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Teaching and Learning in a South African University: Are Peer Facilitators' Strategies Succeeding?

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to examine the strategies used by peer facilitators in improving students' academic performance in a previously disadvantaged university in South Africa. It also assesses whether peer facilitators are succeeding in this quest. This paper stems from a larger study on the implementation of peer academic support programmes, which used the qualitative research approach and a sample of 31 participants made up of peer facilitators, students and programme coordinators. The study made use of in-depth interviews and focus group discussions as well as documentary analyses as methods of data collection. Data was analysed thematically using the main and sub themes that emerged from the data coding. The results indicate that peer facilitators use different strategies to engage students in an interactive manner in order to improve their academic performance. Some of these strategies include ethically acceptable discussions, questioning, and answering and redirecting questioning. The findings further show that these strategies are succeeding in improving students' academic performance to an extent. This is through improved pass rates and skill proficiency in various areas of academic learning. However, the participants reported that the strategies are not satisfactorily yielding the desired results because of certain impediments, which include the behaviour of some facilitators, poor relations between the Teaching and Learning Centre (TLC) and various departments, and less individual attention paid to students by the peer facilitators, some of which raise ethical concerns. Consequently, these hinder satisfactory achievement of students' academic overall performance at the university. Among other recommendations, the Teaching and Learning Centre should forge better relations with departments to attract needy students for academic support, and there is need to ensure better preparation of peer facilitators with necessary acumen to guide students effectively.

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Introduction

The most highly contested issue in the world today is how to improve students' academic performance in most higher education institutions. Literature reveals that most universities in the world, especially in Africa, are putting systems in place to improve students' academic performance. In South Africa, as in most developing countries, most universities have established developmental programmes such as Peer Academic Support to mitigate students' academic problems. At the centre of the implementation of the programmes are the Peer facilitators/tutors of the programmes recruited and trained on different strategies, which this paper explores.

Amongst the numerous debates held in the world today are the academic challenges faced by students at higher education institutions. 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. 2011:15). With the massification of higher education, this trend is observed in many developing countries (Tangwe 2016). These historical factors have impacted negatively on throughput and retention rates at many previously disadvantaged universities in South Africa, with approximately 34 % of students failing to complete their degree courses within the periods allotted to them (Tangwe 2016). The high university attrition rate represents a distressing blow to the ambitions of tens of thousands of dropouts each year, many of whom consider education as the only available means of advancement and mobility (DHE 2012).

In attempts to increase the rates of retention and throughput with respect to students, Boughey and McKenna (2016) argue that most tertiary institutions, including the university under study, have established developmental programmes (academic development, academic support or peer academic support programmes) to facilitate and support educational change. Despite the range of interventions provided by the programmes, the desired results have not materialised, owing to the fact that the numbers of students who drop out remain high and there is still a high failure rate (Kaburise 2010; Matomela 2010; CHE 2014). Altbach et al. (2009) claim that during the past few decades the implementation of teaching strategies has tended to be standardised, owing to the massification of higher education in the world. According to these writers, today, one-size-fits-all solutions are no longer regarded as appropriate, as the world has become too complex and the rate at which changes occur has become too great. In addition, Ainworth (2006) explains that teaching is a dynamic, well-planned and systematic presentation of facts, ideas, skills and techniques to students and its focus is to acquire the maximum of learning experiences. Thus, selection of the most suitable teaching strategies is the basic condition for a successful teaching and learning process. Hence, this paper explores the implementation of different strategies used by peer facilitators and the extent to which they are improving teaching and learning at the university under study, as well as interrogates ethical issues in executing these strategies.

Although the strategies adopted by peer facilitators are ethically accepted, there are concerns, which need to be redressed if peer facilitation should continue to be useful and

effective in advancing teaching and learning that is helpful to students at tertiary institutions in South Africa and other countries. Therefore, this paper contributes to ethics through the analysis of these ethical responsible teaching and learning strategies as well as the concerns of unethical behaviours that are counterproductive to the process. The section that follows is the overview of the literature, followed by the research methodology that was adopted for the broader study. The findings are presented and discussed within the context of the current literature. The paper ends with a conclusion and recommendations.

Overview of the Literature

Teaching strategies refers to the methods used to help students learn the desired course content, and allow them to develop achievable goals in the future (OECD 2008). There is a great range of approaches to ensuring and encouraging retention, most of which are geared towards fully integrating students into a university environment (Tinto 2001). According to the findings of some studies (such as Badger 2010), most universities of the world make use of background information in order to obtain assessment scores and information concerning the socio-economic status of individual students. This is part of an early warning system to identify students with particular needs and problems, and to design programmes to meet their needs. It also helps first year students entering university with low assessment scores to be directed to special programmes that focus on improving their academic performance, such as skills' workshops, academic tutorials and/or engaging a tutor (Veronica et al. 2004).

Several universities assign first year students to a 'big brother' or a 'big sister', such as senior student or even a faculty member, who provides academic support, peer tutoring and instructions in studying techniques through a collaborative engagement (Barber et al. 2007). Peer tutoring is a teaching method involving peer mentorship, as is the case with peer teaching and peer reviewing, which are considered to be successful approaches to helping students increase their capacity for learning and making academic progress (Badger 2010).

According to Gordon and Edward (2005), peer tutoring requires careful planning and grounding in the appropriate training of student tutors. Research shows quite clearly that effective peer tutoring does not result from a haphazard volunteer programme, but requires a purposeful programme with specific learning objectives, activities and assessments for developing the ability of students to master the key concepts of the various disciplines that they are studying.

