

Socio-economic Background and Students' Poor Academic Performance in South African Universities

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ABSTRACT Higher education institutions in South Africa are plagued with challenges such as poor academic performance, retention and throughput that need some interventions. The objective of this paper was to examine students' poor socio-economic backgrounds and poor academic performance and how these affect retention and throughput rates of universities. This paper is based on a review of literature where there was a search for articles from various electronic databases. The findings show that the impediments of poor retention and low throughput facing South African higher education institutions are as a result of students who are inadequately prepared from high school. It is also revealed that the poor academic performance of students is due to their poor socio-economic background. Consequently, most students drop out from university and others take longer time to complete their degrees. It is recommended that universities establish peer academic support programs to mitigate these challenges.

INTRODUCTION

Universities in South Africa have recently undergone vigorous transformations in an effort to change the apartheid legacy. Despite the improved levels of participation in higher education on the part of previously disadvantaged people, Jansen (2002) warns, the integration process and the disruption of educational development in the Department of Education, resulting from crises in its schools and universities, does not augur well with the development of curriculum policies and transformation programs in education. Consequently, it may be understood that the need for the effective implementation of educational programs to improve academic performance is not the manifestation of a new problem, and that the effects conferred by the legacy of apartheid will remain embedded in the very fibre of most academic institutions in South Africa for many years to come. It is in this regard that it became important to explore the challenges faced by university students and the effect of these challenges to higher education institutions.

The South African National Development Plan acknowledges and summarises the chal-

lenges with these words: "Higher education faces major challenges: low participation rates, high attrition rates, a curriculum that does not speak to society and its needs, the absence of an enabling environment that allows every individual to express and reach full potential, and poor knowledge production that often does not translate into innovation" (National Planning Committee (NPC) 2011: 271). It also adds that the massive investments in the higher education system have, so far, not been rewarding in terms of improved academic performance or graduation rates. While acknowledging that the disparities in terms of enrolments and the attainment of academic qualifications have been narrowed among the various race groups, the National Development Plan maintains that the quality of education for the vast majority has consistently not improved at all (Lewin and Mawoyo 2014). Consequently, higher education tends to be characterised by low participation and high attrition. The objective of this paper was to review literature on the effects of poor socio-economic backgrounds on students' academic performance at universities. It discusses the impediments facing higher education institutions as a result of students' poor socio-economic background.

METHODOLOGY

The challenges facing South African higher education institutions have extensively been

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written about in books, journals and newspapers as well as in government documents. While this paper is generated from a larger research project that uses several methodological approaches, the data collected for this particular review is from various databases through the use of a combination of keywords including higher education, challenges, institutions and South Africa. A further manual search was conducted of the references for articles obtained from the database. Articles were retained based on the criteria that they were full-text peer reviewed articles and written in the English Language. Newspaper articles and conference proceedings written in the English language within the last ten years were also included in the review. Some of the databases that were searched included Academic Search Complete (EBSCOhost), and Research Information at the University of the Free State and Teacher Reference Centre (EBSCOhost).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings show that poor socio-economic background and poor academic performance of students result in poor retention and low throughput rates in universities in South Africa. These are discussed in the sections that follow.

Poor Socio-economic Background of Students

Socio-economic status has been defined as “the relative position of a family or individual in a hierarchical social structure, based on their access to or control over wealth, prestige and power” (Sharvers 2007: 1013). Thompson (2014) maintains that a more important resource than the funding provided to schools is the effect of school peers on learners, and their socio-economic background in particular. A large body of research has shown that alongside such variables as culture, ethnicity and general cognitive ability and quality of education, socio-economic status (SES) has a significant effect on the intellectual coefficient and IQ scores of children, their academic performance and, ultimately, their success at school (Richardson 2002). In addition, “many South African children grow up lacking food and nutrition, which does not provide a good platform for cognitive development and full participation in society. Nowhere is this more evident than in South Africa’s poor schooling

outcomes and low skills base” (NPC 2011: 269). This state of affairs severely undermines the academic performance of children and their ability to cope at university later. For this reason, students from these backgrounds who manage to enrol at university are entitled to have access to peer academic support programs in order to consolidate their position at university.

