INDUCTING FIRST-YEAR SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS: REFLECTIONS ON A DISCIPLINE-SPECIFIC APPROACH TO ACADEMIC DEVELOPMENT

Priscalia Khosa, Roshini Pillay, Nkosiyazi Dube

First-year students at tertiary education institutions face multiple problems including under-preparedness, financial problems and adjustment to university. In response, some universities have introduced generic academic development programmes. In contrast, three educators from the Department of Social Work at the University of the Witwatersrand (UWits) engage in a reflective analysis of a discipline-specific academic development programme. Thematic content analysis was used to analyse transcripts of two focus group interviews with students and reflective reports written by two educators on strategies used to design the programme. Findings suggest that this programme meets the unique needs and professional identity development of Social Work students.

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INTRODUCTION

Student success and retention are among the major debates in higher education institutions (HEIs). An area of special concern is the students' drop-out and failure rate in their first year of study, which is a worldwide problem (Spaull, 2013). Although the problem is common globally, within the South African context first-year students at institutions of higher education are confronted with additional challenges. Students coming from situations of low socioeconomic status (SES) have the added burden imposed by certain faculty members who assume and communicate publicly that financial limitations translate into limited educational and linguistic abilities (Notshulwana, 2011). The communication of this deficit view of students as deficient places an additional burden of stigma on them: this is especially so when the higher educational institution (HEI) and more specifically the teaching departments are unable to offer adequate structures of support to meet the specific needs of these students. In the South African context this position reinforces the social perception (experienced therefore by students) that access to an HEI does not mean success. This deficit view of low SES students is inextricably linked to shame, which exacerbates the burden carried by the student, and limits the potential or basic capabilities available to the student to thrive, exercise agency and feel at home within the university environment (Leibowitz, Bozalek, Carolissen, Nicholas, Rohleder, & Swartz, 2010).

In the light of these serious concerns the majority of South African HEIs have recognised the need to put supportive programmes in place to help students successfully adjust to life and the demands of tertiary education and to achieve excellence in their academic performance (Andrews & Osman, 2015; Bozalek & Boughey, 2012; Potgieter, Davidowitz, & Mathabatha, 2008). However, many universities have adopted "one-size-fits all" generic academic development programmes for the first year, which are often unable to meet the specific needs of students. While these generic academic development programmes are important, they tend to neglect the specific demands of the social work discipline and the diverse and unique needs of students studying towards a specific professional qualification. Generic programmes often report a lack of student motivation to attend them, particularly for professional degrees such as Social Work (Kennelly, Maldoni, & Davies, 2010; Durkin & Main, 2002).

In this paper it is argued that developing *public good professionals* such as social workers requires discipline-specific tutoring programmes; it is contended that these enable the development of students' professional identity and promote an ethic of care, given that social work in South Africa is a rigorous and hands-on practising profession. In this context, an ethic of care refers to a "social practice" that is moral and political

(Bisman, 2004; Sevenhuijsen, Bozalek, Gouws, & Minnaar-McDonald, 2003). Concepts of caring and social justice are closely woven into the moral code of social work (Bisman, 2004), and should therefore also be integrated into the way students are supported within the Department of Social Work at UWits. The ethic of care also encompasses elements such as responsibility, competence, honesty and concern for others, the community and society at large, which requires early induction into this ethos. Evidence is provided from the Department of Social Work at UWits, which recently initiated a discipline-specific support programme for first-year students called the Social Work Students' Support Programme (SWSSP).

There is evidence to suggest that students' experiences of discipline-specific programmes are under-researched in the South African context (Davids, 2014). Hence, this paper explores learning strategies designed by the Department of Social Work (UWits) to assist first-year students in achieving academic excellence. The SWSSP consists of two parts: the Academic Development Programme (ADP), which focuses on teaching students academic competencies such as referencing, studying effectively, note taking and reading skills, using the library, and developing skills in the technical aspects of using the Sakai Learning Management System (LMS); the second part of the strategy consists of theory tutorials (TTs), which focus on extending and reinforcing the information taught in the course *Introduction to Social Work Theory and Practice I*, using a more experiential approach, which includes role plays and small group discussions. In this way generic and discipline-specific areas of support were addressed.

The study is based on student perceptions of their experiences in their first year, and reflections of educators regarding the learning strategies, approaches and methods used to design and implement the SWSSP. In this study three educators from the Department of Social Work (UWits) engaged in a reflective, preliminary analysis of the implementation of the SWSSP, placing the focus on the lessons learnt, as well as guidelines and recommendations for future programmes.

BACKGROUND TO THE SWSSP

Social work is often described as a calling, which is historically located in concern for the wellbeing of society: it encompasses the fight for social justice, especially for people who have been discriminated against, and are poor and marginalised. Furthermore, at the very centre of the social work profession is the strong moral imperative to care for the "neediest amongst us" (Bisman, 2004:109). Thus the question that the three educators grappled with was: *What are we doing to ensure that the professions' values and morals are upheld in the groups of students that pass through our hands?* These three educators are aware of the social problems faced by students as a result of under-preparedness, financial problems and being the first in their family to attend university (Boyinbode, Ngambi, & Bagula, 2013). It is for this reason that educators saw a need to demonstrate care and consider the wellbeing of students in the design of the SWSSP.