Wilson and Arendale (2011) note that collaborative learning is an important strategy that can be used to improve the academic performance of students. Collaborative Learning is an approach to teaching and learning that involves groups of students working together to solve a problem or complete a task. It is believed that in a collaborative learning environment, learning flourishes when students socialize through conversations on content between themselves (Wilson and Arendale 2011). This strategy is held to be an important technique used by peer facilitators to improve teaching and learning in the classroom. It is assumed that the peer facilitators of the programmes are trained to use this collaborative approach, which is what this study explores. As already noted, it is generally acknowledged that collaborative learning is an important strategy used to improve the academic performance of students. A peer educator's content skills comprise the skills developed by performing well in the course they are tutoring and having an understanding of the learning process. This entails knowledge of both a specific academic discipline, such as general chemistry, and of learning theory, cognitive development and educational psychology (Wilson and Arendale 2011).

Accordingly, peer facilitators need to develop a broad knowledge of learning strategies, such as content organisation and self-management. In addition, it is maintained that although peer educators will have some basic knowledge of their particular academic disciplines and possibly some insight into their own learning, they need support from both the instructors in their disciplines and learning specialists, in order to learn how to best integrate the two and promote learning in the domain of content (Badger 2010). This is an indication that peer facilitators need support in whatever teaching activities they are assigned to perform. Facilitators need to understand and practise questioning techniques such as Socratic questioning, encouraging student questions, and redirecting questions (Wilson and Arendale 2011). Wilson and Arendale add that facilitators need to cultivate active listening skills, such as repeating student responses, allowing time for responses from students, and providing feedback.

Another strategy used by peer facilitators in order to acquire cognitive learning skills is peer assessment. This is a collaborative technique in which groups of students provide comments and feedback to one another. Studies have shown that the best results are obtained from students developing their own assessment skills while working with their peers (Bransford et al. 2000). This is an important strategy used by students at many universities, and it enables them to become involved in their own learning and to benefit from the comments made by their peers. It has been pointed out that the benefits of peer assessment in pre-service education include creative brainstorming and the fine-tuning of lessons, which result in improved organisation, preparation and delivery of lessons (Wu 2008). This makes a strong case for the inclusion of peer assessment in the training of peer facilitators.

Literature indicates that having students work together competitively in small groups is much more effective than having them work alone (Klavina and Block 2008), and the motivation when students work in small groups tends to be intrinsic, rather than extrinsic. Hussain et al. (2011) explain that students need to be involved in-group work or peer instruction, in which they help one another by challenging the ideas of their peers through discussion. This is an indication that group work is an essential component of achieving academic success. It is assumed that when students work together, their attitudes towards the subject are greatly improved (Hussain et al. 2011). The facilitators regard themselves as fellow-students, rather than figures of authority, thereby promoting a general acceptance of one another among the students (Morris and Waggett 2004). It is within this acknowledgement that this paper examines the strategies used to achieve this method of involvement to enable students to work together.

Studies have also shown that when students interact and work in groups, they tend to benefit because of one person's contributions shared with all of the members of the group. Morris and Waggett (2004) add that shared group goals, and often a shared group reward are essential for encouraging cooperation. Therefore, individual accountability is also important in cooperative learning groups, and all members of the group need to understand the material and be able to explain the group's answers. This goes with the "we sink or swim together" feeling in a group, which increases the likelihood that the group will be successful and that all of its members will master the material (Wu 2008:46). Presumably, this is an important strategy that peer facilitators of the programmes are expected to use to improve students' performance. Regarding the university under study, one is not sure on how peer facilitators encourage students to learn in a cooperative manner as insinuated by Wu.

Brady et al. (2003) confirm that retention of information is enhanced in a cooperative setting, and that students who work in cooperative relationships are likely to have a conscious understanding of the strategy followed in order to obtain the answer. However, Akerlind (2007) suggests that it may be most effective to organise most of the group cooperatively, then

monitor, and interact with two to four students. NA (2008) maintains that peer-assisted learning programmes can improve only by having one peer tutor assisting a maximum of two academically weak students. Consequently, peer facilitators could encounter difficulties while attempting to work in groups, particularly if the groups are large.

There is increasing evidence that students who "talk through" material with peers learn it in a more effective way than those who merely read or listen to material (Hussain et al. 2011). Hence, it could be useful to encourage all of the students in a session to verbalise a significant amount of content in their respective groups and to encourage constructive argument. Nadler (2002) claims that it is possible to overcome or challenge dominance in situations of inequality by using inter-group helping strategies. This aligns with the recommendation offered by Johnson and Johnson (1987). They recommend that peer facilitators should "mix" the group members in heterogeneous groups, including both male and female, handicapped and non-handicapped members, members from different ethnic backgrounds and so on, to enable the students to overcome the effects of initial stereotyping and to treat one another with respect, courtesy and kindness. This supports the contention by Makura et al. (2011) that most universities in South Africa admit students from diverse backgrounds in order to uphold the principle of racial diversity. This makes it imperative for the peer facilitators in support programmes to embrace this value with a combination of different strategies, to enable the students to respect and appreciate diversity. Nonetheless, peer facilitators need to be ethically responsible in doing their jobs. However, concerns have been raised with respect to some unethical behaviour as the literature reveals (Fazlil et al. 2018).

