

Laying the Ground Work: Setting up a Student Mentoring Programme

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ABSTRACT Universities in South Africa take the issue of student success and progression from one year level to the next seriously. A high number of the 2011 cohort of first time entering students who were repeating their first year modules in 2012 at one university in South Africa prompted the conceptualisation of a mentoring programme to assist these students to pass their modules. The purpose of this paper was to establish lecturers' impressions on this proposed programme and to lobby for buy-in before implementation. Designed in the qualitative research paradigm, the researchers held conversations with academics to obtain their impressions and recommendations on the proposed programme. Data were analysed through content analysis and revealed that some lecturers had positive views on the introduction of a mentoring programme while others saw it as an unnecessary burden. The paper recommends that there be extensive consultation with all affected stakeholders before introducing new interventions.

INTRODUCTION

The first year of study at university is usually the most challenging for students in South African universities, some of whom are usually under-prepared for higher education, and this has a significant bearing on whether these students progress to second year or drop out (Bunting 2004; Letseka and Maile 2008; Nelson et al. 2009; Wilson Strydom 2010; Council on Higher Education 2010; Selesho 2012). Dropping out of university at first year level is not only a South African problem; this is common in countries such as the USA and Australia. In some cases, students drop out because of failure to make social connections (Egege and Kutieleh 2015). A study done by Morales et al. (2015) found that students from low socio-economic backgrounds take longer to graduate as compared to their peers from wealthier families. Statistics on student attrition at first year level in the South African higher education sector, for example, indicate that the dropout rate for the year 2000 cohort amounted to thirty percent (Bunting

2004). Similarly, in America, according to Hattie (2009) cited in Morales et al. (2015: 122), with the increase in the number of poor students have come questions centred upon "why and how students, particularly poor, first-generation college students, are not graduating at the same rates as their wealthier peers." In the same vein, in Australia, one in five Australian students leave their studies by the end of their first year at university (Gilmore 2014; Cornelius et al. 2016). It is clear that universities need to put mechanisms in place to reduce this dropout rate and help their first year students in their transition from high school to university. As McInnis et al. (2000) cited in Nelson et al. (2009) show, the commitment of an institution to the student is a critical factor in retention, and since attrition is highest amongst first year students, universities need to initiate, support and promote student personal, social and academic engagement in the early weeks of first year to retain students and stop the drift away from university life.

The university under study is referred to as the Small Comprehensive University (SCU) to protect its identity. At the small comprehensive university (SCU), the Teaching and Learning Centre was asked by the university management to analyse the 2011 first year students' end of year examination results. The analysis revealed that fifty three percent of those students would be repeating one or more first year modules in

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the following year. An intervention had to be put in place to assist first time entering students in order to avoid a repetition of the scenario. It was with this in mind that the academic management decided to introduce a student peer mentoring system in the university. The researchers believed that, for such a system to succeed, winning over the support of lecturers and heads of departments was critical. The purpose of this paper was, therefore, to explore lecturers' impression of the proposed pilot student academic mentoring programme and get their buy-in.

The Need for the Involvement of Stakeholders before Implementing Innovations

Engagement with stakeholders as early as possible in decision-making right from conceptualization to planning and implementation has been frequently cited as essential if participatory processes are to lead to high quality and durable decisions that stakeholders take ownership of (Mokoena 2011; Reed 2012; Wadesango 2012; Rabinowitz 2013). This view encouraged the team responsible for the setting up of the programme to engage with academics before the programme was implemented. This, the team assumed, would allow academics to identify with the programme when it is eventually implemented, and this would minimise rejection of the programme. Rabinowitz (2013) argued that it is important for stakeholders to form part of each phase of work to enable them to make contributions in the process. The Civitas initiative (2013) defined stakeholder consultation as "...the integration of the opinions and concerns of relevant stakeholders in the decision-making process. The aim is to make the decision-making process more transparent; to gather more input on which to base decisions; and to create support for the decisions that are made". Similarly, Morales et al. (2015) in their study, reported about the success of the mentoring programme, "...because the program had support from the upper administration, that is, vice-presidents, deans, and department chairs, therefore control over the selection of the faculty members to teach the sections was relatively easy to acquire." Morales et al. (2015) believed that obtaining the authority and buy-in from lecturers teaching on the courses selected for mentoring should be a primary objective for those wishing to create their own mentoring programs.

