

PARTNERING WITH STUDENTS TO CONNECT STUDENTS

B. O. Ige*

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0451-5418>

G. Doyle*

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1321-8178>

L. Pienaar*

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2829-2717>

*Department of Health Science Education

University of Cape Town

Cape Town, South Africa

ABSTRACT

Too often outreaches and interventions designed to support students transitioning to higher education, are developed by academics who may not have a full understanding of the complexity and diversity of their students' realities. This disconnect explains why, in most cases, interventions are reactive instead of proactive. In this article, we draw on our experiences in terms of the design and implementation of a Student Resource Centre (SRC) to advocate for student and staff collaborative design. The student-run initiative works with students as partners to constitute and operationalise an innovative near-peer mentoring and support space. The mixed-methods study draws on social-cultural learning theory on student engagement and reflective practice tools. We explain how a student's sense of belonging is central to their success, progression, and graduation. This article highlights the need to contextualise and personalise institutional support for students.

Keywords: student engagement, student-staff partnership, peer support, student belonging, transition

INTRODUCTION

Diversified academic support interventions are pivotal to assisting students with their educational needs and ability to be successful. However, what is defined as academic success often fails to recognise and interrogate the sociocultural processes that could affect graduate throughput (Weuffen, Fotinatos, and Andrews 2021, 123–124). Consciously created and contextually relevant opportunities are critical to meet the needs of students coming from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. However, access is one of many hurdles facing prospective students which makes it crucial to build inclusive learning communities and

university environments (Boughey 2007, 4–5; Ige, Amosun, and Hartman 2017, 84–85; Scott 2009, 4–5). It is, therefore, essential to create an environment that appreciates the knowledge and skills brought into the academic space by all students to help foster their sense of belonging (Pretorius and Macaulay 2021, 642; Yosso 2005, 69–70). In higher education, much of the dominant discourse around student centres on deficit thinking especially for those coming from disadvantaged and/ or previously marginalised backgrounds. In South Africa, disadvantaged and previously marginalised students are those who are from underrepresented racial and ethnic groups, from rural and low socioeconomic backgrounds, while traditional students are those who are from privileged backgrounds and racial groups which were and often still are privileged before South Africa became a democracy. By default, as elsewhere, higher education was structurally and culturally designed to service “traditional” students (Hartman et al. 2012, 477–478; Scott 2010, 230–231; Sikakana 2010, 922). Although higher education is changing, it continues to promote the prior knowledge and experiences of the dominant culture within its walls, e.g. English culture in the South African context (Thomas 2002, 430–431; Yosso 2005, 75–76). Recognition and acceptance of individual students’ prior experiences or frames of reference are key to facilitating rich, transformative learning in a new environment. Accordingly, it is important to understand belonging as an act of self-identification and identification by others that is dynamic. Yuval-Davis (2006, 199) explains that belonging can be constructed on different analytical levels “the first level concerns social locations; the second relates to individuals’ identifications and emotional attachments to various collectivises and groupings; the third relates to ethical and political value systems with which people judge their own and others’ belonging/s”. In the South African context, belonging may erroneously be considered as being a stable process, reinforced by educational programmes and support structures underpinned by a one-size-fits-all model (Abrahams, Badenhorst, and Ige 2018, 96; Yuval-Davis 2006, 199).

In the last two and a half decades, South African higher education has embarked on a transformation agenda of broadening access, with universities opening their doors to students from previously marginalised and disadvantaged backgrounds (Akoojee and Nkomo 2007, 385). A series of interventions implemented in the last decade to support South African students were remedial in nature and widely criticised for racial profiling and perpetuating segregation (Heydenrych and Case 2015, 180–181). To date, a record number of students have dropped out nationwide, largely because university systems remain rooted in dated pedagogical support approaches (Warren 2002, 85–87). In most cases, this tends to leave behind the students from previously marginalised and disadvantaged backgrounds and isolate them.

The higher education landscape is changing fast. Underprepared students no longer come

only from linguistically and socio-culturally diverse backgrounds and under-resourced schooling (Abrahams et al. 2018, 98–100; Badenhorst and Kapp 2013, 465–466; Ige et al. 2017, 66–67). This group has expanded to include students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, irrespective of their schooling. Whatever their background unprepared (e.g., students from poor socioeconomic and/or school circumstances, those who are the first in their family to attend university), this group of students has significantly changed the ethos of students entering the university (Ige et al. 2017, 73; Monnapula-Mapesela 2015, 256–257). These students are often labelled as disadvantaged, perhaps erroneously so, and the academic and non-academic support offered to them should not be a further hindrance to them.

A significant issue that was highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic is that some students never had access to technologies before their university acceptance (Badenhorst and Kapp 2013, 470–472; Czerniewicz et al. 2020, 948–949; Ige et al. 2017, 75; Scott 2018, 6–8). If such students are to thrive in their new learning environments, the need for deeper commitment of the institution to comprehensive support that includes academic, emotional, psychological, and socio-economic assistance, cannot be overemphasised, (Sikakana 2010, 922). Too many students remain consistently limited in their involvement in university activities and interactions, despite many of the support systems in place. It is important to consider the contexts of the students' lives and backgrounds to help do away with demotivating barriers to success and completion of academic goals. Removing the barriers that separate students requires intentional effort towards the creation of interculturally sensitive support opportunities along with culturally sensitive pedagogy, and this is critical for the way forward.

