

# EPISTEMOLOGICAL ACCESS: A CASE OF ACADEMIC DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMMES AT A UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY

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## Abstract

South Africa has made significant progress in expanding access to higher education since the end of the apartheid era. This gave opportunities to a larger portion of the population to pursue higher education studies, especially those from previously disadvantaged communities. The growth in student enrollment has not always correlate with academic success. High levels of failure and dropout rates amongst first-year students are a common challenge across universities. This implies that the challenges related to epistemic access at universities persist. To address these challenges, universities implemented academic development programmes providing targeted interventions and fostering a supportive learning environment that can help bridge the gap between formal access to universities and epistemic access. The study that informs this paper sought to explore how academic development programmes enable epistemological access to first-year students. This study employed a qualitative methodological approach and adopted a purposive sampling strategy to select the participants. The study interviewed twenty mentors participating in an academic development programme (mentorship) at a University of Technology. The findings highlights the role of academic development programme (mentorship programme) in enabling students to transition from unfamiliarity to familiarity within their chosen field of study, leading to an epistemic shift that alters their epistemological level. These findings can contribute to the broader discussions and advancements in higher education pedagogy by highlighting the importance of and understanding the mechanisms behind the mentorship programme. The implications of this study on higher education is to inform the design and implementation of effective initiatives that foster epistemological growth and empower students to engage with disciplinary knowledge more effectively.

**Keywords:** higher education, access, academic success, academic development, epistemological access, mentorship programme, first-year students, knowledge acquisition, student support, mentors.

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## 1. Introduction

In South Africa, the issue of access to higher education is complex and multifaceted, with many factors contributing to disparities in access between different socio-economic groups [1]. The complex and multifaceted access history has typically been defined by injustices and imbalances, imposed on previously disadvantaged communities because of strict racial segregation and discrimination [2]. The previous system was designed to perpetuate white minority control and deny black South Africans' access to quality education. At the dawn of Democracy, institutions of higher education, which had hitherto been established on racial grounds, needed transformation. However, the decision was not one that white liberal universities made; instead, it was a reaction to political pressure [3].

Since 1994, one can argue that South Africa has done well in terms of increasing the number of previously disadvantaged students enrolling for higher education [3]. However, the true growth and potential of the higher education sector is being hampered by low academic success, highlighted by [4] as one of the challenges that need urgent attention. According to [3], high failure and dropout rates among first-year students are common in most South African universities. Over half of first-year students drop out before completing their degrees [5]. Data from the Higher Education

Management Information Service (HEMIS) indicates that black students have a low success rate and that less than 10 % graduate at universities. This contributes to the 55 % unemployment rate among black students, which also reflects the gap [3].

The South African government has endeavoured to increase its response to the historically disadvantaged populace by providing widened access to higher education [6]. However, formal access to university facilities is not the only solution to ensure academic success. Once admitted, students struggle to succeed and gain access to the knowledge the university provides [7]. According to [8], the term “epistemological access” was coined while referring to the challenges, faced by South African students in acquiring the necessary knowledge in higher education. It holds relevance within the context of access to higher education in South Africa due to the historical legacy of apartheid [9]. By understanding and addressing issues of epistemological access, institutions can work towards creating a more equitable and inclusive higher education environment [10]. This may involve implementing practices that recognise and value diverse forms of knowledge, promoting equal opportunities for learning, and fostering an environment that supports the inclusion of historically marginalised perspectives.

#### **The problem of epistemic access in higher education – a review of literature**

The concept of epistemic access has been a subject of debate and contention in South Africa’s higher education system. Following the transition to democracy in 1994, there has been progress in terms of formal access to higher education for black students [11]. However, challenges related to throughput rates and completion in higher education remain a concern. The study on student dropout by [12] noted that 50–60 % of dropouts were first-year students. Most of these were also from disadvantaged backgrounds. This implies that while higher education in South Africa has made strides in broadening formal access for black students, the challenges related to epistemic access at universities persist.

Apartheid policies in South Africa systematically marginalised and disadvantaged non-White communities, resulting in limited access to quality education, restricted resources and segregated institutions [13]. These systemic barriers created significant disparities in knowledge acquisition and perpetuated epistemic injustices, which highlights the enduring impact of apartheid on education opportunities and knowledge production [2]. Addressing the ongoing inequalities, faced by historically marginalised students, is crucial for empowering them to fully participate in the academic sphere [14]. Epistemological access highlights the importance of students’ ability to access and engage with the knowledge, skills, and practices necessary for success in higher education [11].

The concept of epistemological access has acquired traction in transformative discourse in South Africa higher education. It emphasises the need for a comprehensive understanding of the barriers that exist beyond physical access to higher education, which ultimately provides a reference to access to academic practices and bodies of knowledge in the academic disciplines [15]. Many universities in South Africa thus need to recognise the importance of addressing barriers to academic success and embrace practices that facilitate epistemological access. [11] maintains that gaining epistemological access means that students are able to acquire the relevant disciplinary identity and participate effectively in the discipline. Therefore, academic development programmes should play a vital role in supporting students’ acquisition of disciplinary identity and effective participation in their chosen disciplines [1].

