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Institutional Leadership Efforts Driving Student Retention and Success: A Case Study of the University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

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Introduction

Student access and their success in higher education in terms of retention, progression and graduation are amongst the key drivers of higher education transformation within South Africa. Student access is understood to be linked to the tangible increase in the student population of previously disenfranchised population groups in South Africa (SA) and student success is 'students' persistence at the institution and their achievement of degree completion' (Manik, 2015, p. 102). For this chapter, we concentrate our discussion on the retention and success of undergraduate students in public higher education in SA. As is widely published, the ills of apartheid in SA have penetrated the fabric of educational, political and socio-economic spaces (Chetty & Vigar-Ellis, 2012; Kallaway, 1984; McKeever, 2017; Rakometsi, 2008). Since democracy, the country

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has been constantly undergoing transformation – socially, economically and educationally – in attempts to overcome the past imbalances.

Changes in Higher Education

Higher education, being an important sector within the country for social, economic and political transformation, is informed by a National Government Act (namely Education White Paper 3 – A Programme for Higher Education Transformation of 1997) to drive its transformational agenda (South African Department of Education, 1997) and this act has paved the way for colossal changes to the higher education system (Soudien, 2010). These articulated changes in the policy statement are as follows:

- Promot(ing) equity of access and fair chances of success to all,… while eradicating all forms of unfair discrimination and advancing redress for past inequities.
- Meet(ing), through well-planned and coordinated teaching, learning and research programmes, national development needs … [for] a growing economy operating in a global environment.
- Support(ing) a democratic ethos and culture of human rights….
- Contribut(ing) to the advancement of all forms of knowledge and scholarship, and in particular address(ing) the diverse problems and demands of the local, national, southern African contexts and uphold(ing) rigorous standards of academic quality." (South Africa Department of Education, 1997, p. 14)

Key to the transformation agenda as espoused in White Paper 3 (above) was the need to change the demographics of South Africa's student population with several interventions to widen access and to increase the participation of disadvantaged groups in higher education (Manik & Ramrathan, 2018). In this regard, the racial profiles of students accessing higher education was critical in increasing the participation of students from marginalised communities (Ramrathan, 2019), thereby attempting to widen access to include particular students. The population of

students accessing higher education has now increased exponentially (CHE, 2013a, 2013b) and the majority of students registered across public higher education institutions were Black African students who constituted 81% of a total of 938,200 students in 2011 (MacGregor, 2014). We agree with the contention by Lewin and Mawoyo (2014, p. 10) that the variables that influence 'access and success at university are complex and multi-dimensional'. Therefore, while it may be argued that the goals of White Paper 3 (South Africa Department of Education, 1997), in terms of changing the demographics of the student population, have been met with success (as was claimed by Badat, the Chairperson of Higher Education South Africa (HESA)), universities have been dogged by several challenges related to retaining students and degree completion.

This brief background to the South African higher education sector sets the scene for the rest of the chapter wherein the challenges that higher education institutions are facing in terms of student progression within their study programmes will be presented followed by a short biography of the case study institution. The chapter ends by presenting an account of how the case study institution, through its structural leadership, is attempting to address an array of complementary issues in supporting students to achieve academic success in their programmes with a special emphasis on teaching and learning supported by research-led initiatives. Some of the evidence for this chapter has been produced through an ongoing institutional case study on student access, progression and dropout being conducted at the university.

Challenges Experienced by Higher Education Institutions in Relation to Student Retention and Progression

As alluded to earlier, White Paper 3 – *A programme for higher education transformation* (South Africa Department of Education, 1997), set the platform for institutional change. Initially commencing with increasing the participation of Black African students and curriculum

transformation, these two aspects of transformation continue to inform changes and challenges in higher education within South Africa.

Several publications (e.g. Council on Higher Education [CHE], 2013a, 2013b; Letseka & Maile, 2008; Manik & Ramrathan, 2018; Ramrathan & Pillay, 2015) have averred that while enrolment targets in terms of the population demographics have been achieved overall within higher education (but not necessarily in each of the higher education institutions due to historical privileges of universities) there are still enormous challenges of access. These challenges were numerous and they included, amongst others: access to higher education by potential students from previously disadvantaged communities; poor schooling that excluded potential students from accessing programmes of their choice; and an expansion of higher education to cater for the increased enrolment numbers together with greater demand for student housing, support services offered by universities and access to digital technology, including wifi connectivity (Manik & Ramrathan, 2018).

