CONCEPTUALISATION OF STUDENT UNDER-PREPAREDNESS AND ITS EFFECT ON SELECTION CRITERIA FOR EXTENDED CURRICULUM PROGRAMS

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ABSTRACT

Student under-preparedness is a growing concern in higher education institutions (HEIs) around the globe. In South Africa, extended curriculum programs [ECPs] were devised as a context-fit remedial strategy to assist underprepared students to successfully transition into academia. As a result, under-preparedness is a key criterion for the selection of students into extended programs. Nonetheless, the concept of under-preparedness has not been accurately articulated. This research envisages a cascading effect, wherein the incoherence in the interpretation of under-preparedness endorses the inconsistencies in formulating the selection criteria for extended programs.

The research used a case study approach, conducting in-depth interviews to ascertain how the conceptualisation of under-preparedness informs the selection of students for enrolment in extended programs at a University of Technology. To enhance the reliability of data, the results were triangulated using document analysis. The findings confirm the disparities in the conceptualisation of underpreparedness. Accordingly, the selection criteria reveal significant fragmentation, with some programs deviating from prescribed standards. The research proposes a holistic framework and provides valuable recommendations to assist the higher education institutions to streamline their programs to be fit-for-purpose.

Keywords: under-preparedness, academic preparedness, extended curriculum program (ECP), developmental course, selection criteria

INTRODUCTION

Student under-preparedness is a growing concern in higher education institutions (HEIs) around the globe. In the dynamic business environment nowadays, the emphasis is on delivering adaptive graduates, who can respond aptly to the needs of the workplace. Nonetheless, the HEIs are increasingly facing a huge intake of underprepared students, particularly in South Africa (Mtshweni, 2022:240). In the South African context, under-preparedness can be attributed to

the transformation agenda to widen access for redress and reconstruction after apartheid (Human-Hendricks & Meier 2020:80; Reddy 2018:162; Warren 2002:86).

According to Mungal and Cloete (2016:203), the HEIs have a mandate to impart transferable skills and to equip graduates with the attributes that will prove useful in the workplace. However, various scholars contend that most of the university graduates are weak and underprepared. For example, McClenney (2009 as cited in Perin 2013:116) stated that 60 per cent of incoming students may be academically underprepared. In agreement, Bharuthram (2012:208) asserts that a huge dropout rate in the South African university context is due to academic under-preparedness. Consistent with this assertion, the articulation gap and under-preparedness were identified as factors that hamper academic success in HEIs (Human-Hendricks and Meier 2020; Moyo 2020; Du Plessis and Gerber 2012).

To address the issues of under-preparedness, the context-fit remedial strategies have been continually devised. For instance, in the United States of America, a developmental course is offered to underprepared freshmen (Long 2017:3; Ley and Young 1998:42). In the United Kingdom, Warren (2002:88) affirmed that supplementary instructions are offered within the high-risk modules to help the "lesser-prepared" students address their difficulties in a collaborative environment. Within the South African context, Mungal and Cloete (2016:204) and Du Plessis and Gerber (2012:85) asserted that the extended curriculum programs [ECPs] assist the underprepared students to transition into academia and mould them for the work environment.

Consequently, under-preparedness of students is a key criterion for the selection of students into an ECP (Scott 2019). However, the literature is riddled with inconsistencies in the interpretation of what and who is an underprepared student from an academic perspective (Grimes 1997; Ley and Young 1998; Baruthrum 2012; Du Plessis and Gerber 2012; Perin 2013; Mungal and Cloete 2016). In addition, Leibowitz and Bozalek (2015:14) warn that the interpretation of who to include in ECPs varies across different HEIs. This conceptualisation gap predicts the incoherence in the selection of potential students into the ECPs. Accordingly, the Council of Higher Education (CHE) (2020:2) found it problematic that HEIs select unqualifying students to ECPs in the spirit of widening access. Hence, these inconsistencies defeat the intended purpose of ECPs.