Commenting on the importance of communication and consultation before introducing mentoring programs, the University of Melbourne (2012: 2) noted that "open communication is vital at all stages of the formal mentoring program... Everyone in the area, whether participating in the program or not, needs to know what the program involves, how it will work and why it is being implemented". Rabinowitz (2013: 4) identified some of the advantages of consulting stakeholders before implementing an innovation; "It puts more ideas on the table than would be the case if the development and implementation of the effort were confined to a small group of like-minded people; it gains buy-in and support for the effort from all stakeholders by making them an integral part of its development, planning, implementation, and evaluation; and is fair to everyone. All stakeholders can have a say in the development of an effort that may seriously affect them and saves them from being blindsided by concerns they did not know about. If everyone has a seat at the table, concerns can be aired and resolved before they become stumbling blocks. Even if these concerns cannot be resolved, they will not come as a surprise that derails the effort just when one thought everything was going well; it further strengthens one's position if there is opposition. Having all stakeholders on board makes a huge difference in terms of political and moral clout; it increases the chances for the success of one's efforts. Identifying stakeholders and responding to their concerns makes it far more likely that one's efforts will have both the support it needs and the appropriate focus to be effective."

Based on the beliefs above that decisions reached through consultation are more likely to succeed, the researchers decided to consult with lecturers in the university who would be affected by the proposed student academic peer mentoring programme to get their input and buy-in before piloting the initiative.

The Concept of 'Mentoring'

Literature confirms that the concept 'mentoring' means different things to different contexts. Landolt (2012) defined mentoring as an informal face-to-face communication which takes place within a given period of time. He further explained that mentoring takes place between a person or a mentor with a much broader knowl-

edge, wisdom or experience and a person with less of these qualities or a mentee. For Morales et al. (2015: 123), "...mentoring is a formalized relationship whereby the mentor facilitates the success of the mentee by teaching and modeling effective behaviours." The mentor in all instances socialises or inducts the mentee into a given community of practice (Hagger et al. 2013; Cornelius et al. 2016). Meinel et al. (2011) considered the following elements as key constituents for a mentoring relationship: (1) Mentoring relationships are personal in nature and involve direct interaction (2) Mentoring relationships are long-lasting (3) Mentoring does not merely foster an individual's skills or knowledge, but represents an integrated approach to support the individual mentee's development. Oltmann (2009) averred that 'mentoring' has become a buzz word in organisations, both in higher education and business contexts, and it has brought about positive results within these contexts. Another positive factor regarding the concept 'mentoring' is that its characteristic is attached to varying activities that share a goal of empowering. When mentoring is adopted as a support service, the organisation should have a goal to achieve through that mentoring programme. The goal of mentoring at SCU is to improve student success. However, it is important to note that although the practice of mentoring has gained popularity in organisations, not all stakeholders have a uniform understanding of the concept, hence the need for a study of this nature.

Mentoring as an Intervention Strategy to Curb Low Pass Rate

Mentoring has proven to be an effective support strategy in bringing about improvement in learning, work performance and confidence in participation. Studies conducted in varying countries do confirm the effectiveness of mentoring in curbing low pass rates and improving student success (Matthew Goniwe School of Leadership and Governance 2009; Andrews and Clark 2011; Egege and Kutieleh 2015; Morales et al. 2015; Cornelius et al. 2016). Andrews and Clark (2011: 50) unearthed that peer mentoring has the ability to help mentees 'learn to learn' which, in itself, promotes independent learning. Mentoring, in the researchers' view, is an exercise whereby the self-esteem for both the mentor and mentee can be boosted. This could be so because

the two (mentor and mentee) relate fairly comfortably with each other since they are both at the same level (in being students). According to Cuseo (1991), cited in Young (2015), peer leaders are empowered to exert influence in a less intimidating way than staff or faculty members. Therefore, the study established that students working with mentors, tutors or peer leaders at participating institutions in South Africa improved dramatically in their academic performance; this implies that they reached their goal of benefiting from educational support for improved performance.