The more relevant the academic context is to students, the more they are likely to succeed and think highly of their institutions. This leaves us with the following question: is there an ideal approach to providing a more personally relevant higher education context? This article explores the question by looking at the nature of student support and students' perspectives at the University of Cape Town, South Africa. It then presents a possible model for promoting students' personal meaning, active involvement, validation, and social integration.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK – COMMUNITY OF PARTNERSHIP

A collaborative student and staff approach is desirable for inclusive and responsive student support. The student-staff partnership approach is increasingly becoming a common strategy employed by higher institutions of learning to promote student engagement (Curran 2017, 2–4; Healey, Flint, and Harrington 2014, 15). Cook-Sather, Bovill, and Felten 2014, 6–7) describe partnership in this sense as “a collaborative, reciprocal process through which all partners have the same opportunity to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways, to

curricular or pedagogical conceptualisation, decision making, implementation, investigation, or analysis.” Partnership with students goes beyond simply acknowledging students’ voices. It recognises the value of students’ contributions to and role in resolving issues of concern to both parties. This invariably enables students and staff to benefit from one another’s experience, insights, and expertise as input to the process.

Research studies on staff partnership with students show that an increase in student motivation and enthusiasm and a sense of community results from partnership activities with students (Bovill, Cook-Sather, and Felten 2011, 134–136; Brooman, Darwent, and Pimor 2015, 671–673; Fieldsend-Danks 2016, 89–95). In this case, partnering with students to develop student-centred support in the wake of #FEESMUSTFALL, was an invitation for student involvement in the shaping of enabling support systems to improve their learning experience. This allowed students not only to share their views but also to brainstorm with staff on how to address the issues and to help implement identified solutions. This approach is a useful position, given the University of Cape Town Transformation agenda on widening access and participation as well as Health Sciences Faculty’s commitment to an equitable and inclusive learning experience.

In this study, we draw on reflection as a tool for promoting action, as we are practitioners involved in rethinking the student learning support approach. Reflective practice such as student-staff partnership is a powerful tool used in higher education for critically examining past experiences to inform the future (Pinsky, Monson, and Irby 1998, 214–215; Schön 1983, 21–38; 1987, 4–17). It is used here in our study to improve student connection and engagement in teaching and learning. We drew on Schön’s (1987, 22–75) reflective cycle of *in and on* the action, which uses reflection to create models from a body of previous knowledge and speculate on how the situation could be different and what knowledge would be helpful. This type of reflective exercise allows us in this study to reframe a problem or issue relating to academic support, which then informs interventions, and the outcome leads to further analysis and interpretation. Reflection “in-action” for us meant reflecting on the decisions we made and the processes we engaged with for the design of the student resources centre and reflecting “on-action” ensured that we were cognisant of the historical positioning of academic support in the faculty.

Moreover, we wanted to critically reflect on and interrogate our own practices to explicitly uncover and challenge the power dynamics that framed academic support in the faculty (Brookfield 2009, 296–297). We did this by considering the various assumptions that informed our understanding of student learning (Brookfield 2009, 296–297; 1998, 198–199; Mezirow 1997, 7). As researchers we challenged the assumptions behind how and why we provided and

implemented student support. As suggested by Schön (1983), the process is driven by the need to find answers on how to deal with learning challenges that continue to plague our students, especially in the first year of study. We began by reflecting on what the faculty offers to support students on entry and “when” they offer the academic support. This led us to look at key faculty initiatives that were designed to provide support for first-year students.

As already established, students bring unique insights and direct experiences of learning and teaching to the table (Bovill et al. 2011, 134; Bron, Bovill, Van Vliet, and Veugelers 2016, 39; Cook-Sather et al. 2014, 1), which offers a unique and practical approach to some of the major challenges confronting university practice. By bringing students on board and soliciting their participation in the design and implementation phase, it was inevitable that we rethink support. It became clearer through our reflections and review of pertinent literature on academic support that engaging and supporting students are both critical for learning and interconnectedness, particularly for non-traditional students (Brooman et al. 2015, 671). Keeping the social nature of learning in mind, we recognised that the involvement of senior students was crucial to promote students’ voices, ideas, perspectives, experience, and skills. Their input on the type of support needed was also crucial to prevent the alienation of new and non-traditional students. In this article, we move beyond the curriculum partnership to transform how we support our students. More importantly, integrating the advantages of near peers as facilitators was crucial (Bruno et al. 2016, 141; Silbert and Lake 2012, 395). If the primary tenet of a social support programme is to help students recognise that there are others who are like them, then institutions need to involve students a lot more in the design and administration of such initiatives. The involvement of students in support programme design can only strengthen the content and delivery in terms of relatedness and relevance for the larger student body (Cook-Sather 2020, 894).

RESEARCH METHODS

This article is a product of a piloted project that responds to students’ agitation for student-led and student-centred support among other things. The nationwide student protest in 2015 and 2017 in South African higher education, famously known as #FEESMUSTFALL, informed the innovative student-staff collaborative peer-support initiative. The #FEESMUSTFALL movement became a catalyst for wider curriculum change discussions and transformation across programmes at the University of Cape Town. We decided to focus our response on enhancing the existing student support programme to further promote and foster students’ sense of belonging and improve their learning experience in the Faculty of Health Sciences. We spotted a gap in the wave of the responses to student calls, which seem to primarily focus on

academic change; and student support was secondary to this. Grounded in transformative design (Mertens 2010, 470–471; Sweetman, Badiee, and Creswell 2010, 441–443), we employ a mixed-methods survey for the study.