As this was the first year of delivery of the revised discipline-specific support programme for first-year students, the authors saw a need to investigate and explore the students' views of the programme and to reflect on the lessons learnt. Discipline-specific

programmes are also called *embedded programmes,* and are more effective than generic programmes, because the content and knowledge is related to the profession, using "in-discipline vocabulary" (Kennelly, Maldoni & Davies, 2010: 63) to teach students professionalism (Simpson, 2015). The advantages of discipline-specific programmes are that they are embedded in the Social Work Department and therefore can offer individual consultations with subject experts, and feedback on writing, literacy and learning skills within the discipline; support systems within the department also help to develop a community of practice amongst students who are going to be in the same class throughout the four-year degree. A further advantage of the programme being based in the Social Work Department is that students are able to build bonds with members of staff.

Historically, the Department of Social Work (UWits) had offered previous discipline-specific programmes such as the "Building Capacity Programme" conducted in the mid-1990s, with the aim of inducting so-called *under-prepared* students (Drower & Kleijn, 2008). The focus of the programme was on academic skills development and personal growth, and it was introduced as part of the extended curriculum that saw students doing the first year of the Bachelor of Social Work degree over two years. The criticism of such a programme was that there was separate provision of support to a certain group of students who were mainly black; they were singled out as having deficits, and this may have made such students feel resentful and stigmatised (Warren, 2002). This approach did little to create and develop a community of practice across all students, irrespective of race, and could have led to further divisions. After 1994 the Social Work Department at the University of the Witwatersrand reviewed its vision and curriculum. In its curriculum transformation, the department had to address issues around *"cultural, linguistic, religious, socio-economic and racial diversity"* (Drower & Kleijn, 2008: 365).

This resulted in the redesigning of the programme with new content, using a different approach based on student feedback and in keeping with the changing socio-political landscape of the country. In 2002 a revised Capacity-Building Programme was implemented, which was still separate, voluntary and non-credit bearing for second-year students on the extended programme; these were only black students and were enrolled for introductory courses in Psychology and Sociology. This programme was designed and conducted by a postgraduate student under the supervision of the second-year Social Work coordinator. This programme was run in three parts, with the aim developing the students' coping skills and maintaining their interest in Social Work. While it can be argued that this programme was well intentioned and offered students a safe space to assist them, it was unfortunately segregated, voluntary and not fully integrated into the Social Work programme, as was borne out by the drop in attendance of Part One of the programme, from 34 to only 14 students (Drower & Kleijn, 2008). In addition, the language used to describe the students and their concerns by the authors Drower and Kleijn (2008:365) suggested a deficit view of these students, perpetuating the idea of remedial assistance for students who are described as coming *"from poverty stricken backgrounds, had received poor preparation for the demands of tertiary education, and*

presented with a lack of confidence, poor self-image, dependence and learned helplessness".
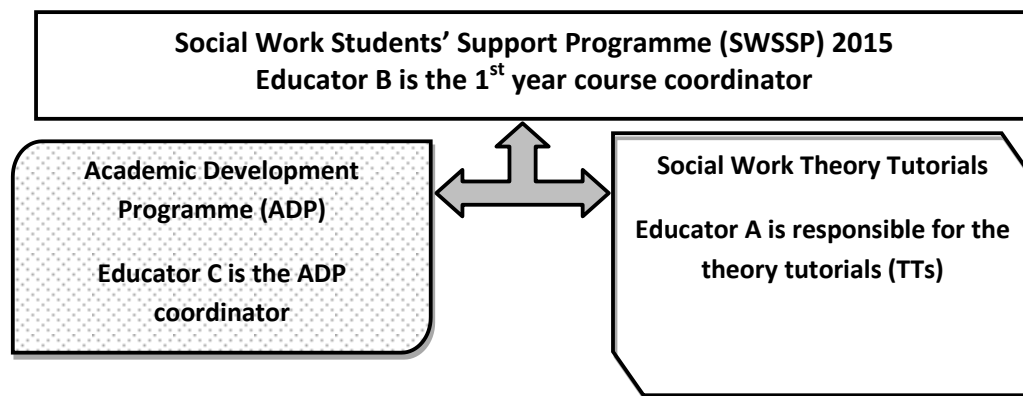
This quote makes several assumptions about the students, focuses on deficits and negatively labels them; this is contrary to the empowerment approach which underpins the social work profession. Furthermore, of concern is the description of the authors' findings regarding the stressors faced by students:

> *"the lack of educational experience of elders and hence a lack of understanding from home of the demands of tertiary education; overcrowding and poverty at home which afforded limited privacy for the pursuit of study commitments; and family arguments"* (Drower & Kleijn, 2008:372).

These quotes from the article by Drower and Kleijn (2008) present the students in the light of their "deficits and shortcomings", and may suggest a short-sighted view held by lecturers regarding students coming from low SES positions. In contrast, a more nuanced and culturally relevant account would see the role of the elders as also being supporters of education, albeit that formal education was denied to them because of apartheid. Such an account would affirm the strengths of the student's strong heritage and culture. Furthermore, the stigma and labelling of "poor Black students with low self-esteem" and "a learned helplessness" then shifts the blame away from the HEIs to provide real tangible support which could build and strengthens students' agency. This programme was run between 2002 and 2003 and stopped on account of financial constraints, which raises questions about its impact and sustainability. Another support programme resurfaced in 2007 and was compulsory for all first-year Social Work students. The programme was compulsory only for the first six months of the year, that is from February to June; after the June examinations, it was only compulsory for first-year students who might have obtained a mark lower than 60%: this programme continued until 2013. The programme was broad in scope and was not clear in terms of its aims and objectives. It covered a lot of diverse issues including self-confidence, academic writing and developing an argument.

