ICED 2020 proceedings:

Peer tutoring programme as a student academic development strategy in a selected university of technology

Cephas Makwara[1]

Durban University of Technology
15 FJ Sithole Road, Imbali
3201 Pietermaritzburg, South Africa

Abstract

Quality education is one of the main aims of sustainable development goals (SDGs). It can be achieved when the quality of teachers being produced is appropriate and these teachers are adaptable, agile and competitive in their areas of expertise. Providing future-ready graduate teachers is one way to enable attainment of this goal. This paper expresses the need for a repositioned tutorial programme for the School of Education, a department in the University of Technology (UoT). The study is located in an interpretive paradigm and utilised a qualitative approach where interviews and focus group discussions were the main data collection instruments. The paper explores the question of how first years experienced peer tutoring. Sound structures need to be put in place to facilitate the goals of peer tutoring, including seeing to it that learning spaces are available; that the correct number of students attend each tutorial; and that a proper timetable is drawn up and adhered to.

1   Introduction

Peer tutoring has many advantages, including its ability to yield confidence building for tutor and tutee as both have the same ontological (ways of being) and axiological (background capitals and cultural oriented ways of being) assumptions. Several definitions of "tutor" exist, including one stating that a tutor is someone employed to support the efforts of a lecturer. UNISA, Africa's largest open distance university by enrolment (Shikulo and Lekhetho 2020, Rakoma 2018), has had a structured tutoring programme involving face-to-face (F2F) and electronic tutoring (eTutor) since 2013, supported by secured funding from the Department of Higher Education for the Tutor Development Programme. UNISA tutors are employed in a structured programme where the F2F tutors work for 15 hours during the semester, while the eTutor works for one hour a day in a 5 hour week and up to 75 hours in a 15 week semester. The tutors are employed as independent contractors and should have obtained a minimum of honours level in the modules in which they are contracted to offer. In contrast, the tutor at the UoT and in this case study is a senior student. In this paper, wherever tutoring is mentioned, it should be taken to refer to peer tutoring.

The paper argues that a stable structure should be availed to the programme to harness its intended benefits, such as fostering the future ready graduate via its student academic advising concept. Peer tutoring is cognizant of the realities bedeviling the UoT and is appropriate for the institution. The UoT's School of Education (SoE) has largely been an undergraduate programme offering the Bachelor of Education (BEd). Hiring of postgraduate students as tutors is therefore inappropriate, as that would mean the need for a relook at the current structure, including the remuneration structure. The SoE postgraduate students tend

---

[1] cephasm@dut.ac.za; ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6567-301X

to be working elsewhere as educators, and have also been trained elsewhere due to the absence of a full-time honours programme and Master's programme. All the current tutoring programme needs is strengthening, which is possible once its inherent weaknesses have been identified and highlighted. That is the aim of this paper.

2   Methodology

This paper was based on a case study of the SoE in a multi-campus UoT. The researcher acquired ethical clearance for the study with reference number **IREC 157/19**. The overall topic was "Square pegs for round holes: First-year student experiences of Tutorial support in a Bachelor of Education programme in a University of Technology". Data gathering instruments included interviews with tutors and the first years, in which ethical issues including confidentiality, beneficence, and informed consent were looked at in line with the independent research proposal submitted to the institution (UoT) ethics committee.

3   Findings and discussion

3.1   Tutor recruitment and resourcing

In the REP, which appears to be the most well-resourced and visible peer tutoring programme, senior students in the form of second, third and fourth years are appointed for mostly bottleneck subjects with low pass rates. The academic department is not appraised of the exclusion of some subjects in the REP. Student agency has seen some previously excluded subjects coming onstream.

