The Impact of Differences in Perception of At-risk Students between Staff and Students of the Academic Monitoring and Support Program (AMSP) in the Humanities

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ABSTRACT Evaluating the pilot phase of the Academic Monitoring and Support Program (AMSP) in the College of Humanities, Pietermaritzburg campus at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, has revealed that the differences in the lecturers' and students' perception of "At-risk" students adversely affected successful program implementation. The program strategies have been reformed with the theme: "Stay on the Green, Reach your Dream!" Data was gathered through 16 semi-structured interviews, eight from staff and eight from students, during the abovementioned evaluation to illustrate the impact of the differences in perception of at-risk students among staff and students, and its consequences on the intervention. The study illustrates how such lack of coherence between perceptions can be a challenge to the Program's success.

INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of students at-risk is made complex by its diverse and multiple sources, ranging from family issues, finances, computer literacy, personal problems, laziness, teaching methods, language barriers, lack of responsibility and disability among others (Kalenga and Samukelisiwe 2015; Muhamedbhai 2014; Dhunpath and Vital 2012). While bridging programs admit and support underprepared students, other Academic Development Programs (ADPs) target struggling mainstream students. The popularity of these programs indicates that tertiary institutions are gradually taking ownership of the phenomena of 'under-preparedness' and by extension, underperformance (Potgieter et al. 2015; Volbrecht Boughey 2004 cited in Kloot et al. 2008).

The term "at-risk", as employed in this study denotes students, who in accordance to the University Monitoring and Exclusion Policy are not making good progress towards completing their degrees. At-risk students are identified based on semester academic results, but the diverse causes are often simplistically attributed

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to under-preparedness or poor academic ability, especially by staff. This prejudice and lack of awareness by staff of the underlying causes of underperformance leads to misrecognition with its detrimental implications against students and the program. This paper differs from the many other studies in the field by focusing on how the staff's biased or prejudiced perceptions affect the students' engagement and outcome, and thus the programs' success.

Kalenga and Samukelisiwe (2015) note the relationship between psychological challenges of the university and students' dropout rates in tertiary education. They assert that tertiary students stand at higher risks of developing psychopathology. The material, financial, personal and relational (including personal, family and social) pressures and challenges often add to the pursuit of higher goals of education and employment, cross-cultural issues, family dysfunction, poor frustration tolerance, addiction to drug, academic work overload, and pressure to succeed (Potgieter et al. 2015; Kalenga and Samukelisiwe 2015). These pressures affect the students' ability to concentrate on their studies and social activities. They lead to study burnout with various forms of psychopathology like anxiety or depression (Kalenga and Samukelisiwe 2015).

Therefore, being at-risk only adds to whatever pressures the students were already under. Their primary objective is to come off the risk

and any other pressures. The paper illustrates how at-risk students' capacity to build a positive self-image and confidence is necessary to break out of the risk can be influenced by program staff recognition and relationship with them. Thus, the very programs designed to help them can be a source of further strain and challenge to their success.

Although several studies have been undertaken on the effectiveness of academic development programs (Potgieter et al. 2015; Kalenga and Samukelisiwe 2015; Smith et al. 2014; Kloot et al. 2014; Clarence-Fincham n.d), the impact of staff perceptions of at-risk students is rare (Potgieter et al. 2015). This paper also differs from other studies in terms of its focus and comparisons of staff views to those of at-risk students themselves. It assesses the implications of these diverse and contradictory perceptions on the program's success.

Objectives

The primary objective of this paper was to discuss how the conflict between biased staff perceptions of at-risk students and students' perception of themselves, the program and the staff of the Academic Monitoring and Support Program (AMSP) affected the success of the program. It explored how students come to be labeled at-risk and how the AMSP responds to the University Monitoring and Exclusion policy. It also assessed the consequences of the issues of perceptions between academic literacy staff and students themselves of being at-risk.

The Academic Monitoring and Exclusion Policy in the College of Humanities

Underperformance has to be measured in order to be addressed. The Academic Monitoring and Exclusion Policy of the University of KwaZulu-Natal guides the monitoring and identification of students at-risk. The policy describes how students become at-risk and conditions for excluding students from the university on the grounds of academic performance as follows.

The Academic Monitoring and Exclusion Policy is based on a system of classifying student academic performance as "good academic standing", "at risk" [At-Risk] or "severely underperforming" with appropriate interventions and actions for each. Every undergraduate student…is assessed at the end of each semester and their status, based on their academic performance at the end of the semester or subsequent supplementary exams, is determined and reflected on the student administration system as "green", "orange" or "red" (UKZN 2014: 34).

Thus, the policy lays benchmarks for monitoring student academic performance from admission and continuously tracks their performances after every semester. This ensures timeous identification of academically struggling students for early interventions to combat dropout. It aids the identification of trends and factors responsible for student poor performances.

Every student without prejudice is granted a 'good academic standing' (green) upon first registration. Students continue on the green if they pass at least seventy-five percent of their maximum expected credit load till date, while at the same time having passed seventy percent or more of the normal credit load for the semester (Kalenga and Samukelisiwe 2015; UKZN 2009, 2014). Students fall into the 'at-risk' (orange) zone once they fail to meet the above requirement by the end of that semester. In which case they are placed on academic probation with specific and practical conditions and must only register for one semester. At-risk students are offered academic, personal and career counseling and this condition is reviewed each semester.