The mixed-methods survey allowed us to gather data through closed-ended and open-ended questions. The survey questions focused on student awareness of existing support programmes offerings in the faculty and explored the kinds of changes students are advocating for. For the closed-ended questions, students were asked to rate level satisfaction using a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 indicated being very dissatisfied and 5 indicated being very satisfied. For the data gathering, we used the Special Study Module (SSM) platform. The SSM is a compulsory four-week research-oriented module for second-year medical students, which is aimed at developing students' research skills through early exposure to research experience, in a particular field of interest. As required, we submitted research interests to the SSM programme coordinator to identify interested student(s) in our research topic, and we were subsequently assigned to supervise the student study. We met with the research student and together designed the study, which included the student's own ideas around accessing video learning material. In this article, questions about the video learning material are left out. We focus on student perceptions of existing support system offerings and their suggested changes. The student researcher played a leading role in the design of the study and later the analysis and discussion.

The survey consisted of Likert scale open-ended (n=6) and closed-ended questions (n=12) administered through a Google Doc sent to all undergraduate students (n=1800) in the Faculty of Health Sciences (MBChB, Audiology, Occupational Therapy, Physiotherapy, Speech, and Language Pathology). The survey results and information on the support programmes in the faculty helped to shape the development of the Student Resource Centre (SRC). This study was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University EC Ref 413/2017). Participants were provided with information, and each participant was given time to review the form and discuss their participation with the research team if they wanted to. The consent form was administered together with the survey on Google Docs. Subsequently, the quantitative data was analysed to provide descriptive statistics such as mean, standard deviation, variance, and mode using an online statistical package (Maple Tech 2021). The qualitative data were categorised and analysed thematically. The survey, although administered to all undergraduate students, was answered predominantly by MBChB second-year students. The possible explanation for this is that the SSM module is a second-year medical course. In analysing the results, we only considered the second-year students' responses. In retrospect, their views are being used as a guideline to illuminate students' views in general on learning support in the

faculty. The responses from students in other years were insufficient and considered insignificant.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

The findings below start with the description of the researchers' critical reflections on student support in the faculty, how students view their experience of the existing learning opportunities and support, and what the students would like to see put in place.

Student support in the Faculty of Health Sciences

As researchers, we began by critically reflecting on what support the Faculty of Health Sciences offers to students on entry and the timing of those interventions. The faculty has an estimated 450 first-year Physiotherapy, Audiology, Speech and Language Pathology, Occupational Therapy and Medical students. Students have about a 28-week academic year filled with various academic activities. The mainstream curriculum across the faculty consists of various pedagogies with MBChB currently using hybrid problem-based learning, and Physiotherapy, Audiology, Speech and Language Pathology, and Occupational Therapy using a combination of lectures, discipline led tutorials, practice-based learning, and occasional peer-led tutorials. To augment the curriculum in the faculty, offer diverse types of academic support to first-year students, most which is offered alongside the curriculum. This includes an extended degree programme, called the Intervention Programme (IP), for students who fail core subjects in the first semester, but this programme is in the process of being changed (Ige et al. 2017, 71).

In addition, augmented tutorials, such as academic literacy (AL), quantitative literacy (QL) and so forth are offered. The objective of these is to provide academic support to a selected group of students in the form of small group tutorials facilitated by trained tutors. Where students are identified as being at risk of failing, they are provided with extra tutorial support sessions, for instance in the basic sciences and some disciplinary courses. There is also ad hoc support as the need arises to support students. It is also not unusual for lecturers to meet one-on-one with students and/ or offer consultations via email or a range of telephonic and instant message systems. The office for student support and development and the First-Year Experience (FYE) workshops are also spaces where support is offered with dedicated academic staff whose role is to support students in each discipline.

From observations, it is more likely that the academic support finds its way into courses as an add-on rather than an embedded practice, which is currently primarily dependent on staff to identify the type of student support required. It was evident that there is no shortage of a range of support programmes and initiatives in the faculty. We then wondered why we are not

seeing drastic changes and results given the availability of these support programmes, coupled with the ongoing curriculum changes in the faculty. A closer look at the student demands in the faculty (which emerged from the 2016 student protests for social change (Luckett 2016, 416)) and marrying that to the list of support the faculty offers revealed some level of disconnect. We realised that when support is offered as explained above, it competes with a full curriculum into which it is difficult to integrate the necessary concepts associated with academic support, such as, study skills, examination preparation, assessment, and digital literacy. More importantly, staff, and not the students identify the academic support students need. Therefore, we felt it was imperative to hear from students how they experience the academic support on offer in the faculty and what their needs are to inform future interventions.