3.2   Tutoring in practice

REP peer tutoring has the advantage of taking place after hours. Students are taught in their places of residence from 6pm to 8pm for 2 hours per identified bottleneck subject per week. There is a timetable which ideally is deliberated upon by the REP facilitators. While it was possible to tutor in earlier years in the students' spaces of residence (CHE 2014), there are mattresses in the residence dining halls and tutors have been forced to approach the academic department for Teaching and Learning (T&L) spaces, with varied results.

3.3   Tutor agency

The agency of tutors came in handy in accessing the lecture venues after hours. Others whose personal emergent powers and properties (PEPPs) (Archer 2008) were weak continued to teach at the residence, with the consequence that tutees were learning while standing when they ordinarily should be seated and taking notes. Therefore the one recommendation that the academic department be fully involved in the structuring of this programme cannot be overemphasized. The department's involvement is likely to foster the epistemological access envisaged in the design of the programme.

3.4   Implementation of tutoring

Ideally, fewer students (preferably maximum of 20) should be attending tutorial classes with one tutor. Currently there appears to be no sensitivity to student numbers per tutorial class. This is anathema to the spirit, letter and ethos of the tutorial programme in contexts that value it. The recommendation is that students be grouped into smaller classes per tutor so that all students have enough access to the tutor and to the knowledge structures of the subject. The tutorial programme (DUT 2014) brochure alludes to the need for fewer students per tutor, but in practice this does not appear to be realised.

Seemingly missing is consolidated tutorial material readily available for implementation. The REP should facilitate the availability of such material for the subjects in conjunction with the lecturers. These materials should be developed and be availed to the tutors for use. There also appears to be no proper monitoring and evaluation mechanism for this intervention. Earlier, the REP recognized tutors by giving them certificates at an REP ceremony, but this good practice appears to have petered out. The practice also appeared not to involve the academic department whose hard work was being recognized. Compilation of REP tutorial activities could help to provide a rich practice based repertoire from which to draw on in subsequent years as new REP administrators come on board.

4   Student voices from REP interviews

Tutorials are important as they allow us to be tutored by our peers, who know our challenges and cultural backgrounds.

The tutor is like my brother, big brother, who can also mentor me and ease me (reduce the articulation gap between University and high school) into the campus life given that I am the I first person to go to University for my family. (First-generation university student – Tinto 2014)

I am was able to pass my assignments as the tutor shares then own experience the previous years helping me unpack the behaviours, mannerisms or character of some lecturers that may not be apparent in the class.

Tutors from module X look quite organised and prepared. They teach us together in one tutorial venue, four of them, but they allocate each a portion of the content learnt in the week then we go away quite satisfied. This is unlike in the other module Y where there appears to be no leadership. The tutors speak over each other and sometimes are confrontational to each disputing the other's earlier statements.

In other words, the peer tutorials were useful in mediating the articulation gap between high school and the university offering. The first years were offered an opportunity to grow under the mentorship of their peers. This made the student walk much easier. The attendant structural challenges need to be addressed for fuller, more integrated results.

5   Conclusions

Overall, there is much that the tutorial programme could achieve once the administrative side of the programme has been sorted out. Clear outcomes and clear expectations and performance standards can improve graduate attributes and produce future ready graduates. For teacher education programmes the need for future ready graduates cannot be over-emphasized. These better graduates will be versatile, agile and ready to face any challenges, feeding into the quality education aspired to in the Sustainable Development Goals.

Acknowledgements

References

Archer, M. (2002). Realism and the problem of agency. Alethia, 5(1), 11-20.

DUT. (2014). *Quality Enhancement Project: Institutional Submission*. Durban: Durban University of Technology.

Rakoma, M. A. (2018). *Rural students' experiences of online learning support in an open distance learning environment* (Masters dissertation, Stellenbosch: Stellenbosch University.

Shikulo, L., & Lekhetho, M. (2020). Exploring student support services of a distance learning centre at a Namibian university. *Cogent Social Sciences*, 6(1), 1737401

Tinto, V. (2014). Tinto's South Africa lectures. *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa*, *2*(2), 5-28.