After two consecutive semesters of being at-risk, a student is considered as 'underperforming' (red), wherein strict academic probation is recommended. Compulsory academic and personal or career counseling is recommended, during which the student may be advised to continue with the current or choose another qualification within the college. Upon another consecutive semester of underperformance, the students must appeal to justify why the university should readmit them. Re-admission after an appeal is considered final probation, a further underperformance would mean exclusion from the university for two semesters (UKZN 2014: 35). Meanwhile, students can continuously and incrementally improve their performance and gradually recoup previous levels of underperformance until they eventually get back on the 'good academic standing' (green).

Appropriate support systems like AMSP are implemented for battling dropout and exclusion

rates while aiming to enhance throughput and completion rates of students. The preamble to the 'Academic Monitoring and Exclusion Policy and Procedures' (UKZN 2009) mandates that students' exclusion on account of poor academic performance applies only after all other avenues have failed to restore their academic performance. Exclusion thus becomes insurance that students who cannot complete their degrees for reasons that cannot be mediated by the university support structures, are prevented from any further registration. This prevents unnecessary waste of time and resources over academic pursuit by students who cannot cope. It is applied after warnings and interventions offered by the university have failed. Thus, the policy allows students maximum support with incremental and sufficient warning of the danger of exclusion, including an opportunity to appeal for readmission.

Appeals are considered at two levels, firstly, by the college Faculty Exclusion Appeal Committee (FEACOM). Those excluded by FEACOM are finally reconsidered by the University-wide body known as the Academic Exclusion Appeals Committee (AEACOM) (UKZN 2009). Excluded students can return to the same or another college within the university in the future, having satisfied some conditions. These include demonstrating that they have achieved a level of competence satisfactory to the relevant college and the senate or passed 48 credit relevant modules from another University during this period (UKZN 2015). This summation of the Monitoring and Exclusion Policy for UKZN forecasts how the Academic Monitoring and Support Program (AMSP) fits into the scheme of activities within the university as the next section presents.

The Academic Monitoring and Support Program

The Monitoring and Exclusion Policy of UKZN justified the need for the AMSP as an intervention strategy against student underperformance. The Mentorship and Academic Monitoring and Support Program section of the College of Humanities Teaching and Learning Unit Websites gives the following description of the program:

The Academic Monitoring and Support Program [AMSP]…was created in the implementation of the Academic Monitoring and Exclusions Policy in 2009. This program was created in order to deal with the increasing number of students that fall in the "At-risk" (academic) status category… We monitor and support students as soon as they are in this category with the aim of getting them out of the "At-isk" status and back to the "Good" "Green" status. The program is on the three sites of delivery, Howard College, Pietermaritzburg and Edgewood. At Edgewood, the Academic Monitoring and Support Program is known as the STAR program (UKZN College of Humanities Teaching and Learning Website).

The multiple campus locations of the College of Humanities entail uniqueness to its program formulation in each campus as the above quote alludes. These programs align with the goal of the College of Humanities Strategic Plan 2012-2016 to promote excellence in teaching and learning in the College, ensuring ninety percent throughput in minimum time and reducing student dropout to less than five percent (College of Humanities Strategic Plan 2012-2016: 10). It purposes to increase throughput through college-wide Academic Monitoring and Support Programs (AMSP) and Academic Development Officers (ADOs) providing academic mentoring and support for students at-risk.

The Academic Monitoring and Exclusion Policy has a student management system, which generates information about student performances to inform AMSP. AMSP informs students what the policy decisions imply for their academic performance. It also ensures that only students, who cannot leverage the support of AMSP and other support services; consistently underperforming for at least three consecutive semesters, may be excluded from the University.

The AMSP's current goal enjoins students to "Stay on the Green, Reach your Dream!" Its strategies on the Pietermaritzburg campus include the Orientation Program (OP), the Mentoring Program (MP), the Writing Place (WP), the Academic Development Officers (ADOs), the Students Counseling Centre (SCC) and other support workshops on academic writing, time management, stress management, study skills, and preparing for exams. Some of these workshops are currently facilitated by the writing place staff, while others are run by SCC staff. The proceeding section presents in brief, the content of the different activities of the program,

beginning with the mentorship program, which incorporates both the OP and the MP mentors.

The Mentorship Program

Byrne (1991 cited in Ehrich et al. 2004: 519) records that famous artist, scientist and musicians often relate their mentors' significant roles in shaping their destinies. "The term mentor is traceable to a father figure who sponsors, guides, and develops a younger person" (Ehrich et al. 2004: 519). "Mentoring is popular in education, business and medicine, as a means of teaching, inducting and developing the skills and talents of new members to institutions, clubs or professions groups" (Ehrich et al. 2004: 518; Wunsch 1993: 353). Mentoring in academics requires new members to be paired up with more knowledgeable or experienced professionals (Wunsch 1993).

