Exploring the recruitment and training of peer facilitators in a South African University

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ABSTRACT

The high failure and retention rates at universities, despite peer academic support programmes, have necessitated a critical exploration of the recruitment and training of peer facilitators. Face to face in-depth interviews and focus group discussions were used as data collection methods Twenty one participants working with different programmes and ten first year undergraduate students in the university under study were purposefully selected. The findings revealed that while the overwhelming majority of peer facilitators were recruited following laid down procedures and based on merits, a few were appointed to certify the rules of affirmative action. Also, while the training of peer facilitators at the Teaching and Learning Centre was effective, regular and undertaken by qualified consultants, those at the different departments received once-off training. The contribution of peer facilitators to students' academic performance and retention rate cannot be overemphasised. Therefore, critical factors such as the quality and maturity of the peer facilitators, the quality of training and content were cited as key issues that needed attention if peer facilitation was to make a difference in the academic lives of students. The major recommendation, among others, is that one central body should be responsible for the recruitment and training of all peer facilitators across all the departments of the university.

1. Introduction

Quality education has become the priority of most higher education institutions in the world. Among the most vigorously debated issues in higher education institutions throughout the world today are the academic challenges faced by students and the implementation of effective strategies to ensure successful retention and throughput. Prior to 1994, the South African education system was characterised by discrimination and was based on racial lines. In order to ensure equity and to redress the injustices of the past in the domain of higher education, after the first democratic elections of 1994 the new government introduced a number of new policies (Council on Higher Education [CHE], 2003), including the White Paper on Higher Education (Act 101 of 1997), the Higher Education Quality Committee Institutional Audit Framework for education for South Africans or HEQC (2004), the CHE (2003) and the South African Qualification Authority [SAQA] (2001). Most universities in Africa, particularly in South Africa, have developed mechanisms to improve the quality of both teaching and learning and formulated policies to develop and improve both of these essential components of education. These policies have ensured increased access and admission to higher education for previously disadvantaged students (CHE, 2003).

In addition, they have embraced inclusivity, diversity and multi-culturalism in higher education in South Africa and they are based on what Verieva (2006:105) has termed "constitutionalism" in their commitment to redressing the inequalities and discrimination of the past in the sector.

In order to attain the goal of redressing the educational imbalances of the past and transforming the higher educational sector, some higher education institutions have opted for Senate Discretionary Exemption and Recognition of Prior Learning policies, particularly in previously disadvantaged universities (Department of Higher, 2012). These policies enable students who do not meet the entry requirements for a degree course to be admitted without being prejudiced by their weak matriculation results (Makura et al., 2011). The aim of these policies is to increase access to higher education in order to achieve what is now commonly known as the massification of higher education (Cloete and Bunting, 2000).

It is generally acknowledged in South Africa that the populations, from which the students enrolling at the previously disadvantaged universities are drawn, to a large extent, tend to be those of provinces which are characterised by poor socio-economic development, poor performance in matriculation examinations, high poverty levels and

poor infrastructure (Makura et al., 2011). These historical factors have impacted negatively on throughput and retention rates at these universities, with approximately thirty-four percent of students failing to complete their degree courses within the periods allotted to them (Matomela, 2010). The National Development Commission [NPC] (2012), in its Plan summarises, with a note of regret, the problems and challenges facing South African higher education with these words: "the data on the quality of higher education is disturbing. South African universities are mid-level in terms of knowledge production, with low participation, high attrition rates and insufficient capacity to produce the required levels of skills. They are still 'characterised by historical inequalities and distortions' (Council of Higher Education, 2014:7).

Most educational institutions in South Africa have responded to poor performance at the university level by giving priority to improving the learning abilities of students, particularly in undergraduate courses, as undergraduates constitute the vast majority of students in most tertiary education institutions. In South Africa more than eighty percent of the students enrolled in higher education institutions are undergraduates (Council of Higher Education, 2014). One of the solutions to this poor performance is the establishment of the foundation programme to assist and prepare students with poor matriculation results to gain access to the degree programmes of the universities. According to the Department of Higher Education and Training (2012:1), the primary aim of the foundation programme "is to improve the academic performance of students who are at risk due to their educational background". In order to overcome the obstacles presented by the effects of academic disparities of this sort, the foundation programme aims to provide support to educationally disadvantaged students entering university for the first time, and who are regarded as being underprepared for higher education. Further, in an attempt to increase the rates of retention and throughput with respect to students, most universities in South Africa have established peer academic support programmes within their institutions. According to Boughey (2010), these peer academic support programmes were established in response to the influx of students from poor socio-economic backgrounds, who were under-prepared to enter university following the demise of apartheid. Similarly, as McInnis, James and Hartley (2000) stress, students entering a system of higher education for the first time, particularly those with poor previous school performance need help and support with the transition and enculturation process. Reyes (2007) maintains that peer academic support programmes are vital resources for assisting students to overcome obstacles and play a great part in promoting the retention of students.