Critical of these previous support programmes, the Department of Social Work introduced the SWSSP in 2015 for first-year students, catering for the disciplinary requirements of the degree. In Figure 1 below we have illustrated two structures, namely the Academic Development Programme (ADP) and Social Work theory tutorials (TTs) which make up the SWSSP.

FIGURE 1
THE FIRST YEAR SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS' SUPPORT
PROGRAMME 2015

Social Work Students' Support Programme (SWSSP) 2015
Educator B is the 1st year course coordinator

Academic Development Programme (ADP)
Educator C is the ADP coordinator

Social Work Theory Tutorials
Educator A is responsible for the theory tutorials (TTs)

The Academic Development Programme (ADP) refers to a programme coordinated by Educator C, with the assistance of Social Work Master's students. Master's students assisted in the delivery of the ADP programme, which was presented as a series of 90-minute sessions to the entire class on a weekly basis. The purpose of the ADP was to teach students academic skills such as referencing, study skills, note taking and reading skills, using the library and developing competencies in the technical aspects of using the Sakai Learning Management System (LMS). It should be noted that the academic aspects that were taught during the ADP sessions were related to Social Work: for example, students were taught the American Psychological Association (APA) referencing style, which is the one used by the Department of Social Work. In addition, when the students were introduced to the library system, they were directed to search engines that had social work material, and they were also taught how to access social work journals online. Moreover, readings focused on the actual prescribed Social Work readings that were given to students, while writing focused on the actual development of Social Work essays which formed part of their assessments. This kept the ADP activities relevant to the discipline of social work. Currently, this programme is run across the year and is compulsory for all first-year Social Work students regardless of their marks. This was meant to promote a community of practice amongst students and to encourage collaboration and team work. All activities offered in the ADP were directly derived and complementary to what was taught during the theory lectures.

The Social Work theory tutorials, henceforth referred to as TTs, started in 2014 owing to the large numbers of students who were admitted to the first year of the Social Work degree. The TTs are discipline-specific, because they only cover the content taught within the first-year theory course and reinforce skills required in the profession. TTs consisted of a series of small group sessions with 15-20 students and were conducted by Educator A. These weekly TTs were 45 minutes in duration and compulsory for all students throughout the year. They focused on the content of *Introduction to Social Work Theory and Practice 1,* which consists of five modules, taught by different lecturers. The purpose of TTs was to extend and reinforce the information shared in the course, but in a more experiential manner than in class, using role plays and small group discussions. In this context, tutoring was seen as one of the tools which could increase students' success and nurture them within the profession.

Even though these TTs were mainly guided by what was taught in lectures, more practical examples were given in order to enhance the understanding of the taught

content. Educator A worked closely with all the lecturers who taught different modules at first-year level. Collaboration between Educator A and the different lecturers jointly assisted in planning ahead for the weekly tutorial themes. The contents of the tutorials were based on what the lecturers' regarded as significant, and what students needed to enhance their understanding of the course. Therefore, the tutorials did not and could not cover all the content of the modules taught in class. The tutorials, however, awarded students an opportunity to engage further on topics discussed in class and seek clarity where possible. In addition, individual written feedback on the content of the course was provided to students on the homework given.

The overall philosophy that underpins the SWSSP is that the ethic of care should begin at student selection and when students commence their studies at a contact institution. It is for this reason that Educator B, who coordinates the first-year theory course (*Introduction to Social Work Theory and Practice 1*), developed an in-house Social Work branded induction programme that begins with a welcome of the students by all members of staff; this aims to create a sense of belonging to the profession by becoming acquainted with the people within the department whom they can call upon, should they require assistance. This three-day Social Work induction programme is in sharp contrast to the generic Orientation Week programme that is held by the University for all first-year students. Some of the fun-filled activities included a scavenger hunt, when students are tasked to work in groups to locate different lecture venues at the institution, and to take photographs of themselves in front of these buildings. These group activities set up the foundations of developing a community of practice, whereby students can support each other. Prizes for the winning team are vouchers for the entire group of students to share a meal at a local restaurant and get to know each other at a social level. Other examples of activities conducted are talks by a social worker from the Counselling and Career Development Unit (CCDU), as well as a nurse from Campus Health, explaining to students the type of support that they could expect. At the induction programme each student is presented with a pencil case with various small but symbolic gifts to assist them on their journey, such as a birthday candle to represent the ethical basis of the social work profession.

An additional factor that makes the support programme described in this paper effective is the close teamwork and collaboration between the educators and the tutors on the first-year programme. This teamwork begins with planning the induction programme and continues with regular meetings throughout the year to review student performance, course design, assessment, attendance and the personal wellbeing of the students.