Physical and Epistemological Access

As noted globally and locally, students' success is linked to the phenomena of student dropout, progression and graduation rates which have become an area of concern. Despite interventions over decades, limited progress has been made in addressing this concern. In South Africa, the dropout rate is perceived as high with approximately one third of the students dropping out in their first year of study (CHE, 2013a, 2013b). Thus one of the key discourses on undergraduate students in public HEIs has consistently been that of dropout rates, with Higher Education South Africa (HESA) and researchers red-flagging it as an area of grave concern with some institutional dropout rates being 35% and a majority (55%) of higher education students never reaching graduation (Badat, 2014; Beck; 2011; Manik, 2015). Locally, Prinsloo (2009, p. 18) argued that student retention is a phenomenon which is the consequence of any one of three categories operating at different stages: individual (personal reasons), 'institutional (quality of advice, guidance and general quality of provision)… and supra-institutional (finance and other socio-economic

factors).' Several studies have indicated that in some cases there are singular reasons but, frequently, there are multiple reasons across more than one of the above-mentioned stages, which are responsible for student drop out (Lewin & Mawoyo, 2014; Manik, 2014; REAP, 2008).

An associated area of institutional anxiety which mars discussions on students' success rates has been that of low progression and graduation rates (CHE, 2013a, 2013b; Lewin & Mawoyo, 2014) with statistics revealing a shocking 27% of all undergraduates who graduate in the minimum time for degree completion. Additional statistics revealed that approximately 50% of students graduated within the minimum period + two years of study in their respective programmes (CHE, 2013a, 2013b) and the latest statistics now show that the majority of students are taking six years to complete a three year degree (South Africa's Education Statistics, 2019). These statistics are despite institutional attempts to improve throughput rates.

Several factors have been identified as reasons for the low progression and high dropout rates (Manik, 2014; Sosibo & Katiya, 2015), including institutional issues of language of instruction, classroom experiences, assessment and access to resources; access issues in terms of readiness for higher education (articulation gap) through their school education, programme choice based on selection criteria and programme design issues (e.g. pre-requisites and co-requisites in the programme design); and personal issues including illness, family support, relationship issues, financial issues and accommodation. Despite the above, although there can be initial acceptance at an institution for students, continued access for disadvantaged students is not guaranteed for the duration of their degree. This has been evident with repeated student uprisings at several institutions in the past few years (including the case study institution of UKZN) as a result of historical debt accumulated by marginalised groups who are unable to register for a new year of study given that they have not paid their previous year's study fees (later on we explore this further). Epistemological access (Boughey, 2005; Dhunpath & Vithal, 2012; Maphosa et al., 2014) has also dominated, becoming a cause for institutional anxiety as student retention and timeous graduation is critical in accessing public university funding. First Generation students, who are predominantly Black African, are identified as an 'at risk' group. Reports

reveal that 'historically disadvantaged students' who are considered an 'at risk' group are not graduating in the minimum time although they have financial support through several funding avenues, such as National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) (Govender, 2013; Heymann & Carolissen, 2011). Manik (2015, p. 230) did earlier argue from an institutional study (UKZN) that 'measures to financially support students are insufficient in propelling them to achieve success and that additional measures need to be institutionalized, factoring in the impact of educational history.' Indeed, funding does play a critical role for institutions and students.

Institutional and Student Funding

Clearly the attempts to increase access and widen participation in higher education means that institutions would have to put in place structures and processes to support students as they progress through their studies to ensure timeous completion. This support is not just about a transformational or social imperative. There are economic issues that have the potential to weaken the university. The funding model for higher education in South Africa has, as one of its parameters, student progression through their degree within the block grant funding tool that universities receive from the state (Ministerial Statement on University Funding: 2019/2020 and 2020/2021, 2018). This means that while institutions may widen participation in higher education, their survival financially is also dependent upon students' progression in their study programme. Student fees have developed into a major issue within the South African context, erupting in major student protests (Habib, 2019) with students demanding fee-free higher education. This demand by the students erupted after the former President Jacob Zuma, towards the end of his term of office, announced fee-free higher education to students who come from economically poor backgrounds (Areff & Spies, 2017). A block grant within the national higher education budget has been set aside to financially support such students within a family financial threshold benchmark (family income that is less than R300 000–00 per annum) (Ministerial Statement on University Funding, 2018). While this reprieve

for students from disadvantaged backgrounds has been welcomed by the students, there are severe implications for universities as these financial aids come with conditions linked to students' academic success. When students fail some modules within the curriculum of their programme, they are then required to pay the institution with their own funds for repeating the failed modules. The inability of students to fund these failed modules has led to students accumulating extensive debts at the university.