The Conceptualised Mentoring Programme at SCU

Mentoring at SCU is relatively new, and its stakeholders liken it to tutoring. The establishment of a centre that oversees teaching and learning activities in the institution saw the need for formalised student support programs. Therefore, a mentoring programme became a flagship for such programs to curb low pass rate, which was becoming a growing concern. Since there were no formalised student support programs in the university, there was no policy for such an initiative. Therefore guidelines for the mentoring programme were put together and approved by the relevant stakeholders in the institution. These guidelines suggested that mentoring should be conducted to 'at risk' students (mentee). 'At risk' students are students who are repeating a module or more. These should be attached to a mentor who would provide academic support. Mentors are also expected to provide emotional support when a need arises; however, it is emphasised that they should only provide layman counselling to the mentees. Hence these mentors are equipped with layman counselling skills from life skills training. That is, all mentors are trained on basic mentor training skills as well as life skills training. In a study by Lin et al. (2014), participants recognized the importance of pre-training and on-the-job training of peer mentoring and in this regard, Lin et al. (2014) recommended that mentors should undertake pre-training as well as on-the-job training before assuming mentoring duties. Similarly, Cornelius et al. (2016) also identified the training and orientation provided to mentees and mentors as a critical design feature for mentoring programs. Altogether, the training of mentors in

this study was intended to take two days, and skills gained therein would put a mentor in a position to provide lay counselling to their mentees. However, mentors would be encouraged to refer more complex problems to the in-house student counsellors that are based in another unit of the teaching and learning centre.

As a result of the worrying failure rate of first time entering students in the university, the institution secured a reasonable amount of funds from government to introduce a mentoring programme. The funds covered mentor training and payment of at least 40 mentors per School over a period of three years. SCU uses a School system instead of a Faculty system due to the preferred small sizes in enrolments per study programme (Strategic Plan 2012-2016). The initial agreement was that the Higher Education Management Information System (HEMIS) office of the university would assist in identifying students 'at risk'. They would meet for a period of not more than two hours per week to discuss content matters of the problem module. Since mentors are senior students, a strategy to avoid overwhelming them with work was devised. It was then agreed that mentors would work with a maximum of five mentees throughout a semester. The mentor and the mentees would be encouraged to agree on a topic that they would discuss in their next mentoring session. Mentors would also be encouraged to attend the main lecture sessions of the modules they were responsible for in mentoring. The motive behind this was that since mentors would work with mentees on the actual content covered in the modules, attendance of lectures with mentees would make it easier for them to make a meaningful contribution during mentoring sessions. Another interesting aspect was that all trained mentors would also be trained in life skills to ensure that they provided meaningful support to the mentees. Life skills topics imparted to mentors at SCU are as follows: increasing motivation, goal setting, time management, problem-solving and decision-making, self-concept enhancement, stress management, interpersonal relationships, communication skills and assertiveness.

The guidelines further suggested that a mentor should be assigned not more than five mentees because this exercise is supposed to be a one-on-one interaction. This raised the concern about the number of mentors that would be appointed per module. Again, it is worth noting

that mentoring guidelines came about as a result of benchmarking with other universities in South Africa. Therefore, the approaches that were adopted in the guidelines were not necessarily based on research at SCU but based on best practice from other institutions.

Description of the Context

The institution under study was a rural based comprehensive university situated far from most institutions that are in cities or big towns. The student profile comprised mainly what could be considered as an 'underprepared' cohort for higher education students who mostly come from poor performing schools in the province. Furthermore, the student body at SCU is dominated by first generation students who do not have the necessary social capital to easily succeed at university. According to Coleman (1988, 1990), social capital refers to access to people who are able to offer insider knowledge and guidance as to how to negotiate potentially important social contexts. Social capital, as per Budgen et al. (2014: 158), also "pertains to the potential or actual advantages of belonging to social networks that can facilitate cooperation and success."

