An exploratory study on the perceptions of previously educationally disadvantaged first year learners of law regarding university education

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ABSTRACT
This article presents an exploratory study and focuses on the high failure rate amongst first year learners at South African universities. A trend that is significantly higher at HBUs (historically black universities). A cause for this problem can probably be found in the inadequate school education of these learners. Some of the findings of the study are that learner preparation had a non significant influence whilst presentation of lectures had a significant influence on the perceptions regarding university studies. For the success of outcomes based education and the successful shifting of focus from teaching to learning, a culture of learning needs to be cultivated. Lecturers should make learners aware that they must adopt a different approach to learning at university level. Learners have a greater responsibility to work on their own.

INTRODUCTION
The high failure rate amongst first year learners at South African universities has long been a cause for concern. This trend is significantly higher at HBUs (historically black universities). A cause for the latter situation might be found in the disadvantaged back ground of these learners, which includes school education of an inferior quality (Dlamini 1995:44). A learner from such a challenged background is ill prepared for the demands of studying independently at university.

A learner’s attitude is a “learned” experience which if formed when the learner experiences something (concrete or abstract), evaluates it on the basis of the available information and his or her frame of reference, and according to his or her own perception of it, forms a specific predisposition (Du Plessis & Rousseau 1999:218). According to Luthans (1998:139 140), an attitude makes up the personality of a person. Furthermore, attitudes can be characterised three ways. First, they tend to persist unless something is done to change them. Second, attitudes can fall anywhere along a continuum from very favourable to very unfavourable. Third, attitudes are directed toward some object about which a person has feelings (sometimes called “affect”) and beliefs. Mullins (1999:324) defines attitudes as providing a state of “readiness” or tendency to respond in a particular way. Because an attitude is a predisposition it can be assumed that it will influence learners in their behaviour, which may be a response that is either favourable or unfavourable. This response in the learning situation involves how the learner applies him or herself to the learning situation and the expectations they have of themselves and their lecturers for example. Expectations in this sense are the perceptions of the degree of probability that the choice of a particular action will actually lead to the desired outcome. The key to understanding what perception means, is to recognise that it is a unique interpretation of the situation, not an exact recording of it. In short, perception is a very complex cognitive process that yields a unique picture of the world, a picture that may be quite different from reality. These attitudes, perceptions and expectations could impact on the approach to and the success of the studies of the learners.

As perceptions affect behaviour, the need to develop an appropriate instrument that would measure learner perceptions, and highlight the factors that influence these perceptions regarding university studies, is evident. The underlying value of this is, that once the perceptions have been identified, steps can be undertaken to change, and/or develop and reinforce perceptions, which will contribute towards an attitude of learning that ensures improved university performance.

All learners entering university have certain expecta
tions with regard to university studies and individual progress. These expectations are often not realised and consequently high failure rates are reported at many institutions. This is often attributed to learners not being “university ready”. Included in this latter concept are the perceived inability to work independently and/or taking responsibility for one’s own progress. A gap thus exists between the expectations of achievement by learners and the perceptions of what it takes to achieve at university level.

OBJECTIVES

The primary objective of this article is to identify certain aspects of learning problems encountered during university study in order to establish to what extent these have an influence on the perceptions of learners of what it takes to achieve success at university. The aspects investigated were obstacles encountered or perceived to be faced by students during university education, the role of learner preparation (their involvement) and the role of the lecturer.

It should be stressed that the perceptual findings reported here are preliminary in nature, enabling certain initial conclusions to be reached that will serve as a point of departure for a more comprehensive study.

THE CHANGING ROLE OF THE LECTURER

The importance of the lecturer cannot be over emphasised as an agent in the transfer of knowledge. If South African education is to keep pace with the changing times and shoulder the responsibility of providing quality education for all, then it must be recognised that the key person in the restructuring task is the teacher. Although it is important to increase funding, to improve physical facilities, to develop new curricula, to provide democratic structure, to have effective planning and an efficient administration, the success or failure of our education system will ultimately be determined by the classroom teacher (Hartshorne 1992). As noted by the National Education Policy Initiative (NEPI) of the National Education Coordination Committee (NECC) the primary agents in education are teachers and thus a “teaching corps of quality and substance is a necessary condition for educational transformations” (NECC 1992:1).

In 1994, a National Training Strategy Initiative was produced in South Africa. It included proposals on how to close the gap between education and training and the key recommendation was to establish the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). This document emphasised that “... a human resource development system in which there is an integrated approach to education and training which meets the economic and social needs of the country and the development needs of the individual” was necessary in South Africa. This led to the introduction of outcomes based education in South Africa.