The incoherence might continue to perpetuate the dysfunctionality of the higher education system, as highlighted in Du Plessis and Gerber (2012). It will further hamper the CHE's attempts to redress and reconstruct a successful education system that meets or exceeds the international benchmark success rate of 25 per cent. Moreover, the underprepared student from

the South African education context is a student from a disadvantaged educational background (Mungal and Cloete 2016:206), however; the "educationally disadvantaged" has not been precisely articulated (Smit 2012:370). In agreement, Leibowitz and Bozalek (2015:14) contend that "educationally disadvantaged" is an ambiguous concept, which still requires explicit definition in relation to the ECPs. Furthermore, placement of students on ECPs is an ongoing problem that requires urgent attention (Council of Higher Education 2022:3).

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate how the conceptualisation of student under-preparedness impacts the selection criteria of the ECPs to enhance coherence in the selection of students. To achieve this primary purpose, the study is guided by the following objectives: Firstly, to ascertain the interpretation of student under-preparedness by conducting a comprehensive review of relevant literature and gathering insights from participants. Secondly, to explore the selection strategies used in various ECPs within a University of Technology (UoT) through the analysis of pertinent documents as well as gathering insights from participants. Lastly, to evaluate how the conceptualisation of student under-preparedness influences the selection of students in ECPs.

Furthermore, this study seeks to explore the correlation between the interpretation of students' under-preparedness and the selection criteria across various programs within a UoT. The literature underpinning student under-preparedness and selection criteria will be discussed. The use of qualitative methodology will be justified. Finally, the results and discussion will ensue. The following section discusses the literature review.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This research focuses on how academics interpret student under-preparedness and how that subsequently determines the students who are selected into extended programs at a UoT. Although there is a plethora of research both on the under-preparedness of students as well as selection criteria, there are fewer studies that address the selection process of ECPs, especially how the interpretation of under-preparedness informs the selection of students into the ECPs.

Students Under-preparedness

Under-preparedness of students has been a subject of interest for quite some time. Scott et al. (2007 as cited in Mungal and Cloete 2016:206) defined under-preparedness of students as a lack of engagement to key academic experiences and approaches required as a foundation in the higher education environment due to a disadvantaged educational background.

Additionally, Smit (2012:370) defines under-preparedness as those students from lower socio-economic groups, who use English as an additional language; and have not yet acquired the relevant numeracy, literacy, and academic skills. Moreover, under-preparedness appears to be the core challenge facing HEIs (Mokoena and Materechera 2012:25). Long (2017:2) postulated that student under-preparedness ranks second only to affordability challenges in terms of students' university access and choice.

Citing the reasons for the under-preparedness of students, the literature is highly fragmented. The first pillar of reasoning behind under-preparedness is grounded in personal characteristics of students. For example, Ley and Young (1998:43) advanced the lack of self-regulation as partially a reason for under-preparedness. The authors defined self-regulation as the use of "personal (self) processes to strategically monitor and control his or her behaviour and the environment". In agreement, Grimes (1997:51–53) found locus of control- "a perception of students having less control over their environment and subsequently less responsibility for taking action" to have a strong relationship with academic under-preparedness. Self-regulation is a serious personal characteristic that underprepared students lack, which subsequently results in high attrition rates in the HEIs.

This suggests that students who lack self-regulation are prone to under-preparedness and ultimately, failure in higher education. Moreover, Perin (2013:118) also suggested students' low motivation amongst the reasons for under-preparedness. In agreement with these scholars, Cung et al (2019:179) suggested that limited self-direction and the lack of prior academic achievement might hinder the success of underprepared students. Self-motivated students view learning as a controllable process, where a student is a master of the process and can manipulate learning through the utilisation of various learning strategies to attain academic success (Ley and Young 1998:44). However, underprepared students hold a contrary view in that they view learning as an uncontrollable process.

The second pillar of reasoning on under-preparedness focuses on poor literacy levels. For example, Bharuthram (2012:208) suggested the lack of literacy levels as a main driver of under-preparedness. The author highlighted that most South African students entering HEIs lack the prerequisite analytic and interpretive skills in writing and reading. Alluding to the work of Bohlman and Pretorius (2002), the author mentioned the strong correlation between reading ability and students' academic performance. Likewise, Human-Hendricks and Meier (2020:77) and Perin (2013:118) recite inadequate instruction in the schools, whereas Moyo (2020:182) and Du Plessis and Gerber (2012:83) identified low English proficiency as a reason for under-preparedness.