Another factor that exerts enormous influence on general morale and intellectual ability is food security. It is estimated that “an average South African eats less than four out of nine food groups against the dietary diversity norms of seven out of nine...Nationally, stunting affects almost one in five children (18%), with higher levels of stunting in rural areas (24.5%) and informal urban areas (18.5%). About one in 10 children (9.3%) are underweight and this reflects the severity of child malnutrition” (NPC 2011: 269). It can safely be assumed that all of these factors have an impact on the performance of South African students, and this is confirmed by Mullis et al. (2011), in *International Association for Evaluation of Education Achievement* (2006).

The origins of the poor socio-economic backgrounds of many learners in South Africa can be traced back to the apartheid era, whose effects continue to be felt in post-apartheid South Africa, affecting the lives of those who suffered at the hands of the regime and succeeding generations. In 2011 it was found that more than twenty-seven percent of black children between the ages of 10 and twelve years lived in a household with neither parent present, nearly forty-two percent lived with a single parent and only slightly more than twenty-seven percent lived with both parents. By contrast, eighty percent of white children and eighty-three percent of Indian and Asian children between the ages of 10 and twelve years lived with both parents (Statistics South Africa 2013: 9). Research has shown that the presence or absence of parents in families has a significant effect on the progress made by children at school. Bruner (2014) maintains that family structure strongly affects whether or not children are enrolled at school and the highest grade which they complete and the number of grades which they are required to repeat if they are still enrolled at school. Consequently, it is of great importance to emphasise the importance of peer academic support programs, which are destined to provide support and assistance to disadvan-

taged university students in order to help them to escape from the effects of their adverse socio-economic circumstances.

Tangwe and Rembe (2014) maintain that socio-economic status affects the choice of higher education institutions and access to them, both directly and indirectly; often coinciding with a lack of social and cultural capital, such as the knowledge of which 'signals' are appropriate and most effective to transmit to the admission offices of institutions of higher education. According to Banerjee (2016), in order to promote the integration and retention of disadvantaged students, higher education institutions in South Africa could recognise and honour the cultural capital of these students. It is in this particular context that this paper recognises that disadvantaged students at higher education institutions, particularly those attending universities based in rural areas, are faced with specific academic challenges owing to having received little or no parental guidance or orientation among many other factors. Therefore, it is vital to call for an exploration of the manner in which peer academic support programs are implemented in order to overcome these specific problems.

Dell (2012) indicates, in a special report on *University World News*, that the integration process in South Africa had presented higher education with unique challenges with respect to the under-preparedness of students who have been admitted to universities, particularly those universities admitting students coming mostly from poor schools. There has been insufficient public funding and initiatives for academic development programs to support under-prepared students, and this has had negative implications for quality education at the higher level, compromising the educating and training of graduates who possess the knowledge, competencies and skills required by the labour market, in turn affecting economic development adversely (Badat 2010).

The Department of Higher Education and Training or DHET has stressed that there is a pressing need for improving pass rates and graduation rates and also for improving the quality of the graduates leaving many institutions (Cloete 2009). All of these considerations imply that it is important to give urgent and careful attention to the role of the programs that are implemented to provide academic support to students at higher education institutions. According to

the Department of Higher Education and Training (2012), the graduation rates at higher education institutions in South Africa are generally lower than those set by the National Plan for Higher Education. In 2012 the average graduation rate for doctoral students stood at thirteen percent, while those for Master's degree students and those studying for undergraduate degrees and diplomas were twenty-one percent and fifteen percent respectively. The DoE's target for throughput rates "is a minimum of two percent which would imply a final cohort graduation rate of about sixty-five percent. Instead, throughput rates for 2010-2012 were between thirteen and fifteen percent and the cohort graduation rate was forty-five percent in 2012, with an overall drop-out rate of forty-five percent (DHET 2012). The new report by Macfarlane (2013) informs that less than five percent of black youth succeed at university, and more than half of all first year entrants never graduate at all. These pessimistic figures are cause for grave concern, and hence the need for studies to examine how to effectively tackle these issues.

Bouhey (2010) explains that the academic support programs were established at most universities in South Africa in response to the influx of students from poor socio-economic backgrounds, who were under-prepared to enter university, following the demise of apartheid. Accordingly, the role of academic support programs cannot be under-estimated, as it is an important aspect in the context of the integration of the South African education system. Today, South Africa is reported to have one of the highest rates of public investment in education in the world. Allocating approximately seven percent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and twenty percent of total state expenditure, the government spends more on education than on any other sector (MOHTE 2004).