Hrabak et al. (2004) posit that universities should pay special attention to ethical issues like cheating, moral misconduct, and dishonesty. The application of unethical behaviour by students is associated with class inattention, taking no notes, boredom, indifference, dishonesty, disturbance, large classes and late coming or not coming to class at all (Hrabak et al. 2004). Fazlil et al. (2018) affirm the view that such unethical behaviours in students generate a weakness of moral commitment and irresponsibility, which, consequently, cannot function in a moral fashion in the future. Similarly, Thomas and De Bruin (2012) indicate that these particular students will carry forward this unethical behaviour as leaders and employees, which is likely to invoke questionable moral behaviour that may fall back to the university ethical standard. However, this unethical behaviour from some peer facilitators has been attributed to some factors, such as the teaching of large classes by peer facilitators, which makes it difficult to monitor misconduct (Bertram-Gallant 2008). The section below is on the research methodology that was adopted in the execution of the broader study that the current study is a part of.

Research Methodology

This paper is part of a larger study that examined the implementation of peer academic support programmes in the university under study. The broader study used the interpretive paradigm, associated with qualitative research approach.

Research Approach and Paradigm

Qualitative research is often described as a naturalistic, interpretive approach concerned with exploring phenomena from an interior perspective (Denzin and Lincoln 2011). Regarding the adoption of interpretive paradigm, Neuman (2014:103) defines it as "the systematic analysis of socially meaningful action through the direct detailed observation of people in their natural

settings in order to arrive at understandings and interpretations of how people create and maintain their social worlds." Similarly, Holloway and Wheeler (2010) maintain that research should explore lived experiences in order to reveal the connections between the social, cultural and historical aspects of people's lives and to understand the context in which particular actions take place. Despite the many criticisms against this paradigm (Yin 2009), the interpretivist paradigm assumes that multiple interpretations of human experience, or realities, are possible. The significant relevance of this paradigm to the study lies in the fact that it enabled a holistic understanding of the views, feelings and perceptions of the study's participants. Therefore, the observations and interpretations were based on the points of view of the participants. This qualitative approach and interpretive paradigm allowed for different methods of data collection, including in-depth interviews, focus group discussions and documentary analysis. This helped to provide a critical reflection and understanding of the different strategies used by peer facilitators and their effectiveness in improving students' academic performance.

Target Population, Sampling Technique

One previously disadvantaged university offering peer academic support programmes in South Africa was selected purposefully. The target population of the study was made up of all undergraduate students across four faculties who were receiving academic support from the programmes, all peer facilitators and all programme coordinators. The sample was 31 participants, made up of ten undergraduate students, fourteen peer facilitators and seven programme coordinators. The sample was selected purposefully and, more specifically, maximum variation sampling, also known as heterogeneous sampling, was adopted. It enabled the researchers to capture a wide range of perspectives relating to the theme of this paper, which is whether peer facilitators' strategies are succeeding in improving teaching and learning. Therefore, the larger study allowed the researchers to select participants who fit a certain profile; viz., undergraduate students from four faculties who were making use of the peer academic support programmes as well as peer facilitators and coordinators of the programmes who were very conversant with, and knowledgeable of, the programme offerings.

Data Collection Methods and Data Analysis

Three methods of data collection were used. First, two focus group discussions were conducted with undergraduate students (five each) who were benefiting from these programmes. Representatives of two faculties (Social Sciences and Humanities, and Management and Commerce) constituted one focus group discussion, and they were represented by three and two participants respectively. The second group was made up of Law, Education, and Science and Agriculture, which are smaller faculties compared to the first two faculties. One participant represented the faculty of Law, while the other two faculties were each represented by two participants. All genders were represented though females were three in each of the focus groups.

A focus group discussion involves unstructured group interviews in which the focus group leader actively encourages discussion among the participants concerning the topics of interest (Engel and Schutt 2009). The focus group discussion was an interactive discussion between pre-selected participants, which was led by the moderator, who is the principal investigator of this study. The discussion provided the investigator with an opportunity to observe a large

amount of interaction concerning the topic, within a limited time frame and it also provided direct evidence of the similarities and differences in opinions and experiences of the participants. Another benefit of research conducted by making use of focus groups is the additional insight gained from the interaction of ideas among the participants. The focus group discussions took place at the TLC on a Saturday at different times with the two groups over a duration of one hour each.

Secondly, individual interviews were conducted with TLC programme coordinators and peer facilitators. While the TLC pays the peer facilitators employed by the centre, tutors are paid by the different departments that employ them. However, it is the responsibility of the TLC to provide training to all the peer facilitators, including those employed by the departments. The individual interviews were conducted at the TLC on weekends at convenient times to the participants and they took approximately one hour. Finally, documentary analysis was conducted. These documents included records such as attendance registers, observation reports and share learning sessions from the Teaching and Learning Centre that coordinates the peer support programmes of the University under study. Also of significance was the analysis of registered students and graduation rates of the university obtained from the Office of Planning and Quality Assurance. Therefore, the type of documents analysed were printed materials and a personal letter written by one of the lecturers at the university under study.

The interviews and focus group discussions were guided by interview guides, which contained open-ended questions. Open-ended interviews were considered appropriate than any other interviews because they enabled the participants, that is peer facilitators and programme coordinators, to share their views, experiences, attitudes and beliefs on the implementation of the learning strategies that facilitate teaching and learning as aptly suggested by Maree (2007). The focus group discussions and individual interviews were audio-recorded with the permission of the participants. This enabled the researchers to understand and gauge the success or failure of the strategies used to facilitate learning, and the extent of ethical responsibility in practice at the university. Overall, we reached saturation point in data collection, whereby we gained confidence that we were learning little that was new from subsequent interviews.

