

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

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INTRODUCTION

- The phenomenon of students At-Risk has diverse and multiple sources.
- Tertiary institutions are gradually taking ownership of the phenomena of ‘under-preparedness’ and by extension, under-performance (Volbrecht & Boughey (2004 Cited in Kloot, Case & Marshall 2008: 801)).
- The term “At-Risk”.
- Diverse causes are often simplistically attributed to under-preparedness or poor academic ability.
- Prejudice and lack of awareness by staff of the underlying causes can lead to misrecognition with its detrimental implications
- This case-study of a pilot programme on the PMB campus discusses how biased staff and students perceptions of an ADP in a literacy module affected the Academic Monitoring and Support Programme (AMSP).
- As a way forward, the paper locates the programme in Tinto Integration Model (TIM); a theoretical model for eliminating the impact of negative biases on the programme.

The Academic Monitoring and Exclusion Policy

- The Policy is based on a system of classifying student academic performance as “good academic standing”; “At-risk” or “severely underperforming” with appropriate interventions and actions for each.
- Every undergraduate student academic result... is assessed at the end of each semester and classified on the student administration system as “green”, “orange” or “red” (UKZN 2014: 34).

The Academic Monitoring and Support Programme (AMS/AMSP)

- The AMSP was created in the implementation of the Academic Monitoring and Exclusions Policy in 2009 to deal with the increasing number of students that fall into the “At Risk” (academic) status.
- The purpose for monitoring and supporting students is to provide immediate support with the aim of getting students out of the “At-Risk” status and back to the “Good” ... “Green” status.
- The programme is on the three sites of delivery, Howard College, Pietermaritzburg and Edgewood. At Edgewood the Academic Monitoring and Support Programme, is ...known as the STAR Programme (UKZN College of Humanities Teaching and Learning Website).
- The pilot study is for the PMB campus

AMSP STRATEGIES

- **Mentorship**
- **Academic Literacy:** a module aimed at equipping students with writing and conceptual competencies of reading and critical thinking
- Writing place
- Saturday classes

Methodology

- A qualitative methodology was used to analyse data already collected during the evaluation of the pilot phase of the AMSP on the Pietermaritzburg Campus of UKZN.
 - Individual interviews with 6 staff tutoring the academic literacy module (ELH)
 - Focus group interviews with 8 students
 - Interviews with programme coordinator and 4 other staff involved in programme administration.
- Differences in perception was noted as a significant theme that arose among others and this paper expands on the implication of this theme and the impact that it had on the programme, drawing some lessons going forward.
- Thematic analysis of relevant findings have been undertaken and discussed with relevant literatures, using extensive quotes from qualitative responses
- Findings are not meant for generalization, but may be crucial for reflections on the practice of Academic Support in general if greater success is envisaged.

FINDINGS

- Academics' apathy towards underperformance
- The shock of confronting under-performance
- The notion of being discriminated
- Students' reaction to staff attitudes and programme approaches

Academics' apathy towards underperformance

- Most staff tutoring the ELH module were from mainstream.
- CHE 54 notes that the intellectual resources that gain students entry into the university does not meet the expectation of tertiary institutions (cited in Dhunpath, Nakabugo & Amin 2013:3).
- HE in SA accepts responsibilities for student quality (Dhunpath, Nakabugo & Amin 2013: 1).
- Many academics are in favour but ambiguous towards academic support. The university 'mainstream', is 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 itself to remain unchanged (Kloot, Case & Marshall 2008: 801).

Early perceptions of students

- Prior to being on the programme At-Risk students reported feelings of: unhappiness, feeling stupid, foolish, dumb, demoralized, incapable of being at the university, lost dreams, 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 reduced credit load. Embarrassment and loss of confidence. Students' reactions are best understood based on these original sentiments and fears.

Early Perceptions by Academics

- The comments below:
 - 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.
 - how did (students) get admitted into the university with this level of performance?
- Assumption under-performance is related to laziness, under-preparedness, or poor learning abilities - beyond the scope of responsibilities of academics. (poor awareness of the issues of under-performance).
- Academics have heavy workloads, but their limited awareness of the context adversely affected their attitudes towards academic support programmes and the plight of the under-performing students.
- The problem arises when these academics (as was the case with tutoring ELH) get involved with struggling students for the first time. They are shocked
- Students At-Risk are quick to perceive these attitudes from their lecturers, as discussed later, and they tend to resist it (let students' perceptions unfold).

