Research success and structured support: Developing early career academics in higher education

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Abstract
Entry into a successful academic career is often an arduous process. From career preparation through to doctoral studies and beyond, the journey can be fraught with trials. Why do many academics find difficulty in completing their studies in the minimum time and publishing afterwards? As the University of the Witwatersrand has a strategic goal of increasing the number of academics holding Ph.D.s from the current 48 per cent to 70 per cent by 2020, the ‘Research Success and Structured Support’ programme was launched in 2007 by the Centre for Learning, Teaching and Development. This article discusses the programme structure, participants’ evaluation of the year-long intervention and longitudinal data from a follow-up study conducted in 2008. It is evident in studies conducted in South Africa (Geber 2006) and elsewhere (Sorcinelli 2000) that support including mentoring and coaching is necessary for enabling aspirant academics to establish successful careers. This study confirms and extends earlier findings.

INTRODUCTION
Entry into a successful academic career is often an arduous process. From career preparation through to doctoral studies and beyond, the journey can be fraught with trials. Why do many academics find it difficult to complete their doctoral studies in the minimum time and to establish a publication record afterwards? As the University of the Witwatersrand has a strategic goal of increasing the number of academic staff holding Ph.D.s from the current 48 per cent to 70 per cent by 2020, the ‘Research Success and Structured Support’ programme was launched in 2007 by the Centre for Learning, Teaching and Development to support academics. This article discusses the structure of the programme and participants’ evaluation of each aspect of the year-long intervention. Longitudinal data is included from the follow-up study conducted with this cohort in 2008. It has become evident in studies conducted in South Africa (Geber 2006) and elsewhere (Sorcinelli 2000) that support which includes mentoring and coaching is a necessary process for initiating aspirant academics into successful careers in higher education. This study confirms and extends earlier findings.
LITERATURE SURVEY

Having a doctorate or higher degree and the beginnings of a publication record is very important in progressing in academia as a credible researcher. There is a body of literature which covers various aspects of becoming successful in obtaining a doctorate and establishing a publication records in academia. Bland, Center, Finstad, Risbey and Staples (2005) show in their model of faculty research productivity that the three main components of a productive research organisation are institutional, individual and leadership which must all be present and accessible for optimal productivity. They show that an individual’s research productivity is influenced by a combination of individual characteristics and institutional characteristics and that the importance of research-orientated leaders cannot be underestimated. This is crucial for any research intensive institution to bear in mind while it provides support for individuals, particularly young academics starting their careers. Early career academics may develop all the desirable individual characteristics of highly productive researchers but without institutional support and appropriate leadership, they are likely to be less than optimally productive and it may take 4–5 years for them to begin to establish their publication records (Boice 1992; Ollis, Felder and Brent 2002). It is within this context that this literature overview focuses on the individual characteristics of prolific researchers and is based on the work of Badenhorst (2007); Bland, Center, Finstad, Risbey and Staples (2005); and Gray (1999).

Prolific researchers show the following characteristics:

1. Robust self esteem, resilience and persistence.
2. Good time and stress management skills.
3. Realistic perception of workload – prolific researchers do not carry a lower workload than other academic colleagues, and in fact often tend to carry a heavier administrative workload, but their assessment of their workload is realistic, and they manage trivial work more expediently and efficiently. ‘Plodders’, on the other hand, over-estimate their workload (daily worklogs of actual labour show that they spend fewer hours on academic work than they think they do), and are prone to ‘busy-ness’ – that is, generating heat rather than light, or spending disproportionate, exaggerated effort on insignificant ‘make-work’.
4. Prolifics engage in consistent, persistent daily writing, in small bite-sized chunks, as well as for extended periods. Plodders tend to engage in long fallow periods of zero productivity, interspersed with frenzied spurts of ‘binge writing’.
5. Prolific writers are networked and have a community of engaged, interested writers/readers and fellow scholars (usually not at their own institution or in their home department).
6. Prolifics tend – historically – to have had significant mentors.
7. Prolifics tend to be in stable partnerships/relationships/marriages.
8. Data is mixed on the interplay between teaching and research, but overall agreement seems to be that there is a negative correlation between time spent on teaching and research output.