Nonetheless, the institution does have students from other provinces, especially Gauteng and Mpumalanga. There is also an influx of international students from Southern Africa and other parts of the continent. On implication, one could safely argue that the institution comprises students from varying educational systems and backgrounds.

A handful of departments have been involved in student support initiatives but have not been following a formal system. Some academics in this context who have provided student support services in their programs or modules have used tutorial sessions more as regular lecture sessions, that is, tutors introduce new topics for discussions during tutorials instead of dealing with tasks or activities and clarifying gaps around a topic that was introduced by a lecturer during the main lecture session. Academics have designed their own academic support programs guided by their needs and human capacity. The programs are not coordinated from a central office. For this reason, a centrally coordinated mentoring programme that would suit the context had to be thought of carefully, taking into consideration both poor infrastructure

as well as lack of infrastructure for support activities such as mentoring or tutoring activities.

The Research Problem

The problem of the study is that SCU has never had a formal institutional student support programme because firstly, such programs are encouraged only today in South African universities. Therefore, conceptualising a mentoring programme at SCU was found to be ideal. Secondly, the high failure rate alluded to above served as an affirmation for a need to set up some kind of support to 'at risk' students. Therefore, it was imperative for the researchers who are also responsible for implementing the programme to understand lecturers' views about such a programme. Since qualitative research reports on detailed views of participants, this would give the researchers an opportunity to provide a naturalistic view of the impressions of a mentoring programme at SCU.

Objectives of the Study

The objective of this study was to explore lecturers' impressions of the proposed pilot student academic mentoring programme and get their buy-in. In addition, the aim was to lobby for buy-in before implementation. The guiding question in the researchers' minds was: "What are the academics' impressions of the proposed mentoring programme?" The specific objectives of the pilot programme were to:

- Explore lecturer impressions on the new proposed peer mentoring programme;
- Get input from lecturers on the new peer mentoring programme; and
- Ascertain the extent of buy-in on the programme from the lecturers.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Paradigm/Conversation Analysis

The paper adopted a qualitative approach where conversations were held with academics without any pre-determined set of structured questions. A qualitative research study is an inquiry process of understanding a social or human problem based on building a complex, holistic picture, formed with words, reporting detailed views of informants and conducted in a

natural setting (Creswell 1998; Denzin and Lincoln 2000). This study adopted a qualitative approach called conversation analysis, as developed by Sacks (1978). Conversation analysis, as a methodology in research, is more than interchange, discourse or talk; it has three characteristics, as outlined by Roca-Cuberes (2014). It occurs between and among people and is a cooperative venture where there is an exchange of views, that is, a dialogue. As opposed to interviews, conversation does not require questions as such, but the interlocutors engage in a turn-in-talk around a topic, and the talk will be characterised by the three characteristics already mentioned.

Population

SCU consisted of around 11000 students at the time of conceptualising this mentoring programme. Of these, large enrolments were realised in the undergraduate level with specific modules across schools carrying larger numbers of 'at risk' students; therefore, it is important to note that the sample cannot be based on the total number of students at SCU but rather based on the number of modules that carry large numbers of students and a great likelihood of 'at risk' students. Secondly, since this study is qualitative in nature, the conversations held with lecturers led to a saturation point since all lecturers that participated belonged to all departments with large numbers and 'at risk' students.

Sampling

A purposive sample of seven lecturers teaching the identified 'at risk' modules were targeted for the study. In purposive sampling, sampled units are selected for a specific purpose on which the researcher decides (Holloway and Wheeler 2010). In this paper, the specific purpose was to set up a mentoring programme for students 'at risk' and, therefore, the lecturers teaching those modules were considered 'information-rich' sources because of their work with students who were repeating the modules.

Participants were lecturers and/or Heads of Departments (HoDs) of modules that were targeted to be in the pilot study of the envisaged mentoring programme. The targeted modules were modules that were large in size with high failure rates. These are Mathematics in the De-

partment of Mathematics, English Communication Skills in the Department of English, Geography in the Department of Geography, Ecology and Resource Management in the Department of Ecology, Geo Information Sciences and Management Sciences in the Department of Geography.