Definition of Mentoring

Wunsch (1993) defines mentoring as "a complex, interactive process occurring between individuals of different levels of experience and expertise, which incorporates interpersonal and career development". It is a progressive relationship, which matures as the individuals involved advance in knowing and learning. It is mutually beneficial while the less experienced individual matures and gains experience to develop as an expert in the field. Wunsch (1993: 349) argues, "mentoring programs can be highly beneficial in terms of acceptance and effectiveness if they are designed in response to the needs of participants". Informally, mentors and mentees naturally find each other, but formalized mentoring programs have started in the last forty years to enable allocation of mentees to mentors (Ehrich et al. 2004).

Mentoring in the College of Humanities

The website for the College of Humanities, University of KwaZulu-Natal identifies two general objectives of its Mentoring Program, namely, achieving good academic performance and achieving quick and successful socio-academic integration in the university environment. AMSP in the Pietermaritzburg Campus has the theme, "Stay on the Green, Reach your Dream!" and its strategic objectives now include: to support the students' adjustment to physical, emotional and life-skills development within the University, to help students develop basic academic and support skills and to support students in the social and governance aspects of student life through allocating them to mentors.

These objectives are primarily focused on first-year students, but resonate with the goals for mentoring registered at-risk students. Thus, the two foci of support mentorship are, firstly to orientate all first-year undergraduate students into the university, and secondly to support students who have completed at least one registered semester, and are at-risk or underperforming. These objectives are met through four mechanisms. These are one-on-one sessions (consultations), group sessions (discussions), Saturday tutorial classes, and social and developmental programs. The first years' Orientation Mentorship was already independently operational.

The mentorship of at-risk students within AMSP is formal. The Program Coordinator matches students to mentors who are senior students, mainly postgraduate students in the same school. Mentors are well-performing students who ideally have studied similar modules. The other component of AMSP, which is relevant to this study, is what has now been replaced by the Writing Place (WP) on the Pietermaritzburg campus. At the time of the study, there was no WP, but an Academic Literacy (AL) Module, taught by trained tutors. Nonetheless, both WP and AL programs have the same objectives of facilitating academic writing skills.

The Academic Literacy Program

The AMSP has now replaced the Academic Literacy (AL) Module with the Writing Place (WP). Unlike peer-mentoring, which targets students psycho-social constraints to academic performance, the AL was a credit bearing module Exploring Literacies in the Humanities (ELH) equipping at-risk students with writing and conceptual competencies of reading and critical thinking (Johnson et al. n.d: 5). ELH is now substituted with the WP. Nevertheless, both ELH and WP have worked hand-in-hand with mentoring and have some mentoring roles.

Exploring Literacies in the Humanities (ELH)

Exploring Literacies in the Humanities (ELH) was a 16 credit bearing literacies module. Its two

outlooks include, (i) writing and learning should be examined at the level of epistemology and identity, and (ii) students should learn within a culture, get to grips with the literacies, and develop their own exploration and thinking (Lea 2004). The module was social constructionist in character, aiming at developing student competencies in reading, writing, and critical thinking. Six specialist tutors were each allocated two to three groups of 20 students per class. Students attended five lectures per week, where the lecturers provided intensive, individualized tuition and feedback through introducing the discourse of academia within Humanities and social Sciences, providing epistemological access, responding to comprehension and literacy elements of the university, developing reading and writing skills, developing competence in research, referencing, and the structure of academic writing, introducing students to how to access information and the use of the library, and helping students achieve better academic results (Johnson et al. n.d 6-7).

The Writing Place (WP)

Conversely, the Writing Place (WP), replacement for the ELH module is an academic support service responsible for student development in academic writing and critical thinking skills. The two main approaches to the writing place include primarily as a drop-in center assisting students with essays and assignment structures, and understanding of academic concepts. Secondly, it organizes workshops on different aspects of academic writing. Within its first function, the center provides one-on-one academic writing tutorials to students by trained tutors. During a 45-minute consultation, the tutor works through a student's essay, discussing how the student has addressed different parts of the essay question and provides suggestions on how the student can improve the structure and grammar of the their essay. Tutors also alert students of the dangers of plagiarism and advise them on correct referencing techniques. They assess student essays guiding students on how to handle structure and cohesion. Tutors are not editors but mentors, nudging students to be more thorough, encouraging grammatically challenged students to book follow-up sessions to discuss corrections effected on the original draft. The center also identifies students who are severely

struggling with basic sentence construction and refers them for more intensive interventions. Students receive a copy of a guide on academic writing and further information on referencing and examination techniques.

The second function of the WP involves a workshop on academic writing among other topics. Unlike ELH, the WP tutors are postgraduate students. They provide a series of academic writing workshops for undergraduate students. These voluntary workshops are held once a week during the 45-minute university forum period. They are not credit bearing and are open to all, not just at-risk students, which means there are no financial implications to the students or the University for registering for the ELH Module. These group sessions are facilitated by the WP tutors to develop their teaching skills as they guide students on essays and assignment writing. They also provide information on how to write objectively in an academic tone. The WP assists at-risk students, and prevents other students from becoming at-risk.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative approach was used to analyze data collected during the evaluation of the pilot phase of the AMSP on the Pietermaritzburg Campus of UKZN. A total of 159 students on the program were divided into 12 tutorial groups. Seven academic tutors were in charge of these groups, with some handling two groups and others handling only one. Primary data was collected through 16 semi-structured interviews. At least one student was chosen from each tutor's group based on their availability for the interviews. Seven one-on-one interviews and one focus group interview was conducted with the students. Each of the seven tutors was also interviewed on a one-on-one basis as well as the program coordinator.