Regarding data analysis, data collected was coded and analysed into major themes and sub themes that emerged from the field notes and discussions. After coding the data, a matrix of main and sub-themes was vividly presented to show the experiences, views and opinions on the strategies used by peer facilitators in teaching and learning in their sessions, and how successfully these were. The participants were given codes ranging from COD1–7 for programme coordinators 1–7; PF1–14 for peer facilitators 1–14, and FGD1and 2 for focus group discussion one and two respectively.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness of the data was ensured through triangulation, that is, the use of three data collection instruments (interviews, focus group discussion and document analysis) as a way of validating the authenticity of the data collected. There was also prolonged engagement in the field as well as participants' checking to ensure credibility. Harper and Cole (2012) claim that member [participants] checking is a quality control process in qualitative research that is done during the course of conducting a study. In the course of the study, participants got the opportunity to review their statements for accuracy. Prolonged engagement refers to spending extended time with participants in their native cultural setting and everyday world in order to

gain a better understanding of behaviour, values, and social relationships in the social context (Given 2008). The researchers were patient with the participants, enough to get their views on the strategies used in the implementation of the programmes (Language and Writing, and Supplemental Instruction programmes).

Ethical Consideration

Resnik et al. (2015) maintain that ethics are norms for conduct that distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. Maxwell (2012) postulates that ethical considerations are important in a research study because the integrity, reliability and validity of the research findings rely heavily on adherence to ethical principles. For the integrity, reliability and validity of the findings of the larger study, confidentiality and anonymity were ensured by employing codes during interviews. Considering that participants have rights, the interviewers observed their rights by not asking questions in public but in a private place. The information obtained was treated with confidentiality, privacy and anonymity. Permission was obtained from the participants to audio-record the interviews and focus group discussions. The participants were allowed to withdraw from the study anytime they wanted, though none withdrew. Nonetheless, the participants filled informed consent forms prior to the interview proceedings, to ensure that they agreed to be interviewed. In the informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity as well as privacy and no harm were guaranteed.

Findings

Under the theme of strategies used by peer facilitators, subthemes that emerged from the discussions and interviews include engaging students in discussion, questioning strategy and answering and re-directing strategy. The other theme is the success of these strategies in achieving satisfactory academic performance of students of the university under study.

Strategies Used by Peer Facilitators

Three sub themes on the strategies used by peer facilitators emerged. They include discussions, questioning, answering and redirecting questions. Peer facilitators used these interactive methods extensively, particularly those who are postgraduate students. All the peer facilitators in the sample maintained that, as peer facilitators, they were warned not to teach, but to facilitate learning. However, most of them qualified this by saying that the methods adopted depended on the level achieved by the students and the type of assignment or task presented to the peer facilitator. The data also indicated that peer facilitators were trained to use a variety of methods. However, according to the responses of the participants, most peer facilitators tended to use the question and answer method and grouping in their sessions, because these methods encourage active participation and enable them to manage time effectively. Only one peer facilitator reported using demonstration as a method of instruction: this peer facilitator was from the science faculty, where experiments are routinely used to conduct demonstrations in the laboratories.

Engaging Students in Discussions

An important line of questioning in the interviews with the peer facilitators concerned the ways in which they engaged with students during their sessions. All of the peer facilitators indicated

that they mainly engaged their students in discussions. They explained that they discussed the problems that were presented to them by different students in order to enable everyone in the session or the class to benefit from the discussion. One of the peer facilitators said:

> *One of the major things we do in class is to facilitate discussion between students, while we, as facilitators, simply guide and provide some order in the discussion. We also iron out differences and acknowledge commonalities in the discussions, which are usually very rich* (PF3).

As the question was put to the peer facilitators only, without asking other groups such as the coordinators or the students, the unanimous agreement among the peer facilitators underlines the importance that they attached to discussions as a means of encouraging their students to become actively involved in their learning.

Questioning Strategy

Questioning was one of the activities that all of the peer facilitators explained that they used in order to engage actively with academically weak students in their classes and sessions. They went on to explain that questioning was one of the techniques that they had been trained to use in order to help students become actively involved in their studies, and in using the content of their courses, as opposed to acting as stand-ins for their lecturers. One of the peer facilitators explained this by saying;

> *We are not lecturers, but we simply facilitate learning, through questioning students so that they are able to interact in front of us and their peers. We question in such a way as to encourage everyone in a class or a session to talk through answering questions. It does not matter whether the answer is right or wrong, what is important is participation* (PF14).

According to the peer facilitators, questioning has become such an important technique for stimulating understanding used extensively in peer tutorials and sessions. When they were asked about their questioning techniques, many of the peer facilitators maintained that they believed that they were using the techniques correctly and obtaining the desired results with many students. However, some of the facilitators explained that no matter what they did, not all students will talk or answer questions in class, whether they knew the answers or not, and that there is little that can be done to change that. Although introverted students will limit the effectiveness of any techniques that aim to involve students actively in their work, the techniques are still regarded as being effective and relatively easy to use. If the resources were available, excessively shy and introverted students could be brought out of themselves with strategies designed to build self-confidence, and this would undoubtedly increase the effectiveness of interactive group techniques in higher education.

Answering and Redirecting Questions

Although all of the peer facilitators emphasised their role in answering the questions asked by students during their sessions, many of them explained that a great many of the students who attended their sessions did so simply to ask questions and obtain answers. They explained that

a good way of dealing with many questions is to redirect them to the class. Doing so does not mean that the peer facilitators are not able to provide answers where and whenever necessary, but redirecting questions has the potential to involve all of the students in arriving at the answer, as one of the peer facilitators explained;

> *Although we sometimes provide answers to students' questions, we are advised to redirect the questions back to the students for those who know to help answer the questions, thereby learning and letting their friends learn* (PF3).