In order to better explain the concepts of interest to this study, a short review of the literature on student issues in this context, social work education and the value of discipline-specific programmes is presented in the next section.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Students' "under-preparedness" for higher education

The post-1994 demise of apartheid in South Africa has still not resulted in students in higher education achieving academic success in regulation time (Spaull, 2013), although access has improved. At present there is a high degree of diversity among students who require personalised support (Ngambi, Jameson, Bolalek, & Carr, 2016). Specifically, skills such as academic writing, language skills, information literacy, critical thinking and using suitable methods of engagement with answering questions and construction of knowledge were found to be lacking in students from both advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds (Bradbury & Miller, 2011). Similarly, this trend is evident at an international level as Durkin and Main (2002) identified: they note that first-year Engineering students in the United Kingdom lacked the confidence and knowledge to structure assignments and critical evaluations, and made poor use of references. Hence, many institutions of higher learning have developed generic academic development programmes to address students' academic challenges, owing to the increase in numbers and diversity of students, and the fact that these skills are unique to academe and new to almost all school leavers. Maphosa (2014:11) argues that an "increase in diversity of the student population in South African universities has led to the enrolment of students who require academic support in order for them to succeed in their studies".

During academic development sessions, qualities that foster a safe environment for learning are to be encouraged: this, according to Pololi, Knight, Kay, Dennis and Frankel (2002), provides a safe and supportive learning environment which facilitates the positive formation of relationships and trust between the educator and the learner. Scholarly focused writing is also part of academic development: according to Underhill and McDonald (2010:93), institutions have "developed different academic development programmes, as it was observed that the large weekly lecture format on its own is not always an ideal option for maximum learning, as students may be overwhelmed by information that they cannot readily apply". However, it is observed that academic development programmes do not yield much if they are insufficiently applied within their disciplinary context. Underhill and McDonald (2010) highlight that generic programmes do not offer a contextual framework and they call instead for discipline-specific programmes. This literature motivated the authors to develop and deliver a discipline-specific academic programme for first-year Social Work students at UWits.

The next section provides general information on the nature of social work education and on discipline-specific academic programmes to provide a context for this study.

Social work education

Social Work is a four-year degree in South Africa and the profession of social work was seen as a scarce skill in 2003 (Earle, 2008), which resulted in an increase in the number of students admitted in the Social Work Department. However, Social Work was later declassified as a scarce skill in 2014 in terms of the Department of Higher Education and Training's (DHET, 2014) list of occupations in high demand (DHET, 2014). Other contributing factors have been "the certainty of a job at the end of one's studies and the

generally lower entrance requirements for Social Work" (Simpson, 2015). The degree is regulated by the South African Qualifications Authority and the Council for Higher Education, and students register with the South African Council for Social Service Professions (SACSSP) from their second year. The admission requirements for this degree at the University of the Witwatersrand are 34 points and 60% in English at secondary school level. Although UWits is described as a historically *advantaged* English-medium institution, the majority of the Social Work students regard English as an additional language. The South African Social Work student population has been described in an academic paper as having a "myriad of social, economic and academic challenges" (Simpson, 2015), including childhood trauma and psychosocial vulnerability (Dykes, 2012; Van Breda, 2013), which requires educators to engage thoughtfully when designing support programmes that cater for their diverse needs and strive to harness their potential and empower them to be successful in higher education.

Discipline-specific academic development and student support programmes

As noted previously, the Department of Social Work (UWits) saw the need to nurture first-year students and develop their professional identity by designing a discipline-specific academic development programme known as the ADP. Durkin and Main (2002) state that discipline-specific academic development programmes provide a framework for professional development, emotional support, career planning and the enhancement of personal awareness and skills that are important for academic success within a specific degree course. A study that was done by Underhill and McDonald (2010) at University of Johannesburg, South Africa, highlighted the benefits of discipline-specific tutor training. Of particular importance to note from this study was the fact that tutors who did not have sufficient knowledge about the discipline they were tutoring failed to engage students in discussions. Within the Department of Social Work, the ADP is facilitated by a qualified social worker and postgraduate students studying towards a Master's degree in Social Work.

Academic writing is, however, critical for students to achieve academic excellence in HE. The ADP in the Social Work Department does not only instil in students the values and ethics of the profession, but it also develops students' academic writing skills. Underhill and McDonald (2010) highlight that there is a need to understand the tension between the demands of academic writing conventions and students' primary and more familiar ways of writing. Identity in writing is very important and this is argued only to be achievable through discipline-specific programmes (Underhill and McDonald, 2010). Master's students were involved in the ADP and first-year students readily identified with them compared to lecturers, who were said to be remote and disconnected authority figures. Master's students were invited on several occasions to share their academic journeys with first-year students. This was done to promote peer tutoring within the Department. Colvin (2007) observes that postgraduate students have also attained what undergraduate students, specifically first-years, hope to achieve. Therefore it is anticipated that they may provide inspiration and motivation to undergraduate students, together with practical mechanisms of coping with workload and other university demands.

The value of discipline-specific tutorials

According to Davids (2014), South African universities are experiencing large class sizes on account of increased student enrolment. Davids (2014) further observes that an increase in enrolment of students is often not matched by an increase in the provision of teaching staff and resources, which has led to uncertain educational outcomes. Given the unproductive and detrimental effects of large classes on student learning, tutorials are viewed as a teaching strategy to minimise the negative consequences of large classes. Many HEIs in South Africa and abroad use tutorials to supplement the learning which occurs in lectures. Tutorials are "recognised as a crucial academic development service for students in higher education" (Underhill, Clarence-Fincham & Petersen, 2014) and has therefore become an essential feature of many universities' teaching structures. Davids (2014) suggests that a smaller tutorial is more effective than a larger one, because it is more interactive and it allows students to exchange ideas in small groups.