The third pillar of reasoning asserts that under-preparedness stems from socio-economic challenges (Perin 2013; Grimes 1997). For example, Mtshweni (2022:237) highlights the evident differences exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic between students of different socioeconomic backgrounds. Ray, Woolley, and Sen Gupta (2015:7) found that students from rural backgrounds had significantly lower quartile scores for overall academic achievement compared to their urban counterparts. In agreement, Du Plessis and Gerber (2012:83) advanced that "efforts to raise the quality of education of poor children have largely failed". This claim is further supported by Grimes' (1997:52) assertion that African American students demonstrated lower placement scores compared to their Caucasian counterparts. In addition, Perin (2013:119) advanced that low socio-economic status and ethnicity were also barriers associated with under-preparedness.

Contrary to the aforesaid student-centred categorisation of under-preparedness, Smit (2012:374) postulates that the HEIs are underprepared for the changing student bodies. The author attributes the universities' under-preparedness to the massification of higher education, especially in the South African context (Smit 2012:369). Additionally, Reddy (2018:162) asserts that HEIs need to examine their teaching staff, institutional cultures, and curricula to see if they are prepared for the changing student bodies. Concurring with this viewpoint, Mtshweni (2022:244) identifies the need for HEIs to capacitate their staff in the pedagogy of online learning. Moreover, Mokoena and Materechera (2012:26) state that the Mafikeng campus of North-West University, like other HEIs, is struggling to identify the skills underprepared students need to succeed. This implies that the HEIs should evaluate their own preparedness for the changing student bodies and learning environment.

Under-preparedness creates substantial attrition and subsequently results in low throughput rates. The HEIs around the globe are battling to eliminate this challenge. However, various scholars have offered valuable recommendations to lessen the impact of under-preparedness on attrition and throughput rates. For instance, Ley and Young (1998:57) suggest that academia consider including self-regulating strategies in developmental courses. Baruthrum (2012:211) calls for HEIs in South Africa to create the university-wide awareness campaigns to promote the culture of reading and offer appropriate reading practices required at a university level to support underprepared students. In addition, the author suggested that there should be staff development programs in place to support reading pedagogy.

Additionally, Lesgold and Welch-Ross (2011 cited in Perin 2013:119) proposed that the "instructional improvement is a critical part of efforts to improve educational outcomes for underprepared students". Instructional improvement through embedded developmental skills in

coursework can also prove to be fruitful (Perin 2013:125). In the same breath, Mungal and Cloete (2016:207) advocate for transformative learning in an era whereby universities are only concerned with generating a high throughput rate at the expense of quality assessment. Moreover, Reddy (2018:168) emphasises the importance of understanding the students' general backgrounds as it enables academia to plan and implement instructional offerings accordingly.

In the South African context, the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) has made the foundational provision available to support underprepared students in form of the ECPs (Mungal and Cloete 2016:206; Du Plessis and Gerber 2012:85). Likewise, the purpose of the developmental course provision is to provide the underprepared students with an opportunity to strengthen their skills and enhance their readiness for the university level (Cung et al. 2019:178). Divergently, Smit (2012:373) proposes a change of perspective as a starting point for addressing the issues of under-preparedness. The author argues that the use of the term "underprepared students" is problematic itself in a sense that it perpetuates the stratification and deepening of class inequalities.

Furthermore, the ECPs' fundamental goal is to integrate the students' academic development into the overall instructional offering to attain a meaningful and coherent learning experience for an underprepared student (Mungal and Cloete 2016:206). On the subject of integration, Reddy (2018:167) advances a contention that:

> "Developing curricular and cocurricular programming for today's university student population requires lecturers to shift from looking at diverse, first-generation, and underresourced college students with a deficit mindset simply because they do not possess the characteristics of typical college students of previous generations in terms of race, gender, socioeconomic status, academic preparation, and enrollment patterns".

From this position, it is reasonable to conclude that under-preparedness is not necessarily the measure of IQ or lack of it thereof; rather, a disadvantage due to systemic structures of the society.

Selection Criteria

Selecting or matching students to a particular program is becoming increasingly relevant. Selection criteria is "the process through which students enter tertiary education" (Du Plessis and Gerber 2012:82). The selection process is equipped with measures that either qualifies or disqualifies a student for the HEIs. Oftentimes, these measures are statistically derived and do not truly illuminate the under-preparedness that the universities battle with on a yearly basis. For instance, citing several scholars, Niessen and Meijer (2017:436) argued that traditional

measures favour certain ethnic groups and fail to measure capabilities that relate to essential outcomes such as future job performance, leadership, and so forth. This drives an inquiry into the role of the selection criteria and strategies in addressing the issues of under-preparedness.