The peer facilitators stressed that they always tried to encourage students to participate actively, through either writing or talking. One of the peer facilitators said:

> *I group them, I write, I point to a student to come and write on the board. Also, I direct specific questions for particular students to answer, even though some of them feel it is embarrassing* (PF5).

Another peer facilitator pointed out that some of the students did not want to talk and the only way to make them do so was to ask them questions in an appropriate way, saying;

> *I pose questions that make them think in a manner that does not make them look stupid. Making them talk to you and talk to each other* (PF2).

We also got the programme coordinators' responses regarding the methods used by peer facilitators to assist students, and one of them reported that:

> *They are not teaching as such, they are providing peer support. This is done through questioning and group discussions* (COD4).

Another coordinator supported how they (peer facilitators) used redirecting questioning strategies and said that;

> *They redirect questions ask by students; make use of probing questions, informal quizzes, mnemonic devices etc. With the informal quiz, they do not get marks, but it is meant to assist the students* (COD7).

The Extent to which Peer Facilitators' Strategies Are Successful

The extent to which the strategies are succeeding refers to the manner in which the participants perceived and assessed the success of the strategies in improving students' academic performance. While all of the participants acknowledged the success of the strategies, they also faulted the strategies.

Strategies Are Succeeding to a Larger Extent

The participants all maintained that they believed that the strategies were effective in achieving the goal of improved academic performance to some extent, but not very satisfactorily. This

perception was expressed in two sub-themes, namely; the improved pass rate among students and the improved proficiency in skills.

Improved Pass Rates It was widely believed by the coordinators and the peer facilitators that the pass rates had improved for different courses offered by the faculties of the university. They expressed the view that credit was due particularly to those students who had been attending tutorials and the SI and language and writing programmes at the TLC. Two of the coordinators remarked:

> The programmes have been so successful because our pass rates have been high. We have at least six hundred and fifty students in a class. As lecturers, we do not have the time to attend to individual students. It has been successful because when students are face with problems, they go to the tutors. The pass rates have been improving. We also make sure that tutorials are compulsory by including attendance and participation marks to their continuous assessment
> (COD 6).
> I think they have been very successful, just looking at the test marks of the students and the pass rates. Those who failed are the ones that do not attend the tutorials (COD4).

These perceptions, with their references to pass rates, would imply that the programmes have played a significant role to improve the rates of retention and throughput at the university.

In those departments in which tutorials are compulsory, peer facilitators acted as intermediaries between lecturers and students and consolidated the learning process, resulting in the improved pass rates reported by the coordinators and peer facilitators. The results are can be seen on Table 1 below. Some of the coordinators suggested that in those departments in which tutorials were not compulsory, students could be failing as a result of not attending tutorial sessions. The peer facilitators felt that the effectiveness of the programmes could be ably demonstrated by the fact that those students who believed that they had received help always came back to thank them for their assistance and the positive feedback which they received from the lecturers in the various departments. One of the peer facilitators said;

> The programmes are effective, because students pass well. We also check with the lecturer to find out how they have performed in their tests (PF6).

In line with the views expressed by the participants, Table 1 below shows hard data of student cohorts (2000/2001) who enrolled before the introduction of the programmes in 2004 and graduated in 2004 and another cohort who enrolled more than ten years after the introduction of the programme and graduated in 2018.

These calculations are based on the 2000 Education cohort and 2001 cohort of students registered for other programmes, which are four and three years respectively. It is assumed that these cohorts (2000 and 2001) should have graduated in 2004. Social work, which is a four year degree programme now, was a three year programme before 2005. Therefore, social work is included in the 2001 cohort and not the 2000. However, they are included in the 2013 cohort rather than 2014 as the programme is now four years. It is also assumed that the 2013 and 2014 cohorts should have graduated in 2018.

The configuration of faculties for the 2000/2001 student cohort was different from today's configuration. Therefore, we critically examined the figures or statistics (data) based on the qualifications that students registered for and graduated with and matched them to the

Table 1 Entry and graduation number of students before and after the introduction of peer support programmes

Faculty	Before the introduction of support programmes (2000 education cohort and 2001 for other programmes)			Ten years (2014 cohort for education and 2015 for other programmes except social work) after the introduction of support programmes		
	First Year Registered students 2000/2001	Number of Graduated students (2004)	Graduation Percentage	First Year Registered students 2014/2015	Number of Graduated students (2018)	Graduation Percentage
Education*	977	289	30	552	401	73
Law	500	80	16	317	226	71
Mgmt & Commerce	624	144	23	969	574	59
Science & Agric	898	127	13	756	445	59
Social Sciences & Humanities	887	224	25	698**	424	61**

Source: Planning and Quality Assurance Office of the University under study, 2019

*All programmes of the Faculty of Education are four years

**Registered students do not include social work students whose programme is four years but the graduation rate include social work as there was no way to exclude them from the provided percentage

equivalent faculty reconfiguration that presents itself today at the University under study. Also, in extracting the data, care was taken to exclude those who registered for and graduated with certificates and diplomas. Hence, the data presented on Table 1 are for bachelors' degree programmes only. The faculty of Health Sciences is excluded as it was established in early 2000s. Before the establishment of peer support programmes by the Teaching and Learning Centre in 2004, the graduation rate at the Faculty of Education was barely 30% and after more than ten years, the percentage increased to 73% in 2018. In the Faculty of Law, the graduation rate was as low as 16% and, thereafter, there was a remarkable graduation rate of 71% in 2018. As Table 1 shows, the Faculty of Management and Commerce 2000/2001 student cohorts registered a graduation rate of 23%, and in 2018 the faculty's graduation rate went up to 59%. The Faculty of Science and Agriculture according to Table 1 had the most decimal graduation rate in 2004 with a percentage of 13. However, in 2018, the same faculty's graduation rate increased tremendously to 59%. Finally, the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities had a graduation rate of 25% and this increased to 61 in 2018. Because social work graduates were included in the graduation rate of this faculty, but not included in the registered students in 2015, it means that the percentage would be lower than 61%.