Poor Academic Performance

In the context of this paper, poor academic performance is understood as an inability to produce successful results immediately (Johnson 2002). As Tinto (2006) points out, poor academic performance will inevitably result when students in higher education institutions do not respond well to the teaching methods employed. While enabling students to enter institutions of higher education may be important, retaining and

helping them complete their degree work in no more than five or six years is just as vital to the economic and social health of a nation (Veronica et al. 2004). Institutions of higher education present students with a host of academic challenges to overcome in order to succeed and graduate, such as mastering the content of courses cognitively, successfully coping with demanding study material, effectively managing time and so on.

Remaining persistent and persevering with challenges in higher education are the attributes that define and express the psychological construct of achievement at higher education institutions (Johnson et al. 2014). Johnson et al. (2014) suggest that this psychological construct is associated with academic achievement among students. From this perspective, it may be seen that the sources of social support and the influential people in lives of individual students may have a profound influence on how students develop their own sense of achievement and how they persist in face of academic challenges. Social support, such as that provided by families and friends in the form of peer support, has been reported to constitute a positive predictor of how students at higher education institutions perceive their achievements (Johnson et al. 2014). It is in this specific context that the role of peer academic support programs is vital.

Brown (2010) investigated the phenomenon of dropping out from higher education in a study conducted in rural secondary schools in the Eastern Cape in South Africa, using focus group discussions. The study found that the main cause of dropping out was the failure of students to adapt to the demands of higher education. It also found that this was directly related to the school system not preparing students adequately, resulting in some students finding the adjustment to the demands of higher education difficult. The second cause of students dropping out to a large extent involved the institutions themselves. Brown attributed failure of particular students to the admission policies of universities, maintaining that they did not function effectively to exclude those students who lacked the necessary intellectual capacity and skills. An example of the policies is the third Education White Paper, which has been applied from the time it was ratified until the present as a means of accommodating students who had been previously disadvantaged. According to this policy,

increased access to higher education is the key issue that is being addressed. Despite this, “the participation rate for African and coloured students is still only at thirteen percent... Graduation rates remain unacceptably low and below the benchmarks ...” (NPC 2011: 274).

Critics have attributed the increased costs associated with university education to the apparent rapid growth of faculty and staff, perhaps not recognising the challenges entailed by attempting to educate an increasingly diverse and often under-prepared student population (Williams 2011). Learning assistance programs, supplementary instruction, tutoring and other remedial strategies have required a significant growth in infrastructure. It is generally acknowledged that teachers tend to teach classes in much the same way as they themselves had been taught, typically lecturing without interacting with the students (Mazur 2008), a tendency that has prevailed for generations and which, in many instances, still continues. It seems likely that this tendency may also be prevalent in the methods used by many peer facilitators, as in all probability most peer facilitators would inherit these methods of teaching from their lecturers. Mazur (2008) maintains that this stereotyped approach to learning results in learners depending upon learning by rote without gaining a deep understanding of scientific phenomena, concepts and theories, resulting in learning problems, particularly in science courses where facilitators use such traditional methods. Semela (2010) confirms this by saying that the decline in rates of enrolment and graduation in science subjects at all levels has been evident even in technologically advanced countries such as the USA, the UK, Germany, and the Netherlands. This being the case, it is particularly relevant to recommend support programs to be implemented at all previously disadvantaged universities.

Poor Retention Rates

Retention, attrition, and graduation rates are all measures of the success and persistence of students within a particular educational program (Fontaine 2004). Moll (2004) maintains that one of the key factors contributing to student attrition in South Africa has been shown to be the under-preparedness of school-leavers for studying at higher education institutions. Expanding on this theme, Scott et al. (2007) have

concluded that the reason students fail to complete, or take longer to complete Master's degrees, stems from their lack of academic preparedness, resulting from both their socio-economic background and an inadequate high school curriculum. Fontaine (2004) explains that academic preparedness may be interpreted as the extent to which students feel that they are ready to study at the higher education level, and the ways in which institutions provide academic support if it is needed. According to this view, learning problems may be the result of poor individual skills, or institutional deficits, or both. They can be overcome by enabling learners to improve their language skills, with specific respect to grammar and spelling (Gibbs 2006). Gibbs maintains that although learners are enrolled as full-time students, they are in reality studying part-time, which seriously affects their academic performance at the university level. According to Tinto (2006), the seven areas which influence the retention of students at institutions of higher education are academic experience, including assessment, academic and social matching, finance and employment, family support and commitments, institutional expectations and commitment, academic preparedness and the degree of academic support supplied by universities. These are discussed below.