The nationwide student protest in 2015 and 2016 was the most severe since democracy that commenced with a demand for a 'no fee increase' and it culminated in a web of demands ranging from the removal of senior leadership in some higher education institutions, to access to higher education by the poor and marginalised, to fee-free higher education studies. In addition, all public higher education institutions have a three-year rolling plan on admissions and their subsidy is capped based on these rolling enrolment plans. Hence their subsidies from the state is heavily impacted by access, throughput and graduation rates of its enrolled students. Curricula at institutions are an important facet of the discussion on students' success (Ramrathan, 2016). The curriculum implications relate to students who stay longer in the institution and the repercussion of this is that limited new students can be enrolled within a programme. Thus, in high demand programmes, there are limited spaces available due to student blockages which result from low throughput rates and graduation rates.

Another feature is the decolonisation of higher education curricula and the removal of all symbols representing colonial influences (e.g. the #Rhodesmustfall movement of 2015[1])which spread to other institutions that had statues and other artefacts of colonial history (Habib, 2019). The most recent violent student protests of 2020 currently unfolding within the South African higher education context is related to students demanding that their historical debt be cancelled and that they are registered despite these historical debts, as stated above (Masweneng, 2020). The result is that institutions in this position need structures and processes to manage student throughput to allow for academic success that

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[1] For example, to remove Cecil Rhodes' statue from the University of Cape Town campus.

will minimise the impact of financial instability arising from the reduced income through student fees.

Decolonising the Curriculum

Currently all higher education institutions are required to transform their curricula offerings to address issues of decolonisation (Chisholm, 2019; Le Grange, 2016). Hendricks (2018) argues that there are several challenges that abound which impede decolonising curricula in SA higher education. A key challenge to the decolonisation project stems from lecturers themselves and leaders such as deans who are expected to ensure that there is implementation of a decolonised curriculum but whose own education was centred in curricula that were Eurocentric in nature and thus colonial epistemologies were foregrounded (Paraskeva, 2011).

Another challenge articulated by Fomunyam and Teferra (2017) is the language of instruction at institutions of higher learning which was identified as a hurdle to decolonisation. A tangible effect of the current medium of instruction at HEIs was its negative impact on particular populations of students (whose home language is different) hindering them from achieving success (Jama et al., 2008; Maphosa et al., 2014; REAP, 2008). For example, the 'underpreparedness' of students, first years (Jama et al., 2008) and others (Sosibo & Katiya, 2015), was linked to the English language with students struggling to acquire skills proficiency in academia. Research has revealed that attempting to incorporate indigenous languages into university for the purposes of teaching and learning is a challenge (Makhubele et al., 2018; Mkhize, 2018). The implications of high dropout, low progression and low graduation rates, besides the social, economic, political and transformation impacts, has financial and programmatic implications for higher education institutions. All public funded higher education institutions rely quite heavily on funding from the state in terms of state subsidy. The state subsidy is based on a funding model that includes registration and throughput as parameters in its calculation of the subsidy given to universities. Slow completion rates at institutions, as was evident in 2019 and previously,

impact negatively on institutions (South Africa's Education statistics, 2019).

Programme Offerings and Preparation for the Twenty-First Century

A noted uneasiness persisting in relation to curriculum is that of gateway subjects, threshold subjects and threshold concepts (Meyer, 2008). Access to some programmes require students to have gained a minimum pass level for admission. Most common of these gateway subjects are Mathematics, English and selected Natural Sciences subjects, such as Physical Sciences and Life Sciences. Selection into these programmes of study are guided by minimum requirements and selection criteria. Minimum requirements comprise requirements that form the basis for an application into a programme of choice and these requirements are approved at the university level and at the South African National Qualification Framework level. The selection criteria are more locally determined and usually based on historical patterns of perceived and researched elements to enable success in a programme. The selection criteria can change depending on the historical interest in a programme. If a student does not qualify based on the selection criteria, they may be asked to take a foundation programme, an extended programme or an access programme, which are usually offered by the institution. Hence, in addition to offering and managing mainstream programmes, institutions are required to offer and manage these extended access programmes which are routes of entry into the general degree.