Outcomes based education and training, according to the National Department of Education, is a learner centred, results oriented design, based on the belief that all individuals can learn. It bases curriculum design, content and delivery on the assessment of the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values needed by both learners and society. Key attributes of outcomes based education include focusing on purposes and ends, and shifting the primary focus from teaching to learning. A Learning Outcome Statement in a Unit Standard, in the Further Education and Training Phase, specifies the knowledge skills, values and/or attitudes that a person is expected to acquire in a given Area Framework (Bohler 2000). These specific outcomes must fit in with the critical outcomes essential to all areas of learning.

Certain critical outcomes were identified by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA). Firstly, problems in which responses display that responsible decisions using critical and creative thinking have been used should be identified and solved. It was also suggested to work effectively with others as a member of a team, group, organisation or community. SAQA also mentioned that one should organise and manage one’s activities responsibly and creatively and that one should critically select, analyse, organise and evaluate information.

Communication should be effective, using visual, mathematical and/or language skills in the modes of oral and/or written presentation. Science and technology should be used effectively and critically, showing responsibility towards the environment and health of others and to demonstrate an understanding of the world as a set of related systems and recognising that problem solving contexts do not exist in isolation.

Additional guidelines were also added. In order to contribute to the full personal development of each learner and the social and economic development of the society at large, it must be the intention under lying any programme of learning to make an individual aware of the importance of reflecting on and exploring a variety of strategies to learn effectively. Participation as responsible citizens in the life of local, national and global communities as well as being culturally and aesthetically sensitive across a range of social contexts, were also suggested. Mention was also made of exploring education and career opportunities and developing entrepreneurial skills.

Research done by Leder (1993:13) shows that the aims of university teaching are often not realised with many students leaving university with passive knowl
edge, ie knowledge of facts that can be reproduced on demand, instead of active knowledge, which is congruent with the aims of university teaching. It is argued that the prospect of students leaving university with active knowledge would be improved if lecturers approached their teaching task as one of guiding, supporting and accompanying students’ learning. This approach implies the creation of a context conducive to student learning.

In line with this approach, are the outcomes based education and the shifting of focus from teaching to learning, in that learners will be more involved in the learning process and will take more responsibility for the learning process themselves. In practice this shift of focus and the success thereof depends on the receptiveness of learners in recognising and accepting these changes. Clearly when learners do not understand this new responsibility they cannot partake in the learning process and this will result in even less learning taking place than in the previous dispensation. It therefore remains important to understand the attitude of learners towards the learning process.

THEORETICAL MODEL

A theoretical model was constructed in order to determine the possible influence of independent variables on a dependent variable. These independent variables as well as the dependent variable, were identified by the researchers. The theoretical model (see Figure 1) consists of three independent variables, namely “perceived obstacles to study”, “learner preparation” and “presentation of lectures”. The dependent variable of the study is the “perceptions of students of university studies/learning process”.

“Perceived obstacles to study” relates to identifying certain factors which can be perceived by students as hindering the learning process and thus their perception of the learning process. Items used to measure this variable included statements such as, “My particular race or cultural group will negatively affect my law studies, ie will make my law studies more difficult” and “My background (where I live and come from) will negatively affect my law studies”.

Items relating to “learner preparation” attempted to determine what students perceived as being necessary, in terms of preparation to achieve progress and success in their university studies. Examples of these items include statements such as “I need to prepare a minimum of 5 hours for an examination” and “Class attendance alone should prepare me enough for an examination”.

The variable “presentation of lectures” attempted to determine the perceptions of the students as to the role that the lecturer has in their university progress and was tested with items such as “The task of the lecturer is to make sure I understand the work” and “I
cannot study everything, therefore the lecturer must give me good ‘tips’ (scope of study) before the examination’.

The dependent variable, namely “perception of university studies”, relates to the perception of the university learning process by the learner. The theoretical model thus proposes that the dependent variable, “perception of university studies” is significantly influenced by the independent variables, namely “perceived obstacles to study”, “learner preparation” and “presentation of lectures”.

METHODOLOGY

Research design and data sources

The type of research design used, was exploratory research. The focus of this article is first year learners of law at an historically black university and convenience sampling was used. The sample size was 177. The response rate was 100 percent. This can be ascribed to the fact that the questionnaires were completed during a lecture period.