9. Men tend on the whole to be more prolific than women, and older/more senior academics tend to be more prolific than younger academics.

10. Concentrated time off (e.g. mini sabbaticals) is not in itself a guarantor of increased research output. Time off sabbaticals can even have a negative effect in that they tend to confirm the work patterns of ‘plodders’ – that is, of binge writing, and of poor management of workload and time. While a plodder may produce some output as a consequence of 6-months’ free time, they will tend to return to work and repeat their ‘dysfunctional’ writing behaviour, and once again grind to a halt in production.

11. One intervention that does correlate positively with increased research output for early career academics is attendance at international conferences. The effect of this is less significant for established, late-career academics.

This is a selective review of the literature sufficient for the design of the research support programme for early career academics. The issue is that early career academics need a supportive environment in which to achieve their own professional goals and assist their employing institutions in achieving organisational strategic goals.

**STRATEGIC CONTEXT AT THE UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND**

How does a developing country like South Africa compare with other countries in terms of Ph.D. graduate production? South African doctoral completion and attrition rates are congruent with international trends (Mouton 2007). At the University of the Witwatersrand in 2008, only 48 per cent of the teaching staff, at all levels from early career lecturer to professor, have doctorates. The University has a strategic goal of increasing the number of academic staff holding Ph.D.s to 70 per cent by 2020. The two keys to successful career development for early career academics are the completion of a Ph.D. and the establishing of a publication record in peer reviewed and accredited journals. With a doctorate and several peer reviewed publications, the two academic ‘icons’ imply credibility in the academic discourse.

Once academics have doctorates and take up a teaching post they find it hard to make the transition from student to academic and struggle to get research going and establish a publication record. This may be because of their teaching loads and lack of guidance about publication. Little is known about the effects of structured support which includes coaching for early career academics at research intensive universities in South Africa.

The purpose of this research study is to investigate how effective the ‘Research Success and Structured Support’ programme was at the University of the Witwaters-
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rand and how it facilitated research and publication in higher education in a research intensive university. The research questions used to guide the investigation were:

• Does a structured programme help early career academics achieve their research goals?
• What aspects of the structured programme are most beneficial?

The design of a small pilot programme extensive support for early career academics is described in the next section.

‘RESEARCH SUCCESS AND STRUCTURED SUPPORT’ PROGRAMME DESIGN

After a review of the literature on publication success a programme based on these research findings was designed to address the most critical issues for young academics and to provide as much support as possible. The ‘Research Success and Structured Support’ programme was designed with coaching included as one of the support processes. Coaching within research support programmes was not found in the literature but Wits considered it essential as the golden thread which weaves the hard skills courses together to make the robust fabric of a successful research career. The courses sourced or developed for programme are discussed in detail below.

The ‘Research Success and Structured Support’ programme

The programme ran over eight months from March to November 2007 and was designed to include various hard and soft skills which would support early career academics in their attainment of higher degrees and in consolidating publication of their research. All Heads of School in the Faculties were asked to submit names of early career academics for the programme. These academics had to meet certain criteria: they had to have made substantial progress towards completion of a higher degree, a Masters or Ph.D., preferably more than 50 per cent, and have a realistic chance of completion within eighteen months from the beginning of programme. Preference was given to applicants from previously disadvantaged groups and staff doing research in areas identified as ‘scarce skills’. Applications had to be supported by both the Head of School and their supervisors. Applicants had to commit to completion of the full programme as contracted with their coaches.

The hard skills training offered included courses on:

• Research Writing Skills
• Voice and Presentation Skills
• Effective Speed Reading
• Time and Stress Management
• IT tools: MindManager; Virtual training; Visual Thesaurus
• How to write National Research Foundation funding proposals
The soft skills support consisted of coaching in which participants were paired with coaches of their choice and offered 12 coaching sessions over a period of eight months.