Threshold subjects and threshold content have been identified as barriers to progression within a programme (or content within a module) (Meyer, 2008). Threshold subjects have largely been identified as those subjects that are either pre-requisites or co-requisites within a programme design. There are also other subjects that students within a programme design may find difficult to pass and ultimately this can hold them back from progressing within a designed programme. Noting these threshold subjects (and content), several interventions have been put in place across institutions to support students in developing mastery over the subject

(or content). These interventions include, amongst others, tutor support within disciplines, short video recordings explaining these threshold concepts for students to access at any time, additional sessions with lecturers, mentor support and peer support. The challenges associated with curriculum issues related to student throughput also include academic support services by Academic Development Officers who are largely employed on a limited duration contract and the nature of support is at times dependent upon who provides the support (Ramrathan & Pillay, 2015).

More recently, due to the global economic downturn and the focus on the fourth industrial revolution (4IR), the growing rate of unemployment has become a grave concern for higher education (Menon & Castrillon, 2019). The lack of employment for graduates has raised questions about the kind of curriculum offered by higher education institutions and there is debate on whether the attributes of graduates are sufficient to meet the needs of the rapidly changing world of work. Two specific concerns are picked up within this challenge. The first is that the higher education curriculum does not meet the rapidly changing needs of industry, including the emergence of the 4IR skills and competences which are needed to drive an ever-changing work environment. The global pandemic of COVID-19, which took a foothold from March 2020 onwards, also presented public higher education institutions with an enormous hurdle to suddenly navigate. Institutions were forced to prematurely close and explore remote teaching options away from the normative multimodal approaches (due to lockdown and social distancing imperatives) to curb the spread of the novel coronavirus.

Noting the enormous challenges that higher education institutions within South Africa are faced with, and the web of complexity surrounding these challenges, leadership and leadership structures have become the central drivers in charting a way forward and effectively managing the support systems which are required to sustain an adequate functioning higher education system (systemically as well as institutionally). In a paper, Manik (2015, p. 239) argues that, given the complexities of each HEI, 'discussions on access and success have to also be carved according to the uniqueness of each case study institution'. The rest of this chapter, therefore, presents a case example of how student access and progress is managed through a leadership perspective against this backdrop of the

current challenges in higher education as the case study institution continues to address the negative legacy of its historical past, whilst keeping abreast of global trends by demonstrating local relevance through its structures, processes and programme offerings.

Biography of the Case Study Higher Education Institution

The University of KwaZulu-Natal was formed in 2004 from the merger of two historically-initiated universities. The merging universities were the University of Durban-Westville (historically non-white student population) and the University of Natal Westville (historically white student population), both located within the Province of KwaZulu-Natal. As expected within the structural organisation of apartheid, the former University of Durban-Westville received lower subsidies from the state and it was not able to attract massive private funding to sustain and grow itself to keep up with the demands of higher education. The former University of Natal, on the other hand, had immense financial support both privately and from the state to ensure and sustain a high image of a leading university in South Africa. Since 1994, the transformation of higher education to bring about social equity and redress of the historical past resulted in several initiatives. One such initiative was the re-landscaping of higher education which took place under the watchful eye of the then Minister of Education, Kader Ismail. In the re-landscaping of higher education across the country, some institutions remained unchanged, some were merged and some were unbundled in terms of their campuses and re-assigned to other universities. With the merging of the University of Durban-Westville and the University of Natal to form the University of KwaZulu-Natal, the traditional race groups that attended the former universities had, over time, changed substantially, with an increasing number of Black African students accessing both of these former universities. Currently, the student population of the University of KwaZulu-Natal is approximately 45,000 students registered across all of its now five campuses and across undergraduate and

