

First year students' experience of access and engagement at a University of Technology

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Abstract

Universities in South Africa have opened access to a diverse population of students, which has resulted in an increased participation of first-generation, low-income and mature students. Concomitant to the widening access, issues relating to retention and success continue to remain a challenge. Student engagement persists as a key concern at universities both locally and globally. This study draws on the theoretical observations of Tinto (1975, 1993), and Leach and Zepke (2011) to explore First Year (FY) students' pre-university non-academic factors and its influence on student engagement experiences with institutional support initiatives. Data was collected from a quantitative questionnaire completed by 195 participants and from a follow up of qualitative data gathered from focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews. The findings from this study reveal that students' pre-university non-academic factors play a significant role in the way students engage with institutional support initiatives. One such factor include students' motivation and resilience to succeed and the key role it plays in enhancing their engagement with peers and lecturers at the university.

Introduction

South African universities, despite moving from an elite, racially divided education system to one that is more democratic and representative of the country's demographics (Pather, 2015), still face numerous critical challenges to verifiable transformation. The historically unequal distributions of economic, social and cultural capital in the South African landscape have created disparities in the way students access and engage with the university. Research into student access to higher education emphasises the fact that access does not necessarily guarantee meaningful social and academic

engagement, levels of retention and/or attainment of success (Morrow, 2009). Discussions in the reviewed literature about access to higher education raise critical issues about students' acquisition of knowledge regarding courses, admission, financial capacity and social equity (McKenna, 2012; Akoojee & Nkomo, 2012).

The preponderance of critical literature on the topic highlights what institutions must provide to ensure better access and engagement for students in higher education (Trowler, 2010, Strydom, Basson & Mentz, 2010). Research in this field has largely been reviewed from an institutional perspective (Kuh, 2009). To date there has been limited research that focuses on the influence of pre-university, non-academic factors and how such factors affect student access and engagement at university. This paper addresses this gap. It focuses on students' pre-university, non-academic factors as significant resources influencing students' engagement experience with institutional support structures. The First Year Experience (FYE) student mentorship programme was used as the vehicle for enquiry into student engagement experiences with institutional support structures.

This paper expands on the work of Leach and Zepke (2011), and Zepke (2013), who emphasise non-institutional factors influencing student engagement. Zepke (2013) outlines that in much of the research done on student engagement; the effects of background contextual differences, culture and power, have been either neglected or incorrectly identified and described. To capture a more cogent understanding of student background and its influence on university engagement we used concepts from Tinto's (1975, 1993) theory of social and academic integration together with Leach and Zepke (2011) as a conceptual organiser. Quantitative data was collected from FY students before they entered university in order to gain an understanding of students' pre-university non-academic profiles and how such information impacted on student engagement. The qualitative data collected from FY students explored student experience of engagement in terms of the FYE mentorship programme. Our main finding in this study reveals that students' pre-university non-academic factors are important resources that can be used to enhance institutional support programmes to cater for a more diverse student population. We highlight the need for faculties and institutional student support services to forge a closer link and connection so that more inclusive and coherent academic and social support initiatives could be developed to cater for the varying needs of students; in particular, first-generation and academically disadvantaged students at universities.

Literature on student engagement and pre-university factors

It is a common understanding that students enter South African universities from positions of extreme inequality, in terms of schooling, race, class, and socio-economic resources. Pym and Kapp's (2013) study acknowledges these diversities and add that although students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds gain admission to university they experience a crisis of confidence and self-esteem which influences their sense of belonging in the new environment. Thomas (2002) suggests that in order for all students to be fully engaged in educational practices at university, they have to feel a strong sense of belonging. He adds that researchers involved in student engagement debates need to be mindful of ethnicity, age, gender, socio-economic status and backgrounds of students. Kuh (2009) adds that student engagement research tends to be blind to cultural and other differences; he suggests that quality in engagement requires appropriate institutional cultures that cater for diversity. Krause (2005) cautions that some institutional cultures alienate many first-generation students; many of whom lack the necessary cultural and social capital, and therefore struggle to engage effectively at university.