In addition, Watson and West (2003) explored how an empowering approach by tutors can enable students to build and refine their own empowering style in practice. They are of the view that tutoring lays the foundation for a more critical and reflective practice amongst Social Work students. They further argue that in order to develop the students' professional identity within an established value base, it is beneficial to use tutors who are qualified and experienced social workers, because "as a member of the social work profession, the tutor will be best placed to ensure the transfer to the student of appropriate knowledge, skills and values" (Watson & West, 2003).

The ethic of care as a social work principle

As stated earlier, an ethic of care refers to a "social practice" that is moral and political (Bisman, 2004; Sevenhuijsen et al., 2003). In South Africa care may also be linked to the practice of *ubuntu*, which describes the interconnectedness of people. In some African culture the concept of humanness is enshrined in the Zulu maxim *"Umuntu ngumuntu ngabanye"*, meaning one is a person through others, making this a familiar concept to many of the students (Becker, 2005). This concept of caring and social justice is closely woven into the moral code of social work (Bisman, 2004) and the way that lecturing and tutoring staff support students. This type of care is fraught with challenges for both students and tutors, as attending to the emotional needs of students may create boundary conflicts, and requires clear moral judgement (Saleebey, 2006). Furthermore, the use of student-centred, discipline-specific teaching practices that favour not only developing structures of care, but better and safer learning environments, are important foundations for developing emancipatory relationships which incorporate the experiences of students (Watson & West, 2003).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study method was qualitative in nature. According to De Vos, Strydom, Fouche and Delport (2012) qualitative research is concerned with exploring subjective reality from the perspective of an insider. This approach was relevant to this study, because the authors explored their own perceptions as well as the experiences of students in a discipline-specific academic development programme. The study employed a case study

research design and it was exploratory-descriptive in nature. According to Simons (2009) a case might be a person, a classroom, an organisation, a programme, or a policy. In this context the case refers to the Social Work Students Support Programme (SWSSP). Non-probability purposive sampling was used to select a sample of 14 student participants. The inclusion criteria were, firstly, that participants should have been enrolled as first-year Social Work students in 2015 and have successfully completed the course, *Introduction to Social Work Theory and Practice 1,* and secondly, that they should have experience of the SWSSP. In 2016 data were collected through focus group discussions with the same students, now in their second year. Additional data took the form of reflective reports written by Educators A and C on their experiences of designing and delivering the SWSSP. Even though there were two sources of data in this study, the main and key source of data was the two focus group discussions with the student participants; the reflective reports data were supportive in nature. In order to reduce power dynamics during the focus groups, a Master's student facilitated the discussions. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Data from focus groups and reflective reports were analysed using thematic content analysis.

In order to enhance the trustworthiness of the study, credibility, confirmability, dependability and transferability were considered. According to Leininger (1994, in Maxwell & Satake, 2006), credibility refers to the truthfulness, believability and the value of the researcher's findings in representing the real world as perceived by participants. Credibility was enhanced by using two focus groups as a way of triangulating the students' experiences in relation to the lecturers' viewpoints. The study was voluntary, which meant that all the participants were given an opportunity to decline participation in the study. This was done to increase honesty in participants' responses, because they were not coerced into participating. Previous research findings were also examined to assess the degree to which this study is congruent with past studies. To enhance confirmability, the researchers made use of correspondence checking, recommended by Pretorius and De la Rey (2004), whereby the categorisation of themes was checked by an independent person, who is one of the authors' mentor. Furthermore, Educator B, as the course coordinator, played a critical role in analysing the reflective reports compiled by Educators A and C, providing some distance from their content. Direct quotes from the focus groups and reflective reports are used as evidence, when presenting the findings of the study. Dependability, which is the equivalent of reliability, was enhanced by having a Master's student (not a researcher) conduct the focus groups. The same interview schedule was used in both the focus group discussions. There was consistency in following the same steps when analysing all the data. In terms of transferability, the rich description of the context may enable transferability to similar settings with first-year Social Work students throughout South Africa. This is further justified since the aim of the study was to develop a deeper understanding of what works within the specific context of the UWits. Ethics clearance was obtained from the UWits.

PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This section presents the findings from the analysis of the interview data and reflective reports, which are discussed under thematic headings.

Benefits of the SWSSP

A key finding is that students believe that they have benefited from the discipline-specific SWSSP. The students were pleased with the way in which the two aspects of the SWSSP were designed to meet their needs. For example, some of the students felt that the TTs were very useful for their learning, finding that they offered an opportunity to engage further with the lecture and to address any misunderstandings. For example, one of the students in the focus group discussions indicated that:

"Those sessions (TTs) were very helpful, some of the things I missed in the lecture she (Educator A) can explain those things and I can even ask, but in the lecture I can't ask ... the teaching part I liked it because it was helpful." (Dladla)

Another student, who felt that she understood more during the TTs, noted:

"Most of the things that were discussed in the theory tutorials (TTs) were based on like, she (Educator A) was very based on giving us clarity on theory what we did in theory classes, so in my lectures I will be busy writing what I see in the slides, cut and paste. Sometimes I will not understand a thing but when I went to the tutorial I gain understanding of what she was saying." (Dineo)

It is evident that students valued the TTs: they liked the fact that TTs were engaging and students were given different tasks to do during each session so that they could learn by doing. Therefore, TTs served a discipline and content reinforcement role in a context that was non-threatening as is illustrated in the following two quotes:

"... like how she (Educator A) taught was different from how we learn during a lecture. In the lecture we will sit and we are just taking in whatever they are saying, but in the tutorial we do an activity that is centred on what we did in class. (Amanda)

"... it was interactive (the tutorial) compared to the lecture." (Mbalehle)

The findings concur with those of Watson and West (2003) that tutorials need to be designed in such a way that students are encouraged to actively engage in order to learn. This means that tutorials should offer students the opportunity to test out the congruence between theoretical understanding and lived realities (Ruch, 2000). This was done through different activities such as role playing and small group discussions within the TTs.