Data Collection

Conversations with Lecturers

Data were collected during the examination marking period. This warranted the researchers to hold conversations with participating lecturers, through their HoDs in their offices. This was done to ensure that the conversations took place in conducive environments for the lecturers, given that this was a marking season. Prior to the visit, the participants were sent an electronic copy of the proposed student mentoring guidelines that had been drafted by the Deputy Vice Chancellor (DVC) - Academic. The intention was to allow them time to familiarise themselves with the document before the conversation took place. This was also done to enrich the conversation between the researchers and the interviewees. In cases where there was more than one lecturer teaching the module, a combined session was held with such lecturers, while in cases where there was only one lecturer taking the module, an individual conversation was held with the lecturer. The conversations were audio-recorded using a tape recorder and were transcribed.

The Conversation

During interaction with academic departments whose end of year results were analysed, the researchers started off the conversation by providing a background of the analysis of the results that was done by the DVC Academic and the director of the teaching and learning centre. This was followed by the explanation of the proposed student academic peer mentoring initiative. The researchers then invited a response from the lecturers on the proposed programme as a starting point for the discussion. While the sessions did not take the form of interviews, some questions were used to guide the conversations. Guiding questions included ascertaining the lecturers' views on the introduction of a mentoring programme, and whether or not they thought such a program would work in the univer-

sity and challenges they thought the programme might face and how these could be resolved.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using content analysis. Elo and Kynga (2008) cited Cole's (1988) assertion that content analysis is a method of analysing written, verbal or visual communication messages. Elo and Kynga (2008) argued that content analysis allows points to be reduced into fewer content related categories. Through content analysis of the data, common themes were identified, and these guided the analysis and presentation of results. After identifying emerging themes from the unstructured conversations (Leibowitz et al. 2014), the inductive approach was adopted. Elo and Kynga (2008) asserted that the inductive approach is recommended in situations where there is not enough background around an issue. The inductive approach, as a method of analysis, proposes an idea of opening codes, categorising items and abstraction. Parker (2011: 59) described abstraction as a practice of dividing a whole into elements that are distinct from one another and from the original context and formulating a general description of the research topic through generating categories (Robson 1993; Burnard 1996; Elo and Kynga 2008). Since there was no former background on student academic mentoring at the University in question, one could safely assume that the inductive approach was ideal for this study. This was followed by a meeting of the two researchers where identified emerging themes were compared, and a final set of themes was drafted. For illustrative purposes, some of the verbatim responses from respondents are presented in the results section.

Ethical Issues

The researchers took the responsibility of openness in the study. They sought permission from the participants to have this content published. Although there was no consent form that was handed to the participants, they were assured of the confidentiality of their identities regarding the data.

RESULTS

Conversations held with academics from different Schools and departments brought about

two stances by academics. Some felt positive about the idea of introducing a mentoring programme; others appreciated the idea but raised concerns regarding lack of structural support while others were hostile to the idea, accusing the University of just trying to copy and export ideas from other universities. The results are presented below and reveal that while some academics were positive and showed support for the mentoring programme, there were others who felt that although this was a novel idea, certain structural challenges needed to be addressed before the programme could be introduced. These are discussed in detail in the sub-sections that follow.

Support for the Introduction of a Mentoring Programme

Lecturers in this category raised contradicting reasons why they found it important for the institution to introduce a mentoring programme.

Lecturer 1

This lecturer was positive about the idea of introducing a new mentoring programme. He cited several reasons for supporting this initiative. One was that if mentors were appointed to augment teaching activities that would be better because tutors had thus far been appointed in his department. Their role, however, was to carry out administrative duties because the department had no administrative support, yet academics were fewer than required. *Lecturer 1* had this to say:

"Tutors are appointed but for assisting in the administration of the department, yet the current staff-student ratio is 1:250 yet the recommended ratio by the Department of Higher Education and Training is 1:25."