Survey results

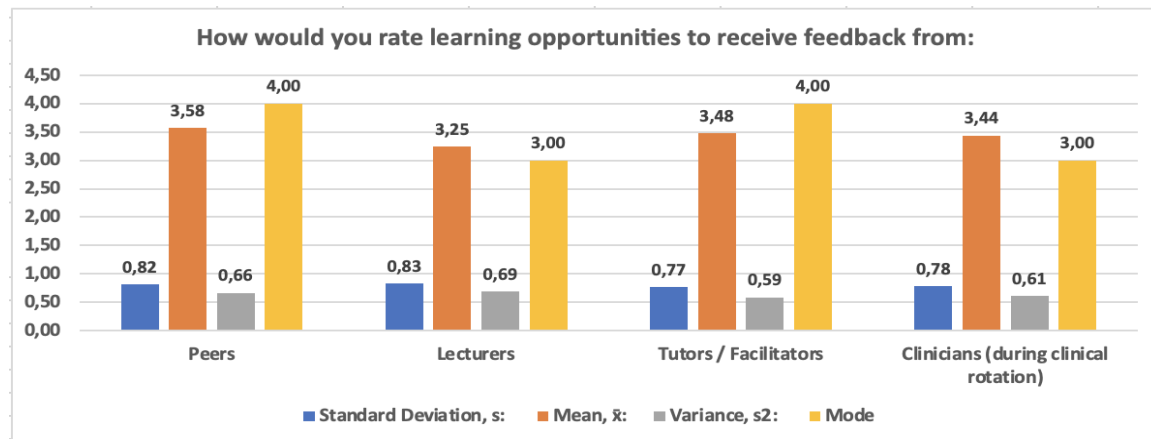
We asked students to rate their satisfaction level with the learning support opportunities available to them in the faculty in the aftermath of the #FEESMUSTFALL campaign. A total of 73 students responded from the MBChB Year 2 class of 265 students. The data analysis (Table 1) showed that while the students were satisfied with the availability of physical infrastructure in the faculty, their biggest request was for more physical spaces, namely more communal areas, and a twenty-four-hour study area on campus. They also requested that more tutors be available after class and specifically tutors who could offer support in languages other than the university's prescribed English.

Table 1: Satisfaction with learning spaces

	How would you rate your satisfaction with the following provided in the faculty?									
	Lecture rooms	Tutorial rooms	Laboratories	Online learning materials	Availability of computers on campus	Assigned books, notes, and resources	Student spaces and common areas	Multimedia equipment to assist with assignments, etc.	Spaces to practice skills required	Facilities to develop learning material and resources
Standard Deviation	0,62	0,89	0,66	1,04	0,70	0,98	1,07	0,82	1,00	0,95
*Mean	3,84	3,38	3,95	3,16	4,30	3,14	2,93	3,12	3,07	2,77
Variance	0,39	0,80	0,44	1,08	0,49	0,95	1,15	0,67	1,01	0,90
Mode	4,00	4,00	4,00	3,00	5,00	4,00	4,00	3,00	3,00	3,00

*1=extremely dissatisfied; 2=very dissatisfied; 3=neither satisfied nor dissatisfied; 4=very satisfied; 5=extremely satisfied

As much as formal learning and spaces make an impact, students, more than the faculty, realise the significance of how informal learning and spaces are viewed.



*1=extremely dissatisfied; 2=very dissatisfied; 3=neither satisfied nor dissatisfied; 4=very satisfied; 5=extremely satisfied

Figure 1: Satisfaction with learning opportunities

In Figure 1, students rated the contribution from peers and tutors as higher than the learning provided from lecturers, an indication that informal learning is perceived as more important, or equally valuable than formal learning.

The following section presents the thematic analysis of the qualitative open-ended questions of the survey. The students' responses further reinforce the importance of informal learning and their desire for student-oriented connection, spaces, and engagement. The questions explored here centred around students' view of desirable learning support resources, as well as identifying their own personal learning strategies and tools.

Mentoring and learning resources

It was interesting to see mentoring coming through as a strong theme throughout the students' responses to the open-ended questions, especially given that our questions did not directly ask about mentoring but rather about the types of support they would want in place. None of the statements made by the students suggest the existing mentoring programmes are invalid. Rather, the student's responses focused on the preferred type of mentoring and support. We recognise the quest for connection with other students or the like for guidance in their statements. Some students expressed this need by asking for more flexible tutor support, perhaps because in most programmes in Health Sciences the tutors are qualified clinicians who are also employed as health care professionals. Others asked directly for a student group-led type of connection and support, for example, "Personal tutors/Online tutors," and "More tutors from the faculty in each subject," while others asked for a "study group," which "is

better arranged among students themselves ... I would love to have a group I know I can be safe with and rely on.” Some wanted “Individualised mentoring” and “... space for groups to work together.” They were looking for a different kind of connection that is either currently not in place or considered inadequate in the existing support. Their suggestions and options appear to marry connection with a positive learning experience that seeks to shift existing boundaries (Yuval-Davis 2011, 14) or narrow them to reposition themselves. This desire for connection recognizes student mentors as important social learning support for students to grow their own student identity, thus, locating and positioning themselves as peripheral members of their learning communities (Yuval-Davis 2011, 14; Lave and Wenger 1991, 29).

The students also provided insight into the kinds of learning resources they consider necessary to foster out-of-classroom learning experiences. These include the following: “Student lounges; 24-hour access to computers; multimedia opportunities to record presentations/mock examinations”, “I would like for there to be more online resources, in the form of videos and lecture notes”, and “Rooms that are open to learn/practice skills”. The students’ inclination towards the affordances of technology is a positive one and they seem to suggest that the faculty is behind on the issue of technology.