Selection strategies

Previous research on admission demonstrates that universities use grade point averages (GPA), standardized test scores, departmental examinations, instructor evaluations, interviews, or a combination of these methods to categorize students (Ley and Young 1998:43; Niessen and Meijer 2017:437). These scholars reckon that these methods are futile to those seeking new strategies to address the issue of students' under-preparedness. Additionally, in their studies on student performance, Schmitt (2012) and Stemler (2012) as cited in Niessen and Meijer (2017:437), found that "many learning objectives are aimed at domain-general abilities that are not measured by GPA". Therefore, the effectiveness of these selection tools is questionable in reference to addressing under-preparedness.

As a result, some scholars advocated for the development of specialised selection tools, which intended to detect underprepared students. For instance, Ley and Young (1998:56) devised and used three self-regulation measures to predict developmental courses (i.e., ECPs) or mainstream admission for students. The scholars' postulate that the number of strategies by categories is the best predictor for classifying students to either the extended programs or mainstream programs. In the Netherlands, open admissions and lottery admissions were replaced by selective admissions and consultative matching procedures (Niessen and Meijer 2017:442). This is crucial to attain student-program suitability and to increase student diversity.

According to Du Plessis and Gerber (2012:82), the South African Higher Education Act No. 101 of 1997 assigns the HEIs the responsibility and accountability of the selection and admission of students into various programs. Therefore, it is common that the institutions will set different criteria for different programs. The selection criteria must be aligned with the mission of the program (Melton and Duke 2015:205). Most South African HEIs select students using national senior certificate (NSC), senior certificate, national certificate vocational (NCV), international certificate, recognition of prior learning (RPL), as well as mature age exemption.

As noted from its policy framework, the purpose of the ECPs is to offer additional provision to strengthen the academic foundations – in terms of knowledge, skills, and competencies – to enhance the chances of underprepared students succeeding in the programme for which they have enrolled (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2019). Similarly, in the US context, the purpose of developmental education is to provide underprepared students

who enter college the opportunity to strengthen their skills and bring them up to an adequate level for further college-level coursework (Cung et al. 2019:178). However, the question that arises from this is 'who is the under-prepared student within the context of ECP or developmental education?

The relationship between selection and success

To attain the quality of the programs by graduates who are equipped to pursue successful careers, it is essential to align the admission processes with the programs' mission and learning outcomes (Melton and Duke 2015:206). Interestingly, this will influence the quality of future graduates and ultimately the overall program success. On the contrary, Du Plessis and Gerber (2012:84) contend that tests for academic preparedness tend to emphasize poor schooling while ignoring the potential for success where students are provided a conducive learning environment. In agreement, Niessen and Meijer (2017:437) argued that the desired students' outcomes go beyond the GPA, hence; it is essential to use broadened selection criteria.

Moreover, these scholars noted a shift from the classical high school grades to focus on what a student should be able to do in their specific program (Niessen and Meijer 2017:442). This is particularly important given the poor relationship between grades obtained in high school and university performance (Palominos et al. 2017:990). Palominos et al. (2017) advocate for a transitional state where an appropriate diagnostic, methodological, motivating, and didactic system is built independent of the selection process. Perhaps this is a system that most ECP coordinators and administrators should consider.

In the South African context, Du Plessis and Gerber (2012:92) concluded that "the NSC should be further understood, developed and strengthened as an assessment instrument for predicting success in higher education studies". The scholars are of the view that it is an oversimplification to predict the students' potential using their NSC results. The scholars devised a program where students were given a conducive environment with academic support to confirm this notion. In the same vein, Marnewick (2012:122) questioned NSC results as a determinant of students' future performance and ultimately as the predictor of their success at the university. Therefore, it is essential to select students for an academic program not only based on their foreseeable chances of success, but also based on their potential for success.

METHOD

The research utilised a case study approach to ascertain how the wide-ranging programs at the University of Technology (UoT) interpreted the DHET policy framework (Department of

Higher Education and Training 2019) to identify and select underprepared students into their respective ECPs. The research method included a combination of document analysis and semi-structured interviews. Furthermore, the data were triangulated to minimise bias.