Some data from the Learning Enhancement Checklist (LEC) was also used for the paper. The LEC is described as: *A checklist for identifying academic and non-academic factors affecting student studies. The LEC identifies major issues that each student was facing in order to focus intervention…so that students are treated according to their unique reasons for being at-risk.* The LEC was administered midway through the program. Data was thematically analyzed and differences in perceptions of at-risk

students among staff and students were noted as a significant theme, which affected the students' performances. This paper focuses on the implications of this finding on the program's success. The research question was: How did the differences in perception of at-risk students between staff and students affect the success of the AMSP? Perceptions of staff and students regarding why they were on the program, how students were identified to be on the program, what the benefits and challenges of the program were, and the way forward for the program were made to derive findings.

DISCUSSION

The key finding of this paper is that staff of the AMSP perceived at-risk students differently from the students' perception of themselves. These differences had adverse consequences on the students and on the program. It is asserted that the intellectual resources that gain students entry into the university does not meet the expectation of tertiary institutions (CHE 54 cited in Dhunpath et al. 2013: 3), and higher education in South Africa is accepting responsibilities for student underperformance and under-preparedness on the basis that the schooling system is not likely to yield significant improvement in the quality of its products in the near future (Dhunpath et al. 2013: 1). Higher education is bridging this 'articulation gap' between schooling and higher education systems to curb underperformance in higher education.

However, some tertiary staff are facing an enormous challenge of embracing this new responsibility without requisite training. These challenges affect positive engagement between staff and the target students in ADPs. The challenges range from the sense of apathy among academics regarding the phenomenon, the shock that academics experience upon their first engagement with students at risk, and the fact that students feel discriminated by a program that is meant to support them. There are differences in the way staff and students view the phenomenon of underperformance. The next section investigates academics apathy regarding the matter of underperformance.

Academics Apathy towards Underperformance

Apathy here refers to the absence or suppression of passion, emotion or excitement about underperformance. It entails the demonstration of a lack of concern for it. Despite growing pressure for universities to look more seriously at the issues of underperformance, apathy among academics tend to hamper the universities' transformation to meet student needs (Ketenga and Samkelisiwe 2015; Kloot et al. 2008; Dhunpath et al. 2013). An instance from the University of Cape Town demonstrates the situation as follows.

While many academics were in favor…there was also a certain amount of ambiguity towards academic support. The attitude of the university 'mainstream'… was very much 'business as usual' while it was left to academic support to get on with the job of preparing disadvantaged students for an institution that was itself to remain unchanged (Kloot et al. 2008: 801).

Not all ELH staffs were aware of the phenomenon of underperformance. As academics they favored the idea of academic support without necessarily showing interest in its details and work. They seemed interested in lecturing, but not in whom they were going to lecture. With such apathy and ambiguity they showed no passion or interest in the problem or its causes. This apathy bred a biased perception of underperforming students in these academics'.

Some of these early perceptions were expressed as follows:

Students, a lot of them don't have any real sense of wanting to learn… Some of these students were at-risk in the first place [because] they don't attend their lectures and they do not take things seriously.

Most academics assumed that every case of students' underperformance was related to laziness, under-preparedness, or poor learning abilities, and needed to be dealt with by specialist support staff. In this case, they failed to realize that part of their responsibility was to deal with this issue of underperformance by students in the program. Meanwhile, students at-risk are quick to perceive these attitudes from their lecturers, and they tend to be defensive and resistant. Kalenga and Samukelisiwe (2015) list some other reasons why students could be at-risk including, pressures of financial lack, interpersonal relationships, family and parental challenges, employment prospects, cross-cultural issues, academic overload and many more, which can lead to burnout, depression and anxiety.

Being recognized by the tutors has far reaching implications for the students, given evidence

from the LEC that many students at-risk already feel that they are unhappy, stupid, foolish, dumb, demoralized and incapable of being at the university. Meanwhile, many academics are familiar with bridging programs for underprepared students. Conflating these two sets of students gives an impression that they face the same kinds of challenges. As such, many academics assume that academic support programs are not their responsibility. Understandably, academics have heavy workloads, but these assumptions adversely affect their attitudes towards academic support programs and the plight of the underperforming students. The problem arises when these academics need to be involved with supporting underperforming students, and they receive quite a shock, which negatively affects their work in support of students at-risk. The next section discusses some of the shock that academics had to deal with when confronted with assisting underperforming students in the AMSP.

The Shock of Confronting Underperformance

Academics' lack of awareness about underpreparedness and the causes of underperformance elicited biased perceptions. This caused them to be shocked in their first experience of dealing with at-risk students. The problem with bias is that although not always incorrect, it may not always be the complete picture of the situation or the people. It bears the risk of misrecognition. The following responses are characteristic of how academics raised alarm in expressing their shock over confronting students who are at-risk.