However, it was evident, and confirmed by most of the coordinators, that there is no means of tracking the performance and progress of individual students at the university. Many of the coordinators and the peer facilitators explained that they could not be sure about the improvements in academic performance achieved by many individual students after taking part in the support programmes, as they received no feedback from a great many students. Some of them also maintained that some lecturers were not very willing to play their own part in the implementation of the programmes because they believed that TLC is solely responsible for all aspects of improving the academic success of students and the effectiveness of the various Peer Academic Support Programmes.

Improved Proficiency in Skills The data revealed that some students felt happy about their participation in the programmes because they believed that they had benefited in different ways. Most of them indicated that they felt that they had benefited from revision, having concepts clarified, being able to prepare for examinations, guidance concerning the correct study materials, referencing, group question and answer sessions and help with making use of online resources. A few listed being able to detect plagiarism through the use of Turnitin, receiving help with paraphrasing and obtaining access to e-books as benefits. Their general perception of the programmes was that they helped them to overcome their academic problems, and that for this reason, they should continue to be implemented. Most of the students also felt that the peer facilitators guided them regarding the correct reading materials and clarified points that they did not understand concerning the content of their courses. Among the responses given by the students, when they were asked whether they believed that they were benefiting from the programmes or not, were:

> *The tutors take us through the work that was done in class by lecturers. The tutor also guides us on what to read for a test or exam and how to read. In fact, they provide us with examination tips* (SFGD1).
> *The tutors also advise us where to get valuable information for assignments and where to find online resources* (SFGD4).

In one of the focus group discussions, most of the students maintained that they benefited a great deal from the TLC and the tutorial programme in terms of the assistance that they had received with respect to referencing and the structuring of their assignments. However, a few of the participants maintained that despite the great benefits provided by the TLC, it was not easy to obtain access to their services owing to the long queues. One of the students said:

> *At the TLC and during tutorials, the facilitators help me to structure my assignments and also show me how to reference. However, my only problem is that there are long queues at the TLC, where one has to wait for a long time before being helped* (SFGD7).

Some of the coordinators cited improved student portfolios, communication skills and assignments as evidence of the effectiveness of the peer academic support programmes. Two of them said:

> *I think they are helping a lot because you will find that with the language issue, students are improving. I am not saying that the students will become perfect after the first assignment has been reviewed, but you can see when you look at the second draft, there has been some improvements.* (COD5).
> *The programmes are effective because we have had good results from most of the students. However, right now, with the first year students, they are still facing many challenges. Even the students we have assisted have improved; looking at their previous and current assignments, one could see the improvements* (PF7).

Some of the participants felt that the programmes were effective because many of the students felt free to speak during the sessions, owing to the fact that the groups are small. They maintained that this made it easy to revise for tests and examinations. However, some of participants maintained that some of the students did not feel free to participate during the sessions, making it difficult to gain an accurate impression of

the progress that they may, or may not, have made. One of the peer facilitators commented on this concern by saying;

> *They are surely coping, otherwise they would complain. In addition, there is no way we can track their progress because there is no provision for that. Also, some students do not want to express their feelings if they feel that something is not right. So, when we discuss in class, I make sure that they are coping* (PF 14)

The above excerpt is an indication that the programmes and strategies used were useful and should continue to be implemented.

Strategies Are Not Completely Satisfactorily Achieving the Overall Goal of Improved Academic Performance

While acknowledging the success of the strategies employed by peer facilitators, the participants, on the other hand expressed some dissatisfaction with the overall success of the strategies. Many students also expressed a degree of disappointment with the strategies, as they felt that they were not as effective as they ought to be. They raised a number of concerns regarding the strategies used. As was mentioned in the previous subsections, these concerns were raised mainly by the undergraduate students who participated in the focus group discussions, representatives of the students whom the programmes are designed to help. In order to assess the effectiveness of the strategies, the participants were asked to discuss their concerns and to express their levels of satisfaction with the strategies. The sub-themes that emerged were; tutors being ill-prepared for large classes, unprofessional conduct of some tutors during tests, and the poor relationship between the peer facilitators and some departments whose students they were endeavouring to assist. Some of these issues border on ethical concerns that are interrogated in this paper. These sub-themes are presented below.

No Individual Attention from Tutors Owing to Large Classes A sub-theme concerned large classes, which preclude individual attention being paid to students by tutors at departmental level. Many of the students in the sample felt that tutors did not have time to give them individual attention, in which they could discuss their academic problems on a one-on-one basis. Other students explained that it was difficult to arrange meetings with some tutors. One of them said:

> *We usually have tutorials without tutors attending to us as individuals. Even if we have tutors, the groups are usually so large that the discussions do not flow well due to overcrowding* (SFGD5).

It should be added that at the TLC, Supplemental Instruction leaders and Language and Writing consultants often provided individual attention, along with the group discussions which they lead. In this respect, their role is different from that of the tutors, who act as peer facilitators in the various departments.