**Training of coaches**

Parsloe (1999) defines coaching as a process that enables learning and development to occur and thus performance to improve. To be a successful coach requires knowledge and understanding of process as well as the variety of styles, skills and techniques that are appropriate to the context in which the coaching takes place.

The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (2007) Coaching Fact sheet defines coaching as developing a person’s skills and knowledge so that their job performance improves, hopefully leading to the achievement of organisational objectives. It targets high performance and improvement at work, although it may also have an impact on an individual’s private life. It usually lasts for a short period and focuses on specific skills and goals.

Three permanent University staff members were trained in 2006–2007 as professional coaches. The Co-active Coach Training Program curriculum involves 124 hours of intensive face-to-face training. Further information is available at: http://www.thecoaches.co.za/index.htm.

The eight academics completed the courses and coaching by the end of 2007. They filled in course evaluations for each course which they attended. In April 2008, they handed in a written follow-up survey and had a face-to-face in-depth interview as agreed at the beginning of the program. The methodology is discussed in detail in the next section.

**METHODOLOGY**

This is a qualitative interpretative study of how effective the ‘Research Success and Structured Support’ programme was at the University of the Witwatersrand. Participants were aware that the programme was part of a research study and a series of questionnaires was used to obtain data before and after the programme. They were also interviewed to provide information about their experience of the programme, their coaching relationships with their coaches, and what outcomes they achieved as a result. The eight participants were used to obtain intensive, rich, and in-depth data about the relationships as described by Patton (1990), who suggests using few, information-rich cases in order to learn a great deal about concerns central to the purpose of the research.

**Sample**

Eight academics were selected according to the criteria and invited to attend an initial meeting where they were paired with coaches and advised of the schedule of courses available during the year and they began the programme in March 2007. Participants are grouped by qualification in Table 1.
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Table 1: The research success and structured support programme participants by qualification

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Qualification</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ph.D. completed</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1 (Indian); 1 (White)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ph.D. candidate</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>(African)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M.Sc. candidate</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1 (African); 1 (White)</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The participants were academics in Sciences and Engineering. There were three men and two women from Health Sciences; two women from Science; and one man from Engineering.

Data collection and analysis

The data was collected in a number of ways at different times during the programme. An initial survey was filled in by all participants to obtain benchmarks or baseline data before they had participated in any of the courses or coaching. Once the programme had ended, the participants filled in a follow-up survey to document their evaluation of the programme. In addition they were interviewed using a semi-structured interview schedule about their coaching experiences. The interviews were transcribed and responses to the questions coded in a thematic way. The four categories of findings are discussed in the next section.

FINDINGS

The core course or hard skills component of the programme was well attended and well evaluated by participants. Those who did not attend these courses had clashes with lecturing schedules. The attendance at courses is shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Core course attendance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Core workshops:</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Research Writing</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voice &amp; Presentation Skills</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effective Speed Reading</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time &amp; Stress Management</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coaching (12 sessions offered)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The core courses require a commitment to 14 days of formal training over the year. This is a fairly heavy time commitment especially when participants are teaching. In addition most of them spent between 18 and 24 hours in coaching during the year.
There was a range of optional courses on offer during the year. Three participants received training in the use of the IT tools MindManager; Virtual training; Visual Thesaurus; one attended a workshop on how to write NRF funding proposals. A variety of the university’s standard offering of courses in teaching at tertiary level, and how to supervise postgraduate students, was also available.

The findings from the data have been sorted into five categories

- Differing expectations of the programme – career development; publications; and personal development.
- The effectiveness of goal setting within the programme.
- The effectiveness of the core courses offered by the programme.
- The effectiveness of coaching during the programme.
- The tangible outcomes of the programme.