Students don't understand the culture of university! So university means I'm just here in body! But then the work attitude and learning has to change…I must come to class!

I have never seen such unprepared students in my life, so disinterested in learning and without any hunger for knowledge...

I don't think some of these students are fit to be in the university.

While the above comments might be correct of some students' attitudes on the AMSP, generalizing them to all students in the program was quite biased. Such biases have misrecognition effects from staff to students especially considering the assertion that ability is not always the only reason for underperformance (Englebrecht

et al. 2014). Other contributing factors like time management, available resources like food, textbooks and living conditions or distances also add to psychological and physical health reasons, lack of funds or disinterest in the current degree (Kalenge and Samukelisiwe 2015; Englebrecht et al. 2014; Clarence-Fincham n.d).

Misrecognition often evokes reactions from the misrecognized. Most academics tutoring the ELH, not understanding why some students were at-risk, failed to realize that part of students' attitudes were reactions to their misrecognitions. They did not realize that some of the students' negative reactions were resistance to what they considered as bias from the staff and unfair treatment in the program. Nevertheless the dilemma of academics, and their shock about students in the program is justified by the South African Council of Higher Education that "an enduring feature of under-preparedness is that what the students know and can do – attainments that were good enough to gain them entry to higher education – does not match the expectation of the institutions" (CHE 54 cited in Dhunpath et al. 2013: 3).

The resources that some students bring to the university do not quite meet the expectations of these academics. Some students do not realize that despite qualifying for university, their standards are quite low. Moreover, the assertion that under-preparedness is now the responsibility of universities reveals a mismatch between what is expected of Universities and staff dispositions to these expectations. This is an institutional challenge, which implies that not all academics are prepared for the new students entering the universities.

Some academics' assertions that all students are at-risk due to under-preparedness had implications for academics, students and the institution as a whole. Before working on the AMSP, most ELH tutors were oblivious of the issues responsible for student underperformance. Thus, they underestimated the work demands and some of them found the course content challenging. This aggravated their shock as one of the academics expressed,

It was quite challenging because it was a new course and to be honest I don't know that it was the right course for the students…it was challenging for me to have to cope with students who were really weak, they were quite unmotivated. I think they were wondering what on earth this course was doing for them…

The above comments illustrate the challenge faced when a "business as usual" staff suddenly had to deal with students at-risk. This shock exposed their prejudices, triggered resistance from the students and frustrated staff who reported, *'I could not have been prepared for this; the training did not prepare me for this…'* Staff reactions of shock, added to insufficient preparation for the program and were picked by students who thought that the staff were being too nice or treating all at-risk students as though they had the same problems, and trying to teach them as though they were unintelligent. Some students reported that staff asked questions like, "*how did you get admitted into the university with this level of performance?*"

Some staff members also noted with dislike, the negative attitudes from fellow staff towards the students and its implication as expressed below,

I found that sometimes the tutors expressed a lot of negativity and I felt that could be toxic to the students and I certainly found it not very conducive to constructive meetings with the other tutors. Tutors were making complaints about students like "they probably should not be in the university"…and that is against the ethos of what we are supposed to be helping these students with…there were negative comments about the course, which I think was masking their insecurities that they actually didn't understand the materials…the negativity doesn't help for cohesion of the team, but I feel that it impacts the students and it does the students disservice…the negativity is being passed unto them.

The above concerns indicate that as some staff were expressing shock about students on the program, while other staff were shocked that these staff were being shocked and this was creating conflict among staff and limiting the chances of coherence. The response also indicates how this could negatively impact the students. Meanwhile, added to these were some unrealistic expectations that some tutors had, of students.

Unrealistic Expectations of Tutors

Some staff members were shocked about the quality or attitudes of students. They were shocked about how those students were on the AMSP. Despite the realization of some of the challenges that students on the program were going through, some staff still expected students to persist in spite of tutor inefficiencies as described in the following response.

I think for many of them it was quite challenging because I myself found that material quite difficult to deal with, and therefore it was challenging to present to the students in a way they could actually manage or cope with.

Some staff expected students to continue to attend the module, despite admitting that the module contents were difficult for them as staff. Potgieter et al. (2015) emphasize the value of having knowledgeable lecturers in the field of study as a positive contributor to students' positive response to ADPs. Nevertheless, ASMP's lecturers' justification for such expectations was mainly that these students needed help.

Attendance of the students was very challenging. I found it extremely frustrating that people who were looking for help even if the course was quite difficult…were not in class... This coming and going all the time was very challenging for me…. And so we did get a bit stressed in the beginning because students couldn't seem to deal with it…some of them started missing because they…can't deal with things, and that becomes more frustrating.

The differences in expectations could be summed as follows: staff expected that students would continue to attend a difficult module because they needed help. Students expected that if a module is difficult, they should quit it and focus on other modules. There was no understanding between both parties and this led to frustration on both parts.