postgraduate students. The student population is quite diverse, although the vast majority are Black Africans and many students are from disadvantaged backgrounds, socially and financially. 'First year entrants from non-fee paying schools (quintiles 1, 2 and 3) peaked in 2016 at 42% compared to 26% in 2010' (UKZN AMS, 2017, p. 05). This is not unusual as poverty and unemployment are rife in KZN province (Jacobs et al., 2009). The national poverty ranking of SA schools (quintiles) and learners are based on a policy of norms and standards for schooling where quintile 1 ranked schools are categorised as the schools located within the poorest part of the community with very meagre school infrastructure to support effective teaching and learning (South African School's Act: National Norms and Standards for School Funding, 1998). Quintile 5 category schools, on the other hand, are schools located in more wealthy communities and with better infrastructure to support teaching and learning. Thus, many UKZN students do have financial support through the National Student Financial Aid System, a government supported financial system to support students from less economically able families. In 2016, an alarming '48% of students had NSFAS funding. An overall profile of the 2016 cohort admitted into UG studies at UKZN shows that of the 7973 new students enrolled in bachelor degrees: 79% are African and 57% are female' (UKZN AMS, 2017, p. 05). The Rural Education Action Programme (REAP) (2008) linked rurality and poverty to first generation students and learning in a language which is not their first language as being key variables in determining their success at university. The impact of COVID-19 is a new variable as the majority of rural areas do not have access to electricity and the necessary infrastructure to support wifi however institutions continued their academic program from June 2020 via online platforms.

In terms of the University of KwaZulu-Natal's five campuses, offerings are largely face-to-face programmes across most fields of study, including medicine, health sciences programmes, engineering, education, social sciences, law and management. All five campuses are urban based in relatively close proximity, with the exception of one of its campuses, which is located approximately 100 km away from the headquarters of the university. This campus is also urban based and it is located in the capital city of the province of KwaZulu-Natal. The university is amongst the top five

universities within the country and it is premised on a research-led mission. Hence, its research standings are usually in the top three of the country. The university is also located within the 500 to 600 world ranking scale (UKZN Press release, 2019) and, according to the UKZN AMS Report (2017), 'in 2016, voluntary dropouts have dropped to 6% (in 2013, it was 11%) and graduation rates have plateaued at 18%' (p. 05).

The College Model at UKZN

The University is managed through a college model system (with the head of the institution occupying a Vice Chancellor position) comprising four colleges, each headed by a Deputy Vice Chancellor (DVC) and a Head of College. Within each college there are up to a maximum of six schools and each school is headed by a Dean of the School. Within each school there are several clusters made up of different disciplines of study. The clusters are led by Cluster Leaders and some larger clusters have the added recent benefit of the tier of Deputy Cluster Leaders (an introduction in 2020). Within each college there is a Dean of Teaching and Learning who oversees the teaching and learning aspects of programme delivery. Within each school there is a Teaching and Learning Academic Leader who directs the affairs of teaching and learning within the school. Decision making for its programme offerings are located within the college and its sub-structures with the devolution of power coupled with accountability regimes to the colleges as critical elements. There are two other university wide structures, namely, the University Research Office and the University Teaching and Learning Office (UTLO), each headed by a Deputy Vice Chancellor. The professional staff within each college have professional support responsibilities at the college level as well as at the school level. The programmes offered are usually located at the college level, but the discipline staff across the schools offer specific modules constituting the various programmes. A further academic layer supporting academic staff is that of tutors in certain disciplines. The University also has other support services for staff and students and this includes academic development coordinators, sporting facilities, student health support services and personal counselling services. The latter support

services for students, amongst others, comprise a clinic, an HIV/AIDs centre, a disability unit and a general counselling centre.

Leadership at the University of KwaZulu-Natal

As indicated in the institution's biography, the University of KwaZulu-Natal operates within a college framework and it has four colleges offering an array of programmes. There is an executive committee chaired by the Vice Chancellor of the University which comprises the six DVCs, the Chief Financial Officer and the Registrar who manages the university affairs overall with decision-making powers devolved to colleges and other key personnel who are responsible for university-wide issues. The leadership model evident is that of distributed leadership (Bolden et al., 2009). Teaching and learning across the university is a cross-cutting institutional issue that has far-reaching implications (such as institutional image, financial viability and quality assurance of its programme offerings) for the university. Noting this, a DVC for Teaching and Learning forms a key component of the senior executive of the university within a distributive leadership (Bolden et al., 2009) perspective. The university has positioned itself as a 'premier university of African scholarship' (www. ukzn.ac.za). In order to realise its vision, mission and strategic plan in respect of teaching and learning, the university teaching and learning office (UTLO) and the DVC are responsible for providing such strategic leadership across all five campuses.