Research setting and sample

This study was conducted at a UoT in South Africa. The distinction from the traditional universities is in the sense that UoTs place greater emphasis on career-oriented courses. UoTs seek to develop employable and responsive graduates who apply scientific knowledge to devise innovative solutions to real-world problems (Human-Hendricks and Meier 2020:90). Given the large number of historically disadvantaged students that are admitted to this UoT, several academic programs within all the faculties adopted the ECP to enhance the academic success of the underprepared students. In 2023, the year of the principal data collection, these programs were actively involved in the ECP. The population for this study consisted of varied academics involved in the ECPs. Based on the researcher's previous involvement in the ECP, appropriate participants were identified, and the research applied *referral* sampling until the maximum variation was attained.

Design

To understand the phenomenon from the participants' experiences, this research applied a phenomenological approach to research design. It adopted a three-phased systematic data collection procedure. The first phase involved semi-structured interviews with the administrators and curriculum developers at the institutional level to establish the institutional background and stance on ECPs. The second phase entailed semi-structured interviews with academics who oversee an ECP at the departmental level, to examine the processes surrounding the enrolment of students into the ECPs. The third phase consisted of content analysis - thorough scrutiny of the departmental handbooks and institutional rulebook to triangulate the data.

Ethical approval

The ethical approval was sought and obtained from the Ethics Office of the DVC: Research.

FINDINGS

Based on the research methods mentioned above, thematic analysis was carried out on NVivo software. Upon importing the interview transcripts and documents, the preliminary codes were grouped where appropriate and further assessed to identify apparent themes. The identification of the themes aimed to address the central research question:

> "… how does the conceptualisation of under-preparedness inform the selection of students for enrolment in extended programs at a University of Technology? "

Consequently, the results derived from the data are as follows:

Conceptualisation of under-preparedness

The results reveal a fragmentation in the conceptualisation of under-preparedness. Despite these differences, the participants consistently cited the "lack of knowledge and the "lack of exposure" as key elements in defining under-preparedness. The predominant definitions are:

> "The concept of under-preparedness to me speaks to not being ready for something with respect to teaching and learning, not having been sufficiently equipped to handle the rigors of teaching and learning in an academic environment" (P8).

> "For me, under-preparedness does not mean that they are necessarily a weak student. They are students that may not have been exposed to the privileges or everything else that another student may have had. So, what I'm talking about is things like computers. You know, Wi-Fi, having access to quality libraries and facilities and resources. They could academically be very bright students and very capable students, but they haven't had equal opportunity" (P3).

In the pursuit of discerning what distinguishes an under-prepared student from a prepared one, the participants highlighted the following traits: the lack of knowledge (conceptual), deficiencies in various literacies and skills (academic, communication, information, presentation, reading, writing), language barriers, academic-social life-balance, and social ineptitude. On the contrary, a prepared student can be identified by their attitude (driven, initiative, interest), academically literate, adaptability to change, self-regulation, effective time management, ability to work independently, and consistent good grades.

The participants assert that under-preparedness stems from numerous factors, including a poor schooling system, the impact of COVID-19, a rural background, insufficient career guidance, and inadequate preparation for tertiary education. Since the pre-tertiary schooling system received overwhelming criticism, participants pointed to a lenient system (30% pass for certain subjects), poor facilities (lack of libraries, poor classroom infrastructure), and the lack of resources (equipment and software required to offer certain subjects, no internet connectivity). Divergently, one participant (P3) pronounced that "underpreparedness may not have anything to do with the quality of the schooling background, but it may become a personal issue". In support, another participant (P5) emphasised that even students who "…had the best facilities, the best education and so on..." will struggle if they lack motivation and ambition.

Furthermore, most participants asserted that the majority of the South African student' populace is under-prepared for HEIs. This assertion is rooted in the nationally observed low throughput rate (P1, P3, P4, P8). In addition, half of the participants questioned the HEIs' preparedness for the changing student populace, hinting that the HEIs might be exacerbating the issue of under-preparedness. For instance, P1 suggested that "…the UoT may not be fully responsive to meeting the students where they are at" and the curriculum might be alienating. Supportively, P2 indicated that the student populace has changed, hinting a need for curriculum revisions. In addition, large class numbers were noted, making it difficult to properly attend to each student's inefficiencies.