Meanwhile, as staff members were shocked about the students' lack of seriousness, students were also shocked about expectations that staff had. Such expectations seemed unrealistic for students, especially those who did not need the literacy support. Those who were really struggling needed to rebuild their confidence, and the staff demonstrating lack of understanding of the course material was likely to cause them to panic. This is because failing this or any other module automatically puts them at a deeper level of risk of exclusion. Some students thus felt stigmatized by the assumption that they were compelled to be in the program. Orienting the tutors for the context of such programs would be necessary to avoid such program failures as Clarence-Fincham (n.d) recommends. The next subsection focuses on how these differences in

perceptions amounted to discrimination towards students at-risk.

The Notion of Being Discriminated

The AMSP aims to help students at-risk to avoid exclusion, but students were feeling discriminated and stigmatized for being in the program. The most dominant negative theme of ADPs is a feeling of discrimination and isolation (Potgieter 2015). Prebble et al. (2004: 77) add that discrimination has such influences on retention, persistence and withdrawal from tertiary institutions that it can result in social isolation, alienation, difficulty in making friends, not belonging, or feeling homesick. Most AMSP students felt discrimination from other students, staff and the program at large, and hence some withdrew from the program or the university. Nonetheless, the Monitoring and Exclusion Policy had to be implemented through piloting as the following respondent from management highlights.

If we leave it up to the students and say 'we have this program, come if you may, try if you want, we may not necessarily get the desired outcomes but if we enroll students and then give them the option of dropping out if they wish, some may feel compelled enough to stay, only to find later on that they are glad that they chose to stay. But we cannot force students.

However, students disliked being associated with a program exclusive to at-risk students and a special venue that seemed to betray the uncomfortable feeling of being at-risk. One student describes the experience thus,

When my friends ask me: "why are you always going to the basement?" I tell them that I am taking Spanish lessons because I don't want them to know that I am at-risk.

Many students consider being at-risk a stigma. Potgieter (2015) reports similar experiences among students in similar programs from other studies as being especially related to the locations of ADP being isolated from other mainstream programs. AMSP added to this, misrecognition from some staff, heavy workload and an impression that the program was compulsory. This caused students to be frustrated, leading to high rates of absenteeism. Absenteeism added to the frustration of the tutors evoking assertions like,

The level of absenteeism was also an indication of why some of these students were at-risk in the first place, they don't attend their lectures and they do not take things seriously.

While this statement might be true of some, it is defamatory to other AMSP students whose reason for underperforming was that they registered for fewer credits than necessary or had missed their examinations due to health or family related concerns. Moreover, such students who believed that they were compelled to be on the program against their wishes, resisted because it was depleting their confidence as the following sentiments express:

I think lecturers in the program should stop treating us like grade 7 kids. Just because the module is given to people who are at-risk does not mean that they should give us grade 5 works. It would be better taught to students who have just started university so that they would have knowledge of what is expected of them at the university level.

The idea that such modules are taught to all first-year students indicates how students perceived the program treating them. However, such sentiments are unheard of from other students doing the same module as electives outside of AMSP. This suggests that the problem lies in the exclusiveness of the module to underperforming students. Moreover, at-risk students from different years of studies were lumped together *ad hoc* into tutorial groups, which became a source of further discrimination for those third and sometimes fourth-year students. Students' perceived stigmatizing and degrading treatment from the program affected their engagement and commitment to it. This militates against reports that ADPs should improve students' confidence as it aids their familiarity with the university systems (Potgieter et al. 2015).

Nevertheless, the views of staff and students who persisted in the program changed with time and as they got used to each other and the program. Critical to this change in perceptions was the use of the Learning Enhancement Checklist (LEC) later in the program. The LEC, allowed staff to decipher students with academic challenges from those with time management challenges, study skills, social life or residence challenges. This realization, reinforced what staff were already beginning to observe in their interactions with students, leading to a change in staff perceptions and attitudes toward students

on the program. This vital realization came late, after some students had left the program as the following comment from a staff corroborates:

The entire program…not just the ELH has a model that these students are badly off and we have to raise them up, it's a deficit model. I think the point is to accept that most of the students are fine, they need to be pushed in the right direction, rather than lifted up from some sort of base.

The above response affirms that the program produced the deficit model of students, which affected staff perceptions. Other staff demonstrated change in attitudes by suggesting that ELH was not the best module choice for students on the program:

People, who made an odd mistake, like the timetable mistake ended up with two fails... Others, unfortunately think they know everything and have come a bit short somewhere... come into this course and get annoyed at it because they think it's beneath them, very bad students, but they could give the impression that they knew what they were doing and it was a little bit disturbing.

[T]here are some who are struggling academically a bit, certainly ELH conceptual stuff is difficult for them. And other ones who are battling at a much lower level with language and expression. I think this course is a bit of a blunt instrument, all these students have got the label "At-Risk", which is not a nice label in the first place, but they're "At-Risk" for different reasons and they shouldn't all be doing the same thing.