The measuring instrument used for this specific study comprised 50 items and was developed by the researchers.

DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

In order to establish the reliability and validity of the measuring instrument, a stepwise reliability analysis was performed by using SAS PROC CORR (SAS Institute Inc 1990). In this stepwise analysis individual measurements of a measuring instrument are removed if such deletion will result in an improvement of the internal consistency, as measured by Cronbach’s Alpha Coefficient. Cronbach Alpha measures the internal homogeneity or consistency among a set of items, i.e. the extent to which the same set of respondents replies in a consistent manner to similar items (Diamantopoulos & Schlegelmilch 1997:36). The procedure terminates when the Alpha Coefficient of the measuring instrument can no longer be improved by deleting individual measurements.

Nunally (1977:226) argues that in the early stages of basic research reliabilities of 0.50 to 0.60 are sufficient, and increasing them beyond 0.80 is often superfluous. For the purpose of this basic study the cut off value of 0.50 was used to indicate the significance and reliability of the individual measuring instruments.

The final Cronbach Alpha values are present in Table 1.

The multivariate relative kurtosis is suitable since it is close to unity (1.194). Kurtosis describes the “flatness” or “peakedness” of the distribution. A measure of kurtosis will be close to zero if the distribution is normal, namely a distribution that is like a bell shaped curve where certain assumptions can be made regarding the spread of variables around the mean, or measures of central tendency (Diamantopoulous & Schlegelmilch 1997:107).

From Table 2 it can be seen that the correlation (relationship) between learner preparation and obstacles as well as the relationship between presentation and preparation is not significant. The correlation (relationship) between presentation and obstacles is significant.

From Table 2 it can be deduced that there are significant correlations between perceived obstacles to study and presentation of lecturers. Correlations measure the strength of the relationship between two variables.

IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATORS

There is no significant correlation between perceived
obstacles to study and learner preparation, meaning that one does not affect the other. Thus, perceived obstacles experienced by students have no influence on their perceptions relating to preparation. This could be attributed to the low regard for preparation for lectures by the respondents in general.

Learner preparation and presentation of lectures also are not significantly correlated i.e. they have no influence on each other. This seems to indicate that the perception exists that preparation for lectures, amongst others, is not necessary or will not “add value” to contact lectures.

Perceived obstacles to study have no significant correlation with learner preparation as already stated, but it does have a significant correlation with presentation of lectures. This correlation is positive, meaning that the more obstacles exist the more essential presentation becomes. Thus, the more the obstacles to the learner’s study, the more the learner will rely on the presentation of a lecture and therefore the role of the lecturer becomes even more important.

Learner preparation, as an independent variable, has no significant influence on the dependent variable (learning process), thus preparation plays a minor role in the mind of the respondents in terms of their perception of the learning process and successful university studies.

On its own, perceived obstacles do not significantly correlate with the dependent variable, thus obstacles do not impact on the respondents’ perceptions of the learning process.

Presentation of lectures is significantly correlated to the dependent variable, (the perception of university studies and the learning process), reflecting or emphasising the significant role of the lecturer for these learners/respondents. Based on the finding that the presentation of lectures has a significant influence on the perception of university studies, the learners’ perception of university studies will be based on their perceptions of the lecturer and his or her presentation style. A style of presentation to which learners cannot relate, will negatively influence the perceptions of learners towards their university studies. The findings seem to indicate that the respondents/learners have a perception that their success is dependent more upon the performance of the lecturer than upon their own efforts. This seems to imply that a lecturer who facilitates active learning may actually achieve the exact opposite, as the learners (at least this specific group of respondents) do not perceive their own participation and preparation as significant to their own learning process.

For the success of outcomes based education and the successful shifting of focus from teaching to learning, a culture of learning needs to be cultivated. This will have to be done at school level so that the culture
already exists by the time the learner reaches university. Bridging programs can also assist in enabling learners to take responsibility for their own learning process and so becoming less reliant on the presenter or lecturer. Lecturers should also make learners aware that they too must adopt a different approach to learning at university level. Learners have a greater responsibility to participate and work on their own.

This preliminary study used a specific sample (first year learners of law at an HBU) and a newly developed measuring instrument, the aim of which was to identify and to establish a basis for further research regarding the interrelationships between the different variables. It is submitted that a further refining of the measuring instrument and making use of a more representative sample of first year learners at South African tertiary institutions may improve the quality of the research. Such further research could establish whether the tendencies are geographic and race specific or apply to the learner population as a whole.

REFERENCES

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