the role ascribed to the lecturer in comparison to the teachers. How students perceived lecturers in comparison to their teachers suggests that something different was happening at university as opposed to school. The implication is that lecturers are not seen as teachers as they do not teach, they lecture. Further interrogation about this perception during the small group sharing sessions unravelled that students' experience most of their lecturers in a 'one way communication mode'. They explained that the lecturers were the only ones who were talking, while they were expected to listen and take notes. An inference could be made that teachers appear to make a concerted effort to engage learners in 'two way discussions' at school, while lecturers are perceived to be 'self- absorbed'. Two other students explained:

> At school the teachers explained things slowly so we understood. At university the lecturers seem to be the only ones who understand what they are talking about.

> Lecturers talk from the beginning to the end of their lecture … their whole attention is focused on their power-point presentations while most of the students are lost because the lecturer seems to be racing to get somewhere…..but we are left behind!

The two responses draw attention to the fact that some lecturers are unaware that the students do not understand what has been lectured, and that the lecturers are mostly concerned about covering the content of the course, instead of focusing on the students and whether or not they understood what has been lectured. KELLER's (1987) theory of motivation has particular relevance in this context, as the implication is that the 'attention' of students' is waning in lectures; that students

are not grasping the 'relevance' of what is being shared and the element of 'satisfaction' is a missing dimension in the context of how the students experienced the lectures. These academics (unknowingly) became not only a transitional challenge to the students, but more importantly, a learning challenge. It would be correct to infer that the academics did not provide the students with the epistemological access that Morrow argues for because the students did not comprehend what was shared in some lectures which, ironically, is what the foundation subjects are supposed to do.

The second sub-theme points to the fact that all the students perceived the *workload as heavy* and identified it as one of their key challenges in the first semester. Many explained that even though they arrived at university with the expectation that the workload would be of a higher standard and greater quantity, the intensity of what each lecturer expected of them left them feeling extremely overwhelmed. Examples were:

> The workload has to be the biggest challenge of them all. Because it is way too much to what a student coming from high school is used to….some days I am torn about whether I should prepare for the test or complete the assignment….I end up not doing justice to either.

> The workload is never in sync meaning you can get 3 or 4 assignments from different lecturers at the same time while still writing tests and attending lectures. It is like being thrown at the deep end of a pool while still learning to swim.

In addition, students shared in the small group sessions that the content covered in one lecture could be equated to the amount of work covered 'over a two-week' duration at school. The responses illustrate the demands made by academia on the students: students are expected to prepare for each class, attend classes and tutorials which in their case, equals to five classes per subject, and they have four subjects, spread over the course of fourteen weeks. Moreover, they are also required to complete assignments and write two term tests for each subject, before the final examinations. It is no wonder then that they experienced the workload as heavy

because it seems as if they are 'pressured with output' for work that they did not understand in the first place. Their responses reflect that they were not receiving the academic support that they supposedly should have been provided with. It is fair to suggest that academia expects far more from the students than what they anticipated for or can manage. Thus, while the Extended Curriculum Program provides access to higher education study, it is not providing the students with the epistemological access that Morrow is arguing for.

The third sub-theme was about *a language barrier*. The university has elected to use English as its language of teaching and learning, but more than 80% of first-year students in the Extended Curriculum Program are either Afrikaans or Xhosa speaking students. The implication is that most of the students have not been immersed or adequately exposed to the English language, yet they are expected to comprehend the content of lectures and meet the requirements of the tasks allocated in English. Responses were:

> My whole life I have been in a Afrikaans school. Now at university everything is English. I struggle to understand what is being said, the words are very new, very confusing…I feel so lost!

> Sometimes I ask myself …am I in the right place…I don't understand what the lecturer is talking about a lot of the time…I feel like I am on another planet….like an alien.

> I go to tutorials because my lecturers tell me that it will help me to understand what was discussed in lectures better, but the funny thing is that I don't understand what my tutor is saying. She speaks very differently…like a French person.

