Introduction and context

A cursory review of the history of higher education shows marked shifts in its conceptualization and what it purports to do and how it is responsive to societal needs. Barnett (1990) captures Plato’s view of higher education as being the understanding and critiquing of knowledge for its own sake in pursuit of total wisdom. Newman in Barnett (1990) discusses the notion of knowledge as extending horizons and that university education then was for intellectual enlargement and character formation. This was, according to Barnett (1990), a radical liberal education that was an intellectual self-empowerment. For the medieval age although the object of study was strictly controlled, what counted as knowledge was subjected to continual reassertion and demonstration through disquisitions, particularly structured discussions. Learner growth was evidenced by advancing levels of competence and was acknowledged through the awarding of degrees by the body of scholars.

The functions of the modern university in Jasper’s view (Barnett, 1990), are research, teaching, a professional education and the transmission of a particular culture. For Barnett (1990), placing emphasis on the usefulness of education by universities was indicative of the underwriting of nationalism and the new technological age. His ideas capture tensions felt between the Germany state and the university at that time. Barnett (1990) views on what disciplines universities could teach are opposed to those of Newman. Jasper brought up the link between teaching and learning on the one hand, and research on the other. His epistemology and sociology of knowledge yielded the following implications for the university curriculum: students’ academic freedom to actively engage in the academic enquiry; doing of research as an active encounter with knowledge and an interdisciplinary approach to knowledge. The whole process then was self-formation through self-criticism and this is a necessary condition of life.

During the 1960 the growth in higher education across the Western world has accompanied expansion in its functions. The current stage is marked by a sharp change in attitude on the part of the state. There is a new emphasis on value-for-money, accountability, planning, efficiency, good management, resource allocation, unit costs, performance indicators and selectivity and reduced opportunities for tenure (Barnett, 1990). Subjects within the curriculum are preferred to the extent to which they contribute towards the economy. This is an era that is strangely devoid of public debate on the wider aims of higher education. Faced with the various tensions, we posit that some universities have no single sense of direction. Objective knowledge and academic autonomy, two underpinnings of liberal higher education, are not available in modern society. This epistemological and sociological undermining marks the boundary of the modern discourse about the idea of higher education.

Mitigating graduate unemployability through student academic support: the case of the University of Fort Hare

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Abstract

Graduate unemployability in the South African context is slowly becoming a topical issue. This development puts into perspective the quality of the graduate churned by the respective institutions as well as the quality of education on offer. Most South African higher education institutions have in place centres of ‘academic excellence’ or ‘academic development centres’ or ‘centres of teaching and learning’ whose mandate is to offer academic support to students. The aim is to improve the quality of particularly, the undergraduate student. Research on practices aimed at empowering the “disadvantaged learner” in a Higher Education context is scanty. This paper reports on how the University of Fort Hare has structured and run its academic development or support programmes for the benefit of all students by adopting a developmental approach. The university has put in place quality assurance measures within these support programmes as well as other measures aimed at improving graduate quality and possibly employability. Using secondary statistical data captured from the academic support programmes on offer, the paper shows how such programmes can impact on graduate output rates, academic excellence and perceived employability. The perceived positive impact of the Fort Hare academic support project makes a strong case for the adoption of transformational leadership styles if the goals of student quality and success are to be realised.

Key words: Graduate employability; academic support; South Africa
In South Africa, the state macro-economic policies as well as the constraints of globalisation have led to two opposing tendencies (Reddy, 2004). The first is that the university should become ‘entrepreneurial’ in its organisation, outlook, research and curriculum content. The second is that the predominant mandate of the university should be to produce the person-power and knowledge that would make South Africa globally competitive by helping it reconfigure into a ‘knowledge economy’. Thirdly, universities “are the places where students’ minds are shaped in preparation for enacting their responsibilities as citizens in a democratic society” (Waghid, 2010: 491). In particular, the Joint Initiative for Priority Skills Acquisition (JIPSA) brought into renewed focus the skill needs of the economy and the role of higher education (Griesel & Parker, 2009). This development coincided with managerialism and marketisation of higher education bringing to the fore the question of graduate employment particularly unemployability.