To address this challenge, it is imperative that South African Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) take on a multidimensional view to identifying the factors that influence student academic engagement practices, which include factors internal and external to the university. Previous studies on student engagement focused exclusively on student engagement at university (Strydom, Basson & Mentz, 2010). However this study takes a more holistic view and includes students' pre-university factors as an additional lens to investigate how it influences student engagement. Studies done by Pather & Chetty (2016), Norodien-Fataar (2016), Van Zyl, Gravett and De Bruin (2012) and Gillies (2006) acknowledge pre-university non-academic factors such as, family support (parental encouragement and mother's emotional support) and life circumstances, play an important role in the nature of student engagement. This paper introduces the significance of pre-university non-academic factors as a key influence in students' social and academic engagement at university.

In contrast to the above studies, Kuh (2009) believes that what students bring to higher education matters less to their success than what they do during their time as a student at university. Although this may be true to some degree, we

assert that pre-university, non-academic factors are important attributes for student engagement at university, which cannot be ignored. This is in light of the fact that students' pre-university non-academic factors could play a key role in assisting institutions to design institutional support programmes aimed specifically at helping diverse students to successfully transition and engage with university life.

In addition to understanding the influence of students' pre-university factors on university experience, Cleyle and Philpott's (2012) study suggests that factors such as institutional support structures at the institution could be instrumental in supporting student engagement and success. They add that providing students with: access to information and advice, connection to university services, high quality of courses and programmes, and quality instruction and guidance are all critical components of institutional factors that could improve student engagement. However, Smit (2012) questions the nature of the university support provided to the current students. She suggests that further investigation is needed in understanding student diversity and the nature of support offered.

The FYE mentorship programme is an example of a support service that has the potential to improve student engagement. According to Chester, Burton, Xenos, Elgar, and Denny (2013), the FYE mentorship programme has been widely recognised as having a constructive impact on students' first year experience. Moreover, peer mentor programmes have been shown to be beneficial in facilitating FY university transition by affording incoming students an opportunity to enhance their cognitive and personal growth and social engagement opportunities (Du Preez, Steenkamp, & Baard, 2013).

Kuh, Kinzie, Cruce, Shoup, and Gonyea (2006) suggest that careful consideration should be given to the design and implementation of university support programmes and structures as they play a critical role in advancing successful student engagement and enhanced academic performance. They add that to create a successful student support culture, institutions need to focus on the following key components: student success; foregrounding student learning; establishing high expectations; investing money in support services; asserting the importance of diversity; and preparing students for learning in higher education. While these features may be valid from within the institution, this paper foregrounds students' pre-university non-academic factors as key components that are external to the university and discusses

how they impact on student engagement within the institutional support structures.

Theoretical and conceptual framework

In understanding the complexities of student engagement, the student integration model of Tinto (1975, 1993) and the conceptual organiser of Leach and Zepke (2011) offer a pertinent framework for this study.

Students entering university come from diverse backgrounds, most evidently, poor state of basic education, and limited access to funding and other resources. Tinto's (1975, 1993) integration model acknowledges these disparities in students' backgrounds; individual attributes and prior academic experience. He regards students' pre-entry characteristics as having an influence on students' ultimate social and academic integration. In this study, we also highlight pre-university non-academic factors and further describe how these factors influence student experience of engagement with university support structures. Tinto theorises that the interactions between student characteristics and level of commitment to the university influence their level of engagement and success. Tinto's integration model emphasises structural and normative integration within the institution, which provides a useful framework to analyse data in terms of student support structures available in the institution. Tinto (1975) regards structural integration as the explicit standards required by the university (duties, responsibilities, procedures) while normative integration refers to norms and expectations of the student identification of normative structures of the academic system that are not officially stated.

The use of Leach and Zepke's (2011) conceptual organiser in this study expands on Tinto's notion of commitment and engagement by providing key lenses that could be used to investigate student engagement. Two distinctive features in their model are that firstly, the authors identified key lenses from the literature reviewed on student engagement, indicated as perspectives on engagement in their model; and secondly, they suggest indicators of outcomes that may be reached by using the six lenses. Leach and Zepke's six perspectives of student engagement is summarised in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Leach and Zepke (2011) A conceptual organiser for student engagement