After-hours support

Students expressed in many ways that after-hours support is currently inadequate. Some of the responses seem to suggest that the existing after-hours support requires rethinking in terms of alignment with student needs, space, and required support. Out-of-class learning is always emphasised by lecturers and course conveners as being part of learning hours. Nothing the students said seems to contradict this understanding; they point to the gaps between what is expected of them and the available resources for self-directed learning. Some of the student participants put it as follows: “more after class help;” “more study spaces open to all at all times;” “Student study groups, this is probably better arranged among students themselves, ... a group I know I can be safe with and rely on.” Others phrased it differently: “time and place prior to OSCE to practice with other students;” “Learning areas with interactive e-boards or even a space for groups to work together that are not in the library.” These explain why the level of student’s satisfaction with the status quo was low as indicated in the graph above. The responses reflect awareness, understanding, and agency on their part, in relation to input required of them outside classroom learning for their studies, thus the ability to self-identify what they require to learn. Too often, instructors tend to conclude that students lack agency and are poor at self-regulation. These students’ requests suggest otherwise, as they understand that learning happens through social interaction and that is welcome.

Willingness to share own ideas to help other students

When asked about an individual's own learning strategies and the willingness to share with classmates, the responses were telling in terms of (1), the richness and diversity of students' own learning strategies and (2) their readiness to participate in other students' development by sharing their strategies and tools. This shines a light on the raw capital every student enters the institution with and reinforces the importance of individual students as part of the collective (Pretorius and Macaulay 2021, 642). Here, we see the repositioning of self-displayed through the students' willingness to engage with their fellow students, which is empowering. Some of the learning and coping strategies include the following: "personal notes and summaries", "study notes and voice notes of my reading material to playback ...", "YouTube videos especially when textbooks are too wordy and convoluted", "typed out notes from lecture", "Mind Maps, drawings, summary documents, or voice recordings (to listen to while exercising/walking)", "I also use YouTube videos from channels like Khan Academy, Armando Hasudungan", "... written notes with images", "digital mind map and simple mind application", "recordings of certain topics and tables of categories of information", "sketches with notes and concept linking". While the students confirmed that these are personal and private learning tools developed for their own use, most of them indicated the willingness to share the tools and strategies with other students without hesitation. The common phrase used is "yes I will share." Even those who were reluctant used the conditional phrase "but if asked, I will ..." to express their eagerness to assist despite their reservations. Other examples include "... these cannot really be shared but I do send pictures if someone asks me to," and, "If I find it useful, I will share these with some of my classmates." Students are not only resourceful but also recognise that they are a community of students in need of each other to develop and learn.

DISCUSSION

Ideally, socio-cultural aspects of support should drive the kind of activities which are designed and implemented but this is not always the case (Ravhudzulo 2014, 28–30). The students need to be surrounded with the required attention to succeed, by removing common barriers that separate the so-called "traditional" and "non-traditional" students from each other. As such, it is important that support programme initiatives are contextualised and relevant for the type of student population an institution is seeking to attract. In this section, we present two overarching themes that emerged from the results – the "how" and the "when" of support.

Importance of “how” and “when” of support

The first apparent disconnect was not so much about the type of support but rather the “*how*” of the support offered. The students recognised the need for identity shifts from deductive learning to inductive learning by emphasising the importance of the role of senior students’ involvement in their learning and development as crucial for the shift. They achieved this by foregrounding learning as social interaction and at the same time moving beyond traditional classroom support. There was a clear quest for more student involvement in the current system of support, where peer or near-peer engagement is encouraged. They acknowledged the strength of having tutors (near-peers) as guides to navigate their studies. The students also stressed the importance of informal learning and mentoring in their learning and development as members of their learning communities. This informal learning and mentoring not only promote collaborative learning but also foster student integration and a sense of belonging and strengthen learning communities (Holyfield and Miller 2000; Cook-Sather et al. 2014, 5–8; Lave and Wenger 1991, 36). The findings suggest that students’ views on their role in fostering an active culture of learning and participation are positive and empowering. This is because they recognise the changes that must happen for them to become a student in their respective programmes (Gale and Parker 2014, 747). It also articulates how the changes are centred around having students supporting students, as anchors and symbols of familiarity. Accordingly, the first years see senior students as being intermediaries to bridge the divide between them and the new knowledge and culture. They repeatedly stress the importance of tutors, creative spaces, and their own willingness to share. Students can identify for themselves what they need, thus using self-identification and identification of others to alert them to their learning needs and foster belonging (Yuval-Davis 2006, 199). By doing this, they connect themselves and others and become role players instead of peripheral members of the various learning communities.

Furthermore, the *how* speaks to tailoring support to students’ acknowledged goals, backgrounds, and experiences. A student-to-student approach provides amicable ground for the recognition and identifiable connection that encourages and motivates, and at the same time minimises fear and confusion (Yosso 2005, 69–70; Yuval-Davis 2006, 199–202). Student-to-student interaction, directly and indirectly, serves as a user-friendly portal, where students can access information and/or be referred to cushion transition challenges with just one visit. It also interfaces with students’ academic needs, e.g., students seeking assistance with a course or module, or study skills. First-year students from low-income backgrounds or who are the first in their families to attend tertiary institutions need to feel as if they belong in a higher education environment. By partnering with senior students as advisors, first-year students can be connected to a network of near peers for support and growth (Matthews 2016, 2–3). The

findings also show that students' perceptions and experiences of their realities are valuable tools for identifying and designing support that resonates with them, given their expert views on the matter (Brooker, Brooker, and Lawrence 2017, 59–60).