Coming from the student support perspective, the researchers were not comfortable with the idea of using students in providing only administrative support to departments. This creates a negative imprint for both the students concerned and the department itself. The challenge is that the students providing administrative support are not necessarily gaining disciplinary knowledge which they could share with their peers during support sessions. The concept of 'tutor' loses meaning along the way because while these students are appointed as tu-

tors, their job description is not aligned with the meaning of their title. The concern is students' access to the department's confidential documents. As a lecturer, how does one monitor tutors' access to confidential departmental information?

Secondly *Lecturer 1* commended the calibre of university students who were seen to be hardworking and willing to learn despite their poor schooling background. This positive commentary was raised by a lecturer who had worked as a lecturer in another rural-based institution for a period of 25 years before joining the University. In essence, the lecturer saw this from a comparative perspective which, in the researchers' view, was an important observation worth being popularised in the University; the reason is that lecturers in this institution believe that the institution attracts mostly weak students who could not meet admission requirements in other institutions. He appreciated the commitment that his students showed towards learning. This is what he had to say:

"With the calibre of students we have at the University, that is, hardworking students, we should invest in this strength and provide the best learning environment we possibly can."

Lecturer 2

This lecturer brought a contradictory reason for introducing a mentoring programme at University. Unlike lecturer 1 who felt the programme would strengthen the pool of committed students the University admits, lecturer 2 felt that the University was populated with weak students, mainly those who left school in the late 1990s. These were seen as deserving students for a mentoring programme. These adult learners appeared to be failing to cope with university demands and needed more attention than the students coming directly from high school. The lecturer showed a strong sense of frustration. This was highlighted as follows:

"The registration period of 2012 has seen a large intake of students who finished school/matric in the mid-1990s. This led to a number of students with an exaggerated amount of academic problems amongst students."

Unlike *lecturer 1's* assertions, *lecturer 2's* view on the introduction of a mentoring programme was more on the advancement of disciplinary knowledge than on academic or admin-

istrative staff shortages. This view is commended from the student support perspective. A programme of this nature should, first and foremost, help in the advancement of disciplinary knowledge to 'at risk' students before imparting any other skills such as administrative skills to these students. University teachers should respect the role that universities play, including the importance of students' learning experience during their stay at an institution.

Support for the Introduction of a Mentoring Programme with Reservations

Similar to what academics in the first category mentioned, academics who admitted that there was a need for a mentoring programme, but with reservations, felt that mentoring would only succeed if certain structural issues were first addressed, thereby recommending a small pilot before rolling out the project.

Lecturer 3

"The mentoring programme would be an extra burden to academics because one would not want a situation where students coach others without the lecturer's supervision. You should pilot with a small group, first maybe just one or two lecturers"

The same point made above by *lecturer 1* is reiterated here. While *lecturer 1* feels extra hands from mentors would ease teaching pressure on academics, *lecturer 3* feels that as long as there is shortage of human resources, a programme of this nature would not work because that would mean poor monitoring of activities by module lecturers. This point is well supported by the student support team. Without monitoring, the purpose of the programme would be defeated. *Lecturer 1* has confidence in the calibre of University students, hence he believes that a mentoring programme will succeed and that senior students, especially postgraduate students, can serve as mentors. On the other hand, *lecturer 3* is concerned about the quality assurance of the mentoring programme and feels such a mentoring programme cannot be run without proper monitoring or strong presence of the module lecturer. This lecturer advocates for a small pilot programme first which should be evaluated for quality assurance before full implementation

Lecturer 4

"Though I appreciate your intentions to run a mentoring programme for first year students, I think this will be a fruitless intervention if the issue of clashes in the main time table is not resolved urgently."

This participant shows concern with the University's main timetable. He argues that although introducing a mentoring programme is a move in the right direction, it is not going to solve students' performance in this institution because the main timetable for the whole institution is in the hands of an individual who draws it manually. With the growing number of programs and modules at the university, it is becoming cumbersome to have a practical timetable planned for manually. The current timetable creates endless clashes, which naturally lead to poor attendance of classes.

Opposing Views to the Introduction of a Mentoring Programme

Lecturer 5 condemned the University for displaying a tendency to adopt the pragmatic social science research approach, noting that the University in question had a tendency to copy from other institutions, as shown in the quotation below:

"Small Comprehensive University (SCU) has a tendency to copy from other institutions; we should learn to customise projects according to SCU needs and situation."

