UNCONVENTIONAL TIMES IN HIGHER EDUCATION: LIVED EXPERIENCES OF SOUTH AFRICAN STUDENT SUPPORT CHAMPIONS DURING THE COVID–19 PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT

The COVID–19 pandemic necessitated swift changes to remote teaching and learning. This study explored the experiences of student support champions comprising teaching assistants, tutors, mentors, and retention officers) in providing affective and content support via remote modalities to first–year students. The study focused on insights gained during remote learning. This adaptation to change speaks to resilience thinking, 'being able to withstand or overcome adversity and unpleasant events and successfully adapt to change and uncertainty'. Learning to be resilient and adaptable to rise above challenges, is simultaneously transformative to create new ways of thinking to deal with current situations. This study resides within the interpretivist paradigm and draws on the subjective experiences and understandings of research participants within a university of technology. Surveys were conducted to garner insights and experiences and were analysed according to emergent themes of challenges, improvements, and future practices. Data revealed that despite the demands placed on student support champions, they managed to cope with their studies and acquired attributes, dispositions, and values beyond the formal curriculum. Thus the study shows that times of complexity present opportunities for resilience and transformation to changing circumstances.

Key words: Higher Education; Student support; Resilience; Beyond the curriculum

INTRODUCTION

Higher education, like all other aspects of social and economic structures, is in a continuous state of evolution. This fluidity of change became starkly apparent during the COVID–19

pandemic. The default face–to–face learning, teaching, and assessment (LTA) modality was disrupted, to be replaced by the swift change to emergency remote LTA. In South Africa, the Council on Higher Education (CHE) released a communique on 17 April 2020, to inform public and private universities that "the restrictions on all programmes for contact delivery are lifted" and that programmes may be "supported and assessed through virtual and online delivery and blended learning approaches" (CHE 2020). Despite lockdown levels being eased progressively from the most severe Level 5 lockdown to a sense of normality at Level Zero over a two–year period, remote learning remained the dominant modality in the faculty which is the focus of this study.

Given the global shift to emergency remote learning (ERT), several interpretations emerged on remote learning and online learning. It would be salient to include such interpretations to set the context of student support during ERT. Eaton (2020, 81) provides a distinction as follows:

> "emergency remote learning is not the same thing as online learning. In the former, panic underpins a rapid response to ensure learning continuity in an uncertain environment. In the latter, students receive orientations to the learning environment and professors receive training and mentoring to think through how to assess students in appropriate and effective ways, and everyone who takes part consents to doing so, at least to some extent."

McCarty (2021, 3–4) avers that "online education includes hybrid learning, partly online and partly face–to–face" which is usually a planned and purposeful norm for tuition, and that "ERT arose to non–judgmentally describe the circumstances of educators mostly unprepared to cope with the new necessity to teach online". These two interpretations of ERT ring true for the context of this university. While ERT might well have been `a novel social process that has been gathering momentum as the surrogate for customary face–to–face classroom' (Adedoyin and Soykan 2020, 2) at the height of the pandemic ERT became the preferred mode of tuition and continued as such post–lockdown.

It is against this background that student support champions provided support to fellow first–year students who required academic and social peer support in an uncertain remote learning environment.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

This study was conducted in a business and management sciences faculty and focuses on academic and social support provided to first–year students during emergency remote learning. The student profile represents diversity in respect of language diversity, rural/urban divide, as well as educational and socio–economic backgrounds. Many students were challenged with

ERT, with most students not being prepared for this unexpected shift to remote LTA. For example, most students did not have appropriate devices for online learning, internet connectivity was often erratic or lacking in rural areas where students were located, and access to on–campus resources such as libraries, computer laboratories, and free internet connectivity was unavailable during the pandemic. As far as possible, the institution provided appropriate devices as well as data to staff and students to ensure that they remained connected and were able to participate in remote learning. Similarly, academics were challenged as this changed tuition modality was sudden and many lecturers and support staff explored the most effective remote learning pedagogies.

The COVID–19 pandemic and the associated health and safety threats led to an immediate global response with the implementation of lockdown strategies to prevent the spread of this contagious virus. These drastic unprecedented measures included social distancing, wearing of facial masks, and meticulous disinfecting which impacted the economy, daily lives as well as education harshly (Adedoyin and Soykan 2020; South African Government Information Services, 2002). The world had to adjust to this changed enforced regime with new rules and protocols to continue for some semblance of normality.