The role of academic development programmes is to support students’ learning and academic success, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds or with limited prior educational experience [16]. Previously disadvantaged students face challenges in navigating and adapting to the dominant culture and discourse in higher education [17]. It is imperative, that academic development programmes acknowledge and address these challenges through the enactment of transformative pedagogies that provides students with access that enables them to achieve epistemic access.

Academic development in the South African higher education system had its roots in the early 1980s when the apartheid-era legislation was relaxed to allow white liberal universities to accept smaller numbers of black students [1]. The increased need for academic development shifted

towards greater access to higher education for previously marginalised groups [16]. At the time, academic development work was framed primarily as academic support, aimed at assisting black students who were viewed as inadequately prepared for university education due to the poor quality of education available under apartheid [4]. It could be argued, that “unpreparedness” was a misconception, commonly used about the nature of previously disadvantaged students’ issues.

However, the challenges black students faced in higher education were multifaceted; hence an understanding of what unpreparedness meant during the apartheid era was limited. As a result, it could be argued, that academic development work was based on a “deficient” assumption, and support was primarily limited to what was assumed about the nature of the previously disadvantaged students’ issues [18]. In this regard, it would seem that the main aim of the academic development interventions was to ensure the assimilation of the previously disadvantaged students into the dominant ways, valued in the Western academy.

Over time, the focus of academic development in the South African higher education system has shifted to a more holistic approach that recognises the multiple factors that can impact student success [19]. The academic development field is well-established in South African higher education and has undergone significant growth at universities. Currently, most universities have dedicated centres or departments, focused on providing academic support to students. These centres are often called Centres for Teaching and Learning (CTLs). Their primary role is to coordinate and facilitate academic development programmes and initiatives in the universities. This includes programmes to improve student performance, such as the extended curriculum project, tutoring and mentoring, the Writing Centre, the First Year Experience and the Maths, Science, Engineering and Technology Centre [1, 16, 20]. Of interest is the overarching theme in these academic development programmes that emphasise epistemological access.

This study notes that the mentorship programme was identified as a standard academic development programme in South Africa’s higher education. As such, the rationale behind the mentorship programme at the university, chosen for the research, was intended to provide first-year students with psychosocial and academic support that inspires them to achieve academic excellence [21].

The aim of this study was to explore how academic development programmes enable epistemological access to first year students.

## 2. Materials and Methods

This study was qualitative [22] and followed a qualitative methodological approach, considered appropriate for exploring how academic development programmes enable epistemological access to first-year students. Qualitative research was beneficial as it allowed for a detailed and nuanced exploration of the perspectives and experiences of the participants in-depth [23]. The target population was purposively selected from the university being studied [24]. This study engaged twenty mentors who participated in the mentorship programme because of their experience and expertise. This experience and expertise put the selected respondents in the best position to respond to the study-related questions. Data was collected utilising interviews and semi-structured questions were employed [22]. For this qualitative data, coding and thematic analysis were helpful to identify patterns and themes related to epistemological access.

The study that informs this paper was conducted from 2020–2022. The researchers followed ethical guidelines and obtained consent from the participants before their involvement in the study. Any potential risks or benefits were discussed with the participants, and they were given the opportunity to ask questions or withdraw from the study if they wished to do so.

## 3. Result

Given that the research intended to understand how academic development programmes enable epistemological access to first-year students, the findings were underpinned by the value of the mentorship programme and its impact on first-year students’ epistemological access and the kind of support the mentorship programme provides for first-year students. The meanings were

derived from the comments and statements of the participants that were quoted verbatim in the data collection process.

The mentorship programme being investigated was considered to have value regarding the exposure mentors provide to first-year students. During mentorship sessions, mentors expose first-year students to knowledge and information [25]. Mentors share their own experiences and insights about the academic environment, courses, resources, and opportunities available on campus. They provide valuable information about academic requirements, extracurricular activities, and potential career paths. This exposure helps first-year students become more aware of the various aspects of university life and make informed decisions [25].

*...I allowed them to get more exposure on the field. I felt that the mentor programme gave me the chance to work with people who may be struggling, as I was in my first year, as well as the fact that I needed to share my passion and experience for my course with others in need... (R4)*

*...it adds something to the academic success ... to make other things easier or clearer... (R6)*

Some participants added that mentorship permits them to advise and support students in their careers beyond university life. Mentors, therefore, play a significant role in helping students explore and navigate their post-university career paths. By providing career advice, professional networking opportunities, skill development guidance, and long-term support, the mentorship programme extends their impact beyond the university years [26]. Mentors can help students' successful transition into the professional world and navigation of the challenges and opportunities that arise in their careers. The exposure to mentorship continues to benefit students as they progress in their professional journeys, contributing to their overall success and fulfilment.

A few participants also felt that mentorship helps students' transition from high school to university. Mentorship programmes are crucial in helping students' transition from high school to university [27]. By providing academic guidance, campus orientation, personal support, social integration, goal setting, and assistance with independent living, mentors contribute to students' overall adjustment, well-being, and academic success during this critical transition period.