Nzimande (2010) explains that academic experience encompasses curricula, matters pertaining to teaching and learning, the accessibility of staff, the relationship with staff, the flexibility allowed by teaching staff in terms of concerns such as timetables and deadlines, modes of assessment and opportunities for re-taking courses. Understanding of the concerns of academic experience provides several sound reasons for implementing peer academic support programs. It is easy to understand that most students do not feel that they are able to converse with their lecturers as equals or in a relaxed and unaffected manner, with the consequence that they do not find it easy to talk to them about their academic problems. Kimmo et al. (2010) maintain that students find it easier to maintain regular and on-going contact with their peer facilitators, who can be more flexible and accessible than faculty members. In addition, peers are often able to provide help and support with problems such as homesickness, conflict with roommates and anxiety about tests, matters which students may not wish to broach with their lecturers, whom

they usually encounter only in the formal atmosphere of the lecture theatre.

It has also been suggested that institutional expectations and commitment have a significant influence on retention (Koen 2007). Koen explains that commitment arises from, and is reinforced by, the very strong traditions of those universities which enable their graduates to enter prestigious areas of employment. Consequently, the role of academic support programs should embrace only those institutional expectations that encourage and nurture the desire for academic success among students.

Retention in higher education institutions is also influenced to a very great extent by the academic and social match between students and a particular university, which is related to the degree of academic and social integration within the institution (Mackinnon et al. 2009). The fit between the characteristics of the individual and the institution strongly influences a student's commitment to obtaining a degree. Bean and Metzner's (1985) critique of Astin's involvement theory state that part-time and commuter students tend to be less involved in general institutional activities than full-time students, as they are less likely to be completely integrated into the institution to which they belong. It could be suggested that it would be difficult for peer support programs to function effectively for students who are not completely integrated into the social life of the institution.

Considerations concerning finance and employment also affect retention among students in higher education institutions in South Africa. Skead (2006) and Hlalele and Alexander (2012) concur that most merged institutions of higher learning in South Africa are faced with a host of problems, including students being excluded for financial reasons, a lack of access to higher education for many and under-preparedness for higher learning. It was also revealed in the report on retention at institutions of higher learning of the House of Commons Select Committee in South Africa that a lack of finance and being obliged to seek part-time employment were factors contributing to early withdrawal from institutions on the part of students (Koen 2007). From this it would seem plausible that support programs alone, no matter how great their potential to be effective may be, may not be sufficient to deal with all of the problems which have been enumerated. Most students seek part-time em-

ployment in order to generate supplementary income and, as a consequence, may find it difficult to study as a result of having missed lectures and may not have time to attend peer support programs owing to pressure of work off campus (Koen 2007). Their continued absence from the campus would make it difficult to contact them, even for peer facilitators who are willing to help. Assessing the role of support programs becomes difficult in the light of factors of this sort, as they cannot be effectively implemented in a vacuum created by students being unable to avail themselves to such programs.

The support and commitment provided by families of higher education students is one of the key determinants of retention at institutions of higher learning. Tinto (2006: 23) explains that “families or communities with little or no experience of higher education may be less supportive of students.” In addition, family responsibilities, especially for female students with children, have also been found to have a negative effect on retention. Morrow (2003) maintains that when low academic standards are considered and discussed, there is a great need to consider the heart of institutional discourse and reflect on the institutional values and priorities which cause change and vie for dominant positions in it. This discourse includes what is said and done in lecture theatres, seminars, tutorial rooms and residences. Some examples of institutional discourse include official university statements, policy documents relating to specific subjects, choices of textbooks, the construction of curricula and pedagogical preferences.

As has already been alluded to, academic preparedness is another significant factor affecting the retention of students in South African higher education institutions. The problem of students being poorly and inadequately prepared for university education is not unique to South Africa, and is widespread throughout both the developed and the developing countries, affecting even the most developed countries, such as the United States of America and the United Kingdom (Happen and Therriault 2008). In the US, African Americans and people of Latin descent often fall within the category of disadvantaged students. Francis et al. (2006) have pointed out that students who need to learn English present a unique set of challenges to educators in the US, owing to the central role played by proficiency in academic language in

the acquisition and assessment of content-area knowledge. They go on to explain that a significant proportion of learners and students needing to acquire English language skills are receiving support in order to develop them.