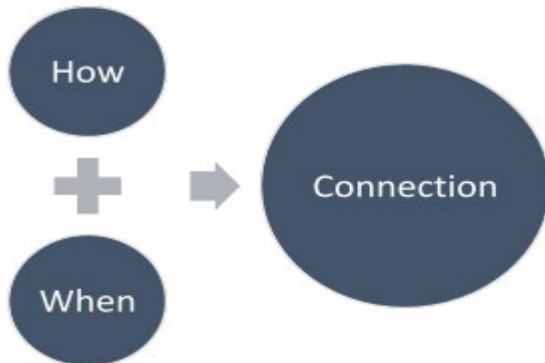


Figure 2: Tailoring and timing support for connectedness

The second disconnect identified by the students relates to the “when” of support. Most of our support programmes are seen as being reactive and not proactive. In other words, we wait for an “at-risk” signal to respond. This is true for IP, the extended curriculum programme, the flagging of students by the Student Support Office, and the placement of selected students in augmented support, to name a few. Even the FYE that is designed to be proactive appears to be too broad and general and tends to miss a core group of vulnerable students. Students are calling for proactive programmes that would prevent them from becoming “at-risk” in the first place. The call for change requires a new way of thinking that does not just add on to or recycle traditional support ideologies but re-envision student support as perceived by the student for the student.

IMPLICATIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

The outcomes of this study present implications for the support model in higher education. It is important to note that the first-year experience is not homogeneous but rather diverse and multifaceted, particularly in the context of an academically and demographically diverse student population. Not only are the experiences as diverse as the backgrounds of the student cohorts, but they are continually evolving and changing throughout the first year of study. As we have reported, every first-year student is confronted with one or more challenges that come from mismatched expectations, and social and personal issues in their first semester of study. For example, for some students, what began with culture shock in terms of expectations, such

as workload and literacy skills, could be replaced with or/and compounded by non-academic issues, such as finding accommodation close to or on campus. These experiences may completely derail learning, which underscores the importance of the first-year experience as a critical foundation for students' long-term academic success in higher education.

Therefore, for support programmes to be successful, they must be done to promote and create familiar and recognisable opportunities as well as space and anchor academic journeys (Meeuwisse, Severiens, and Born 2010, 533). Visibility of familiar features of the learning system is important for fostering and strengthening students' sense of belonging. This is because students would not only perceive their courses as being important, useful, and interesting, but also feel they belong (Strayhorn 2012, 784–786; Tinto 2017, 3–4). It is advisable that such provisions should start with visible programmes and activities that are geared toward enriching the recognition of new students and confidence building for students transitioning from the first to the second year or from pre-clinical years to clinical years. This can become visible through relatable structures and orientation activities. These active exchanges of recognisable learning expectations and activities are a wonderful opportunity for enriching learning experiences and, thus, creating opportunities for students to feel catered for and included. This could be an essential way of tackling retention challenges linked to widening access. This can facilitate how universities simultaneously provide equal access and assist students academically, emotionally, psychologically, and socio-economically (Hornsby and Osman 2014, 717–718; Spark et al. 2017, 77–78).

The study also highlighted the implication of students' insights into and expertise on matters relating to the improvement of students' learning experiences, which makes them important partners on student issues. The unique insights, direct experience, and expertise they bring to the table can contribute to the development of meaningful and relatable interventions for students across a complexity of diverse backgrounds (Bron et al. 2016, 39; Cook-Sather 2020, 887–894). All higher education institutions need to recognise and value their students' input in shaping students' own experiences. Such a powerful relationship or partnership will not only encourage active engagement but also increase motivation and enthusiasm, and a sense of community(ies) among the student population. For instance, giving greater opportunities for students to engage in peer learning and peer support could lead to them taking on greater responsibilities for their own learning and development and that of their peers.

Similarly, the wealth and diversity of learning strategies presented in the study by the students, shine a light on untapped resources in higher education. By sharing their individual creativity and developed study tools, they show vibrant ideas about academic learning tool induction, and transition, and establishing communities of student support. It was evident that

students are their own biggest resource, but this remains largely untapped. The active engagement of students in all areas and taking their perspectives into account can significantly address both practical and strategic challenges and opportunities (Felten et al. 2013, 70).

CONCLUSION

Creating a connected and inclusive learning environment is paramount to student success and retention. Although this kind of support usually happens, in this article we put forward that more is needed to improve student retention and graduation. Universities need to connect better to the lives and needs of the diverse student population. We assert that student support needs to shift focus from generalised problem-solving to an individualised understanding of the needs of students. Therefore, we suggest that student support would be best delivered by students, for students. Furthermore, timing is important – early engagement with students is essential to address likely problems which might impede progress. We contend that the success of the first-year support programme lies in expanding and partnering with senior students in delivering that aid. In the 21st century, universities need to rethink the first-year experience programmes, student support, and what is “normal” (campus culture) and recognise the tremendous role senior students can play in all these processes.