The South African scenario

Graduate unemployability in the South African context is slowly becoming a topical issue. This scenario is situated in a society that is characterised by high levels of poverty and unemployment (Maistry, 2010) and a history of education in South Africa, characterised by racial segregation, fragmentation and inequalities (Matoti, 2010). Employment differentials also occur by race and gender (Human Sciences Research Council, 2005). These factors put into the spotlight the quality of the graduate churned by the respective higher education institutions as well as the quality of education on offer. Hence, Maharasoa and Hay (2001) have posited that employability, particularly post graduation employment rates, is an indicator of quality. Most South African higher education institutions have in place centres of ‘academic excellence’ or ‘academic development centres’ or ‘centres of teaching and learning’ whose mandate is to offer academic support to students. The aim is to improve the quality of particularly, the undergraduate student. Research on practices aimed at empowering the ‘disadvantaged learner in the South African higher Education context is scanty (Makura, Skead and Nhundu, 2011, Archer, 2010). This paper reports on how the University of Fort Hare has structured and run its academic development or support programmes for the benefit of all students by adopting a developmental approach. The university has put in place quality assurance measures within these support programmes as well as other measures aimed at improving graduate quality and possibly employability. So, as completion for students increases, employability has become a marketing tool for academic programmes (Maharasoa & Hay, 2001).

A report commissioned by Business Leadership SA (BLSA) (2006) identified skills shortage and poor quality education as twin evils impacting on unemployment and consequently on economic growth in South Africa. The black youth are at the receiving end as regards unemployment. These youths are poorly educated and low skilled in an environment demanding highly skilled and capital intensive labour (Business Leadership South Africa [BLSA], 2006). The report states that at least 200 000 youth with a tertiary qualification are unemployed. These hail from historically black universities (such as the University of Fort Hare) these universities have a history of offering programmes with low employment prospects (Arts and Humanities). Apartheid created these ethnic-based universities by removing them from catchment areas that contained modern infrastructure, by eliminating emerging leadership within these institutions, denying them research infrastructure, and subjecting them to chronic under-funding (Nkomo & Schoole, 2007). This perennial form of institutional marginalisation (Nkomo & Schoole, 2007) puts into perspective, the quality of graduates and the relevance of secondary education they received. Such students, according to the BLSA report (2006), do not possess minimum requirements for science related programmes. As a way of mitigating graduate unemployability, universities have been challenged to satisfy students’ expectations by offering programmes that lead to some employment (Maharasoa & Hay, 2001). It is this context that the academic support programmes at the University of Fort Hare are contextualised.

The Teaching and Learning Centre at the UFH

This centre was established in 2004 with a mandate to coordinate functions related to curriculum development, cooperative education, teaching and learning excellence, student assessment and success, reflective practice and the professional development of staff (http://www.ufh.ac.za/centres/fhc). These functions are performed by three Units viz: Teaching Development, Learning Advancement and e-Learning. Of these, the Learning Advancement Unit plays the greatest role as regards students’ development particularly their learning. In an attempt to generate new forms of thinking and doing, the Learning Advancement Unit (LAU) of the TLC has come up with innovative student support programmes aimed at not only unlocking students’ potential, but enhancing their academic performance, and access (Makura, et al, 2011). This enables previously marginalised students to access quality education. The unit’s focus is to increase academic access to such groups, and in the process, improving quality education as well as countering the deleterious effects of apartheid. The following teaching and learning strategies (http://www.ufh.ac.za/centres/tlc) have been crafted for the benefit of students viz:

* Provision of student support and development initiatives
* Nurturing a culture of excellence through research in teaching, learning and re-curriculation
* Establishment of internal and external partners in pursuit of development in teaching and learning in higher education

Pursuant to the first stated strategy and partly the second, our unit offers a battery of voluntary peer academic programmes namely, Supplemental Instruction (SI), Language and Writing Advancement programme (LWAP), Computer Assisted Language Programme (CALL) and the National Benchmark Test (NBT). These programmes are collectively referred to as Peer Assisted Student Services (PASS). These academic support programmes seek to improve the students’ language and writing as well as subject matter mastery in the various courses particularly the traditionally ‘difficult’ ones. Subjects perceived as difficult, are referred to as ‘risk’ though the students that enroll in them are not ‘risk students’. Both under and post graduate students are encouraged to voluntarily seek PEER
assistance at our centre. It is the supplemental instruction programme that is sort after particularly by undergraduate students. The Supplemental Instruction (SI) programme “...focuses on helping students understand the subject content...” (Twalop, 2008: 3). Generally, students have challenges in Science (Mathematics, Stats, Chemistry, Physics, Computer Science, etc) and Economics related subjects (Accounting, Economics, Commercial law etc). Incidentally, it is these areas that are sort after by prospective employers. As such, our Unit has made it its mission to improve students’ proficiencies in these subjects using a developmental approach. In a developmental approach, students are trained to reflect on their practices and such practices and feedback are evaluated at individual, peer and institutional levels (http://www.ufh.ac.za/centres/ile)