Dougherty (2010) maintains that there is ample evidence that most African American and Hispanic students do not graduate from universities because they are not adequately prepared, academically, to enter them. Consequently, these students create great challenges for institutions to ensure that they succeed academically (Neild and Balfanz 2006). Van Dyk et al. (2009) suggest that the language problem experienced by students in South Africa is a far cry from the one identified and described by many academics elsewhere, and that it exists beyond the realm of grammar and syntax, in the complexities and values of disciplinary discourses and knowledge bases. Van Dyk et al. (2009) conclude that these challenges can be overcome only by working alongside disciplinary specialists who are fluent in the language of the students receiving assistance and who are able to provide precise explanations in the first language of the students who are novices in a particular discipline. It is only once this has been accomplished that interventions may be developed which result in students being provided with the secondary discourses, such as the peer academic support programs, which they need in order to succeed at university. According to Leaver et al. (2005), writing has been reported by many professionals, who use specialised language at advanced levels of discourse, as being one of the most difficult skills to acquire. Consequently, if students who speak English as a second language experience difficulties while writing assignments during their first year at university, it is likely to become progressively more difficult for them as they proceed to higher levels. This analysis would indicate that dropping out of university is likely to become increasingly more prevalent as students advance through their courses if additional supplementary support is not provided.

Low Throughput Rates

Throughput refers to the number of years a student or a cohort of students takes to complete the learning programs or the qualification for which they have registered (Peterson and

Arends 2009). Consequently, throughput will be reflected in the number of students who graduate each year in relation to the number who enrol. According to the CHE's State of Higher Education Report (2009), the educational system in South Africa has made important gains in terms of student participation. There was a need to increase the participation of black people and other disadvantaged groups in order to reflect the demographic realities of the South African society in terms of educational representation. However, the gains in terms of increased participation on the part of previously disadvantaged people have not been matched with corresponding levels of academic success at the level of higher education. Although the policies that were introduced after 1994 resulted in a considerable increase in the representation of formerly disadvantaged groups at institutions of higher learning, a similar degree of success has so far not been achieved in terms of academic performance and retention (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD] 2008). From the dying days of apartheid, during the early 1990s to the present day, there has been a steady growth in the number of these students entering higher educational institutions in South Africa. According to Chabaya et al. (2011), there has been a remarkable increase, with students from previously disadvantaged backgrounds from all corners of the country entering institutions of higher education.

However, the higher rates of participation have been accompanied by undesirable consequences in terms of academic progress and retention, with dramatically increased rates for students dropping out of institutions, which some commentators have referred to as the 'students' departure puzzle' (Chabaya et al. 2011). The Department of Education (2001) has revealed that the rate of retention at higher education institutions has decreased, while the rate of dropping out has increased correspondingly. It has also been pointed out that owing to the persistent stresses experienced by students whose homes are far from the institutions which they attend, the retention and graduation rates for migrant students are affected negatively (Bean et al. 2003). Academic performance affected adversely by these stresses tends to result in students taking more than the stipulated number of years to complete their degree programs. This trend has been particularly noticeable in South

African institutions (Agar 1990; OECD 2008). It could be suggested that one of the main causes of the low rates of graduation at most South African universities is that most of them, particularly the previously disadvantaged universities, mostly admit students coming from poor socioeconomic background and are faced with numerous social problems. Makura et al. (2011) and Maphosa (2014) have pointed out that while the number of students registered at South African universities increased between 1970 and 1980, with a corresponding increase in the number of degrees awarded, the number of female graduates declined as the overall number of registered students rose. This supports the assertion made by the OECD (2008) that the higher education programs of many female students are hindered by family responsibilities. This is an indication that there are other factors that influence rates of retention and throughput, apart from the role played by peer academic support programs, which need to be acknowledged.

Graduation rates for black South African students are shockingly low, and most institutions have significantly lower graduation rates for black students than for white students (Agar 1990; OECD 2008). It is estimated that 1 in every 3 students entering higher education in South Africa will have dropped out by the end of the first year of study and that 7 out of 10 of the students dropping out will be female (OECD 2008). The report by the OECD maintains that the high rate of students dropping out from higher education is bad for the students who drop out, for the institutions involved and for the public in general. These implications require the active concern of both policy makers and higher education authorities (Longden 2004). Carey (2008) has shown that despite the trend, some institutions are in fact graduating black students at a higher rate than white students as a result of monitoring year-to-year changes. This may probably be an indication that some institutions have taken steps to improving students' academic performance.