The above quotes reveal that academics, after being on the program and experiencing the students at-risk, admitted that their original perceptions were totally discriminatory and potentially dangerous for students. They also make valuable suggestions regarding how the program could proceed from there. Such realization is in line with the suggestions by Englebrecht et al. (2014) that the realization of recognizing the indicators of non-success and alerting all parties about them are crucial for the future success of ADPs. The same is suggested for employing or ensuring that quality prepared staff members are engaged in such programs (Englebrecht et al. 2014). Nevertheless, care must be taken to ensure that those students who admit that they really need support are not ignored for the sake of those who feel undermined by them

and staff should be trained to recognize these differences (Potgieter 2015).

In sum, having a program exclusive to students at-risk was in itself discriminatory. Most staff thought that students at-risk should be grateful for the opportunity, but students perceived and reacted differently to discrimination. Some students did not want to be associated with a program constituting a stigma over past poor performance for which they were keen to overcome. Some staff in the program lacked knowledge of the reasons for the students' underperformance. Many students left the program, or were absent because of its reputation as exclusively for at-risk students. Students do not want to be recognized as underperforming. However, as staff perceptions changed, student attitudes also changed. The next section focuses on how students reacted to staff perceptions.

Students' Reactions to Staff Attitudes and the Program Approach

Prior to being in the program, the majority of the respondents reported the realization that they were at-risk or underperforming evoked feelings of unhappiness, feeling like a fool, stupid, dumb, demoralized, feeling incapable of being at the university, feeling like a failure. Some students felt let down or disappointed with themselves and were afraid of being excluded. Upon getting on AMSP there were feelings of anger due to a perceived obligation to be on the AMSP with a reduced credit load. Feelings of embarrassment and loss of confidence were also reported as the pressures that these students had to deal with. Students' reactions are best understood based on these original sentiments and fears. Meanwhile, academic staff tended to perceive at-risk students in the AMSP the same as underprepared students in bridging programs. It is for such reasons that students reacted to perceptions of being spoon-fed or treated like children (Potgieter et al. 2015).

Moreover, the chances of acceptability and success of an ADP is dependent on its response to student needs (Potgieter et al. 2015; Wunsch 1993: 349). While some students were positive and relieved about impending help from the AMSP, others were uncertain, uncomfortable, nervous and not knowing what to expect. Some AMSP staff could not respond to a student's needs, because of their bias. As a result, some

students began to resist the program through withdrawal, absenteeism, lack of commitment or refusal to participate.

The diverse and contradictory perceptions of the relevance and value of AMSP for target students evoked some pessimism about its acceptability. The program was recognizing some students in ways that affected their self-perception and confidence. While some students resisted all forms of misrecognition, other students who accepted the negative recognition or unrealistic expectations risked losing self-confidence. The planners and designers AMSP anticipated the dilemma while expressing the challenges in enrolling students unto the program as follows:

In some instances the people need a little nudge because if you ask them: do you need this program? Some of them would say I don't and…you need to tell them, yes you do! If we leave it up to the students and say 'we have this program, come if you may, try if you want, we may not necessarily get the desired outcomes but if we enroll students and then give them the option of dropping out if they wish, some may feel compelled enough to stay, only to find later on that they are glad that they chose to stay… We must do something, [but] the one thing that we cannot do is to force students to do this.

Accordingly, every student identified as at-risk was enrolled unto the program without any prior assessment of their reasons for underperforming. Having no understanding of why students were at-risk from the onset, some staff of the program misjudged and mistreated many students as one tutor of the literacy module confirms:

Tutors and mentors, needed to know why each student was on…there was a[n] assumption…that there was one reason for students being on the course…that they weren't doing too well academically but we all come across students who were very adequate academically and I think those ones have got a bit bored and some have dropped out…

Before this realization, students were already misrecognized to their detriment. Some of the tutors had already confronted their students that '*the level of absenteeism was also an indication of why [they] were at-risk in the first place, they don't attend their lectures and they do not take things seriously*'. Meanwhile, some students were absent out of fear, or to avoid further misrecognition. Some staff members were con-

fused about their own roles in the program, and students could sense the negative perceptions and the confusions. This enhanced absenteeism originally propelled by some students' curiosities about being on the program. A student who considered learning of essays writing skills as undermining noted: *"Just because it is given to students at-risk doesn't mean they should give us grade 5 work."*

Student frustrations were heightened by the program specification that underperforming students register for 48 credits bearing modules only, including ELH. This probationary obligation prevented some students from registering for modules necessary towards their degree completion. Meanwhile, the compulsory ELH module was unnecessary for some students. The program's insensitivity to reasons for students' previous semester underperformances caused some aggrieved students to leave the program. Some students had underperformed due to financial, psychosocial factors or lack of academic advice, which scholars consider being critical (Potgieter et al. 2015; Englebrecht et al. 2015; Kalenga and Samukeliswe 2015). Fear of failure or lost hopes prompted some students to stay on, while the same factors prompted others to quit the program or the university.

However, the differences in tutor personalities determined the uniqueness of each group challenges. A student who was transferred from one group to another explains:

Some tutors did not understand…they thought that this was our major and we were bombarded with work. My second tutor was lovely. She helped us when we needed help and she gave us homework once a week. My first tutor gave us homework every single day and at one stage I could not cope…it is not my major subject and yet they give me all this stuff… My second tutor was there when we needed help and was nice.