Perspectives on Engagement	Indicators
Motivation and agency (engaged students are intrinsically motivated and want to exercise their agency)	A student feels able to work autonomously. A student feels they have relationships with others. A student feels competent to achieve success.
Transactional engagement (students engage with teachers)	Students experience academic challenge. Learning is active and collaborative inside and outside the classroom. Students and teachers interact constructively. Students have enriching educational experiences.
Transactional engagement (students engage with each other)	Learning is active and collaborative inside and outside the classroom. Students have positive, constructive peer relationships. Students use social skills to engage with others.
Institutional support (institutions provide an environment conducive to learning)	There is a strong focus on student success. There are high expectations of students. There is investment in a variety of support services. Diversity is valued. Institutions continuously improve.
Active citizenship (students and institutions work together to enable challenges to social beliefs and practices)	Students are able to make legitimate knowledge claims. Students can engage effectively with others including the 'other'. Students are able to live successfully in the world. Students have a firm sense of themselves. Learning is participatory, dialogic, active and critical.
Non-institutional support (students are supported by family and friends to engage in learning)	Students' family and friends understand the demands of study. Students' family and friends assist with, e.g. childcare, time management. Students' family and friends create space for study commitments.

Leach and Zepke's conceptual organiser illustrates the complexities of student engagement which provided us with a starting point into our investigation. These complexities assisted us in gaining a deeper understanding of student engagement as a "complex interaction between personal and contextual factors" (p.200). They conceptualised student engagement at the university as a form of transaction that students enter into with other parties at the university. We found the concept of transaction useful to explain FY students' engagement at the university as they transition from an 'outsiders' to 'insider' at the university. While Tinto's model of integration provided a scope to be more descriptive in analysis of student engagement, Leach and Zepke's (2011) conceptual organiser allowed an enhanced understanding of the nature of student engagement experiences in relation to the institutional support provided.

Research design

In this study, we explore FY students' pre-university non-academic factors and its influence on engagement at a University of Technology (UoT). The aim of this study was to understand in greater depth the issues and complexities related to FY student engagement experiences with university support structures within a UoT.

This study was framed within an interpretive paradigm which employs the assumption that meaning in the social world is constructed by individuals engaged in the world they are interpreting (Creswell, Plano, Clark, Gutmann, & Hanson, 2003). The interpretive view resonates with this study in order to adequately capture the subjective experiences of students and the influence of their pre-university factors on their educational engagement practices. A case study approach was applied to capture the experiences of incoming, FY students at a UoT. The focus was on gaining first-hand knowledge of students' engagement experiences in the FYE mentorship support programme, which forms part of the institutional support structure. A major advantage of this approach is defined by Yin (2003, p.3) as an empirical enquiry which "investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are not clearly evident". An understanding of incoming students' backgrounds was particularly important to capturing and understanding their engagement experiences at university. In this regard, both quantitative and qualitative data informed this study's findings.

Quantitative data collected through a survey from 195 incoming FY students established their pre-university non-academic profiles and the influence of such on academic engagement. The participants for the quantitative survey included all incoming students who returned their completed FYE survey forms. A 65% participation rate was achieved from the selected faculty responses. Qualitative data was collected through focus group discussions and one-on-one semi-structured interviews. Sixty FY students from the FYE mentorship programme were selected for this study. The participants were purposively selected to represent the diversity in the UoT's FY student population.

One-on-one interviews with the participants were conducted towards the end of the first term while, five focus group discussions with 12 participants in each group was conducted towards the end of the academic year. The intention of the interviews and focus group discussions were to draw on a rich diversity of opinions concerning student engagement with the institution, support structures, peers and lecturers. These interviews provided information on students' experience of engagement with the FYE mentorship programme. Interviews and focus group discussions were transcribed and coded using Atlas.Ti. The focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews were generated to provide thick descriptions of participant engagement with the university (Patton, 2002). A broad range of perspectives was shared constructively leading to meaningful conversations (Brown, 2002).

For the quantitative part of the study, information about students' prior school experience, demographic and socio-economic information formed the backdrop in understanding pre-university factors influencing students' university engagement. The descriptive statistical analysis provided a detailed and realistic overview of incoming student pre-university, non-academic profiles. Data obtained through the questionnaires, interviews and focus group discussions were coded and refined into meaningful categories. Patterns that emerged from the various categories provided insight into student engagement practices.

Ethical clearance was received from the institution and full, informed consent was obtained from each participant prior to the study; thereby ensuring protection and privacy. Confidentiality was maintained throughout the research process, including reporting of data.

Findings and discussions

In this section, we reflect on the findings of this study. Leach and Zepke's (2011) conceptual organiser was used as a framework with which to discuss students' experiences of access and engagement. Leach and Zepke's six perspectives were grouped and discussed under the following four headings: non-institutional factors and student motivation influencing engagement; institutional support; transactional relations with lecturers; and transactional relations with students. Leach and Zepke's perspective of active citizenship together with Tinto's notion of commitment and engagement is discussed across all four headings below.