The students' responses illustrate that adapting to a second or additional language at university level is a phenomenal challenge. The second explanation ("…I am on another planet") aptly sums up the situation for many students in similar situations. In addition, students ability to understand what is being taught is further weaken when the issue of differing accents and discipline specific discourses are added to this equation (third explanation). Even competent speakers of English are chal-

lenged by unusual accents as this invariably impacts on one's understanding of what is being shared. Where then does this leave second language speakers of English? Morrows' argument about providing students with epistemological access, Keller's theory of relevance and satisfaction, and Tinto's notion that students should integrate to the university environment are not being met for students who have English as a second or additional language at university as they experience a sense of alienation.

The fourth sub-theme was about a *literacy challenge*. The origin of the literacy challenges that the students' experienced in South Africa are two-fold. Most of the students come from poor backgrounds where there was no money for reading material, and the schooling systems did not teach nor encourage them to read. Thus, they do not know how to read and are unable to discuss what they read. They explained:

> There is so many articles to read. But the language is so high….it is so confusing.

> I don't understand what I am reading a lot of the time. I sometimes ask myself what is the point of reading if I do not understand the stuff.

> We are often asked by lecturers to read additional articles…I cannot even read my basic textbook.

The responses indicate that there is a great divide in how the students' experience 'the act of reading' and lecturers' perceptions of the abilities of their students. Hence, the students were not only faced with a language barrier and a workload that seemed impossible, but they also had to deal with literacy challenges right at the start of their academic careers. It is no wonder that they failed the end of the first semester – it appears that the support which the program was supposed to provide was absent. Instead, the demands made by academia hindered the students' learning and resulted in negative experiences which ended in failure for all of them.

The last sub-theme identified was about *the use of technology*. The ability to use technology in academia is a norm and is already a pre-requisite in the acquisition

and construction of knowledge. And although the students might have been exposed to technology at school, how to use it effectively and independently is a challenge for many incoming students. The students explained:

> Lecturers give us tasks...They say `It is on Ikamva' and we must download the information. We did not have computers in our school. My friends and I struggle with downloading the information.

> We sometimes spend more time trying to find what we need to do on 'Ikamva' than time doing the work which we also struggle with!

> Often the University system is down. We wait then we give up…time goes on…we try again. Sometimes if we are lucky someone helps us. But this is so stressful.

What emerges from the students' responses is the fact that they encounter different challenges relating to technology depending on their prior experiences in this area. Some students seemed to have very limited knowledge about how to use computers because they came from under-resourced public schools. Other students appear to be comfortable working with computers, but not so confident about how to access the students' portal that they were required to use. The lecturers assumed that the students not only know how to use technology, but that they were able to access the required information and complete the assignments. Then there is the dimension of systems failure that the students have no control over, but are still required to meet the deadlines for assignments. The technological demands made on the students became a barrier to their learning and made their transition to the university environment "stressful" which contributed to their feelings of discouragement and despair, which is why they sometimes just "give up" and do not submit their assignments.

5   Discussion

The second question posed in Section 2 was: How did the identified challenges impact on the students' learning process, with reference to their self-efficacy and their academic performance in the first semester? The analysis in the previous section showed that the challenges impacted negatively on the students' learning process and lowered the students' perceived self-efficacy.

Firstly, when lecturers engaged in a one way communication mode, students felt alienated and disinterested. They were not immersed in the content of the lecture, resulting in a lack of understanding of the work and eventually losing the will to learn which was why they did not see the point of attending classes anymore. Thus, the attention of students were not kept; they could not see the relevance of the content discussed because they did not understand the content; they were not satisfied but confused and there was no satisfaction in the learning process for them (KELLER, 1987). Their responses clearly demonstrate that the lecturing styles of the lecturers directly impacted their learning process negatively and hindered their integration to the university environment (TINTO, 1975, 2006).

Secondly, the perception that the workload was heavy resulted in the students feeling pressurized and overwhelmed. It was clear that they did not have the relevant coping mechanisms or the necessary skills to manage their time. Their self-efficacy was negatively affected as they saw themselves as 'failures' because of their inability to cope. This is an indication that they did not believe in their own capabilities to organize and execute the required action to produce given attainments (BANDURA, 1997).