Since social work is a practice-based profession, role playing was one strategy used in the TTs to enhance learning. Students enjoyed this type of authenticity of activity, because it gave them an opportunity to find creative ways to work with different client systems. Role plays also initiated students into the values and culture of the social work profession, which is evident from the focus group discussions; this is what students said about their experience of role playing:

"I remember those role plays, they were cool." (King Kong)

"They [role plays] were, it was the only one that was showing the ethics and values." (Patricia)

"Like when you are with the client how do you do it." (Dineo)

During role playing students were able to link theory and practice, rather than viewing these as two separate domains. Students were pleased with the integration of theory into practice, because they were given practical examples during the TTs. One student observed that:

"She (Educator A) was good in giving examples, she was very practical very much on point with content." (Dineo)

The Oxford Learning Institute (2011) suggests that a tutor may find it useful to introduce illustrations and discussions deriving from their field experience into a tutorial. This was the case in terms of role plays, because Educator A used practical case scenarios based on her field practice experience. Such techniques advantage students and strengthen tutorials, because they extend the range of examples derived from lectures, and encourage the individual formation of the student's personal response to the subject. Furthermore, role plays facilitated an understanding of the subject area through participation, with illustrative examples related to the nature and practice of the social work profession. Therefore, tutorials are appropriate for teaching good practice in argumentation, intellectual self-reliance and developing confidence in students.

One other strategy which was used to enhance effective teaching and learning within the TTs was to divide students into groups of about 15-20. This was done in order to promote a culture of collaborative learning within the discipline. In her reflective report, Educator A noted that:

"The small groups created a conducive environment for learning because students were more comfortable as compared to large lecture halls."

Group work activities which were given during the TTs enabled students to learn from each other, and to develop a sense of belonging. In addition, because of the diverse nature of the first-year class, working together in small groups encouraged students to learn about each others' cultures, appreciate that they are different and avoid judging each other or imposing their views and opinions on others. Educator A further observed that:

"It also assisted them to break away from stereotypes and negative perceptions they had about one another."

Educator A's reflection was supported by Underhill, Clarence-Fincham and Petersen (2014), who argue that tutorials build on students' solidarity, because they "assist students' social integration within a multicultural setting".

The SWSSP was viewed as a student-centred programme, as students were encouraged to play an active role in their learning by contributing to the activities that took place during the ADP. Specific students' needs were accommodated during both the TTs and the ADP and every effort was made to encourage students to participate and to *own* the

programme. Students' approval is evident in the quotes from the focus group discussions, regarding ADP. One student said:

"It [ADP] focused on what we needed." (Siya)

This is indicative that the SWSSP was not just about what the educator deemed necessary for the student, but took students' needs into account. Another student said:

"But with that one [Master's Student] I feel there are people who approached her to say we still have difficult with references, that's why she even came with her friend so that she will also help to explain." (Mbalenhle)

In order to enhance learning within the SWSSP, particularly in the ADP, senior students and postgraduate students were used to give lectures on aspects of academic reading and writing. This process enabled students to relate at peer level with their tutors, and to explore some other aspects of their development, such as learning to become confident and developing presentation skills. The findings show that this was a welcome move for the students, as is illustrated in the quotations below:

"She (Master's student) was much approachable." (Dineo)

"Yes because you might say go to [Educator C] and maybe I am scared of him going to someone you are afraid of will not help so they should be given options because I think 3rd year 4th year students were better." [Siya]

"I remember there was this Master's student who was doing ADP. I don't know what to call her, she [Master's student] did a very good job in reinforcing being able to reference and how we should write essays and I find that very helpful and that session also helped me in terms of presentation like also being confident of my work." [Patricia]

These quotations indicate that within the SWSSP, first-year Social Work students benefited from the involvement of senior students as peer mentors, as advised by Durkin and Main (2002). The senior students were viewed as approachable and able to explain concepts and processes well. However, even though students showed appreciation of senior students, some indicated that senior students were there to push their own agendas. This was specifically mentioned for the senior student who told them about a book that he had written, in which he reflected on his academic journey. This is what the students said:

"Yes I think sometimes he [Master's student] came and assists us but that was not for ADP." (Dineo)

"He [Master's student] came, but it was like he was campaigning not for ADP but it was for marketing his book." (Patricia)

This is an indication that lecturers need to select Master's students carefully. Another positive response to SWSSP concerned the holistic nature of the discipline-specific ADP. The focus was not only on social work, but an interest was shown in other courses that the students were doing. However, it should be indicated that even though students were assisted with courses like Sociology, the tutorials were not open to any other

student who was registered in that course, but was only for first-year Social Work students. This was done in order to try to and create a balance, in terms of work load, between the students' Social Work courses and other courses that they were enrolled in. In addition, the students' welfare needs were also taken into account. In order to illustrate this theme, a participant said:

> *"Sorry ok just to go back on some of the positives things she did like give us the chance to tell her [Master's student] our concerns that we think one two three is a weakness such as essay writing, and another positive is that she [Master's student] will sometimes teach us other things that we didn't understand in other disciplines like Psychology, Sociology and Anthropology."* (Mbalenhle)