Some Tutors Are Ill-Prepared Some of the students complained that some tutors arrived ill-prepared for tutorials, and that some students achieved better academic proficiency than the tutors. During one of the focus group discussions, a dominant perception was that students were not satisfied with the ability of some tutors to communicate effectively in English. They

complained that the English of these tutors was not good and that they used poor English during sessions, which they felt created distrust. The following excerpts summarise the principal complaints and misgivings concerning the Peer Academic Support Programmes by the students who participated in two separate focus group discussions:

> *I am not satisfied because of the language barrier. Some of the SI leaders do not want to speak in English and the language of instruction is English. I know that they are deficient in English. The TLC facilitators check the assignments in their own way. When we submit them to the lecturers, we don't get good marks* (SFGD1).
>
> *I am not really satisfied, because in my department, they do not attend to most of our problems, as we are many. Sometimes, if we ask questions to which the tutors do not know the answers, they would say 'Go and look for the answer for the next class'. They usually say 'We are not here to teach, we are here to support* (SFGD6).

This is an indication that despite the strategies used by peer facilitators, there is still some dissatisfaction on the part of students. However, the overall view of the students tended to support the good work being done by the tutors in the various departments, to improve their learning abilities and the general quality of their education.

Unprofessional Conduct of some Tutors during Tests (Unethical Behaviours) Some students accused tutors of unprofessional conduct during tests, because of instances in which tutors have whispered and shown answers to their friends. Others complained that some tutors were very rude to students, acting as if they imagined that they were lecturers and not tutors. A few also maintained that their tutors did not revise the work covered in their lectures. One of the students, talking about the unprofessional conduct of some tutors, said:

> *During tests, some tutors who have friends will show answers to their friends because, most of the time, the lecturers have asked them to invigilate during tests while the lecturers do other things in their offices* (SFGD10).

Although these were some of the relatively minor problems that emerged, they remain significant. Therefore, acceptable professional standards of conduct for peer facilitators need to be laid down and enforced.

Poor Relationships with some Departments Some of the peer facilitators and some of the coordinators, particularly those from the TLC, felt that a poor relationship exists between some departments at the university and the TLC. This perception has gained currency as a result of some departments refusing to send students to them for academic assistance, maintaining that there was no difference between the assistance provided by the tutors in the various departments and that provided by the SI and LW programmes at the TLC. A coordinator said;

> *We don't see many students from some departments because their lecturers and departments do not send them to us. Some of them complain that they don't see the difference between the tutors and the peer facilitators at the TLC. We organise Annual Teaching and Learning Week to explain some of these things, but many lecturers do not turn up to listen* (COD1).

Document analysis cast some light on this perceived reluctance to cooperate with the TLC and to take advantage of the support programmes that it offers, with a letter written by a lecturer from one of the departments, which reads;

I do acknowledge responsibility for not applying [advising students to apply] for SI support for the 2016 academic year in my capacity as First Year Coordinator at... Campus. I can attest that SI support was available for all first year students during the 2015 academic year. Mrs. [Name withheld], a second year student [programme withheld], served as SI leader for the students. She regularly attended lectures and also made appeals to the students to utilise the SI support. Students, however, displayed very little interest in the programme. I wish to recommend that we should conduct an evaluation of the SI programme for the first years and then design mechanisms that can ensure that students understand and utilise the benefits of it. This appears to be missing at present (Anonymous lecturer, September 29, 2015)

Some of the peer facilitators remarked that the TLC ought to be able to market itself well, to both the staff members of the different departments and to the students, who are the ones who make use of their services. The letter above, from one of the lecturers, shows that students in some departments have not felt inclined to avail themselves to the programmes offered by the TLC.

Discussion

The strategies used to implement the programmes (language and writing, and supplemental instruction) has been ethically effective to the extent that there have been improved pass rates in some departments and also an improvement in proficiency in writing, referencing and paraphrasing, among a significant number of students. This is an indication that the strategies are bearing fruit, to a certain extent. This can be seen from the hard data on Table 1. However, the table does not accurately represent the ideal situation as those who dropped along the way are not reported or indicated on the table. Similarly, other factors such as the provision of financial and other assistance to students might have also contributed to these graduation rates. It is important that pass rates in the different subjects and courses should improve as a result of the interventions made by the programmes' strategies, as this does not only encourage the students, but should also serve to remind those who have not been making use of the programmes to consider doing so in future. It is predicted that the pass rate will continue to improve if students become actively involved in their learning in the manner advocated by Astin (1984, 1977). Perceived success is certainly a very strong motivator, which could motivate not only the students, but also the peer facilitators who intend to play a motivating role. It is also hoped that the rates of retention and throughput, which lie at the heart of the problems faced by this university, will continue to improve significantly in the manner suggested by Tinto (2001).

The principal concerns of the university have been poor writing skills, the inability of many students to cite references or to create bibliographies, proficiency and communicating in English, all of which stem from the poor socio-economic backgrounds of most of the students. According to literature, inter group helping strategy suggested by Hussain et al. (2011) should be used to enable the students to overcome the effect of stereotypes and treat each other with respect and kindness. However, this particular strategy is not being used at the university, one which could bring much relief, not only for the peer facilitators, but also for the students, the lecturers, the management and the university community as a whole.

Although the use of the strategies by peer facilitators, as revealed in this paper, are ethically accepted worldwide, the findings show serious unethical behaviours, which have implications, not only on the individual peer facilitators/tutors but the tarnishing of the image of the university and its academics. Fazlil et al. (2018) maintain that such unethical behaviour leads to a weakness in moral commitment and irresponsibility on the part of the defaulter(s), and affects the individual morally in the future. Similarly, Thomas and De Bruin (2012) hold that such behaviours are usually carried forward, and these have negative effects on the individuals' leadership styles as employees. Although the unethical behaviour leads to questionable moral behaviour of the individual peer facilitators, Thomas and De Bruin (2012) reiterate that these fall back on the university ethical standards. It might be puzzling whether the programme coordinators have not yet focused on selecting the most suitable strategies regarding training in some areas as reiterated by Ainsworth (2006) to avoid these unethical behaviours from peer facilitators.