A Focus on UTLO Structure and Leadership in Managing Student Access, Retention and Success

The UTLO portfolio (www.ukzn.ac.za) involves managing key partnerships with the national Department of Education, several funders and donor organisations, managing funded projects based on access, throughput and success of students, such as the South African Norwegian Tertiary

Education Development project (SANTED) and Department of Education foundation programmes. UTLOs portfolio is extensive and it includes the monitoring of specialised project funds dedicated to the access and success of students; writing and coordinating such project reports; developing proposals for future funding in respect of teaching and learning by co-operating with Colleges/Faculties, the UKZN Research Office, UKZN Foundation and others. UTLO (www.ukzn. ac.za) shows a dedicated commitment to both new and seasoned academics by developing 'their teaching knowledge via workshops, seminars, and conferences that address a variety of topics, techniques, and programs'. UTLO has identified three key priorities:

1. To lead curriculum transformation at the university. This entails supporting the vision and mission of African scholarship, to enact curriculum reforms to ensure curriculum relevance as well as responding to SA's developmental needs. Additionally, to meet the requirements of the Higher Education Qualification Framework and National Qualifications Framework as well as undertaking a review of current programme offerings and devising new qualifications.
2. To continue to promote access but strengthen the focus on throughput (progression) and success. Hence, research-based evidence from drop-out studies and carving out ways to sharing best practices in all programme offerings (including teaching and learning in access, foundation and mainstream programmes).
3. To effect a rotation of development, implementation and review of staff and student policies and procedures which impact on teaching and learning. Most importantly, the office claims 'we focus on the implementation of the Language Policy, in relation to teaching and learning.'

An interesting aspect of UTLO is its implementation of 'incentives and rewards' for academic staff who excel in teaching (for example there are annual 'distinguished teacher' and an 'Excellence in Teaching' awards. Another idea is to integrate ICT into teaching and learning to fulfill the needs of the twenty-first century workplace.
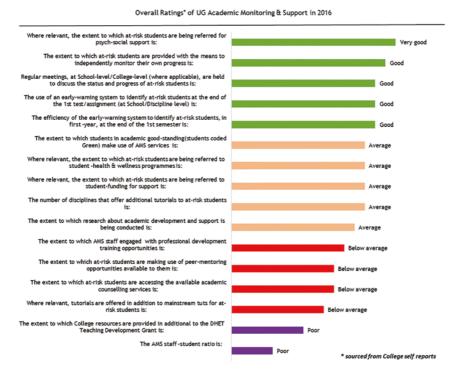
A significant moment in the recent history of UKZN came amidst claims of the 'articulation gap' of students (Lewin & Mawoyo, 2014) and their 'underpreparedness' for university in SA across institutions. Internationally, there had been caution expressed in pathologising students when discussing their lack of success (Woodley, 2004). UTLO leadership (Dhunpath & Vithal, 2012) in a landmark publication, bravely asked whether institutions should not rather be admitting to being underprepared rather than passing the buck to schools and students. This revelation was instrumental in seeking to alter the higher education access and success discourse in SA and the lens of viewing students as deficit. Most importantly, it showcased a valuable outlook by UKZN leadership to introspect in its efforts to strengthen its own systems, policies and procedures to ensure students' success by research-led endeavours to address students' departure and in efforts to bolster the throughput and graduation rates. One of the university's efforts was a drop-out study by Ramrathan, Manik, Pillay and Goba. Amongst the findings, Manik (2014, p. 156) revealed that students who had departed the university had singular and multiple reasons for leaving but the majority had 'multiple stressors' leading to 'multiple deprivations' (finance, poor career choice, poor or lack of counselling by the institution's support personnel, academic performance, personal reasons) but there were triggers (key was failing modules) that led to their final decision to exit. Most importantly was the finding that the majority of students dropped out without seeking assistance from any of the university's structures. A later funded study by UTLO on UKZN's three-year programme offerings in order to reflect and improve, pronounced that UKZN's programme choices and offerings (via its website and marketing materials) were 'confusing' and 'inconsistent' and 'can contribute to students making poorly informed programme choices' (Borden, 2016, p. 02).