Therefore, the ECPs were fully supported as an antidote for under-preparedness in HEIs. In addressing this issue, the ECPs provide students with psycho-social support, extra-tutorials, mentorship, team building, as well as academic and information literacies, among other related forms of support. This support is instrumental in the success of students, as affirmed by P7: "…with the ECP having a lower workload, extra assistance, and whatnot, most of them tend to finish in record timeanyway. All those students who come from ECP in the past have been our shining stars in industry or wherever they go". Likewise, P2 asserted substantial improvement among their ECP students, stating: "...you know they most of them graduated on time", while P3 claimed that "…a lot of them actually outperform our mainstream students". The ECPs enable HEIs to impart essential skills and knowledge for students' success.

The selection of students into ECPS

To understand how the conceptualisation of under-preparedness informs the selection of students for enrolment, this study interrogated both the entrance requirements and subsequent

selection criteria for the ECPs. Concerning entrance requirements, the study sought to understand the entrance requirements for each program and whether the requirements for ECP differ from the mainstream. According to DHET, the entrance requirements for the ECP and mainstream should be the same. Indeed, 62,5 per cent of the participants indicated that this is the practice within their respective programs. Shockingly, 37,5 percent claimed to use different entrance requirements for ECP and mainstream programs. Referring to the ECP students, P6 stated "...basically some of them don't meet the points" whereas P8 suggested that "the ECP is an access program which is supposed to accommodate those who may not have met the required benchmarks to enter into the mainstream program". Apparently, this incoherence is extremely concerning.

Furthermore, the participants were asked to describe the procedure for selecting the students into the ECPs. Firstly, the representative of the centre responsible for managing the ECPs at the UoT confirmed that the selection criteria are left to the discretion of each department (P1). Accordingly, most of the participants confirmed to have selection criteria for the respective departments. Mainly, the criterion includes an entrance test, an interview, and a portfolio (P2, P4, P5, P7). The participants were confident that their selection criteria were thorough to identify an under-prepared student. Seemingly, the selection criteria sought to measure conceptual knowledge, numeracy skills, writing skills, communication skills, and language command. For instance, P2 stated that their entrance test measures students' abilities in terms of design (program specific), numeracy, and following instructions. Likewise, "We look at their language, we look at how they write and a little bit of calculations, those kinds of things in it" (P4).

Contrarily, some participants claimed to have no criteria, but selecting students based on failure to meet entrance requirements. Responding to what criteria apply to select students into the ECP, P3 stated, "Nothing, except for if they have Maths and Accounting and maybe getting low points…". Similarly, P8 claimed, "the criteria for uh who we are going to accept and who are going to leave is very fluid. It is not clear cut for me". Nonetheless, the participants highlighted the importance of having selection criteria, particularly adopting a universal model for the UoT. For instance, P6 proposed that a UoT "…should have a standard test for all students entering university". In support, it was suggested that, for coherence purposes, the UoT should deploy a committee to set a standardised procedure for selecting students into the ECPs (P5). Perhaps, this committee could also address the issue of stigma surrounding ECPs, as noted by the participants.

DISCUSSION

Supportive of the previous studies (Perin 2013; Bharuthram 2012; Ley and Young 1998), the findings revealed that under-preparedness stems from socio-economic issues, poor literacies, and the personal characteristics of a student. Thus, student under-preparedness is defined as the lack of the requisite literacies and self-regulation required to adequately handle the rigors of tertiary education, due mainly to socio-economic issues. Sadly, the literature has shown that, irrespective of the setting, under-preparedness is predominantly an issue faced by a poor rural student of African ancestry and/or other people of colour (Ray et al. 2015; Perin 2013; Du Plessis and Gerber 2012; Smit 2012; Grimes 1997). Seemingly, the crisis of under-preparedness might perpetuate until structural socio-economic issues that make South Africa the most unequal country in the world are addressed.

The findings of this study clearly show that student under-preparedness manifests as reduced literacies and a lack of self-regulation. The illiteracies in South Africa may be attributed to the ineffective educational system, which received criticism for failing to adequately prepare students for HEIs (Mtshweni 2022; Human-Hendricks and Meier 2020). Therefore, overhauling the educational system; particularly curriculum, delivery, and infrastructure (facilities and equipment), should be helpful in addressing the issues of under-preparedness. Obviously, a system overhaul is a long-term objective; hence, short-term solutions are required.