Differing expectations of the programme

The main aim of the ‘Research Success and Structured Support’ programme was to improve research productivity through intensive support for writing and research goals. The expectations articulated by the participants were outlined in a written survey completed before the programme commenced. There were three categories of expectations of the programme – career development, research writing skills and to a lesser extent some personal skills.

Career development expectations

For participants with doctorates, expectations focused on long-term goals: on mapping a post doctorate career trajectory or career path within the hierarchical structure at Wits. They emphasised the importance of establishing their independence, when no longer under the tutelage and supervision of their Ph.D. supervisors. One participant expressed her expectations like this:

To obtain skills in research writing and guidance in managing my time and tasks effectively. I also wanted to learn strategies to become an effective and independent researcher.

For participants registered for a Masters degree or Ph.D., their expectations were medium or short-term with a clear focus on conducting the research required for the degree and getting the dissertation completed as quickly as possible.

Academic career development is closely linked to publication and so establishing a publication record featured prominently in the participants’ expectations of the programme.
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**Expectations about establishing a publication record**

A second category of expectations related directly to establishing their publication records. One of the most important expectations was linked to developing research writing skills, dealing with writer’s blocks, procrastination and later getting appropriate feedback on written drafts and coping with reviewers’ comments. Participants expected to write a number of papers and have some systematic follow-up on their progress, and tracking of their ability to meet their own writing deadlines.

> I was registered for an M.Sc., and having trouble getting going, not getting lot of feedback from my two supervisors. I was hoping the programme would help.

Keeping up a steady flow of writing and drafts for a dissertation or for journal articles is invaluable in getting a publication record established.

**Personal development expectations**

Participants were aware that the programme might also afford them the opportunity to develop personal skills which they felt they necessary for being more effective researchers. One participant who developed on her assertiveness said this:

> My coach encouraged me to be a bit of a nag, and keep contacting my supervisors to try and push for feedback.

Many participants expected to develop personal skills that would help them directly at work and many found that these new strengths were visible in other areas of their lives as well. One participant expressed the effects in this way:

> It really did make a world of difference to my outlook on my career and life in general.

Participants’ expectations were given concrete formulation in written goal setting at the commencement of the programme and these are discussed in detail in the next section.

**Goal setting within the programme**

Why should a research support programme bother with explicit goal setting for young academics? What appears to have been a really important part of the process was the opportunity it provided for explicit and overt goal setting. Participants were able to set priorities and look at the big picture, their long term career objectives and visualize what they could do now, within the year, to start addressing them. The most valuable aspect of it was building in some internal accountability in a systematic way. The coaching was invaluable in that it made it easier for the participants to keep participants on track, accept guidance and adjust priorities when necessary.
This response is typical of the participants:

Especially for someone like me who is just starting out in an academic career, it is too easy to get bogged down with teaching, with the result that research and writing papers tends to fall by the wayside if there aren’t structures in place to draw one’s attention and focus back to these areas periodically.

Participants had to set their goals early in the programme, before attending any of the core courses and before the coaching began, and they articulated what they wanted to achieve as research and personal goals.

Setting specific goals for the year
Participants set a number of specific career development goals: several set very concrete goals around academic papers; others set a goal of learning to write funding proposals; two wanted to finish their M.Sc. dissertations. One woman wanted to be promoted to senior lecturer level. The participants set personal goals related to their research goals. These included reassessing work habits and self-management, managing and organizing their time, setting priorities, acquiring and developing work-related skills in teaching; and networking to establish ties within the university.

The effectiveness of the core courses in the ‘Research Success and Structured Support’ programme
Participants gave an undertaking to complete the courses in the programme within the year. These courses are offered regularly to all academics at Wits, however the statistics show that no early career academics undertake such year-long systematic development themselves within their first five years at Wits. Their planning around their own development is ad hoc, slower and less research driven. Possibly this comes from a lack of sufficient guidance in their Schools or the lack of effective mentoring during their three year probation period.