In this instance, however, there was research-based evidence that there was a need for a mentoring programme at the University. An analysis of examination results had been conducted which indicated that more than half of the first entering students would be repeating a module the following year. What also seemed to be the issue according to *Lecturer 5* was that the student support unit of the University outsourced funds externally to introduce a mentoring programme without first consulting lecturers to hear their views. She argued that the University should learn to be original, that is, the institution should learn to customise its projects according to its own needs and not according to trends seen elsewhere.

Lecturer 6, instead of focusing on the mentoring programme that was being proposed, took a swipe at the University for failing to come up

with a workload model that would see lecturers carrying fair teaching loads. This is what *lecturer 6* had to say:

"There is no university-wide agreed [upon] workload at University."

There is need for the university to resolve the workload issue as this creates frustrations among lecturers and leads to demotivation.

This was echoed by *Lecturer 4* who felt that coupled with the current shortage of administrative assistants, the mentoring programme would simply create an extra burden for academics.

DISCUSSION

Averting the Introduction of a Mentoring Programme

As shown in the results section, lecturers in this category have differing motivations for introducing a mentoring programme. Some feel a mentoring programme will help ease their current teaching workload. There seems to be a misunderstanding on the part of these lecturers regarding what mentoring is as they perceive it to be a programme that will allocate more people for actual teaching. Such misunderstandings about what mentoring exactly is are also reported in literature. After a review of the literature on mentoring, several researchers have concluded that slow progress has been made on clarifying its boundaries, specifying mentor functions or achieving any disciplinary consensus on what constitutes a mentoring program; they concluded that mentoring research had made little progress in identifying and implementing a consistent definition and conceptualization of mentoring (Crisp and Cruz 2009; Gershenfeld 2014; Egege and Kutieleh 2015). Mentoring, as the literature shows (Husband and Jacobs 2009; Mcghie 2012; Raven 2015), is meant to provide additional space in the absence of the lecturer where peers can create a supportive and safe environment where students can learn to speak openly. Citing Parsloe and Wray (2000), Husband and Jacobs (2009: 231) advised against using mentors as teachers when they argue that, "Mentors need not be teachers. Although there is a tendency for mentors to try and teach, this should be discouraged". Rather than using mentors as teachers, Hatfield (2011: 1) averred that, "... in order for students to succeed as whole human beings, students need additional atten-

tion and care outside of the classroom." Mentoring should, thus, be seen to be complementing what already takes place in lecture rooms and not as a replacement for it.

Another view supporting mentoring from the findings was that the University had seen an upsurge in the intake of adult learners and that a mentoring programme would help these students to cope with University demands. This finding is similar to findings by Mcghie (2012) in Australian higher education, who found that student peer mentoring was particularly important and effective for international and mature students in finding a social group and practicing English language skills and broader academic skills. Commenting on the importance of mentoring in helping students find social groups, Egege and Kutieleh (2015) pointed to evidence that indicated, "about a third of students drop out of university because they made few social connections in their first year and had little personal contact with academic staff."

Mixed Feelings on the Introduction of a Mentoring Programme

Lecturers in this category appreciate the idea of a mentoring programme, but they strongly believe that the existing structural challenges will not give room to the success of the programme. Therefore, before the programme is rolled out, certain structural challenges need to be addressed. The issue of conducting an empirical pilot study before a programme is implemented should be taken seriously to minimise varying expectations by stakeholders. As Leon et al. (2011) showed, the purpose of conducting a pilot study is to examine the feasibility of an intervention that is intended to be implemented on a larger scale. This helps to identify modifications needed in the design of intended interventions. Since feasibility studies focus on the process of developing and implementing an intervention and result in preliminary examination of participant responses to the intervention (Ormond and Cohn 2015), the recommendations from the participants for a pilot first is worth taking into consideration.