The use of technology-enhanced learning (TEL) within the SWSSP

One of the strategies employed within the SWSSP to facilitate learning outside the classroom was the use technology-enhanced learning (TEL) in the form of the SAKAI LMS, the UWits e-learning platform. SAKAI was used to post announcements, lecture notes, study materials, examination tips and to hold discussion forums on any subject discussed in the TTs. The discussion forum on SAKAI was regularly used by students to debate different subjects relevant to their lectures. This was a learning experience for students and they enjoyed interacting with one another outside the lecture room. In her reflective report Educator A noted that

> *"discussion forum engagements are structured to ensure that all perspectives are advanced in a safe environment, allow for spaces where students work cooperatively and collaboratively, so that they can engage intentionally around the social conditions encountered in the real world."*

The use of TEL promotes learner-centred tutorials, which was the basis for the use of blended learning combining face-to-face classroom instruction with online learning. In the discussion forum students had an opportunity to reflect on their own learning and develop a professional identity. For instance, students were required to post their personal autobiographies and share with the rest of the class their personal values and ethics in relation to values practised in the profession. This was done in conjunction with one of the modules in which they were taught about social work values and ethics. Educator A observed that:

> *"This reflective and fun online activity was able to develop students' professional identity, increase cohesion and make the course of values and ethics more personal".*

The SWSSP afforded students an opportunity to learn by doing, especially for Social Work-related courses. During ADP, for instance, students were trained in the use of the library and the UWits e-learning platform. This was done through structured practical sessions in which students were encouraged to learn by doing in a real-world setting. For example, for library navigational training, students were divided into two groups and each group was allocated an hour of training in the library electronic classroom with a qualified library instructor. In this session they were taught how to set a library pin for

easy access to the library catalogue at different computer labs and through their mobile devices. In addition, students were trained on how to search the library catalogue for social work books and journals, both for online books and articles and those that are available on the library shelves. Students were orientated to the SAKAI platform in a computer laboratory, where they had to log in and practically navigate within the platform to undertake online submission of assignments, plagiarism checks using the Turnitin software, and searching for their Social Work courses on the platform. These sessions were appreciated by students as they were discipline-specific. This is what one student said in the focus group discussions:

> *"Educator C took us to West Campus to FNB building to show us how to upload our assignments on SAKAI."* (Mbalenhle)

Although the educators saw the benefits of using SAKAI, students expressed some of the challenges experienced when using the platform. For example, while two students were sharing their experiences, one said:

> *"Yaa and she put more emphasis on checking Sakai but the thing is some of us don't even have access to computers. There are people who literally only have access to computers when they come to school."* (Patricia)

The other student said:

> *"Guys Sakai is so confusing like in the beginning I felt very yaa ok I can look at a computer but I am not a genius. Sakai yooo I think the first task was uploading a picture, uploading a picture was hard for me."* (King Kong)

Comments by students lamenting the use of TEL may be attributed to their lack of prior skills in using technology, as noted by student King Kong above, and the lack of sufficient access to technology in higher education, as stated by student Patricia. These concerns are real and are supported by other studies (Bozalek & Ngambi, 2015); this warrants further consideration in the next iteration of the programme.

Incorporating an ethic of care within the SWSSP

The ethic of care and the caring attributes of a tutor and educator are critical within the social work profession. One of the students referred to this aspect:

> *"It made me feel ok, it made King Kong feel that the department really cares, it cares for, it doesn't only want to produce work like machines, but it does care for your emotional needs your or other needs, or it doesn't only needs for social work give us that work and that's it made me feel ok they care."* (King Kong)

One of the lecturers notes the specific opportunities for the caring role of tutoring:

> *"Tutoring was seen as one tool which can increase students' success and nurture them within the profession."* (Educator A)

This comment gives an indication that the educator understands the various challenges placed on students and is able to extend a helping hand. According to Pololi et al. (2002), there are certain qualities and attitudes that are important for the facilitation of

learning and optimal development of individuals. It is argued that an effective teacher is one who shows acceptance, cares about and respects the learner, is emotionally congruent and genuine, and actively listens to the learner with empathetic understanding.

Furthermore the lecturers showed an understanding and willingness to see students as people first. This is evident in the following comment from one of the educators:

> *"We try to display a nurturing and supportive attitude to the first-year students, many of whom are first-generation students and we also make ourselves readily available for consultation with students and maintain liberal office hours at times convenient to students."* (Educator C)

This suggests that lecturers are student-focused and sometimes go beyond the call of duty to ensure that a human element is incorporated into the SWSSP. In addition, an understanding of the social problems faced by students is evident in this reflection:

> *"Students who had personal challenges were referred to various counselling centres and resources on campus e.g. CCDU and campus health."* (Educator C)

Sibanyoni and Pillay (2014), Dykes (2012), Schenck (2009) and Earle (2008) also acknowledge that various students do experience social, financial and emotional constraints in HEIs. This suggests that students need support when facing difficult circumstances that might hamper their learning.