Research Writing
The Research Writing course was the most valuable of the core courses as it is designed to develop the academics’ a sense of identity as a writer and support the transition process from student to independent researcher (Badenhorst 2007). It helped academics to develop ways of coping with feedback and reviewers’ comments which many more senior academics take for granted but which can derail a publication career (Piercy, Moon and Bischof 1994). Participants are shown how to avoid self-destructing in this process.

The Research Writing course provides at least 24 contact hours and is more intensive than the other core courses, which do not usually exceed 12 hours. The Research Writing course aims for sustained learning for better integration and has deliberate strategies for changing identity and self-perception. For most participants, the course revolutionized the way they write, how they think about writing and
how they view themselves as writers. It does provide many explicit explanations of what happens in the writing process and useful techniques but it also empowers participants to take charge of their writing and it deconstructs some of the mystery about writing.

Although the course covered several aspects of research writing that I was already familiar with, I still found it quite interesting. Coming from a scientific background where creative thinking in written work is not usually encouraged or widely used, I found this particular aspect of the course quite eye-opening and very informative, and I have since used some of the techniques taught in the course.

Some participants experience an immediate transformation and begin to write and produce writing prolifically; others are enabled to get through the writing of articles and academic work in a more enjoyable way but do not become prolific writers; others change their old habits or attitudes for a short while and struggle to become productive writers (Badenhorst 2008). One participant who made an immediate and lasting change said this:

This was very useful. It freed my writing; I learned to do free writes which makes writing much easier and enjoyable. During free writing one writes without editing and with no criticism, as a result I now can put my ideas on paper with less struggle while saving time. I learned to write everyday rather than allocating specific time for writing, this way not only do I save time but I am continuously thinking about my projects and therefore get ideas all day.

‘Binge writing’ has been shown to be ineffective in prolific publication (Badenhorst 2007; Bland et al. 2005; Boice 1998). A ‘binge’ writing participant who found it difficult to sustain the change said this about his experience:

It helped me decide that I can write. It increased my confidence in the work that I have already completed. Application beyond the workshop has been a struggle.

The Research Writing course was absolutely critical to the programme although other related core courses were important too.

**Related core courses**

Most participants found the core courses valuable and invigorating. The courses which taught practical skills were valuable especially to those participants who have no tertiary qualifications in teaching.

The Voice and Presentation Skills Workshop was helpful for public speaking at conference presentations and in classrooms. The enthusiasm for the new skills learnt is reflected by this participant:
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This was my favourite. It was very helpful to watch myself presenting (on video) and get honest opinions from people who attended the workshop about my presenting style. The positive comments boosted my confidence and rectifying the mistakes made me even a better presenter. I also learned how to deal with nervousness before and when presenting.

Foreign academics and second language English speakers often find it quite difficult to make themselves understood and for them such a course was especially helpful.

Reading and assimilating large numbers of articles and academic literature is important for academic literature reviews and for focusing research on gaps in knowledge in research fields. The Effective Speed Reading Workshop helped to deal with reading load for research, literature reviews and allowed the participants to become more efficient at this core skill. One participant stressed the benefits he gained when he said:

I thoroughly enjoyed this workshop. I still use some of the techniques taught for my social reading. I read academic work much better after that course.

Young academics are under enormous pressure to allocate their time wisely and prioritise demands so that they can get on with their research. The Time and Stress Management Workshop was also good because it provided simple but effective ways to avoid time wasting and more efficient ways of managing time. One researcher comments on the skills she gained from the course:

This was useful. I gained skills particularly to deal with time management. I now have a big desk calendar where I jot down my daily activities and tick them as I finish them; this keeps one on track and at the end of the day gives me a sense of accomplishment. I value my time more than I used to and therefore don’t waste it unnecessarily. Because I feel that I do enough when I am at work, I no longer feel like I need to take work home which I end up not doing anyway.

Gaining control of one’s time is crucial to being able to allocate sufficient time to research and writing for publication. Learning how to do this early in one’s career has lasting benefits.