These radical emergency measures necessitated education to shift swiftly to enable the continuation of the academic project. This disruption led to higher education institutions migrating to emergency remote learning. Online learning is a consciously planned pedagogical approach whereas emergency remote learning is "to provide temporary access to instruction and instructional supports in a manner that is quick to set up and is reliably available during an emergency or crisis" (Hodges et al. 2020,6).

At the site of this study, emergency remote learning was also employed, and this impacted all facets of the academic project as well as student support. Academics, students, and student support champions were required to adapt to this emergency mode of instruction. This was unchartered terrain and although extensive plans were devised, a great part of the journey was experienced as it was travelled. The uncertain and unpredictable state of the pandemic meant that academics and students had to be flexible and particularly resilient. Student support champions had to pivot to the online environment becoming acquainted with the institution's learner management system and other social technologies to effectively support students under challenging circumstances. Simultaneously, they themselves had to adjust and navigate the changed learning environment to succeed as students.

With the sudden unexpected shift to remote LTA the need for student support intensified, especially for first year students. To this end, four kinds of student support champions (SSCs) were available, each providing specific kinds of support. Teaching assistants (TAs), tutors,

mentors, and retention officers (ROs) provided academic and social support to first–year students to facilitate enculturation and assimilation to the academic demands of tertiary studies in an unexpected ERT environment. Each form of student support had specific roles as follows: (1) TAs assist lecturers with assistance in class and the compilation of student statistics, amongst other tasks; (2) tutors assist students with improved understandings and application of academic subject content; (3) mentors provide social support and refer students to institutional support units if necessary, and (4) ROs act as a liaison between lecturers and at–risk students by tracking progress and reporting success rates of academically under–performing students. Over the two years that this study was conducted, the faculty appointed 20 mentors, 14 teaching assistants (TAs), 10 retention officers (ROs), and an average of 60 tutors per year across the sixteen departments depending on the needs of the department. For example, a department might have had a TA, a mentor, and tutors, but not an RO. All departments made use of tutor support.

The SSCs are registered third–year, fourth–year, and Master's level students who were selected based on their academic performance, amongst other factors. These student support champions voluntarily indicated their intention to be appointed or were selected by lecturers in their respective departments. Students would generally be appointed annually from February to November, for a maximum workload of 40 hours per month. They received bespoke two–day training for the specific support role that they would fulfil. They work closely with lecturers who provide guidance on the kinds of support that specific students might require. The point to note here is that not only did student support champions have to manage their own studies and challenges in the shift to ERT, but they also had to support peers with learning and coping strategies for ERT during an unprecedented pandemic.

Due to the widespread Covid–19 virus, traditional classroom settings morphed into online or hybrid education models. This resulted in the necessary yet difficult transition in how students were supported. Student support champions (SSCs) worked in an emergency remote learning environment for the first time. As the educational situation evolved from ERT to online learning, SSCs become invaluable in advancing student support. As change agents SSCs showed resilience in not only focusing on themselves and their own studies, but sought to equip themselves with knowledge, skills, and attributes to help other students who might not be able to cope on their own.

Considering this context, this study explored the experiences of student support champions (i.e., teaching assistants, tutors, mentors, and retention officers) in assisting first–year students during remote learning.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Student support champions as change agents