Non-institutional factors and student motivation

Leach and Zepke (2011) identify the non-institutional support perspective as a crucial component that is often an overlooked perspective of student engagement at universities. In this perspective of engagement, they identified family and friends as key role players in assisting students' success at university. Our findings support Leach and Zepke's perspective and identified the following three factors that had a direct impact on student academic and social engagement at university: students' financial status, students' immediate family encouragement and support for higher education, and students' status as first-generation students.

Table 2 below indicates that 67.7% of the participants entering the UoT were first-generation students, implying that they were the first member from their immediate family to attend university. This finding is crucial as it will influence the kind of support students receive at home and their awareness of support offered at university. We contend that it will be the universities responsibility to make students aware of the support available and to adapt their current support programmes to suit the needs of these first-generation students.

Table 2: First-generation university students

First-generation students			Total
Are you the first in your immediate family to attend university?	Yes	67.7%	132
	No	32.3%	63
Total		100%	195

The interviews revealed that first-generation students were intrinsically motivated to succeed as a result of being the first to attend university, as indicated in the following quotes:

I am the only one in my family who has gone to university; I want to be a role model for my siblings.

My mother and father did not go to university, so that’s why they encouraged me; I think I’m going to be the first one to graduate from university.

The kinds of support first-generation students received are corroborated by the following findings: 61% of the participants reported on receiving intangible support from their parents while 39% received tangible support. Although many of the parents could not assist with academic work or provide lived advice on university life, they provided the following tangible and intangible support shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Nature of support from family

Response
Tangible (39%)
Financial: paid partial fees; full fees; registration fees
Informational: career advice; university selection; context shaping; finding information
Assistance: filling in application forms; registration process
Intangible (61%)
Emotional: nurture; empathise; compassionate
Personal advice: spiritual; finance; goal setting, commitment, safety, friends
Companionship: sense of belonging, listening, understanding
Encouragement: positive,
Positive reinforcement: motivating, supportive

The kinds of intangible support received from parents, such as, emotional support; personal advice, which included empathy and spiritual guidance; encouragement and positive reinforcement, made the students feel a sense of belonging which led to them feeling supported in their university studies. The focus group discussions with students on campus provided further explanations of family support received. The emotional support, particularly from single mothers, aunts and extended families were a strong motivational factor as indicated in the following quotes:

My mother she just wanted me to get education. When I struggled to cope in my first year, she was always there supporting and saying don't give up.

My extended family is very supportive, my aunt's sisters and my aunt's children play a part in saying that this is good for you, keep doing what you are doing. They ask me about what is happening on campus and stuff like that so I call them my family, they care about me.

Mothers, aunts and extended families played a more significant role in providing intangible support to many first-generation participants. Data revealed that mothers motivated the students to access university; they also provided motivation before tests were written; and encouraged students to persist once they were admitted into university. Gillie's (2006) research on working class mothers suggests that a mother's emotional support is an important resource for some students. Norodien-Fataar's (2016) research showed that parent's moral discourses about education in the South African contexts played an important role in students' motivation to pursue university study. Yosso (2005) refers to this element as family capital which she describes as "the cultural knowledge nurtured among families that carry a sense of community history, memory and cultural intuition" (p. 79). It may be argued that this type of support developed resilience in students since they felt a sense of accountability to their mothers' sacrifice. These findings corroborate the work of Leach and Zepke (2011) who identified the significance of support received from family and friends in terms of understanding the demands of study by assisting through various support mechanism such as childcare, time management and creating space for study commitments.

Another important indicator influencing student engagement is their financial capacity to pursue higher education; which is linked to their status as first-generation students.