Antagonism to the Introduction of a Mentoring Programme

One interesting finding emerging from the study was the rejection of the mentoring pro-

gramme as a mere copy-cat from other institutions and the accusation that the University was guilty of importing inappropriate interventions unsuitable for its own context. This lecturer seemed unaware of the benefits of benchmarking in higher education. Instead of viewing benchmarking as mere copying from other institutions, Achim et al. (2009) argued that, “benchmarking studies, by contrast, draw attention to successful scenarios and serve as a self-improvement tool for organizations which allows them to compare themselves with others, to identify their comparative strengths and weaknesses and learn how to improve.”

Similarly, as Shersad and Salam (2015: 16) showed, “No single university, however large, can encompass all knowledge. It is demanding to be world class in even a few academic fields. Benchmarking is a structured and collaborative learning exercise which would help identify and disseminate good practices and develop new ways of addressing specific problems.” It should be noted, however, that despite the majority of positive recommendations for using benchmarking and successful examples of its current use, there are critics of its applicability to higher education. According to Achim et al. (2009: 856), “The stated objections include the belief that benchmarking is merely a strategy for marginally improving existing processes, that it is applicable only to administrative processes (or only to teaching practices), is a euphemism for copying, is lacking innovation, or that it can expose institutional weaknesses.” There could, therefore, be justification in the fears of these academics for borrowed interventions from elsewhere to be blindly implemented.

Ownership of an idea often comes when participants are consulted from the onset. The finding from this study that lecturers were only consulted after funding had already been obtained and an intervention already conceptualised is cause for concern. As Rabinowitz (2013) showed, in order to get support for interventions, buy-in and support for the effort must be sought from all stakeholders by making them an integral part of its development, planning, implementation and evaluation. Approaching the academics with a complete product only to get buy-in for implementation can be futile. As Morales et al. (2015) argued from their findings, working closely with professors with proven track records of success with at-risk students, the coordinators of the

mentoring programme were able to build mutually beneficial relationships with them and share feedback and observations. Therefore, closely working with affected stakeholders will result in a sense of ownership and ensure that mentoring interventions get full support.

CONCLUSION

There is evidence that some form of student support is necessary at SCU. However, it is also true that there is a sense of concern amongst academics that the intervention might not work if certain conditions are not addressed first, as shown in the reservations given in the results. It appears from lecturers’ concerns that the institution was not ready for such a big programme to be implemented. With the current Council on Higher Education quality enhancement project which focuses on teaching and learning, academics are compelled to embrace interventions such as peer mentoring that enhance student success. The mentoring programme was eventually implemented and interestingly, today the mentoring programme at SCU has grown very popular among both students and academics. The challenge now remains with the teaching and learning centre to urgently review the structure of the programme. Academics who were reluctant to have the programme in place have placed their modules in the programme. A sequel to this paper is planned to examine why the programme has become so popular among the stakeholders.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to allay fears shown by lecturers in laying the groundwork for a mentoring programme, the researchers make the following recommendations to the teaching and learning committee of the University:

- An empirical study is the key to providing evidence of the importance of any new programme. The University is advised to involve the lecturers in such an empirical study in order to promote ownership of the findings. Students, through the Student Representative Council (SRC), could also be brought in to get their views on any new proposed programs meant to benefit them.
- That lecturers be involved from the onset in the conceptualisation of any interventions

meant to benefit the students they are teaching. Without such involvement, lecturers are likely to see such interventions as impositions and reject them.

- Where benchmarking is conducted, lecturers should be included in the benchmarking teams in order to see for themselves the best practice from other institutions.
- The University should consider the matter of assisting staff in change management. Lecturers could be encouraged to attend change management short courses as an up-skilling technique.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE STUDIES

As this study was a feasibility study to ascertain the viability of a proposed peer mentoring program, future research could focus on evaluating the effectiveness of existing programs. Such evidence could then be used to convince lecturers on the effectiveness of such student support programs in promoting student success.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

A limitation of the study could be attributed to the size of the sample as only seven lectures were sampled for the study. However, since the intended new peer mentoring programme's intention was to target modules that had consistently poor results, this sample is considered adequate as these were the lecturers teaching the modules with poor results.

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