REFERENCES

- Abrahams, Amaal, Elmi Badenhorst, and Busayo Ige. 2018. “Building a community of practice in an extended curriculum: The intervention programme.” In *Teaching in extended programmes in South Africa: Classroom contexts, lecturer identities and teaching practices*, ed. L. Coleman, 95–105. Cape Peninsula University of Technology Fundani, Centre for Higher Education Development.
- Akoojee, Salim and Mokubung Nkomo. 2007. “Access and quality in South African higher education: The twin challenges of transformation.” *South African Journal of Higher Education* 21(3): 385–399.
- Badenhorst, Elmi and Rochelle Kapp. 2013. “Negotiation of learning and identity among first-year medical students.” *Teaching in Higher Education* 18(5): 465–476. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2012.753050>.
- Boughey, Chrissie. 2007. “Educational development in South Africa: From social reproduction to capitalist expansion?” *Higher Education Policy* 20(1): 4–18.
- Bovill, Catherine, Alison Cook-Sather, and Peter Felten. 2011. “Students as co-creators of teaching approaches, course design, and curricula: Implications for academic developers.” *International Journal for Academic Development* 16(2): 133–145. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360144X.2011.568690>.
- Bron, Jeroen, Catherine Bovill, Eddie Van Vliet, and Wiel Veugelers. 2016. “Negotiating the curriculum’: Realizing student voice.” *social Educator* 34(1): 39–53.
- Brooker, Abi, Sarah Brooker, and Jeanette Lawrence. 2017. “First year students’ perceptions of their difficulties.” *Student Success* 8(1): 49–63.
- Brookfield, Stephen. 1998. “Critically reflective practice.” *Journal of Continuing Education in the*

- Health Professions* 18(4): 197–205.
- Brookfield, Stephen. 2009. “The concept of critical reflection: Promises and contradictions.” *European Journal of Social Work* 12(3): 293–304. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691450902945215>.
- Brooman, Simon, Sue Darwent, and A Pimor. 2015. “The student voice in higher education curriculum design: Is there value in listening?” *Innovations in Education and Teaching International* 52(6): 663–674.
- Bruno, P. A., J. K. L. Green, S. L. Illerbrun, D. A. Holness, S. J. Illerbrun, K. A. Haus, S. M. Poirier, and K. L. Sveinson. 2016. “Students helping students: Evaluating a pilot program of peer teaching for an undergraduate course in human anatomy.” *Anatomical Sciences Education* 9(2): 132–142. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1002/ase.1543>.
- Cook-Sather, Alison, Catherine Bovill, and Peter Felten. 2014. “What are Student-Faculty Partnerships? Our Guiding Principles and Definition.” In *Engaging students as partners in learning and teaching: A guide for faculty*, 1–14. Jossey Bass.
- Cook-Sather, Alison. 2020. “Respecting voices: How the co-creation of teaching and learning can support academic staff, underrepresented students, and equitable practices.” *Higher Education* 79(5): 885–901. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-019-00445-w>.
- Curran, Roisín. 2017. “Students as partners – good for students, good for staff: A study on the impact of partnership working and how this translates to improved student-staff engagement.” *International Journal for Students as Partners* 1(2): 1–16.
- Czerniewicz, Laura, Najma Agherdien, Johan Badenhorst, Dina Belluigi, Tracey Chambers, Musawenkosi Chili, Magriet De Villiers, Alan Felix, Daniela Gachago, and Craig Gokhale. 2020. “A wake-up call: Equity, inequality and Covid-19 emergency remote teaching and learning.” *Post-digital Science and Education* 2(3): 946–967. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42438-020-00187-4>.
- Felten, Peter, Julianne Bagg, Michael Bumbry, Jennifer Hill, Karen Hornsby, Maria Pratt, and Saranne Weller. 2013. “A call for expanding inclusive student engagement in SoTL.” *Teaching and Learning Inquiry* 1(2): 63–74.
- Fieldsend-Danks, Paul. 2016. “The Dialogues project: Students as partners in developing research-engaged learning.” *Art, Design & Communication in Higher Education* 15(1): 89–102.
- Gale, Trevor and Stephen Parker. 2014. “Navigating change: A typology of student transition in higher education.” *Studies in Higher Education* 39(5): 734–753. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2012.721351>.
- Hartman, Nadia, Harsha Kathard, Gonda Perez, Steve Reid, James Irlam, Geney Gunston, Vicki Janse van Rensburg, Vanessa Burch, Madeleine Duncan, and Derek Hellenberg. 2012. “Health Sciences undergraduate education at the University of Cape Town: A story of transformation: Forum-education.” *South African Medical Journal* 102(6): 477–480.
- Healey, M., A. Flint, and K. Harrington. 2014. *Engagement through Partnership: Students as Partners in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education*. York: HEA.
- Heydenrych, Hilton and Jennifer M. Case. 2015. “Academic development in the mainstream: A case study in an undergraduate engineering programme in South Africa.” *South African Journal of Higher Education* 29(5): 179–200.
- Holyfield, Lavern J. and Barbara H. Miller. 2000. “Training in Dental Education.” *Journal of Dental Education* 77(8): 990–997.
- Hornsby, David J., and Ruksana Osman. 2014. “Massification in higher education: Large classes and student learning.” *Higher Education* 67(6): 711–719.
- Ige, B. O., S. L. Amosun, and N. Hartman. 2017. “Widening student access and participation in Allied Health Sciences: A critical reflection.” *South African Journal of Higher Education* 31(5): 65–89.
- Lave, Jean and Etienne Wenger. 1991. *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge University Press.
- Lazarus, Richard S. 2006. *Stress and emotion: A new synthesis*: Springer publishing company.