THE SHOCK OF CONFRONTING UNDER-PERFORMANCE

staff and students were shocked by different factors

- Tutors were shocked about students performances.
- Bias is not always incorrect, but incomplete - leading to misrecognition when confronted with At-Risk students for the first time as expressed by academics below:
 - Students don't understand the culture of university! ... they are just here in body! ...poor work and learning attitude, not attending classes!
 - 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 for the university.
- Students were shocked about staff treatment and responses to them
- Some of students were shocked by and resisted bias from the staffs and unfair treatment by the programme.
- They were unaware of the view by the South African Council of Higher Education 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, Nakabugo & Amin 2013:3).
- Thus, they felt discriminated by how staffs treated them leading to absenteeism, lateness and disinterest.

Shock of confronting...

- Most ELH tutors understood neither why some students were At-Risk nor the reasons behind students' attitudes.
 - Until working on the AMSP, most ELH tutors were oblivious of the issues responsible for student under-performance. Uncertain about the work demands and unfamiliar with the course contents:
 - It was quite challenging because it was a new course and to be honest ... 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...
 - 'I could not have been prepared for this; the training did not prepare me for this'...
 - This shock exposed their prejudices, and frustrated staffs who tried to be too nice treating all At-Risk students the same.
 - One of the staff observed what was going on in the following terms:
 - Sometimes the tutors expressed a lot of negativity and ...that could be toxic to the students and ...not very conducive to constructive meetings with the other tutors. Tutors complained about students ... against the ethos of what we are supposed to ... negative comments about the course, which I think was masking their insecurities ... doesn't help for cohesion of the team, but I feel that it impacts on the students and it does the students disservice...
- Staffs were frustrated, students felt stigmatized

THE NOTION OF BEING DISCRIMINATED

- Prebble et al (2004: 77) note that discrimination has such influences on retention, persistence and withdrawal from tertiary institutions that it can result in social isolation, alienation, difficulty making friends, not belonging, or feeling homesick.
- One of the students, in reporting her feeling of discrimination collaborates the above assertion...
 - 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.

Stigma, misrecognition and heavy workload from the programme caused students to avoid the programme, but below was typical of how most staff perceived students absenteeism

- *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’.*

- Some students found this view even more discriminating because some reasons for being At-Risk included:
 - registering for fewer credits than necessary
 - missing their examinations due to health or family related or social concerns.

Students who felt compelled, resisted because it was depleting their confidence:

- I think lecturers in the programme should stop treating us like grade 7 kids. ... They should [not] 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 sentiments that such modules be taught to all first year students are uncommon from other students doing the same module as electives outside of AMSP.
- Nonetheless, At-Risk students were from different years of studies together *ad hoc* into tutorial groups.
- Students on the programme register for only 48 credits including the ELH. Thus it deprived some students needing only specific modules to graduate.

Latter Perceptions of Academics and Students

- The views of staff and students who persisted on the programme changed as they got used to each other and the programme. Later use of the Learning Enhancement Checklist (LEC) in the programme was critical to this change
- The LEC is described as:
 - A checklist for identifying academic and non-academic factors affecting student studies. Identifies major issues facing each students in order to focus intervention... on their unique reasons for being At-Risk.
- The LEC, allowed staffs to decipher students with academic challenges from those with time management challenges, study skills, social life or residence challenges.
- This vital realization came late, after some students had left the programme, but it collaborates what staffs were beginning to notice:
 - 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. ...most of the students are fine, they need to be pushed in the right direction.
 - 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...

STUDENTS REACTIONS

- Wunsch (1993: 349) The chances of acceptability and success of an academic support programme is dependent on its response to student needs. 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 biases left the programme.
 - some students soon resisted the programme through withdrawal, absenteeism, lack of commitment or refusal to participate.
- While some students resisted all forms of mis-recognition, other students who accepted the negative recognition or unrealistic expectations risked losing self-confidence.
- This dilemma was aggravated because every student identified as At-Risk was enrolled onto the programme without any prior assessment of their reasons for under-performing.