Koen (2007) provides the example that some students who are recorded as having dropped out have, in fact, transferred to other institutions in the belief that doing so would increase their chances of success. Consequently, while dropping out is often viewed in a negative light, in some instances it may actually provide the means for achieving a particular level of suc-

cess. This also applies, to a certain extent, to those cases in which students leave institutions owing to conflicts between their studies and their part-time employment or the need to raise money. As a result, there is a need to develop useful indicators to investigate the processes of teaching and learning and also to determine how the readiness of students, socio-economic factors and the pedagogical abilities of lecturers all combine to generate widely differing academic results (Scott et al. 2007). The choices made by students may contribute towards a negative perception of the effectiveness of the implementation of academic support programs, as it would be possible to conclude that students are dropping out as a result of poor implementation of academic support.

The CHE Monitor (2010) maintains that South African universities do not pay sufficient attention to ensuring the suitability of students for university and that, instead, they tend to rely on high enrolment and graduation numbers as indicators of success, doing little to mitigate the high rates of dropping out or to promote the retention of students. Huysamen (2000: 146-151) points out that although the schools were integrated in 1995 and have since then experienced a level of transformation, deficiencies in the former Department of Education or DET schools have not been addressed, as yet. Inadequate conditions at schools will continue to disadvantage certain populations of learners for some time to come.

In the domain of higher education a great diversity of factors can affect the performance of students, the number of subjects for which a student registers per year being not the least. In addition, cognitive factors, such as language proficiency, and non-cognitive factors, such as the locus of control and study habits, all exert a significant influence on performance, retention and throughput (De Beer 2000). Matomela (2010), tackling issues of declining pass rates among first year students, quotes the Rhodes University spokesperson, Kerry Peter, as saying that one factor which could possibly explain the drop in pass rate was that the intake from the National Senior Certificate pupils of that year had been unusually high. He said in the Education Faculty the pass rate was over ninety-three percent in 2008 and nearly eighty-nine percent in 2009. At the University of Fort Hare, the throughput rate between 2006 and 2009 has been steadily de-

creasing. There was a small increase in 2009, which was in all probability owing to the corresponding increase in the student intake (University of Fort Hare 2012). Returning students are less likely to return to an institution at which they have failed than students who have passed. This is especially true when they blame the institution for their failure and when they doubt their own academic abilities. All of these points suggest that economic, psychological and other factors play a significant role in students dropping out from higher education (Koen 2007). According to Mabope and Meyer (2014), it is vital to provide access and to ensure throughput for deserving students from previously disadvantaged backgrounds, because South Africa needs highly skilled workers for the labour market in order to help to improve equity. De Beer (2000) maintains that the increasing pressure to select students from disadvantaged backgrounds necessitates the consideration of dynamic psychometric tests to measure potential educational and economic capacities. However, concerns have been voiced that tests of this sort could be disadvantageous to students who are from weak, unsuccessful or under-resourced schools.

A counter-argument is that poorly prepared students, who have the potential to learn, will normally be provided with the extra help and support needed to succeed academically (Balfanz et al. 2004). Most of the students enrolled at universities in South Africa, and particularly those at historically disadvantaged universities, fall into this disadvantaged group. This has necessitated the establishment of academic programs with specialised interventions to support these students and enable them to succeed academically.

CONCLUSION

It would seem obvious from the above discussion that most historically disadvantaged higher education institutions in South Africa are faced with some challenges ranging from academic writing, resource availability and the use of technology among others. It is also obvious that most of the students enrolled in these universities come from poor socio-economic backgrounds and have inherited the apartheid education from their predecessors. Therefore, these are not well equipped for university studies. Most of the students that obtain a minimum re-

quirement and are admitted into the universities face challenges with academic writing, the use of computers, interpretation of questions etc. Due to some of these challenges, most students drop out from the university and others take longer time to complete the degree, which affects the retention and throughput rates of these institutions. It is, therefore, a call for concern that is based on how the challenges are being mitigated to improve retention and throughput hence a fervent call for the establishment of peer academic support programs at all universities to help in the mitigation of these impediments.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends that

- ◆ The high school curriculum should be revised to ensure that learners are well equipped with the necessary writing skills to cope at the university.
- ◆ Universities should establish academic support programs that are well monitored to support students faced with some academic challenges.
- ◆ Students coming to the university from poor socioeconomic background should be identified and special attention given to them by faculty.

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