Albert Bandura's (2001) core features of human agency (i.e., intentionality, self–reactiveness, self–reflectiveness, and self–regulation) that typify Social Cognitive Theory resonate with student support champions as being change agents. Firstly, intentionality speaks to acts done intentionally (i.e., where a proactive commitment is made to bring about an intention) (Bandura 2001, 6). Student support champions volunteered their services to intentionally bring about change to students whom they supported. Students choose to be TAs, tutors, mentors or ROs for successive years, not only because of their own growth and development but are also driven by the needs of peers requiring support. Secondly, self–reactiveness requires an agent "to be not only a planner and forethinker but a motivator and self–regulator" (Bandura 2001, 8). Bandura (2001, 8) posits that agency "involves not only the deliberative ability to make choices and action plans, but the ability to give shape to appropriate courses of action and to motivate and regulate their execution". Student support champions noted that they often faced challenges where students were reliant on them, to solve students' problems or be available at odd hours when students required assistance. The remote learning space unfortunately created possibilities for extended working hours. The data show that SSCs had to motivate students who were isolated and were called upon to suggest action plans for student support. Self–reactiveness in this sense required SSCs to think, plan, and motivate themselves as well as students requiring support. Thirdly, self–reflectiveness required agents to be self–examiners of their own actions and to reflect on the adequacy of actions and practices as SSCs. This opportunity is provided at the end of each semester, where SSCs provide reflections on the positives and challenges of providing support, as well as improvements they would make for future actions and student engagement. Lastly, self–regulation and taking ownership for self–development would be key to ensuring that as a TA, tutor, mentor, or RO, each SSC should have knowledge of the subject, the programme, and have specific skills, attributes, and values to provide the kinds of support required. SSCs should be proactive, independent thinkers and planners and be able to identify and provide requisite support to bring about change in student behaviour and/or student learning.

Most ERT research seems to focus on student and teacher readiness for ERT (Jili et al 2021; Matarirano, Gqokonqana, and Yeboah 2021; Waghid, Meda, and Chiroma, 2021) whereas resilience studies centred on teacher and student retention (Bobek 2002; Taylor 2013; Holdsworth, Turner, and Scott–Young 2018). Taylor (2013) posited that resilience is a crucial characteristic to facilitate teacher retention. However, this study introduces a target population (the student support champions) who have also been impacted in the higher education domain

during times of sudden shifts as they continued to provide critical student support.

Resilience as a developmental construct

Resilience is a complex construct with several interpretations and definitions. For the purposes of this study, Mcewen's (2011) definition is considered to be most apt. Mcewen (2011, 2) asserts that "resilience involves being able to withstand or overcome adversity and unpleasant events and successfully adapt to change and uncertainty". She notes that resilient people are described as those who can "bounce–back" or "rebound", which is in itself "a sense of personal growth as we use each adverse experience not just to enhance our coping but also to better manage the next one" (Mcewen 2011, 2). As such, adversity is not always negative depending on how we respond to adverse situations and whether we learn from each seemingly problematic event to "anticipate, plan for, and better manage the next situation we encounter" (Mcewen 2011, 2). Bobek (2002) argued that resilience development requires "significant adult relationships, a sense of personal responsibility, social and problem–solving skills, a sense of competence, expectations and goals, confidence, a sense of humour, and a sense of accomplishment" (Bobek 2002, 202). He noted that having this trait better enables the individual to evaluate difficult circumstances, decide alternatives for managing as well as apply suitable solutions. Resilience thinking, responses, and dispositions are developed by managing and navigating actual problematic events from one to the other.

Situations and events such as those experienced during COVID–19 were new and unprecedented, and required resilience thinking to find new ways of knowing, doing, and being. (Chiramba, 2021). Shifting from face–to–face learning to a fully remote learning environment without time for orientation, preparation, and planning, within the context of pandemic lockdown levels, required everyone to manage personal fears and rebound to continue the academic year in isolated learning spaces. The need for resilience thinking and actions would be more profound for SSCs who had to support first–year students who, at the time in 2020, had only three months of face–to–face university contact learning. Student support champions were called upon to support lecturers and first–year students during times of uncertainty and adversity traversing the academic year via emergency remote learning. However, simultaneously these SSCs had to manage their own challenges and fears as they themselves were students who had to navigate the ERT environment. What emerged was that students were keenly supported, but that through these adverse situations, SSCs learned more about themselves in terms of their endurance, emotional resilience, and personal development. It is, therefore, the SSCs growth and development, that is the focus of this study.

SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY

The study was conducted to determine the value of the student support project from the perspectives of student support champions during ERT and online learning necessitated by the COVID–19 pandemic. This study offers an opportunity to gain insight into the perspectives of student support champions who provided critical interventions to first–year students who had minimal experiences of actual higher education classroom environments during ERT. It also provided awareness of what aided or supported these student support champions to manage change and cope successfully under trying circumstances. The data could be used to improve student support services as gaps and shortcomings were highlighted. Importantly it offers an opportunity to reinforce the positive aspects of student support projects in higher education and to further explore and validate the growth and development of student support champions.

METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted in a business and management sciences faculty at a university of technology which offers mainly diploma qualifications. At the end of the first ERT academic year, SSCs were asked to complete a reflective qualitative survey, which was replicated in the successive years respectively (i.e., 2020 and 2021). The survey provided the SSCs with a platform to "make meaning from learning situated in experiences" (Guthrie and McCracken 2010, 2). The online survey consisted of 25 questions focusing on the nature of support requested by and provided to first–year students, the challenges first–year students encountered, the challenges SSCs faced, and the positive experiences gained by SSCs. The survey was administered via Google Forms and all responses were anonymous. Students were not asked for personal details such as names, student numbers or departments. Participation was voluntary and students were informed that they could withdraw their participation at any time. Ethical considerations were acceded to, such as first being granted ethics clearance from the faculty ethics committee before the study was conducted. Thirty–one (31) SSCs responded to the first survey, which included 9 TAs, 17 tutors, and 5 mentors. Nineteen of 31 respondents (61 per cent) provided support in previous years and 12 (39 per cent) were first–time appointees. For the successive survey, 23 responses were received of which 3 were TAs, 18 tutors, and 2 mentors. Twelve (52 per cent) of SSCs had previous experience whereas for 11 (48 per cent), it was their first experience as SSC. No ROs completed the survey in any of the two years in which this study was conducted.

The role of student support champions in their engagement with first–year students was

essentially socially constructed within the online learning space. The survey data instrument required SSCs to provide their perspectives and experiences of providing their respective type of student support as either TA, tutor, or mentor. This participant view of their world aligns with the tenets of the interpretivist paradigm where "emphasis is placed on understanding the individual and their interpretation of the world around them" (Kivunja and Kuyini 2017, 33). Similarly, Thanh and Thanh (2015, 24) aver that "in seeking the answers for research … the interpretive paradigm allows for participant experiences to be used to construct and interpret an understanding of participant data" To this end, the interpretivist paradigm was used as a lens to understand how SSCs perceived their roles. In turn, the researchers made meaning of research participants' data "through their own thinking and cognitive processing of data informed by their interactions with participants" (Kivunja and Kuyini 2017, 33). While the "subjectivist epistemology" (Al–Riyami 2015; Kivunja and Kuyini 2017) of the interpretivist paradigm is acknowledged, the analysis and discussion remain pertinent to the experiences and responses from SSCs.

Participant responses were analysed using thematic content analysis. According to Kiger and Varpio (2020, 2) thematic data analysis is:

> "…a method for describing data, but it also involves interpretation in the processes of selecting codes and constructing themes. A distinguishing feature of thematic analysis is its flexibility to be used within a wide range of theoretical and epistemological frameworks, and to be applied to a wide range of study questions, designs, and sample sizes".

A two–layered approach to thematic data analysis was used. Firstly, the survey responses were subjected to a close reading to identify dominant emergent themes and, secondly, to extrapolate salient data to establish patterns of themes that relate to SSC's experiences of offering support, for analysis and discussion. With thematic data analysis the "research constructs themes to reframe, reinterpret, and/or connect elements of the data" (Kiger and Varpio 2020, 3). Clarke and Braun (2017, 297) note that

> "TA [thematic analysis] can be used to identify patterns within and across data in relation to participants' lived experience, views and perspectives, and behavior and practices; "experiential" research which seeks to understand what participants' think, feel, and do".

The findings are the subjective experiences, insights, and learnings of the student support champions based on data from the two student support champion cohorts. It is interesting to note that the responses for both SSC cohorts were primarily the same across all questions administered in the two successive years when ERT was prevalent.

In keeping with Kivunja and Kuyini's (2017, 34) position that "the interpretivist researcher deals with human behaviour which is by its very nature continuously variable, contextual, and subject to multiple interpretations of reality", the findings and discussion of this study and are not generalisable to any other cohort of SSCs.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The responses were grouped into three themes that emerged from the data analysis as discussed below namely:

- challenges experienced by student support champions.
- how they responded to address these challenges, and
- personal learnings through growth and development.