- Staffs prejudices and mistreatment of was later affirmed by a tutor:
 - 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; it was assumed 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...
- Personalities of tutors also affected the success of certain groups. A student who transferred from one group to another explains:
 - Some tutors were not understanding... they thought that this was our majors and we were bombarded with work.
 - My second tutor helped us when we needed help and she gave us homework once a week. My first tutor gave us everyday single day and at one stage I could not cope

- Some groups started with 20 students and ended with four or five.
- Students who did not see the relevance of the course to their needs, expressed these concerns that Attending four times a week, and having assignments each time is too much work, yet we have our own majors and other modules too plus the mentoring demands of time.
- Students who persisted eventually enjoyed the benefits of the programme.
- Their earlier perceptions and fears demonstrated through: feelings of unhappiness, trauma, lost confidence, coercion into the programme, misrecognition and discrimination, belittlement, work overloaded, changed towards the end of the semester to growth in self-confidence and abilities; enhanced social lives with friends within the programme; enhanced capacities to engage with academic materials and write academic essays; improved marks in other modules and an overall positive of self-worth.

- Some were later to note that:
 - The tutoring was not bad. Tutors can keep an open mind when it comes to tutoring and realise that there is no fixed way to getting to an answer. The tutor made it a point to be clear using practical, common and recent examples. She guided us with assignments writing and referencing; and she communicated well with the students.
- By the end of the semester, positive perceptions overwrote the overwhelming negativity that characterized the early and mid-point of the programme.
- This could be owed to the fact that most of those still on the programme 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 programme. Nevertheless, it can be argued that most of the students who stayed on were the weaker students who really needed the help that the programme was offering and had few challenges.

Looking forward

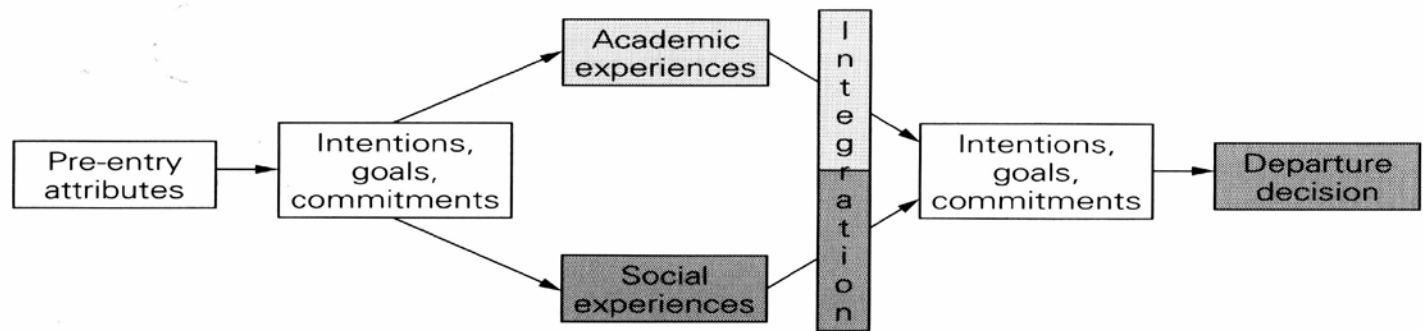


Figure 1. Tinto's Model of Departure (Prebble *et al* 2004: 3)

CONCLUSION

- Mistakes are imminent in pilot programmes.
- It is impossible to successfully assist another without knowing what problems they need assistance with.
- Many students At-Risk already feel very vulnerable
- Lecturers attributed student failures to internal factors while students attribute them mostly to external factors.
- ADPs staffs should be trained but all staff should be aware

- Tinto's model proposes a holistic understanding of At-Risk students; a feasible means of understanding and approaching students with clarity for every staff involved.
- It can also inform what trainings are needed for all academic staffs,
- Students need confidence to be able to face life without despair, even when they are not back on good academic standing.

- Misrecognition imposes on students a burden to disprove the prejudices perceive from staffs.
- Student resistance to negative attitudes coming from staff of the programme is in itself resistance to the programme.