The combination of core courses forms the basic framework around which the research support programme is structured but the coaching process enhanced the effectiveness of the core courses and goal achievement for all participants.

The effectiveness of coaching during the programme

All participants attended coaching sessions during the year. Goal setting with coaches and support in the achievement of the goals was the primary intention of the coaching. Those registered for higher degrees made most use of the coaching sessions and some requested several additional sessions. It is clear that they felt the need for much more support in getting to grips with their research.
Although coaching was specifically included to enable participants to achieve research goals it had much wider effects than that. Participants used the coaching as a personal development space to explore areas directly linked to the research and writing process, and they also explored areas like work/life balance, interpersonal skills, communication, assertiveness and dealing with criticism, departmental politics etc.

With the help from my coach I now have a better relationship with my supervisor who is also my colleague and this created a much healthier working environment. Also thanks to my coach I now have a good relationship with my sister and as a result I have less stress.

Coaches who are familiar with the Higher Education discourse are able to weave the strands of the core courses together in such a way that participants could create a masterful and creative design for each project that they became involved in.

I have learnt to be more selfish, to set limits on my time, and to be more objective in judging the value (potential) of an endeavour. I read and write every day, and have tried to disseminate my new approach to my students. This change derives primarily from coaching, as well as the writing and time management courses.

Without exception all participants said that their coaches were instrumental in helping them achieve their goals. Those with really specific, concrete, realistic goals about academic papers and higher degree dissertations achieved their goals. Many got their funding grants, two got promotions and one obtained a permanent research post. Their tangible outputs are good, even dramatic in one case of a Ph.D. candidate who submitted six articles for publication in the year.

**Tangible outcomes of the programme**

One of the ways of evaluating the effectiveness of the programme is to look at the tangible outcomes. These are shown in Table 3.
Table 3: Tangible outputs from the Research Success and Structured Support Programme

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Papers accepted for publication</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International</td>
<td>2 (W)</td>
<td>2 (I)</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National</td>
<td>1 (I)</td>
<td>7 (A, W)</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Papers under review</td>
<td>3 (I, W)</td>
<td>1 (W)</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M.Sc. completed</td>
<td>1 (A)</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promotion</td>
<td>1 (I)</td>
<td>2 (C, W)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conference presentations</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conference presentations – National</td>
<td>1 (C)</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conference presentations – International</td>
<td>2 (I, A)</td>
<td>2 (A, C)</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conference presentations prize-International</td>
<td>1 (I)</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NRF Rating</td>
<td>1 (W)</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grant funding</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NRF grant funding – National</td>
<td>1 (I)</td>
<td>1 (W)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grant funding – International</td>
<td>3 (W)</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The tables show that most of the tangible outcomes are fairly evenly distributed between men and women except in the case of articles accepted for publication in national journals. The majority of these papers (six of the seven) were produced by one male doctoral participant in Engineering. The publication of papers is a requirement of his doctorate whereas this is not the case with any other participants, although some women also produced articles from their higher degree studies.

In terms of race, the most prolific publishers in this study were African and Indian academics. Demographically, White academics outnumber Black (African, Indian, Coloured) and other academics quite significantly: there were 72 per cent White and 28 per cent Black academics at Wits in 2007. Prolific publication by Black academics is an unexpected outcome. White academics have published more articles per head than Black academics between 2000 and 2007 (MIU 2009). Black engineers show low publication rates in this period, so this finding is exceptional, not only for the Faculty of Engineering but for all Faculties. The participant attributes his prolific output directly to the support from his coach:

I normally have average of three publications in a year. Last year, I have six and I achieved it through the coaching.

Men also applied for and gained more grant funding than the women did. This may be because fewer women applied for grants than men.