- Luckett, K. 2016. "Curriculum contestation in a post-colonial context a view from the South." *Teaching in Higher Education* 21(4): 415–428. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2016.1155547>.
- Maple Tech, I. L. 2021. "Calculator.net." <https://www.calculator.net/mean-median-mode-range-calculator.html>
- Matthews, Kelly. 2016. "Students as partners as the future of student engagement." *Student Engagement in Higher Education Journal* 1(1): 1–5.
- Meeuwisse, Marieke, Sabine E. Severiens, and Marise Ph. Born. 2010. "Learning environment, interaction, sense of belonging and study success in ethnically diverse student groups." *Research in Higher Education* 51(6): 528–545. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-010-9168-1>.
- Mertens, Donna M. 2010. "Transformative mixed methods research." *Qualitative Inquiry* 16(6): 469–474. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800410364612>.
- Mezirow, Jack. 1997. "Transformative learning: Theory to practice." *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education* (74): 5–12.
- Monnapula-Mapesela, Mabokang. 2015. "Students' perception of their own preparedness for higher education: Case Study." *International Journal of Educational Sciences* 9(2): 255–264.
- Pinsky, Linda E., Dorinda Monson, and David M. Irby. 1998. "How excellent teachers are made: Reflecting on success to improve teaching." *Advances in Health Sciences Education* 3(3): 207–215.
- Pretorius, Lynette, and Luke Macaulay. 2021. "Notions of human capital and academic identity in the PhD: Narratives of the disempowered." *The Journal of Higher Education* 92(4): 623–647. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2020.1854605>.
- Ravhudzulo, Anniekie. 2014. "Enhancing Teaching and Learning in Open and Distance Learning: A Mechanism to Facilitate Student Success." *International Journal of Educational Sciences* 6(1): 27–32.
- Schön, Donald A. 1983. *The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action*: London: Temple Smith.
- Schön, Donald A. 1987. *Educating the reflective practitioner: Toward a new design for teaching and learning in the professions*: Jossey-Bass.
- Scott, Ian. 2009. "Towards an agenda for SoTL in Africa?" *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching & Learning* 3(1): Article 3.
- Scott, Ian. 2010. "Who is 'getting through' in South Africa? Graduate output and the reconstruction of the formal curriculum." *The Next* 25: 229–243.
- Scott, Ian. 2018. "Designing the South African higher education system for student success." *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* 6(1): 1–17. doi: <https://doi.org/10.24085/jsaa.v6i1.3062>.
- Sikakana, Cynthia N. T. 2010. "Supporting student-doctors from under-resourced educational backgrounds: An academic development programme." *Medical Education* 44(9): 917–925. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2923.2010.03733.x>.
- Silbert, Benjamin I. and Fiona R. Lake. 2012. "Peer-assisted learning in teaching clinical examination to junior medical students." *Medical Teacher* 34(5): 392–397. doi: <https://doi.org/10.3109/0142159X.2012.668240>.
- Spark, Linda, Danie de Klerk, Tshepiso Maleswena, and Andrew Jones. 2017. "Paving the Road to Success: A Framework for Implementing the Success Tutoring Approach." *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* 5(2): 75–88.
- Strayhorn, Terrell L. 2012. "Exploring the impact of Facebook and Myspace use on first-year students' sense of belonging and persistence decisions." *Journal of College Student Development* 53(6): 783–796. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2012.0078>.
- Sweetman, David, Manijeh Badiee, and John W Creswell. 2010. "Use of the transformative framework in mixed methods studies." *Qualitative Inquiry* 16(6): 441–454. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800410364610>.

- Thomas, Liz. 2002. "Student retention in higher education: The role of institutional habitus." *Journal of Education Policy* 17(4): 423–442. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02680930210140257>.
- Tinto, V. 2017. "Reflections on student persistence." *Student Success* 8(2): 1–8.
- Warren, Digby. 2002. "Curriculum design in a context of widening participation in higher education." *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* 1(1): 85–99.
- Weuffen, Sara, Nina Fotinatos, and Tulsa Andrews. 2021. "Evaluating sociocultural influences affecting participation and understanding of academic support services and programs (SSPs): Impacts on notions of attrition, retention, and success in higher education." *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice* 23(1): 118–138. doi: <http://doi.org/10.1177/1521025118803847>.
- Yosso, Tara J. 2005. "Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth." *Race Ethnicity and Education* 8(1): 69–91. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1361332052000341006>
- Yuval-Davis, Nira. 2006. "Belonging and the politics of belonging." *Patterns of Prejudice* 40(3): 197–214. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00313220600769331>.
- Yuval-Davis, Nira. 2011. *Power, Intersectionality, and the Politics of Belonging*. FREIA Working Paper Series No. 75. <https://doi.org/10.5278/freia.58024502>.