*...first-year students are still coming from High school; they need to be motivated and have to be taught how to balance, as they are studying many things at the same time... (R15)*

*...it's like a bridge between two areas. So, first-year students are coming from high school to university, which is challenging. I know how difficult it was for me as a first-year to adjust from being in high school to being at university. When you enter into something completely new it's nice to have someone who has done it before and is willing to help you. I wanted to help... (R16)*

Secondly, the value of the mentorship programme noted concerned the kind of support mentors provide. The responses show that mentors provided academic and psychological support to first-year students. By offering academic and psychological support, mentors contribute to the holistic well-being and academic success of first-year students [28]. They assist in overcoming academic challenges, foster confidence and resilience, and provide a source of guidance and encouragement throughout the transitional period of adjusting to university life. As argued by [29], academic support equips students with the necessary knowledge, skills, and resources to excel in their coursework. It helps them understand academic requirements, develop effective study strategies, and improve their academic performance. This support enhances students' confidence and competence, enabling them to participate in their learning actively.

*....so I wanted them to focus on their academic performances rather than their other social lives. I gave them different study methods to think out of the box, so they could really understand their studies (R1)*

*...I provide academic support for them whenever they are experiencing some challenges with some aspects within the context of the study. I start with them reading through the textbook and underlining the important parts... so what I change is the mind map style of studying, which basically results in having various sub-divisions of the chapter, with just the relevant points from their class notes, confirmed in the textbook, and this makes it much easier to associate the various points with each other... (R12)*

In addition to academic support, psychosocial support was also identified as critical to first-year students' academic success, allowing them to participate fully in their academic process-

es [27]. Psychosocial support addresses students' emotional well-being, promoting mental health and resilience. It helps students cope with stress, anxiety, and other psychological challenges that may arise during the transition to university. Psychosocial support allows students to manage emotional demands and maintain a healthy balance between their personal and academic lives by providing a supportive environment and resources.

*...so, social support is one of the main things we provide them. I think at the beginning of the programme, you want to assist the mentees in every aspect of their lives, whether it is time management, social or financial problems or anything to that effect. But the real reason, at the beginning, is to provide social support... What I have gathered is from the improvement of their well-being, as the other aspects of their academic lives automatically improve as well because they realise the amount of work that needs to go in and with that, then time management falls into place and with that, the sleeping patterns fall into place, and everything is sort of connected to the academic progress...(R4)*

*...psychosocially Uhm, we have problems that are faced in the student communities, such as how do I balance studies with lifestyle, I take them through simple prioritisation tasks, and once they complete the task, it would mean they understand how to balance life and academics... (R7)*

#### 4. Discussion of the research findings

The study explored how the academic development programme enables epistemological access to first-year students. This study reveals that the mentorship programme might not always be coherent with teaching and learning in the conventional sense, as observed by [28]. However, for students to access the university's knowledge, the mentorship programme offers students and develops an alternative and extended critical pedagogy.

The finding that the mentorship programme enables the sharing of knowledge and skills, either academically or socially, was consistent with [25], who found that students can benefit from the mentorship programme to develop skills, enhance their academics and increase their sense of belonging. This came out strongly as most participants in this study assumed that sharing knowledge and skills enables students to improve their lives, thereby creating a platform for learning and development.

[27] further observed that the mentorship programme helps students adjust to university life and assists them during the transition. This observation concerns bridging unfamiliar situations – the transition from high school to university. This conclusion is by this study's findings that mentoring causes a change in epistemic perspective from the unfamiliar to the familiar.

The study also found that the mentorship programme supported epistemological access as a condition of possibility and a place of being and becoming. This is attributed to what mentors expose first-year students to. The findings revealed that mentors provide students with opportunities to gain exposure to their fields of study and bring awareness to what students are studying. This important finding is related to [29] observation that mentoring programmes allow students to explore their subjects and learn relevant ropes.

Limitations and recommendations for future research. This study was of limited scope as it sought the perspectives of mentors only. Hence the results that can be derived from such a study can also have limited application. Other studies can look at the students' perspectives and the intersections between the mentors' and students' perspectives.

#### 5. Conclusions

The study explored how academic development programmes enable epistemological access to first-year students. By providing valuable insights into the impact of academic development programmes, particularly mentorship programme, on students' epistemological access, this study contributes to the broader discussions and advancements in higher education pedagogy. The findings highlight the role the mentorship programme play in enabling students to transition from unfamiliarity to familiarity within their chosen field of study, leading to an epistemic shift that alters their epistemological level. The implications for higher education is that by understanding how mentorship programmes facilitate the transition and epistemic shift for first-year students can



inform the design and implementation of similar initiatives within universities. This emphasises the significance of creating supportive learning environments that foster epistemological growth and empower students to engage with disciplinary knowledge effectively.

### Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest in relation to this paper, as well as the published research results, including the financial aspects of conducting the research, obtaining and using its results, as well as any non-financial personal relationships.

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### Data availability

Data will be made available on reasonable request.

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