The findings and discussion focus on excerpts from surveys administered in both successive years. The interpretation of the data was directed at the SSC's own lens of self–reflection as they navigated ERT in their endeavours to provide student support. The data generated three themes and sub–themes. The three themes identified were (1) challenges, (2) responses and (3) growth and development.

The findings reveal that despite teaching assistants, mentors and tutors having specific roles in providing student support, the distinct roles were blurred as student support champions responded to students' student support needs as requested. For example, although mentors provided social support to manage tertiary studies, they often provided academic support if students requested this in addition to social support. As such, the excerpts below relate to responses from SSCs who offered similar kinds of support irrespective of the specific roles for which they were trained.

Challenges

Three dominant sub–themes on challenges emerged, namely affective factors, challenges in providing support in ERT, and finding the balance between attending to own studies and providing student support. Each of these will be clarified using students' insights and perceptions.

Affective Factors

The affective domain refers to the capacity to deal with a range of emotions and dispositions of self and the ability to satisfactorily respond to affective signals of others. The ERT environment was enforced suddenly and unexpectedly. The SSCs found themselves in unfamiliar spaces not

just as students but as facilitators providing online support to first–year students. Several responses referred to SSCs emotional concerns about the effectiveness of their support in the remote learning environment.

The following excerpts share SSCs concerns with affective challenges of different kinds. For example, a tutor noted that "it was disheartening when students wouldn't answer questions during sessions, but I tried to stay upbeat and carry on with my lesson". The online space via the Learner Management System, Blackboard, did not allow for direct eye contact where students could be prompted for answers or be coaxed to contribute to discussions. Although this was noted by a tutor, this was the experience of all SSCs, where students did not participate as expected. This challenge was explained by another tutor as follows: "during the online lectures, it's hard to keep students engaged without a facilitator's physical presence and face–to–face contact". For many SSCs it was important to draw on inner strength not to be disheartened with lack of responses, not knowing whether students understood what was presented or whether their work was being appreciated. The need to "carry on with the lesson" shows the resolve to fulfil their roles to provide support in whichever was requested. The positive was also experienced. One tutor noted that "some [students] were very keen on online learning and engaged every time we had tutorials and was thankful for the opportunity you [the tutor] gave us [the students]".

The pandemic affected many families who lost loved ones. SSCs did not communicate their challenges of having to deal with personal loss to lecturers, but merely persevered despite their own emotional struggles. The excerpt below is a case in point where the tutor "would have taken a week or two after the passing of my family members instead of helping others only a few days after their passings".

A mentor commented that the hardest part for most students "was the mental and emotional struggles that came with learning online". Mentors were trained to provide social support to first–year students to acculturate to university life. The kinds of "mental and emotional struggles" of students, were often referred to institutional support units for professional support. The default understanding of academic prowess for success is often confined to managing the curriculum, yet the affective components that impact learning are often key to whether students can cope or not. The SSCs were not only focusing on their own challenges but on students' well–being and ability to deal successfully with ERT. They shared their apprehensions about the students they supported but also took responsibility for the role they played in successfully applying themselves as they supported these students. This disposition speaks to resilience as these SSCs displayed "a sense of personal responsibility" (Bobek 2002) under trying circumstances.

Working in isolation and a sense of loss associated with the ERT modality were evident in the data. The realities of ERT for SSCs were articulated as noted below.

The challenges of ERT were described in terms of "physiological discomfort [with] limited opportunities to see faces of students to determine their mood/attitude". Other challenges of learning in isolation included:

- "Missing the noise and joy of interacting with students".
- "Loss of the human factor in face–to–face, teaching and learning, less control over assessment practices, loss of supporting students in transition".
- "Very isolated with no colleagues to help out if stuck".
- "I was anxious and apprehensive, ...".

The references to a sense of loss and isolation, not being able to interact with others and "missing the noise and joy" of face–to–face engagement suggest the impact that learning in isolation had on the psyche of these students. The loss of personal connection that they would have had in a face–to–face environment, where physical and verbal cues would indicate whether students understood what was being shared were no longer there. They had to draw on their personal social and emotional intelligence since other support structures were not physically available to provide immediate assistance. This created angst and apprehension initially, which diminished somewhat with time and experience.