The pressure described above explains why some groups started with 20 students and ended with four or five. Moreover, students who did not see the relevance of the course to their needs, let alone the heavy workload, expressed these concerns:

It is just essay writing…the double lecture and heavy workload, dealing with reading and referencing, library orientation…are really unnecessary.

Attending four times a week, and having assignments each time is too much work, yet we have our own majors and other modules too. There is also the mentoring that we must meet individually and group sessions.

The negativity of staff and the fear of failure by students led many to deregister. Some students attended sparsely, and others persisted because they feared the unknown implications of withdrawing from the module, which is exclusion. This reinforced their feelings of victimization, discrimination, or being punished through the program. Tutors working for the first time with underperforming students were very confused. Students could perceive the tension and frustration.

Nevertheless, those students who persisted eventually enjoyed the benefits of the program. Their earlier perceptions and fears demonstrated through feelings of unhappiness, trauma, loss of confidence, coercion into the program, misrecognition and discrimination, belittlement, work overload, to mention a few changed towards the end of the semester. Persisting students reported the beneficial effects of the program towards growth in self-confidence and abilities, enhanced social lives with friends within the program, enhanced capacities to engage with academic materials and write academic essays, improved marks in other modules, and an overall positive self-worth. Their views on tutors changed to:

The tutoring was not bad. Tutors can keep an open mind when it comes to tutoring and realize that there is no fixed way to getting to an answer. It developed a person and also created chances to amend academic materials, review them as to create awareness of errors to improve on the next tasks.

The tutor made it a point to be clear using practical, common and recent examples. She guided us with assignment writing and referencing, and she communicated well with the students.

Despite the above challenges related to why students left the program, the program also recorded remarkable success for those students who stayed on. By the end of the semester, the report on and the general feelings about the program were more positive than the overwhelming negativity that characterized the early and midpoint of the program. This could be owed to the fact that most of those still on the program by the end of the semester had already had a change

of heart, while most of those with the negative attitude would have already left the program. Nevertheless, it can be argued that most of the students who stayed on were the weaker students who really needed the help that the program was offering and had few challenges. The next section draws some concluding remarks, while speculating on the future of the program.

CONCLUSION

The differences between staff and student perceptions of the pilot phase of the AMSP on the Pietermaritzburg Campus of the University of KwaZulu-Natal had both positive and negative impacts on the program as demonstrated by the evaluation of the program. Lessons learnt are being used, and still have valuable potential for transformational improvement of the program.

Attributing all underperformance to poor academic ability is a myopic bias capable of negatively affecting staff attitude and their relationship with students. Students are also quick to notice discriminatory perceptions and often impulsively react against it through resistance, absenteeism, boycotting the program or remaining in it with significant amount of bitterness. These factors can affect the kind of relationships that develop between staff and the students, and the extent of program success. Moreover, if students sense that the program is not meeting their needs, they are inclined to resist its compulsory probationary requirements.

Interactions between staff and at-risk students were sore until both parties discovered their mistakes and misrecognition of the objectives of each other and the background for these objectives. These discoveries, though late, evoked changes in attitudes and perceptions. Negative attitudes had already affected student commitment, resulting in many students dropping out.

The study affirms the assertion that it is impossible to successfully assist students without knowing what problems they need assistance with. Academic monitoring and support programs are useful for unearthing the challenges facing students at-risk. This includes what causes students to be at-risk and the challenges faced by these students. Some often-ignored attitudes of misrecognition by staff do have severe consequences on the students' confidence,

well-being and success. As such, ADP staff must be trained following some trends on student experiences and challenges before assuming responsibilities.

Clear understanding of why students are at-risk overrides the conflict between staff and students, while facilitating staff assistance of students. Misrecognition, on the other hand, imposes on students a burden to combat prejudice from staff or the entire university community and to protect their self-confidence. Meanwhile, knowing and responding to student needs reduces student resistance and builds the students' confidence. This confidence is necessary to elicit positive belief in them and to enhance their performance.

Students' resistance to negative attitudes coming from staff of the program is in itself resistance to the program. This is evident in the number of students that withdrew from the program due to staff attitudes and perceptions. Some students who persisted for fear of exclusion, benefited from the program content and the change in staff attitudes. These findings are very vital for tertiary institutions in South Africa, especially as universities are taking responsibilities for underpreparedness and underperformance.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Responding to challenges in its pilot phase, AMSP has undergone some restructuring. The replacement of ELH, which was exclusively for students' at-risk with the Writing Place (WP) boycotts the negativity and perceived discrimination surrounding the module as associated with poor performers. The WP upholds academic literacy support not only for students who are at-risk, but all undergraduate students in the College of Humanities. AMSP now provides mentoring for first time arriving students and extends that support to students at-risk with the theme: "Stay on the Green, Reach your Dream!" The AMSP goals now include the following.

To support the students' adjustment to physical, emotional and life-skills development within the University, to help students develop basic academic and support skills, and to support students in the social and governance aspects of student life through allocating them to mentors. Added to these, the training of Academic Development staff should take into consideration the factors of familiarity with the reasons for students' underperformance and equip them

with strategies for dealing with these. This could be integrated into the training of future teachers at both secondary and tertiary levels.

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