Thirdly, not being able to understand what was taught because they were second or additional language speakers of English, resulted in not achieving any measure of success work-wise. This diminished their self-efficacy further because they were not confident to engage in class and articulate their thoughts. As a consequence, they withdrew from the learning process because they lacked confidence in their own abilities, they were not satisfied but unhappy and they could not develop in

becoming self-regulating students (BANDURA, 1997; KELLER, 1987; ZIM-MERMAN, 2002).

Fourthly, not comprehending what they were reading and feeling overwhelmed with the amount of reading impacted their self-efficacy even more, and contributed to a negative self-worth. The fact that they failed everything illustrates how severe the impact was on their self-efficacy. They were not motivated, their performance did not encourage them to believe in their own capabilities and try harder; instead, it created the opposite effect – a feeling of helplessness and surrendering to failure (BANDURA, 1997; KELLER, 1987).

Lastly, because they could not access the student portal, some assignments were not submitted because they did not have the know-how to access the information to complete the assignments. This resulted in non-submission of tasks and subsequently failure to secure a pass in their semester marks.

Overall, the demands made by academia on this group of new students diminished the students' self-efficacy and impacted negatively on their academic performance (BANDURA, 1997). The transition from high school to university was a devastating experience for the 40 students, resulting in total failure for them at the end of their first semester of studying. The demands made by academia did not provide the students with the epistemological access that MORROW (1989, 2007) argues for; the motivational opportunities which KELLER (1987) promotes; and the challenges experienced prevented the students from developing into self-regulating students who could believe in their own abilities to manage and execute the necessary courses of action (BANDURA, 1997; ZIMMER, 2002). Therefore, everything that the students experienced in their first semester at university prevented them from integrating academically and socially to the university's environment (TINTO, 1975, 2006).

5.1   Recommendations

The last question at the end of Section 2 was: What can the institution do to minimise or prevent the challenges so that new students could integrate successfully to

the university environment? A first recommendation is that the first semester of the Extended Curriculum Program should be structured around inducting the students to the university environment since it is a bridging program that must provide academic support to students who are not academically strong. As such, the main focus should be on strengthening the students' reading abilities in order to avoid the literacy challenge; providing language support to the students who are second/additional speakers of English; providing digital literacy support to assist students to navigate the student' portal and submit their assignments on time; and teaching the students how to apply effective time management in order to manage the workload.

A second recommendation is that, similar to the schooling system, the students should be lectured by South African lecturers, the lectures should be student-centred and interactive, and the lecturers should work together and synchronise the content, assignments and tests so that the students will not feel overwhelmed and stressed.

A final recommendation is that the theoretical orientation in this study be used to provide a safe and conducive learning environment where students will be motivated and feel and experience the learning process as welcoming and supportive, as KUH, KINZIE, SCHUH, WHITT and Associates (2005), and BOWLES, FISHER, MCPHAIL, ROSENTREICH and DOBSON (2014) advocate. Doing it this way will strengthen the students' confidence in their abilities, encourage them to develop into self-regulating students and assist with their integration to the university environment (BANDURA, 1997; KELLER, 1987; TINTO, 1975, 2006; ZIM-MERMAN, 2002). Moreover, students will be provided with the epistemological access that MORROW (1989, 2007) argues for. The end result would be successful learning that the students could build and improve on as they progress to the actual first-year level and sub-sequent subjects.

5.2 Conclusion

New first-year students need positive experiences and authentic support in order to foster a will to learn, the opportunity to succeed, and the resilience to stay the course overcoming any barriers encountered on their learning journeys (BAR-NETT, 2007; BEAN, 2005; EINFALT & TURLEY, 2013). The findings discussed in this paper revealed that the demands made by academia on incoming students created the opposite effect – it weakened the students' perceived self-efficacy, and resulted in total failure in the learning process. It prevented the successful integration of the students to the university environment. This could be a reason why, nationally, the dropout rate of Black students are so high in the first year of study.

It is hoped that the findings discussed in this paper and the impact they had on the students' academic progress will inspire the necessary action from the authorities in higher education in South Africa. We argue that the recommendations made would assist universities to change the status quo, so that future cohorts could be assisted and supported in order to prevent or minimize the academic transition challenges. Learning is developmental and new students' chances to reach their full potential and succeed in their academic careers should be one of the most important priorities in South Africa today.

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