English, not being the first language of the overwhelming majority of our students, is a threat to concept and skill mastery. As the 'official' mode of instruction it presents challenges among the (mainly Black) students. Our Language and Writing Advancement programme is meant to mitigate these challenges. This programme focuses on improving students’ proficiency in writing in the respective academic discourses. The task of imparting the language skills is done by specially trained Language and Writing Consultants (LWC). Hence Archer’s (2010) proposition that historically disadvantaged students/learners need assistance with academic writing for them to acquire discipline specific conventions. Most students submit their assignments to us for scrutiny prior to submission. Our input helps improve the quality of the written work. As regards the National Benchmark Test (NBT), every undergraduate is expected to write this test. The fundamental purpose of the test is to establish the students’ entry level academic literacy in Mathematics and English grammar and place the candidate into an appropriate degree programme. Regrettably, the NBT result has not been effectively used for such purpose as the programme is in its infancy. We have however been able to identify students that require academic support on the basis of the NBT results. We work with faculties in identifying and encouraging such students to make use of our academic support system.

In all our programmes, we use Peer and staff observations as quality assurance mechanisms in line with the university’s quality assurance regime. Our peer facilitators are a cohort of local and International students who show potential in the ‘risk’ subject areas where students need academic support. Our support programmes are non-remedial and proactive and use an active learning, peer-collaborative model whose quality is assured as intimated earlier. Moreover, student attendance is voluntary hence a conscientious student is capacitated. As such our students are actively engaged in process learning. In an effort to offer the students quality education, the Peer facilitators concurrently receive extensive ongoing training and supervision by trained qualified full-time staff. In line with quality assurance, the Peer Facilitators are mentored by knowledgeable consultants. Mentoring is established professional support or nurturing strategy world over for student learning and adjustment and involves tasks and behaviours such as modelling, encouraging and assessing the protégés (Zazaus and Tay, 2003 in Sutherland, Claxton andPollard, 2003). Each peer facilitator keeps and maintains a continuously updated portfolio for self reflection and evaluation. Depending on the staffing situation, we occasionally award a South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) accredited certificate (National Qualifications Authority, NQF 6) to Peer Facilitators meeting a set standard. The certificate is referred to as Certificate in the Facilitation of Learning (CFL). The CFL quality assurance issues are derived from the UFH policy framework using a developmental and total quality management perspective (Makura, et al, 2011). Its objective is to train and equip our and other peer facilitators with ‘best teaching and facilitation practices’ aimed at enhancing student academic performance. Other quality assurance guidelines and mechanisms are adhered to, to ensure that the services offered to the clients are of high quality.

The Skills Deficit Model: A theoretical framework

The world of work expects graduates with social, technological, problem solving and lifelong skills (Maharosa & Hay, 2001). According to the skills deficit model, a ‘faulty’ education system is responsible for the persistent unemployment characterising a particular society. The graduates that are churned by an education system are devoid of critical skills (Pauw et al, 2006) hence are ‘unemployable’ in most instances. This is despite the emphasis on skills over formal knowledge by the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) in the South African context (NCHE, 1996). There is thus, a mismatch between what the world of work requires and the qualification provided by an institution. Hence the HSRC’s(2005) contention that choice of learning institution, geographical area and employment sector determined economic outcomes, of which, employability was a key factor. The constraint therefore, is not much so on the quantity of graduates but their quality (Business Leadership South Africa, 2006). It is skills deficit in terms of quality rather than a skills shortage in terms of numbers (ibid). It is education that lies at the heart of the graduate unemployment problem (Pauw et al 2006). The BLSA (2006) report goes further to argue and demonstrate that poor quality of science education and poor academic performance are responsible for the low enrolment figures in key study areas in South Africa. Rod Bally (2007) cited in Makura, et al (2011), has observed that students coming into university are underprepared and this under-preparedness, in the case of UFH, stems from its traditional student market which is characterised by poor performance of the provincial school system. It is the location of the institution and historical factors which have impacted negatively on student throughput and retention rates (SANTED II 2006 report cited in Makura, et al 2011). These factors negatively impact on the quality of graduates that are unleashed into the world of employment. Hence a suggestion by Stes (2009) for universities to invest into student centred active-learning, assessment and curriculum development. The UFH has therefore, through its vision and mission, devised mechanisms aimed at increasing student output and retention rates. The mechanisms are meant to inform strategy and in the process identify students “at risk” to meet their demands and expectations. (SANTED II, 2006 cited in Makura, et al 2011).
Research question
What academic mechanisms has the University of Fort Hare instituted to improve graduate quality and, consequently mitigate unemployability?