Providing support in ERT

As noted in definitions above, ERT resulted in a sudden shift to online learning with limited time to plan for implementation of an online curriculum. Student support champions had to think differently about how students would be supported, since training received before the pandemic did not include training for remote learning. Similarly, lecturers found themselves in a new teaching space and were not always able to provide definitive outlines of the kinds of academic support that students might require. Lecturers and SSCs were guided by students' need for assistance and together they developed support materials as required. SSCs reported that they received regular weekly and monthly support from most lecturers.

The kinds of support that first–year students required, placed undue pressure on SSCs. For example, three main challenges reported by both student support champion cohorts of this study were time management, not attending all classes and not understanding subject content. As a result of these challenges, SSCs reported that they mainly provided support with understanding and applying concepts and understanding subject content. Providing support remotely seemingly exacerbated the workload in the ERT space. As noted by a tutor, "it was time–

consuming preparing the screencast and recording videos" while other tutors' experiences were that it was "extremely time–consuming to prepare for online teaching" and "preparation is more intensive as you are preparing for different modes of teaching". Besides the need to have a thorough knowledge of subject content, SSCs had to learn to be assertive because students would contact them "late at night or outside hours" and "expect you to be available all the time". One tutor aptly captured the sentiments of other SSCs as follows:

> "… students put pressure that they want to be assisted whenever they need help especially when the due date is close by, they don't just need to be assisted sometimes but they require to be given answers instead of being given the clues".

These excerpts suggest that some first–year students were not coping with self–regulated learning and considered SSCs to be their on–call support structures to provide answers and to always assist with assignments. With reference to time management, one SSC succinctly summarises the reality of providing support during ERT as follows: "because there is no physical boundaries in this environment careful time management is necessary, as one can easily be "available" 24/7 or significantly increase your working hours".

However, these adversities also presented opportunities to be resilient and adapt to changing circumstances. A tutor learnt to be "way more tech savvy and open to new learning methodologies … excited about learning new styles and applying it, [have] renewed energy and tenacity for lecturing and engaging with students".

In addition to learning how to use the learner management system as a support platform, being a tutor provided the "opportunity to be innovative and really think about lesson planning … [also] learnt how to engage with new online platforms". Furthermore, learning how to apply improved time management skills for remote learning was a dominant learning experience. A candid response was that, "honestly, online learning makes people become lazier, it makes you think you have more time and it is easier".

Tutors, TAs and mentors learned how to balance their own studies with having a personal life and providing student support. Their ability to continue providing student support under demanding circumstances whilst simultaneously focusing on their own studies as full–time students is reflected in their academic success. This is resilience personified as these SSCs managed to cope and rise with these challenges to successfully navigate providing student support as well as tending to their own academic demands (Mcewen 2011).

Despite the increased efforts and workload, these SSCs displayed a keen sense of responsibility and dedication, with some struggling to find a balance between studies and providing student support.

Finding the balance between studies and providing student support

Due to the nature of the intensive online engagement with first–year students many SSCs over–extended themselves with having to manage students' demands during their time outside of scheduled student support sessions, as well as having to cope with their own studies. Student support champions were also students themselves and simultaneously had to manage the pressures of their own studies. These sentiments were noted by tutors as being a "blurred line between work and personal time, having no access to students who do not have access to technology: and the fact that "sometimes it was hard preparing for sessions with students while I had assignments and tests". The lack of data and challenges with internet connectivity appeared as dominant responses by all respondents. Internet connectivity in rural areas, for example, was non–existent or intermittent at best and load–shedding (power outages) in South Africa further complicated the ability of SSCs to communicate and provide support as required. According to a mentor, who "sometimes had to multi–task, where I would have a class to attend, an assignment to complete, a test to study for, and at the very same time to provide mentoring services to students", the many roles and responsibilities of being mentor and student were all too stark. When SSCs were asked what they would have done differently, their responses centred on improving time management and having face–to–face classes with students. In terms of coping with studies, an average of 72 per cent of SSCs reported that they coped with their studies, while 28 per cent sometimes coped, and 91 per cent of SSCs passed all their subjects in the year that they provided student support.