These programmes bring students together in order to learn and absorb the content of courses with one another. The role of the peer facilitator is to provide support and guidance to individual students and groups to improve their ability to study, take notes, write properly and gain mathematical skills. Peer facilitation also involves integrating topics concerning the orientation of learners into the institution and offering academic advice regards studying for examinations, and providing feedback to group members to ensure that they understand their course material. They also provide short lectures on key topics to augment the class lectures (Wilson and Arendale, 2011). The peer academic support programmes referred to in this paper include Supplementary Instruction (SI), Language and Writing Advancement and Tutoring Programmes.

Despite the various post-apartheid policies mentioned earlier in this paper and university programmes, there is still a general cry of poor educational standards, poor students' performance and low throughput and retention rates characterising the South African higher education institutions (CHE, 2014). The National Planning Commission (2012: 274) notes that "the participation rate for African and coloured students is still only at 13 percent...Graduation rates remain unacceptably low and below the benchmarks …". Therefore, the need to evaluate the recruitment and training of peer facilitators, whose role has been described as pivotal in the context of the integration of the South African

education system (Boughey, 2010).

2. Literature review

It is generally agreed that the process of improving the retention of students through the use of peer facilitators begins with the recruitment of qualified peer facilitators (Latino and Ashcraft, 2012). Latino and Ashcraft define recruitment as the act of enlisting people for a job or a cause. They maintain that the selection of peer facilitators who are best suited to play academic support roles requires intentional and directed effort. Among the common criteria for peer facilitators to be considered for recruitment are a high grade point average, upper class status and nomination by faculty. According to Latino and Ashcraft (2012), targeting students who meet these particular requirements requires significant time and effort. They maintain that it can best be achieved by means of a detailed marketing, recruitment and selection plan. As it is likely that peer facilitators who meet these stringent criteria and are adequately prepared for their roles, they will have no challenges if they are provided with challenging responsibilities (Padgett and Keup, 2012). It is therefore the responsibility of the programme coordinators to make sure that all of these considerations are taken into account in order to recruit the best qualified peer facilitators. According to literature, the process of advertising the positions would need to be laid down by the institution and should include posting the position on the university websites, contacting students through their university associations and announcing the positions in students' lists and publications (Arendale, 2005). In addition, relevant material concerning the posts would need to be made available in advance to enable those students who qualify to become aware of the positions and conditions entailed before applying. It is therefore very important to explore the recruitment strategies used by the case university.

As intentional and ongoing training is perhaps the most important contributory factor towards a successful peer facilitation academic programme, the programme administrators need to devote a great deal of time and effort to the training of peer facilitators (Latino and Ashcraft, 2012). The importance of in-service training, education and continuing professional development in the teaching profession in general is becoming increasingly acknowledged throughout the world (Fraser et al., 2007). Peer educators need to receive adequate training in order to fulfil the responsibilities of their positions, as they are neither professional educators nor student development specialists (Wilson and Arendale, 2011). It would therefore seem obligatory to train peer facilitators once they are recruited to enable them to be familiarized with the job description. Materniak (1984) suggests that the training should include instruction concerning the role of peer facilitators in learning centres and skills pertaining to the process of instruction and the content of courses. Peer facilitators should also receive adequate instruction regarding the boundaries of the role of a peer facilitator. Unfortunately, it is unknown whether there are explicit training programmes that provide coordinators of programmes with guidelines to explain exactly how to provide peer facilitators with the required knowledge and skills. It needs to be stressed that for successful implementation of any programme, those who implement it need to receive continuous professional developmental assistance, either from within the organisation in which they are employed or from outside (Fraser et al., 2007). Although Wilson and Arendale (2011) suggest that peer facilitators are intended to receive training with respect to the various roles and strategies involved in implementing support programmes, it is not known whether the training of peer facilitators at the university at which the study was conducted accords with these requirements.

It is important for peer facilitators to be trained in a manner that encourages the development of a classroom culture in which the important contribution made by the students themselves to one another's learning is acknowledged and respected. This approach should ensure the success of the review process as a means of preparing and educating