Therefore, in accordance with Mtshweni (2022) and Reddy (2018), the HEIs should direct resources to address socio-economic, psycho-social, and illiteracies issues. The respondents questioned the HEIs' readiness to meet the needs of underprepared students, whereas some scholars suggested that HEIs should prepare for a changing student body (Reddy 2018; Smit 2013; Mokoena and Materechera 2012). It is crucial that HEIs should direct resources towards capacitating academics to deal with underprepared students. In addition, the findings indicated that the additional support offered to students in the ECPs enabled them to excel. Therefore, HEIs, especially the UoTs, should consider increasing the number of student populace receiving the support, given the socio-economic and literacies status of their students.

The findings on personal characteristics of a student support the claim by Ley and Young (1998) that the lack of self-regulation is partially the reason for under-preparedness. The authors suggested that a prepared student views learning as a controllable process, where a student is a master of the process. As evidenced by Perin (2013) and Cung et al. (2019), self-motivation is central to self-regulation. Consistent with these views, this study found that a prepared student possesses the following self-regulation traits (contrary to an underprepared student): positive attitude (driven, initiative, interest), academically literate, adaptable to change, time

management, ability to work independently and consistent good grades. As a personal characteristic, self-regulation is hugely dependent on a student's background and upbringing.

Furthermore, the findings revealed that there is incoherence in the selection of students into ECPs. The selection criteria for the enrolment of students need to be clearly defined. Unfortunately, the findings demonstrate that a substantial number of students are merely selected into ECPs using the entrance requirements. This is unsurprising as the Council of Higher Education (2020) has noted that most HEIs use ECPs as a means of widening access. For those respondents who use a particular selection criterion, it is clear that the selection criteria focus mainly on the detection of poor literacies, ignoring the socio-economic and self-regulation status of a student. In addition, the selection criteria do not factor in the student's potential to succeed in higher education.

Therefore, in accordance with the participants, the UoT should establish a committee to design standardised selection criteria. This is of utmost importance for adherence to the DHET guidelines and for clear demarcation of an underprepared student. Accordingly, Palominos et al. (2017) and Niessen and Meijer (2017) advocate for a multifaceted selection criterion. Thus, a committee at a UoT should create a holistic selection criteria framework that is inclusive of diagnostic measures (detect socio-economic, psycho-social, and illiteracies status of a student) and remedial measures (ascertain the potential to succeed should a student be exposed to a conducive environment to learn). In addition, student agency structures should be established in student friendly settings such as residences. Such structures might be helpful in enhancing students' tenacity in navigating HEIs.

This study provides valuable insights into the conceptualisation of student under-preparedness and its impact on selecting students for enrolment to the ECPs. Although the scope of this research is mainly the ECPs, the broader landscape of developmental education initiatives globally can benefit from the findings and recommendations of this research. The primary contributions of this research are: (1) articulating the concept of student under-preparedness and (2) generating a holistic framework for the selection criteria, which has the potential to be pivotal in enrolling the "right people" for developmental courses. This might prove useful to assist HEIs to streamline their program to be fit-for-purpose.

Despite these valuable insights, the results should be interpreted with caution, considering the inherent limitations. Provided the use of a case study approach and a small number of programs participating in ECPs, the sample size of 9 for in-depth interviews was a limitation. To some extent, the case study approach denies the generalisability of the findings beyond the case. In addition, the criticism of the pre-tertiary education system in South Africa as ineffective

presents the possibility that the results might be different in a setting with a more effective schooling system.

CONCLUSION

The phenomenological study applied a case study method to determine how the conceptualisation of student under-preparedness influences the selection of students for enrolment into ECPs. The findings confirmed that the conceptualisation of under-preparedness is fragmented, leading to inconsistencies in the selection of students into ECPs. Notably, this research proposes a holistic framework, which will assist HEIs to select suitable candidates in their developmental courses, specifically the ECPs. Additionally, the research advocates for increasing students' intake in the ECPs. Building on these findings, future research should conduct comparative studies between ECPs and mainstream throughput rates to ascertain if increasing intake in the ECPs is warranted. Also, future research may extend the scope, sample size, or use a different method to replicate this study.

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