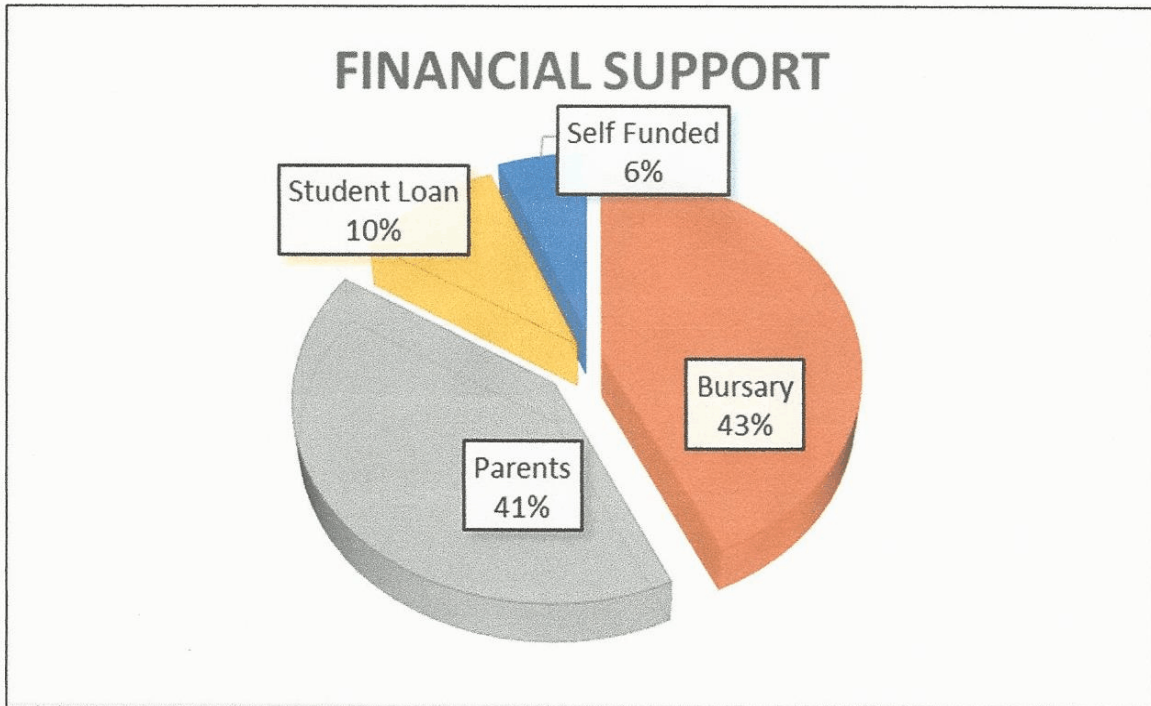


Figure 1: First year students' financial support

The findings from the study revealed that 94% of the participants were financially unable to support their own university study. Forty-three per cent of the students relied on student loans, 10% had secured bursaries and 41% received financial assistance from parents and extended families. Students' financial constraints would impact on their social and academic engagement at university. Many would have to seek alternative means of gaining funds to support their studies, which would limit time spent on campus. As one participant explains:

I'm working every weekend now to pay like for my food & studies. I work on a wine farm, every Friday I take the taxi home and then my dad brings me back Sunday night because the hours are long and there is no taxi so late at night to the city. I take my university work with me and when there are no customers I would take my bag and quickly do something and then when a customer comes I will leave it aside. . .

Cabrera, Nora, & Castaneda (1992) posit that when the financial needs of students are addressed it could, to some degree, level the playing field between advantaged and disadvantaged students; allowing students to focus on their studies as a primary concern.

Thomas (2012) adds that universities must be aware of, and give careful attention to, student backgrounds. From the findings, it was noted that some of the participants' cultural capital and/or family habitus was incongruent with the university's habitus. However, this study's results clearly demonstrated that these students' emotional support and family capital provided them with a strong emotional basis from which to access and engage with the university. A distinctive feature that enabled the students to persist and become resilient in their quest for a tertiary level qualification.

Student engagement with institutional support structures

The next section focuses on students' accounts of their engagement with the institutional support structures. Our data show that students made extensive use of the library. Many used the library as a resource centre, to engage in study sessions with friends or study individually. However, most of the participants acknowledged that their visit to the library was largely influenced by the availability of the internet facility. One participant explained:

I live at university residence at the moment and use the Internet at the library a lot. When I'm doing research or have a project. . .I do go to the library to also get books.

Another participant added:

I prefer using the online sources at the library.

Our exploration of students' engagement with the Teaching and Learning Unit (TLU) at the university reveals mixed reports. From the participants' responses below it was evident that some students were aware of the TLU services but unable to use it due to heavy workload, others were unaware of such services and some students reported on using TLU services when instructed by some of their lecturers as it formed part of their assessment task.

No, we don't have time. Our timetable, it's very full and by the time we're finished it's very late.