UTLO has become the hub of online activity from March 2020, informing and managing the training of staff and students for online teaching, learning and assessment in preparation for the re-opening of UKZN in June 2020. There are manuals and videos for reference on navigating platforms (such as Moodle, Zoom and Google teams), in addition to the ongoing live training via Zoom. The university has live support options through Skype for business and WhatsApp. Additionally,

the university has embarked on several critical endeavours to ensure that students continue their academic studies and complete the year successfully. All staff and students have access to zero-rated websites where they will be able to use 500 MB of data free to undertake their work. Staff were supplied with data and devices to connect to the internet. Vulnerable students were also considered and laptops, data bundles and devices were delivered to students in rural disadvantaged areas during the lockdown period. This was to ensure that all students are prepared for the dry-run of using the online platforms for all their modules' delivery, before the opening of the institution for online instruction in June 2020. The dry run was assessed and modules were adjusted given staff and students' feedback on the dry run before final implementation of all online modules.

UKZN has sought to strengthen and improve its academic monitoring and support system (AMS). The AMS report is annually tabled at senate for feedback and comments on the findings so that processes can be tweaked for improving AMS strategies for the future. AMS offers up-to-date information on each student, tracking their performance and monitoring their progress across their degree, with early warning signs and interventions. For example, after the first test or assignment when marks are captured, at the discipline or school level, 'at risk' students are identified. They are also identified at the end of the first semester. 'At risk' students are referred to health and wellness programmes or psycho-social help in addition to academic assistance via supplemental instruction, tutoring and peer assistance. There are regular meetings held at school and college level to discuss the status and progress of 'at risk' students. Students are also taught to monitor their own progress and submit a 'self-report' to their assigned academic development officer (ADO). Given that ADOs are a key component of AMS, their effectiveness in assisting students is crucial, thus their development and growth is of paramount importance. Hence, they are encouraged to study one UEIP module during their contract term, they are supported and mentored by the AMS co-ordinator and they present their research papers at the university's Annual Teaching and Learning Conference. It will be interesting to monitor henceforth how 'at risk' students are supported during the time of COVID-19 with additional measures for the academic year of 2020,

after a two-month lockdown period with the closure of universities in March and re-opening in June.

It is evident that reflexivity is encouraged as is evident in the AMS Report of 2017 which noted that the following two issues needed to be addressed: the ratio of AMS staff to students as a result of colleges expressing that this ratio is too high; the financing of AMS because the Teaching Development Grant (TDG) was to be replaced by the University Capacity Development Grant (UCDP) in 2017. Below is a summary of undergraduate AMS self-reported ratings in 2016 (UKZN AMS, 2017).

Overall Ratings* of UG Academic Monitoring & Support in 2016

Conclusions

There is no 'silver bullet' to bring an end to students' slow progress and departure from public higher education institutions in SA, including UKZN, and to ensure students' retention, their timeous degree completion and success at university. The challenges are ever-spiraling for a country still plagued by historical, socio-economic and political inequalities, apart from the arrival of COVID-19, which repeatedly threaten to unwind higher education, as has become the norm in the past few years since the widening of access into higher education for the previously disadvantaged. Thus, despite outbreaks of destruction to the university at several campuses recently, and the sudden two-month closure from March to May 2020 due to South Africa's lockdown, there is a silver lining evident, especially at UKZN in its leadership commitment. At the highest level of the institution, the DVC has called for ongoing engagement between management and students to resolve students' access challenges at registration and their access to online teaching and learning during COVID-19. Leadership commitment at various other levels are evident, to forge ahead and attract private and staff funding apart from national block grants to support research, teaching and learning at university and students in their desire to persist in their studies despite the lack of finances. There is an understanding that UKZN is located in one of the poorest provinces of South Africa. Additionally, staff and student policies and practices are constantly reviewed and refined after their implementation; for example, the introduction and development of isiZulu as a language for teaching and learning from 2014 onwards, a dry-run of all modules online to gauge what the challenges will be for students when the system goes live in June 2020. This signals a commitment by the institution to grow and develop better strategies to implement and support the academic project of teaching, learning and research whilst being committed to its African identity. The Academic Monitoring and Support system across UKZN is underpinned by the Academic Monitoring and Exclusions Policies and Procedures of 2009 and it was updated in 2012. It is an example of an effective institutional tool to identify early warning signs of 'at risk' students and to assist and monitor

them in addressing their performance through a variety of support mechanisms so they can achieve success in their studies and timeous graduation.

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