Challenges of the SWSSP

Mixed reactions were extrapolated from students when it came to attendance at SWSSP sessions, especially during the ADP. The majority of the students who took part in the focus groups discussions highlighted that the ADP should be offered to those who struggle with certain issues related to academic skills and not to all students. This is what they said:

> *"Ok with me I feel like ADP should not be like compulsory, you should go when you want to go there."* (Dladla)

> *"You know that it's ADP you need to attend, it's compulsory and there is a register ... people thought that it's for people who are struggling, so people were like so they are also pulling us here."* (Mbalenhle)

This is indicative of the fact that students had their own perceptions about the programme and that some felt it was not for them. This also warrants considering that making part of the programme optional might compromise the development of a community of practice at first-year level; it might also reinforce an attitude of not seeing the need to support one another, the benefits of learning from peers and the value of encountering varied standpoints. The other thing that was raised and which relates to the issue of compulsory versus optional was the issue of repetition, especially of the sessions presented during the ADP. There was general consensus that the programme was repetitive and that this demotivated some students from participating fully. This is what they said:

"I feel like what happened is that we end up wasting time that we should have used for other things and those who felt they were still struggling, they should have gone to her and ask, because the whole time we are still repeating the same thing and some of us we had understood the thing because there were Sunday tutorials where we will explain do it, but she will still come to class and repeat the same thing." (Siya)

"This issue of repetition does not lie necessarily with ADP; it lies with students because you will find that 5 out of 70 are struggling and then they will have to repeat to the whole class, so then the other 65 will not be concentrating because they understand and the only 5 who don't understand are in the same class and you will find that those who understand are causing the distraction. So I think consultation should be suggested." (Siya)

The above comments show that students felt that the programme should be made optional so that those who do not feel the need may choose not to attend. However, this defeats the notion of collaboration and building a community of practice; furthermore, being with stronger students allows one to be challenged and to move towards other students' discourse level, a point which is emphasised in discipline-specific programmes. This is highlighted by Maphosa (2014), who states that discipline-specific programmes allow for individual consultation, feedback on writing, literacy and learning skills, all of which help to develop a community of practice amongst students who are going to be in the same class throughout the duration of their studies.

Advice for future first year students from student participants of the study

The focus group had one special question which aimed to get students to share the advice they would give to a new first-year student, based on their own experiences of negotiating the academic space. The responses received were encouraging, such as this one, which indicated that university can be a harsh foreign terrain; however, it also indicates that working in a group with like-minded students is beneficial:

"Don't alienate yourself, yes we are all new but find people you can relate to and whilst you are doing that, do yourself a favour don't relate with mediocrity because of you will find people who are a group they think they are working, but they are getting busy doing nothing and they are prioritising things which are not important." (Amanda)

Another comment addressed the real concern of not achieving academic success and the feelings of failure and self-doubt that accompany this experience, confirming that first-year adjustment in higher education is daunting and requires a degree of self-care.

"In first year you ask yourself questions like, what am I doing here? Am I good enough to be in this position. They [the new students] should not think like that. Failing here at Wits, it's not a crime." (Dladla)

These comments underscore the multiple problems faced by first-year students: such as under-preparedness, financial problems and adjusting to the demands of the university environment.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In reviewing the transcripts of the two focus groups with the students and the reflections of the two educators, it is clear that the SWSSP, which is comprised of the ADP and TTs, had a positive impact on the Social Work students' learning. It may have strengthened their adjustment to the university and assisted many of them to achieve academic success. An observation was made in the data collected and it was clear that data from the focus groups and reflective reports gave comprehensive suggestions and recommendations for the next design iteration of the course. However, it was also noted that several concerns were raised about the SWSSP, especially concerning the ADP's repetitive and compulsory nature.

The other important area that was raised by both educators and students was the ethic of care principle; this reinforced that it should be clearly demonstrated when working with students in order to attend to their needs holistically. In this context it was amply observed that personal problems do surface during interactions between educators, tutors and students, and therefore educators need to make use of university structures in their endeavour to support first-year Social Work students.

Finally, this student-support intervention, the SWSSP, can be said to have facilitated quality learning and an ethic of care, both of which were made possible by the discipline-specific location of the programme, enabling smaller student numbers, academic development which is embedded in the disciplinary discourse and topics, and which enabled educators to model some of the essential professional qualities of these future social workers at an early stage. Some practical implications have also arisen for forthcoming course delivery.

Practical implications

- Discipline-specific programmes should be participatory in nature and student-centred, and each iteration should include the educator and other support staff reflections together with student evaluations, in order to introduce improvements in the programme.

- Personnel working on the support programmes should work collaboratively throughout the year to monitor the progress and wellbeing of students.

- All personnel in the student-support programme should have high expectations of students and work towards creating methods to allow students to adjust and succeed.

- With the diversity of the student population, the support personnel should include African Black Social Work staff who are able to role model and can share their own lived experience amongst students.

- The use of TEL can be used to support the development of a community of practice.

- Ideally, induction and support programmes should be linked and should commence from the first day the student enters a particular discipline within the university.

- Students should be advised at the beginning of the course that attendance to discipline-specific programmes is compulsory, and programmes should be designed

to enhance collaboration and the establishment of a community of practice amongst students.

- All discipline-specific student support programmes should have course outlines stating clear outcomes and objectives of the programme.

- Blended learning methods should be used to deliver these programmes in order to accommodate unique student needs, and consideration should be given to access and training of students to use TEL.

- Discipline-specific support programmes should be conducted in small groups and should be reflected in the academic timetable.

- Educators should engage in the scholarship of teaching and learning.

- Educators should practice the ethic of care principle and acknowledge that personal circumstances of students cannot be separated from their learning needs and outcomes, and create support structures to meet students' needs.

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