The less tangible achievements are more difficult to assess. In their self-report participants indicate that they have made huge strides in their personal, interpersonal and communication skills. The less successful reported that difficulties in achieving
their goals were attributable to lack of personal skills in dealing with criticism, interpersonal conflict, time management, and lack of assertiveness. They resolved difficulties primarily through discussion with their coaches. It is clear that coaching is important in tackling these issues quickly and effectively.

The findings of this study have several implications for institutions and programmes which are designed to support research success.

**DISCUSSION**

The explicit message of ‘Research Success and Structured Support’ programme is that research and publication are crucial and the University is willing to provide extensive resources to assist young academics in achieving significant research outputs early in their careers. Bland et al. (2005) point out that this is a key factor in research productivity.

The findings of this research study show three important outcomes of the programme: firstly that all the courses assisted early career academics with gaining more technical expertise in various skills. Secondly, that the courses and coaching shifted the participants’ sense of identity as writers and as researchers. Thirdly, participants were able to manage interpersonal processes in a much more proactive way than they had before the programme. Coaching is the process which is instrumental in making the whole programme much more effective than the sum of the parts.

Participants’ expectations in respect of direction setting, gaining perspective on work/life balance, oral presentations, teaching and networking were met or exceeded. All said that the coaching which they received in addition to the core courses was especially helpful in realising their expectations.

Where research writing expectations were not met, two participants did not complete their writing goals. These were perhaps too ambitious or not sufficiently specific.

Participants felt that the programme was valuable because they also gained a variety of soft skills. These included better self-management, being able to balance work/home life, becoming more efficient and successful; increased confidence and self-esteem, having exposure to coaching and an enjoyable learning experience. One man reflected on his experience this way:

I think that my writing skills are much better. I feel much more confident to take on a writing task. I have a boldness that now allows me to volunteer for writing things. I also feel that I better understand the process of research and the personal commitment that is needed for the task at hand. My time with my coach was amazing. I have gained so much insight because of her input into my life.

The programme in no way attempted to replace discipline experts and mentors as critical resources and support for young academics. Only one woman reported having a mentor during this programme. Their value has been documented in several studies.
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in South Africa in recent years (Geber 2003; Geber 2004; Geber 2006). Mentors who are conversant with the academic discourse and the particular discourse of a specific research area will enable young academics to make the transition from Ph.D. candidate to fully-fledged colleague in their academic disciplines and departments (Geber 2003).

One man felt that the programme should be more widely available throughout the University. He commented:

Overall I am grateful for being included in the programme and with some modifications, envisage it fulfilling an important (and neglected) role in career development within the University. It is something to which young researchers aspire – it should be seen as a prestigious training programme offered by a supportive university concerned with the development of young academics.

The higher degree candidates found that the programme was most helpful in conceptualizing their research, getting started and keeping on track, and managing the interaction with supervisors, soliciting feedback and coping with tardy feedback from supervisors. They were able to finish assignments, prepare and make conference presentations, increase their publication output and improve their teaching. The findings from the written surveys show that the support provided to young researchers is well worth the time, money and effort invested in them at this important phase of their careers. A further series of in depth interviews was conducted with participants on the coaching process and the findings appear in another journal article.

CONCLUSION

Although many early career academics find it difficult to complete their doctoral studies in the minimum time and to establish a publication record afterwards, it is clear that goal setting is a really important part of the coaching and research support process. Stating goals overtly and discussing them with the coach is a key factor in getting them actualized and achieved. Publication is a priority for a successful academic career and these participants found that they could publish more easily when some of the confusions around the academic discourse were clarified. They feel that they are more legitimate members of the academic community when they are able to perform well especially in areas held critical in academia – publication and conference presentations. It is clear that support for academics in the process of obtaining higher degrees or establishing a post doctoral publication record is necessary and they are able to establish themselves more quickly in their careers.

The ‘Research Success and Structured Support’ programme has shown that a wide variety of support programmes and coaching, even for a rather limited period of a year, can have a dramatic effect in getting young researchers into a position where they are able to perform well and view themselves as successful and independent researchers.
REFERENCES