Methodology
This study mainly used secondary statistical and word data derived from selected programme activities within the teaching and learning centre (TLC). As such, we adopted a mixed methodological approach but with a quantitative slant. We systematically selected data from the Peer Assisted Student Services (PASS) activities for 2010 and part of 2011. Data from programme evaluation instruments or surveys was added to demonstrate how our interventions are impacting on academic life. Data were captured by category to investigate utilisation by selected categories. These were run and analysed using qualitative and quantitative approaches. The latter data came from evaluation instruments and were analysed for their content to discerned themes and other related issues.

Results and discussion
The preceding data has amply revealed the various student academic support programmes at the University of Fort Hare. Two programmes are mainly utilized by students. These are the Supplemental instruction and the Language and Writing Advancement Programme. The statistics below show the extent to which the students utilised these programmes in 2010.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course</th>
<th>Faculty</th>
<th>No. of SI Sessions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accounting 2</td>
<td>Management &amp; Commerce</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chemistry 1</td>
<td>Science &amp; Agriculture</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business Maths</td>
<td>Management &amp; Commerce</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer Science 1</td>
<td>Science &amp; Agriculture</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction to Law</td>
<td>LAW</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accounting 1</td>
<td>Management &amp; Commerce</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economics 1</td>
<td>Management &amp; Commerce</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English 1</td>
<td>Social Sc. &amp; Humanities</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physics 1</td>
<td>Science &amp; Agriculture</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mathematics 1</td>
<td>Science &amp; Agriculture</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Botany 1</td>
<td>Science &amp; Agriculture</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Work 1</td>
<td>Social Sc. &amp; Humanities</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geology</td>
<td>Science &amp; Agriculture</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Law of Contract</td>
<td>LAW</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychology 1</td>
<td>Social Sc. &amp; Humanities</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commercial law</td>
<td>Management &amp; Commerce</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customary Law</td>
<td>LAW</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Law of Persons &amp; Family</td>
<td>LAW</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: TLC programme Statistics: 2010

Perceived impact of academic support programmes
A few evaluation instruments were analysed with view to establishing user perceptions of the efficacy of our programmes. The students were probed on how our programmes have impacted on academic performance. For instance, in Term 1 of 2010 our LWAP workshops and consultations received an 85% satisfaction rating from the 2037 clients that visited us (LWAP Q1 Report, 2010). We conducted forty workshops on the two university campuses. The rating for 74 consultations we had in Term 1 of 2011 was 91%. Consultations involve one-on-one interaction between an LWC and the student. These statistics show that the clients were satisfied with our interventions. With regards to the CALL programme, ninety-three percent (93%) of the students interviewed highlighted that their computer skills and competence had increased. In a mini survey we conducted in 2011(Neluswi, 2011) to establish students’ preferences between the Supplemental Instruction (SI) programme and Tutorial system in a chemistry course, the majority of students preferred the former. Snippets from students’ evaluations said that the SI programme ‘ is for a student who still does not understand something in class and tutorial’, ‘offers more opportunities to grasp you work and create better understanding’; ‘In SI sessions we attempt problems as a group and we provide the answers for ourselves.’. These sentiments
and many more go to show the efficacy of our programmes on students learning. It is this multiplier effect that we hope will filter to students and improve their academic quality and subsequently, employability.

**Conclusion**

This study has revealed that the University of Fort Hare has instituted several or interventions aimed at empowering students with view to increasing their marketability. Such students come from poor Black rural communities of the country. The university offers free programmes whose aim is to enhance students’ academic performance. The Supplemental Instruction programme is popular among students who aim to improve their content proficiencies. The majority of students are supported in the natural sciences than the humanities. The former is an area that has a higher probability of finding employment after one has graduated. Hence the HSRC’s (2005) observation that fewer humanities and arts graduates compared to economic management sciences and natural sciences found employment immediately after obtaining a qualification. Our programmes are therefore, perceived as impacting positively on student choice of areas requiring support and enhanced academic performance. The perceived positive impact of the Fort Hare academic support project makes a strong case for the adoption of transformational leadership styles if the goals of student quality and access are to be realised. Transformational leadership focuses on positive change in individuals and society (http://www.en.wikipedia.org). Trinidad and Normore (2005) argue that this style is effective in organisational management due to its inherent characteristics that relate to values developed through socialisation. These values include building relationships, communication and unity of purpose (Makura, 2011). The university leadership should focus on churning out the numbers and quality of graduates sort by the economy. Hence Bhorat (2007) talks of fixing the higher education system to focus on narrowing the gap between supply and demand. This paper implores all those entrusted with offering academic support interventions to vigorously champion these amongst students and staff.

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