Responding to challenges

Given the circumstances of providing support in isolation, i.e., having to be always available, student expectations of completing assignments and providing answers to tasks, dealing with linguistic diversity, and not readily having lecturer guidance to deal with these challenges, SSCs had to be resilient and develop skills to cope as required. Due to SSCs training being conducted in different bespoke training sessions and being appointed in different departments in the faculty, and because they worked in isolation, SSCs often did not know one another. This further exacerbated being an SSC in isolation. However, SSCs found ways to withstand the challenges they faced, and revealed resilience as posited by Mcewen (2011) above. The SSCs drew on their own strengths, dispositions, and determination to provide continued support despite adverse circumstances. They looked beyond themselves and their circumstances, to motivate their students. One tutor "told students my story of being a Cum Laude student yet I did not have a business studies background and this resulted in them becoming interested and

feeling encouraged", while another tutor, "always motivated them [and] always reminded them of the goals that they had disclosed to me and why they are at university". It seemed important for SSCs to remain positive to fulfil the roles assigned to them. This was an admirable trait noted in all SSC responses.

The gains in learning for students and student support were not necessarily in improved results but in the acquisition of attributes, dispositions, and values about learning to learn independently. This research reveals that the significance of a student support project resides in acquiring attributes and skills which are beyond the formal curriculum. The SSCs not only experienced personal growth and development but could see this in the students themselves. The following excerpts are verbatim examples of how a student support project adds value beyond the curriculum. SSCs reported as follows:

- "I gained experience working in the new method of learning improves leadership skills";
- "… it served as revision for me which helped me a lot with my studies";
- "I was anxious and apprehensive, now I am confident and open to anything";
- "… taught me that I am able to work with people";
- "It was great offering my help to other students and I wish to continue doing it next year, being a tutor is great";
- "To see how students flourish and become great young men and women with confidence";
- "It improved my communication skills as well as my leadership qualities" and,
- "… most importantly the growth I have seen in me".

These excerpts provide evidence that being a student support champion forms part of lifelong learning in managing self and others to grow and develop to be the best that one can be. In 2020 when ERT was first imposed, the online environment presented tutors, TAs, and mentors with different learning opportunities. Despite the unexpected new learning circumstances, these SSCs embraced the challenges and in the process entrenched existing attributes and acquired new skills and attributes. They displayed resilience through the student support journey as they learned to manage and embrace the ERT challenges with "a sense of personal responsibility, social and problem–solving skills, a sense of competence, expectations and goals, confidence, a sense of humour, and a sense of accomplishment" (Bobek 2002, 202).

CONCLUSION

The excerpts and discussion present a collage of working in isolation for SSCs themselves and in terms of how they had to engage with students whom they supported, as well as how they developed agency to bring about change in first–year students. The SSCs were cognisant of

their roles and how first–years relied on them to transition to tertiary studies in an uncertain online learning space. SSCs developed a repertoire of skills to manage their roles and created a bricolage of skills and attributes to be change agents. Baker and Nelson (2005, 333) define bricolage as "making do by applying combinations of the resources at hand to new problems and opportunities." This definition is most apt in this context given that most SSCs had to draw on a combination of content knowledge, personal wisdom, intuition, and interpersonal skills to deal with student anxieties, demands and undue academic expectations.

This study shows that a time of complexity is simultaneously an opportunity for the creation of new norms for teaching and learning to transform future thinking and practice. These new norms should invariably include the dispositions and attributes that empower students to be self–regulated learners who take ownership of their learning and the learning experience. The data reveal the measure of resilience, adaptability and transformability that emerged during and because of the COVID–19 pandemic restrictions and the "hunger to succeed" despite the adversities experienced. What this study highlights is that student support champions developed or refined attributes such as adaptability, self–management, self–motivation, leadership skills, determination, dedication, reliability, confidence, care and the ability to bounce back in the face of adversity. These attributes stood them in good stead as they persisted during trying times showing resilience in action. These are attributes that extend beyond content knowledge and skills. Interestingly the very dispositions which were challenges and struggles became drivers for success. In many instances, student support champions developed new ways of thinking and dealing with their changed situations as they persisted, were determined and with dedication continued to succeed. This certainly is the embodiment of resilience thinking. It is critically important that we provide opportunities for students to become student support champions and so contribute to their personal growth and development outside of the formal curriculum. Given the value of being an SSC, every effort should be made to appoint willing students to these positions – learnings are lifelong.

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