I hear from my township friends about the centre but I don't even know about it.

I always go to the TLU for my reports, yes, especially when I have those big reports that you combine everything.

Ja, so they [Department] said that if we send it [assignments] to TLU you will get some certain percentage.

These statements indicate the importance of establishing a connection between departments and the TLU centre to ensure successful student engagement.

A significant feature of the data was reports from participants about their cautious engagement with the student counselling services. One participant stated:

I wanted to use the counselling services because I was having difficulties coping with first year. My personal problems affected me with concentrating on my studies and I made an appointment. But I couldn't keep the appointment, because I was busy with my classes and workload.

The findings reveal that many of the participants did not prioritise their need for counselling and did not have the 'map knowledge' which is a detailed understanding of what is required to maximise their behaviour in social spaces, such as the university (De Certeau, 1984). The institution, in turn, did not provide students with a deep understanding of how to use the counselling services effectively for their development.

Results from students participating in social support structures such as choir, sport, and religious, social and political organisations showed a low level of interest. Most of the participants in the focus group discussions indicated they lived off campus; many of them were from informal settlements and townships, located long distances away from the university. This factor influenced their access to and participation in many of these social activities that took place outside of the formal structure of their programmes. Many of

them commented on the time and money spent on travelling to campus and back.

Other participants expressed their concern for safety when travelling home late in the afternoon or evenings. Many recounted on their home environment as a barrier to their social engagement, indicating the following: they felt unsafe walking home with laptops, cell phones and books; the high crime rate; and risky surroundings such as thugs, loud music and informal pubs near their homes, which limited their use of social institutional support structures. Zipin (2009, p. 330) describes this environment as 'dark life world assets', in which poor students are faced with and are forced to find a way to navigate through in order to achieve their aspirations for higher education. Living in the townships and travelling long distances to the university is another pre-university non-academic factor that institutions must take into consideration when providing support to students from diverse backgrounds, more specifically to students coming from challenging socio-economic circumstances. A lack of this type of engagement reduces students' sense of belonging and connectedness to the institution and their programme.

Transactional engagements with students

This section focuses on student-peer engagement at the university in the context of the FYE mentorship programme. Odey and Carey (2013) suggest that peer engagement both informally and formally provides many opportunities for students to develop their academic goals. The findings of this study revealed that engagement with peers in the mentorship programme provided FY students with a sense of belonging. Students who engaged with the same mentor tended to socialise together outside of the formal mentorship programme. Many of them formed academic friendships that gave them the base from which to meet their academic aspirations. Study groups were key to the formation of their academic friendships. Students who were involved in these study groups eventually became friends who socialised over weekends and celebrated important events as one participant commented:

I became friends with the other students, we had the same mentor, and we even went to movies together and celebrated each other's birthdays.

This transactional relationship is corroborated by Briggs, Clark & Hall (2012). They state, that interaction among students often goes beyond academic life to include social interactions. According to Tinto (1993), the social engagements between students assist with an easier student transition into the culture of the institution.

Our research showed that students who shared the same language and culture often studied together and were able to form strong academic friendships. Data from the interviews showed that these students often reached out to other students in their communities who could support them in their academic work. Students thus preferred to associate and seek support from like-minded peers.

Seeking help from knowledgeable peers was also noted in the findings. Students commented that they sort assistance from peers who were more knowledgeable in subjects such as Mathematics. They identified these peers as not only being more knowledgeable but also easily accessible. This was a practice they related they had used when they were at school. This behaviour we suggest is an example of a pre-university factor, which can be regarded as a key resource. Seeking peer support and associating with like-minded peers was a 'pre-university practice' that these students brought with them to the university. One participant commented:

I am very careful when I choose peers to work with and therefore the friends that I have really contributed a lot to my good Maths marks, because in high school my friends were ambitious, and now all the people I have surrounded myself with are very ambitious.

It was evident from this study that student-peer engagement provided students with opportunities to actively engage in their learning collaboratively inside and outside the classroom. Some students were able to develop positive, constructive peer relationships through their transactional engagement with each other. The students' pre-university background characteristics influenced the way they positioned themselves to take full advantage of academic support initiatives offered by the institution, specifically from the mentor programme where FY students regarded their peers as important people who could assist them with their academic goals as shown in the following comment:

Inside the classroom, I found that working with peers in a group was something new for me. I didn't do that before so I engaged myself with the group and that had made my understanding of mathematical concepts more easier for me. I became more comfortable with mathematics and I really enjoyed the group work, students in the group became friends.