Despite the successes achieved through these strategies, the participants also identified the respects in which they perceived the strategies to have been less effective. The study also endeavoured to determine the levels of satisfaction with the strategies expressed by the participants. A related perception, expressed by some of the participants, was that some tutors were ill prepared when they conducted tutorials. This is unethical behaviour that should not be tolerated. However, many factors, including the heavy workloads of advanced undergraduate students, could contribute to problems of this sort. This is supported by Bertram-Gallant (2008), who maintains that large classes are a huge contributing factor of unethical behaviour. Some of the students also complained that some tutors did not give them individual attention, which should be available in tutorials conducted at departmental level as the intention behind tutorials is to organise individual and small group meetings with students or peers who have academic problems. It is obvious that facilitators sometimes fail to utilize the socratic questioning techniques suggested by Wilson and Arendale (2011), and which involve encouraging student questions, redirecting questions and cultivating active listening skills, such as repeating student responses, allowing time for responses from students, nonverbal cues and providing feedback.

Contrary to the literature, the findings reveal that there is an apparent unwillingness by some tutors to adequately assist students that are needy academically. However, this might be a result of the frustration experienced because of insufficient training and heavy workloads. Some of the participants, particularly the first year students, felt that some tutors and peer facilitators had displayed unprofessional conduct by showing answers to questions to their friends during tests, which is also unethical. This unethical behaviour could suggest that the level of maturity of peer facilitators who behave in this manner may be low, pointing to the need to recruit mature and academically experienced and competent postgraduate students.

Some of the participants maintained that there was a poor relationship between the TLC and the departments of the university. The root cause of the problem seems to be ignorance, as many lecturers do not understand the differences between the peer facilitators at the TLC and the departmental tutors. As a result, they do not encourage their students to go to the TLC to seek any type of academic support. Some of them maintain that the assistance provided by the tutors is sufficient and that they cannot see why students should need go to the TLC for further assistance. These lecturers either forget, or are ignorant of the support programmes, which entail very specific academic interventions. These include programmes that improve and develop language and writing skills and the Supplemental Instruction programmes, which

are implemented by the TLC only, and which are intended to provide help to students at the university who may need them.

Conclusion

The principal method of facilitation used by peer facilitators at the sampled university is the interactive teaching method, which utilised the strategies of discussions, questioning, and answering and re-directing questions. Though not all embracing as suggested by the literature, these strategies have been successful to a certain extent in improving the academic performance of many students as revealed by the study participants. It should be noted that the improvements are in the area of skill proficiency (referencing and bibliographical construction, paraphrasing and citation, various components of the English language amongst others). As a result, there is a general improvement in academic performance of those students who get support from support programmes where these interactive teaching strategies are used. The graduation rates have shown remarkable improvements over the years after the introduction of the peer support programmes. However, other factors might have also contributed to these improved graduation rates.

The strategies, however, have not been able to achieve miraculous results as some expect. They have their own shortcomings, and these might depend on how these strategies are used by the different peer facilitators. Nonetheless, the participants singled out some reasons why these strategies have not been very successful. Some of them are unprofessional behaviour portrayed by some tutors as well as the limited use of the services by some students who are not encouraged from their different departments. This is due to the lack of proper demarcation between what tutors in the department do vis-à-vis what the peer facilitators from the TLC do. The repercussions of the identified unethical behaviours go beyond individual peer facilitators to also negatively impact the ethical standards of the university in question as well as the nation.

Limitations of the Study

As with most academic research projects, this study did not successfully end without any hitches. The following constitute the limitations of the study:

First, some students, who were carefully and purposefully selected because they could provide sufficient and rich information about the implementation of the LWC and SI programmes, were unwilling to be interviewed. Nonetheless, measures were adopted to persuade other students to participate in the study. Furthermore, there was limited exploitation in the analysis of the TLC documents because there is no effective storage of information and annual statistics of peer facilitators' activities and services. Some registers from past years were inaccessible, and some facilitators could not give a proper account of their responsibilities at the TLC. This limitation was overcome through verbal explanations by some experienced peer facilitators and coordinators. Finally, the TLC has only two programme coordinators and, as such, only their views were available from the in-depth interviews. These two coordinators could not generate enough and diverse information about the implementation of these programmes to allow for comparison and for the generation of salient themes. It would have been preferable to have different views for the purpose of generation of themes.

Recommendations

The following are suggested as possible implementable recommendations to the different stakeholders:

- More peer facilitators need to be recruited in order to keep pace with the increasing numbers of students. The programmes cannot hope to achieve their objectives if the ratio of students to peer facilitators becomes greater than that provided by the model, which stipulates no more than twenty students per group.
- The poor behaviour of some of the tutors/peer facilitators during sessions could be avoided by providing regular and continues training on class management, ethics, morals and rectitude.
- Different departments of the university need to be invited and sensitized on the programmes and strategies that are available for students at the TLC, which are different from those used in the departments. Moreso, the TLC is a specialised unit that helps struggling students academically, and departments should be required to refer such students to the centre. Regular meetings between the TLC and the various departments could improve relations.
- All of the Peer Academic Support Programmes, which are being implemented at this university, need to be informed by the best practices, which are employed by universities at which similar programmes and strategies have been implemented successfully.
- Peer facilitators should also be better prepared with necessary academic acumen to guide students effectively in answering academic questions set by the lectures. Further, peer facilitators should avoid unethical behaviours.

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