Our research shows the capacity of platforms such as the FYE peer mentorship programme to harness student engagement, sense of belonging and connectedness to the university. We suggest that when faculties and departments build stronger connections with FY peer support programmes, students can begin to address their university learning in more constructive and formal ways.

Transactional engagements with lecturers

Establishing a collaborative relationship between student and lecturer is key to enhancing student engagement and success. Our findings show that lecturer-student engagement was complex. Some participants expressed their feeling of apprehensiveness to engage with their lecturers due to a fear of being embarrassed by them. One student explained that:

...it was not like easy to go and consult a lecturer because one of the things is that if you go to a lecturer and he explains or she explains the work then at the test and maybe you didn't understand the question well then you mess it up he will do an example about you.

Some students enjoyed their engagement with lecturers especially when they received positive feedback about their academic work. They found it very beneficial, as mentioned by the following participant:

when he gives us back the test we can even like see our mistakes and we discuss them, we always get the feedback, its good.

Other students revealed that their engagement with their lecturers were not a usual engagement as it was endured out of necessity. For example, when students felt frustrated with getting low marks for a subject, only then out of desperation, they would find the courage to consult the lecturer. However, many of them indicated that lecturers who were friendly were easier to

approach. Another interesting finding was that students who were part of a study group supported their peers and went as a group to consult lecturers, which gave students the courage to engage with lecturers.

The findings suggest that lecturers' approaches and attitude to students are areas that need to be explored to ensure better lecturer-student engagement. The findings also indicate the important role of student study groups as an essential resource that can be utilised by lecturers as strategies to ensure optimal student engagement. The findings from the student-lecturer engagement thus outlines the need for lecturers to be more aware of the needs of first-generation students in their classrooms and to use learning and teaching styles that will encourage both student-lecturer and student-peer engagement inside and outside the classroom.

Conclusion

First year student engagement was discussed under four headings that addressed the six perspectives from Leach and Zepke's conceptual organiser and Tinto's model of student integration. Our paper highlighted the significance of understanding students' pre-university non-academic factors and its influence on student engagement at university. In many studies, pre-university non-academic factors were either regarded as a fixed variable or insignificant in understanding student engagement at university. In this study, it was evident that students' non-academic background factors had a direct influence on the way the students engaged and participated with the university support structures and programmes. The study revealed that pre-university non-academic factors are assets and resources that students use to engage with university support structures.

The findings of this study bring to the fore three important indicators from the pre-university non-academic factors, these include, family support, financial status of the family, and the family's level of education. All three of these indicators are central to understanding students' engagement at university. As revealed in the findings, it had increased students' motivation and persistence to stay and succeed. This element was particularly evident in students' participation in the FYE peer mentorship programme, which increased their sense of belonging at the university.

The study revealed that many of the FY students did not optimally use the institution's support services, offered by the university's teaching and learning unit. The findings show that although students were aware of these support services available, external factors such as family commitment, financial constraints and living off-campus, precluded them from engaging easily with the institutional services.

Academic engagement was a key indicator that emerged from our findings relating to student-peer engagement in the mentorship programme. Our study revealed that students prioritised academic engagement over social engagement. Due to the students' challenging backgrounds they regarded their academic involvement as a priority over extramural and other social support services at the university. The study showed that the FYE mentorship programme was a crucial vehicle for peer engagement, increased students' sense of belonging and deepened their commitment to their own academic goals, aspirations and academic success (Tinto, 1975; and Lizzio, 2006). The findings from the student-lecturer engagement revealed that there are many complexities when understanding this relationship but when the lecturer created an enabling environment, it brought about a positive student-lecturer engagement experience.

This study demonstrated the significance of students' pre-university non-academic factors influencing students' engagement experience with university support services. The paper reveals the nature of the struggle of many first-generation students and students from challenging socio-economic backgrounds to engage with the institutional support structures identified in this study. We assert that institutions need to recognise and acknowledge the pre-university profiles of diverse students as resources and build on their knowledge assets in order to provide more effective and inclusive support. We believe that institutions can be more proactive in bridging the links between faculties and support services through their planning and policies at universities. Continued research in this area is required and should focus on closely examining interactions of students and the influential factors as described in this study in order to create a university environment which is welcoming and inclusive of the diverse body of students.

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